

Opinion A new puritanism is turning Catholics into Salem's witches



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Religious persecution is nothing new to Massachusetts. But the commonwealth's recent denial of a Catholic couple's application to become foster parents *because* of their faith is a notable variation on the mass hysteria that once sent "witches" to the executioner.

My analogy is hyperbolic only insofar as we accept that Catholicism disqualifies one from full participation in civic life. In this instance, Michael and Catherine "Kitty" Burke were told they weren't qualified to be foster parents unless they vowed to support a child should he or she someday identify as "LGBTQIA." Talk about a litmus test.

In fact, during a rigorous interview process with a social worker to determine their fitness as foster parents, the Burkes said they would love and support a foster child regardless of the child's sexual or gender identity. But they also said they'd continue to honor their faith and its teachings on marriage and sexuality.

You might be thinking what I initially thought: Why didn't they just fudge and say whatever the interviewer wanted them to say? Because the Burkes are good and honest. Even their interrogator described them as "lovely people" and wrote in her report: "Kitty and Mike are devoutly Roman Catholic and not only attend church with regular frequency, they both also work for local churches as musicians."



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Michael is an Iraq War veteran, church organist and small-business owner. Kitty, a former special-education caregiver, is a church cantor and small-business owner. They were willing to foster children of any race, culture or ethnicity, as well as children with special needs and even siblings. How much better could a foster couple be? The social worker concluded that the Burkes' faith "is not supportive and neither are they." After 30 hours of interviews, training and assessments of the Burkes' home and financial security, the license review team determined that they "would not be affirming to a child who identified as LGBTQIA."

This decision is absurd. And it is certainly not in the best interest of homeless children, who are so numerous in Massachusetts, they're sleeping on office couches and being held in hospitals and other unsuitable places because social workers have no place to put them. A Boston Globe story this year told of a 15-year-old boy who was trapped for 40 days in a windowless hospital room while awaiting placement. He "ate hospital meals, wore thin papery scrubs, and was allowed to leave only to use the bathroom or shower down the hall."

Not surprisingly, the Burkes have gone to court.

Their suit claims that the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families' actions were discriminatory and unconstitutional. Court papers filed by Becket Law said the Burkes were troubled that so many interview questions focused on their religious views about sexual orientation and gender identity, and said they "experienced hostility toward their Catholic beliefs" in violation of the First Amendment's free-exercise clause.

If only the social worker had been as determined to learn the Burkes' Catholic views on adoption, which, more than an act of kindness or a pursuit of parenthood, is a sacrament. Read the prayer for Catholics considering adoption:

"You have called us by name and made us your sons and your daughters, and you know your plan for our lives. If it be your will, bless those who are pursuing adoption, give them generous hearts, and send them a child to love and with whom to share your great love for us. Grant this through Christ our Lord."

Or consider Matthew 18:5: "And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me."

I'm no theologian, but I would interpret Matthew's "such as this" as any child, no matter his or her sexual identity or gender identity. For the record, I'm not a Catholic, though I do come from a long line of Irish Catholics who migrated here during the Great Hunger to escape both starvation and religious persecution. But persecution found Catholics even in a country that had codified religious freedom. Today, Catholics seem to be the only group that can be diminished, ridiculed and penalized for their faith without public outrage. The scourge of sexual abuse within the priesthood can probably be blamed for this. But the First Amendment shouldn't get the boot along with disgraced church leaders.

What happened to the Burkes, if once unimaginable, was perhaps inevitable. Less than 40 years ago, conventional wisdom held that children's best interests were served by a married couple composed of one mother (female) and one father (male). This template was neither controversial nor in conflict with religious teachings of the time. In the 1990s, arguments for same-sex marriage became prominent. In the early 2000s, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize it, via a court ruling. In June 2015, the Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* made marriage equality the law of the land.

The ruling effectively made same-sex adoption legal in all 50 states, and countless loving families have resulted. However, it is at least ironic to note that, in Massachusetts today, a child could more easily be placed with a gay or transgender couple than with a Catholic heterosexual couple.

If the Burkes win their case, as expected, maybe they can find a foster child wearing thin paper scrubs in a windowless hospital room who would love to go home with them.