

by *Bill Berkowitz*

David Kuo's new book 'Tempting Faith' confirms that the faith-based initiative is little more than part of a political-religious patronage system

David Kuo may have lost his faith in the Bush Administration, but he has not lost his faith. These days, Kuo is at once profoundly disappointed and yet still extremely hopeful. He is disappointed that President Bush has not kept his promise to fully fund faith-based programs aimed at helping the poor. He is hopeful that conservative evangelical Christians will consider taking a time-out from politics and reconsider their involvement in partisan politics.

Although under attack by Team Bush and its surrogates -- some in the administration have called him naive and one movement conservative branded him an "addition to the axis of evil" -- Kuo has a lot more on his plate than merely responding to his critics; although to his credit he has responded to them with remarkable clarity.

During a recent interview with PBS's Tavis Smiley, Kuo pled guilty to being an "optimist." However, in response to charges that he is naive, he pointed out that given that he had worked with such conservative mega-stars as former Attorney General John Ashcroft, Bill Bennett, for Christian Coalition executive director Ralph Reed and the C.I.A., he could "be accused of being a lot of things... [but] I am not really naive."

Kuo, the former second-in-command at the White House Office on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, and a true believer in the power of faith-based organizations to help the poor, has written a new and controversial book titled "Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction." He comes to this task from the vantage point of having served in the White House Office for three years (he resigned in December 2003 after being diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor that is still growing slowly, giving him, by his own account, perhaps five or 10 years to live) and having been fully involved in the evolution of the faith-based initiative from its inception as the highly touted compassionate conservative centerpiece of the president's domestic agenda to its current status as under-funded afterthought.

"Tempting Faith" is full of provocative revelations; from how the Bush White House took every opportunity to politicize the initiative to how ideologically-minded officials frequently rejected applications for federal faith-based funds because they came from non-Christian applicants; from revealing how administration operatives mocked and ridiculed leaders of the Christian Right to how the very essence of the initiative's charge to help the poor was reduced to platitudes.

Although his critics have raised questions about the timing of the book's release (a few weeks before the critical mid-term election), those same naysayers cannot question Kuo's conservative credentials. That's because Kuo's resume includes working for the National Right to Life Committee and the CIA, writing

speeches for Reed and the Rev. Pat Robertson and stints with such top-shelf conservatives as Bennett, Ashcroft, Bob Dole, and Congressman J.C. Watts.

Kuo's book is far more than inside baseball, although there is enough inside stuff to satisfy any outsider.

For example, Kuo, who is currently the Washington editor of the religion-focused website, Beliefnet, recently told Leslie Stahl of "60 Minutes" that words like "nuts" and "goofy" was thrown around by White House staffers when talking about evangelicals: They referred to Pat Robertson as "insane," Jerry Falwell as "ridiculous," and James Dobson as having "to be controlled."

Kuo argued that the GOP has convinced Christian leaders "that Jesus came primarily for a political agenda, and recently primarily a right-wing political agenda -- as if this culture war is a war for God. And it's not a war for God, it's a war for politics. And that's a huge difference."

Kuo pointed out that "God and politics had become very much fused together into a sort of a single entity. Where, in a way, politics was the fourth part of the trinity. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and God the politician."

"I feel like it was more spiritually wrong. You're taking the sacred and you're making it profane. You're taking Jesus and reducing him to some precinct captain, to some get-out-the-vote guy." Kuo added, "[T]he name of God is just being destroyed in the name of politics."

But, as Kuo told Tavis Smiley, his book is also "an intensely personal political and spiritual memoir. This is a deeply personal book about my own experience. About finding God, right? About growing up in a home where my mom, who is a descendent of Jefferson Davis, worked on an interracial Christian commune in the 1950s. I grew up with the passion in my heart for the poor and for civil rights."

While his conservative critics and Bush Administration surrogates are these days otherwise occupied doing back flips over, and moon walking through a series of past and ongoing political missteps and scandals, and the debacle that is Iraq, Kuo reviewed the past and is focusing on the future.

"I feel a pressing spiritual need to say what I think is important," Kuo told the Washington Post. "And I really think that what is important is to be able to warn Christians about politics, that they should not throw so much at politics, because they're being used, and it will not answer the problems, and it corrupts the name of the God we're trying to serve."

Therefore, Kuo is suggesting that conservative evangelical Christians consider taking a two-year time-out from politics; he calls it taking a "fast" from politics. "For two years, instead of giving \$200 million to the RNC, let's give it to those charities that the Bush Administration was supposed to be supporting," Kuo told Smiley. "Let's spend more time with our families. Let's love more. Because what is it that Jesus told us to do? He didn't tell us to go out and court precinct captains. He didn't tell us to fight for abortion or against abortion, nor for or against homosexuality.

"He said love your neighbor. He said serve those who are in need... What did he say is the criteria for entering the kingdom of God? It's did you visit me in prison? It's hard stuff; it's bracing stuff. Politics is easy, Following God is hard. Let's try that following God thing."

Although Kuo's book details his disappointment with the president's faith-based initiative, it should be noted that the initiative has taken hold in nearly a dozen government agencies, is rapidly spreading its tentacles to state governments, and although it hasn't fulfilled its financial promises, it has handed out several billion dollars to religious organizations.

Faith-based Confidential by Bill Berkowitz