

## [Religion as a bulwark against big government](#) [1]

Written by [Jesse Harrington](#) [2] | Wednesday 27 June 2012



The ongoing debate in the United States over Obamacare recalls the value of religion in the debate on liberty. Key to the religious perspective on the debate are efforts by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to require Catholic organisations to provide contraceptive, abortifacient and sterilisation services to their employees as part of their health insurance programmes; an attempt which the Catholic Church has staunchly resisted as infringing on matters of conscience.

The opposition from the Catholic Church of course hinges on religious freedoms guaranteed under the First Amendment, but galvanises awareness among religious groups of the broader personal freedoms at stake under the other Obamacare mandate, requiring all Americans to purchase health insurance on pain of a fine. Indeed, a [Gallup poll](#) [3] now shows that a majority of Americans regardless of political persuasion view the mandate central to the health reform package as unconstitutional.

In some ways, the circumstances resemble the manner in which the first New Deal was brought down by provisions which violated the kosher practices of Jewish butchers, as recounted [in an article in The Freeman](#) [4] this month. In that case, the butchers' challenge did not rest on First Amendment grounds, but it was motivated by religion and ultimately resulted in the economic regulation being struck down by the Supreme Court.

As the religiously-minded classical liberals of the 19th-century wrote, religion was valuable in a free society because it reminded the people that their sole duty was not to the state, and could thus serve as a means of protecting civil liberties from encroaching government. As historian Ralph Raico [says](#) [5] of Alexis de Tocqueville, who penned *Democracy in America* in 1835, the Frenchman believed that religious sentiment:

*?...sets up barriers to the heedless trampling on individual rights. It is ultimately because of these influences, he holds, that no one in the United States has dared to advance the maxim that everything is permissible for the interests of society, an impious adage which seems to have been invented in an age of freedom to shelter all future tyrants. ? ? (p. 99)*

Whatever the Supreme Court may decide this week ? whether it overturns or upholds the individual mandate which affects all citizens, or the HHS contraceptive mandate which affects employers ? the religious dimension of this debate will hopefully sharpen awareness of individual liberties in future political discourse. Many secular libertarians today, like their 19th-century forerunners, suspect authority including religious authority. Rather, it is coercive authority which is to be suspect. Ultimately, the first protection in

upholding the rule of law in a free society is not the court or legislature, but the sentiment of the people, wherein religious sentiment can perform a valuable role.

[blog comments powered by Disqus](#) <sup>[7]</sup>

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/politics-government/religion-as-a-bulwark-against-big-government>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/politics-government/religion-as-a-bulwark-against-big-government>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/authors/jesse-harrington>

[3] <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155300/Gallup-Editors-Americans-Views-Healthcare-Law.aspx>

[4] <http://www.thefreemanonline.org/features/thats-not-kosher-how-four-jewish-butchers-brought-down-the-first-new-deal/>

[5] <http://mises.org/etexts/raico.pdf>

[6] [http://disqus.com/?ref\\_noscript](http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript)

[7] <http://disqus.com>