NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Newspaper ads urging people to leave church seen having little impact

Maria Pia Negro | Jun. 20, 2012

WASHINGTON -- Dialogue generated by full-page newspaper ads placed by the Freedom From Religion Foundation is a good thing, said an associate professor of theology.

"The very presence of an ad like that is a symbol for one dimension of the situation of Catholicism in American society today," said Tom Beaudoin, associate professor of theology at Fordham University's Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education in New York.

The ads, which appeared in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *USA Today* in May and June, encouraged "nominal Catholics" to quit the church. The full-page ad, in the form of an open letter, cited the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' contraceptive mandate, the Vatican's call for reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and church teaching against artificial contraception and same-sex marriage as reasons to leave.

Paul Scolese, president of the John Carroll Society in Washington, said the ads misstated Catholic teaching and the church's stand on religious liberty, but he added such campaigns were not likely to have an impact or propel a massive movement away from religion.

"It was just a medium for this atheist organization to state their position," Scolese said. "Their numbers are probably small, but they are very vocal."

Beaudoin, who studies de-conversion in modern society, said religion is changing in the United States and people live their religion differently. In his view, "responding to what the ad represents, rather than going point for point with the ad, is a more promising pastoral, theological response," he said.

The ads accuse the Catholic church of, among other things, wanting to use "the force of secular law to deny birth control to non-Catholics." But the bishops oppose the HHS mandate requiring most religious employers to provide free contraceptive coverage, because it violates religious liberty principles.

After the first ads appeared, readers sent letters to the editor and added their comments to the blogosphere, sharing their support or opposition to the ad's claims and talking about their interpretation of the First Amendment.

In a letter to the editor in *USA Today*, Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore, chairman of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Freedom, said the ad published by the paper June 1 misrepresents the Catholic church's call for religious liberty.

"In fact, the church opposes being forced to violate its teachings by providing access to services that are contrary to its beliefs," he said.

Charles C. Haynes, director of the Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum in Washington, called

for dialogue to clarify the confusion he said exists about religion's role in the public square and the principle of separation of church and state.

"The principle of religious freedom is to make sure the government does not establish religion, does not take sides in religion. That does not mean citizens have no right to express their religion," said Haynes, who also is a senior scholar at the First Amendment Center in Washington.

"Our arrangement for religious freedom is intended to encourage religion not to discourage it or censored," he said.

"There is no danger of a theocracy in the United States," said Andrew Walther, vice president of communication for the Knights of Columbus. "The danger is in the misinterpretation of the Constitution."

According to Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the ads turned into a campaign to "confront the Catholic church" on what she termed "its medieval opposition to reproductive liberty."

Gaylor said the bishops' position on the HHS mandate has more to do with dogma than with religious freedom, but bishops' position is that it's wrong for the federal government to require any church to provide something it opposes on moral grounds.

"It is fine if they want to preach to their own members -- who are not listening -- but they have no right to interfere with workers' rights to contraceptives," she said.

A Pew national survey showed that overall, 55 percent of Catholics support an exemption for HHS contraceptive mandate.

The survey, released in February, showed that 63 percent of Catholics who attend Mass at least once a week support an exemption for religiously affiliated institutions, while those who attend less often are evenly divided, with 48 percent in favor and 49 percent against it.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is a Wisconsin-based nonprofit that seeks to "educate the public on matters related to nontheism." According to its website, it was founded in 1978 by Gaylor and her husband, Dan Baker, and says it has more than 17,000 members. The group collects dues and donations to finance its media campaigns.

The foundation has made headlines for complaining about prayers and "overtly sectarian" musical performances at high school graduations, as well as asking the courts to take down religious symbols from public land, such as a 60-year-old World War II memorial at the Whitefish Mountain Resort Ski Area, Mont., which includes a statue of Jesus.

Gaylor said the foundation accepts the free exercise of religion, but she thinks organized religion has too much of a role in modern society.

"Sometimes people forget that the free exercise of religion is the first freedom listed in the Constitution," Scolese said. "In the end, the idea that God is an important part of this country is critical for the protection of rights."

"Religion plays an incredible, important role in the world for better and for worse," Haynes said, citing churches' contributions to the welfare of humankind, especially those in need, and contrasting that with religion as a cause of conflict and even violence in some cases.

"The question is not if religion should play a role, but how should it play a role (in the modern world)," he said. "The challenge is to encourage a positive role for religion."

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