



## FREE EXERCISE OF RELIGION: Putting Beliefs into Practice

*An Open Letter from Religious Leaders in the United States to All Americans*

Dear Friends,

Religious institutions are established because of religious beliefs and convictions. Such institutions include not only churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship, but also schools and colleges, shelters and community kitchens, adoption agencies and hospitals, organizations that provide care and services during natural disasters, and countless other organizations that exist to put specific religious beliefs into practice. Many such organizations have provided services and care to both members and non-members of their religious communities since before the Revolutionary War, saving and improving the lives of countless American citizens.

As religious leaders from a variety of perspectives and communities, we are compelled to make known our protest against the incursion of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) into the realm of religious liberty. HHS has mandated that religious institutions, with only a narrow religious exception, must provide access to certain contraceptive benefits, even if the covered medications or procedures are contradictory to their beliefs. We who oppose the application of this mandate to religious institutions include not only the leaders of religious groups morally opposed to contraception, but also leaders of other religious groups that do not share that particular moral conviction.

That we share an opposition to the mandate to religious institutions while disagreeing about specific moral teachings is a crucial fact. Religious freedom is the principle on which we stand. Because of differing understandings of moral and religious authority, people of good will can and often do come to different conclusions about moral questions. Yet, even we who hold differing convictions on specific moral issues are united in the conviction that no religious institution should be penalized for refusing to go against its beliefs. The issue is the First Amendment, not specific moral teachings or specific products or services.

The HHS mandate implicitly acknowledged that an incursion into religion is involved in the mandate. However, the narrowness of the proposed exemption is revealing for it applies only to religious organizations that serve or support their own members. In so doing, the government is establishing favored and disfavored religious organizations: a privatized religious organization that serves only itself is exempted from regulation, while one that believes it should also serve the public beyond its membership is denied a religious exemption. The so-called accommodation and the subsequent Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (AN-PRM) do little or nothing to alleviate the problem.

No government should tell religious organizations either what to believe or how to put their beliefs into practice. We indeed hold this to be an unalienable, constitutional right. If freedom of religion is a constitutional value to be protected, then institutions developed by religious groups to implement their core beliefs in education, in care for the sick or suffering, and in other tasks must also be protected. Only by doing so can the free *exercise* of religion have any meaning. The HHS mandate prevents this free exercise. For the well-being of our country, we oppose the application of the contraceptive mandate to religious institutions and plead for its retraction.

Sincerely yours,

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