



Guest commentary: Insurance mandate for birth control attacks religious liberty, should be defeated

Nearly three years after President Barack Obama called for the protection of conscience rights at the University of Notre Dame, not only has he failed to honor his words, last month he authorized perhaps the most egregious and sweeping intrusion into the religious liberty and conscience rights of every American citizen.

On January 20 the Obama Administration announced through the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) that religious employers who serve persons of any faith or those of no faith at all must provide in their health benefit plans contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs. In effect, the mandate forces charitable and educational institutions, against their conscience, to pay for services they have long held as immoral.

The mandate has rightly elicited a vociferous national response from nearly every Catholic bishop in the United States, as well as prominent members of Jewish, Evangelical, Southern Baptist and other faith traditions, many of whom do not share Catholic teaching on contraception but agree that conscience and religious f

reedom must be protected. According to a news release from the National Association of Evangelicals opposing the HHS mandate: "Freedom of conscience is a sacred gift from God, not a grant from the state. No government has the right to compel its citizens to violate their conscience."

The Washington Post, USA Today, Detroit News, New York Daily News and several other editorial pages have also opposed the HHS mandate, with the USA Today opining "...the Obama Administration didn't just cross the line. It galloped over it....that's contrary to both Catholic doctrine and constitutional guarantees of religious freedom."

While national news outlets are highlighting the administration's attack on religious freedom, Catholics of all political persuasions are unified in their opposition to this mandate, including those who supported the president's health care reform law. Messages from everyday Catholics in Michigan and throughout the country are being sent to members of Congress, numbering in the tens of thousands.

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If the president's decision to trample on the First Amendment right to religious liberty has accomplished anything, it has united Catholics who otherwise may disagree on some policy matters. Michael Sean Winters, a blogger for the liberal-leaning Catholic paper the National Catholic Reporter, for example, wrote "I accuse you, Mr. President, of failing to live out the respect for diversity that you so properly and beautifully proclaimed as a cardinal virtue at Notre Dame."

The Catholic Church, and I suspect those of many other established faith traditions, will not acquiesce to this unjust mandate.

There is no place in America for those who wish to trample on First Amendment rights and turn people of faith into second class citizens. Many of our parents and grandparents who helped to build this great nation, its institutions, infrastructure, towns and cities, did not come to this country only to have their posterity stripped of their God-given rights.

The United States has maintained, since gaining its independence, a healthy and functional approach to ensure those with established religious beliefs are protected from state intervention. In 1804 President Thomas Jefferson reassured the Ursuline Sisters of New Orleans, who wrote the president with concern over their property rights, "that your institution will be permitted to govern itself according to its own voluntary rules, without interference from the civil authority."

Some 208 years later one could state that the HHS mandate leaves President Jefferson's protection of religious liberty as an archaic remnant of centuries past. Surely, depressing and archiving to history

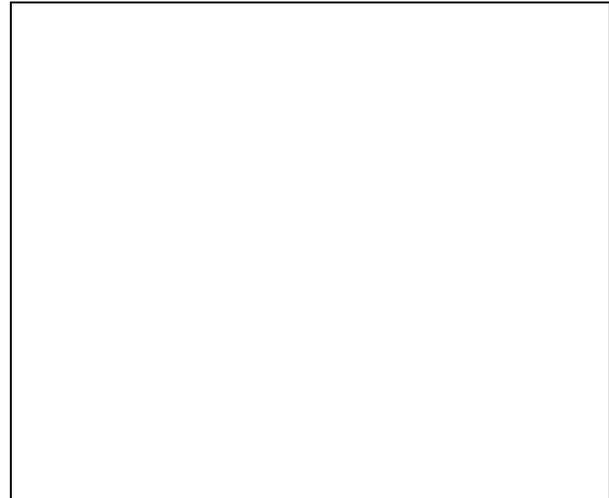
the Founding Fathers' protection of religious freedom would have disastrous consequences for our pluralistic democratic society and the common good in these United States of America.

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