

Religious freedom and the need to wake up

By Archbishop Charles J. Chaput



“IRS officials have, of course, confessed that they inappropriately targeted conservative groups — especially those with ‘tea party’ or ‘patriot’ in their names — for extra scrutiny when they sought non-profit status. Allegations of abuse or harassment have since broadened to include groups conducting grassroots projects to ‘make

America a better place to live,’ to promote classes about the U.S. Constitution or to raise support for Israel.

“However, it now appears the IRS also challenged some individuals and religious groups that, while defending key elements of their faith traditions, have criticized projects dear to the current White House, such as health-care reform, abortion rights and same-sex marriage.”

Terry Mattingly, director, Washington Journalism Center; weekly column, May 22

Let’s begin this week with a simple statement of fact. America’s Catholic bishops started pressing for adequate health-care coverage for all of our nation’s people *decades* before the current administration took office. In the Christian tradition, basic medical care is a matter of social justice and human dignity. Even now, even with the financial and structural flaws that critics believe undermine the 2010 Affordable Care Act, the bishops continue to share the goal of real health-care reform and affordable medical care for all Americans.

But health care has now morphed into a religious liberty issue provoked entirely – and needlessly — by the current White House. Despite a few small concessions under pressure, the administration refuses to withdraw or reasonably modify a Health and Human Services (HHS) contraceptive mandate that violates the moral and religious convictions of many individuals, private employers and religiously affiliated and inspired organizations.

Coupled with the White House’s refusal to uphold the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, and its astonishing disregard for the unique nature of religious freedom displayed by its arguments in a 9-0 defeat in the 2012 *Hosanna-Tabor* Supreme Court decision, the HHS mandate can only be understood as a form of coercion. Access to inexpensive contraception is a problem nowhere in the United States. The mandate is thus an ideological statement; the imposition of a preferential option for infertility. And if millions of Americans disagree with it on principle – too bad.

The fraud at the heart of our nation’s “reproductive rights” vocabulary runs very deep and very high. In his April 26 remarks to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America,

the president never once used the word “abortion,” despite the ongoing Kermit Gosnell trial in Philadelphia and despite Planned Parenthood’s massive role in the abortion industry.

Likewise, as Anthony Esolen recently noted so well-- <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2013/05/10193/>, NARAL Pro-Choice America’s public statement on the conviction of abortionist Gosnell was a masterpiece of corrupt and misleading language. Gosnell was found guilty of *murdering three infants*, but no such mention was made anywhere in the NARAL Pro-Choice America statement.

None of this is finally surprising. Christians concerned for the rights of unborn children, as well as for their mothers, have dealt with bias in the media and dishonesty from the nation’s abortion syndicate for 40 years. But there’s a special lesson in our current situation. Anyone who thinks that our country’s neuralgic sexuality issues can somehow be worked out respectfully in the public square in the years ahead, without a parallel and vigorous defense of religious freedom, had better think again.

As Mollie Hemingway--<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/getreligion/2013/05/irs-scandal-and-easy-religion-ghosts/#more-105402>, Stephen Krason--<http://www.crisismagazine.com/2013/irs-targets-catholic-critics-of-obama-regime>, and Wayne Laugesen--<http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/picture-emerges-that-irs-targeted-obamas-political-opponents-and-critics> have all pointed out, the current IRS scandal – involving IRS targeting of “conservative” organizations – also has a religious dimension. Selective IRS pressure on religious individuals and organizations has drawn very little media attention. Nor should we expect any, any time soon, for reasons Hemingway-- <http://www.intercollegiatereview.com/index.php/2013/05/20/how-to-be-a-really-lousy-journalist-for-fun-and-profit> outlines for the Intercollegiate Review. But the latest IRS ugliness is a hint of the treatment disfavored religious groups may face in the future, if we sleep through the national discussion of religious liberty now.

The day when Americans could take the Founders’ understanding of religious freedom as a given is over. We need to wake up.

American Catholics are called to observe a second annual “Fortnight for Freedom” this June 21-July 4. For more information, see the [website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#).

To send a message to your elected officials in support of religious liberty, [click here](#) for the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference’s [Action Center](#).