

2009 in Review: Religion, politics meet head-on over abortion, other issues

WASHINGTON - Religion and politics met head-on this year, with abortion often at the center of the debate, but church-state tensions also arose over public displays of religious symbols, threats to the free exercise of religion and concerns about protecting the conscience rights of health care providers.

Abortion was a key issue in the debate about health care reform and sparked an exchange of remarks between at least one Catholic politician and his bishop.

During the House debate, Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-R.I., criticized the U.S. bishops for threatening to oppose health reform unless the legislation banned the use of federal funds to cover abortion. He said their stance was “fanning the flames of dissent and discord.”

The House, unlike the Senate, ultimately passed an amendment to ban abortion funding in the final health care bill its members approved, but Kennedy’s remarks, and his vote against the amendment, drew reaction from Bishop Thomas J. Tobin of Providence, R.I., who demanded Kennedy apologize for his comments.

In an interview with The Providence Journal daily newspaper, Kennedy made public a private request from the bishop in 2007 that he not receive Communion because of his stand on abortion. Bishop Tobin told The Rhode Island Catholic, diocesan newspaper, saying he made the request based on the congressman’s “consistent actions,” but did it confidentially and had no intention of making it public.

The exchange between Kennedy and Bishop Tobin took place just two months after the death of the congressman’s famous father, Sen. Edward M. “Ted” Kennedy, D-Mass.

Even in death, the senator represented the tensions between Catholic politicians and the church over the abortion issue. He stood with the church on a wide range of

issues from immigration reform to the minimum wage during his lengthy Senate tenure, but his legislative support of legal abortion prompted some critics to say that giving him a Catholic funeral was a scandal to the church.

Abortion also was at the center of criticism of the University of Notre Dame for inviting President Barack Obama, who supports legal abortion and embryonic stem-cell research, to deliver the commencement address and receive an honorary degree.

After his speech, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. bishops, and two members of Congress urged Obama to make good on a point he made, namely that he wished to “honor the conscience of those who disagree with abortion.”

Cardinal George said health care professionals and institutions “should know that their deeply held religious or moral convictions will be respected as they exercise their right to serve patients in need.”

He also said that among their other concerns about health reform, the bishops would continue to insist that reform could not include abortion funding and would protect conscience rights.

Belmont Abbey College in Belmont, N.C., was one Catholic institution that found its religious beliefs challenged this year when the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission said the institution’s failure to offer employees coverage of prescription contraceptives discriminated against women.

William Thierfelder, college president, said Belmont Abbey was adhering to Catholic teaching against artificial contraception and exercising the freedom of religion guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. The college, which hopes the EEOC will change its ruling, changed its health care coverage in 2007 to exclude oral contraceptives, abortions, vasectomies and tubal ligations.

The controversy at Belmont Abbey was just one of the issues mentioned in a November press conference in Washington announcing the Manhattan Declaration – a joint statement signed by more than 140 Christian leaders pledging renewed zeal

in defending the unborn, defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman and protecting religious freedom. The document also mentioned the possibility of civil disobedience, if necessary, to defend beliefs.

Washington Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl, one of signers, said he hoped that step would not be necessary.

The marriage issue in particular was a focus in the District of Columbia, as the City Council approved a bill Dec. 15 to make same-sex legal. It will be sent to Mayor Adrian Fenty, who was expected to sign it before Christmas. The bill will become law next spring if it survives a 30-day congressional review process.

The Washington Archdiocese opposed any effort to redefine marriage as other than that between a man and a woman. The Catholic Church teaches that marriage is a permanent union between one man and one woman.

Archdiocesan officials also argued that the bill would restrict the free exercise of religion and would affect the ability of its agency Catholic Charities to work with the city in serving the poor.

The year's church-state tensions started with the New York City Council being urged to revise a policy that bans Nativity scenes in city public schools, while allowing holiday displays of Jewish and Muslim religious symbols. But other discussions about public displays of religious symbols found their way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

In February the high court ruled that a public park in Utah that displays a Ten Commandments monument was not legally required to accept another religious monument under the free speech clause of the First Amendment. In October, the court heard oral arguments about whether a cross could be displayed on a war memorial on federal land in a remote California desert.

The Supreme Court declined to hear a petition by the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., asking the court to overturn a ruling by the Connecticut Supreme Court requiring the diocese to release documents from long-settled abuse cases.

The diocese had argued in part that constitutional issues involved in the case, "including the First Amendment rights of religious organizations and the privacy

rights of all citizens, are significant and important for the court to consider.”

The issue of religious freedom also came to the fore in the same diocese during the summer when Connecticut ethics officials were investigating whether the diocese violated state lobbying laws with its efforts to rally Catholics against legislation that would have given laypeople financial control of their parishes.

The state officials decided to stop the investigation, which the diocese called “welcome news, not only for the diocese but for all citizens who cherish the fundamental rights guaranteed by the First Amendment.”