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March 24, 2011: The Challenge to Obamacare is Secular—As is the Defense of Abortion

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: The Challenge to Obamacare is Secular—As is the Defense of Abortion

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3/24/2011—In her book, *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong describes the disregard of self as one of the essential teachings of all religions. The most obvious examples are Buddhism and the description of Jesus as emptying himself—kenosis—to become a servant to all.

In terms of the disregard of self, capitalism may be regarded as the quintessential anti-religious stance. Capitalism teaches the inherent self-interest of human nature. According to capitalism, this trait cannot be weaned out of us because it is essential to our humanity. The economy is based on the pursuit of self-interest, referred to as happiness in the Declaration of Independence but pretty clearly meaning “our individual happiness” in fact.

So committed is capitalism to self-interest that defenders of the system assume that all social systems operate on the principle of self-interest. Thus one of capitalism’s most influential thinkers, Judge Richard Posner, writes that the manipulation of legislation to favor interest groups at the expense of the common good is too inherent in politics to be considered unconstitutional: “[I]t would be odd, indeed, to condemn as unconstitutional the most characteristic product of a democratic (perhaps of any) political system.”

The challenge to the constitutionality of Obamacare, the individual mandate to buy health insurance, is anti-religious in the same sense of being premised on self-regard. In the worldview of the challengers, the uninsured person is sitting alone in his room, choosing not to participate in the healthcare market. Government then unconstitutionally forces him to buy a product he does not want.

When it is pointed out that such a person might lack the resources to pay for a health emergency, the challengers say that the right not to participate includes the right to go without healthcare, including the right to die on the highway without treatment.

At first I could not take these arguments seriously. Surely the challengers to Obamacare know that all citizens have a right to emergency care in our system. This uninsured person will be taken to the hospital for care after a heart attack in his room or an accident on the highway and society will pay his costs if he does not have healthcare. So he already participates in the healthcare market. He just does not necessarily pay for it.

I have come to understand, however, that the safety net of healthcare is for the challengers part of the affront of Obamacare. The individual is seen as having the right to go without care if he wishes. Thus this individual is seen as self-sufficient and without social relationships and obligations. The regard of the government for the others in his life—spouse, children—and its regard to the public nature of his decision—the effect on society in general of people dying in the streets, is just more government imposition on individual rights.

This whole worldview is self-centered in the extreme and one wonders how conservative Christians who are supporting this challenge can fail to see it.

The basic structure of the healthcare challenge is the same as the challenge to laws restricting the right to abortion. It might seem obvious that in the case of pregnancy, there are rights and interests at stake beyond those of the pregnant woman alone—those of the unborn child, those of the father, those of other family members and those of society itself.

But to have any regard for those social interests as opposed to the individual right of the woman herself is seen as an affront to her selfhood. Thus abortion, like going without healthcare, is an individual right with which government may not interfere without oppressive injustice.

Perhaps the underlying coalitions in these contexts have simply failed to see their commonalities yet. (Of course, one could add, if this is secularism, then what is hallowed secularism?)