

## **“Religious Liberty on Trial in America”**

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This past Thursday, I watched with great interest the hearing held by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, which was titled, “Lines Crossed: Separation of Church and State. Has the Obama Administration Trampled on Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Conscience?” The purpose of the hearing was to hear testimony from those opposed to the recent decision by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) requiring religious employers to cover contraceptives, even those that can kill unborn children.

If you have turned on a television or listened to the radio these last couple of weeks, you have no doubt heard something about this. The public outcry against the decision, which, contrary to the way the media portrayed it as being a showdown between the Obama Administration and the Roman Catholic Church, came from all sorts of citizens in our country, both religious and non-religious. That public outcry led President Obama to hold a press conference on Friday, February 10, to announce that an “accommodation” to the decision had been made, which would supposedly protect the religious liberties of those religious institutions whose tenets prevent them from covering some of the contraceptives they were previously mandated to cover. However, the “accommodation” really turned out to be no accommodation at all, since those religious institutions who own their own insurance programs would still be required to pay for the contraceptives in question, thus being forced to violate not only their religious tenets, but also the consciences of their adherents. Thus, the hearing spoken of above was called.

Rev. Dr. Matthew Harrison, the President of the church body to which I belong, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, was called upon to sit on the first panel of witnesses at the hearing, along with a Roman Catholic Bishop, two Baptist Ministers, and a Jewish Rabbi. All five men were united in their testimony against this HHS decision and its supposed “accommodation,” making it vividly clear that it violated the religious liberty that serves as one of the major pillars upon which our great country was built. I was proud of all of them for being there to defend that liberty, as it is currently being threatened in a very real way today.

You will no doubt hear from the media that this is a political issue, or that it is a women’s health issue, but it is not, my friends. This is religious liberty issue. This HHS decision tramples upon the First Amendment of our Constitution, which is something that should greatly concern all Americans, whether Republican, Democrat, Christian, Jew, Muslim, or any other religious or non-religious adherents. I pray that the citizens of America will band together to fight against this oppression and that our current presidential administration, as well as all future administrations, will realize that religious liberty is still as important to us today as it was to our founding fathers. With that said, I’d like to conclude this article with the statement released by my church body’s president earlier this week:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In response to President Obama’s announcement Friday concerning an “accommodation” to a previous mandate that health plans must cover all forms of birth control (even those that can kill the unborn), The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) remains deeply concerned. We strongly object to the use of drugs and procedures that are used to take the lives of unborn children, who are persons in the sight of God from the time of conception. Drugs such as “Plan B” and “Ella,” which are still included in the mandate, can work post-conception to cause the death of the developing child, so don’t be fooled by statements to the contrary.

We see President Obama’s action Friday as significant, in that it appears to have been prompted by the many voices united in concern over an infringement of our religious liberties. But the “accommodation” did not expand the exemption for religious employers, nor did it restrict the mandate in any way. It simply described a temporary enforcement delay and a possible future change—a change that, unfortunately, would not adequately protect religious freedom or unborn lives.

We remain opposed to this mandate because it runs counter to the biblical truth of the sanctity of human life. We are committed to working to ensure that we remain free to practice the teachings of our faith, that our religious rights are not violated, and that our rights of conscience are retained. Freedom of religion extends beyond the practice of our faith in houses of worship. We must be free to put our faith into action in the public square, and, in response to Christ's call, demonstrate His mercy through our love and compassion for all people according to the clear mandate of Holy Scripture.

The government has overstepped its bounds. This controversy is not merely about "birth control" and the Catholic Church's views about it. It's about mandating that we provide medications which kill life in the womb. And moreover, and perhaps even more ominous, it is about an overzealous government forcing coercive provisions that violate the consciences and rights of its citizens. We can no longer expect a favored position for Christianity in this country. But we can, as citizens of this great nation, fight for constitutional sanity against secularizing forces. As we have vividly experienced in discriminatory state legislation with respect to homosexual adoption, we, and our institutions (and those of other religious citizens of good will), are being robbed of the right to the free exercise of religion absent government intrusion or threat. The next assault will come upon church-related retirement facilities. How much longer will it be legal in this country to believe and act according to the dictates of biblical and creedal Christianity?

Jesus bids us, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17). We will pray for and support our government where we can, but our consciences and lives belong to God.

In His peace,  
Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, President of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.

In Christ,  
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