

Tony Perkins: Obama Is No Champion of Religious Freedom

The president of the United States declared Wednesday “Religious Freedom Day.” It commemorates one of the great dates in American history, Jan. 16, 1786, when the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, drafted by Thomas Jefferson, was enacted. That law was famous for declaring the freedom of religious choice and free exercise to be “natural rights of mankind.” Its adoption was a milestone in human history.

It is ironic for President Obama to make pronouncements extolling **religious freedom** when his administration has the worst record protecting religious liberty in American history. That is true both at home and abroad. Here are some examples.

At home, in January 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court rebuked the Obama administration in a 9-0 decision issued in *Hosanna-Tabor v. EEOC*. The case centered on an employment discrimination claim at a Lutheran school. The administration had argued that employment discrimination laws trumped the First Amendment’s religious freedom protections—even those concerning the choice of ministers. The Court rejected this extreme position observing, “We cannot accept the remarkable view that the Religion Clauses have nothing to say about a religious organization’s freedom to select its own ministers.”

In 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius announced that, pursuant to **Obamacare**, employers would be required to provide sterilizations and contraceptives, including some that can cause abortions, with no co-pays. Churches would not be covered by the mandate. However, religious employers including universities, colleges, religious hospitals and soup kitchens would fall under the requirement. Private employers religiously opposed to the mandate would not be exempted either.

This mandate has now culminated in the litigation involving the retail chain **Hobby Lobby**. Hobby Lobby is privately owned by a Christian family, the Greens, who correctly believe that purchasing such insurance will force them to cooperate with the provision of embryo-destructive technologies—**abortion-producing drugs**. They refuse to do this. Hobby Lobby's request for emergency relief has been denied and the company now faces potential Obamacare penalties of approximately \$1.3 million per day—yes, that is per day. The Greens refuse to comply, and the penalties are looming.

Thomas Jefferson would have considered this to be tyranny of the worst kind. Yet, **President Obama** will brook no conscientious objection to his diktat.

President Obama's record of defending **religious liberty** overseas has been terrible as well. Most significant has been the administration's behavior before and after the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, and more specifically, its support for the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a powerful, effective organization that reaches into numerous countries and promotes the adoption of Shariah-based government and the suppression of Western values. The Muslim Brotherhood now controls Egypt, the most populous Arab nation, and that has brought great fear to Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.

American obsequiousness to the Muslim Brotherhood displayed itself in late 2011 after the Egyptian army and government forces killed 28 Copts who were peacefully protesting in Cairo's Maspero area. Many of the protestors were crushed when soldiers drove their vehicles directly into the crowds. Over 200 were injured.

Yet, as the Hudson Institute's Nina Shea noted, the U.S. reaction was disturbingly muted. Our government's statement on Maspero did not recognize that Coptic Christians had been

killed nor did it indicate that they were protesting previous acts of religious intolerance and violence.

Shea notes that these remarks stood in sharp contrast with the government's pointed, forceful comments regarding two attacks on a mosque that took place in northern Israel at roughly the same time.

More recently in 2012 the State Department refused to declare **Boko Haram**, the vicious al-Qaida-linked jihadist group operating primarily in Nigeria, to be a "foreign terrorist organization." Boko Haram espouses the establishment of a Shariah-based government.

According to the Nigerian army's chief, Boko Haram has killed at least 3,000 Nigerians, mostly Christians, since 2009. Those on both the left and right are incredulous that the administration failed to take this step.

So it is, on this Religious Freedom Day, that we should cast a skeptical eye on President Obama's professions of support for religious liberty and look to his actions to understand his relative lack of sympathy for the free exercise of religion. Our president needs to understand that religious liberty is often called our "first freedom" not simply because it is the first of the enumerated rights in the Bill of Rights, but because allegiance to God precedes allegiance to the state.

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