

# The Washington Post

## Pope Francis, President Obama and religious freedom

By Jennifer Rubin, Updated: March 26 at 12:13 pm

Catholic scholar [George Weigel writes](#) on President Obama's upcoming visit with Pope Francis:

[W]hen the White House announced on January 21 that the visit to Pope Francis would take place on March 27, the administration's spin machine was whirling at high RPMs: "The president looks forward to discussing with Pope Francis their shared commitment to fighting poverty and growing inequality." In other words: The administration looks forward to getting a nice photo to insert into the communiqué it has already written on the president's meeting with the pope, which is a rather obvious attempt to use the Holy See and Pope Francis as allies in the class-warfare campaign the administration manifestly intends to run in the 2014 congressional cycle, the administration's record over the past six years not being a very attractive campaign platform.

He notes that the Obama administration's scam-the-Vatican operation already had an opening act in January: "Secretary of State John Kerry had a lengthy meeting with Vatican secretary of state Pietro Parolin. According to Vatican sources with direct knowledge of what transpired, Parolin drove the entire conversation, emphasizing at some length the Holy See's concerns over the Health and Human Services contraceptive/abortifacient mandate that has put the bishops of the United States, and many Catholic institutions, on a collision course with the government unparalleled in U.S. Catholic history. None of that, of course, was discussed by Secretary Kerry in his subsequent remarks to the press, which focused on a future meeting between President Obama and Pope Francis."

It is always amusing to see liberal uber-secularists cozy up to the Vatican, selectively of course, to advance their own interests. They've been doing this for decades, such as praising the church on no nukes, no death penalty, etc. while bitterly denouncing the church for clinging to all those traditional ideas about women as priests, abortion, etc. The idea that you can invoke the moral authority of the church — because it's the Catholic Church! — only when convenient is not, of course, unique to this president.

But in the case of Obama, the meeting comes at the very time the administration is running roughshod over the religious sensibilities of some Americans when it comes to abortion and contraception. Yesterday was the oral argument in the Obamacare contraception mandate case.

In that context, liberals have little regard for the religious values of people of faith. Consider this exchange between the chief justice and the administration's solicitor general:

**Solicitor General Verrelli:** The touchstone for resolving this case is the principle Justice Jackson articulated in *Prince v. Massachusetts*. As he said, "Limitations which of necessity bound religious freedom begin to operate whenever activities begin to affect or collide with the liberties of others or of the public. Adherence to that principle is what makes possible the harmonious functioning of a society like ours, in which people of every faith live and work side by side."

**Chief Justice Roberts:** That's a statement that is inconsistent with [Restoration of Religious Freedom Act] RFRA, isn't it? The whole point of RFRA is that Congress wanted to provide exceptions for the religious views of particular including proprietors, individuals.

It speaks volumes that this blanket statement revealing the low regard with which the administration holds religious liberty is not only constitutionally inapt but the opener — best foot forward? — for the government's oral argument. The liberal welfare state, if it is to run peoples' lives, can't be exempting people willy-nilly for things like religion, you see, for if it did the magnificent, unrelenting power of the state would be limited. (They don't call it the "totalitarian temptation" for nothing.)

The disregard for religious beliefs is rampant in this administration. [Damon Root](#) reminds us of another doozy:

The First Amendment prevents the government from "prohibiting the free exercise" of religion. Yet in *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, the White House maintained that the Free Exercise Clause did not protect a parochial school from facing an anti-discrimination suit over its decision to fire a teacher whose duties included both secular and religious instruction. In the [words](#) of Cato Institute legal scholar Walter Olson, "The Obama administration had taken the disturbing position that there should be no ministerial exception at all to stand between churches and the full panoply of official employment regulation."

The Supreme Court [repudiated](#) the White House's approach. In a 9-0 opinion authored by Chief Justice John Roberts, the Court declared: "By imposing an unwanted minister, the state infringes the Free Exercise Clause, which protects a religious group's right to shape its own faith and mission through its appointments."

It's no easy feat to get every justice from Ruth Bader Ginsburg to Antonin Scalia against you. But then, this administration is unique, I would argue, in its hostility to religious accommodation. The state trumps all for this crowd.

So, then, it is pretty nifty of the president to try to enlist the Pope to hawk his class warfare agenda. He does so ostensibly because religious institutions have moral authority separate and apart from the state, yet his administration tramples on religious liberty, making little if any allowance for the space Americans have carved out for religious practice free from

state regulation. Maybe the Pope should level with the president: A decent and just society is one that addresses inequality but also maintains a realm in which religious belief can operate beyond the heavy hand of government. Boy, wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall in that conversation?