



Faith and Choice

For many Americans, religious and spiritual convictions contribute significantly to their view on reproductive rights. And while abortion is often discussed in terms of law, medicine, personal autonomy, public health, and the appropriate role of government in citizens' lives, it is equally valid to consider the issue from a perspective of faith. Family-planning choices, including the decision whether or not to end a pregnancy, are considered by many faith traditions to be morally complex and appropriately made by a woman, her family, and her God – not by the government.

In the United States, religion has a major role in people's lives and is viewed as a source of moral and spiritual guidance.

- More than eight in 10 Americans identify with a religion and say that it is at least fairly important in their daily lives. Of the 78 percent of Americans who identify with the Christian faith, 51 percent are Protestant and 24 percent are Roman Catholic.¹
- Forty-four percent of Americans report that they frequently attend church – almost every week or every other week.²
- More than 60 percent of American youth spend at least one hour per week in activities at a church or synagogue.³

Where Religious Institutions Stand On Reproductive Rights

While many opponents of reproductive freedom claim religion as the basis of their political views, it is important to note that there is diversity among religions on the issue of choice. In fact, for more than 50 years, religious leaders have been at the forefront of the reproductive-rights movement, ensuring that family-planning decisions remain informed, personal, and in accordance with one's individual beliefs.

- The Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, Unitarian Universalist Association, and Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative Judaism all have official statements in support of reproductive choice as a matter of conscience, adopted by their governing bodies. Additionally, at least 14 religious denominations have official policies supporting sex education in their congregations and public schools.⁴
- Despite Catholic Church leaders' opposition to abortion, lay Catholics are no different from the general public in their views on this issue.

- Sixty-eight million Catholics in the United States use and support the availability of comprehensive reproductive-health-care services for those who choose to use them.⁵
 - Overall, 56 percent of non-Hispanic Catholics and 59 percent of Hispanic Catholics say they oppose making it harder for a woman to choose abortion.⁶
 - Additionally, 58 percent of Catholics believe one can be a good Catholic without following the bishops' teaching on abortion while 75 percent believe one can be a good Catholic without following the bishops' teaching on birth control.⁷
 - Only 14 percent of Catholics (12 percent of the population) believe that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances.⁸
 - Two-thirds of Catholics believe that clinics and hospitals that take taxpayer money should not be allowed to refuse to provide procedures or medications based on religious beliefs.⁹
- According to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, "much within the legal reasoning of Islam leads to understanding and allowing reproductive choice" and that the decision lies solely with the woman.¹⁰

The Religious Impact on Reproductive Health

While there is both public and religious-institutional support for reproductive rights, there are other organizations and religious denominations that seek to impose their beliefs on others. In recent years, debate around reproductive rights and faith has tended to focus on two issues: hospital mergers and refusal clauses.

Hospital Mergers

Across the country, health-care organizations have been consolidating in an effort to reduce costs and compete more successfully in the market. Catholic hospitals "constitute the largest single group of the nation's not-for-profit hospitals," operating 12 percent of total hospital beds and providing care to one in six Americans each year.¹¹ The Catholic Church's influence is spreading through mergers and affiliations between Catholic and nonsectarian hospitals. When nonsectarian hospitals merge with Catholic hospitals, they typically adopt the rules governing Catholic hospitals, which include policies forbidding various types of services.¹² Mergers between Catholic health-care providers and nonsectarian providers frequently curtail access to reproductive services, often without the knowledge of the patients served by the merged hospitals and health plans.¹³

- The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services denounce assisted reproductive technologies such as in-vitro fertilization and sperm donation, prohibit abortion care, prohibit treatment for an ectopic pregnancy, prohibit contraception other than "natural" family planning, ban prenatal diagnosis when undertaken with the intention of terminating the pregnancy if a serious anomaly is discovered, and bar permanent and temporary sterilization of both men and women.¹⁴

- Between 1990 and 2001, an estimated 50 percent of mergers between Catholic and non-Catholic hospitals resulted in the elimination of some or all reproductive-health services.¹⁵ For instance, when Catholic Healthcare West replaced Gilroy, California’s only community hospital with a Catholic hospital, all contraceptive services, sterilizations, and abortion services were eliminated, forcing women to travel 25 to 35 miles to receive basic family-planning care.¹⁶ More recently, a patient denied termination of an ill-fated pregnancy at a New Hampshire hospital was forced to travel 80 miles by cab to the nearest hospital not under religious restrictions.¹⁷
- In March 2011, the Sierra Vista Regional Health Center (SVRHC) in Arizona decided to end a trial affiliation with Carondelet Health Network, a Catholic hospital system, because it needed to follow Catholic directives on reproductive health and abortion care. While it was affiliated with Carondelet Health Network, SVRHC was prohibited from providing abortion care even if the woman’s life was in danger, performing sterilizations, or providing birth control. According to SVRHC’s Dr. Bruce Silva, the affiliation with the Catholic network would have created a burden on women seeking reproductive-health services.¹⁸

Some religious health-care organizations use doctrine, rather than science, to determine which health-care services a patient may receive. Failure to provide adequate and comprehensive care—even for religious reasons— may jeopardize patient health.

The myth is made more complicated still because most hospitals accept public funds, serve broad populations of many faith traditions, and employ staff of all backgrounds. These factors, among others, tend to contradict Catholic hospitals’ claim to a strict religious identity.

Refusal Laws

Refusal [laws](#) (sometimes called “conscience” [laws](#)) permit a broad range of individuals and institutions—including hospitals, hospital employees, health-care providers, employers, and insurers—to refuse to provide, pay, counsel or even refer for medical treatment to which they have a moral or religious objection.

- Under the guise of protecting religious freedom, anti-choice activists have aggressively used the political process to promote refusal [laws](#). The Catholic hierarchy – through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Health Association of the United States – has collaborated with anti-choice organizations across the country both to suggest that the consciences of medical professionals are in jeopardy and to expand the number of serves that are subject to such an exemption.¹⁹
- 47 states and the District of Columbia allow certain individuals or entities to refuse to provide women specific reproductive-health services, information, or referrals: AK, AZ, AR, CA, CO, CT, DE, DC, FL, GA, HI, ID, IL, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN,

MS, MO, MT, NE, NV, NJ, NM, NY, NC, ND, OH, OK, OR, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, WA, WV, WI, WY.²⁰

- Refusal [laws](#) can impact a broad range of reproductive-health services, including: information and referrals for family planning, genetic counseling, infertility treatment, sexual-assault treatment, sterilization, STD and HIV testing, and abortion care.
- Anti-choice proponents of refusal [laws](#) claim that without such provisions, religious organizations would be forced to abandon their principles. However, such refusal [laws](#) often exempt a broad range of organizations, including health plans and hospitals, most of which not only have a secular purpose, but also employ and serve individuals who do not share those organizations' religious beliefs. Recent California and New York court decisions upheld narrow refusal laws and made clear that institutions may not impose one particular religious view on the general public.
- Catholics for Choice President Jon O'Brien, testified recently to a congressional committee on conscience rights. He said, "Catholic teachings on conscience require due deference to the conscience of others in making decisions – meaning both that the pharmacist must not dismiss the conscience of the person seeking emergency contraception and that the employer should not be allowed to dismiss the conscience of the employee seeking coverage for the healthcare services guaranteed to any other."²¹

Traditionally, refusal [laws](#) have recognized the complexity of human values, feelings, and religious beliefs by enabling *individuals* to opt out of providing health-care services to which they are religiously or morally opposed. For more information on refusal [laws](#) and their many effects on Americans' ability to access quality comprehensive health care, please see the NARAL fact sheets entitled: "Federal Refusal Clause Endangering Women's Health," "Fast Facts About the Federal Refusal Clause," "Refusal [Laws](#): Dangerous for Women's Health," and "[Current Refusal Laws](#)."

Conclusion

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice says that "As pro-choice people of faith, we believe that the ability to make moral decisions is the very basis of an individual's dignity and autonomy and an expression of our God-given ability to exercise free will."²² These notions of free will and personal autonomy form the foundation of a woman's right to choose. One's religion and spiritual beliefs do not conflict with the right to control one's reproductive freedom, but rather go hand in hand.

January 1, 2012

Notes:

- ¹ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Religion Landscape Survey* (Feb. 2008) at 5.
- ² Gallup Poll, *Questions and Answers About Americans' Religion* (Dec. 24, 2007).
- ³ Reaching Out to Faith Communities; A Guide for Sexual and Reproductive Health Organizations p2
- ⁴ Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, *Reaching Out to Faith Communities* (2006).
- ⁵ Catholics for Choice, "Testimony of Jon O'Brien, President, Catholics for Choice," *Submitted to U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health; Written Testimony for the Hearing Record on 'Do New health Law Mandates Threaten Conscience Rights and Access to Care?'* (Nov. 2, 2011).
- ⁶ Pew Research Center, *Abortion a More Powerful Issue for Women* (Apr. 23, 2004), at <http://www.people-press.org/2004/04/23/abortion-a-more-powerful-issue-for-women/> (last visited Oct. 28, 2011).
- ⁷ Catholics for Choice, *The Facts Tell the Story: Catholics and Choice* (Feb. 8, 2006).
- ⁸ Catholics for Choice, *By the Numbers: Abortion* (Nov. 24, 2008) at <http://www.catholicsinpubliclife.org/page7/page20/page20.html> (last visited Oct. 31, 2011).
- ⁹ Catholics for Choice, "Testimony of Jon O'Brien, President, Catholics for Choice," *Submitted to U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health; Written Testimony for the Hearing Record on 'Do New health Law Mandates Threaten Conscience Rights and Access to Care?'* (Nov. 2, 2011).
- ¹⁰ Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, *Islam and Reproductive Choice* (Oct. 31, 2008) at <http://www.rcrc.org/perspectives/muslim.cfm> (last visited Oct. 31, 2011).
- ¹¹ Catholics for Choice, *Catholic Health Care Update* (Sept. 2005) at <http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/topics/healthcare/documents/2005factsaboutcatholichealthcare.pdf> (last visited Oct. 31, 2011).
- ¹² CFFC, *Caution: Catholic Health Restrictions May be Hazardous to your Health*, at 4 (1999); Mergerwatch & Family Planning Advocates of New York State, *No Strings Attached: Public Funding of Religiously-Sponsored Hospitals in the United State*, at 21-25 (2002).
- ¹³ In a 1995 survey, 73 percent of women were not aware that belonging to a Catholic health care plan would limit their access to medical procedures such as family planning, abortion, vasectomies, in vitro fertilization, and emergency contraceptive pills for rape victims. CFFC & EDK ASSOCIATES, INC., *Health Care Reform Crossroads: The Gap Between Catholic Church Mandates and Women's Needs*, at 10 (1995).

-
- ¹⁴ NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, at 17-20 (1994).
- ¹⁵ CFFC, CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE UPDATE, *The Facts about Catholic Health Care*, July 2002.
- ¹⁶ Maria Alicia Gaura, *Newly Catholic Hospital Bans Family Planning*, S.F. CHRON., Oct. 1, 1999.
- ¹⁷ Lois Utley, *Hospital Mergers 101: Countering the Threat to Patient's Rights and Access to Care from Religious/Secular Hospital Mergers*, The MergerWatch Project, 2005.
- ¹⁸ *Arizona Hospital Calls off Merger with Catholic Health Network, Citing Concerns About Reproductive Health Services*, NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP FOR WOMEN AND FAMILIES, (Mar. 30, 2011) at http://www.nationalpartnership.org/site/News2?abbr=daily2_&page=NewsArticle&id=28138 (last visited Oct. 31, 2011); Press Release, Center for Reproductive Rights, *Patients' Rights Group Congratulates Sierra Vista Hospital Board for Calling off Carondelet Affiliation* (Mar. 30, 2011).
- ¹⁹ Catholics for Choice, *In Good Conscience; Respecting the Beliefs of Health-Care Providers and the Needs of Patients* (2008).
- ²⁰ NARAL Pro-Choice America Foundation, *Who Decides? The Status of Women's Reproductive Rights in the United States* (21st ed. 2012), available at www.WhoDecides.org.
- ²¹ Catholics for Choice, "Testimony of Jon O'Brien, President, Catholics for Choice," *Submitted to U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health; Written Testimony for the Hearing Record on 'Do New health Law Mandates Threaten Conscience Rights and Access to Care?'* (Nov. 2, 2011).
- ²² Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, *Common Questions* (Oct. 27, 2008), at <http://www.rcrc.org/issues/questions.cfm> (last visited Oct. 26, 2011).