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Outrage: A New Kind of Ecumenicism

The new Republican hegemony in Washington and Albany is producing a backlash among those religious groups that have traditionally taken care of the aged, the sick and poor. Long before FDR invented the New Deal, New Yorkers relied on the generosity of Catholics, Protestants and Jews to build the hospitals, settlement houses, orphanages and shelters that are the first line of defense against disease and poverty. Last week, the House Ways and Means Committee voted to deny welfare benefits to immigrants and teenage mothers under 18, and New York State will soon slash education and health-care spending as well.

These measures are leading to new alliances, as demonstrated by the spiritual embrace between Cardinal John O'Connor and the Rev. Al Sharpton. Liberal and moderate religious groups many of them asleep since the civil rights and anti war protests of the 1960s are waking up and may even challenge the religious right that has dominated political pulpits in this country for the past two decades.

Many spiritual leaders who unsuccessfully fought the death penalty, abortion and condom distribution are about to enter a new political battle, one that is more consistent with their own historic role and with their congregants' values. They are caught in the middle of a two-pronged government assault: Budget cutbacks will increase the ranks of the poor, forcing them to demand more social and health services from voluntary and religious organizations, much of whose funding will also be pared by government cutbacks.

Old-fashioned Tory conservatives - unlike new age Republicans - recognized that it was in their spiritual and organizational self-interest to take care of the poor. How could one acquire and hold great wealth and material possessions if the masses weren't well fed, housed properly and kept healthy so they would work long hours? And they relied on voluntary and religious organizations to do this dirty work. The great robber barons hoped that, through religious philanthropy, they could assure their own salvation while subsidizing the spiritual nourishment essential to divert the poor from the picket line.

Over the past two decades, New York City and State have come to rely on religious institutions to take in many of the homeless, care for the terminally ill and rescue the abused. Long before privatization was the Republican mantra, a vast network of religious-based service agencies became the delivery arm for many government-subsidized services.

Under the inspired leadership of Bishop Joseph Sullivan, Brooklyn Catholic Charities converted underused parochial schools into housing for single adults by harnessing federal, state and local

funds. In Queens, Floyd Flake, a Congressman and the pastor of Alien A.M.E. Church in Jamaica, has effectively used his religious base to build a remarkable social service delivery system and web of small businesses.

Religious organizations have not just depended on government contracts to help the poor. They have also donated their space, utilized their organizational know-how, and supplied volunteer workers. At Hebrew Union College in Greenwich Village, for example, cantorial and rabbinical students operate a soup kitchen that feeds hundreds of homeless people. It relies solely on volunteer contributions.

Now the religious community in New York is discovering that it takes more than faith to survive in the current political climate. Rather than slam the get-together between O'Connor and Sharpton as New York Times columnist Abe Rosenthal did yesterday, we should welcome the possibility that religious leaders will fill the political vacuum created by the tongue-tied Democrats.

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