

Chapter 9
God, Abortion and Democracy in the Pro-Life Movement

By Ziad Munson

“Everybody should be out in front of the [abortion] clinic whether you’re Muslim, Christian, or Hebrew, it doesn’t matter. You should be out there because it’s a human rights issue.” Andy, 35, a pro-life activist from Charleston, South Carolina, is arguing that all Americans ought to resist legalized abortion.¹ “Six million Jews died during the Holocaust in Germany,” he continues, “but over 100 million children have been murdered by abortion.” Andy anchors such ideas firmly in his religious faith. He explains his activism in terms of a personal encounter with Satan, and believes God called him to oppose abortion. This call occurred when “the grieving of the Holy Spirit from the hurt of all the innocent children who have been slaughtered and murdered by abortion came upon me.”

Is Andy and others like him a threat to democracy? Certainly his views suggest the dark side of religion’s role as a shaper of moral discourse and stimulus to political involvement: the potential for intolerance and exclusion. Yet despite the fervor with which pro-lifers express their views, and the real potential for violence, interviews with pro-life activists also show striking evidence of a simultaneous, perhaps even paradoxical, commitment to democratic principles. The pro-life movement’s zealous pursuit of a moral imperative exists in tension with a respect for citizenship.

Andy takes his calling from God calling seriously; he regularly attends anti-abortion protests in different parts of the country, has been arrested several times in front of abortion clinics, sued by an abortion provider, and donated money to the families of

those imprisoned for anti-abortion violence. For Andy, those who are pro-life must answer to a higher law than the statutes protecting abortion rights.

Andy does not represent everyone in the pro-life movement, but his beliefs about abortion—and his faith—do reflect common themes in the understandings of many pro-life activists in the United States today. Abortion as the murder of babies, the issue of human rights, analogies to the Holocaust, and the references to God are all common ideas within the movement. Most activists view the issue in starkly black and white terms: Abortion is the killing of children pure and simple, an act that violates God’s law and is always evil.² The ideas at stake are thus linked to a moral code that transcends the decisions of the country’s legislatures and courts. “It’s all because our government is wicked and evil,” explains Andy, “They’re not following in the footsteps of God as God commanded it.” These words underscore a common belief in the pro-life movement that the importance of the abortion issue trumps the decisions made by political and legal institutions.

What makes the case of pro-life activists interesting, however, is that activists express these ideas while simultaneously holding strong commitments to democratic ideals. Intimidation and violence directed against abortion providers is a chilling reminder of the power of popular movements driven by outrage to curb democratically established rights. The view that such violence is justified, however, is surprisingly rare in the pro-life movement given its uncompromising views of the abortion issue. Andy, for example, talks at length about the rights of Americans, rejects the idea that violence—and even civil disobedience—is the proper response to legalized abortion, and believes that education and legislative efforts are the best means the pro-life movement has at its

disposal to effect change. “I thank God we have the power to vote,” he says. Pro-life activists in fact generally place great value on the very political institutions they vilify and reject for permitting abortion. If activists simply rejected state authority and democratic values as secondary to the evil of abortion, evaluation of the pro-life movement’s contribution to the public square would be straightforward. The worldview of pro-life activists, however, is considerably more complicated.

This essay explores the relationship between absolute beliefs about abortion and equally absolute beliefs about democratic society held by pro-life activists in the United States today. It shows that rank-and-file participants in the pro-life movement believe *both* that the moral evil of abortion transcends the democratic process *and* that democratic values must be held inviolate. The central argument of this chapter is that the inherent contradiction between these two ideas is resolved in several ways within the worldview of activists. First, like Andy, many activists root their beliefs about abortion simultaneously in ideas about God and in principles of the U.S. Constitution and individual rights. The relationship between their religious views and their democratic views is in fact a syncretistic one in which activists embrace a sacralized vision of the American polity. Second, the attitude of activists toward the public square is determined more by their understanding of the most appropriate means to end abortion than it is by their view of abortion’s moral status. In short, beliefs about action differ from moral understandings of the issue itself.

This analysis is based on life-history interview data collected in 1999 and 2000 from 82 rank-and-file pro-life activists in four metropolitan areas: Boston, the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Charleston SC, and Oklahoma City. These cities

were chosen because they vary in their religious composition, degree of pro-life mobilization, and regional location. Interview participants were identified through snowball sampling in each city, with a theoretical sample then selected to maximize variation in age, race, creed, and type of pro-life movement involvement. Interviews typically lasted 2 to 3 hours, and were all taped and fully transcribed. Data collection produced over 3,000 pages of transcripts that were then coded and analyzed. More complete information on the study design and data collection is available in (Munson 2002). The result is a rich data set that allows us to explore the terrain of beliefs about one of the most contentious social issues in the United States, and to analyze how these beliefs are tied to the political system.

Abortion as an Absolute Evil

“You’re killing. You’re killing a life. This is life. It doesn’t matter whether you get a gun and shoot somebody or do this. They’re the same. It’s the same thing.” Forty-nine-year-old Oklahoma activist Dominique’s words reflect the most basic and common understanding of the abortion issue expressed by pro-life activists. The belief that abortion is killing and therefore wrong is central to the movement’s moral universe. Mildred, an 80-year-old in Boston, responded without hesitation when I asked her why she was opposed to abortion. “Well, it’s the killing of a life. Life is sacred.” An awkward silence followed. This was the end of the story for Mildred; she didn’t see any reason to elaborate on such a basic point.

At the core of the pro-life worldview is the belief that the unborn fetus is a person. Abortion is therefore morally wrong because it ends the life of a person. All other beliefs within the movement revolve around this central idea. “Killing an unborn infant is

wrong,” says 68-year-old Twin Cities activist John, “killing something is wrong. It’s not killing a rabbit or a bird, it’s a fellow human being. What do people think it is? A baby is a human being.” If the fetus is a person, then others certainly have no right to end its life. Activists are incredulous over arguments about the right to privacy and a woman’s right to control her body because of this belief. If the fetus is as human as a toddler or a child or an adult, then surely its right to life supercedes these secondary rights of others.

This core idea leads activists to reject the notion that there are any circumstances under which abortion is permissible. Although public opinion is divided over where to draw the line between justified and unjustified abortion, the pro-life movement is not. There is one final goal of activists: an end to *all* abortions in the United States. Activists universally agree on this goal, even if their immediate work is focused on stopping only certain cases of abortion. Abortions following rape, incest, and medical/genetic problems with the fetus are no more justified than abortions in any other circumstances. Sandra, a 34-year-old in Oklahoma City, reflects this view in her explanation of why even the rape of a 10-year-old girl cannot justify abortion:

A good friend of mine’s little sister was...her mother was ten years old. Ten years old! Which is a horrible thing to even think about. A ten-year-old child getting pregnant and carrying a baby for nine months and laboring to give birth to a child at ten years old. But I can’t imagine not ever knowing her. And if the woman is raped, and then has to go through an abortion also, how is that I think it would be very hard to go through a nine month pregnancy if it was rape. But I don’t think it’s in any way healing to abort it either. Every person is their

own person in their own right, in their own merit, and if a life is conceived it was meant to be conceived, because it has a reason and a purpose on this Earth.

Sandra's explanation sums up many pro-life understandings of why abortion must be stopped in all cases: every person is unique regardless of the circumstances of their conception; abortion only compounds the pain of a crime like rape; pregnancy is a unique gift of God, not to be judged as wanted or unwanted.

Abortion in cases of genetic disorders—supported by 78 percent of the general public³—are particularly abhorrent to pro-life activists. They see abortion because of genetic defects as a kind of genocide that weeds out people with undesirable characteristics. “They were talking about abortion in cases of rape, incest, life of the mother, psychiatric health of the mother, and defective child. And it was the defective child one that really upset me the most,” explains Linda, a 55-year-old in the Twin Cities, “That was a eugenics thing!” Many also worry about a slippery slope in abortion mentality. A gay activist in Boston put it this way:

If they ever isolate a gene for sexual preference, parents are going to say, ‘Well, we live in Marblehead [an affluent Boston suburb]. And I’m for gay rights, but I don’t want to subject my infant, my child who has this gene and is going to come out gay, to that. So I’m going to abort to save him...I don’t want to bring a gay person in this world because it’s going to be hurtful.’ So genetics—that’s just misguided.

The only crack in this universal consensus comes in cases where the mother's life is in jeopardy. About one third of the movement say abortion is wrong even in these cases. We can't judge whose life is more important, the mother's or the unborn baby's,

and therefore abortion is never justified. Some say that the baby's life is actually more important; the mother has lived her life, but the unborn baby has not yet had that chance. "If you understand that that is another life," says Jeff, a 35-year-old in the Twin Cities, "even at the peril of your own life, you always try to do your absolute best to save that child, to save that other life."⁴

Opponents of abortion thus do not see abortion as a personal choice. Their opposition is an absolute moral commitment, absolute in the sense that it is a moral principle that brooks no exception. Even those active in the political arena, who work to outlaw or regulate abortion in only some cases, see such legislation as an 'incremental' milestone toward the final goal of eliminating abortion altogether.⁵ The issue is thus not one of extreme versus moderate beliefs about the core piece of the pro-life moral universe. On this issue of the moral status of abortion, the movement stands as one.

A Religious Evaluation of Abortion

Many activists, although certainly not all, root these absolute ideas about abortion firmly in their religious beliefs.⁶ All but a handful of activists in my sample are weekly churchgoers, and 68 percent participate in religious activities outside of regular worship services.⁷ Interestingly, specific religious traditions are relatively unimportant in activist understandings of the abortion issue. Indeed, even well-educated pro-lifers active in their churches frequently expressed confusion over the specific theological commitments of their congregations.⁸ Activist opposition to abortion is not rooted in particular faith traditions or doctrinal teachings, but instead on the simple, nondenominational principle that God is sovereign over human life.⁹ Andy, the activist introduced at the very

beginning of the chapter, reflects this principle when he notes that *every* religious person should be trying to stop abortion, whether they are Christian, Muslim, or Jewish.

Christina, a 46-year-old in Boston, is representative of what many activists have to say: “It all boils down to the belief that there is a God and He’s the author of life, and that for some reason He allowed a life to be created.” Because God is responsible for the creation of human life, many activists see it as hubris if not heretical to interfere with God’s plans by ending such life through abortion:

God is the author of life and He has His reasons for things that happen. And we may never know what they are. Even if we don’t know, He’s a good God, we know that. So we know that He will give you what you need, and this [an unplanned pregnancy] is probably what you need. So we can’t play God in that.

Ben, a 79-year-old in Charleston, sees abortion here as playing God. Human souls are imbued by God at the moment of conception. The abortion issue is thus not one that the politicians or judges are qualified or even authorized to decide. The only acceptable position on abortion, for both individuals and society as a whole, has already been decided by God.

The central tenet of the pro-life understanding of abortion is the belief that the fetus is imbued with personhood and therefore abortion represents the killing of a human being. For many this position is reinforced by a religious understanding of the sanctity of human life based on God’s hand in creating life. The result is the idea that there must be an absolute prohibition against abortion and a battle against the system that allows it. “One of the most detestable sins to God is the shedding of innocent blood. And how more innocent is a child, a child inside a mother’s womb?”

Hitler and Slavery

On one level, then, many activists suggest that the sanctity of human life—and thus the immorality of abortion—trumps the value of the government system that permits it. In other words, abortion is such a compelling evil that ending it is more important than support for institutions that have made abortion legal, including state and federal legislatures, the system of the courts, and the electoral system. Activists draw on two analogies in making sense of the moral weight of abortion and its relationship to the political system: the Holocaust in Germany and slavery in the United States. The analogies serve to underscore their belief that the sanctity of human life is a principle that cannot be abandoned even in the face of a political authority that violates it.

Many pro-life activists draw parallels between legalized abortion in the United States and the Jewish Holocaust in Germany. For some, the Holocaust stands as a historical example of the evil to which abortion can lead. “If you read the history of the development of the Holocaust and how it started,” explains 58-year-old Allen in Charleston, continuing:

Early on, even before Hitler, the German government was doing abortions, they were doing infanticide, and it was getting more and more expansive and permitted. They were already getting into euthanasia before Hitler latched onto the Jews. But that previous business made what he was doing with the Jews even more acceptable...to the populace.

Allen returns to a concern expressed earlier that abortion is a big step down a slippery slope toward almost unimaginable evil. More common is to actually equate legalized abortion with the Holocaust directly, rather than as merely a step toward a similar kind of

tragedy. Typical are the thoughts of Carol, 52, and Nicky, 37, both activists in Charleston:

Carol: Let's go back to Nazi Germany. And if you think about the horrors that went on there, and how people were shocked when they heard after the war was over what was going on, and why didn't they know when it was going on right under their noses. You have the same situation here. The same parallel going on right here in the United States. You have killing going on every day of the week. So many a day. And everybody is acting like nothing is going on. We're in a free society, but we don't have the freedom to kill. That's not right.

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Nicky: And I say to myself, 'You're going to decide that someone with an M.D. behind their name should be making ultimate decisions? Who was Hitler's right-hand man? They were very well-educated men. And some of them were M.D.s. That does not make them automatically worthy to decide public policy.'

The Holocaust serves as a historical point of comparison for activists like Allen, Carol, and Nicky.¹⁰ It defines the moral category in which legalized abortion falls.

The implication of the analogy is that any reasonable person should be compelled to stop it, even if this means defying political and judicial authorities. Nicky's previous comments hint at this point; she feels public policy on abortion is morally wrong despite its support by physicians, just as Nazi policies were wrong despite being supported by well-educated men. Others are more direct. Consider the views of Josh, a 45-year-old from Oklahoma City:

I look at abortion clinics like I do the gas chambers that the Jews went to. Same type of thing. Except nobody stopped what was happening in Germany, and people are trying to stop it here. Who are what? They go to jail. They may eventually be executed. Hitler was able to [kill], and we say that's a major disaster, but yet here we've murdered millions of our children and nobody wants say, 'hey, when is the shedding of blood going to stop'. You know? It utterly amazes me.

Josh expresses the need felt by many to do something immediately to stop abortion, even if it means going to jail or even being executed by the state. Ronald, 54, who lives in Boston, makes the connection to basic democratic principles explicit:

Now certainly any American is going to be very struck by the idea of democracy and what the majority want. But you can't avoid the comparison that all those years when Hitler was doing what he wanted, he had won an election. And after that he had hundreds of thousands of people out there cheering and a negligible opposition and so forth like that. So I don't know if I'm struck by the idea that we just put it to a vote and so forth.

Here is a clear expression of the tension between unwavering opposition to abortion and a core feature of the American political system. Ronald suggests that there are certain things that are never permissible, even when those things — the killing of Jews and abortion — are supported by a democratic majority. Abortion must be stopped even if it means certain democratic principles are undermined, because the evil is immediately present and can never be undone. “The only comparison I think is the Holocaust of the

Jews,” Ronald explains, “There are people that are here that are not going to be here. There’s not going to be a second choice. It’s definitive.”

Activists use comparisons with slavery in the United States in the same way. Slavery too is interpreted as a historical example where the evil being done in a democratic system must be stopped even if it requires actions that lie outside the established bounds of the U.S. democratic system. Maria, a 49-year-old in the Twin Cities, explains a common belief among activists:

How much different is it to say that you have friends who, although they themselves would say they won’t have an abortion, they’re willing, as a taxpayer, to fund someone else’s abortion or drive someone else there who is in need? How is that different than someone who might say, ‘Well, I probably would never have a slave myself, but I’m going to support someone else, or I’m going to keep laws that keep slaves from escaping, or I’m going to...’? How is that different?

They’re both oppressive of human rights and basic things.

The analogy extends to the historical consequence of continued slavery in the United States: civil war. Frank, 58, who lives in Boston, puts it this way: “Okay, ‘I don’t own slaves but I’ll defend anybody’s right to own slaves,’ that’s a crock of bullshit. Do you believe in abortion or not? Do you believe in slavery or not? We have the Civil War right there. So it’s that simple. It’s as simple as that.” Frank’s perspective highlights not only the direct comparisons made between legalized abortion and legalized slavery, but also the black and white perspective that activists take toward the abortion issue.

Abortion is either right or it is wrong, just like slavery is either right or wrong, just like the Holocaust is either right or wrong. In all these cases, the answer is clear and

sufficiently compelling to outweigh even the decisions of courts or the results of referendums and elections that have allowed each of these phenomena to occur.

A Threat to Democracy

The sanctity of life is not only a value that can trump the value of democratic institutions in cases like abortion, it is also understood as a value on which democracy itself is predicated. In other words, the sanctity of life is logically prior to democratic values—thus abortion represents a threat to the political system. Only by ending abortion, therefore, is the continued health of the American system possible. Fifty-nine-year-old Barbara, an activist in the Twin Cities, puts the argument in its simplest form: “There is nothing more important than life. Everything else—peace and justice and church and everything else—none of it matters if you don’t have life first.” “If you look at what causes a society to disintegrate, I think the abortion issue is the most serious” echoes Dorothy, 67, an activist from Twin Cities, “because it’s at the core of our person.” Without protecting the sanctity of life by ending abortion, this argument goes, the entire society is in jeopardy.

Underlying the beliefs put in these simple terms is a more complex understanding of the foundations of civic life. Abortion not only takes the lives of individual human beings, but it also has the larger social effect of cheapening the value of human life more generally. “I think the broad picture of the abortion issue isn’t thought through,” explains Joan, 69, also from Twin Cities, “All aspects of life are being affected in our society by the decline of the respect for life.” George, a 68-year-old in Charleston, expresses a similar view:

Sooner or later a nation that kills its own children legally will end up going down the tube. I think that once abortion became so prevalent and became legal, it so cheapened life in the United States, that I think it mainly—and I’m sounding real philosophical—so cheapened life that it also cheapened morality and everything.

The idea that the whole country will “end up going down the tube” if abortion isn’t stopped means democratic values, however cherished they might be, are irrelevant when the value of life is degraded. Abortion leads to a changed social mentality that, in turn, hurts everyone.

Activists will occasionally connect this cheapening of human life directly to the political process. More common, however, is to draw connections to rising violence and abuse in society generally. The massacre at Columbine High School was raised by several activists in this context:

I think this [abortion] is really the foundation of it all. I really truly do. I mean *life*, you take life away. I think of what our kids are growing up with, such a disposable society. I think about that tragedy in Colorado. But what are these kids seeing? They’re seeing these kids give birth to babies and wrapping them in garbage bags and getting rid of them, and they’ve grown up with such a terrible culture.

This is the perspective of Susan, a 45-year-old Twin Cities activist. The culture in the United States has sunk so low, she says, that even the basic protections of civilization are no longer respected. “Spiritually we’re dead,” says Andy, “I mean Columbine. Children are shooting children now. Why? Well because of abortion. We’re teaching them that they can kill their innocent children. Why can’t they kill each other?” For

these and other activists, there is little hope for our system as a whole unless abortion can be stopped.

The link between abortion and democracy is made consciously by those who understand abortion as undermining the system by eliminating those who can't speak for themselves—unborn children. Abortion is thus seen as a direct threat to democratic principles, as it does not treat people equally. “How can you, I mean, how can you *not* want to defend this most vulnerable, most innocent baby?” exclaims Margaret, 73, who lives in Twin Cities. Race is often raised in these kinds of discussions, as blacks have a disproportionate number of abortions in the U.S. while the black population as a whole is disproportionately pro-life in its views toward the issue. More generally, however, activists see many of the arguments for legalized abortion as privileging a certain kind of white, middle-class, educated lifestyle. Glen, 33, a Boston resident, sees the liberal emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness to be contradicted by pro-choice views on abortion:

A lot of the pro-abort arguments are very simple. It's, ‘Well, these people are going to lead terrible lives. We have to have abortion so these people don't live these terrible lives.’ But what are these terrible lives? Somebody who is living a terrible life is living a life of not being out in the suburbs with 2.2 kids and a white picket fence.

Glen's comments typify the view that legalized abortion is rooted in social inequality; that those with a louder or more powerful voice can make their lives more convenient, even at the expense of the lives of others. It thereby undermines basic principles of freedom, equality, justice, and diversity.

Abortion also threatens our system in another way: It jeopardizes our country's relationship with God. "I think abortion is a big one for our country," says Evelyn, a 50-year-old in Charleston, "I think we'll be judged someday for the lives that are lost." Tim, a 38-year-old in Oklahoma City, goes into much more detail:

I mean he'll forgive us if we ask him. If we turn from our wicked ways he says he'll come in and heal our land. He's a loving God, but he's also a very wrathful, vengeful God, I believe. And just because we live in the New Testament, not the old, doesn't mean he's changed...He is wrathful, he's vengeful, and he doesn't appreciate people killing his creation.

Tim argues that abortion is a sin that takes place not only on the individual level, but on the societal level as well. By allowing legalized abortion, the country as a whole puts itself at risk. Ultimately it is God that supports a democratic way of life, and abortion mocks God's laws; it is such a flagrant violation of God's will that American society will inevitably suffer punishment unless it changes its ways. It is therefore not enough to simply convert or persuade others of this point of view. Abortion must be universally eliminated on behalf of society and on behalf of God.

Pro-life activists understand the abortion issue in absolute terms. They are absolute not only in terms of permitting no exceptions, but also in terms of not being subject to negotiation or debate. There is no argument or evidence or experience that activists believe will convince them to change their evaluation of the issue. Abortion is evil. It is wrong under all circumstances. Abortion violates God's law, a law that is higher than those made by Congress or the Supreme Court. Like the Holocaust in Germany and slavery in the United States, abortion is such an egregious crime that it

necessitates action even in the face of the political and legal opposition. In fact, it is abortion itself that is a threat to those institutions, and thus the democratic values that underlie them. Abortion perpetuates an uneven playing field in which the rights of the powerless and voiceless are denied for the convenience of others. It cheapens the value of life generally, and the lives of the poor, the elderly, racial minorities, and the handicapped in particular. It also jeopardizes society by inviting God's wrath on a fallen nation. This is a composite summary of the pro-life understanding of abortion as it relates to democratic life. While no one activist necessarily expresses this moral evaluation in its entirety, it represents the worldview of the movement as a whole.

Democratic Values as Inviolable

There are thus many ways in which activists believe the abortion issue trumps democratic values. Remarkably, however, the very same activists *also* express strong beliefs in the rule of law, the principle of non-violence, and the paramount value of the democratic system as embodied in the U.S. Constitution. There are some notable exceptions, people who support any actions that might stop abortion. Michael, a 42-year-old resident of Boston, is a frightening example. Although he doesn't unambiguously endorse killing abortion providers, he is sympathetic to what they have done:

You know, that clinic in Brookline where that guy shot up the place and a couple people got killed?¹¹ [pause] I don't have any great care for the fact that one way or another a couple people got killed. Okay, it's something that probably shouldn't have happened. But that's as far as I go with that. Those people aren't any great heroes as far as I'm concerned, either the guy who pulled the trigger or the people who got killed. They were all doing something that was wrong as far

as I'm concerned. They are not heroes and their families aren't people that I have any great sympathy for, for what happened. Too bad...People get killed. It probably shouldn't happen, but the only reason I believe that there shouldn't be any murders of people who are working in those clinics is because it hurts our movement. And that's the only reason I feel, you know, any great regret for people getting killed.

This sentiment stands out in the thousands of pages of interview transcripts because it is so exceptional. Given the absolute beliefs of activists about abortion, one would expect widespread expressions of support for extra-legal strategies for ending it. Yet only 2 of the 82 activists interviewed for this study provided any justification for violence against abortion providers.¹² Far more common is the perspective of Doug, 32, who lives in Oklahoma City: "If society says he's [an abortion provider] protected, then it doesn't matter if I agree with it or not. I made the choice to live in a country where I support the laws. The law protects him. Whether I agree with them or not, it doesn't mean I can override them."

In fact, activists simultaneously hold the belief that abortion transcends the political process and the belief that democracy is an ultimate value. Concern over democracy is expressed by activists even as they explain how the democratic system has produced and sustained legalized abortion. "I have always had this view, which I still sort of have, that the need for protest underscores some kind of failing of democracy," says Steve, 28, of Boston, "So I don't see it as particularly productive behavior overall." Steve has a very narrow view of the democratic process; even peaceful protest is largely excluded from the realm of legitimate activity for ending what he calls the killing of

innocent human life. Glen, the 33-year-old Boston activist quoted earlier who considers abortion to be “murder,” nonetheless is equally clear in how he thinks the movement must approach the issue: “Through politics. Through effective spokesmen and passing legislation and through having debates. Through the debates you can change peoples’ minds, and that leads to more legislation and things like that.” Chris, a 29-year-old in the Twin Cities agrees:

So I think any way we can fight it, you know, we should do so with the means that we are given as a country. I mean I think we’ve got a great country... You know, this is the country we live in and I’m not going to go out and kill someone. I’m going to try to change the laws of this country.

Elsewhere, Chris calls abortion “the greatest sin” and tears fill his eyes when he explains how “so many babies are being killed.” These beliefs do not, however, lead him to look for anything but regular, well institutionalized, legal solutions built on an explicit respect for the democratic process.

Activists thus hold contradictory beliefs with respect to these issues. On the one hand they understand abortion as an absolute evil made possible by a flawed system. On the other hand they place uncompromising value on the system that allows abortion. Two elements of the pro-life worldview make holding these two beliefs together possible. First, although religious beliefs are important in the lives of most activists, much of the moral certainty about abortion comes from ideas about individual rights and the U.S. Constitution. This point is evident in many of the activist quotations already presented. In fact religious beliefs and beliefs about the American political system frequently are elided, and activists understand them to be one in the same value. In other words, the

activists do not see the issue as an either/or question: either opposition to abortion or support for the system that sustains it. They see God, democracy, constitutional law, and so forth as all elements of the same underlying principle.

Second, there exists a sharp distinction between beliefs about ultimate values—the sanctity of human life, for example—and beliefs about the means by which those values might be met, e.g. the political process. In other words, beliefs about abortion and beliefs about politics are different *kinds* of beliefs, and they operate independent of one another in the moral understandings of activists. Absolute and uncompromising views on abortion therefore need not dictate an individual’s beliefs about how to properly participate in civic and political life. The issue is not only that activists see democratic mechanisms as positive in instrumental terms; as a means to an end. They place independent value in procedural democracy itself.

Abortion and Individual Rights

Abortion rights in the United States are based legally on the notion that the right to privacy is guaranteed by the Constitution, and laws prohibiting the procedure violate this right for pregnant women. More generally, legalized abortion is understood as part of a woman’s right to control her own body; her right to choose (Condit 1990). Those who oppose abortion, however, also understand their own views in terms of individual rights. From their perspective, the key issue is the “right to life” of the unborn child. Beliefs about abortion, even when held in absolute terms, are therefore not necessarily in contradiction with basic democratic values, because in many cases they extend *from* those principles. Recall that Andy’s comments introducing the chapter refer to abortion

as first and foremost a human rights issue, even as his opposition is also rooted in beliefs about the will of God.

References to individual rights, human rights, or the U.S. Constitution are as frequent as references to God in activist discourse about their beliefs. “You have the Constitution which says *everyone* is created equal, and that includes your religious preferences and everything, unless it is detrimental to society. So if your preference is to go kill people [as in abortion], that’s not going to work,” explains Lisa, a 34-year-old in the Twin Cities. “The Constitution is what guides me in my belief of things,” says Mildred, 80, of Boston, quoted earlier. Activists feel as if the principles of the country have been hijacked in making abortion legal; that the Supreme Court has perverted the meaning of the Constitution and the intent of the Founding Fathers. Bill, a 68-year-old in Boston, grew increasingly angry as he told me about how he felt when *Roe v. Wade*¹³ was handed down in 1972:

If somebody said to me in those days, we’re going to have within five years a Supreme Court decision that wipes out the laws against abortion on demand in what would have been forty-six states, right across the board, I would have said you’re crazy! That can’t be done. Because of the fifth, ninth and fourteenth amendments to the Constitution and the English common law that preceded those amendments to the Constitution. That can’t happen here! *Well, it did!*

By the end of the story he was yelling at me, enraged at what he saw as perversion of a sacred text, the U.S. Constitution. Activists like these don’t understand the issue as abortion versus democratic decision-making; they understand abortion as possible only because democratic decision-making has been circumvented.

Activists also don't always differentiate between the moral authority of God and the moral authority of the Constitution. Consider the following three statements by activists:

I mean each individual is valuable because God created them. And so that's where our one man-one vote, property rights, that's where this idea of human life comes from. If you don't have human life as sacred, then how can you have property rights and all this other stuff? How do you have any other rights if you don't have a right to life? (Suzanne, 50, Charleston)

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I feel like our country was founded on Biblical principles. That's where the Constitution came from. (Paul, 34, Oklahoma City)

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This country is built up on a foundation, and the foundation of the country is built up on the word of God. And if the Constitution is coming, built up with the Ten Commandments and what they say, 'Thou shalt not kill,' they should stop that. They should make it illegal and vote for it and not approach it. (Dominique, 48, Oklahoma City)

Such sentiments are representative of the ways in which activists synthesize understandings of their religious beliefs and beliefs about the American system. In Suzanne's case, the two are so thoroughly combined as to be inseparable; she moves back and forth between talking about God and talking about property rights and other individual rights. For Dominique and Paul, the relationship between the two is extremely close, but reflect a belief that the Constitution is an embodiment of God's law, or at the

very least derivative of God's design. Activists as a rule do not seek to supplant democratic institutions with their concern over God (and, by extension, abortion). Instead, they see their work as an effort to restore "Godly" American democratic ideals from others who have twisted and subverted them.

Claire, a 59-year-old Boston woman who was quoted earlier, puts it this way: "I mean I know what the church's position is. But to me it was much more the right to life. 'Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' It was, 'how can this happen in a just country?' It was much more, not political, but governmental or whatever, than it was religious." Andy, whose strident views of abortion introduced the chapter, says exactly the same thing: "See abortion is a human issue. Everybody wants to make it a ministry but it's not. It's a human rights issue. You're given the right to life, to the pursuit of happiness and that's taken away from those children." Religion and the U.S. constitutional system in each of these comments are viewed as two sides of the same coin. Just as religious ideas undergird opposition to abortion, so too do they legitimate a certain understanding of the Constitution. These values then, rather than being a source of contradiction, are instead mutually reinforcing.

Concern Over Ends and Means

There is also a second way in which absolute beliefs about abortion are integrated with equally absolute views of democratic institutions. When activists talk about ultimate values, concern over abortion takes precedence over virtually everything else. In translating such beliefs into implications for action, however, activists invoke democratic principles for understanding the most effective and morally appropriate ways to end abortion. Democratic values are inviolate in this discussion. Morally they value the rule

of law and submission to democratic decision-making. Practically they may also believe politics in general to be the wrong focus for the movement; they concentrate instead on organizing and persuasion within civil society.

Doug is a 32-year-old activist in Oklahoma City quoted earlier who, like many in the pro-life movement, believes that abortion is wrong under all circumstances, even in cases where a pregnancy threatens the life of the mother. “Is there a time that life is going to be threatened? Yeah, there is. But your life is going to be threatened driving down the road too. You don’t get rid of cars...It’s just a part of life that hardships are going to happen.” Doug also has a strong religious basis for his pro-life position. He sees abortion as a violation of God’s plan for the world and for individual souls. “The Bible says that God knows us even before we’re conceived in the womb. And so that means that before we’re even conceived, there’s a plan set in motion. And the conception is just a part of that plan, God’s plan.” Doug translates these comparatively extreme beliefs into a perfectly mainstream view of what ought to be done.¹⁴ While violence against the unborn is evil to Doug, so too is working outside the law to end that violence:

I mean when we try to set ourselves above the law and be the justice system, it’s almost like you, you know, there is a justice system and elected government system in place for a reason. So that we’re not all vigilantes running around taking the law into our own hands.

Many agree with Doug, seeing a moral requirement to keep efforts to end abortion within the limits prescribed by the law. Ruth, 71, from Twin Cities, is deeply disturbed by all the violence and destruction done in the name of the movement:

Hearing in the newspapers about the burning of the clinics, the destruction, and the killing of abortionists. To have anybody pro-life be connected with that makes you ill... You cannot kill and be pro-life. No matter how it's done. And what does it solve? It doesn't solve anything. And the same for burning or destruction of any kind, to me is just abhorrent.

Virtually all activists have a moral commitment to acting on their beliefs in ways circumscribed by their democratic values. They see illegal tactics aimed at stopping abortion as morally tarnishing their cause as "un-Christian" and making them "no better than the abortionists."

Nor is everyone in the movement even comfortable with political solutions. Many reject electoral politics as corrupt or not equipped to deal an issue as important as abortion. However these ideas do not lead them to reject the value of the system altogether but rather to turn their attention to strategies focused on public awareness and education. Stan, 41, from Oklahoma City, helped establish a pro-life organization focusing on public outreach; it provides pro-life speakers to schools, publishes a pro-life newspaper insert and operates a pro-life exhibit. He nicely summarizes a common view of politics in the movement:

The [abortion] issue is a lot deeper than politics. Politics is just a result. When you look at a plant, what do you see? We see the flowers and leaves and the branches or whatever. We see the top of it. But really what is underneath is a root. Now if you said, 'I hate roots. Get rid of the roots and just stick that plant back in the ground.' What will happen? Will it thrive? No, it will die without

the root. So the root of the problem is not politics. The root of the problem is the hearts of men.

Thus many activists see the problem of abortion as reaching deeper than politics. They reject politics not because it lacks legitimacy, but because it is ineffective, corrupt or controlled by enemies of the movement. These activists concentrate on bringing the pro-life message to the general public or convincing individual pregnant women to carry their pregnancies to term. The strategy is thus not to circumvent or overturn the system. They seek to influence the system—in which they place great value—by addressing what the activists see as the underlying reasons abortion has become legalized and so common.

Where Does This Leave Us?

Participants in the American pro-life movement possess an absolute and uncompromising belief that abortion is wrong. It is a moral understanding that is rooted in deeply held religious beliefs. Abortion is wrong for many because it violates God's will, it violates Scripture, it violates the teachings of the Catholic and other churches. Abortion, they believe, is evil. These kinds of belief raise very legitimate questions about how the abortion issue can be negotiated within a democratic system. The actual divisiveness and occasional violence of the public debate over the last three decades only deepens these questions. What role can religious ideas play in the public square? How can commitments that are understood to transcend democratic principles be debated and incorporated into a democratic process? How do activists integrate their beliefs about abortion and beliefs about legitimate authority and action?

Resolving such questions with finality is beyond this essay, but any discussion of them is flawed if it does not recognize that the beliefs of the pro-life movement are not monolithic. One of the goals of this chapter is to present the multiple layers of meaning and moral understanding that those in this movement bring to their activism. To some degree, one must look not only at their discourse but their actions. Activists do *express* their views on abortion in black and white, all or nothing terms. Through comparisons and analogy, they suggest that almost any means would be justified for ending abortion. Given this perspective, then, it is noteworthy that the number of advocates for stepping outside the boundaries of legitimate civil discourse and action is surprisingly small. Thus, even when we can clearly summarize the range of beliefs held about abortion, the implications for participation in the political system are unclear. A more finely tuned analysis of the overall worldview of activists is needed.

Activists couple a belief in abortion as an issue that trumps the ordinary operation of the system with a belief in the moral sovereignty of democratic principles. Moreover, these two beliefs are held simultaneously, with no apparent sense of tension or contradiction. This is possible for two reasons. First, the moral certainty about their abortion beliefs comes in part from their ideas about democratic principles, especially as it is embodied in the U.S. Constitution and myths about the Founding Fathers and the creation of the American republic. The authority of God and the authority of the Constitution are frequently elided. Outrage over legalized abortion is thus rooted in an understanding of freedom, individual rights, and justice. Their beliefs about abortion can therefore transcend the democratic system without actually challenging it. Second, beliefs about abortion and about democracy shift in their meaning in subtle but important

ways as activists move from talking about moral beliefs to talking about practical implications of those beliefs. While abortion is attached to the moral category of the sanctity of life in abstract discussions of value, beliefs about democracy and moral action take precedence when activists consider how they should actually address the abortion issue.

Ultimately, the totality of evidence suggests that the religious basis of pro-life beliefs is not particularly salient to the way in which activists enact their beliefs. Religious beliefs underlie the ideas activists bring to the public debate and are deployed as strategic resources to win public support, legislative action, and legal decisions. At the same time, these religious beliefs are tied to a range of other ideas about the proper functioning of a democratic system and the values on which the system rests. The pro-life movement's participation in the system thus can only be understood by analyzing their overall worldview in this context. From this perspective the movement appears less as an extreme case— certainly less than Andy's opening remarks would suggest —and more like a common if complex example of the way in which ideas, religion, and politics regularly interact in the public square.

¹ Andy and all other names of activists in this chapter are pseudonyms.

² It is worth noting that partisans on both sides of the abortion debate view the issue in such dichotomous terms. Pro-choice activists are equally fervent in their belief that abortion is an absolute right of women, above and beyond any other moral or legal concerns.

³ Figure derived from the 2000 General Social Survey, variable ABDEFECT; results from other polls on this issue are similar.

⁴ This statement was made by a man, but those who do not believe in abortion, even in cases where the life of the mother is in jeopardy, are equally distributed among men and women; however, married people are more likely to believe this is an acceptable justification than those who are single.

⁵ Fred, a 56-year-old in Charleston, provides a typical expression of this point of view: “I would love to see them right now, this year, pass a federal law that abortions are illegal with the exception of health of the mother and rape and incest. It would be better than what we have now. I would settle for that compromise at this point. I would like to see it completely done away with, but I don't think that will happen at one stroke of the pen.”

⁶ Rank-and-file activists in the movement are much more likely to express a religious basis for their opposition to abortion than are movement leaders. This is probably due, in part, to the slightly higher levels of education among the leadership as compared to regular members. It is also likely that leaders are more sensitive to public relations issue and choose to express more secular arguments that they believe will better resonate with the general public.

⁷ Compare this number to 59 percent of the general churchgoing population, according to the 2000 Princeton Survey Research Associates Poll (August 24), question 013.

⁸ Overall 66 percent of my sample is Catholic and 12 percent Southern Baptist, with the remainder spread across the full spectrum of other mainline and evangelical denominations.

⁹ Exceptions tend to be Catholics who express the belief that abortion is wrong because the Catholic church teaches it is wrong. Even in these cases, however, the religious beliefs of

rank-and-file activists tend to be theologically unsophisticated and strongly influenced by the pro-life movement itself.

¹⁰ Some activists go further and argue that legalized abortion in the United States is far *worse* than the Holocaust, simply because of the scale of death and the innocence of the lives lost.

¹¹ On December 30, 1994, John Salvi killed two women and wounded five others at abortion clinics in Brookline, MA, a suburb of Boston. Salvi committed suicide in prison in 1996.

¹² Subjects were not chosen through a random probability sample, but I made every effort in each of location to identify and contact the most “extreme” elements of the pro-life movement. I am confident that sympathy for violence against abortion providers is rare even if my data does not allow me to precisely quantify how rare.

¹³ *Roe v. Wade* and its companion case handed down the same day, *Doe v. Bolton*, together deal with the legal status of abortion. They established the conditions under which states can regulate the procedure.

¹⁴ Doug’s views are extreme in the sense that they are dramatically different from the views of most Americans on abortion and on religious faith.