

Introduction

As governor of Texas, George Bush gained a heap of experience learning the pros and cons of using taxpayer dollars in secular and spiritual endeavors. It also didn't hurt that the openly religious Bush remained true to his political base by first promising to alter and then radically changing the way that religious organizations and government interact. Bush's motivation and commitment were steadfast, and were attributes that his supporters and political foes saw as confirmation of his strong personal faith. As a presidential candidate, George W. Bush had made faith-based funding a key feature in his domestic policy. It was something that Bush said would level the playing field for faith-based providers, making it easier for them to compete for federal funding on an equitable basis with others.

However, political adversaries of the newly elected president's faith-based program alleged that there was a political strategy at play, which prompted a groundswell of controversy. Faith-based initiative opponents from the left and right claimed that the Republican Party (GOP) and Christian Conservatives were using the federal funding to target African American churches, ministers, and religious organizations. They alleged that the GOP was willing to do this to gain black voter support and a foothold in the Black Church. Some faith-based funding antagonists were adamant when leveling this powerful charge that struck some as very credible.

From the start, similar accusations had been made by challengers of Bush's domestic agenda, preventing bipartisan support for the president's key domestic plan. Opponents were gaining momentum by asserting that

the creation of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI)—and plans to drastically change the relationship between the federal government, churches, and other religious organizations—might compromise the separation of church and state. They bolstered their position by saying that faith-based initiatives would likely erode established safeguards aimed at preventing a blurring of the line.¹ By putting the Constitution in play, faith-based foes were able to slow support for the recently elected president's domestic plan. However, in the end, the expansion and sweeping reforms related to federal funding for religious and charitable organizations would eventually prevail under the Bush administration.

Whatever Bush's motivations were, it turns out that faith-based initiatives were a mix of good and bad that garnered strong support and stout opposition from their inception. Yet over a decade later, the lasting effects of Bush-era faith-based initiatives on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community are not entirely known. There is however, convincing proof that faith-based competition and a dependency on federal funding may have exacerbated an already strained relationship between the black LGBT community and the traditional Black Church. It's also possible that those who opposed Bush's domestic philosophy, believing that it had a quid pro quo feel that favored the conservatism of people like Grover Norquist, Karl Rove, John Dilulio, and evangelical conservatives—all architects of faith-based initiatives—were likely onto something.

FAITH-BASED INITIATIVES AND THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION

It turns out that speculation about federal funding and the tax-exemption status of churches and other religious organizations was on the mind of Iowa Republican senator Charles E. Grassley (R-IA). Senator Grassley, a devout Baptist, announced in 2007 that his office would look into the spending practices of some of the nation's wealthiest megachurch ministers. Grassley was particularly interested in the so-called Prosperity Preachers, who use a prosperity theology focused on the premise that God provides material wealth for those he favors. Among those investigated were two prominent members of the black clergy, one of whom had been a recipient of faith-based federal funding during the Bush administration. A black megachurch minister from Atlanta, Bishop Eddie Long, captured Senator Grassley's attention. Bishop Long had also caught

the attention of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which named him “One of the most homophobic black ministers in America.”²

Bishop Long is one of the Bible-toting black religious extremists whose fierce inflammatory rhetoric against black LGBTs is well documented and central to an increasingly intolerant homophobic black culture. So it is not surprising that Long, along with other black ministers who espouse hateful preaching against black LGBTs, was one of the earliest supporters and recipients of Bush-era faith-based funding. It is also what prompted some to believe that the competition for faith-based funding, and the expectation of ongoing federal financial support, had helped to encourage a campaign of animosity against black Christian LGBTs. The possibility that faith-based funding had facilitated and amplified discrimination against black homosexuals, by an already unsympathetic black community, seems entirely plausible.

Homophobia in the Black Church lays bare the long drawn-out struggle between the Black Church and black Christian LGBTs. It lifts the veil on the secretive and vicious homophobic black culture that punishes and exiles many black homosexuals to live their lives in the shadows. Going further, it examines the ways that black Christian LGBTs, who are often already victims of their families and communities, are scorned by black religious leaders and made to suffer what is tantamount to a social crucifixion that some believe was amplified by competition for federal funding.

The consequential discussion about the legislative maneuvering that made it possible to fund openly religious organizations in a whole new way is necessary. However, great care was taken when writing this book to avoid a wonkish and technical reporting of the political gamesmanship involved in fulfilling President’s George W. Bush’s commitment to compassionate conservatism. Members of the black clergy who publicly proselytize against the LGBT community are identified in this book to show how the exploitation of the Black Church by Christian evangelical conservatives was instrumental in subverting the Black Church and promoting the ideology of Christian evangelical conservatism. Now, over a decade since the dawning of Bush-era faith-based initiatives, and as “Don’t ask, don’t tell” (DADT) has been rescinded, it seems an appropriate time to discuss the predilection to homophobia and longing of some black clergy to feed at the trough of federal funding. It’s also a fitting opportunity to reveal how they were handily co-opted and used by GOP conservatives and religious extremists to create a nightmarish state of affairs for black LGBTs.

Advancement of the key domestic agenda of the Bush presidency represents the fulfillment of a promise made by candidate Bush to the conservative wing of the Republican Party and Religious Right. By putting into practice faith-based programs that were aimed at resolving the country's social problems, the newly elected president's viewpoint of compassionate conservatism would be realized. In furtherance of this, Bush's action to establish the OFBCI, coming only nine days after his swearing in, was seen as proof of his allegiance to the most conservative wing of the Republican Party and Christian Coalition loyalists. To evangelicals, family-values supporters, and Christian Conservatives like Ralph Reed, the former executive director of the Christian Coalition, the president's campaign of compassionate conservatism had gone from a presidential hopeful's political vision to a reality that was coming to fruition in the Bush White House.

It was an enormous step in that the president had fulfilled a campaign promise to go forward with a national agenda that was in harmony with that of key supporters who had boosted his candidacy among Christian Conservatives and party traditionalists. However, a number of things prevented the smooth ratification of the president's plan, among them vocal opponents of the domestic agenda who contested its legality. Organizations like Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), resisted the advancement of H.R. 7, known as the Community Solutions Act of 2001, on the basis that it violated the First Amendment. They and others raised concerns about the increased possibility of religious and sexual discrimination that faith-based programs proposed by the president might present. The authorization of the Republican domestic plan ultimately came down to Bush's use of his presidential executive powers to initiate an historic transformation in the way that churches and other religious organizations would be treated by the federal government and Bush White House.

Black political leaders and clergy had either not yet recognized the possibility for increased intraracial discrimination that the Bush domestic programs presented for black LGBTs, or chose not to speak out. Prominent leaders like the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, for example, seemed preoccupied with the idea that the Bush administration was conspiring to exclude him, and other black leaders, from planning and policymaking related to faith-based initiatives. Reverend Jackson said, "I know the subplot: This is an attempt to play one group against the other."³

Elsewhere, the political squabbling that was expected following proposal of the president's domestic agenda came to pass. However, its duration and intensity were not entirely anticipated. In fact, someone

unfamiliar with the practice of the federal government funding religious-based organizations might have assumed that it had never been done before. However, federal funding of religious-based organizations has in one form or another existed for years. For example, the Salvation Army has been a recipient of federal funding since the nation's creation.

There were a series of fits and starts, some prompted by growing opposition to the president's domestic agenda and others unrelated, for example, the nation's shifted focus in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. One objection that hindered implementation was launched by the ACLU, which implied that faith-based funding was likely to cause discrimination based on religion. Others protested, saying that faith-based initiatives programs were a violation of the separation between church and state. Eventually, President Bush took steps to unilaterally put his agenda into action with two executive orders that addressed faith-based funding on December 12, 2002. Bush's Executive Order 13280 created two additional executive departments to augment the five agencies already participating in the administration of faith-based initiative programs. But it was the issuance of Executive Order 13279, which required equal protection for faith-based and community organizations, that triggered immediate controversy.⁴

It was this controversy, in part, that compelled me to contemplate writing a book about homophobia in the Black Church. However, it was also a need to understand the reasons for widespread homophobia in the black community, and what (if any) role politics, faith-based funding, and religious extremism played in growing homophobic attitudes in black culture. My yearning to understand the rampant homophobia mindset would eventually include a personal challenge to overcome the foreboding feeling that by exploring these questions, I was doing something wrong, even violating a code of cultural ethics. In time, I'd come to understand that this feeling of telling tales out of school that I somehow instinctively felt was shared by other African Americans.

It was the troubling intuitive feeling that bothered me most and caused me to question why I or anyone should feel guilty for wanting to explore an issue so important to the black community. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more a sense of obligation developed to understand why the subject of homosexuality prompted such a visceral reaction in the black community. It also contributed to a need to know if federal faith-based funding had been employed by the Bush administration and religious extremists with the intended purpose of taking advantage of a homophobic black community to advance a campaign against gays and same-sex marriage. To my way of thinking, this was central to understanding what

had occurred during the Bush era, and whether faith-based initiatives had enticed black ministers, bringing them under the control of GOP conservatives and religious extremists.

When I announced a sabbatical from my newspaper column to write this book, word spread quickly that the subject of the book was homophobia in the Black Church. In the beginning, I thought it was just my imagination and even conceded the possibility that I had become a bit paranoid. However, over time, I concluded that the discernible change in the way some people interacted with me was real. Some would, for example, ask, "What makes you want to write about that?" They would then sarcastically add, "Why do you want to open that can of worms?" These and other instances made me feel that not only were my motivations being questioned, but my own sexual identification. Several members of traditional black congregations, whose approach bordered on confrontational, asked, "Just who and what do you intend to write about?" Undeterred, my interest was stimulated and in a way, such encounters became the impetus for understanding and enlightening others about the paralyzing homophobia that exists within black culture. However, as an African American Catholic, I was exceedingly aware that my own religion had failed miserably on every level to deal with homosexuality. As a Catholic, I had been embarrassed by the scandal and cover-up of pedophilia that had been permitted to continue for years inside the American Catholic Church. I confess that my critique of the harsh preaching toward black LGBTs that was springing from the pulpit of some black churches made me feel like a hypocrite. I could also understand how it opened me to criticism as an intruder. Yet I felt that this was no reason to negate or diminish the need for answers related to the Black Church and the powerful homophobic position taken by many blacks. Or my desire to know if religious and political conservatism had been influential in ramping up antigay sentiment and opposition to same-sex marriage in the black community.

A variety of sources, including black LGBTs who were raised in the traditional Black Church, would eventually share their personal experiences, helping me to understand what I had not previously comprehended. As a result, I came to appreciate the awesome power wielded by the Black Church and to see more clearly the role it played in shaping the black cultural perspective toward homosexuality. Through this exploration, the reasons that black LGBTs were being ostracized by their own families, friends, and faith community were less ambiguous. It was not difficult to see that the maltreatment of black Christian LGBTs by some black ministers was and continues to be central to the deepening divide, and a contributing factor to the breakdown of an already fragile black family structure.

When working on a story related to the sudden spike in suicides among young LGBTs, I reached out to members of the black clergy. In doing so, I naively admitted that my knowledge about the virulent homophobia within the Black Church was limited. I was shocked by some of their responses. In retrospect, should I have surmised that since homosexuality is considered culturally taboo by the black community, the same viewpoint would be shared by black clergy? Maybe. Yet it is clear that blacks have not dealt with the issue of homosexuality very effectively. Though difficult for the black community to accept, the reality is that the contagious scorn and repudiation toward homosexuals emanates from the community's cornerstone, the Black Church. This highlights an enormous failure, and as if to corroborate this exceptionally disheartening observation, the response I received when reaching out to members of the black clergy was mostly venomous, condemnatory, and disturbing. In almost every instance, it seemed the clergy member was attempting to justify the unfair treatment of homosexuals by using biblical scripture to support the abuse. Of course, I realize that this is not the genesis of the problem, nor does it reflect the position of the entirety of black ministers. However, it is difficult to refute that this continues to be the position taken by many black ministers. As difficult as this is to accept, what most affects me well over a century since the end of slavery is the extent to which the stain of human bondage continues to affect the collective psyche of blacks. This is an essential point because to comprehend slavery's lasting legacy, it is necessary to understand its pathology and diabolical genius.

The subject of the attitude of blacks as it relates to homosexuality prompted me to think about something that had not entered my mind for many years. It came from what some might consider an odd source, and some might even wonder what this person could possibly have to do with the subject of homophobia in the Black Church. However, as it turns out, the celebrated U.S. humorist Richard Pryor, who had a lot to say about many subjects, made a pointed observation about the importance of masculinity in the black community. It was during the 1970s, when people were more familiar with the sometime vulgar and profane comedian from Peoria, Illinois, for his talent as a standup comic. The masses didn't yet think about this very funny man as someone with a social conscience and an interminable connection to the black diaspora. Yet Pryor helped blacks to better understand themselves, the origin of social ills that affect their community, and the insidious impact that racism has on their lives. However, Pryor would go on to receive the inaugural Kennedy Center Mark Twain Prize in 1998.⁵ When the country finally realized his exceptional awareness of race and politics, and Pryor's distinctive ability to

translate for mainstream America the essence of the black experience, his persona was transformed. Pryor achieved this remarkable feat by using humor to talk about the strained relationship between blacks and whites. For example, he would explain how it was possible that more than a century since the end of slavery, blacks still perceived themselves as struggling under a racist society.

Race, war, politics, and yes, black sexuality, were Pryor's areas of expertise. He used his standup routine to skillfully illustrate nuances of the black experience. What Pryor was doing was creating an opportunity for dialogue. One way he accomplished this was by mastering the black cultural tradition of talking or joking about another person or a person's family members. In black culture, this is known as playing the dozen, or signifying. Pryor frequently used this comedic technique to discuss sensitive issues like race relations and cultural differences between whites and blacks. In time, it became Pryor's trademark and a basis of his celebrity. Unfortunately, Pryor's astute observations were never fully acknowledged or seen for their potential to dissect America's race problem.

More than three decades ago, during a comedy routine dealing with race, Pryor offered the audience what he described as the most important question ever debated by white people. Speaking in the exaggerated vernacular of a white man as only Pryor could, he posed a question whose answer he inferred was of the utmost importance to the entire Caucasian race. Referring to the way that some black men hold their crotches, similar to the way pop star Michael Jackson did, Pryor said this: "White people go: 'Why you guys hold your things?' to which a black man responds, 'Cause you done took everything else . . .'"⁶ Pryor's comedic genius is a double entendre that strikes at the core of the homophobic mind-set that is common in black communities throughout the United States. Pryor's observation comes as close to describing the pathology and neurosis toward homosexuality that has plagued the black community for generations. Pryor's insight begs the question: Had he identified the source of black homophobia, yet not fully connected it to the homophobic psychosis permeating black culture? It certainly sounds like an extremely acceptable conclusion.

There is no doubt that Pryor linked the fact that some whites are paralyzed with fear of the stereotypical sexual prowess of the black male, who has been since slavery considered dangerous and at the center of America's racial discord. It is too bad that Pryor's profound observation regarding the importance of masculinity in black culture was not seriously analyzed by sociologists and scholars, or regarded as a revelation by blacks, helping them to understand the genesis of the pervasive homophobia that has for generations consumed black culture. It's impossible to

know what effect, if any, Pryor's observations would have had on the black community's stance toward homosexuality if they had been taken seriously. However, it seems that if nothing else, they would have opened a dialogue that may have had some effect on the strident homophobic attitudes that continue to prevail throughout black culture.

There is no doubt that Pryor opened wide the door for blacks and whites to engage in a meaningful discussion. However, neither was ready or willing for the kind of race relations that would force them to deal with the issue that is central to the relationship between blacks and whites, as was pointed out by Pryor. As a result, not much has been done to preclude the spread of homophobia or the tormenting of black LGBTs. The consequence has been an unremitting wrath that black homosexuals have had to endure. As scapegoats, they are routinely humiliated in their communities and churches, and bear the brunt for our failure to confront the problem head on. Already primed and with little standing in the way, it now seems inevitable that some black ministers would participate in a united campaign initiated by religious extremists against LGBTs and their fight for equality. By the time George W. Bush took the presidential oath and the era of faith-based initiatives began, some black religious leaders could be counted on to support not only the newly elected president's domestic agenda, but a crusade against homosexuals and same-sex marriage spearheaded by evangelical Christians.

The theory that the Black Church and religious organizations were used during the Bush administration to carry out a campaign against homosexuality and same-sex marriage is partly demonstrated by the unconventional relationship that formed between white evangelical Christians and some black clergy. It appears conceivable that the lure of faith-based funding contributed to forming these uncommon relationships and as a result significantly affected the stance of some black ministers.

In retrospect, the likelihood of increased discrimination now seems inevitable, especially given the dire financial position of many Black Churches during the Bush era. The desperate need for funding to battle a host of social ills plaguing the black community was instrumental in opening the door to religious extremism. Given the intense effort of the Christian Right to defeat LGBT advocates who were fighting for equality, expansion of antigay forces to include black clergy may have become a logical necessity. Not only that, but by including powerful black megachurch ministers, resistance to gay rights could be propagated by a formidable multiracial religious and political front. What better way to capitalize on the divide between the Black Church and the black LGBT community than by making federal funding available, while at the same time mounting a united force against gay rights?

With little to prevent it, or to alter the course of events, some black ministers were willing to deliver their congregations to the evangelical effort against homosexuals and advocates of same-sex marriage. Not only was this devastating for the Black Church, it was also a crushing blow for black Christian LGBTs who were caught up in a religious and political struggle to which they had no recourse or real means of defense.

January 29, 2001, when the Executive Order establishing the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) was signed by President Bush, began the formal rollout of his key domestic policy. A blitz to get faith-based initiatives was underway. It was also the start of a financially driven and intensified intraracial bias carried out by members of the black clergy against members of the black LGBT community, something that might have been unfathomable, even to Richard Pryor.⁷

In the chapters that follow, the likelihood that faith-based funding was used by right wing conservatives and the Religious Right to advance their political and moral agenda are explored. In addition, the connection between federal funding funneled through the White House OFBCI and an increase in proselytizing against black LGBTs by black clergy is looked at. Answering the crucial question related to whether President Bush's faith-based "armies of compassion" under the control of the Republican Right and heavily armed with federal funding were inducements and used to encourage participation in an escalation of retribution against the black LGBT community is also explored.

NOTES

1. <http://www.in.gov/ofbci/>. Accessed May 1, 2010.
2. Southern Poverty Law Center, "Face Right," *Intelligence Report*, Spring, 2007, 24.
3. Jo Renee Formicola, Mary C. Segers, and Paul J. Weber, *The Good the Bad and the Ugly: Faith-Based Initiatives and the Bush Administration* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).
4. Union, Because Freedom Can't Protect Itself, 2001.
5. <http://www.kennedy-center.org/programs/specialevents/marktwain/>. Accessed May 1, 2010.
6. <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/MCM/people/cokes/Pryor.html>. Accessed May 1, 2010.
7. Refers to Executive Orders 13198 and 13199, which established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) and delineated responsibility to the federal agencies to carry out specific actions.