

# ALBANY HEALTH BILL FRAUGHT WITH PROBLEMS

The New York State Senate approved a bill on February 5 requiring all health insurers to cover contraceptives. It made an exception for those religious institutions where most of the people who work there and most of the people it serves share that religion. This was considered a compromise measure to appease the objections of New York bishops. But it did not succeed: Edward Cardinal Egan criticized the bill for trampling on the First Amendment rights of Catholics.

Our first response to the media was to question the validity of the so-called compromise:

“It is not easy to understand how it can reasonably be said that the Senate has worked out a compromise with Catholics. Either the lawmakers believe in conscience clauses or they don’t. It will not do to say that Catholic organizations can practice their doctrinal prerogatives save when most of the people who work there or are served by them are non-Catholic. As everyone knows, Catholic schools in the inner city provide a quality education to a largely African American population. Should school administrators lose their religious rights because too many of these kids are Protestant? This would never pass constitutional muster.”

We then drew attention to implications of the bill that the lawmakers may not have considered. “For example,” we said, “it is well known that some Catholic colleges employ a mostly non-Catholic faculty. One way around this bill would be to institute a quota system that gives preferential treatment to Catholic applicants, thus ensuring a Catholic majority.”

A more serious implication is this: Catholic institutions could opt out of providing prescription coverage altogether

and instead offer a cash grant to employees to pay for prescriptions of their choice.

We asked the lawmakers to rethink this bill and, failing that, for Governor George Pataki to veto it. "If he doesn't," we said, "it will set the stage for forced coverage of abortions—the goal of NARAL, this bill's prime backer. This, in turn, may lead to the elimination of all health care coverage by Catholic institutions. Then cash grants will be extended even further. Is this the legacy our officials want to be tagged with?"

And that is exactly what will happen unless our lawmakers rediscover the meaning of religious liberty.