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The Partisan Trajectory of the American Pro-Life Movement: How a Liberal Catholic Campaign Became a Conservative Evangelical Cause

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Abstract: This article employs a historical analysis of the religious composition of the pro-life movement to explain why the partisan identity of the movement shifted from the left to the right between the late 1960s and the 1980s. Many of the Catholics who formed the first anti-abortion organizations in the late 1960s were liberal Democrats who viewed their campaign to save the unborn as a rights-based movement that was fully in keeping with the principles of New Deal and Great Society liberalism, but when evangelical Protestants joined the movement in the late 1970s, they reframed the pro-life cause as a politically conservative campaign linked not to the ideology of human rights but to the politics of moral order and “family values.” This article explains why the Catholic effort to build a pro-life coalition of liberal Democrats failed after *Roe v. Wade*, why evangelicals became interested in the antiabortion movement, and why the evangelicals succeeded in their effort to rebrand the pro-life campaign as a conservative cause.

Keywords: Pro-life; abortion; Catholic; evangelical; conservatism

1. Introduction

In September 1972 several hundred young, liberal pro-lifers gathered on the Washington Mall to protest against abortion.¹ In a demonstration modeled on the political protest tactics of the New Left,

¹ In this article, I use the terms “pro-life” and “pro-lifers” to refer to the antiabortion movement that developed in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Because of the politically charged connotations of the word “pro-life,” some

the young pro-lifers—many of whom were college students or recent college graduates—tore up copies of their birth certificates to protest the fact that the law recognized birth, rather than conception, as the beginning of human life, and they listened to a folk rock band sing about the value of unborn children. All of the speakers—ranging from Erma Clardy Craven, an African American Democrat who chaired the Mayor’s Commission on Human Rights in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to the Rev. Charles Carroll, an Episcopal priest from Berkeley, California, who opposed the death penalty—were liberals. The antiwar Lutheran minister Richard John Neuhaus gave a speech denouncing both abortion and the war in Vietnam, adding his endorsement of the pro-life cause to that of Eunice Kennedy Shriver (wife of 1972 Democratic vice presidential nominee, Sargent Shriver), who had previously sent the young pro-lifers a telegram of support. To the leaders of the National Youth Pro-Life Coalition (NYPLC), the organization that orchestrated the demonstration, it seemed unthinkable that anyone would equate the pro-life cause with political conservatism. At the time, many of the nation’s leading advocates of abortion legalization were Republicans, and many Democrats—including such liberal stalwarts as Senator Edward M. “Ted” Kennedy—were defenders of the right to life for the unborn [2–4]. “We consider ourselves an extremely liberal group,” Susan Bastyr, a co-founder of the NYPLC, declared [2]. Neuhaus concurred. “The anti-abortion forces are not instruments of political and social conservatism,” he told the demonstrators on the Washington Mall. “Rather they are related to the protest against the Indochina war, the militarization of American life, and the social crimes perpetrated against the poor” [5].

Yet less than a decade after the NYPLC’s liberal demonstration against abortion, pro-life protests in Washington, DC, adopted a very different political tone. In January 1981, a large group of pro-lifers—this time, numbering in the tens of thousands—once again gathered on the Washington Mall to protest against abortion. But this time, there was no evidence of the pro-life movement’s earlier connections with politically liberal causes. No one at the rally spoke out against President Ronald Reagan’s military buildup, nor did anyone discuss the “social crimes perpetrated against the poor” that had disturbed Neuhaus nine years earlier. Instead, seven pro-life leaders ended the demonstration with a private meeting at the White House with President Reagan and leading conservative Republican pro-lifers in Congress, including Senator Jesse Helms. The rally itself featured an address by one of Reagan’s Cabinet members, Secretary of Health and Human Services Richard Schweiker. And instead of listening to a folk rock band, as the NYPLC demonstrators had nine years earlier, the participants in the 1981 March for Life were entertained by an evangelical Christian musician from Memphis, Tennessee, who sang a medley of Christian hits and patriotic songs [6,7]. Although the annual March for Life had been started by a Catholic liberal Democrat, by the beginning of the Reagan era it had become infused with conservative Protestant evangelicalism and Republican Party politics.²

scholars and journalists have eschewed this term in favor of the more neutral moniker “antiabortion,” but I have chosen to use the term “pro-life” in this article both because it was the preferred self-designation of my historical subjects and because it suggests the movement’s self-understanding as a human rights movement—a subject that I discuss at length in this essay. For an example of another work of scholarship that uses the term “pro-life,” see [1].

² Nellie Gray, who created the March for Life in 1974, was a Catholic liberal Democrat who had been a lawyer for the Department of Labor before becoming a pro-life activist [8].

How did a movement that was created by Catholic liberal Democrats become a partisan cause of conservative evangelical Republicans? This essay explains why the pro-life movement originated as an explicitly liberal campaign, grounded in the rights-based ideology of twentieth-century liberalism, and why liberals lost their hold on the movement in the mid-1970s, after *Roe v. Wade* reconfigured the politics of abortion. It then explains why conservative evangelicals, a group that had not supported the pro-life cause in the late 1960s, became the nation's leading champions of antiabortion legislation, and it analyzes how their cooption of the pro-life movement transformed what had once been a liberal cause into a conservative partisan issue.

No other historian has yet traced the pro-life movement's trajectory from a liberal campaign to a conservative cause, because few historians are aware that the pro-life movement once had a liberal identity. Most histories of the abortion issue have portrayed the early pro-life movement as a product of a popular backlash against feminism and other rights-based causes of the era.³ By arguing that the pro-life movement originated as a liberal rights-based campaign, this study challenges conventional historical understandings of this subject, and by analyzing the role that religion played in the movement's partisan and ideological shifts, it likewise goes beyond existing scholarship on the movement. This essay argues that transformations in the pro-life movement's religious identity coalesced with changes in the nation's politics to produce a partisan shift in the right-to-life campaign and reconfigure the country's political debate over abortion.

2. The Liberal Origins of the Pro-Life Cause

The Catholic campaign against abortion legalization in the United States began as a human rights cause that was rooted in the assumptions of New Deal liberalism. At the time of the New Deal, abortion was illegal throughout the nation except when it was necessary to save a woman's life, and the sale of contraception was still illegal in some states [17]. Although the laws against abortion and contraception had been passed in the late nineteenth century, long before the rise of New Deal liberalism, Catholics viewed this legislation as evidence of a concern for human life that they thought accorded well with the principles of the New Deal social welfare state. Thus, when a few non-Catholic doctors began calling for the liberalization of abortion laws in the 1930s, and when a much larger number of Protestants and Jews advocated the repeal of the laws against birth control, Catholics reacted against both campaigns by appealing to the values of New Deal liberalism.

Many American Catholics considered the New Deal to be a manifestation of the Catholic values of social responsibility, so appeals to the principles of New Deal liberalism, they believed, were ultimately invocations of the Catholic natural law tradition. The New Deal was "Christ's Deal," the nation's most popular Catholic radio broadcaster, Fr. Charles Coughlin, declared before ultimately turning against it because he thought it was not radical enough [18]. For several decades prior to the advent of the New Deal, Catholic clerics had campaigned for the protection of the rights of workers

³ Studies that treat the pro-life movement as a conservative cause include [9–14]. Several of these books—especially the studies by Luker, Garrow, and Critchlow—offer detailed, informative accounts of abortion politics in the 1960s and 1970s, but they nevertheless say little about the early pro-life movement's sympathies with New Deal liberalism and the politics of human rights. Two studies that present a more complicated depiction of the early pro-life movement's political sympathies are [15,16].

and for legislation mandating a “living wage.” Guided by a growing body of socially conscious papal documents such as *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and later, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), the National Catholic Welfare Conference (the political arm of the nation’s bishops) had called as early as 1919 for legislation limiting the workday to eight hours and guaranteeing “equal pay for equal work” for women and men ([15], pp. 127–65, 199–201; [19]). President Franklin Roosevelt never implemented all of the social reforms that the bishops called for—his national minimum wage, for instance, fell short of the “living wage” that Catholic clerics had advocated—but he lauded *Quadragesimo Anno* as “one of the greatest documents of modern times,” and he gave most Catholics the impression that he shared their Church’s concern for the less fortunate and the values of human dignity ([15], p. 151). The majority of American Catholic voters, influenced by their positive experience of the New Deal, continued to cast their ballots for Democratic presidential candidates until the 1970s. They also cited the New Deal when arguing for moral or social legislation [20–23].

Thus, when a number of Protestants and Jews campaigned for birth control in the 1930s, and when a few doctors also began calling for the liberalization of state abortion laws, Catholics reacted by accusing the birth control advocates and the abortion law reformers of attacking both the values of human life and the principles of the New Deal. Fr. Ignatius Cox, a Fordham University professor and the national moderator of the Federation of Catholic Physicians’ Guilds, responded to the American Medical Association’s endorsement of contraception in 1937 by linking this stance to a lack of respect for the lives and well-being of workers, because he believed that a disrespect for the creation of human life before birth would quickly lead to a disregard for the lives of those already born. “This action is connected with a long denial of a truly living wage and of social justice in our present economic order,” he declared [24]. Cox viewed abortion, like contraception, as another attack on the principles of social justice. It would make the physician the “social executioner” of the nation, he charged. Although abortion law reformers claimed to promote “health and happiness,” abortion would “only succeed in the long run in destroying both” [25].

As human rights ideology became an increasingly prominent part of American liberalism in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Catholic clergy began framing their campaign against abortion in the language of international human rights by speaking of the “right to life” for the unborn. In their view, this right was integrally tied to the other human rights that both New Deal liberals and the Catholic Church championed. In 1947, the National Catholic Welfare Conference sent a draft “Declaration of Human Rights” to the newly created United Nations (UN). The declaration included a long list of human rights upon which both New Deal liberals and the Catholic Church agreed, such as the “right to a living wage,” the “right to collective bargaining,” and the “right to assistance, through community services in the education and care of the children.” Heading the list was the right that the bishops believed undergirded all other human rights—the “right to life and bodily integrity from the moment of conception” [26]. When the UN left this right out of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that it issued the following year, the Catholic Association for International Peace responded in 1950 by sending the UN a call for a revised Declaration that included a prohibition on abortion [27].

For Catholics, a prohibition on abortion would not be a gratuitous addition to the UN’s Declaration, but instead a recognition of the principles that supported the entire human rights tradition. Human rights, Catholics believed, were not the product of modern secular values, but were instead derived from the natural law—an unwritten code which, in accordance with the view of the medieval

theologian Thomas Aquinas, could be discovered through reasoned reflection on the purposes for which God had created human beings. Pope Pius XI's papal encyclicals of the early 1930s had defended both the "sacred rights of the workers that flow from their dignity as men and as Christians" and the "sacred" life of the unborn as inviolable principles derived from the "law of nature" [28,29]. One of the most influential Catholic proponents of international human rights in the mid-twentieth century—and a contributor to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights—was a natural-law philosopher, Jacques Maritain, who grounded his ethical principles in the thought of Aquinas ([15], pp. 199–201). Though proponents of abortion law reform often appealed to the principles of New Deal liberalism in arguing that the legalization of therapeutic abortion would save women's lives and alleviate poverty, Catholic opponents of abortion legalization believed that they were the true guardians of liberal values and the human rights tradition, because their arguments against abortion were grounded in the claim that all people—born and unborn—had the right to life [30,31]. Without protection for that fundamental right, they believed, no one's rights would be secure and the "law of the jungle will prevail" [32].

Protestant and Jewish liberals never accepted the connection between human rights ideology and natural law philosophy, and they were unimpressed with the Catholic argument that abortion would lead to infanticide and to a disregard for all human life. Likewise, they resisted the Catholic assertion that contraception was an attack on the sacredness of human life. Nevertheless, despite the skepticism that most non-Catholics had of Catholic natural-law arguments, many were sympathetic toward Catholics' assertion that the rights of the unborn should be protected in public law. Although the UN had ignored Catholic pleas to include the unborn in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, it did include them in its Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), which asserted that the child "needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth" [33]. Catholics were thus able to ground their legal arguments against abortion in a UN statement that they believed offered firm proof that the unborn child had internationally recognized, inalienable human rights. When Fr. James McHugh, director of the US Catholic Conference's Family Life Bureau, mobilized American bishops in a nationwide campaign against abortion legalization in 1968, he encouraged them to cite the UN declaration as evidence that their campaign was a human rights cause that had the imprimatur of the United Nations behind it [34].

The right-to-life cause became an even more overtly liberal campaign after the Catholic Church's Vatican II conference (1962–1965) and President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs encouraged the growth of a socially conscious Catholic left. In an era of increasing public concern about poverty and racial discrimination, some pro-lifers claimed that legalized abortion was a direct attack on African Americans and the poor, and that by preventing the legalization of abortion, they could protect oppressed minorities against injustice. When Washington, DC, a city that was 71 percent black, legalized abortion in the summer of 1972, Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle, who had given the invocation at the March on Washington nine years earlier, warned, "No one can ignore the implications of genocide" [35]. Later that fall, pro-life advocates in Michigan brought a similar charge against proponents of legalizing abortion in their state. "Is abortion black genocide???" a flyer distributed by African American Democratic state representative Rosetta Ferguson, director of Michigan's Voice of the Unborn, asked in 1972 [36]. As her flyer pointed out, population control measures, including legalized abortion, would likely affect the black population disproportionately. Poor minority women

might be coerced into having abortions in order to continue receiving welfare benefits, just as some women, especially those in southern states such as North Carolina, had already been coerced into accepting sterilization as a prerequisite for public assistance. “Claims that no one is coerced, that the welfare client is merely ‘informed’ of her options have the ring of pious hypocrisy,” John T. Noonan, a Catholic law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, told a California Assembly committee when testifying against an abortion legalization bill in 1970 [37]. A few liberal Protestants, including civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, found these Catholic social justice arguments persuasive. Although Jackson later switched to the pro-choice position in the early 1980s, he was a right-to-life advocate throughout the 1970s because he believed that the campaign against abortion was a natural extension of his efforts to help the poor and minorities. “Politicians argue for abortion largely because they do not want to spend the money necessary to feed, clothe and educate more people,” Jackson declared in an article that he wrote for *National Right to Life News* in 1977. “Here arguments for inconvenience and economic savings take precedence over arguments for human value and human life” [38].

Pro-life advocates argued that the fetus was a powerless minority that was entitled to legal protection, just as other minorities were. Catholic lawyers of the 1960s and early 1970s claimed that the Fourteenth Amendment protected the unborn, a claim that grounded their cause in the same constitutional amendment that had given civil rights advocates their landmark victory in *Brown v. Board* [39–41]. Like civil rights advocates, pro-life activists believed that their campaign was an effort to protect the powerless—in this case, the fetus—against the powerful. As Sidney Callahan, a liberal Catholic and self-described feminist, said, “Each human being has inviolable rights and dignity no matter what...The powerful (including parents) cannot be allowed to want and unwanted people at will” [42].

Pro-lifers’ reactions against the Vietnam War pushed the movement further to the left. In the early years of the movement, opponents of abortion, most of whom were staunchly anticommunist, had been reluctant to say anything against the nation’s military effort in Vietnam. They were New Deal liberals and advocates of the civil rights movement, but in the mid-1960s, they hesitated to link themselves to a radical student cause that would put them at odds with their nation’s government and with some of the nation’s highest-ranking Catholic clerics, including New York archbishop Cardinal Francis Spellman, who had endorsed the war as a necessity in the fight against Communism [43,44]. Indeed, one of the leading pro-life books of the late 1960s, Charles E. Rice’s *The Vanishing Right to Live*, explicitly condemned those who refused to serve in Vietnam [45]. But by the end of the decade, some pro-lifers concluded that if they valued human life before birth, they also needed to protect the lives of those already born and join the campaign against the war. After Fr. James McHugh, founder of the National Right to Life Committee and director of the bishops’ Family Life Bureau, included a discussion of the ethics of war in the model homily on abortion that he sent to the nation’s Catholic priests in January 1969, an increasing number of pro-lifers began talking about the injustice of the war in Vietnam, as well as the arms race [34]. The definitive antiabortion publication of 1970, a 500-page tome by Georgetown philosophy professor Germain Grisez, condemned the nuclear arms race as unethical and questioned the morality of the Vietnam War, saying that it “poses many problems from an ethical point of view” [46]. Despite conservative Catholics’ initial reluctance to issue an unmitigated condemnation of the war, denunciations of the nation’s military effort in Vietnam became widespread in the pro-life movement

by 1972. “We cannot be selective in our love for life,” Detroit’s archbishop, Cardinal John Dearden, declared in September 1972. “The very same reasons call on us to protect it wherever and however it is threatened, whether through the suffocation of poverty or in villages ravaged by napalm or unborn life in a mother’s womb” [47].

Some young liberal Catholics found their way into the pro-life movement through antiwar activism. John Cavanaugh-O’Keefe, for instance, was a conscientious objector in the Vietnam War before he joined the pro-life cause, and Juli Loesch protested against the war as a member of the leftist Catholic group Pax Christi before she began demonstrating against abortion [48,49]. The head of Brunswick, New Jersey’s Birthright office, Anne McCracken, volunteered for the Peace Corps and protested against the Vietnam War before deciding in the early 1970s that she needed to give her full attention to saving the unborn at home. “Suddenly I realized, here I am protesting wars and killing while 25,000 babies were aborted in New York, 30 miles away in three months,” she said. “What a death rate” [50]. Many pro-lifers struggled to understand why any antiwar activist would not join the pro-life movement, because they saw a logical connection between the two causes. As Anna Lawler and Angela Wozniak, officers in Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life (MCCL), explained, “While our sons are dying in Vietnam, it doesn’t make much sense to promote violence in our own society by relaxing our abortion law” [51].

The young pro-life activists who forged an alliance between the pro-life campaign and the antiwar cause imbued their movement with a heightened concern about poverty and a new vision for a cooperative society. The right-to-life cause had long been associated with a Catholic understanding of New Deal liberalism and with the ideology of human rights, but the young Catholic pro-lifers who denounced the Vietnam War pushed the movement further to the left, arguing that the movement should not only oppose all killing—including capital punishment, which some older Catholics still supported—but should also champion a comprehensive program of public assistance to unwed mothers to encourage positive alternatives to abortion. “The solution to the woman’s problems is neither to offer her abortion, nor merely to prohibit it, but rather to demonstrate that there are humane alternatives,” MCCL proclaimed in 1971. “This means that we must provide counseling, medical care, financial assistance, homes for unwed mothers, adoption agencies and effective welfare programs” [52]. Many pro-lifers—including Thomas Hilgers, a Catholic graduate fellow in obstetrics at the Mayo Clinic, a pro-life activist in Save Our Unwanted Life (SOUL), and author of *Abortion and Social Justice* (1972)—advocated an expansion of maternal health insurance, as well as reform of the adoption process to ensure good homes for all children, especially those who were disabled. The War on Poverty should be “more than a backyard skirmish,” he declared [53].

By making a persuasive argument that the pro-life campaign was not merely an extension of the Catholic Church’s longstanding opposition to contraception, but was instead a cause grounded in a concern for all human life and dedicated to the preservation of children’s welfare both before and after birth, pro-lifers of the early 1970s forged an alliance with several leading liberal politicians, especially those who were Catholic. Senator Edward Kennedy, whose sister, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, was a pro-life activist, endorsed the right-to-life cause in language that closely paralleled the progressive pronouncements of Hilgers, SOUL, or the MCCL. “Wanted or unwanted, I believe that human life, even at its earliest stages, has certain rights which must be recognized—the right to be born, the right to love, the right to grow old,” he declared in 1971. “When history looks back to this era it should recognize this generation as one which cared about human beings enough to halt the practice of war, to provide a

decent living for every family, and to fulfill its responsibility to its children from the very moment of conception” [4].

3. Evangelicals’ Role in the Pro-Life Movement’s Conservative Turn

Four years after he endorsed the right-to-life cause, Kennedy broke with the pro-life movement by lobbying for the retention of abortion services in Medicaid programs and by opposing a constitutional amendment proposal to protect human life from the moment of conception [54,55]. He was not the only Democrat to make this political shift; even Sargent Shriver, the husband of pro-life activist Eunice Kennedy Shriver and a devout Catholic whom many pro-lifers had long considered a friend of their cause, refused to endorse the Human Life Amendment during his 1976 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination [56]. Pro-lifers failed to retain the liberal support that they had won in the early 1970s because the fetal rights that they championed conflicted with another rights-based cause that became increasingly important to liberals: women’s rights to equality and bodily autonomy, which the feminist movement convinced the national Democratic Party to endorse in the 1970s. The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which declared that women’s right to privacy gave them a constitutional right to abortion during the first two trimesters of pregnancy, offered liberal Democrats a strong incentive to choose the right that had a Supreme Court mandate (*i.e.*, women’s right to reproductive freedom) over the right that did not (*i.e.*, the fetus’s right to life) when the two rights came into conflict. Pro-lifers’ attempt to ground their movement in liberal rights-based ideology thus ran aground against the feminist movement’s successful lobbying and the Supreme Court’s refusal to accept their constitutional arguments. After the late 1970s, pro-lifers found more political support from conservative Republican politicians than from liberal Democrats, at least at the national level.⁴ Yet their alliance with conservative Republicans such as Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms posed a dilemma for the pro-life movement: How could a movement that had been conceived in the ideology of New Deal liberalism and human rights, and that had been baptized in the rhetoric of antipoverty campaigns and antiwar rhetoric, abandon its liberal heritage and become a conservative cause?

Conservatives such as Reagan and Helms did not subscribe to the Catholic social vision that had shaped the pro-life movement’s early politics, nor did they often agree with Catholic bishops on any item except for abortion. Reagan, for instance, frequently faced criticism from Catholic bishops during his first term for his administration’s cuts in social welfare spending and for his nuclear arms buildup [58,59]. For a while, Catholic pro-lifers attempted to make a merely tactical alliance with Reagan, supporting him because of his opposition to abortion, but refusing to endorse his broader platform.⁵ But by the end of the twentieth century, the pro-life movement was firmly allied with the Republican Party, and the nation’s leading pro-life organization, the National Right to Life Committee, had abandoned most of its earlier concerns about poverty and war. Instead of grounding their cause in the liberal rhetoric of the New Deal, the Great Society, and the antiwar movement, many pro-lifers framed their campaign as a battle to protect “family values” against the assaults of an immoral

⁴ For the conflict between these two different rights-based movements in the 1970s and 1980s, and the New Right’s championship of the antiabortion cause, see [57].

⁵ Nellie J. Gray was a liberal Democratic Catholic pro-life activist who endorsed Reagan in 1980 because of the single issue of abortion [60].

government [61–63]. Pro-life organizations were able to make this shift partly because politically progressive Catholics no longer set the agenda for the movement after 1980; the leading spokespersons for the pro-life cause were now conservative evangelicals, and their political views were very different from those of the Catholic New Deal liberals who had initially launched the antiabortion campaign.

Prior to the late 1970s, the pro-life movement was overwhelmingly Catholic, despite Catholic pro-lifers' attempts to make common cause with Protestants. In 1972, one of the nation's two largest state right-to-life organizations, New York Right to Life, had a membership that was still 85 percent Catholic even after its president had made a concerted effort to recruit Protestants and Jews, and the country's largest national pro-life organization, the National Right to Life Committee, was still closely tied to the US Catholic Conference's Family Life Bureau [64,65]. Even the Protestants in the movement were unlikely to be conservative evangelicals; instead, they were mainline Episcopalians, Methodists, and Lutherans who supported liberal Democrats and who joined the pro-life movement precisely because they considered it a politically progressive, rights-based cause. California Episcopal priest Charles Carroll, for instance, became a national speaker for the movement in the late 1960s only after he had marched with Cesar Chavez and protested against the Vietnam War [66]. Likewise, New York Lutheran minister Richard John Neuhaus (who eventually became a Catholic priest, but who began his ministerial career as a politically progressive Lutheran) began speaking out against the Vietnam War before he wrote anything in defense of the unborn [67]. Nearly all of the Protestants leading state pro-life organizations prior to 1973 were members of mainline denominations; they were not Southern Baptists or Pentecostals. Arizona's state pro-life organization was led by an Episcopalian, Minnesota's by a self-described "liberal" Methodist, Michigan's by a Presbyterian, and North Dakota's by a member of the American Lutheran Church [68–71].

The few evangelicals who did support the pro-life cause in the early 1970s were not necessarily political conservatives. Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR), an evangelical Baptist who co-sponsored a Senate version of the Human Life Amendment in 1973, was an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War and an opponent of capital punishment. As he told the National Right to Life Committee in June 1973, his opposition to abortion stemmed from his antipathy to all state-sanctioned disrespect for human life. "The most tragic consequences have resulted when we, or another nation, have taken a too restrictive view personhood and the value of all human life," he declared, in phrases that closely echoed the social justice declarations of politically progressive Catholics such as Thomas Hilgers or liberal Protestants such as Charles Carroll. "The institution of slavery, the ovens at Auschwitz and the slaughter at all the My Lais of Indochina demonstrates what becomes possible, tolerable, and even legal from a philosophy of human life and personhood too narrowly conceived" [72].

But by 1980, a Gallup Poll showed that evangelical Protestants—most of whom were political conservatives—were more likely than either Catholics or mainline Protestants to oppose abortion [73]. In 1986, the Southern Baptist Convention, which only a decade before had held an official stance on abortion that allowed for the procedure in extreme situations, adopted the Catholic Church's practice of observing Sanctity of Human Life Sunday each January in protest against *Roe v. Wade* [74]. This shift in the religious demographics of the movement reshaped the movement's partisan identity. In contrast to many of the Catholics and mainline Protestants who had joined the movement in the late 1960s or early 1970s, most of the evangelicals who enlisted in the pro-life cause in the late 1970s and

1980s were political conservatives, so after they joined the campaign, they converted the pro-life movement to the politics of the right.⁶

Politically progressive Catholics viewed the campaign against abortion as a human rights cause, but evangelicals reframed it as a campaign to restore the nation's moral order. This contrast reflected larger differences both in their theological view of abortion and their political priorities. Theologically, Catholics and Protestants differed in their view of the beginning of life, because Catholics based their understanding of the issue on a well-developed natural law tradition and body of church dogma, whereas conservative Protestants, with only competing interpretations of a handful of biblical passages as their guide, lacked a coherent theology on the matter. While Catholic right-to-life activists of the mid-twentieth century received a steady diet of church teaching about conception and the beginning of human life, and had no doubt that human personhood began in the womb, Protestants, regardless of whether they were mainline or evangelical, received almost no church teaching on these issues in the 1950s and 1960s, and were unsure about the personhood of the fetus, which made it unlikely that they would view the effort to save the unborn as a human rights cause [75,76].

In addition, conservative evangelicals lacked the Catholic social justice framework that would have led them to treat the protection of human rights as a political priority. Although a few politically progressive evangelicals in the late 1960s and early 1970s wanted to meld evangelical theology with a call for human rights and social justice, these evangelicals were few in number and had only a limited following; most evangelical political activism in the era was anchored in the concerns of the political right, not the left.⁷ Communism, moral disorder, and the sexual revolution were the primary targets of politically active conservative evangelicals in the late 1960s; the language of human rights was not yet a major part of conservative evangelicals' political vocabulary. Most evangelical political campaigns of the era had as their primary goal the salvation of the nation from moral destruction, not the protection of human dignity. Yet ironically, it was their interest in saving the nation and in battling the sexual revolution that eventually led them to embrace the cause of saving the unborn, even though the campaign against abortion was not a political priority for them in the late 1960s.⁸

⁶ White evangelicals' consistent pattern of Republican voting in presidential elections throughout the late 1960s and 1970s was evidence of their political conservatism prior to their antiabortion activism [12].

⁷ For a study of the evangelical left during the 1970s, see [77]. Despite the desire of a few evangelicals to ally with political progressives, most white American evangelicals of the 1970s were politically conservative or centrist, and the nation's best-known evangelical preacher, Billy Graham, was a strong supporter of President Richard Nixon. See, for instance, [78], which focuses on evangelicals' alliance with racial conservatism and the GOP, and [79], which portrays late-twentieth-century American evangelicalism as a politically amorphous and variegated, but culturally dominant and often conservative, phenomenon.

⁸ Billy Graham's sermons of the late 1960s provide good evidence of evangelicals' concerns about moral disorder in society. Some of his sermon titles from that era include: "A Nation Rocked by Crime" (20 November 1966); "Hope in Days of Evil" (22 January 1967); "Students in Revolt" (5 February 1967); "Conquering Teenage Rebellion" (9 April 1967); "Obsession with Sex" (14 May 1967); "The Shadow of Narcotics Addiction" (18 June 1967); "Flames of Revolution" (25 June 1967); "Rioting, Looting, and Crime" (30 July 1967); "America Is in Trouble" (6 August 1967); and "Can America Survive?" (10 March 1968) [80].

4. Why Evangelicals Became Concerned about Abortion

Although the sexual revolution and other alleged signs of social disorder received far more coverage in evangelical magazines during the late 1960s than abortion did, conservative Protestant magazine editors of the era felt compelled to react to the rapid political ascendancy of the abortion law reform movement and the liberalization of abortion policy in several states, including California. They were thus forced to take a side on an issue that few of them had spent much time thinking about. Some Protestants, including a few evangelicals, believed that human personhood did not begin until birth and that abortion was acceptable [81]. Some self-identified fundamentalists, on the other hand, believed that human life began at conception and that abortion was therefore “murder” [82–84]. But most Protestants, including the majority of evangelicals, took a position between these two extremes. They believed that the fetus had value as either a potential human life or an actual human life, which meant that, in their view, the law should protect unborn human life in most circumstances, but should also allow for abortion in extreme situations to preserve the life or health of the mother [85,86].

Because the initial abortion law liberalization campaigns of the mid-to-late 1960s sought only modest changes in state abortion laws in order to allow abortion in cases of rape and incest, suspected fetal deformity, and dangers to the health of the mother, few Protestants—and even fewer evangelicals—joined the right-to-life campaign to lobby against these early liberalization proposals. Having recently rejected the Catholic position on contraception (evangelicals had once opposed birth control, but they generally accepted it after the early 1960s), they were reluctant to endorse a Catholic-led antiabortion campaign that seemed to rely on the same natural-law arguments that Catholics had used against contraceptives [87,88]. Yet they consistently condemned “abortion on demand”—that is, the removal of nearly all restrictions on abortion, at least during the first few months of pregnancy—because of its association with moral disorder, sexual licentiousness, and a disregard for unborn human life. It was better, they thought, to hew to a middle course on the abortion issue, avoiding the extremes of either the antiabortion Catholics or the liberal Protestant abortion rights advocates. Between 1967 and 1969, *Christianity Today*, *Eternity*, and *Christian Life* magazines published several articles on abortion, all of which presented a similar conclusion: it was wrong to use abortion as a means of birth control, because abortion constituted the taking of an actual or a potential life, but abortion was probably acceptable in cases of rape or in instances when a pregnancy threatened the life or health of a mother [89–91]. A *Christianity Today* editorial from 1969 summarized the dominant evangelical view at the time when it declared: “Surely we should resist the taking of innocent lives of unborn infants merely on demand or for convenience. There must be substantial medical and other grounds that are biblically licit. Otherwise abortion becomes murder” [92].

The vast majority of evangelicals, including Billy Graham and evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry, accepted rape as a legitimate reason for abortion, even when they condemned the procedure as “murder” in most other cases [93–95]. Nancy Hardesty, for instance, declared in *Eternity* magazine in 1967 that “abortion is the killing of a human being,” but nevertheless asked rhetorically, “Do we have the right to force a woman who has gone through the horrible experience of being raped to bear in her body for nine months a growing reminder of that horror?” [90]. Evangelicals’ insistence that there were legitimate reasons for abortion in at least a few extreme cases alienated them from the Catholic right-to-life campaign of the late 1960s, which claimed that all abortion was evil.

When abortion law reformers ceased calling for a modest liberalization of existing abortion laws and began demanding a repeal of almost all restrictions on abortion, some evangelicals reacted in horror and decided that the right-to-life movement was worthy of more consideration than they had initially thought. The removal of almost all legal restrictions on first and second-trimester abortions in New York in 1970 was particularly troubling, since it quickly led to nearly 200,000 legal abortions per year in New York's hospitals [96]. Two months after the enactment of New York's new abortion policy, *Christianity Today* published an editorial titled, "War on the Womb," which argued, for the first time, that human personhood probably began "at the very moment or very soon after the sperm and egg meet" [97]. In previous editorials, *Christianity Today*, like other evangelical magazines, had avoided taking the Catholic position that human life began at conception, but its outrage over "abortion on demand" pushed it closer to the Catholic view. The magazine no longer published editorials endorsing abortion in exceptional circumstances. In 1971, it encouraged readers to join right-to-life organizations—even though these organizations, at the time, were overwhelmingly Catholic [98].

Yet some evangelicals who were upset by the legalization of unrestricted abortion still hesitated to endorse the Catholic-dominated right-to-life movement and attempted instead to shore up support for the traditional evangelical stance of moderation on the issue. When the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution in 1971 condemning legislation that would remove all restrictions on abortion, it called not for the restoration of absolutist abortion prohibitions in response but for the passage of the sort of "therapeutic" abortion laws that most evangelicals had favored in the late 1960s. Abortion should be legal, the SBC said, in cases of "rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother"—a stance that was very close to the position that *Christianity Today* had taken prior to 1970 [99]. It was also the stance taken by the vast majority of Southern Baptist pastors, according to a *Baptist Viewpoint* poll of 1970. As the poll revealed, 80 percent of Southern Baptist pastors opposed the removal of all restrictions on abortion in the first trimester (the position later mandated by *Roe v. Wade*), but 70 percent favored allowing abortion in cases where it was necessary to preserve a woman's health, and 71 percent favored legalizing it in cases of rape or incest. Such a stance, the SBC declared, maintained a "high view of the sanctity of human life, including fetal life," while still allowing for abortion in exceptional circumstances [99,100].

The Supreme Court's declaration in *Roe v. Wade* that women's right to privacy prevented the state from placing any restrictions on first-trimester abortions fell well to the left of most evangelicals' views, and as a result, several Southern Baptist and evangelical periodicals condemned the decision. Nevertheless, despite their concerns, a few evangelicals who disapproved of "abortion-on-demand" gave *Roe* at least a tepid endorsement because their fear of Catholic political power was greater than their anxiety about unrestricted abortion. "Religious liberty, human equality and justice are advanced by the Supreme Court abortion decision," the Virginia Baptist Convention's *Religious Herald* stated in February 1973 [101]. Even evangelicals who were willing to condemn *Roe* cautioned against going as far as Catholic bishops wanted; they did not want the law to mandate the "Catholic" view that all abortions were evil. "The Roman Catholic bishops have been pushing very hard with a well-organized and well financed campaign to enact their absolutist position about abortion into law in this country," Foy Valentine, director of the Southern Baptist Convention's Christian Life Convention, complained in 1977. While he insisted that "all life is sacred including fetal life"—a line taken almost verbatim

from the denomination's official resolutions on abortion—he did not believe that “all abortions are murders.” There were at least some situations, he said, in which “abortion is the lesser of two evils” [102].

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) spoke for many conservative Protestants in attempting to condemn *Roe* while at the same time repudiating the Catholic right-to-life campaign's insistence that all abortions were wrong. “We deplore in the strongest possible terms the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court which has made it legal to terminate a pregnancy for no better reason than personal convenience or sociological considerations,” the NAE declared in 1973. “We reaffirm our conviction that abortion on demand for social adjustment or to solve economic problems is morally wrong. At the same time we recognize the necessity for therapeutic abortions to safeguard the health or the life of the mother, as in the case of tubular pregnancies. Other pregnancies, such as those resulting from rape or incest may require deliberate termination, but the decision should be made only after there has been medical, psychological and religious counseling of the most sensitive kind” [103].

Yet many evangelicals who had once accepted the legitimacy of abortion in a few extreme cases decided, by the end of the 1970s, that all human life began at conception and that therefore, any abortion that was not necessary to save a woman's life was murder. Those who made this transition insisted that they were guided by biblical passages, such as Psalm 139, that seemed to treat the fetus as a person in the eyes of God, as well as by scientific findings that demonstrated the presence of a fetal heartbeat and brain activity even in very early stages of pregnancy and that showed that a unique human DNA was present in each zygote from the moment of conception [104]. Evangelicals were people of the Bible, so it was therefore not surprising that they cited biblical guidance as a primary reason for changing their position on abortion. Yet the evangelicals of the late 1960s who had allowed for abortion in cases of rape or medical necessity had also cited a biblical proof-text (Exodus 21:22–25) for their assertion that the Bible differentiated between the value of a fetus and the value of an adult woman; they, too, claimed to be guided by the Bible in resisting the Catholic view that all abortions were murder [105]. It was not the Bible alone that guided evangelicals to oppose abortion; it was instead a realization that the campaign against abortion, which Catholics had viewed as a human rights cause, was in reality a battle against moral disorder in American society. As the number of legal abortions per year in the United States rose from fewer than 750,000 in 1973 to more than 1.5 million in 1980, and as abortion clinics sprang up even in such Bible Belt cities as Birmingham, Alabama, evangelicals who had expressed mere ambivalence or discomfort about abortion reconsidered their stance and decided to join the pro-life side [106–108]. Biblical passages about fetal life suddenly acquired a new importance in their eyes when they realized what was at stake in the conflict.

In 1975, evangelical theologian Harold O. J. Brown, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, founded the Protestant antiabortion organization Christian Action Council with help from Ruth Graham (wife of the evangelist Billy Graham) and C. Everett Koop (a Philadelphia physician and Presbyterian elder who would later serve as surgeon general in the Reagan administration), and began campaigning to enlist evangelicals in the pro-life cause [109,110]. In 1976, the Southern Baptist Convention responded to lobbying pressure from pro-life pastors in the denomination by passing a stronger antiabortion resolution than it had previously. “Every decision for an abortion, for whatever reason must necessarily involve the decision to terminate the life of an innocent human being,” the SBC declared in 1976 ([100], pp. 90–93; [111]). Yet the denomination still allowed for abortion in

extreme cases; it was not yet ready to say that abortion was never justified except to save a woman's life, despite demands from some Southern Baptist pastors to do so. John Wilder, a leader in the recently formed organization Baptists for Life (which Texas Baptist pastor Robert Holbrooke had founded in 1973), blamed a residual anti-Catholicism for this hesitancy [112,113]. Despite evangelical concerns about abortion, many conservative Protestants were still reluctant to endorse Catholic theological views on the issue. They still lacked a way to frame the campaign against abortion as a specifically evangelical cause.

Francis Schaeffer gave evangelicals the framework that they needed to turn the campaign against abortion into a uniquely Protestant battle against moral disorder. The Presbyterian missionary and bestselling Christian apologist had already become a household name among many American evangelicals because of the persuasive power of his arguments against secular humanism and situation ethics, so when he made abortion a primary target in the late 1970s, American evangelicals paid attention. In three major works that called evangelicals to fight abortion—*How Should We Then Live?* (1976), *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (1979), and *A Christian Manifesto* (1981)—Schaeffer repeated many of the traditional Catholic arguments against abortion by appealing to scientific evidence to support his assertion that the fetus was a human being and by linking abortion with infanticide and euthanasia [114–116]. But there was one major difference between Schaeffer and the Catholics: instead of grounding his arguments against abortion in an appeal to the liberal social welfare state's concern for human life, Schaeffer portrayed abortion legalization as a product of a malevolent secular state. He said little about abortion legalization prior to *Roe*, and instead placed sole blame for abortion on the Supreme Court decision of 1973 and the secular values that the Court represented. The fight against abortion was therefore a fight for the return of Christian values in government and society; it was thus the same fight that evangelicals were waging in their battle against pornography, homosexuality, the sexual revolution, and the culture of moral relativism. "In regard to the fetus, the courts have arbitrarily separated 'aliveness' from 'personhood,'" Schaeffer declared in *How Should We Then Live?* "Law has become a matter of averages, just as the culture's sexual mores have become only a matter of averages. As the Christian consensus dies, there are not many sociological alternatives" ([114], p. 223).

Some evangelicals had already suggested that *Roe* represented the collapse of Christian values in the nation and symbolized the rise of a secular state. *Christianity Today*, for instance, had reacted to *Roe* by declaring in its February 1973 issue: "Christians should accustom themselves to the thought that the American state no longer supports, in any meaningful sense, the laws of God, and prepare themselves spiritually for the prospect that it may one day formally repudiate them and turn against those who seek to live by them" [117]. But until Schaeffer, this was not a dominant idea among evangelicals. Most politically active conservative evangelicals in the mid-1970s were still more likely to see sexual promiscuity or feminism as a greater threat than abortion, and they were not likely to cite *Roe* as the chief symbol of a secular state that had rebelled against Christian values. Jerry Falwell, for instance, made gay rights, not abortion, the target of his first foray into national political activism in 1977 [118]. But by the end of the 1970s, when he created the Moral Majority, he listed abortion as his foremost political concern. Like Schaeffer, whom he credited as his political inspiration, he blamed America's policy on *Roe* and portrayed the fight to overturn *Roe* as a quest to save the nation from moral destruction. "The decision by the Supreme Court legalizing 'abortion-on-demand' did more to destroy our nation than any other decision it has made," Falwell said in 1978 [119,120]. Schaeffer

presented a similar message: the fight against abortion was a fight to save the nation from the godless tyranny of a secular humanist judiciary. “We must use every constitutional practice to offset the rise of authoritarian governments and the loss of humanness in our society,” he wrote in *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* when explaining why Christians should work to reverse *Roe* ([115], pp. 194–95).

By portraying the campaign against abortion as a fight against the tyranny of a secular state, Schaeffer reframed what had been a Catholic human rights cause grounded in New Deal liberalism and transformed it into the centerpiece of a conservative evangelical fight for the restoration of Christian-based law in the nation and curbs on the power of the secular judiciary. Unlike Catholics, conservative evangelicals had never been advocates of the New Deal social welfare state, and they distrusted government efforts to eradicate poverty through federal programs. Most evangelicals supported capital punishment and saw no problem with wars against Communism; they therefore had no interest in linking the pro-life cause to antinuclear or antiwar movements. But they had a long tradition of campaigning against sexual immorality and moral vices, so a campaign against abortion that was linked to a broader defense of sexual morality, moral order, and the restoration of Christian values in government appealed to them [121–123]. At a time when many conservative evangelicals were becoming increasingly alarmed about the sexual permissiveness and changes in gender roles in American society, and at a time when many feared that the state had rejected Christian values, the use of *Roe* as a symbol for the evils of a secular state made sense.

Shortly after Schaeffer issued his call to action on abortion, several of the nation’s leading evangelical denominations registered their support for the pro-life cause by passing resolutions condemning abortion for any reason other than saving a mother’s life. The Evangelical Free Church passed such a resolution in 1977, followed the next year by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) [104,124]. In 1980 the Southern Baptist Convention replaced its moderate language on abortion with a staunchly pro-life resolution that, like the resolutions of the Evangelical Free Church and the PCA, allowed for abortion only when a woman’s life was endangered [125]. The Christian and Missionary Alliance Church adopted a similarly worded statement in 1981, and the Assemblies of God did so in 1985 [124]. These resolutions asserted that the fetus was a human life from the moment of conception, and that abortion was therefore murder—a position that the Catholic Church had long taken. But in contrast to the Catholics of the 1960s and 1970s, the evangelicals who passed pro-life resolutions in the late 1970s and early 1980s linked abortion not to a violation of a human rights tradition, but to “moral relativism and sexual permissiveness,” as the antiabortion resolution of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church stated [124]. The Southern Baptist Convention paired its antiabortion resolution with resolutions condemning homosexuality and cohabitation outside marriage, and affirming the “biblical definition of the family” [126]. For evangelicals of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the campaign against abortion was only one component in a much larger campaign to save both the family and the nation from moral degradation and the sexual revolution. Although conservative evangelicals believed that they were saving unborn children by campaigning against abortion, many of them exhibited no equivalent interest in saving human lives from nuclear war, capital punishment, or other threats that had interested politically liberal Catholics in the early 1970s. A few progressive evangelicals, such as Jim Wallis and Ronald Sider, objected to these political priorities and advocated instead for a pro-life ideology grounded in a broader concern for all human life, but their campaign made only limited headway [127,128]. Unlike Catholics, most conservative evangelicals of the early

1980s did not make the promotion of positive alternatives to abortion a major priority; for them, the pro-life campaign was primarily a quest to change the nation's laws. Many of them later became champions of pro-life crisis pregnancy centers and homes for unwed pregnant women, but at the time, legal changes in abortion policy were their main concern [129].

5. The Pro-Life Movement's Alliance with Political Conservatism

Pro-lifers' narrowly based legal campaign appealed to New Right political strategists and conservative politicians, who objected to *Roe* as an example of judicial overreach and who were happy to make common cause with pro-lifers by endorsing their newfound narrative portraying abortion as the product of a liberal, secular state. New Right political operative Richard Viguerie's attempt to blame the New Deal social welfare state for abortion was typical rhetoric for conservatives in the late 1970s and early 1980s. "For years liberalism made war on private property, private initiative, private education, public morality, religion, and finally human life itself," Viguerie wrote in 1982. "Beginning with high taxes and ending with abortion, it violated the deepest aspirations and convictions of millions of Americans" [130]. Ronald Reagan presented a similar narrative when communicating with pro-lifers, blaming legalized abortion on a liberal Supreme Court that had exceeded its power. "The 22 January 1973 Supreme Court decision...overruled the historic role of the states in legislating in the areas concerning abortion and took away virtually every protection previously accorded the unborn," Reagan declared in July 1979. "Later decisions have intruded into the family structure through their denial of the parents' obligations and right to guide their minor children" [131]. By connecting abortion legalization to judicial activism, a violation of states' rights, and an attack on the family, Reagan and his fellow conservatives cooperated with evangelicals in reshaping the pro-life cause into a conservative movement that conservative Protestants were happy to endorse. Reagan may not have been an evangelical, but on the issue of abortion, he echoed the language of conservative Protestants such as Schaeffer and Falwell, who linked the abortion issue to "pro-family" politics and an attack on the liberal state.

Some politically liberal Catholics were alarmed at this political shift. Msgr. George Higgins, a left-leaning California cleric who supported Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers, said in 1980 that "prolife Catholics" needed to "seriously consider the possibility that in collaborating with the right wing on abortion they risk defeat of the overall social justice agenda." Although pro-lifers might get a Human Life Amendment by voting for Ronald Reagan, they would also tie their cause to "a potpourri of other right-wing issues that, almost without exception, contradict the official positions of the church" [132]. In a reflection of their anxiety about linking their cause to the Republican Party or the New Christian Right, the nation's Catholic bishops highlighted their opposition to the death penalty and their concern for the poor when discussing issues of concern in the 1980 election, while saying less about abortion than they had in the previous election cycle [133]. The bishops' desire to distance themselves from Reagan continued after the Republican's election to the White House. While Jerry Falwell endorsed the president's nuclear weapons buildup and his cuts in social programs, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops condemned these measures [58,59,134].

In 1983 the nation's Catholic bishops attempted to reclaim the pro-life cause for the politics of the left by linking antiabortion advocacy with campaigns against war and nuclear arms buildup. To "end

the scourge of war,” America needed to “begin by defending life at its most defenseless, the life of the unborn,” the bishops declared in their pastoral letter, “The Challenge of Peace” [135]. The principal author of this document, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, insisted that Catholics needed to advocate a “consistent ethic of life,” or, as he sometimes phrased it, a “seamless garment” of life [136]. Catholics needed to oppose offensive war, nuclear arms buildup, capital punishment, and abortion; they could not select one of these causes over the other—which meant, in practice, that they would find it difficult to ally with either conservative Republicans or pro-choice Democrats. Many Catholics, along with a few liberal evangelicals, endorsed Bernardin’s vision. The Seamless Garment Network, which Juli Loesch and several left-leaning evangelicals founded in 1987, attempted to translate Bernardin’s ethic into practical politics by lobbying for the protection of human life in all areas, both before and after birth. Yet the majority of pro-lifers never followed this route, partly because a cooperation with a handful of pro-life Democrats—which Loesch attempted—seemed increasingly quixotic after the early 1990s [137,138].

By the early 1990s, the centrality of women’s rights issues for the Democratic Party had led most of the prominent Democratic politicians who had once supported the pro-life cause—a group that included Ted Kennedy, Jesse Jackson, Dick Gephardt, and Al Gore, among others—to embrace the pro-choice movement [38,139–141]. When Pennsylvania governor Bob Casey Sr., one of the few Democrats who still spoke out against abortion in the early 1990s, was denied a speaking slot at the 1992 Democratic national convention, many pro-lifers interpreted his rejection as a sign that the national Democratic Party had no interest in paying attention to their cause [142,143]. Pro-lifers’ only source of help appeared to be the Republican Party and its associated ally, the Christian Right. As New Right political strategist Paul Weyrich explained, “Whether they want to or not, right-to-lifers find they have to work with new Right activists, simply because no one else cares about protecting the unborn” [144].

This move required many of the Catholics who had once grounded their cause in the ideology of the New Deal to embrace a different political narrative for their movement—a narrative that conservative evangelical Protestants provided. By the end of the twentieth century, even many Catholics had come to view the pro-life cause as a movement to protect the family and preserve a traditional view of sexuality, and they began linking their cause not to antiwar activism or the politics of the left, but to a conservative sexual ethic. Thomas Hilgers and Susan Bastyr, who had helped organize the National Youth Pro-Life Coalition and had campaigned for the pro-life politics of the left, devoted their later careers to advocating Natural Family Planning, an abstinence-based form of fertility regulation associated with conservative Catholicism [145]. Juli Loesch, the antinuclear activist, began writing articles against premarital sex [146]. Even Richard John Neuhaus, the antiwar minister who had denounced conservatism at the NYPLC’s antiabortion demonstration in Washington in 1972, moved to the right as he reacted against the sexual revolution and cultural liberalism. In his later years, he converted to Catholicism, founded the conservative magazine *First Things*, and—perhaps most surprisingly, considering his early denunciations of America’s military effort in Vietnam—defended the Iraq War [147,148].

6. Conclusions

By the twenty-first century, the liberal demonstrators who had decried abortion as a crime against human rights had fully embraced the conservative evangelical political fight against the sexual revolution and had abandoned their earlier liberalism. For them, the pro-life cause was still a human rights campaign to save the unborn. Yet now it would be linked not with the other human rights causes of the left but with the culturally conservative causes of the right. The liberal Democratic politicians who had once sympathized with the pro-life cause had long since left the movement, and in the wake of their departure, conservative evangelicals and Republican politicians seemed to offer the pro-life movement its only hope of political victory.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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