



Obama's EEOC Attacks School's Religious Liberty

The president of a small Catholic college in North Carolina is in a standoff with the Obama administration's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) over demands that the school must offer contraception coverage in its employee health insurance. Belmont Abbey College President William K. Thierfelder says he will shut down his school before doing so, citing the Catholic Church's prohibition on contraception and First Amendment religious liberty rights.



On September 10, the college retained the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty to appeal an August 5 ruling by the EEOC, charging the school with discrimination. In a letter to Thierfelder, the EEOC stated the college "is discriminating based on gender because only females take oral prescription contraceptives. By denying coverage, men are not affected, only women." Thierfelder objected with a letter posted on the school's website, saying: "Belmont Abbey College rejects the notion that by following the moral teachings of the Catholic Church we are discriminating against anyone.... We are simply and honestly exercising the freedom of religion that is protected by the Constitution."

The college hopes to settle amicably, but if no agreement is reached, the next step could be for the EEOC to file a federal discrimination lawsuit. So far, the EEOC refuses to comment on the case, citing confidentiality provisions in the Civil Rights Act.

A precedent to this is the 2004 case against Catholic Charities in California, in which the state Supreme Court ruled that the organization had to cover contraception as part of its employee health-insurance plan. Though Belmont Abbey College is located in North Carolina, a state that requires this coverage but provides exemption for religious institutions, the EEOC's letter states that the discrimination charges are based on gender, not religion, and involve only the change in contraception coverage, not coverage for abortion or sterilization. (Of course, only women get abortions, as well as use oral contraception.)

The conflict is rooted in changes the school made to its health coverage in December 2007 after a faculty member discovered their plan inadvertently covered abortions, prescription contraception, and



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elective sterilization. At the time, Thierfelder explained the changes: “As a Roman Catholic institution, Belmont Abbey College is not able to and will not offer nor subsidize medical services that contradict the clear teaching of the Catholic Church.” Eight employees countered with a complaint filed with the North Carolina EEOC, claiming the college was in violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The local EEOC bureau threw out the discrimination charge in March, but the federal EEOC reversed that ruling in July. The new ruling also charges Belmont Abbey College with retaliating against the eight employees by making their names public. (Interestingly, only two are women.)

The Becket Fund blames the “new administration in Washington” for the reversal. Kevin Hasson, president of the Fund, issued a press release saying, “When he went to Notre Dame and the Vatican, President Obama talked a good game about protecting conscience. But when his administration went to Belmont Abbey, where the rubber meets the road, it was a very different story.” Hasson added, “The EEOC’s action is a direct assault on the principle of conscientious objection itself, and we will resist it vigorously.”

Various organizations across the country have raised their voices in defense of Belmont Abbey College. “Under Obama, the federal government is forcing a small religious institution to commit an act that violates its core values,” said Michael Barnett, director of Leadership Development at American Life League. “This is religious persecution and a clear signal of what Obamacare would bring. This is the government imposing its will against the people’s will.” Family Research Council President Tony Perkins pointed out, “This outrageous attack on the historic and clearly articulated convictions of a religious college demonstrate a growing effort on the part of the radical left to impose their anti-faith agenda on people who hold convictions contrary to those of the secular elite.”

Among Belmont’s supporters are students at other Catholic colleges, bracing for their own battles under Obama’s healthcare reforms. President of De Sales University Students for Life, Larry Meo, complained, “The EEOC is attempting to impose a set of values on a certain group of colleges, and this is the very thing the president spoke against during his campaign.”



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