
The Vatican and Reproductive Freedom

A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING REPRODUCTIVE CHOICES

By Frances Kissling

The following is the text of the opening remarks given by Frances Kissling before the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health at a hearing in the U.K. Parliament on Monday, July 3, 2006.

Richard Ottaway (Chairman): Can I welcome everyone to the final hearing of this inquiry. I am very pleased to welcome Frances Kissling as the first witness.... The floor is yours.

THOUGHT I WOULD START BACK with the Cairo conference on population and development. As that conference was getting under way, various national academies of sciences around the world met and issued statements on the conference itself and on their hopes for that conference. I thought I would quote first from one academy of science that met at that point in time and that also met about five years later and made statements that were relevant to the conference. Let me quote from the June 15, 1994, Pontifical Academy of Science statement: "There

FRANCES KISSLING is president of *Catholics for a Free Choice*.

The full text of this speech, including the question and answer session, is available at www.catholicsforchoice.org.

is a need to control births in order to avoid creating insoluble problems that could arise if we were to renounce our responsibilities to future generations. Increases in the life span and advances in medical care have made it unthinkable to sustain indefinitely a birthrate that notably exceeds the level of two children per couple. In other words, this is the requirement to guarantee the future of humanity."

Five years later at a study week called Science for Survival and Sustainable Development, the same academy of science considered emerging chaos theory and the vulnerability of the world and made the following statement: "Our planet is threatened by a multitude of interactive processes: the depletion of natural resources, climatic changes, population growth from 2.5 billion to over 6 billion people in just 50 years, rapidly growing disparities in quality of life, destabilization in the ecological economy." Both of those statements, it may surprise you to know, were made by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences,

which is the official science academy of the Vatican, and so, since the reason you have invited me here is to talk about religion, the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] and reproductive health, suffice to say, when you hear statements like that issued from the Vatican, you might ask: "What is the problem? Why have we for the last 10 or 15 years been dealing with an institution, in this case the Roman Catholic church, which seems increasingly opposed to everything that the United Nations, the European Parliament and governments of the world have begun to develop in terms of a new paradigm and new policies related to reproductive health?" I think it is important for us to recognize, as we begin to analyze that question, that in every religious institution you will find both conservative and liberating tendencies, restrictive and liberating tendencies, and often they coexist within that institution. When it comes to the question of sexuality and reproduction, all of the world's religions have deeply held beliefs emanating from how they describe or what they think is the nature of the human being and how that nature is to be lived out in the world. That is where we see the conflict that arises between a conservative view of religion and the efforts of those in government

and in nongovernmental organizations to help couples and individuals achieve their goals in terms of family size, their own reproductive health and the expression of their sexuality. In our field, we tend to take two approaches.

At the present moment, we tend to take an approach to religion in which our emphasis is on the way in which religion is an opponent to sexual and reproductive health as we understand it. Indeed, we need to do that, because there are many ways in which these institutions are opponents. At the same time, it is probably important, if we want to maintain a dialogue with religious institutions, to have a deeper understanding of where they are coming from and a better ability to work with them on some areas where we do agree. I think you can see from the two statements that I have read that there is indeed room for agreement on many central issues that [we] deal with, even with the Roman Catholic church.

To go one step further, in August and September of 1984 the then Pope John Paul II devoted his weekly general audiences to a series of speeches on family planning, reproduction and sexuality, and I want to give you some quotes of what he said at that point in time. He said *Humanae vitae*, the church's encyclical that disapproves of the use of artificial contraception, "fully approves of the natural regulation of fertility and it approves of responsible parenting." He then talks about something that many of you talk about: "Morally correct levels of birth should be established by taking into account not only the good of the couple themselves but also the good of the society to which they belong, the good of the Church and even the good of the whole of mankind." *Gaudium et Spes*, which is a document of Vatican Council II that the pope also referred to, outlines four criteria that couples should use in determining the number of children that they have: "There should be a consideration of their own lives and their own needs; they should consider the good of the children already born and yet to come; they should read the signs of the times and



The Houses of Parliament in London.

© REUTERS/STEPHEN HIRD, 2005.

their own material and spiritual level; and they should take an estimate of the good that having children or not having children at any particular time in their lives would do for their family, for society and the Church."

Of course, we are dealing with a paradigm in almost all world religions in which the only legitimate use of sexuality and procreation occurs in marriage, and this is one of our great difficulties as we talk about sexuality and reproduction:

It is the insistence on heterosexual marriage as the paradigm for procreation. What the pope said, which is, I think, a good last word, was: “It is married couples themselves who must in the last analysis arrive at these judgments before God.” I think probably most of us in this room are very surprised to hear these kinds of statements coming from an extremely conservative pope and an extremely political apparatus within a religion at this point in time. The question that I want to address in just the few minutes we have before we talk with each other is why, if there is this kind of understanding of the need for all of us to procreate in a way that is responsible, why, if the church really has no demand

and stabilization as a legitimate political issue and a legitimate issue of social and economic interest. The good of the family and the good of individuals does have a relationship to population size and population growth, and no one denies that, but there is, within religious institutions, a fear that historically, the way in which population size, growth and reproduction have been used has reduced couples and individuals to instruments of state policy rather than human beings with full dignity. I think that we have seen a shift in the way in which we have constructed internationally the discourse about population that should enable us to bridge some of the differences that we have with religious

a very difficult problem to overcome in dealing with religions. The age-old set of Western religious beliefs, which have their origins in Aristotle and move forward through Aquinas and Augustine and other Christian leaders, about the nature of the human being, the nature of the fall from Paradise and the demand for personal self-control in the exercise of sexuality, is still dominant in the theoretical and ethical mindset of Western religious institutions, and I would say even within Islam hold sway, how we deal with those questions remains to be determined and is to some extent outside the scope of this hearing.

However, we do have many areas of commonality in terms of a common

“There is a need to control births in order to avoid creating insoluble problems that could arise if we were to renounce our responsibilities to future generations.”

Pontifical Academy of Sciences, June 15, 1994

that couples have every pregnancy that could possibly come to them and do nothing to thwart pregnancy, do we currently face this enormous clash between religion—and not just Roman Catholicism but, I would add, conservative Christianity and some branches of Islam—exist? What is it that we are doing that exacerbates the possibility for dialogue with religious leaders who disagree with us? Because, ultimately, we must have some dialogue with these leaders. Here, it seems to me, there are a number of areas in which we need to look at our own rhetoric and values in order to understand whether or not we can reach out to these religious institutions.

First is the question of the history of population. I heard [Ms. Catherine Budgett-Meakin, MP] wonder what I would have to say about population, and you note that my church has no problem with considering population size, growth

institutions, and I think we have not taken adequate advantage of what has been called the “paradigm shift” within the population community to quality of care, reproductive health, human rights et cetera, in which many of these issues are areas in which we have common agreement.

The other problem is the one I referenced a bit earlier and that is the belief of religious institutions at the highest levels and at the formal level, that the only legitimate expression of sexuality takes place within covenanted, officially recognized marriages often lifelong but at least serial, not concurrent and that, therefore, unmarried adolescents as well as unmarried adults have no right to be sexually active and, therefore, we should not be worried about their controlling births. The way for them to control birth is to follow natural law and only have sex when they are open to pregnancy and children. Indeed, this is

concern among people of faith, including Roman Catholics, for the environment, for the alleviation of poverty, for peacefulness, for national security and for the prevention of chaos in the universe as ways in which we could bond with some of those institutions. We have been through a period of the last 10 or 12 years since Cairo in which a paradigm shift took place in how we think about questions of population and reproductive health. In that period of time, I think, the population community and the reproductive health community have shown to the world a changed mindset on these questions. In that context, I would hope that over the next five years, over the next decade, we could find a way to speak from a human rights perspective about both the importance of population stabilization and the importance of supporting the rights of individuals to reproductive freedom and reproductive choice. ■