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An Unholy Union: The Catholic/Evangelical Relationship in the Culture War of Abortion

In the early 1970s, America continued its experiments in “culture wars” with the increasingly polarizing debate on abortion. Even prior to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that elective abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy could not by federal law be prohibited, religious institutions began to take sides. Clerical Christians of every stripe disagreed with abortion on religious grounds. The National Right to Life Committee was a Catholic institution, for example, which began promoting legislation that restricted abortion rights in southern states during that time. Not surprisingly, the NRLC was met with staunch opposition; after all, the issue was sharply divided. What is truly surprising is who the opposition was—the Baptist General Convention of Texas and other evangelical groups, forming a very premature pro-choice stance solely because local Catholics stood on the other side of the issue (Rozell 28).

And so began an interesting culture war in its own right. In America, both the Catholic Church and conservative, evangelical churches eventually took a hard-line stance against the *Roe v. Wade* decision. But in the turbulent decade that followed the decision, each group went about their anti-abortion campaigns in very different ways. While each fighting on the same front of a biting political issue, the two communities had only mixed success in forming the desired union

of Christian pro-lifers. George Mason public policy professor Mark Rozell adds: “This convergence of interests was...not easily achieved and emerged only after many years of antipathy between these two religious groups that had kept from working together in politics” (Rozell 28). The goal of this paper, then, is to contrast the Catholic and evangelical response to the abortion debate in the 1970s, and to highlight what extent the two communities cooperated with each other for that common goal. The two groups, skeptical of one another, built the current state of the anti-abortion movement while at the same time were very counter-productive due to their disagreements.

The Catholic response to the abortion debate very closely preceded the evangelical response, but neither preceded the rise of abortion as a practice in America. The history of the practice is almost as old as the country itself. According to historian R. Sauer in the wide-ranging article *Attitudes to Abortion in America, 1800-1975*, abortions were performed in America since colonial times (Sauer 53). Attitudes toward the practice were generally split along demographic lines rather than religious lines for most of the country’s history.¹ That said, the Catholic population as a demographic tended to look down on the practice. Of the years before *Roe v. Wade*, Sauer says: “Pope Pius XII reiterated

¹ Sauer, in a pretty meticulous history of attitudes to abortion, forms a number of theses that have informed this paper about the social landscape towards the practice in America. Painting in very broad brushstrokes, abortion before the end of the 19th century and well into the 20th was practiced much more often by the wealthy and the urban. The practice “appears to have been concentrated in the middle and upper classes” (Sauer 56), suggesting that social convenience was a larger factor in requesting abortion—especially for the elite American, more Protestant establishment. Rural populations, with a high birth rate, echo the “manifest destiny” idea of American history and practiced few abortions, while the working class of immigrant populations (mostly Catholics, like the Irish and Italians) neglected the practice for similar reasons (Sauer 56-57). While Catholic and Protestant clergy mostly condemned the practice throughout that time, Sauer insists here that demographic differences like class and location were much more prevalent in determining a population’s attitude toward abortion than religious affiliation.

[in 1951] the position that abortion, even to save the life of the mother, was murder, and apparently no Catholic spoke out against this view” (Sauer 63) This view carried through to the years directly before *Roe v. Wade*. “From 1940 through mid-1960, Catholic teaching about sexuality was remarkably consistent,” says Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson. “The prohibition of artificial birth control, of divorce, or pre-marital sex, and of mixed marriages marked Catholics, they fondly thought, as the serious Christians in this country” (Johnson 28). Surely abortion was included in this laundry list, under the category of “artificial birth control”: especially as the sort that killed a helpless child.

Aided by the demographic realities of Catholic populations in America, Church doctrine saw little friction in the laypeople’s adherence to its prohibition on abortion. Catholics in America, as a fertile immigrant population, had little use for abortion. Members of the working class sought to have large families anyway. This ideology grew into the generally anti-abortion Catholic population in the days of *Roe v. Wade*. As the issue did not generally affect the Catholic population at large, responses to it were localized to dioceses that it did directly affect. “All previous threats to the Church [before *Roe v. Wade*] had been dealt with on a local level and by individual bishops,” says Margaret Ross Sammon, writing on the modern political involvement of Catholic officials (Sammon 11). This includes the first anti-abortion demonstration ever recorded, a march on an abortion clinic in Washington, D.C. organized by the “ultra-orthodox” Catholic magazine *Triumph* (Allitt 159). The “quixotic” event involved readers and editors

brandishing crucifixes and red berets, chanting “Viva Cristo Rey”², and was met with confusion as the issue was not yet a national one (Allitt 159). Other local campaigns popped up across the country to combat the growing campaigns to legalize abortion. Most notably, a Catholic doctor named Jack Willke founded the first recorded anti-abortion counseling center in 1971. Intending to advise pregnant women against abortion, consider adoption, and offer neonatal care, more than three thousand centers opened across the next five years across America, modeled after the first one in Cincinnati (Allitt 159).

Story after story like the ones above exemplify Catholic response to the abortion debate—especially after the *Roe v. Wade* decision eventually led to an increased abortion rate and elevated the issue to the national stage. Certain laypeople, in addition to Church officials, became vocal spokespeople in the debate and came to mold the arguments and methods of the pro-life movement. John T. Noonan became a household name in the debate. A Catholic layman and Berkeley law professor, he proceeded to publish a series of influential legal articles establishing the anti-abortion position. Rejecting the arbitrary (according to him) timeframe that the first trimester of pregnancy was the permissible window in which an abortion can be performed, Noonan first established the idea that a child’s life begins at conception, therefore making abortion a heinous sin. This argument set the precedent that “life begins at conception,” a foundation of the anti-abortion argument since *Roe v. Wade* (Allitt 161). In addition to forming the arguments, Catholics pioneered the methods of protest generally seen

² The police arrested the leaders of the march after the clinic’s windows were smashed in—apparently, Allitt explains, the confusion was such that the marchers were mistaken by the police for Communist supporters of Che Guevara (Allitt 159).

nowadays in the pro-life movement. The sociologist Kristin Luker—another layperson—spearheaded “abortion activism” in the 1970s. This included writing to congressmen and other kinds of non-aggressive protest. The next decade, however, was exemplified by a more aggressive pro-life movement. Joseph Scheidler, Catholic and head of the Pro-Life Action League group, used more direct and dangerous tactics to prevent abortions from even taking place. “[These] included injecting glue into door locks, blockading doorways [of clinics] with old cars and concrete slabs, and padlocking one’s own body to the doors or to the machinery inside...[he] also harangued doctors and developed the idea of “sidewalk counseling,” by which some of his volunteers would try to discourage women arriving at the clinic from going through with the procedure.” (Allitt 162).

With these new developments in the movement, Catholic officials in America eventually entered the debate themselves. While Catholic practice was generally pro-life “by itself” and did not need intervention by the Church, the legalization of abortion was enough to rouse the Church into a top-down movement. Says Sammon about political involvement: “The political activity of the American Catholic bishops has been guided by the words of John Carroll, the first bishop of the United States, who asked that Catholic priests avoid political involvement unless the interests of the Church were in danger” (Sammon 11). This ideal succinctly explains the laissez-faire attitude of American Church officials pre-*Roe v. Wade*. This was to change in 1973. “Believing that abortion was a grave threat to the Catholic Church, the bishops devoted an extensive amount of time, money, and energy in an attempt to overturn legalized abortion” (Sammon 11). When abortion was in a limbo of semi-legality, only performed in

private and certainly not ever by Catholics, it was an issue the Church would rather not get its hands dirty with. Now that the practice was supported by legitimate campaigns, and eventually confirmed by the Supreme Court, however, the clergy had license to interfere with politics. “Although participating politically in such a national matter was out of character for the bishops, protecting the Church was not”³ (Sammon 12). Bishops consequently began to appear on national committees and testify at congressional hearings. Pro-life groups were formed and bishops ultimately “aligned themselves with the Republican Party” (Sammon 12), another precedent that generally holds true today. Politicians began to recognize Catholics as an influential swing-vote demographic in elections in the 1970s, and bishops became more powerful as liaisons to the electorate. This movement continued in elections afterward. Walter Mondale’s 1984 campaign manager noted: “If you are a bishop, you’ve got a lot of people, you’ve got money, places to meet, you’ve got a lot of things that any good politician would like to have at his disposal” (Sammon 17). This is indicative of the interesting evolution that took place regarding Catholics and the pro-life movement. What started as a layman-driven, hands-off movement eventually turned into a full-scale political operation where Church officials had much influence in crafting pro-life attitudes.

While the anti-abortion stance as a political issue was largely birthed and built by the Catholic establishment in the 1970s, the evangelical community certainly took grasp of the view and ran with it. Before *Roe v. Wade* forced the

³ Sammon also attributes the election of John F. Kennedy and the increased median income of Catholics compared to white Protestants in the 1960s as the foundations for increased political involvement of American bishops (Sammon 12).

issue onto the national stage, evangelical leaders (and there were many, sometimes isolated and competing with each other, in contrast to the Catholic hierarchy) also avoided the issue. Many prominent evangelical leaders, says Rozell, “had before the *Roe* decision urged supporters not to engage the political world. But *Roe*, along with a number of state referenda on gay rights and controversies over textbooks in public schools and sex education, began to awaken evangelicals toward political action” (Rozell 29). Conservative Protestants, it seems, entered the culture war from a different angle. While Catholics fought abortion as a form of contraception, evangelicals saw abortion as just one practice under an umbrella of unholy practices beginning to take place in America. In the South, where the Protestant demographic was more populous and more influential, the anti-abortion campaign became just a part of a powerful political shift (Hout 57).

The abortion issue’s push into the national spotlight now forced every demographic to form a position. The conservative Protestant population had no problem folding pro-life sentiment into its newfound political movement. In the mid- to late-1970s, a collective of evangelical, mostly Southern ministers and laypeople called the New Christian Right formed. It was made up of Christians who feared the rise of “the sexual revolution, feminism, legalized abortion, easily accessible pornography, the homosexual rights movement, church-state separation, high rates of violent crime, and declining standards of public and political morality—all these things they interpreted as signs of a national moral crisis” (Allitt 151).

The New Christian Right propagated most effectively from the media than from the pulpit. This is the characteristic that most clearly distinguishes the growth of the anti-abortion movement in evangelical and Catholic circles. Appealing to the New Christian Right's proponents was a series of television segments and radio programs started by a few eloquent ministers. Most influential was the Virginian preacher Jerry Falwell, who built his Lynchburg congregation into a national platform for the values movement (Allitt 152). A powerful figure, Falwell transformed religious television show with a program called *Old-Time Gospel Hour*. He employed rhetoric in his sermons that brought images of war to mind, to the extent that his detractors viewed him as a demagogue. "The local church is an organized army equipped for battle, ready to charge the enemy...Christians, like slaves and soldiers, ask no questions" (Allitt 152) is a typical, not-out-of-context line from a Falwell sermon. The program, and movement, proved to be a success. Four million people tuned in to *Old-Time* every week by 1980, and its impact on the evangelical "values" movement is obvious.

The rise of evangelical groups with regards to anti-abortion and other Christian right stances came to its high point in the 1980s. Falwell's program spurred many others like it, on radio and television, and continued in smaller congregations and communities. Political lobbying groups were formed like the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council were formed to help legitimize the anti-abortion movement (Rozell 30-31). Perhaps the most important and most remembered group was an "interfaith conservative pressure group" called Moral Majority, founded by Falwell, minister Paul Weyrich and

other evangelicals (Allitt 152-153). The Moral Majority was formed partially in response to Christian right disappointment surrounding Jimmy Carter's presidency. Elected in 1976, the first post-*Roe v. Wade* president was voted in partly due to his image as a born-again Christian. Evangelicals grew disappointed by his weakness on many issues and eventually campaigned against his reelection campaign (Rozell 29)—as an anti-abortion candidate, after all, he made almost no initiative against the practice.⁴ Interestingly, the power of the Christian right waned in the decade after. Various sorts of infighting and a failure to find common ground with the Catholic anti-abortion movement resulted in the decline of the evangelicals' political influence and relevance.

So what went wrong? It is very interesting in retrospect to see how little cooperation occurred between Catholics and evangelicals on the abortion issue, considering that both parties were staunchly opposed to abortion and the *Roe v. Wade* decision in question. It is possible that the pro-life movement could have been much more powerful if all Christian parties in America formed a unified bloc of voters. This was never to be, though. Religious scholars attribute the situation's origins, at least, to the mutual skepticism of Catholics and Protestants that has existed in America for centuries.

In the situation I noted in this paper's introduction, a Texas Baptist church group lobbied against Catholic pro-life sentiment in the very early years of abortion activism. This phenomenon speaks to a couple key points about the historical relationship and structure of the two groups. First, the Baptists in this

⁴ ...thus creating the precedent that presidential candidates who accept the legality of abortion are almost always personally opposed to it. This continues for pro-choice candidates in campaigns today.

case formed their opinion not with any reference to Scripture or their own teachings, but instead to their strategic anti-Catholic intentions. In America, the competition between Catholics and Protestants has only ever been accelerated by demographic and class differences. As College of the Holy Cross scholar William M. Shea broadly states it, “The deepest religious and theological convictions of evangelicals for centuries impelled them not merely to denounce Rome as an apostate church but to mount missions to save benighted Catholics” (Shea 183). While not so direct, this legacy between the two sides continued tensions well into the “culture war” era. Rozell brings up an important point, too, in comparing the economic makeup of both faith groups and their resulting political affiliations at the time. “Catholic teachings...often depart[ed] from the positions of Christian right organizations...the Catholic Church has supported social welfare programs and expanded opportunity for women and has opposed the death penalty and nuclear weapons” (Rozell 31). These truths tended to align Catholics with the Democratic Party and evangelicals with the Republican Party, causing further disagreement. Oftentimes, the churches became opposed against each other instead of against the pro-choice stance—the true opponent for both sides.

The second point my example portrays is how the nature of both sides’ hierarchies are very different. The Catholic response to the abortion issue is based on its structure as a top-down, unified institution. The anti-abortion stance was almost universally accepted by the Catholic population and taught by all dioceses and clergy as the correct position. Sammon concludes her essay by saying, for example, how “the amount of resources that the bishops devoted to [the anti-abortion movement] shows the skillful manner in which the hierarchy

will defend the interests of the Catholic Church” (Sammon 24). The keyword here is *hierarchy*.

The evangelical movement, conversely, is marked by a menagerie of congregations, all of differing strains of moderate to radical beliefs, each adhering to their own particular dogma. This resulted in a lack of cooperation with the Catholic Church and with, in certain cases, itself. Rozell explains this situation best: “Some observers report that besides the Moral Majority’s failure to do ecumenical research, its leaders and supporters often were outright to Catholics, mainline Protestants, even some evangelicals...in a telling example, scholar Clyde Wilcox reports of attending a [Moral Majority meeting in the 1980s] where the evening commenced with a sermon entitled “Roman Catholic Church: Harlot of Rome” and continued with a political discussion in which some participants why there were no other pro-life Catholics and other potential allies at their gatherings” (Rozell 29-30). Such attitudes led the Protestant movement to knee-jerkingly disagree with itself—as the Texas Baptist group did, with no precedent, in my example.

While Catholic and evangelical communities pursued the same anti-abortion stance in the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade*, they each went about pursuing the campaign in ways that best suited their populations. Interestingly, their political and hierarchical differences hindered their cooperation and impeded the anti-abortion movement as a result. The situation is a fascinating example of the prisoner’s dilemma—two parties fighting for the same agenda, but eschewing compromise for the sake of mutual skepticism and ultimately losing more ground than they could have gained.

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