

The question of religious conscience clauses

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Editorial by Terry Sanderson

The pope has opened another can of worms this week by advising all Catholic pharmacists that they should not dispense drugs that he considers “immoral”.

Speaking at the 25th International Congress of Catholic Pharmacists, Ratzinger said that their respect for the dignity of human life should compel Catholic pharmacists to avoid practices that “destroy human life”.

He also insidiously instructed these pharmacists that they should preach to their customers about the “ethical implications of certain drugs” such as those “whose purpose it to prevent an embryo from implanting itself or to shorten a person's life.” So now we can expect to find metaphorical pulpits in our pharmacies, from which those who are supposedly there to fulfil our prescriptions will issue sermons about the evils of abortion and the undesirability of contraception.

Ratzinger insisted that governments should respect the right of pharmacists to object to dispensing drugs that “violate their moral or religious beliefs”. He said conscientious objection “is a right that must be recognised for people exercising this profession so as to enable them not to collaborate directly or indirectly in supplying products that have clearly immoral purposes such as, for example, abortion or euthanasia.”

Finally, Ratzinger told the pharmacists that they must pass these authoritarian notions on to other “young people who enter the pharmaceutical professions to reflect upon the increasingly sensitive ethical implications that their actions and decisions may have.”

Now let's get this straight. Contraception is not compulsory. Nobody in a free country can be forced to have an abortion. Assisted dying is legal in only a very few states, in very limited circumstances and it is not mandatory. So, Catholics who feel very strongly that these things are wrong have a choice – they need not do any of them.

But that's not good enough for the pope. He wants to remove choice away from everyone else. He doesn't just tell his flock that they must not do these things, he tells everybody else that they must do as he says. He wants abortion completely outlawed, he would like to see contraception banned and, of course, any form of assisted dying eradicated.

This overweening arrogance must be resisted. Doctors who do not wish to participate in abortions have a legal opt out, but they are obliged to refer their patient on. Some are now refusing to do even that, saying that it amounts to collusion in the abortion. Some religious pharmacists – Muslim and Christian – are taking away a woman's right to choose contraception, and they do it legally with the consent of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society.

This whole question of 'religious conscience' is getting out of hand. Not only are religious people now demanding that they be exempted from certain aspects of their jobs (not handling alcohol or pork products in supermarkets, complaining about serving homosexuals, wanting to over-ride uniform policies and health and safety regulations) they are constantly seeking new ways to impose their beliefs on to an unwilling public.

We saw this coming two years ago and lobbied the RPS for change, without success. The time is overdue for the Government and professional bodies to tackle this problem. It can be done. In April in the USA, the state of Washington joined California in passing a policy that prohibits pharmacists from failing to dispense prescription drugs for religious or moral reasons. But an attempt to introduce a similar nationwide law will be thwarted by Bush.

The British Government – so easily and willingly manipulated by self-serving religious interests – is likely to approach the problem from the point of view of “how can we accommodate and codify these opt-outs?” rather than “if you don't want to do the job in its entirety, then find another one.”

You would think that in decisions concerning our own personal health we would be autonomous. But no, it seems our choices can be nullified by religious activists. Our freedom to choose in so many areas is rapidly being compromised by the Vatican and the mullahs. And the professional bodies conspire to help them.

It's time to get out the pen and paper and write to your MP. Please let us know about the response you get.

See also: [AC Grayling abortion and conscientious objectors](#)

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