

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 16, 2023

Christopher Wray
Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
935 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20535

Dear Director Wray,

We are deeply concerned about the bulletin issued on January 23, 2023, by the Richmond field office warning against, “Radical Traditionalist Catholic Ideology.”¹ While the document was ultimately rescinded after it became public, the formation and issuance of such an advisory to FBI agents and field offices raise numerous concerns. In addition to the extreme process flaws that the approval of such an advisory demonstrates, of particular concern is the continued reliance that the FBI apparently places on data and resources from the partisan Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).

As you know, the document alarmingly asserted that “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) in radical-traditionalist Catholic (RTC) ideology *almost certainly presents opportunities for threat mitigation* through the exploration of new avenues for tripwire and source development,” (emphasis added). It also suggested that the FBI relies on attendance at RTC or “traditionalist Catholic houses of worship”, as well as “language indicative of adherence to RTC ideology in social media postings” for its assessments. We are concerned that the FBI does not have processes in place to ensure that Catholics are not the subject of FBI suspicion or investigation simply because of how and where they worship or what they believe. As you are well aware, the First Amendment protects such speech, beliefs and actions as part of the free exercise of religion.

The advisory included an analyst note stating that, “RTCs are typically characterized by the rejection of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) as a valid church council; disdain for most popes elected since Vatican II, particularly Pope Francis and Pope John Paul II; and frequent adherence to anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, and white supremacist ideology.” The advisory also singled out traditional Catholics for their pro-life views, accusing RTCs of “hostility towards abortion-rights advocates” in the aftermath of the *Dobbs* decision, and describing “legislation or judicial decisions in areas such as abortion rights... and LGBTQ protections,” naming Governor Youngkin’s pro-life legislation as an example, as a “common cause” of RTCs and RMVEs. This specific call out to prolife views is of even greater concern, considering the slow rate of investigation and response to the violent attacks that a number of prolife pregnancy centers² and Catholic Churches³ have experienced since the *Dobbs* decision was leaked in May of last year.

¹ <https://www.uncoverdc.com/2023/02/08/the-fbi-doubles-down-on-christians-and-white-supremacy-in-2023/>

² <https://catholicvote.org/pregnancy-center-attack-tracker/>

³ <https://catholicvote.org/tracker-church-attacks/>

It is of great concern that the FBI did not have the oversight structure in place to stop this document before it was ever published or utilized. And it is crucial that the FBI develop and maintain policies that prevent such objectively discriminatory practices from being advised or implemented again.

Of further concern is the reliance the FBI seems to continue to place on biased data from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) on organizations it classifies as “hate groups”, despite its overt political bias and previous pushback from Congress. While the SPLC claims to be a group working to expel hate, it is in fact perpetuating hate against people of faith because of their religious views. Official government investigations and tracking should not be based on such biased reporting, which has already led to violent attacks against peaceful faith-based organizations.⁴ We call on the FBI to finally stop using data from the SPLC.

It should go without saying that violence and threats toward any person or group of people should be taken seriously. As lawmakers, we are concerned about the rise in violence and hate toward individuals and groups, and as recently as last Congress enacted legislation to prevent and respond to hate crimes⁵. But personal religious beliefs, or agreeing with the Catholic Church’s teaching on sex and marriage are not violent or extreme.

Targeting people on the basis of their religious beliefs and affiliation violates the Constitution. While the FBI claims it “does not investigate, collect, or maintain information on U.S. persons solely for the purpose of monitoring activities protected by the First Amendment,” the fact that such a document was able to be published and released in the first place is of great concern.

We request that the FBI respond to this letter by providing us with all documents and correspondence related to the origin and purpose of the document, including what agents developed the policy and whether any actions were taken in response to it, such as the tracking or monitoring of individuals who attend “Traditionalist Catholic houses of worship.” We also ask that the FBI provide us with a detailed explanation of what actions will be taken to educate all field offices on the Constitutional protections of the First Amendment, and to clarify that the free exercise of religion and religious beliefs do not equate to extremism, and are therefore not a basis for targeting or tracking.

Sincerely,



Michael Cloud
Member of Congress



James Lankford
U.S. Senator

⁴ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/southern-poverty-law-center-website-triggered-frc-shooting>

⁵ Public Law 117-13



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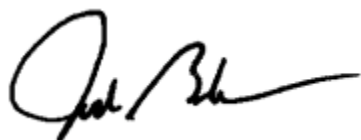
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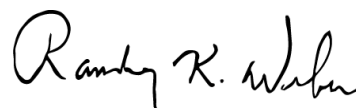
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