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Activists gather to plot defense of 'religious liberty'

by Lauren Markoe by Religion News Service

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Catholic bishops have used the Obama administration's contraception mandate as Exhibit A in their high-stakes defense of "religious freedom." But it's not just the bishops who are fuming, and it's not only over contraception.

Like-minded religionists of several denominations -- including Southern Baptist leader Richard Land and Baltimore Archbishop William Lori -- gathered in Washington on Thursday to organize a response to what they see as the sorry state of religious freedom in America today.

"We must all be willing to stand up and tell the government 'no,'" said Land, who heads the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. "Secularists don't like people of faith because the ultimate authority for us is not the state. The ultimate authority is God."

Sponsored by the Ethics and Public Policy Center's American Religious Freedom Program, the daylong summit attracted conservative Catholics, Baptists, Orthodox Jews, Orthodox Christians, Mormons and others, almost all of whom painted a dismal picture of religious freedom.

Much of the rhetoric was less confrontational than Land's, and several speakers from varying denominations called for civility in a debate that has, to some Americans, become unproductively shrill.

A March poll by the Public Religion Research Institute showed that a majority of Americans do not believe that religious liberty is under threat in this country.

"Civility ought to be the hallmark in the way we deal with one another," Elder L. Whitney Clayton of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints told an audience of about 350.

The conference also honored Lori for his work as the Catholic bishops' point man against the birth control

mandate, which would require almost all employee health plans to include free contraception coverage for employees.

Lori received the group's "American Religious Freedom Award" for his "vigorous but gracious defense of religious liberty in the face of increasing hostility and legal and policy challenges."

While much of the all-day meeting focused on the birth control mandate, speakers also warned that other religious rights are under siege, including religious groups' freedom to hire employees of their choice, and devout workers' rights to abstain from activities forbidden by their beliefs.

Take the family-owned pharmacy in Washington state that originally was told it must carry an abortion-inducing drug, or the town clerk who is required to sign marriage certificates for same-sex couples, said Hannah Smith, senior counsel at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

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On the birth control mandate, Smith said the federal action is particularly noxious to employers who don't want to provide free birth control, because the exemption is so narrow -- narrower than those offered by many states that require employers to cover contraception in their health plans.

The Obama administration considers the federal exemptions a compromise, but "the compromise is really a hollow compromise," Smith said.

William A. Galston, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, rejected the general consensus that religious rights had devolved to a critical point, and called for a "sense of proportion" even as he disagrees with the original contraception mandate introduced by the Obama administration.

In the United States, Galston argued, it's inevitable that religious rights will occasionally collide with the government's responsibility to protect citizen welfare. "This is not a fatal disease," he said. "It is a chronic condition we are called upon to manage."

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