

Standing Athwart the Totalitarianism of the Secular State

By Rev. Robert Barron

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In my years as an observer of and commentator upon things religious, I've become rather accustomed to radical positions. There is just something about religion that can bring out the irrational in both its advocates and opponents. For the most part, therefore, over-the-top opinion pieces and Internet commentary just roll off my back, but occasionally something comes along that is so egregious and indefensible that I sit up and take notice. This happened twice last Sunday when I read editorials in the pages of the two major newspapers in my hometown.

Neil Steinberg, a columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times, who over the years has made eminently plain his animosity toward religion, chimed in on the Obama administration's recent dictate that all insurance plans in the United States, including those used by Catholic institutions, must include provisions for contraception, sterilization, and certain abortifacient drugs, all of which are repugnant to Catholic morality. Though I could scarcely believe it, Steinberg used this as occasion to bemoan the imperialism of Catholicism! He took the American Bishops' Conference's strong objection to the Obama plan as just another sad sign that religious people want to "impose" their views on the rest of the country. In point of fact, the Bishops were complaining that the administration's move, which goes against the express promise that the President has repeatedly made that conscience protections would remain in place, represents the imposition of a secularist ideology on those who object to it. Catholics aren't the least bit interested in legally prohibiting the use of contraceptives; they are complaining about a government mandate that would require them to pay for insurance coverage for actions that they find ethically problematic.

What is puzzling to say the least is Steinberg's failure to see that the oppressor in this case, the force that is trying to impose itself on others by means of the law, is not the Catholic Church, but precisely the liberal state. A particularly chilling expression of this oppression was the statement made by HHS Secretary Kathleen Sabelius in regard to the administration's move. She blithely told religious people, as if she were throwing them a bone, that she was pleased to grant them a year to adjust to the new regulations before she made them mandatory through law. As Cardinal-elect Timothy Dolan of New York put it succinctly, "the administration is telling Catholics that they have a year to figure out how to violate their consciences."

An even more startling article appeared in the same day's edition of the Chicago Tribune, written by the mystery novelist Sara Paretsky and bearing the title "Our Bodies, Our Fertility." We find in this piece the same confusion that we critiqued in Steinberg's screed, namely, the baffling claim that the Bishops' objection to the Obama administration directive amounts to religious imperialism. But there is something else in Paretsky's article, something that is even more disturbing. Again and again, she defends the view that women's sexuality is an arena that ought to be utterly free of any and all legal or moral discipline. Referring to the Roe v. Wade decision, Paretsky says, "Justice Brennan....believed, as I believe, that women are full citizens and moral agents, able to make decisions without a father, a church, or a legislator telling us what to do." Later she laments, "How can bishops, legislatures, or judges claim the right to decide how each woman should react to her unique situation?" If this strikes you as the petulance of a child, you're right.

Every area of life—economics, politics, business, sports, academics, and yes, sexuality—is planted thick with laws, that is to say, rules that are established by authorities and enforced by people with the power to do so. This is because the consensus of centuries is that these arenas are important to human flourishing and hence those who participate in them must be disciplined and directed according to certain objective norms. To the teenager who would like to race at 120 miles down the expressway, the law legitimately says, "you must drive 55." Anti-trust law stands athwart corporate heads who would conspire to fix prices or establish a monopoly. The state can imprison someone who would seek to benefit from the advantages of civil society without paying for them through taxation, etc. To someone who would complain that all of this legality is an affront to his freedom, we would rightly respond, "grow up."

But Paretsky advocates just this kind of radical antinomianism in the arena of a woman's sexuality. In this realm, evidently, freedom is so absolute that anyone—politician, bishop, legislator—who would suggest, for example, that a woman ought not to be permitted to kill the child in her womb is simply a patriarchal oppressor. Here's how she sums up her position: "They (moral and political authorities) see themselves as game wardens, and women as alligators on the loose in the swamp...How do we teach them that women are just as human, and just as capable of making their own choices, as men?" Well... In precisely no area of life are people allowed simply to "make their own choices" thank God. In precisely no area of life are people free from the coercion of the law, thank God. To demonize the formulators of law as "game wardens" and to declare sexuality a law-free zone is an invitation to chaos.

What is particularly troubling in both Steinberg's and Paretsky's articles is that the enemy is clearly identified as the Catholic Church. I think there is a back-handed compliment in this. Liberal totalitarians understand that the Church is perhaps the strongest opponent that stands in their way.