

**'My Life is My Argument':  
Reconceptualizing Religion in Understanding Social Activism**

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I think that the message of repentance is going to be broadcast in a big way and that the time of the waters is near. For some folks it will be the second time and for others it will be the first. In either case there's time for people to have great anticipation. Their cries and their pleas have not fallen on deaf ears. So it's a time of great expectancy and it's almost as we talk, the world is travailing and groans and so on and so forth. The world is about to go into convulsions and transitions and give the new birth to the new heaven and the new earth. But the good thing about it is that, before the labor can begin, those who subscribe to the belief and the trust in Him have to be taken out and honored. That's the sign of the water breaking right there.

These words from 50-year-old Boston resident Albert richly tie together a theological worldview with imagery of pregnancy and birth so important in the pro-life movement. They are reflective of the conventional view of the pro-life movement in the United States as consisting of religious individuals, mobilized through congregations, maintained with church resources, and legitimated by a religious ideology. It is a view perpetuated by critics (e.g. Blanchard (1993; 1994)) and sympathizers (e.g. Jacoby (1998)) alike. Like all stereotypes it is rooted in some reality, but it also paints a fundamentally misleading picture of the relationship between religion and the movement.

The goal of this essay is evaluate the impact of religious forces on the pro-life movement. After an overview of my data and methodology, I begin by looking at the two typical ways of conceptualizing religion in the social sciences: as organizations and as sets of beliefs. The scant attention that has been given to religion by social movement scholars typically treats religion organizationally (e.g. Morris (1981; 1984), McAdam (1982)). Churches are seen as social institutions that provide various resources needed by movements, especially material goods and services, audiences, and leadership.<sup>1</sup> I then shift focus and look at religion defined as bodies of belief. This is the dominant approach among sociologists of religion (e.g. Williams (1999; 1996), Darnell and Sherkat (1997), Wood (1999), Hart (1996)). Religious ideas are seen as important for the values and beliefs they preach, and the religious language and imagery they offer to both their members and the larger society.

These conceptualizations of religion offer two starting points for evaluating the impact of religion on the pro-life movement. The data presented here show that religion plays a role in the

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<sup>1</sup> Christian churches make up the vast majority of the religious institutions in contact with the pro-life movement. I focus in this essay solely on Christian organizations and traditions because the role of Judaism, Islam, and other faiths in the movement is negligible.

movement in both ways— as church organizations and as a rich set of ideas and beliefs. At the same time, however, the relationship between the movement and religion—as defined either as churches or as ideas—is more limited than the common stereotype would suggest. Churches provide measurable but decidedly modest resources to the movement. Religious ideas permeate, but by no means encompass, pro-life activism. Existing conceptualizations of the religion-social movement link are thus helpful starting points, but do not offer the tools necessary to fully understand the relationship between the two.

I suggest that a synthesis, as well as a substantial reworking, of these two basic views is ultimately the most effective means by which to make sense of the many ways in which religion and the pro-life movement are intertwined. I argue that five features of religion make its relationship to social movements distinct from the impact of other social institutions. Religion is 1) a set of organizations that 2) produce ideas and languages legitimated by 3) a tradition with a long historical pedigree and 4) a claim to the sacred, which are 5) continually constituted by the regular religious practice of individuals. It is the fifth dimension of this formulation that requires the most additional elaboration. Religious practice is central to understanding the impact of religion on the pro-life movement.

The second half of this essay offers a model of the relationship between religion and the pro-life movement that goes beyond conceptions of religion as either churches or ideas. Religion and the pro-life movement do not represent separate and distinct phenomena, but rather overlapping spheres of action with substantially blurred boundaries. In the case of the pro-life movement, I demonstrate how religious practice is frequently constituted in pro-life activism. It is not the case that social movement activism is *really* religious practice or that it represents religious belief or commitment. Religious activity and social movement activity are frequently polysemous; they are simultaneously religious practice and pro-life activism. Moreover, actual participation in pro-life events is key to this relationship.<sup>2</sup> The multiple meanings embedded in activism become available to individuals through their involvement and not through simply abstract moral teachings. Another way to put this is that the meaning of events is tied to individuals doing them rather than being a product of simply thinking about them.

From this vantage point, it becomes clear that religion not only has an impact on the pro-life movement, but the movement also has an impact on religion. The data shows that activists

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<sup>2</sup> This is one of the central points I explore in the dissertation from which this essay has been drawn.

who participate in the discussions, meetings, rallies, events and campaigns of the pro-life movement reinforce the vitality of religious faith in their own lives. Activism leads people back to a religious commitment they had lost years ago. In some cases, it can lead to outright religious conversion. Religion can be thus thought of as not only an independent, but also a dependent variable in its relationship to social movements.

Looking for the impact of religion on the movement by seeing each as separate but overlapping spheres of action ultimately allows us a much clearer picture of how religion and social movements are related. It allows us to understand Albert's description of the coming tribulation, quoted above, as representing a synthesized narrative of God and concerns of pro-lifers, a statement of faith constituted in practice that is understood in both religious and pro-life terms. To fully develop this understanding, however, it is important to return first to the existing tools for understanding religion in social movements, the concepts of religion as churches and religion as ideas.

### **Investigating Activists**

The argument presented here comes out of a more general study of mobilization within the pro-life movement (Munson 2002). In-depth, life history interviews were conducted with eighty-two activists in four different locations: Oklahoma City OK, Charleston SC, the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul MN, and Boston MA. Activists in each city were initially found through a search for individuals who had published a pro-life editorial in the major local newspaper in the last five years, referrals from pro-life organizational leaders, and referrals from individuals I met while observing pro-life protest events and attending other movement activities such as fundraisers, chapter meetings, banquets, and so forth. Additional activists were subsequently identified through these initial contacts. I then selected individuals from this snowball technique to be interviewed, with a focus on ensuring I had a wide range of ages, religious backgrounds, levels and types of commitment, and involvement in the different streams of the movement—what Strauss and Corbin (1990) call a theoretical sample.

A second set of life history interviews were conducted in the four cities with twenty-nine pro-life non-activists. Non-activists were identified by asking activists for names of friends, acquaintances, neighbors, or colleagues who they thought might be pro-life and yet

were not actively involved in any pro-life movement activity. Choosing non-activists in this way insures a pool of individuals who are demographically similar to the activists and therefore a reasonable comparison group. I define non-activists for the purpose of this study as those individuals who have never regularly attended pro-life meetings or rallies and who have never regularly donated their time or money to a pro-life organization.

The comparison of activists with non-activists is an important element of the research design. Much has been written about pro-life activism solely on the basis of information from individuals already deeply involved in the movement (Ginsburg [1989] 1998; Luker 1984; Blanchard and Prewitt 1993). Indeed, this has been the primary method for understanding social movement activism generally. In order to fully understand the boundary between mobilization and non-activism, however, it is important to know something about those who stand just to each side of the dividing line. Rather than comparing pro-life with their opponents, which is the way in which the movement has been understood in the past, the present study seeks to understand the pro-life movement through a comparison with those most like pro-lifers, but who nonetheless remain uninvolved in any sustained way.

The overall sample includes individuals in every major racial category, ranging in age from 14 to 85; three-fifths of the respondents were Catholic and two-fifths Protestant. Of those I contacted for an interview only 10 declined to participate, making for an excellent response rate of 92%. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format designed to collect detailed information about the participants' personal biographies, relationship to the pro-life movement, involvement in other social movements, political, and civic organizations, ideas and beliefs about abortion, and relationship to religious institutions and ideas. The interview format and content was pre-tested in interviews with three activists in Orange County, NY, and then modified for use with actual study participants.

## **Religion as Churches**

Aldon Morris's analysis of the Civil Rights movement (Morris 1981; Morris 1984) has been the most influential thinking on the relationship between religion and social movements since resource mobilization and related models replaced the collective behavior tradition. Although previous scholars have noted the importance of religious institutions in the

mobilization of blacks in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. McAdam (1982)), Morris puts the relationship between the two at center stage and documents the specific ways in which the black church was crucial in the origins of the movement. First, churches provided many of the material resources necessary to the Civil Rights movement, especially money and space where meetings could be held. Second, churches provided the movement with an organized mass base—congregations of people who came together regularly and with whom a leader could communicate from the pulpit. Third, the churches provided the movement with a source of indigenous leadership, as church pastors possessed experience as leaders and were not economically dependent on the white power structure because they were hired directly by their churches. Churches, then, can be important sources of resources, audiences, and leaders for a social movement.

### *Resources*

Like the Civil Rights movement, the pro-life movement has been rooted in church institutions in a number of ways. Churches often directly support pro-life organizations, either by making financial contributions to support such groups or by hosting fundraisers in the church for the organization. An example of the former is Minnesota Citizens Concerned For Life (MCCL), which receives several thousand dollars every year from the Archdioceses of Minneapolis/St. Paul. Churches are especially involved in direct support of the individual outreach stream of the movement; many crisis pregnancy centers rely on the support of churches for part of their annual revenue. Fundraising takes many forms: special collections, Pennies for Life campaigns, talent shows, bake sales, church ‘lock-ins’ in which children receive pledges for fasting for 24 hours, Mother’s Day corsage sales, and so forth. Churches can also provide in-kind financial resources, as when they rent buses to transport people to rallies and protests.

Physical space is another important resource that churches provide for pro-life organizations. As activists from any movement well know, much of the time in movements is spent in meetings. Pro-life groups are always in need of physical space to hold an endless stream of meetings, as well as other seminars, workshops, and informational sessions. BirthChoice of Oklahoma City, a crisis pregnancy center, began with offices housed in the basement of a church, as did a number of the organizations in all four cities. Total Life Care Clinics in the

Twin Cities continues to use administrative office space provided by a convent. In South Carolina, board meetings of South Carolina Citizens for Life (SCCL) are held in a small independent church that itself has so little space that the altar in the church must be moved during the meeting to accommodate a portable table for the dozen or so attendees. A Catholic church in Boston houses the main office for Women Affirming Life, a pro-life educational group for professional women. Organizational and inspirational rallies by Operation Rescue Boston were often held in churches on the eve of major civil disobedience campaigns. The movement thus relies on churches for both ongoing and impromptu space to meet, organize, rally, and educate activists and the public. It is an important resource, as alternatives are often difficult to schedule and—especially in the case of larger spaces—prohibitively expensive for pro-life organizations.

### *Audiences*

Audiences are the second important resource Morris identifies that churches can provide to social movements. Churches command an enormous potential audience for the pro-life movement. Many churches allow groups like the Christian Coalition to distribute their voter guides in church the Sunday before an election. Churches have also participated in letter writing campaigns on various issues. When a ban on ‘partial-birth’<sup>3</sup> abortion procedures were being discussed by Congress, many churches distributed postcards directly in the pews that congregants were encouraged to send to Congress, indicating their support of such a ban. Pro-life groups are permitted and in some cases encouraged to display pro-life posters around the church, make announcements of upcoming pro-life events during services, and set up tables or bulletin boards to distribute pro-life pamphlets, newsletters, and fundraising appeals.

Weekly church bulletins are one of the most common ways in which pro-life groups use church congregations as an audience. Many churches allow small advertisements by pro-life groups offering help, soliciting new donations, or recruiting volunteers in their bulletins. Representatives from pro-life organizations are also sometimes given the chance to speak during a service, giving a pro-life perspective on recent events or appealing for support for a particular

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<sup>3</sup> Partial-birth abortion is a political, not a medical term. There is some controversy over exactly what medical procedures are actually covered by the term. See Cohen & Saul (1998).

pro-life cause. Crisis pregnancy centers might present the work of the center to the congregation and then ask for support in terms of new volunteers, financial contributions, and donations of clothing and baby gear. Larger groups in all four streams of the movement have special speakers bureaus set up to train and provide speakers to take advantage of opportunities for speaking in churches. Sermons might remind congregants to keep issues like abortion in mind when they vote.

The message of pro-life organizations is also sometimes brought to church audiences less formally. Individual activists who are members of congregations use their churches as forums for discussing pro-life ideas without being official representatives of particular pro-life groups. So, for example, a number of activists have used function rooms in their church to host showings of *The Silent Scream*, a pro-life video that shows ultrasound images of an abortion. In other cases, activists use their involvement in the church to press pro-life goals. Sunday school and adult religious education classes are places in which this frequently happens. Melissa, a 37-year-old Catholic activist in Charleston, explained what she has done:

You know in our Sunday school program, which my husband Rob and I run, we have these cards that show a sketchy drawing of fetal development at each month for nine months; there are nine different cards basically. And what we encourage the kids and families to do is pray—basically it's the same prayer that we learned. And we give them the prayer and then each month we update them. We encourage them to pray for the unborn baby for nine months through the school year. And each month we give them a card as to where that baby is at in its development. In some ways it's a little corny, but it's like the baby talking to the kid, what I'm doing now, thank you for praying for me, that type of deal. And so we did that. We took them through nine months last year. And then we had a baby shower at the end of the year for unborn babies and they brought in stuff for the crisis pregnancy center. That's just something we did in the Sunday school program.

Melissa's efforts were not a part of any coordinated program of a pro-life group. Nonetheless, she took advantage of her role as a Sunday school instructor to put the issue—and the movement—in front of her class for nine full months.

Churches can also provide an audience for the movement in purely symbolic ways. In other words, church activities give affirmation of pro-life ideas even when the issue is not addressed directly by either pro-life organizations coming into the church or individual activists raising the issue in the context of their church participation. In an independent church in the Twin Cities there is a reading of petitions every week in which congregants are asked to pray for

pregnant women “in the midst of a difficult choice.” In Charleston, a Catholic church hosts a special service twice each year in which pregnant women are asked to come to the front of the congregation for a special blessing. Abortion is never discussed *per se* in either case, nor are the arguments of the pro-life movement, but the regular repetition of a pro-life prayer as an uncontested and uncontroversial part of the service symbolizes the acceptance of the pro-life moral universe by the church.

### ***Leadership***

Leadership is the third way in which religion as churches can contribute to the pro-life movement. Leadership can take place both on the organization level, when church organizations take leadership roles within the movement, and on the individual level, when individual religious leaders are mobilized into the movement. Organizationally, churches have taken leadership roles in the formation of pro-life organizations throughout the United States. A Woman’s Concern in Boston, WomenCare Ministries in Oklahoma City, and New Life Family Services in the Twin Cities all started as outreach programs of churches. New Life Family Services remains under the auspices of the Greater Minnesota Evangelical Ministry, an umbrella organization supported by member churches. In other cases, churches have spun off their pro-life ministries in order to reduce their own financial obligations, and give the independently incorporated groups the opportunity to draw on a larger base for fundraising and volunteer mobilization efforts.

The Catholic church is by far the most important religious body in the leadership of the pro-life movement. Monsignor James McHugh of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) spearheaded the meeting of pro-life leaders in Detroit in 1973 that led to the formation of the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC). Since that time the Catholic church has been a major financial contributor both to the NRLC and its individual state affiliates. In 1975, the NCCB released their “Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities,” a document which called on the entire American Catholic church to take a leadership role in the movement through mobilizing institutions such as Catholic hospitals, universities, and the Catholic press to speak out and work against legalized abortion, support judicial appointments for those who are “fair-minded and objective on abortion,” coordinate with ecumenical and secular pro-life groups, and organize voter education and lobbying campaigns in every U.S. congressional district. At the diocesan

level, the plan called for the creation of Respect Life committees in every diocese that would coordinate parish and congressional district pro-life activity, mobilize grassroots support for the pro-life movement, and educate the public about the issue (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1975). Ten years later, the NCCB revised and reaffirmed their commitment to the plan. In 1990, they hired a public relations firm to direct a \$5 million national pro-life advertising campaign.

Moving from the organizational to the individual level, Morris suggests in his study that religious leaders offer a number of advantages to social movement groups: their churches provide their salaries and thus make them available for social movement work, they already have experience with leadership tasks and responsibilities, they are often well-respected in the community, and they are generally well educated. A number of leaders in the pro-life movement have come from churches with such advantages. Richard is a 57-year-old Catholic priest in the Twin Cities who was once very active in the movement. In seminary in the 1960s, Richard got involved in social justice activism, especially around the issue of racism. His first parish posting, however, was to a white, middle class suburban church in which racism and poverty were not particularly salient issues. Richard decided then to get more involved in the emerging pro-life movement. As he explains:

I wasn't in a position to be involved in interracial affairs in a first ring suburb like Maplewood. And issues of homelessness and poverty weren't present there. I mean it was kind of an awkward situation. So this [abortion] seemed to be a logical place where justice could be pursued—in a pro-life dimension, which actually affects everybody.

Soon after mobilizing his own parishioners to oppose the re-election of a local pro-choice politician, Richard was approached by MCCL:

The leadership of MCCL heard about me, and they came to me—in particular Darla and David—and they asked me to join the board while I was at Sacred Heart in those first three years. Which was very unusual, because I was just starting out. Of course, they were just starting out too. But they wanted a priest representative on their board and they felt that I would (pause), they talked to me awhile to screen how I was and where I was, and they felt that I suited their purposes.

Richard was a leader in his parish and sought out abortion as an issue in which he could make a difference as a social movement leader as well. At the same time, the movement itself sought

Richard out precisely because of his religious credentials. He spent many years as a pro-life leader, involved in the church, on the board of directors of MCCL, and in local and state politics.

Similar religious leaders exist in the movement in other cities too. In Charleston, 47-year-old Jacob is the pastor of a large suburban Baptist congregation. He got involved in the movement about ten years ago after his church began supporting a local crisis pregnancy center. Since that time he has personally become a leader in the direct action stream of the movement. He also estimates he brings up the abortion issue in more than a third of his sermons. Henry, a 59-year-old Episcopal priest in Oklahoma City, has not taken nearly the leadership role in the movement as Richard or Jacob, but he does regularly support crisis pregnancy work in the area and is a vocal supporter of the movement in his church. As in the case of Richard, a local crisis pregnancy center actively sought him out to be on their board of directors because of his religious position.

## **Religion as Belief**

Focusing on the role of church organizations is not the only way to evaluate the impact of religion on the pro-life movement. Religion can also be conceptualized as a body of values, beliefs, ideas, and teachings. Morris recognized that “cultural factors such as religious beliefs” (1984:282) played a role in the Civil Rights movement, but his analysis never explores the way in which such beliefs mattered to the movement, or how such beliefs are related to the moral understandings of movement participants. The sociology of religion, however, has focused more closely on religion as a set of beliefs.

First, religion might be thought of as a source of values and ideals on which pro-life activism is based. Williams (1999), for example, demonstrates how beliefs about the public good come out of different religious visions: the covenant model, the contractual model, and the stewardship model. Religious beliefs in his analysis provide the values that are used in other debates and struggles. Religion can also provide a vocabulary or language for understanding the abortion issue. Religion is thus a “generator of religious culture” (Wood 1999) that can be used by a social movement to articulate its ideology and goals. Swidler (2001) has noted that discourses can have power not just because of the beliefs embedded in them, but also because they are easily called to mind and understood in multiple contexts. Religion can impact the pro-

life movement as a set of beliefs then both through the values it teaches and the religious language it offers.

### *Values*

Perhaps the most straightforward way for understanding religion as a set of beliefs is to see it as the source of the values on which the pro-life movement is based. In other words, religious ideals, moral precepts, and other teachings of the church serve as a basis for justifying the pro-life position and mobilization of pro-life support. Theological understandings of the sanctity of all human life have frequently been the basis for activism in the pro-life movement.<sup>4</sup> The beliefs expressed by pro-life activists are at times rooted quite explicitly in religious values. Some see the whole issue as being rooted in religious ideals: “The pro-life versus pro-abortion debate is really a struggle between the spiritual view of the world and the materialistic view of the world,” says 33-year-old Boston activist Glen, an Episcopalian. Activists understand the abortion issue in terms of religious values, and some can’t see any other value basis for the movement:

I wonder how clear it is if you don’t have a faith-based view. I mean, if it’s just a mass of cells? Seems like at some point you have to say, ‘When is this actually a person?’ I don’t know when that would be then. Would you say viability? Would you say when you notice a finger? Or notice an eye? Or when it comes out? I don’t know. But the faith-based view maybe makes the call easier.

This is the perspective of Steve, a 28-year-old Catholic living in Boston. For him the religious teaching that life begins at conception provides the beliefs that make the whole issue clear. His sentiments are echoed by 32-year-old Catholic Tammy, a fellow Boston activist: “I think it would be hard for someone that does not believe in God to really come to that conviction [that abortion is wrong].” In these cases, activists are expressing their opposition to abortion by reference to religious values, especially the sanctity of life and the existence of God.

Values can also influence individuals by establishing norms of belief and conduct that are tied to their identities. They feel they need to believe in a particular way because otherwise they

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<sup>4</sup> The other side of the coin is that the existence and activities of the pro-life movement have probably led to more extensive theological elaborations of the sanctity of life; in other words, the movement also has an impact on religious values. I discuss this side of the relationship in the final section of the essay.

won't be the person they want to be. Take, for example, the comments of Jeff, a Catholic 35-year-old in the Twin Cities:

You know, if we're not open to life occurring, not necessarily spontaneously, but if *we're* going to be the ones in charge of deciding when life comes about, you know, in a sense playing little gods, are we still open to the Creator of all life?

Jeff sees the abortion issue as one in which ideas about what God is and the role of God in our lives is put in jeopardy if we allow abortion, which he sees as 'playing little gods'. Monica, a 41-year-old Baptist in Oklahoma City, understands the issue in much the same way, seeing her opposition to abortion as a reflection of being a person who believes in the Bible:

I don't believe that anyone believing the Bible can think that it's okay to end a life through pregnancy. I mean I think we can all have our different interpretations of the Bible, but I'd be hard pressed to ever side with somebody trying to find in the Bible that it's okay to do that.

Opposition to abortion is a litmus test for being a believer for Monica. Being a pro-lifer is a reflection of her values, a core piece of what it means to be a Christian.

Activism itself can also be understood as being prescribed by religious teachings. Values are thereby tied not just to the abortion issue generally, but the particular way in which activists address the issue. Mark, a 43-year-old Catholic in the Twin Cities, explains it this way:

You know if I'm a Christian and I believe just the basics of what it is to be a Christian—that we're to be there for the downtrodden, for the homeless, for the poor, for the distraught—if that's the essence of what social involvement is for a Christian, which it is, there's no doubt about it, then this is an absolute, fundamental, core issue that as Christians we need to be involved in.

This then is the polar opposite view to those who shrink away from social involvement on theological grounds. Instead, social activism is not only laudable, it's actually required by one's faith. Activists with this view are fulfilling their values by living out religious beliefs. In Charleston 14-year-old Justin, a Baptist, explains that his activism is his way of proving God's existence:

As far as pro-life goes, I mean how can I persuade somebody to be pro-life, what would I do? Let's say I argue the Bible and they doubt its authenticity. I argue justice and they argue choice. I argue life, they argue choice. I argue freedom, they argue liberty. I argue justice and they argue liberty. I mean there's two sides to everything. So how can I persuade them? I can't argue morals if everything is post modernistic. There's very few things I can argue, but St. Francis of Assisi said, 'Preach always. If necessary, use words.' So my best argument for pro-life

is how I live. I mean I don't think you can really prove there's a God. I don't think there's some system of mathematics or whatever that equals God. But I can prove God because out of what He's done in my life and the joy that He's given me, that's my argument for why God exists. And my life is my argument. And how I live my life and my morals and what I do, is my argument.

Justin ties the pro-life issue intimately to his faith—to argue about abortion is to argue about the Bible and life and God. He never mentions abortion or the pro-life movement after the first sentence of the passage, an indication that he sees the question of how one brings about a pro-life message as answered by an explanation of how one demonstrates one's faith. Religious values thus serve as a motivation to action. They inform how people think about the abortion issue, as well as how they understand their own involvement. People draw on the teachings of their faiths, applying them to the issue and to the movement in important ways.

### *Language*

Language is the second way in which religion as ideas might impact the pro-life movement. Religious ideas serve as a language by which abortion can be understood and discussed by individuals. An individual trying to understand his or her beliefs about abortion, or communicate and discuss those beliefs with others, requires a vocabulary in which such beliefs can be expressed. Certain discourses are more available than others to act as such a language at any given time and place in society. For example McDermott (2001) has recently demonstrated how U.S. white working class expressions of socio-economic threat and anxiety are made in the language of race rather than class. The vocabulary for communicating about social class is undeveloped in the United States, while there exists an extensive language of race rooted in the history of racial dynamics in the country.

In the case of the abortion debate, the potential languages for expressing and discussing beliefs about the issue are more complex. In many contexts, there are multiple languages available to pro-life activists. Contesting the legal status of abortion, for example, can be accomplished using individual rights talk as well as religious talk. The language of individual rights extending to the rights of the unborn child is one vocabulary in which activists do understand and discuss the issue. Religious faith, however, is another and one that is much closer to the personal experiences of many individuals involved in the movement.

Religious ideas provide a powerful language for thinking about and expressing opposition to abortion. Individuals need to discuss the issue with fellow activists and explain their involvement in the movement to family, friends, and potential new recruits. “God is the creator of life and that life is precious because we are made in his image,” Catholic 48-year-old Irene of Boston says in summing up why abortion is wrong, “We’re not animals. We have a soul and God has your life planned.” This idea comes up frequently in the explanations activists give for why abortion is wrong. Activists quote from Exodus that thou shalt not kill, and from Genesis that men are made in God’s image. Michael, cited earlier, articulates the source of the abortion problem in religious language, drawing on the notion of sin, which he believes has been left out of the debate:

One of the most important things that isn’t taken into consideration is the whole idea of sin. It seems to be something that’s just brushed under the rug. You know, even some Catholic priests think that there really isn’t such a thing as sin, that there isn’t such a thing as evil or something. Those rotten conservatives, or those racist homophobic anti-woman anti-Semitic conservatives. That those are the only evils out there. It seems to me that there is this thing where there is no such thing as right and wrong, because all these things are victimless anyways. As if there’s no victim in abortion, you know?

Here Michael rejects the vocabulary of secular liberals in labeling some as ‘racist homophobic anti-woman anti-Semitic conservatives’ and argues that the religious vocabulary of sin is more appropriate. Others describe abortion as the result of a fallen society, one that has stepped outside the grace of God. Expressions of the causes of abortion and the reasons it must be opposed in each of these cases are couched in a religious idiom, a vocabulary that is readily available to the activists and easily understood by others.

Activists are not only using religious language to express their pro-life sentiments to other people, however. Religious ideas also help many activists make sense of their involvement to themselves. “God is my entire motivation, my belief in God is,” says Walter, a 57-year-old Oklahoma City Catholic, of his involvement. The dominant language of motivation in American society puts an overwhelming premium on self-interested behavior. Even participation in charitable, volunteer, or self-sacrificing activity is understood by both scholars and the public alike in terms of the satisfactions it brings to the participant (“I enjoy volunteering” or “I feel good when I give money”) or even the social capital it builds for possible later use to find a job, a marriage partner, or political power. This kind of language can also be found in the pro-life

movement, but the language of religious faith offers an alternative to understanding one's own involvement solely in self-interested terms. In Walter's case, God is his motivation, not personal satisfaction. Others describe such motivation as a nudge from God or a call to be God's ambassador:

It's kind of like when things come across the pulpit: You hear those things and if you're willing and you really want God's will in your life, He's going to kind of give a little tug there. He doesn't do it for you, but a little tug and you sense that, and being in His world and having a relationship with Him, you respond to that. And so I just kept responding to the things I was hearing. (Jean, 46-year-old Baptist in Oklahoma City)

I *know* that this person that I'm talking to is God's *own choice* child, who He has formed and created in His image, who He has known from the womb, from the beginning of time, that He has a plan to prosper her and not to harm her. And He sends me, as His special ambassador, to be the one to try and talk and to reach her. And it doesn't mean that I even say a word that comes from saying 'Well, God told me to tell you all that.' But I feel something in my spirit and I just move with that. So I feel that I work under a special anointing... We have to continue to believe that God has called us into this place, that we're not working for an individual company or an organization or an agency or an institute. We're working on behalf of the Lord as His ambassadors. And that we can't underestimate the difference that we're making in people's lives because of the work that we're doing. (Molly, 51-year-old Baptist in Boston)

Nicole, a 37-year-old member of an independent church in Charleston, describes the religious call in even stronger terms, seeing herself as unable to do anything *other* than be an activist:

The apostle Paul did describe being a prisoner of Christ. And it's funny, when you read the Bible you tend to romanticize things and you romanticize statements people are making. And he's like, 'Well, maybe it wasn't this matter of love kind of thing. It's more like I really am a prisoner of this.' So I feel like a prisoner of this cause in a sense. And not in a bad way, but in a way where I feel like I'm driven on a track that is meant for me.

Mobilization into the pro-life movement forces activists to confront the question of why they do what they do, both for others and for themselves. Religious ideas offers a language in which the sometimes enormous amounts of time and resources they devote to the movement can be understood.

## **Problems with Existing Models**

Thus far I have outlined the chief approaches to conceptualization religion and shown how each approach—religion as churches and religious has ideas—helps to illuminate part of religion’s impact on the pro-life movement. In both cases, however, the role of religion can be easily overstated. Although churches and religious ideas have provided important advantages to the pro-life movement, their impact and influence have also been surprisingly limited.

### ***The Limits of Religion as Churches***

Churches are an important source of resources, audiences, and leadership for the pro-life movement. The resources that churches can provide, however, represent only a small fraction of those used by the movement. Archdiocesan financial support of MCCL in the Twin Cities, for example, amounts to several thousand dollars a year. MCCL’s annual budget, by contrast, is over \$1.4 million. Overall the direct resources that churches provide to the pro-life movement are limited in number and often small. Churches limit their involvement because of the divisiveness of the abortion issue and because many churches most sympathetic to the movement are also those with theological traditions shunning movement activism. Examining religion organizationally also suffers from the theoretical problem of ignoring what is distinctively religious about religious institutions.

Churches—even conservative churches—often shy away from the issue because they see it as controversial and divisive. Congregations are reticent to address the issue or allow the movement to use their churches as a venue for mobilization. Dan, a 17-year-old Baptist in Charleston, believes the controversy hurts the bottom line of church finances and thus church leaders back off:

It’s because it’s a very controversial issue. I think there are a lot of people in the church who are maybe on birth control or who have had abortions, and [the churches] don’t want to do anything to offend them, or they don’t want to take a stand because then people start leaving. I think once you get off ‘God is love’ and you start focusing on real issues that are kind of not so positive, then you get people who get uncomfortable and you lose some of the money.

Churches cannot count on broad consensus on the abortion issue even within their congregations. They therefore are uncomfortable having abortion be the centerpiece of sermons or church activity. “But see even in the Catholic church,” explains 45-year-old Oklahoma City activist

Joshua, “all the churches are sort of shy. You mention the ‘A’ word [abortion] in the churches and the churches want to hide the ‘A’ word. They really do.” Jason, a 23-year-old in Boston, was not allowed to start a pro-life ‘club’ in his Catholic high school because administrators felt it was ‘inappropriate’. Others have been asked to “tone down” their pro-life activism in church or broaden their activism to less controversial issues. Abortion is divisive and therefore not what many churches wish to put at the center of their agenda.

There are also conservative churches and religious leaders who shy away from active involvement because of theological traditions shunning any kind of social activism. Mobilizing for the pro-life movement in such churches is simply not worth the controversy because it detracts from the overall mission of the church. Ben, a 79-year-old member of a Presbyterian church in Charleston, reflects this view as he explains that the abortion issue is seldom raised in his congregation:

Well it’s not very often now because it’s not an issue that’s being accepted. If we’re going to pass the word to go do something, like the January meeting, we pass the word to participate<sup>5</sup>. But we don’t discuss it otherwise. Part of our purpose is to teach the word of God. And we don’t get sidetracked on other things very often... We strictly stay with the word of God.

Of course, others understand the pro-life position as coming directly from the word of God, but Ben is not alone in understanding that the divisiveness of the abortion issue tends to lead churches away from active engagement. “I don’t know that they support this issue [abortion] or not,” says Dominique, a 48-year-old Baptist activist in Oklahoma City, “The church I go to, our pastor doesn’t want anything to do with politics and those issues, and he makes it clear. Only the word of God and teaching the word of God.” Popular conservative leaders Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson (1999) have contributed significantly to this view with their recent book making this argument generally for the Christian Right. Commitment to religious beliefs that shun this-worldly involvement in politics—and especially highly controversial politics—places significant limits on the relationship between many churches and the movement.

To the extent that other churches are involved in the movement, it is often in only partial or symbolic ways. I spoke with several people, themselves pro-life activists, who had never heard of any pro-life activity in their church, even when I knew from other sources that church

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<sup>5</sup> Ben is referring here to a pro-life vigil once held annually in Charleston-- a “Life Chain” in which individuals would silently stand along a major thoroughfare holding pro-life signs.

pro-life committees and fundraisers existed. For others, the level of pro-life commitment in their church, where it does exist, simply isn't strong enough to warrant much time or effort. Jennifer, a 28-year-old in the Twin Cities, sees this as the reason her charismatic Catholic church doesn't provide any movement leadership:

I haven't been real impressed with them. To me it seems like they just do meetings, but I've never heard any of them speak, I've never heard any of them say, 'we need to get people out doing things.' So I just haven't been impressed and I've never been involved in that.

Lisa, another young Catholic activist from the Twin Cities, signed up for the pro-life group in her church when she first moved to her new home; it was years later before anyone contacted her. Many activists have no memory of the issue ever being raised in their church. "Even having gone through twelve years of Catholic education, I can say I had probably never been talked to about abortion. I don't know if I'd even heard the word," reports 53-year-old Brenda of Oklahoma City.

In the case of movement leadership, the pro-life movement is far from the image Morris provides of the Civil Rights Movement being led by energetic and charismatic pastors who mobilized their congregations behind the cause. Although some religious leaders have become part of the movement, their overall impact has been small. Of the fifteen major pro-life organizations in the Twin Cities, only one is headed by a religious figure. Of the forty-seven people on Massachusetts Citizens for Life's (MCFL) board of directors, only two are clergy. None of the officers or executive committee members of MCCL are also church leaders, and only one of the fifty-seven founding members of Human Life Alliance was also a minister. On the national level, only one of the fifty-three members of the National Right to Life Committee's board of directors is also a religious leader. Neither David O'Steen or Darla St. Martin, longtime executive leaders of the organization, have a professional religious background.

Activists themselves recognize the limits on the leadership and resources the church provides the movement. As a result, they frequently have harsh words for the work of churches:

There is no doubt about it that the bishops are strong on the issue. They've done some great things, some wonderful, wonderful things. The Holy Father, he is unbelievable. I think he's one of history's five greatest people. One of the five greatest men who ever lived, and he strikes me as somebody who is—with all the positive things that he's done—he still seems to be a very humble man. But the local priests seem very quiet on the issue. They're only interested in attendance. It [abortion] comes up once in awhile, nothing that strong. And the worst of the

lot are the Jesuits. The rottenest of the lot are the Jesuits. They are completely invisible on the issue of abortion and they're in positions, running the universities and high schools, where they could have a positive impact. You know I say only partly tongue in cheek that the Jesuits seem to be the Catholic Church's Unitarians. No spines. (Michael, 42-year-old Catholic in Boston)

The churches are not in front of the abortion clinics because they have hirelings in the pulpit, they don't have pastors. When they took prayer out of our schools, the churches should have rioted. When they took the Ten Commandments off the wall, the churches should have come out and said something. They should have spoken. They didn't. (Andy, 35-year-old member of an independent church in Charleston)

I find that we have more sincere Baptists supporting right to life, pro-life movements, than we do Catholics. All too often you have (pause), well some Catholic churches mention it probably once a year and that's about it. (John, 68-year-old Catholic in the Twin Cities)

Activists see churches as having failed in their mission both to their own congregations and the larger society. I asked one Twin Cities activist if he thought his parish priest was pro-life:

Oh, I'm sure he's pro-life. But they don't bring it out strongly enough, that's my opinion anyway. I mean, if you believe in a moral issue, if you believe it's morally wrong, that killing of a baby is totally absurd and ridiculous and morally wrong, you should speak out on it.

This sentiment is widespread among activists; few are fully satisfied with the way churches in general—and their own church in particular—address the issue. Many believe the churches have the power to bring an end to abortion if they would just put their collective will behind the pro-life movement. In Charleston, many activists were particularly upset because Baptist churches had recently mobilized a great deal of resources and support to eliminate video poker in the state, but are not nearly as unified or supportive in their opposition to abortion.<sup>6</sup>

There is also a theoretical limit to conceptualizing religion as churches. While the treatment of religion as organizations with potential resources for movements is evident in scholarship on the Civil Rights movement, the relationship between religion and social

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<sup>6</sup> Nobody would suggest that the moral weight of the video poker issue exceeds that of the abortion issue. The fact that the churches would nonetheless all come together in active opposition to the former and not the latter is further evidence that it is the divisiveness and controversy surrounding abortion that limit the involvement of churches in the pro-life movement. There was no controversy, by contrast, over the appropriate stance toward video poker.

movements has not been developed further (Smith 1996). A problem with an organizational approach to churches is that it provides no place for what is particularly *religious* about church institutions. To the extent that social movement scholars have looked at religion, they have analyzed it as just another site of social organization from which to draw resources (Hannigan 1991). Thus churches have no more to offer a social movement than does, say, the World Wrestling Federation—both are institutions which can provide resources, audiences, and leadership. Religion is reduced to just another variable which supplies these social movement needs.

Churches thus do provide resources, audiences, and leadership to the pro-life movement. The impact that such provisions have on the pro-life movement, however, is modest. The financial and other material contributions to movement organizations are small. Churches are reticent to wade into issues that might divide their congregations or that might be judged tertiary to the core task of the church. Religious leaders have not been well represented in leadership positions in the movement. Ultimately the impact of church organizations on the pro-life movement needs to be recognized, but also understood as limited.

### ***The Limits of Religion as Beliefs***

We saw earlier that religious ideas permeate the pro-life movement. They serve as a source of values and teachings about the issue for activists as well as a language in which abortion can be debated and understood. Like religion as churches, however, conceptualizing religion as a set of beliefs also has a number of limitations. The pro-life moral universe consists of substantially more than just religious ideas (Munson forthcoming). Talk of individual rights and freedoms drawn from a more republican language (Bellah, et al. 1985), historical analogy linking the abortion issue to American slavery and the Nazi holocaust, and social conservative ideas about personal responsibility are all a part of the moral universe of pro-life activism as well. There are also both empirical and theoretical problems with addressing the relationship between religion and the pro-life movement solely through an examinations of ideas. Empirically, the pro-life movement itself doesn't always present itself this way, nor is everyone in the movement religious. Theoretically, ideas are often analyzed *a propos* of nothing, without any model of how they are produced or subsequently incorporated into a movement.

Empirically, religious ideas are important but not all-encompassing in the pro-life movement. Many activists who themselves hold personal religious convictions, don't believe putting a religious face on the pro-life movement is beneficial as a matter of strategy. They are concerned that the pro-life message is not most effectively transmitted as a religious message; in some cases they see a potential for religious ideas to impede their work. Sandra, a 34-year-old Catholic and regular volunteer at a crisis pregnancy center in Oklahoma City, worries that religion is a potential barrier between the movement and the women they are trying to reach:

Most organizations I think find it helpful if you're *not* affiliated with any one religion, because then how are you going to get to those other people, you know what I mean? And that's why we're pretty staunch at BirthChoice about, you know, don't bring a priest into it, don't mention Catholicism, you try to keep it as secular as possible. This person may not even believe in God, you know, and if you start spouting Catholicism they're going to run so far away from you because they've got enough to deal with without you pushing your religion on them too.

Others focus on the overall ability of the movement to attract public support if their message is interpreted as a religious one:

I think the pro-life message can be portrayed and should be portrayed without as much of the religious bent because a lot of people don't have that same foundation. And it's too bad, but the media portrays it always as religious fanatics and right wing. And I mean I do have that Catholic basis; I fit all the stereotypes. But I mean it's a kind of basic civil right to have the right to life and I don't think it's that religiously (pause), I don't think you need to be Catholic. (Mariah, 27-years-old, Boston)

Religious ideas are thus consciously downplayed in the movement in certain times and places; while religious ideas may be important, activists also spend time developing arguments and thinking about the issue in entirely secular terms, often for strategic reasons.

Strategy, however, is not the only issue. There are also those activists who don't see the issue as a religious one at all. When 46-year-old Twin Cities activist Debbie first became involved in the movement, "I didn't see it as being primarily a religious issue. I mean I didn't feel like I was against abortion because I was Catholic; I felt I was against abortion because it made sense, you know?" "Life is the most precious thing on this earth. Without life nothing could exist," says Catholic 26-year-old Stephanie from Boston, "Why am I pro-life? Because I think life is beautiful and I love people. Nothing religious. Nothing religious." Activists can be deeply religious, but they can also be uncomfortable with religious ideas, especially when they

first get involved in the movement. Some come at the issue from a more secular, scientific avenue:

The pro-life movement for me has not always been so much just religious. For me, well, abortion itself is kind of a moral question. Which, you know, you don't have to get into religion at all to discuss abortion. It just seems to me that medical science has made so obvious, so clear, what the beginnings of human life are, and if you start degrading human life at any point in time, it seems to me fairly obvious that there's not much standing between that person who is getting killed, getting devalued, and somebody else arbitrarily deciding that I'm not needed or that any person is not needed. (Jeff, 35-years-old, Twin Cities)

The role of religion in the thinking of activists can thus be overstated. Religious ideas are limited in the ways in which they function in the movement.

Activists recognize too that religious conflict is a source of divisiveness. The mobilizing potential of religious ideas thus come with a concomitant danger of schism and arguments that have demobilizing effects. Twenty-eight-year-old Dana wasn't allowed to work at a crisis pregnancy center in Charleston because of her faith: "I was Catholic and they didn't want me because I was Catholic. That's the Bible Belt issue that I've struggled with forever, but that really upset me because the division—this is about the babies, and the mommies and the daddies, it's about our culture." In many instances religious ideas are a hindrance rather than a help to the movement because of conflict over what constitutes 'true' religious faith. Take the beliefs of 44-year-old Jim, a Presbyterian in Charleston: "A fair amount of the Christian community doesn't know a lot about what God's word says...Because most churches don't preach God's word. And I've been to a number of them." Marsha, a 40-year-old Catholic in Oklahoma City, was even more specific:

There's people who say they're Catholic, but in my personal opinion I don't think they are Catholic if they're not following all the doctrines of the Church. If they miss mass on Sunday, and if they're not teaching their children the faith, they're not teaching them the prayers, and the richness of the saints' lives, and things like that. You know, these people say they're Catholic just like some people say they're American. And they're not! You know what I mean? They're just putting on a façade; it's not really true.

Although activists sometimes explicitly played such divisions down, others brought up conflicts between Catholics and Baptists, Anglicans and Lutherans, Catholics and Catholics (as the previous quotation reveals), and more. Religious ideas are not always the most important in the movement, and they at times can be as troublesome as they are helpful to pro-life mobilization.

Conceptualizing the impact of religion on the pro-life movement in terms of religious ideas also has an important theoretical weakness. Understanding religion as ideas—as values or as language—does not suggest the vehicle by which such religious ideas are formed and elaborated. Nor does it tell us the processes by which such ideas become part of the pro-life movement. The question then becomes, why religious ideas and not some other body of belief? Conceptualizing religion solely as ideas, for example, can't explain why it is a Christian language rather than a language of rights or the language of Rawls' theory of justice that is common in the movement.

Wuthnow (1989) offers a possible solution to this problem. In his sweeping look at the production and dissemination of Enlightenment, Protestant, and Socialist discourses in European history, he addresses this theoretical weakness by tying the production of ideas to concrete material institutions and locations of power and resources. He can then evaluate both how some discourses become dominant while others wither, while at the same time analyzing the way in which such discourses themselves alter the structures of institutional power in which they are embedded. Wuthnow, however, was interested in explaining the overall success of large scale social and ideational changes in Europe. By contrast, the present study focuses not on measuring the overall success of the pro-life movement, but instead on the way in which individuals are mobilized into the movement. A more fine-grained approach that is sensitive to individual biographies and social contexts is required. Moreover, Wuthnow's study and analyses like it suffer from the same problem that viewing religion as churches do; namely, that it treats religious ideas as no different than any other body of belief. Religion, however, has unique qualities whether viewed organizationally or through the ideas it generates.

Empirically, religion also does not seem to be a major factor separating activists from non-activists. Table 1 compares the two groups on a variety of different measures of religiosity. Both activists and non-activists in my sample attend church far more frequently than the general population, and are also more involved in church activities outside of regular services. There is less evidence of a difference in religious belief, however. More importantly, activists and non-activists are virtually identical on every behavioral and attitudinal measure of religiosity. Religion, conceptualized as churches or ideas, is not very helpful in understand the difference between activism and non-activism. We require a model that can make sense of a more dynamic

relationship between religion and activism, distinguishing it from the way in which the movement is tied to political, economic, or any other institution in society.

**Table 1: Measures of Religiosity**

	Activists		Non-Activists		Public
Attends church at least weekly	99%	(69/70)	96%	(26/27)	25%
Participates in church activities	68%	(39/57)	77%	(17/22)	59%
Participates in religious activities outside of church	47%	(27/57)	58%	(14/24)	n/a
Has at some point considered the church as a vocation	28%	(15/76)	28%	(8/29)	n/a
Approves of mandatory school prayer	61%	(41/67)	58%	(14/24)	61%
Approves of mandatory Biblical creationism in schools	56%	(40/71)	57%	(16/28)	58%

Note: Figures in parentheses are actual counts; figures in Public column come from 2000 General Social Survey (church attendance and school prayer, variables ATTEND, PRAYER), April 25 1996 Gallup Poll (creationism, question R03D), and August 24 2000 Princeton Survey Research Associates Poll (church activities, question 013).

### **An Alternative: Religion and Activism in Practice**

Conceptualizing religion as churches captures some of the relationship between religion and the pro-life movement; it is the primary dimension along which the social movement literature has understood the role of religion. Conceptualizing religion as ideas captures more of religion’s impact on the pro-life movement; it is the way in which the sociologists of religion have approached the issue. In both cases religion has an impact on the movement, but its role has also been shown to be limited. Two pieces are missing from the picture painted thus far. First, we lack an understanding of how these two dimensions of religion—the institutional and the ideational—combine to produce distinctively religious effects on the pro-life movement. Second, neither conceptualization takes into account the importance of the regular religious activity of adherents. Rituals, ceremonies, and other forms of religious practice are a critical element in the dynamic link between religion and social movements. In order to fully understand the relationship, it is therefore necessary to synthesize the previous two views as well as introduce the ways in which both religion and activism are constituted in practice. I now turn to an alternative approach to understanding the impact of religion on the pro-life movement.

## *The Distinctive Features of Religion*

Religion is qualitatively different than other social phenomena. Religious institutions are not simply organizations like business firms, hospitals, or voluntary associations. Nor are they just another set of beliefs, like the beliefs we might have about the current U.S. president or our favorite baseball team. Defining precisely what it is that makes religion unique, however, has proven to be difficult. The sociology of religion and divinity studies are awash with definitions of religion, often relying on either functional criteria (Wuthnow 1988), what religion does in society or among people, or ideational criteria, what specific kinds of beliefs (e.g. belief in the supernatural) count as religion (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

The definitional debates over religion are endless, but they can also be sidestepped here by focusing only on the distinctive features of religion in the United States that are of relevance to understanding pro-life activism. What is it about religion that makes a unique contribution to the mobilization of the pro-life movement? Asked in these more specific terms, the question becomes more tractable. I argue that the distinctive power of religion in the pro-life movement, and in movements more generally, is rooted in religion having the following five characteristics: It is a well-organized and institutionalized set of organizations, that produces values, languages, and narratives that are legitimated by: an understood tradition with a long historical pedigree, and a claim to the transcendental or sacred. These legitimated, institutionally embedded ideas are learned, understood, experienced, and modified in the context of constant religious practice.

Together, these five characteristics offer a combination of both religion as churches and religion as ideas approaches, while at the same time introducing a focus on religious practice to both these perspectives. Although none of the characteristics alone define the uniqueness of religion, it is the possession of all five traits simultaneously that makes religion different from other social phenomena. I will briefly elaborate on each of these characteristics, and then turn my attention to showing how the fifth characteristic in particular—the importance of practice—has implications for the pro-life movement.

Religion as a well-organized and institutionalized social force: This first characteristic recognizes the important insights of the religion as churches approach. Religion is rooted in church, diocesan, denominational, national, and international organizations. The scope of the resources available to churches is staggering: over 350,000 places of worship across the United

States, organized into perhaps 200 denominations with approximately 170 million members (Salamon 1999). Churches received \$77.1 billion in revenues in 1996, \$66.3 billion of which came in the form of voluntary contributions. On the basis of General Social Survey (GSS) data, Hoge and Yang (1994) estimate the average American home gives \$440 to churches every year. Churches employ over one million people, and attract an additional 2.4 million full-time equivalent volunteers annually (Salamon 1999). They also enjoy a privileged legal position in the United States, deriving their special status from the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The power of churches is further enhanced by the fact that they are organized on the local, regional, state, national, and international levels, and are thus able to communicate and coordinate at a variety of different levels simultaneously. Smith (1996) points out that the geographic dispersion and transnational linkages of churches offer distinct advantages to social movements, allowing movements to spread using extensive church networks that already exist. Certainly this is important in the case of the Catholic church, as the NCCB at the national level produces material and coordinates the overall direction of the pro-life activity that takes place on diocesan and parish levels. Churches are thus not only the source of vast resources, they also have a solid institutional base from which to develop and disseminate religious ideas.

Churches produce legitimated ideas: This second distinctive characteristic of religion recognizes the important insights of the religion as ideas approach. Critical to understanding the relationship between these ideas and the movement, however, is the degree to which such ideas are embedded in church institutions. Religious ideas do not simply exist “out there,” free floating in society. Instead, they are developed, disseminated, and modified in the context of religious organizations which provide the resources necessary for their production and development, the networks necessary for their dissemination, and the legitimacy necessary for their acceptance. Legitimacy, in turn, is a function of the claims that are made on religion, claims to historical tradition and access to the sacred.

Religion legitimated by historical tradition: Churches and the religious ideas embedded in them have held an historically privileged position in the United States, not only in terms of special status under the law, but also in terms of public acceptance. Much of this legitimacy comes from the claims religion makes on tradition. Religious organizations and ideas are seen as legitimate because they have established histories dating back generations, or in some cases hundreds or even thousands of years. Max Weber saw tradition as one of the three principal

sources of authority in society, and scholars of nationalism have long understood the importance of history as a tool of legitimation. Substantial work has been done showing how even the most recent institutions develop the imaginings of a long and glorious history in order to draw on claims to historical legitimacy (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983).

The legitimating function of historical tradition can be seen in the understanding of faith expressed by those both inside and outside the pro-life movement. Many Catholics refer to a two thousand year history of the Church as a basis for their faith. Angela, a 30-year-old Catholic in Boston, refers to the long history of the Church as an important rationale for accepting its teachings:

In the past years I've just kind of felt that my faith and my understanding of the Church, and my appreciation of the Church, has matured. I find myself just rooted and grounded more in church teachings and documents that have lasted two thousand years, versus what might be the latest sensation.

Non-Catholics are more likely to talk about Biblical history than that of their particular church or denomination. However, Protestants still draw on tradition as a source of legitimacy for their religious commitments. Henry, cited earlier, explains that “the reason I am an Anglican, a traditional Episcopalian, is because I believe in what the church has stood for from the very beginning.” This tie to the past, what has lasted “two thousand years” or “from the very beginning” is an important element in elevating religious truths and commitments above many other kinds of belief and attachments.

Religion legitimated by the transcendental and sacred: Religious ideas, learned and discussed in religious institutions, are not simply another set of arguments about the world, like a liberal or conservative political philosophy. They not only have a long historical pedigree, but they are also tied to ultimate truth, and as such may be open to discussion, but not debate or compromise. The legitimacy of religious values, language, and narratives in large part derive from their link to the sacredness of God's will (Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Stark and Finke 2000). As Emile Durkheim observed, this link provides religion with reverence and awe. Religious beliefs make a claim to transcending the everyday experience and judgments of mere mortals; they provide a black and white standard—not subject to negotiation—for how individuals ought to live, what is right and what is wrong.

For many activists, reference to the sacredness of the Bible or God's will is all that is deemed necessary to legitimate their belief in certain ideas. One man from Boston said it simply

didn't make sense to question the Bible because it was God's manual for living. Just as the General Motor's manual for an automobile is the final word on how to run their car, the Bible is the final word on how to live one's life—God gave it to us for that purpose. God's will transcends everything in this world, even if we can't always comprehend it:

I mean I believe in the sovereignty of God, that the Lord is completely in control of all that goes on, and that things don't happen because He doesn't allow them to. When people sin, when we make mistakes, it's not because He wants us to do that, but also it's not because He wasn't able to stop it...We have to simply trust that the Lord has a higher purpose that we can't always understand. Sometimes He will allow us to understand why He did things. But sometimes there will be things that we will never know while we are on this earth, why He allows things to happen. Why was the holocaust allowed? I just have to simply trust that the Lord is sovereign and he had a purpose for that.

For Phillip, a 27-year-old Presbyterian in Charleston, even the Nazi holocaust doesn't give him pause to question his religious beliefs. Trust in the transcendental is key. This can often be combined with a trust in historical tradition as well. "God's laws have been around forever," says Tim, a 38-year-old member of an independent church in Oklahoma City, "I mean, He's eternal. He's always been and He'll always be. It doesn't matter what we think. Our opinions mean nothing. The absolute truth is the absolute truth and it ain't gonna change."

Religious ideas are learned in practice: The final important distinctive feature of religion is that religious ideas, embedded in institutions and legitimated by historical tradition and sacred status, are learned, understood, experienced, and modified in the context of constant religious practice. Religious ideas are enacted and re-enacted at key moments in a person's life when they are baptized, married, have children, and bury loved ones. More importantly, they are reinforced every week in church services, Sunday schools, choirs, and pageants, and practiced every day in devotions, prayer groups, and witnessing of faith to others. Religious beliefs are thereby tied to people's everyday lives. They are understood not just cognitively as abstract teaching, but important ideas that are relevant and connected to lived experiences in a variety of ways. This is how religious ideas become salient and relevant to a person's thinking about the world and what they do in it.

Together, these five characteristics of religion make a unique contribution to the pro-life movement. The power of religious faith in the movement comes precisely from these five distinctive features, features which no other body of belief and practice share. Religion would be

just like any other business, club, or association if churches were not connected to a rich set of values, language, and narratives. Religious ideas would not be well-known or well accepted, however, if they weren't connected to churches. John Rawls' theory of justice, for example, is virtually unknown outside of academia not because it offers an inferior moral code, but because it doesn't have hundreds of thousands of church organizations in which the ideas are embedded. Economic, social, and political ideas are widespread and often backed by powerful institutions. Unlike religion, however, such ideas are not legitimated by both historical tradition and claims to the sacred.

Nationalism shares the first four of the five distinctive characteristics of religion. Patriotism, love of country, and belief in the 'American way' represent a rich body of beliefs that are embedded in organizations. Moreover, nationalism does make claims to both historical tradition and sacred status. But while nationalist ideas are enacted by some rituals—the pledge of allegiance, for example—by and large they are not learned and understood through constant practice in a person's everyday life. It is the combination of all five characteristics that make religion distinct from other social phenomena. The combination is responsible for the force faith has in the moral understandings of activists and the role religion has had in the mobilization of the movement.

These five distinctive characteristics of religion do not change the established impact of religion as churches and religion as beliefs on the pro-life movement. As we have seen, religious institutions provide material resources, audiences, and leadership to the movement. They also provide values and language to the pro-life movement. Understanding the distinct features of religion, however, does help to identify *how* these features of religion become relevant. The ubiquity of churches, their control of enormous resources, and the legitimacy they enjoy both legally and in the popular imagination give them the ability to provide many material advantages to the movement. Religious ideas, in turn, are made available through their embeddedness in church institutions, and are powerful because of their tie to a long and glorious history as well as their claims to transcendental truth. Religious practice is also key. The resources of churches, the continued legitimacy of religious ideas, and their ability to influence the pro-life movement are all tied to the regular and repeated individual enactment of religion.

### *The Practice of Activism is Religious Practice*

The actual lived experience of religion is frequently forgotten with the increasing use of polling data and large survey datasets to measure and study religion in American life. Although some kinds of religious practices are easily quantified through such methods—such as attendance at formal church services—many more are not. A chief argument of this essay is that the impact of religion on the pro-life movement can only be understood by focusing on religious practice enacted outside of specifically religious institutions. By “practice” here I refer to involvement in an activity socially understood to be meaningful in a given context.<sup>7</sup> How such understandings are constructed turns out to be the crux of the issue in understanding the relationship between religious practice and pro-life activism; in many cases the religious and the social movement meaning in particular practices cannot be separated.

The enactment of religious practices is typically seen as something that takes place within the walls of a church, or at minimum under the official auspices of church leaders and programs. People come together each week in congregations to pray together in churches or other houses of worship. Christenings, marriages, and death ceremonies all take place within churches or are presided over by religious leaders. Missions, recruitment campaigns, and evangelism often take place as part of an official ministry or outreach of a church. The religious commitments of people have an impact outside of church walls, but the ritualized practices that renew one’s faith are seen as the province of the religious world. Such “official” religious practices are important, but they are by no means the only kind of religious practice that matters.

Consider simply the issue of time: Even the most devout and religiously focused individuals spend only a small fraction of their hours every week in church or participating in church activity. A very devout Catholic might attend mass every morning, devotions several times a week, and work with a variety of church groups and committees, but this time still represents at most 20 hours in a week. A committed Baptist might attend services Sunday mornings, Sunday and Wednesday evenings, a weekly Bible study, and participate in several of her church’s ministries every week and still spend fewer than 10-15 hours in religious activity.

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<sup>7</sup> I use the term practice here in its most straightforward and pedestrian meaning. Practices are activities in which individuals are physically involved where the actions themselves mean something to participants and observers alike. My use of the term does not carry with it the theoretical baggage common in the tradition of Bourdieu (1977; 1984) or the moral baggage with which it has been discussed in specific relationship to religion (e.g. Stout (1988), MacIntyre (1984)).

Except for those who have undertaken a religious vocation, the sphere of “official” religion allowed for in modern society is relatively small. By limiting our view of the religious to only activity taking place in a designated religious sphere, our view of the relationship between religion and social movements will also be necessarily (almost definitionally) limited.

A look at activity in the pro-life movement suggests that religious practice does not take place entirely within religious institutions. Religion is continually enacted in a wide range of contexts in daily life, and the pro-life movement is one venue in which a great deal of religious activity takes place. The practice of activism is at the same time often religious practice. The issue is not simply translating one interpretation of actions and events into another; the actions are irreducibly meaningful as both religious and social movement practice. There are in fact at least four different kinds of religious practices that are enacted as social movement activity: prayer, rituals of birth and death, the gathering of the flock, and doing God’s work. In each case these different forms of practice become simultaneously activism in the movement and engagement with one’s faith.

Prayer. The practice of religion in the pro-life movement takes on many forms. Perhaps the most obvious, and the most widespread, is prayer. Prayer is the most common religious ritual within the Christian tradition, and is also a common feature of pro-life work. Activists pray during pro-life meetings, on the steps of courthouses and state capitols, in front of abortion clinics, or simply in their own homes, offices, and schools. One group, Rosaries for Life in the Twin Cities, devotes all of its attention to prayer; it does nothing else in the movement. Prayer is an integral part of activism for many others as well. Jennifer, cited earlier, explains how prayer is part of her organization:

*Ziad:* You say that the pro-life group does spiritual adoptions. Tell me about that.

*Jennifer:* It’s a prayer where you adopt an unborn baby, and you just pray for somewhere out in the world that a life would be saved, that it won’t be aborted. A child that is in danger of abortion. I pray, ‘Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I beg you to protect the life of this unborn baby that’s in danger of abortion.’ Just say it daily. I usually give a name to the child.

Prayer is understood not only as a religious ritual, but also part and parcel of a person’s commitment to the pro-life cause.

Prayer in this context is not simply a reflection of religious faith. It is an integral part of pro-life activism, and is seen by many as a bona fide tactic to be used in the struggle to end

abortion in the United States. In Charleston, one activist described how the pro-lifers in front of an abortion clinic would divide the cars in the parking lot and each pray for the people who had come to the clinic in those allotted cars. The prayers are not a performance intended to show religiosity, but are action intended to bring the people out of the clinic and thus stop an imminent abortion. It is ultimately the work of God that will end abortion, and individuals make their contribution by praying to God for action. This is the perspective of Suzanne, a 50-year-old Episcopalian in Charleston, who sees her vigil outside an abortion clinic as making way for God's will to be done:

For a long time I did a vigil even when nobody was there and the place was closed, like some Saturdays. I was just reading straight from the Psalms because God's word is powerful and it has a lot of spiritual power. And I would just, in a normal tone of voice, I would walk the public, as close as I could get to the public route around the building and just read out the Scriptures. And I felt like in a way I was kind of claiming that land for holy work.

If the abortion debate is a battle between good and evil, then prayer is an important weapon activists bring to the fight. "It's a draining, draining emotional experience to go there and pray," explains another Charleston activist, Catholic 50-year-old Sharon, continuing that:

I used to stand there and see like the devil shrouded around the place. And I would see those women going in and I just thought I was valueless, I was worthless. So I stopped going. And then I got strong and I was able to do it. And another woman that was with me, who seemed to be just so great at this, said she sees angels surrounding the place, taking the babies and the souls.

Prayer thus transforms the situation. In Sharon's case, the evil of abortion is transformed to a set of angels helping unborn children.

Prayer as pro-life activism is also seen as effective activism in this world. One Boston man expressed hope that one day they would simply be able "to pray the abortion clinics out of business." Another man reasoned that prayer contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union, and that it would be the same for abortion. Prayer thus does not simply legitimate pro-life activity, it *is* pro-life activity. Charles, a Catholic 64-year-old in the Twin Cities, summarizes a common view within the movement:

At least from the Christian perspective, but probably from any religious perspective, if you believe in God, you know the solution to these problems is going to come from some kind of divine intervention, however you understand that. And so I would say prayer should be the beginning, middle, and end of any kind of serious approach to the abortion issue.

The practice of prayer for Charles and many others in the movement is both a religious and a pro-life practice. It is a “strategy of action” that comes from the same cultural toolkit (Swidler 1986).

Rituals of Birth and Death. Prayer is the most frequent, but not the only, way in which religious practice is conducted in pro-life work. Birth and death rituals also take place in the movement, an extension of a moral universe in which the humanity of the fetus is equivalent to any other human life and thus entitled to the same life course rites as any other person. In Charleston, pro-life activists attend a special service at a local church every year in which babies whose mothers considered abortion are given a special blessing. More common are memorial services and funerals to honor babies that have been killed by abortion. Tombstones are used to commemorate their lives, either set up as temporary graveyards as part of a pro-life campaign (as has occurred on many college campuses), or as permanent markers (as was done by the local Knights of Columbus lodge in Watertown, MA). In the Twin Cities, Pro-Life Action Ministries is working to establish a permanent “Chapel of the Innocents” to remember aborted babies.

Their June 1999 newsletter describes the chapel this way:

At the beginning of this year, through the generosity of two families, we were able to purchase the property next to the Robbinsdale abortuary. Our plan is to use this as a memorial chapel to the aborted babies. We intend for it to be a place of prayer, where Christians from all denominations can come and offer prayers for an end to the killing of defenseless babies by abortion. We are also setting aside an area as a memorial to the aborted babies, keeping alive their memory through pictures, plaques, and other memorials. We envision this as not only showing the reality of what abortion is, but also as a means of healing for those who have been involved in abortion.

In some cases funerals and similar rituals are held as part of a public relations or publicity effort, consciously designed to draw public attention to the humanity of the fetus. But these strategic efforts by movement leaders don’t make the experience of engagement with the ritual practice itself any less real for the participants, who are affected in the same ways as if it was the funeral of a friend or a relative.

Nicole, cited earlier, recognizes the role events like funerals play in the lives of participants and observers. She criticizes abortion rights advocates for failing to recognize their importance:

This is what doctors don't think a lot about too. Even just from an anthropological point of view, so many cultures spend so much time around the death and dying process, and have rituals around that. Well, you have an abortion and there's no funeral for aborted babies. It just doesn't happen that way. The whole point is to get that baby out, get it incinerated or whatever, it's to get rid of it. Out of sight, out of mind.

The pro-life movement has tried to rectify this perceived problem. "As pro-lifers went through garbage cans at abortion clinics," explains 26-year-old Catholic Twin Cities activist Michelle, "they ran across bodies of the unborn, of aborted babies. And there were various services at the university, so whenever they had a memorial service I would attend the funeral and the memorial service." The lines between religious ritual and pro-life activity are blurred in these situations. It is not simply a matter of borrowing or mimicking religious practices; the events taking place within the movement can be as "genuine" as those that occur outside it. Consider how 31-year-old Kimberly, a member of an independent church in the Twin Cities, explains the funeral she had for 'Jeremiah,' the name she gave to her unborn child. Doctors performed an emergency abortion to save Kimberly's life after discovering her fetus was developing in her abdomen, outside of her uterus:

And I knew that He knew Jeremiah since the day that he was born. He knew that he wasn't in the womb, and that his days were ordained. And I think the sovereignty of God helped both Luke [Kim's husband] and I cope with that loss. Because God knew. He knew that his days were going to be as many as they were. He knew that he was going to be outside of the womb. And actually I've seen God use that a lot too. We had a memorial service, and one hundred people came, and we did a graveside burial and stuff for him. And a few people came up to Luke and me after that, within a few months after that, and said that they had had abortions. And that the service was very significant because they had never grieved that loss.<sup>8</sup>

In these cases, the ritual takes on multiple meanings simultaneously. Her memorial service was both a pro-life act and a religious act. The spheres of movement action and religious action overlap here, an important element in the power such events have as both a religious and a pro-life experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Kimberly's telling of the story leading up to this passage took well over an hour. At one point she interrupted the conversation to show me a large photo album filled with pictures of her and members of her family holding Jeremiah's remains in the hospital.

Gathering the Flock. The ways in which pro-life practice overlaps religious practice can be much more mundane than funerals or even prayers. Much of the time activists spend together is spent discussing the abortion issue amongst themselves, exchanging ideas, information, opinions, and experiences. The regular bringing together of activists for banquets, discussions of the abortion issue, public outreach campaigns, and other activities take on the same tone and meaning as the gathering of the faithful in Christian traditions. People talk about how nice it is to get together with “other Christians” at pro-life events, whether they’re prayer breakfasts or abortion clinic protests. “We kind of talked, but we were supposed to kind of be praying,” says Jean, cited earlier, “but to me its fellowship. You’re standing, you’re not afraid.” Activism is seen in Jean’s mind as communing with other people of faith. Pro-life gathering is thus Christian gathering as well.

The relationship between religious gathering and pro-life gathering is not simply a parallel drawn from my analysis; the people involved themselves see that both are at work in pro-life practice. When I asked Anne, a 40-year-old Catholic in Charleston, to describe her first abortion clinic protest, her first response was: “We got up real early in the morning and went and saw really neat Christians. It was kind of exciting and fun. We stood together and we prayed. It was very loving. In fact, I don’t even remember anyone going in.” Her interpretation is one in which the event was defined by a gathering of “neat,” “loving” Christians and action against abortion. They met in front of the clinic to express their faith in God and the evils of abortion. The event was a success even though they didn’t encounter a single woman considering an abortion.

Doing God’s Work. Gathering together to do pro-life work, or expressions of religious faith and movement commitment, are combined in some cases with a sense of doing God’s work—a fourth way in which the practice of activism overlaps with religious practice. To engage in pro-life activism is to live out one’s religious life by doing God’s will on this earth. This twin meaning of activist practice came out to some extent in the earlier discussion of religion’s contribution of values to the movement. “I am driven, there’s no doubt about it, there’s a zeal,” says 55-year-old Patricia, a Catholic in the Twin Cities, “it’s an obsession, it’s something that I know God calls me to do.” Elements of personal sacrifice and persecution are another way in which pro-life practice is experienced as simultaneously religious practice:

If you believe that you're being called or that there is a need to do something and that your religion is speaking on something—and even deeper, that there's a moral reason to do something—you stand up for it. You get out in front when you have to and lead, and you take what comes your way in the way of pain and suffering. (Jeff, cited earlier)

It would be, as St. Paul says, an honor that I could suffer for Christ. And of course I would never fight back or anything, but in as much, to say it would be honor to suffer like that may sound crazy to the third person looking at this, because what is he going to do? I mean that sounds like a jihad. But no, it's more like if I was to be arrested for doing something peaceful like saying the rosary, that would be something to give thanks for. (Jason, cited earlier)

The introduction of personal sacrifice in the activities of the movement provides the opportunity for events to be both simultaneously pro-life activism and religious practice. Individuals can be thankful that they were given the opportunity to do God's work while they also sacrifice for the cause.

In each of the contexts I have described—prayer, rituals of birth and death, gathering of the flock, and doing God's work—activist practices in the pro-life movement possess the important quality of also being recognizably religious practices. Practice in these cases is polysemous, being part of religious and activist spheres of action at the same time. The result is a phenomenon similar to that which Fields (1985) describes in her study of the Watchtower movement in Africa. Attempts to separate the political from the religious in both cases are based on faulty theoretical assumptions that require that the instrumental and the expressive, as well as the political and the religious, be separated analytically and empirically. Fields helpfully shows how such distinctions actually get in the way of full understanding of the circumstances in which “flesh-and-blood human beings” (p.21) actually live out their lives. Those lives, in the case of the pro-life movement, engage in practices that are not reducible to either religion or activism; they are both.

Understanding the relationship between religion and pro-life activism ultimately requires us to rethink the way in which we understand both of these concepts. The clean, analytic concepts we often use in the social sciences sometimes do a poor job of capturing the much messier reality of individual, everyday experience. This is why the concept of religion as either churches or ideas is not fully adequate for us to understand the relationship between religion and activism. Rather than thinking of religion as a separate, distinct social phenomenon exerting an

independent influence on the pro-life movement, it is necessary to see religion and activism as overlapping domains of action, each continually constituted and re-constituted by the practices of those who are involved in them. The boundaries between the two are blurry, and events can speak in two voices—they are simultaneously part of institutionalized religion and the pro-life movement. This conceptualization also opens up an additional possibility: in addition to looking at the impact of religion on the movement, we must also consider the impact of the movement on religion.

### ***Religion as a Dependent Variable***

Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is perhaps the prototype for conventional thinking in sociology about religion. Weber identifies the Calvinistic threads of Protestantism as producing a mindset, or spirit, that was instrumental in the “qualitative formation and the quantitative expansion” of global capitalism (Weber 1958:91). Religion is the independent variable in Weber's view, capitalism the dependent variable which religion helps to explain. Although Weber's focus on the ideational side of religion is complemented by more materialistic analyses, the basic idea of religion as a causal force used to explain other social facts is virtually universal in sociology and political science. We tend to think of religion largely as an ascribed and relatively immutable characteristic of persons, logically and temporally fixed prior to whatever phenomenon we are studying. Did religious forces influence the outcome of the presidential election? Do religious variables help to explain crime rates? How does religious faith affect social movement frames? These kinds of questions, important as they are, come from the conventional toolkit of social science.

The relationship between religion and the pro-life movement shows that this conventional wisdom obscures the important ways in which the concepts overlap. Rather than being independent of one another, religion and pro-life activism often overlap in the practice of those involved. Moreover, the arrow of influence can point in both directions. Activists who participate in the discussions, meetings, events, and campaigns of the movement are not simply influenced by religion—whether conceptualized as churches or as ideas—they are also simultaneously reinforcing the vitality of religious faith in their own lives and in their social

worlds. In doing so they can change their religious commitments or create them where they never existed before.

The dissatisfaction of many pro-life activists with the stance of their churches on the abortion issue is a significant source of pressure for priests, pastors, and church institutions. “How to Encourage Your Priest to be Actively Pro-Life,” “Establishing a Pro-Life Presence in Community Churches,” and “Helping Shepherds give Leadership on Life Issues” are names of some of the many brochures pro-life organizations put out to help activists transform the work of their churches. Despite the Catholic Church’s already strongly pro-life stand, Catholic parishes continually spend energy defending themselves against criticism by activists that they’re not pro-life enough. As much of the religious practice of activists takes place within the movement, activists also seek to move more of the movement inside the churches.

Patricia, a 55-year-old in the Twin Cities, reflects the orientation of many activists toward their church:

*Ziad:* Had you heard about these [abortion] issues in church?

*Patricia:* I suppose I did but frankly (pause), I don’t know if I want to say this, but I probably had more fights with priests about the issue. Because I wanted it said more and I didn’t hear enough of it. So if I did hear it, I don’t remember any barn burners.

Fifty-year-old Charleston activist Sharon is more proactive: “I’ve handed out literature and prayer cards and we discuss it. And I talk to the priest about just talking about in church.” Activists like Patricia and Sharon pressure their churches for change by continually raising the issue. Pro-life sermons, special masses or devotions, public statements and actions by churches, and increased mobilization within the church can all be the result of movement activists also becoming lay leaders in their church, or advocating for the cause with existing leaders.

Religion can thus be thought of as a dependent variable as well as an independent one. On the individual level, religion can sometimes be an avenue into activism, but activism can also be an entrée into a new commitment to religious faith. Social movement activity is thus a vehicle for religious renewal or, in some cases, religious conversion. The process is best seen through the stories of the activists themselves.

Linda is a 53-year-old activist in the Twin Cities. She got involved in the movement before the Roe v. Wade decision was handed down, at a time when the state was holding hearings on the liberalization of abortion laws. She was a leader in the local movement for a

time in the late 1970s and 1980s, but has since reduced her involvement and focused on research and writing about the issue. She was raised in a Catholic home, but didn't want much to do with her church for many years. "As a Catholic growing up in the middle 60s, nearly every priest that I knew left the priesthood," she explains, continuing:

And the priests were giving mixed messages. Birth control was becoming a big debate in the Catholic church and I thought birth control was the best thing that ever happened to anybody. I mean, I couldn't imagine that people would be opposed to that. What do these old men know, and everything like that. So as soon as I was married, I fell off [from attending mass].

She first came into contact with the movement through a regular office visit to her obstetrician, Fred Mecklenberg, who at that time was a leader in the emerging pro-life movement. He urged her to get involved in the issue, but she was initially skeptical because she thought the movement might be too religious. Mecklenberg was Methodist, "and that made a big difference to me, because I was seeing the Catholic church as being kind of stodgy...The Methodists just seemed so much more broad-minded to me."

As she became more involved in the movement, she continued to try and keep religion at arms length:

For a while I was real embarrassed to be with people who would say 'God bless you.' I mean, I thought that was something you said when somebody sneezed, but not when you said, 'Goodbye and God bless you.' That was just kind of foreign to me; my family did not talk like that. And I also started meeting evangelical Christians in the pro-life movement who would talk about what the Bible says. And I never knew what the Bible says; Catholics didn't read Bibles.

She spent years in the movement with this same basic attitude, feeling "uncomfortable" and "embarrassed" when religious and activist practice overlapped. Nonetheless, her activism brought her into contact with different churches, Bible study groups, prayer breakfasts, and religious vigils. She also worked for years alongside not only evangelical Protestants, as she mentions above, but also devout Catholics. Eventually she decided she needed to start "listening with a different ear" to her friends and colleagues of faith. At the request of a friend in the movement she attended a conference of Lutherans. Soon afterwards she had a conversion experience which she retells as a highly dramatized, life-altering moment. She then realized:

I'd been trying to earn my way into heaven. If I was a good girl, if I saved the babies, if I was polite to people, if I voted, if I made nice lunches for my kids at school, if I was a good wife to my husband, if my clothes were white on the line,

you know. I mean, with all those things I thought I could get into heaven. I don't rob from the poor, I don't steal, you know, all these things like that. And I realized then that none of that matters. None of that matters at all. What matters is that God loves me just exactly the way I was. He made me. Every sin I have he knows about more than I do. And it was just this amazing grace...And from that moment on everything started changing.

Things did change for Linda, in terms of how she thought about the pro-life movement, but also in terms of how she related to her family and her attendance and involvement in church. She is now a committed Catholic. "Today, with my faith background," she says, "I would say God had a destiny for me. Maybe that's arrogant, but on the other hand I've lived it out. That's what I've been living since then."

For Linda, mobilization into the pro-life movement led to a re-evaluation of religion and her relationship to Catholicism. Although she never described herself as an atheist or explicitly rejected God, she did consciously reject both religious institutions and religious ideas. Movement involvement, however, put her in contact with people of deep faith as well as practices in which religion and activism were both elements. This led to a massive change in her religious faith and commitment to the Church.

In contrast with Linda, 28-year-old Charleston activist Dana has never felt actively opposed to religious institutions. She too was raised in a Catholic family, and faithfully attended mass every Sunday with her parents. As an adolescent and young adult, however, she struggled with her faith, due both to the strong anti-Catholic sentiment in the area and her perception that the Catholics she knew led far more sinful lives than the Protestants around her.

She began attending other churches—Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist—and praying and reading about religious ideas. She found elements of each denomination and congregation that she liked, but also never felt entirely comfortable in any of them.

Meanwhile, Dana first came into contact with the pro-life movement through a presentation in her college dormitory by a local crisis pregnancy center. Later she began dating a fellow student who was getting involved in the movement. She jumped into activism with both feet beginning her senior year in college, and has devoted herself full-time to pro-life work since then. Abortion became her burning passion. She spent several years working for a national pro-life organization researching and writing position papers, brochures, and other pro-life

information. She is now involved in crisis pregnancy counseling, public outreach, and sidewalk counseling in front of Charleston's abortion clinic.

In the process of learning more about the abortion issue and pro-life movement, she came to see the Catholic church as the most prominent and uncompromising of all the Christian traditions on the abortion issue. It was this fact that drew her back to Catholicism:

I mean being on the forefront of the pro-life movement is pretty much what brought me back in...When I started getting involved in the pro-life movement I realized that the Catholic church, of Christian churches, was one of the only ones that was on the forefront as a pillar in the world, not just in the United States, for that battle. And that they were willing to go against what the world says regardless, and say this is wrong, this is intrinsically evil.

Dana never rejected religion, but was actively searching for a church. Her mobilization into the movement provided her with a key issue through which she could make sense of different religious approaches. She chose to participate in the Catholic church on the basis of their pro-life beliefs, rather than participating in the movement due to her Catholic background.

Joshua, a 45-year-old activist in Oklahoma City, offers an example of yet a third pattern by which individual commitment to religion and the pro-life movement are tied together. Joshua grew up in Missouri in a liberal Presbyterian church. He didn't give a lot of thought to religion after leaving home and spent several years bouncing around from college to college and part-time job to part-time job, focusing mostly on friends and earning enough money to have fun. He eventually earned a computer science degree and moved to Oklahoma City with his now longtime friend and college roommate. Neither religion nor abortion was an issue for him at the time. "I thought basically it sounded great that women had the right to choose what they do with their body and all that stuff," Josh says.

Both Josh and his roommate then began listening to talk radio, which put them in contact with religious messages as well as pro-life ideas every day, and they would often talk about the issues raised. They began questioning their current lifestyles and values they held, including their beliefs about abortion—to this point held largely without conscious reflection on the issue. His roommate then decided to begin attending church, and convinced Josh to try out a local Assembly of God congregation. About that same time they heard ads on the radio for a local pro-life rally. They decided they needed to learn more about the issue, and the rally opened their eyes to the pro-life moral universe. They returned to their new church and talked to their

minister about the issue, asking him if the church would sell fundraising pins for the movement in the church. He told them that he wouldn't sell them, but they were welcome to set up a table at the end of services each Sunday and sell them themselves. They agreed, and their subsequent pin sales got Josh both more involved in the pro-life movement and in his new church.

Josh was mobilized into the direct action stream of the movement, and soon participated in a rescue, blocking the entrance to a local abortion clinic, and ultimately getting arrested. He had a religious conversion experience sitting in the squad car after his arrest wondering about his fate. He describes it as a conversation he had with God:

'Hey God, I don't know what you've got planned for me, but I need you back in my life. Whatever you want, I'll do. I just need you back in me. I *need* you. I don't know where I'm going right now, but I need you.' So I asked God back in my life, and then somebody was tapping on the window and asking if I had bail money, which I didn't even think of or anything like that.

Josh experienced a conversion in a double sense, changing his beliefs about the abortion issue while also discovering a religious faith that was not a part of his life and much different than the traditions he was raised in. His mobilization into the movement and his commitment to religion happened at the same time, and mutually reinforced each other. He began by experimenting with a new church and the movement; the sale of pro-life pins in the church reinforced his ties to both. It was then at a crucial turning point in his commitment to the pro-life movement—being arrested for pro-life activity—that he also experienced a momentous deepening of his religious commitment.

The stories of Linda, Dana, and Joshua offer examples of three different ways in which religion can be the dependent variable in an analysis of religion and social activism. In Linda's case the relationship is clear; she becomes mobilized into the movement as a secular person and the movement then leads her to a religious commitment. Religion was always important for Dana, but she went through a period in her life where she was confused about her faith, unsure about the different religious traditions, and shopping for a church. The movement provided a lens through which she could sort through her confusion; she chose the church she felt was most solidly pro-life. Joshua found the movement and a religious faith concomitantly. His involvement and commitment to both grew in a symbiotic relationship to each other. Religion does not simply impact the pro-life movement; the pro-life movement also affects religion. It does so by being a site in which religious commitments are discovered, explored, reaffirmed, and

sometimes changed. Recognizing religion as a distinctive social phenomenon whose sphere of activity substantially overlaps the activity of the pro-life movement allows the full extent of the connections between the two to become clear.

## **Conclusion**

This essay began with the question, what impact does religion have on the pro-life movement? Looking at religion as churches and religion as ideas, and understanding religion in either case as an independent force which influences the mobilization of the movement, I demonstrated the important yet limited ways in which religion impacts pro-life activism. Churches provide material resources, audiences, and leadership to the movement, whereas religious ideas provide many of the values and language used in it. Contributions in these terms, however, are also modest given the stereotypes that exist about the relationship between religion and pro-lifers, as well as the extensive impacts found in past work that has looked at the role of religion in the Civil Rights movement (Morris 1984).

I then suggested an alternative conceptualization of religion, synthesizing both of these approaches, emphasizing the source of legitimacy for religious ideas and institutions, and adding a focus on everyday practice as the mechanism that sustains religious faith and makes it salient and relevant in people's lives. I applied this notion of the distinctive features of religion to the ways in which religion and the pro-life movement interact. I found that social movement activism is permeated with religious practice. As people fight the battle over abortion, they are also enacting prayerful lives, birth and death rituals, the gathering of the faithful, expressions of faith, understandings of personal sacrifice and persecution, and the doing of God's work on earth. Religion and the pro-life movement, it seems, are not so much discrete, distinct social phenomena in which the former influences the latter, but instead are overlapping social processes that impact each other.

Three key points emerge from this analysis. The first is the importance of polysemy in activist practice. Ideas, events, and behaviors are often seen as having only a single meaning. In scientific analysis this takes the form of scholars interpreting a social phenomenon and telling us what it *really* means. Thus, for example, right-wing extremism is often understood as *really* being about the eroding social status or cultural position of some segment of the population. To

those involved in events, the focus on single meanings manifests as a need to explain the *reason* they believe or act they way they do. Is what I'm doing saving babies, or am I fulfilling my religious obligations? The data shows that the dichotomy implicit in these questions is a false one. Events can take on multiple meanings, behaviors can take on multiple voices, and ideas can simultaneously express multiple intentions and beliefs. The issue is not to reduce these manifold meanings to one that is primary or more fundamental, but instead to recognize that the polysemy of action can be a major source of social dynamism.

Second, this analysis has shown the ways in which religion itself is constituted in the practice of individuals in spheres of activity not fully encompassed by the religious arena. Pro-life activity is not simply an expression of religious faith; activism is itself religious practice critical to the continual re-creation and sustenance of religious traditions and institutions. What it means to "do" one's religion thus needs to be expanded to a much broader set of possible sites of religious ritual and practice. Religion is being done in the dozens of pro-life meetings that are held every week in the Twin Cities, Boston, Charleston, and Oklahoma City. It is being done on the steps of state capitals, as well as in front of abortion clinics. It is being done every day in the estimated 3,000 crisis pregnancies centers in the United States.

The final key point in this essay is that social movements may act as sites of major realignments in the institutions with which it overlaps. In the relationship between religion and the pro-life movement, the movement is not passive. Instead, pro-life activism has an impact on religious organizations by tying religious values and language to one of the most divisive social issues in the United States today, controversial enough to cause divisions in conservative Protestant and liberal social justice Catholic congregations alike. Perhaps even more importantly, the pro-life movement is a site of religious exploration and conversion. A surprisingly large number of activists did not come to understand their activism through a religious lens, but instead came to understand their faith through a pro-life lens. This finding can be added to the list of biographical consequences of activism (McAdam 1999), and also reorients the more general discussion of social movement outcomes (Giugni, McAdam and Tilly 1999; Andrews 1997; Gamson 1990) to consider more than political institutions or the goals of the movement.

There is some truth in the stereotype that sees the pro-life movement as a child of religion. Religious institutions support the movement, religious ideas permeate it, and religious

practice is an important element of pro-life activism. The stereotype, however, does not take into account the significant limitations in the way in which religion impacts the movement, nor does it allow for the important ways in which the movement affects religious faith. Albert's comments cited at the opening of this essay, however, reveal a great deal about the relationship between religion and the pro-life movement. "What is the future of this issue?" I asked him. His response is one in which the religious answer and the pro-life answer are intimately intertwined, each informing the other, simultaneously enriching his spiritual life while it deepens his commitment to the pro-life cause.

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