

The Catholic Church's religious blackmail of secular government

By Susan Jacoby, Washington Post online

Q: U.S. Catholic bishops are defending their direct involvement in congressional deliberations over health-care reform, saying that church leaders have a duty to raise moral concerns on any issue, including abortion rights and health care for the poor. Do you agree? What role should religious leaders have -- or not have -- in government policymaking?

Of course the Roman Catholic Church, like every other institution, has a right to uphold and fight for its moral beliefs in the public life of this nation. What the church is doing, however, is attempting to hold Americans who do not agree with its views hostage. The archbishops have made it quite clear that they are going to try to torpedo any health care reform bill that does not severely limit access to abortion. The church has not been successful at this kind of political blackmail since the 1930s and 1940s, when it fought a long, highly successful battle against birth control at both the state and national level—a battle that, like the current battle over abortion, left well-off women free to do what they wanted and denied reproductive choice to the poor. And when anyone criticizes the church hierarchy for its actions on this or any other political front, the bishops cry "anti-Catholic."

The abortion issues is not the only front on which the church is attempting to blackmail secular government officials. The [Archdiocese of Washington's threat to the D.C. Council](#) to pull out of running social service programs unless the council rewrites its proposed same-sex marriage bill is even more outrageous. And it demonstrates what secularists have been saying for years: funneling public money through religious institutions is a terrible idea.

The church is getting away with this for several reasons. First, the Democratic Party left itself open to this kind of blackmail from the moment it began playing footsie with the "religious left"—a coalition of Catholic leaders and evangelical Protestants who are socially liberal but culturally conservative. Unlike the Protestant Christian right, the Catholic hierarchy supports liberal economic programs and tends to be leery of war. But you don't see the church putting pressure on legislators, and threatening to pick up its marbles and go back to the sanctuary, if the lawmakers vote for higher military appropriations or against tax breaks for the rich. No, the church saves its real muscle for opposing abortion, sex education, international aid programs that emphasize condoms and, of course, gay rights.

The church levels charges of "anti-Catholicism" whenever the media air any ecclesiastical dirty linen. The most recent example was New York [Archbishop Timothy Dolan's response](#) to a piece by the New York Times op-ed columnist Marureen Dowd on the church's second-class treatment of women and nuns. On his blog, Dolan wrote, "In a diatribe that rightly never would have passed muster with the editors had it so criticized an Islamic, Jewish, or African-American religious issue, she [Dowd] digs deep into the nativist handbook to use every anti-Catholic caricature possible, from the Inquisition to the Holocaust, condoms, obsession with sex, pedophile priests, and oppression of women...." I guess the church had nothing to do with the Inquisition; Pope Pius XII was a courageous fighter against the Nazi extermination of Jews; the present pope and his predecessor have not campaigned

agaist condoms throughout Africa, and the pedophile priest scandal is the result not of a systematic coverup by the church hierarchy but was caused by the sins of a few "bad apples."

It is also comical to hear the archbishop claim that any criticism of the church is straight out of an old "nativist handbook." The bishops of (long-ago) Irish descent who still dominate the American church hierarchy—even though church membership would be shrinking were it not for immigration from Latin America—are not immigrants and haven't been for eight or nine generations. We are criticizing your religious leadership and political positions, Archbishop Dolan—and it has nothing to do with the fact that some of your ancestors may have fled the potato famine. You're as American as apple...no, as American as all of the cultural warriors of the Protestant Christian right.

The real concern of the church hierarchy is dissent from lay Catholics, and that is why archbishops feathers' are more ruffled when the last name of a critic is Dowd or O'Malley rather than Goldstein or Horowitz. (My mother's maiden name is Broderick, by the way.) The groundbreaking reporting on the pedophile priest scandal was done by journalists for The National Catholic Reporter, as well as by The Boston Globe, which also employs a many reporters with good old Irish names and Catholic backgrounds. The press is not criticizing "Catholics." As the hierarchy knows perfectly well, the majority of Catholics do not agree with their bishops' and pope's position on opposition to married priests, to women priests, to contraception, to divorce, and to legal abortion. The bishops can't persuade a majority of those raised in their own faith to support their positions, so they lash out at critics and try to intimidate the press with charges of anti-Catholicism.

The alliance between the Catholic church hierarchy and the Protestant Christian right on issues at the intersection of church and state is a real threat to secular government. This alliance may already force liberals to choose between a health care reform bill that will result in much less private insurance coverage for abortion and no health care reform bill at all. Rest assured that the emboldened church (which benefits from the historical ignorance of most Americans, who do not know about the role of the church in delaying access to contraceptives for decades) will apply the same pressure to try to get more government subsidies for religious schools and to, once again, cut off government aid for science-based population control and anti-AIDS programs abroad.

Yes, the church has the right to lobby for its beliefs and use a minority of legislators to block the will of the majority. And those of us who disagree have a right and a duty to battle this religious blackmail of our secular government.

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