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Faith leaders call for religious exemption from LGBT executive order

Joshua J. McElwee | Jul. 2, 2014 NCR Today
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One day after the Supreme Court ruled that some corporations should be afforded exemptions based on religious grounds from providing contraceptive coverage to employees, a number of prominent faith leaders asked the Obama administration to include similar exemptions in an expected executive order barring LGBT discrimination by federal contractors.

The letter, first reported [1] by *The Washington Post* on Wednesday, was sent Tuesday from the leaders, who include a number of the president's former advisers.

In considering the executive order, the leaders ask Obama to value a diversity of thought and to consider how many faith-based social groups contract with the federal government to provide food, charity, housing, or other assistance to those in need.

?While the nation has undergone incredible social and legal change over the last decade, we still live in a nation with different beliefs about sexuality," reads the letter, which is signed, among others, by Catholic Charities USA CEO Fr. Larry Snyder, Catholic University professor Stephen Schneck, and influential protestant pastors Rick Warren and Joel Hunter.

?An executive order that does not include a religious exemption will significantly and substantively hamper the work of some religious organizations that are best equipped to serve in common purpose with the federal government.,? it states. ?When the capacity of religious organizations is limited, the common good suffers.?

The leaders were writing regarding news in June that the Obama administration is beginning consultations [2] in preparation for issuing the executive order, which would reportedly only effect groups that contract with the federal government and not those who receive grants, like charity agencies.

Obama is considering the executive order following Congress' failure to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which prohibits employers with companies of more than 15 people from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. While ENDA passed the Senate 64-32 in November, it is yet to be considered in the House of Representatives this Congress.

The faith leaders call on Obama to adopt language used in the Senate bill to exempt religious groups from its effect.

Schneck, who heads up Catholic University's Institute for Religion and Democracy, served as a leader of Catholic outreach for Obama's 2012 campaign. Another Obama campaign adviser, Michael Wear, also signed the letter. He was the faith director for Obama's 2012 campaign.

A number of U.S. archbishops have preemptively cited [3] "great concern" with the expected executive order.

Monday's Supreme Court ruling concerned a mandate from the Department of Health and Human Services as part of the implementation of the healthcare law that companies must cover contraceptive services in their employees' healthcare plans.

In a contentious 5-4 decision, the Court held [4] that some private companies should be given the same accommodations to the mandate as religious nonprofits like churches and charities.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/faith-leaders-exempt-religious-groups-from-order-barring-lgbt-bias-in-hiring/2014/07/02/d82e68da-01f1-11e4-b8ff-89afd3fad6bd_story.html
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