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Bishops' expansion of conscience exemptions is much broader than we think

Jamie Manson | Feb. 10, 2012 NCR Today

If you listened carefully to the "PBS News Hour" interview with Anthony Picarello [1], general counsel for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and a chill didn't go up your spine, allow me to highlight one crucial moment in the conversation that ought to be cause for alarm.

Co-host Ray Suarez questioned Picarello about the breadth of protection sought by the bishops. Here is his response:

> **ANTHONY PICARELLO**: ... I think, again, what we're looking for in terms of breadth is to protect the religious liberty interests and consciences of all of those who would be affected by the mandate. So that means employers -- religious employers, yes, but also employers with religious people running them or other people of conviction who are running them.
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> It means religious insurers. And they do exist. Under this mandate, they're required to include in their policies that they write things that they don't agree with as a matter of religious conviction, and individuals as well who have to pay for it through their premiums.
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> So all of those entities are the folks whose conscience rights are affected. And the bishops are concerned with all of them, and they have advocated for all of them.
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> **RAY SUAREZ**: It sounds like you want something even broader, not just for the colleges and universities and hospitals, but even Catholic employers.
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> **ANTHONY PICARELLO**: Well, yes, because the principle here is that of religious liberty. And it's not only religious employers that are entitled to religious liberty under the Constitution.
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> So all of those should be protected. They should not be put in this situation in the first place. They shouldn't be required by the government to provide, through sponsorship and subsidy, benefits that are offensive to their moral beliefs.

Apparently, not only are the bishops asking for exemptions for Catholic institutions, but also for "employers with religious people running them or other people of conviction who are running them."

So if I'm working for a secular company that is run by a deeply committed evangelical or a conservative Catholic, should I, too, have to worry that I might not have access to the health care or other benefits guaranteed to me under the law?

Earlier in the interview, Piccarello used the "if you don't like the Church's rules, don't work for a Church institution" argument. But this quote seems to indicate that, if the bishops have their way, any employer with

strong religious beliefs would be free to subjugate his employees to his religious ideology.

Now *that* is a slippery slope if ever I've heard of one.

Which leads me to wonder, at what point does the supposed claim to religious freedom start to trump that other constitutional guarantee known as "equal protection under the law"?

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