

The Freedom of Religious Oppression?



Linnéa Sandström discusses the ways in which religion and reproductive health collide in current US political discourse and questions the paradoxical relationship between the freedom of religious multiplicity and the right of women to control their reproductive capacities.

For the past few decades in the US, reproductive health policies have taken up a large proportion of the nation's political conversation and have since intensified during the run for the Republican presidential nomination. If the debate is not about abortion, it is about the availability of contraception and the morning after pill, issues that have recently gone hand in hand. Admittedly they encapsulate broadly different arguments, including widely different moral issues, but both orientate around the issue of women's reproductive health and rights. The contraception debate has extended from governmental intrusion into the private sphere into a moral debate, with conservative representative Jim Jordan calling contraception "**abortion-inducing drugs.**" The compromise President Obama announced on Friday (10/02/2012) showed how the requirement of religious institutions to provide free contraceptives was withdrawn on religious moral objections (see videos in **this article**). Catholic bishops **refuse to compromise** even though religious institutions would not be required to directly pay for contraception for their employees with insurance companies taking over that responsibility instead. The bishops are aiming to dismantle the new legislation so no institutions or employers would have to cover contraception if they had religious objections. The debate is so polarised it has been called both the "**war on women's health care**" and the "**war on religion**". It even led Al Jazeera to ask in **a tweet** recently if US politics is endangering women's health.

Certainly, a lot of this makes for entertaining politics in the name of buzzwords and sensationalism, especially during the Republican race to the presidential nomination. But behind the phrase "freedom of religion" lies another issue: the way in which religious rhetoric is actively being used to continue oppressing women's sexuality and freedom to choose.

While the Republican presidential hopefuls and religious leaders, in particular the Catholic church, continues to claim that Obama is violating the freedom of religion by forcing religious employers and institutions to provide contraception as part of health insurance, polls keep producing results to the contrary. It becomes apparent that the majority of self-identified Catholics agree with free and accessible contraception, **even when Catholic institutions would have to provide them**, and what is more, 98% of self-identified Catholic women **use contraception themselves**. A more **recent poll by Fox News** released on Friday shows an even larger percentage being favourable to universal access to contraception. The worries about immorality and the outrage therefore seems to lie mainly with a handful of white men who are running for the presidential nomination or are in political positions and therefore have something to gain from the sensationalism. **Mitt Romney has called** Obama's plan an "assault on religion" and "a real blow... to our friends of the Catholic faith." Presumably he means the friends who are part of the clergy of the Catholic Church and are as such not sexually active, and not the Catholic friends mentioned above who overwhelmingly agree with the plan. (This is the same Mitt Romney whose state's health-insurance law expanded access to contraception – see above link.) One may therefore ask how many of those arguing against wider access to contraception knows about the importance of it for women's ability for self-determination and sexual health. Whether the arguments are being made on moral grounds or anti-infringement grounds – and the anti-infringement argument certainly seems to be **used** to defend the moral argument – there is little doubt it will affect women who are Catholic and non-

Catholic, religious and non-religious, who are employed by any of these institutions seeking exemption.

But this post is not an advocacy post for universal contraception to women (fellow LSE MSc Gender, Development and Globalisation student Daniela Ramirez already made a really good case for it [here](#); it is about what effects religious rhetoric has on women's right to self-determination.

Since its founding and continuing appropriation of land, the US has a tradition of tolerance for religious heterogeneity, even those that were frowned upon across the Atlantic, that tradition runs strong today – although not without problem. It is one of the great things about the country and runs hand-in-hand with a strong belief in the freedom of expression. But what happens when freedom of religion and freedom of expression are used to restrict others' choices?

The debate in the US around contraception and abortion does not only affect religious people. The pro-life lobby, as they call themselves, some of which are also part of the anti-contraception lobby, is not looking for a choice that allows religious people who disagree with the use of contraception to pass on using these services, *because no one is forced to use them*. There are no federally forced abortions, mandatory use of contraception or restrictions on practicing your religion. That is not the issue. The issue is that some people are trying to force their religiously derived opinions on others. And it is mainly those few mentioned previously, who have the access to media and power, who are trying to prevent women from accessing health care, contraception and abortion services, all in the name of "religious beliefs and moral convictions." Whose religious beliefs and moral convictions? In a day and place where it is fully possible to be a practicing religious person and still believe that *women have the ultimate choice over their reproduction* that would be the morals and beliefs of those few who shape the discourse. Variance in religious belief and practise is great so why are a minority of people allowed to take up such a large space in the national discourse and to determine *the* 'religious perspective'?

Freedom of religion is a beautiful thing. It allows people to retain their individual faiths without fearing oppression or discrimination by others because of their faith. But does that freedom of religion not extend to others as well? If you are a non-religious person, an agnostic, a Christian who believes people should have the choice about contraception and abortion but would not necessarily go down that road yourself, where is your freedom then? If one would listen to the debates in the current Republican presidential race, those rights do not exist. The argument is that what ought to exist instead are the morals and values – the religion – of a minority of white men. This has been illustrated by the [push for defunding Planned Parenthood](#), the outrage over including free access to contraceptives in health plans and the obsession with outlawing abortion. These actions all amount to using the 'freedom of religion' argument to restrict people's choices – and gain political ground. The consequence would be a return to 'ye olden days' when women did not have a right to control their own reproductive systems, and their health would lie in the hands of others.

With the reported overwhelming majority of Catholic women using contraception, while their religious leaders and "representatives" argue against access to said contraception on a religious basis, it is hardly seems fair. At least some arguments belonging to the abortion debate are more straightforward, focusing instead on the argument over where life begins. This argument is far more honest than one hiding behind the freedom of religion to restrict choices of all women about their reproductive health, when even the majority of those said to be outraged are making the same choices as those who are not.

So the question I want to ask is: at what point does the rhetoric of religious freedom become a rhetoric of religious oppression?

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marriage plays in making a good citizen and hopes to figure out a way to apply feminist and non-feminist political theory to policy. She has kept a blog called Feminism and Tea for the past few years and can often be found discussing gender on various social networks when not feeding her news addiction.

February 13th, 2012 | [Politics](#), [Society](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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