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Can the Seamless Garment Be Sewn?
The Future of Pro-Life Progressivism

The Coherence and Importance of
Pro-Life Progressivism

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Fides et Iustitia

ARTICLE

**THE COHERENCE AND IMPORTANCE OF
PRO-LIFE PROGRESSIVISM**

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Many would say that the subject of today's conference is a bit silly. The phrase "pro-life progressivism," they would argue, is an oxymoron, a self-contradiction borne out by four apparently self-evident propositions:

- The pro-life position on abortion is not a progressive or liberal one; it clashes with foundational progressive or liberal¹ values, particularly with regard to women.
- There is no place for the pro-life position in the Democratic Party, the only home for what is left of the progressive or liberal tradition.
- The pro-life position is tainted by a religiosity that should be irrelevant to law and policymaking in a secular state.
- The number of people who would identify themselves as both "pro-life" and "liberal" is very small, hence neither culturally nor politically significant.

If all of that were true, or if it were the end of the story, then we would not have much to do today other than to talk about how we got into this situation, or to wring our hands about our irrelevance.

Many of the speakers at this conference would not be here, however, if we believed that those four propositions were really self-evident, and that linking "pro-life" and "progressivism" necessarily created a contradiction in terms. In fact, I assume that most of us believe that a pro-life position on abortion can be accommodated within a framework of liberal values, and that there can be a place within liberal politics for such a pro-life position.

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1. When I use the term "liberal" in this paper, I am using it in the narrow sense in which it is usually employed in American politics, i.e., as a description of the political tradition extending from early twentieth century progressivism through Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Kennedys, and what is now the left wing of the Democratic Party. I do not mean to include the nineteenth century tradition of economic liberalism still alive in the twenty-first century. I will also use the terms "liberal" or "progressive" interchangeably in this paper, while recognizing that each word has a different historical pedigree, and can mean different things in different contexts.

Moreover, most of us probably believe that arguments derived from religious faith do have a place in public debate and decision making, and that the number of people who hold both pro-life and liberal or progressive positions may not be insignificant, and that they may be capable of mobilization. The premise of many of us here today thus would seem to be that the idea of pro-life progressivism is plausible, complex, and certainly worth discussing.

The idea's complexity arises from the need to resolve at least two fundamental problems: First, can we construct an intellectually coherent way of linking a pro-life position on abortion to traditionally liberal or progressive positions on other issues, or "social justice" in general? By "coherent," I mean coherent from the standpoint of both liberal and Catholic thought. Second, why have attempts at linkage of these issues—particularly the articulation of the consistent ethic of life²—had so little cultural and political influence, while the separation of abortion from these issues has had such resonance culturally and politically? In other words, can pro-life progressivism be important?

This essay will offer some reflections on these two questions, and offer conclusions that are at least hopeful, if not optimistic.

I. IS "PRO-LIFE PROGRESSIVISM" COHERENT?

Is the phrase "pro-life progressivism" a contradiction in terms? Some would think so. When I tell my friends on the left that I am a pro-life liberal, they look at me as if I were insane. To them it is a bit like a Red Sox fan claiming that his favorite player is Derek Jeter. Similarly, when I explain some of my other social and political views to my pro-life friends, they look at me as if I were some kind of mole planted by the American Civil Liberties Union. My friends on both sides possess world views in which only one position on the incandescent issue of abortion is possible, and transgressions of their expectations produce only bewilderment. The ideas (and values) just don't seem to fit together.

But *can* they fit together? Let's first talk about this question in purely secular terms, from the perspective of progressive thought. One could articulate a left-leaning argument that links abortion to central progressive concerns about victimization of the powerless or less powerful: a capital punishment regime that disproportionately harms minorities, a health care system that leaves the working poor without insurance coverage, a social security system inadequate for many elderly, environmental practices with

2. By the "consistent ethic of life" I refer to the concept primarily associated with Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who also used the metaphor of the Seamless Garment of Life. Cardinal Bernardin articulated the concept in many speeches throughout the 1980s. His most precise statement of the concept is perhaps Joseph L. Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life*, in *The Catholic Church, Morality and Politics* 160 (Charles E. Curran & Leslie Griffin eds., Readings in Moral Theology No. 12, Paulist Press 2001).

disproportionate impact on the poor and minorities, and so on. Why cannot the unborn simply be added to this list of the oppressed for which the Left would demand justice? The problem, of course, is that for most on the left, the “victim” in this context is not the aborted unborn, but the woman deprived of her right of choice by restrictive abortion laws, and hence subordinated and oppressed by a legal regime reflecting and reproducing patriarchal authority. In this view, criminalization of abortion cannot be squared with the Left’s commitment to the dignity and equality of women.

This disagreement over whose dignity needs to be protected leads naturally to the familiar arguments over the personhood of the embryo or fetus and, assuming its personhood, the nature of the mother’s moral and legal obligations to that person. I will not try to resolve these arguments here, but will posit for purposes of discussion a minimalist position: that the fetus possesses at least some attributes of personhood. Once that is assumed, the Left’s typically absolutist pro-choice position on abortion is inconsistent with its own commitment to social responsibility and justice for *all*. A genuinely leftist position on abortion would insist on protection of *both* the mother and the unborn, despite the metaphysical uncertainty about when life and personhood definitively begin. A commitment to equal justice would mean life for the child and a social safety net for the mother. Only that kind of support for women truly respects the mother’s dignity as a woman by helping her avoid the moral tragedy of abortion.³ The Left should not join its libertarian foes by defining the abortion issue purely as a matter of preserving individual autonomy.⁴ The Left also need not assume that a pro-life critique of choice as the paramount value necessarily

3. For an excellent discussion of the possibilities of connection between Catholic and feminist thought (which has its own conflicted relationship with liberalism) regarding abortion, see Mary C. Segers, *Feminism, Liberalism, and Catholicism*:

While liberal feminists support the legality of abortion, many have moral reservations about the high incidence of abortion in the United States. Nevertheless, for these feminists, the way to reduce the incidence of abortion is not to burden or coerce involuntarily pregnant women but to press for reform policies to create alternatives for such women. This sounds remarkably similar to what some Catholic pro-lifers are currently doing regarding abortion policy in the United States—educating public opinion and sponsoring programs which offer alternatives to abortion for involuntarily pregnant women. This is not to minimize basic differences between Catholics and feminists concerning the moral status of fetal life and the primacy of women’s autonomy. Rather, it is simply to point out possible areas of agreement and cooperation between these two groups at least with respect to public policies to assist women.

In *Catholicism and Liberalism* 242, 263–64 (R. Bruce Douglass & David Hollenbach eds., Cambridge U. Press 1994).

4. For a similar argument invoking the value of solidarity, which is shared by both Catholic social teaching and the Left, see M. Cathleen Kaveny, *How Views of Law Influence the Pro-Life Movement*:

The fundamental challenge facing the pro-life movement is to help the American people expand beyond rights talk and move toward the virtue of solidarity—solidarity with the unborn, solidarity with others who are vulnerable, solidarity with those upon whom these most vulnerable depend.

34 *Origins* 560, 560 (Feb. 17, 2005).

presumes a view of womanhood that is anti-feminist and defines a woman's value solely in terms of motherhood. So my conclusion is that pro-life progressivism not only makes perfect sense from a secular liberal perspective, but is more true to its core values than at least the extreme pro-choice position.

Does pro-life progressivism make sense from a Catholic perspective? Here the argument is not with secular proponents of choice, but with Catholics who share a pro-life position on abortion but who do not believe that Catholic teaching mandates, supports, or even allows adherence to "progressive" positions on other social issues. This argument about what our faith commands, or over which is the truly Catholic position, is multi-faceted and usually focuses on the meaning of the consistent ethic of life. Some may argue that the ethic is a flawed concept in and of itself. Others may argue that the ethic is valid, but that it has been distorted in its application by political opportunists on the left. Whichever of these starting points is used, however, the critique usually makes the following three points:⁵

- The consistent ethic of life (or a politicized version of the ethic) presumes a false equivalence between the non-negotiable, intrinsic evil of abortion and those other social, political, and economic issues about which persons of faith committed to the value of life may have prudential disagreements. Politically, it allows Catholics, and particularly Catholic politicians, to be "soft" on abortion because of their correct position on the other issues.
- With respect to the issues other than abortion, a wide variety of prudential positions is possible within the consistent ethic of life; such disagreements represent simply arguments over means, not the principle of life. Catholic teaching does not command obedience in this context, except with respect to the intrinsic evil of abortion.
- Linking the non-negotiable issue of abortion to certain economic, political, and social positions is a way of smuggling a secular, statist ideological agenda into religious doctrine, literally "sanctifying" that agenda in an unacceptable way.

I respond to these arguments first by making a basic point: the antithesis between principle (with respect to abortion) and prudence (with respect to everything else) is dramatically overstated. The question of how to deal

5. For a typical critique along these lines, see Michael Pakaluk, *A Cardinal Error: Does the Seamless Garment Make Sense?*, in *The Catholic Church, Morality and Politics*, supra n. 2, at 196. For a summary of the critical reaction to Bernardin's proposal, see Michael W. Cuneo, *Life Battles: The Rise of Catholic Militancy within the American Pro-Life Movement*, in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America* 270, 290–93 (Mary Jo Weaver & R. Scott Appleby eds., Ind. U. Press 1995) ("To many [pro-life] activists, it seemed that the Cardinal was merely beating a strategic retreat from the anti-abortion position."). For a broader spectrum of views on the consistent ethic of life, see Joseph Cardinal Bernardin et al., *Consistent Ethic of Life* (Thomas G. Feuchtmann ed., Sheed & Ward 1988).

legally and politically with the intrinsic evil of abortion is not just a matter of absolute principle. There are at least some prudential issues to be considered by both citizens and lawmakers as to how the moral evil of abortion is to be handled as a matter of law in a pluralistic democracy. The question of whether and how abortion should be criminalized in a society in which a majority of the people believe that it should be permissible in at least some circumstances is a grave one not capable of easy resolution. Equally grave is the more specific and essentially empirical question of whether overturning *Roe v. Wade*⁶ would in fact lead to criminalization of abortion in every state,⁷ and whether it would reduce the number of abortions at all. To what extent, furthermore, is a position that concentrates on preventing or limiting abortions of a particular type (such as partial-birth abortion), or in as many circumstances as politically or legally possible, more prudent than universal criminalization? Can one not make the prudential determination that the best way to counter the moral evil of abortion is by reducing the number of abortions through transformation of culture and reduction of the economic incentives to abort rather than through a legal rule widely perceived as illegitimate or unenforceable? These questions all suggest that the legal status of abortion is not purely a matter of principle, but also one of prudence.⁸

Conversely, questions of just war, capital punishment, the amelioration of poverty, and other social issues involve the principle of life in such a way that not all disagreements can be dismissed as merely prudential disagreements or arguments about means. Catholic or Christian values with respect to these problems are not infinitely elastic. Clearly, neither the Gospel nor Catholic social teaching provides exact prescriptions for resolving specific problems of tax policy, international trade, or labor relations, and certainly the institutional Church defers to the judgment of the laity with respect to those questions. But there is a set of core values rooted in the Gospel that tilts the scales toward a view of these questions that cannot be easily assimilated into the capitalist world view or neo-conservative economic ideology.⁹

6. 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

7. The likely outcomes of a reversal of *Roe* are decidedly mixed. According to the Center for Reproductive Rights, twenty-one states are likely to ban abortion and nine states might, but twenty will not. Center for Reproductive Rights, *What If Roe Fell? The State-by-State Consequences of Overturning Roe v. Wade*, http://www.reproductiverights.org/pdf/bo_whatifroefell.pdf (Sept. 2004).

8. For an excellent articulation of this way of thinking about abortion, see John Langan: [T]he crucial mistake is the acceptance of a right to abortion. This makes abortion itself either indifferent or morally positive. The essential Catholic affirmation is that abortion is an evil. Whether it is an evil to be forbidden by law or to be discouraged by persuasion is a matter where Catholics, whether they be politicians or citizens, theologians or bishops, may well differ.

John Langan, Speech, *Conscience and Controversy: Twelve Observations about Abortion and Politics 7* (Washington, D.C., Sept. 16, 2004) (available at <http://www.avemarialaw.edu/news/Events/conferences/abortion2.pdf>).

9. For a repudiation of the argument that in *Centesimus Annus* Pope John Paul II was converted in that direction, see Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching: 1891-Present* 206–09

Indeed, those who would dismiss those aspects of Catholic social teaching that contemplate the possibility of state action for the common good, or to achieve greater solidarity with the poor, or to support subsidiary institutions threatened by unrestrained capitalism, may themselves be inspired more by secular libertarian ideology than the Gospel.¹⁰ Similarly, rejection of the Church's critiques of capital punishment and unjust wars may be more expressive of secular conservative or nationalist ideology than of religious conviction.

The "false equivalence" critique of the consistent ethic of life (or its application) thus itself rests on falsity—the false antithesis of principle and prudence, and the false claim of secular ideological distortion. More important, the critique leaves uncontested the core assumption of the consistent ethic of life: that the Catholic Christian value of life must be primary when we think about how abortion, capital punishment, war, and poverty threaten human dignity. To be sure, the balance of principle and prudence works itself out differently with respect to each of those issues and in the different contexts or situations in which those issues arise. But respect for life is a heavy thumb on the scales for all of them, and not for some more than others. That heavy thumb does not allow disregard for the value of life even when the potential victim is a repulsive murderer or a threatening enemy rather than the innocent unborn. The ethic of life disrupts all of our careful, technical, prudential calculations of economic policy by bearing witness to the reality that our calculations can mean life or death for the poor, and by reminding us that we cannot forget them or be indifferent to their fates. That indifference cannot be disguised by claiming that all we have before us is a principled disagreement over the best way to help the poor, resolve an international crisis, or punish the guilty.

Does the consistent ethic of life mean that Catholics must adopt every position on social, economic, and foreign policy propounded by the left wing of the Democratic Party (except on abortion)? Of course not. The interplay of prudence and principle can produce different conclusions on different issues. More important, our starting points are different. The Catholic ethic of life expresses a vision of the common good based on an anthropology very different from the liberal vision of the autonomous bearer of rights. But the consistent ethic of life and liberal politics can

(Georgetown U. Press 2002); David Hollenbach, *The Pope and Capitalism*, America 591 (June 1, 1991).

10. Michael Novak has argued assiduously, however, that the concept of "social justice" usually leads to socialist or "statist" politics or economic policies undermining the freedom of individuals in a way that is inconsistent with the common good as well as with Christian principles. For an example of Novak's criticism of the concept of "social justice" (as it is frequently used in Catholic social teaching), relying primarily on Friedrich Hayek, see Michael Novak, *Defining Social Justice*, First Things 11 (Dec. 2000). For a response to Novak, see Mark A. Sargent, *Competing Visions of the Corporation in Catholic Social Thought*, 1 J. Catholic Soc. Thought 561, 574–81, 588–93 (2004).

converge, albeit from different starting points, on many positions, including opposition to capital punishment, enlistment of the state (especially tax policy) in the struggle against poverty, and the rigorous application of just war policy. That point of convergence may very well be called “pro-life progressivism.”

II. CAN PRO-LIFE PROGRESSIVISM BE IMPORTANT CULTURALLY AND POLITICALLY?

These days, the notion of a convergence of a religious movement and progressive politics seems more absurd than ever. If we define “religion” as conservative evangelicism or Catholicism, and “liberal” as the left wing of the Democratic Party, it is pretty clear that the two do not have a future together, and that pro-life progressivism is not likely to become important culturally or politically. The meanings of “religion” and “liberal,” however, are more complicated than the current political alignment suggests, particularly in their relationship to each other, and that complexity deserves exploration. Once that complexity is understood, we will be able to see that there are possibilities for dialogue and convergence.

A. *The Complex Relationship of Faith and Liberalism*

We should start by acknowledging that the world view of the liberal tradition, including modern rights-based lifestyle liberalism, has usually defined itself *against* the religious world view:¹¹

- Epistemologically, liberalism expresses a principled skepticism about—or even hostility to—the truth claims at the heart of any religion, being more than slightly queasy about such unreasonable and potentially threatening claims;
- Morally, liberalism embodies, or at least tends toward and tolerates a substantial degree of moral relativism, thereby conflicting with religious traditions confident in their ability to define the good;
- Anthropologically, liberalism is built around a highly individualistic, rights-centered conception of the autonomous human person that is in tension with the religious vision of the human person as *created*, as a creature of God, whose freedom exists to serve God;
- Liberalism understands human sexuality primarily within the framework of autonomy and rights, in contrast to the religious world view for which the matter is complicated by the need to reconcile the claims of flesh and spirit, the ethics of non-exploitation and non-instrumentalization of other persons, and the possibilities of sin and transgression;

11. For a useful analysis of liberalism’s adversarial posture toward religion, see Stephen L. Carter, *Liberalism’s Religion Problems*, First Things 21 (Mar. 2002).

- Liberalism would exclude faith-based discourse from the public square, because religious reasons cannot be public reasons.¹²

It is no wonder that for much of its history, liberalism has defined religion (and in particular Catholicism) as its antithesis and enemy. So it is also no wonder that Catholicism has often defined itself against liberalism.¹³ What is more surprising is how often liberalism and religion have *not* functioned as antitheses, but have converged in mass political movements.

American history has several important instances of religious voices providing critical moral and political support for positions or causes usually defined as “liberal”:

- The anti-slavery movement (rooted in evangelical Christianity);
- The civil rights movement (the “Letter from Birmingham Jail”¹⁴ is a profoundly religious document rooted in the Gospel);
- The labor movement (this extends from *Rerum Novarum*¹⁵ to the “labor priests”¹⁶ and beyond; picture Karl Malden being lifted out of the hold of the ship in *On the Waterfront* where he delivered his homily on the “crucifixion” of the longshoreman Kayo Dugan);¹⁷

12. For an excellent critique of this proposition, and citations to the relevant literature affirming that proposition, see Michael J. Perry, *Under God? Religious Faith and Liberal Democracy* 35-52 (Cambridge U. Press 2003). See also Carter, *supra* n. 11, at 27-28 (criticizing the argument that religious citizens “must remake themselves before joining the debate”).

13. For discussion of the origins and development of this tendency, see Peter Steinfels, *The Failed Encounter: The Catholic Church and Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century*, in Douglass & Hollenbach, *supra* n. 3, at 19. This tendency was exacerbated by the rise of the religious right, making liberalism and liberals “implacably hostile to religion.” As E. J. Dionne has put it succinctly:

The greatest victory of the religious right is *not* its success in turning out the vote of religious conservatives. The Christian Right has damaged liberalism by calling forth a liberal reaction against religion’s public role. . . . Confronted with a new religious right from the 1970s on, many liberals were at least as eager to attach the “religious” as to turn back the “right.”

E. J. Dionne, Jr., *Faith Full*, New Republic 12 (Feb. 2005).

14. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter From Birmingham Jail* (The Overbrook Press 1968). For detailed analysis of the religious elements of the civil rights movement, see David Chappell, *Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (U. N.C. Press 2004).

15. Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), reprinted in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (David J. O’Brien & Thomas A. Shannon eds., Orbis Books 1992).

16. On the relationship of the Catholic Church and the labor unions in the United States in the twentieth century, see Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America’s Most Powerful Church* 209-21 (Times Books 1997).

17. Malden’s labor priest tells the longshoremen surrounding Dugan’s body: “Christ is in the shape-up . . . Christ works on a pier . . . Christ goes to a union meeting and sees how few go.” *On The Waterfront* (Columbia 1954) (motion picture).

- The economic policies of the New Deal (recall Monsignor John A. Ryan, “The Right Reverend New Dealer”);¹⁸
- The anti-war movement (remember William Sloan Coffin and the Berrigans);
- The anti-poverty movement (Catholic social teaching was an inspiration to Michael Harrington¹⁹ and many other anti-poverty activists).

In all these instances, a conception of human dignity grounded in the sacred converged with, or at least paralleled the evolving secular liberal tradition of human dignity. This convergence, furthermore, has often been crucial to the success of the political movement, with genuine political change depending on the moral force of religious belief. One can imagine, therefore, a new progressivism animated and energized by the consistent ethic of life. This, however, is easier said than done. Moments of convergence between religion and liberal politics often have been unstable and dependent on the impermanent confluence of other social and political factors such as class interests and racial conflict. Those factors also can explain why the consistent ethic of life has had so little resonance.

Consider, for example, the Catholic/liberal convergence from the 1930s and into the 1960s. The Democrats could count on sizeable majorities of white, ethnic, working class Catholic voters because the economic and social policies of the New Deal and its progeny were consistent with their class interest, with their self-identification with the poor (despite their own social and economic ambitions), their pro-labor orientation, and the communitarian, somewhat anti-capitalist tradition of Catholic social thought.²⁰ Democrats look back wistfully upon that moment when they think about the Catholic vote. But that moment is really gone, for one reason that has little to do with religion and another that has everything to do with it. The first reason was the Republican Party’s enormous success in forging an iron link between race and taxes—i.e., paying high taxes came to mean spending money on undeserving and threatening black people—that began with Richard Nixon and culminated in the reigns of Ronald Reagan and the first President Bush, and tore white ethnic Catholics, now largely middle class or at least lower-middle class, away from the Democratic Party and its tax-and-spend, race-coddling liberals.

18. On Ryan and his legacy, see *Religion and Public Life: The Legacy of Monsignor John A. Ryan* (Robert G. Kennedy et al. eds., U. Press of Am. 2001).

19. Michael Harrington, the author of the influential *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (Penguin Books 1962), eventually left the Catholic Church and became a secular socialist, but his formative time as an activist was as a member of Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker Movement.

20. For discussion of the complexities of this relationship in the first half of the twentieth century, culminating in the New Deal *rapprochement*, see John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* 126-165 (W.W. Norton & Co. 2003).

The second reason, however, has everything to do with religion, or more precisely, religion and sex. While the political battles in the 1950s over contraception, in which the Catholic Church engaged vigorously,²¹ suggested that a potential fissure between liberals and Catholics was growing, the differences between liberals and Catholics about sex were not very threatening to their New Deal convergence on economic issues.²² After the sexual revolution of the 1960s and *Roe v. Wade*,²³ however, the differences over human sexuality, whether it was in the form of abortion, homosexual rights or the pervasive sexual imagery in the media, contributed to a culture war that lingers today, driving a wedge between liberals and the institutional Catholic Church, many Catholics, and most evangelicals. The religious voice in politics thus came to be dominated by conservative religious voices, who co-opted the language of faith, values, and life, and made it appear that there were no other religious voices in politics.²⁴ The Republican Party seized upon and exploited this development, increasingly presenting itself as the only possible home for religious people, and the Democrats played into their hands, at least in presidential politics, by adopting an extreme position on choice that is at least as non-negotiable as the strongest Catholic position against abortion.

B. *The Possibilities of a New Convergence*

It is thus not surprising that religion began to play a diminishing role in liberal/progressive politics. But can that trend be reversed by the development of pro-life progressivism? Here is where we need to think about what we mean by “religion.” A couple of years ago I attended the annual luncheon of the Saint Thomas More Society of Philadelphia,²⁵ a wonderful group of Catholic lawyers on whose board I serve. The speaker was a well-known conservative Catholic public intellectual, who argued, in essence, that the only possible political home for the faithful Catholic was the Republican Party, largely because the Democrats had categorically excluded pro-life voices on abortion. Amid the general assent, a brave priest who spends a lot of time working with the many immigrants and farmworkers in the Philadelphia Archdiocese, raised his hand and asked whether the Republican

21. On the battles over contraception, see McGreevy, *id.* at 157–62, 216–49.

22. See *id.* at 163 (“Until the late 1930s tension between Catholics and liberals on cultural matters seemed manageable.”).

23. 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

24. This co-optation is as much the result of the changing nature of liberalism since the 1960s. As Peter Steinfels has pointed out:

American liberalism has shifted its passion from issues of economic deprivation and concentration of power to issues of gender, sexuality and personal choice. . . . Once trade unionism, regulation of the market and various welfare measures were the litmus tests of secular liberalism. Later, desegregation and racial justice were the litmus tests. Today the litmus test is abortion.

Dionne, Jr., *supra* n. 13, at 13.

25. The Society’s website can be found at <http://www.stmsphl.org>.

Party's positions on poverty, war and peace, and capital punishment also reflected a commitment to life. The speaker sneered dismissively and said, "I don't really buy this Seamless Garment of Life thing. It allows so-called Catholics like Ted Kennedy to say that because he's batting .700 on everything else, he gets a pass on abortion." On the way home I thought of the retort I should have made: "What makes you think that you should get a pass on everything else because you are batting .200 on abortion?" but that has to remain in the category of things I wish I said. What I really wish I had said, however, is that the Republican Party does not have an exclusive claim on "the" Catholic perspective, and that the compelling image of the Seamless Garment provides a Catholic inspiration for a very different political vision than that expressed by the speaker that day in Philadelphia.

This little anecdote demonstrates not only the persistence of the disagreement among Catholics about "false equivalence" within the consistent ethic of life, but also the political dilemma of pro-life progressives. If one takes that ethic seriously, and believes that the ethic compels an approach to social justice issues different from that of the Republican Party, and an approach to abortion different from that of the Democratic Party, one is left without a political home. The dilemma of pro-life liberals is that they cannot stand either with liberals who sneer at pro-life attitudes, or with pro-life conservatives who sneer at their other beliefs. The religious and moral vision that constitutes pro-life progressivism stands in isolation between political forces and attitudes that regard commitments to "life" and to "social justice" as mutually incompatible.

Can pro-life progressivism become less isolated and more important as a cultural and political force? Does it have both the internal energy and external appeal to transform politics on the left? These are fundamental questions that cannot be answered by referring to the Democrats' alleged rediscovery of "values" after the 2004 election, or some potential Democratic presidential candidates' tentative approaches to greater dialogue on the abortion question. Any change at the level of merely political trimming and hedging is likely to be ephemeral and vulnerable to political expediency. It needs to be determined instead whether pro-life progressivism can match the enormous upwelling of religious and political energy generated by the new Great Awakening of evangelicalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Politics and religion have indeed converged in a mass political movement, but one that links neoconservative, nationalistic politics and a fervent form of Protestant Christianity.

This movement, moreover, has not excluded Catholics. Indeed, the Catholic Right in the United States perceives itself as making common cause with evangelicals on questions not just of sexuality—such as abortion and same-sex marriage—but also on broader political and economic issues. Catholics of such convictions regard themselves as sharing in both the polit-

ical force and moral renewal of the new evangelical Great Awakening,²⁶ with traditional theological disagreements put to the side.²⁷ Indeed, we can now talk about an alliance of evangelicals and conservative Catholics whose cultural and political power has secular liberals wringing their hands about the collapse of the separation of church and state and an imminent theocracy in the form of an American “Christian Nation.” A fervent form of politicized religiosity has eclipsed the non-threatening, rationalistic, vaguely liberal churches of the traditional Protestant mainstream, spurring calls for increased privatization of religion and its dismissal from the public square.

Secular liberalism’s panicked insistence that religious voices should be excluded from the public square should not be heeded. It would be wrong as a matter of principle and highly divisive politically to exclude such voices from public discourse and debate.²⁸ Instead, more room should be claimed within the public square for different religious voices, including Catholic and other Christian voices arguing that the Christian vision can encompass a cultural and political world view compatible with liberal democracy, that it can infuse that world view with the fervor of religious commitment, and that a godless culture and polity is not the only alternative to a conservative Christian nation. That kind of fervor could energize progressive politics in a way that has long been missing since the Right managed to make “liberal” a dirty word.

This is not to suggest that a Catholic or other Christian must be a socialist, or that left-wing politics and Christian ethics are entirely congruent. Those on the political left can no more make those claims than those on the political right can wrap the cross in the flag, as they often do. Both attempts at political co-optation of religion ignore the singularity of the faith and its irreducibility to a particular politics. The old argument about whether the Left or the Right is more truly Catholic or Christian is both tired and pointless. The faith is what it is, and it is both different from and more than any political ideology. Faith has an explosiveness that should unsettle the presumptions and practices of any political ideology. Nevertheless, Catholics and other Christians can legitimately find in their faith and in

26. See, for example, the comments of a conservative Catholic activist, William Donahue, president of the Catholic League, who participated in “Justice Sunday: Stop the Filibuster Against People of Faith” (referring to the Democratic Senate filibuster against several judicial nominees), organized by evangelicals on April 24, 2005, and said that he had “more in common ideologically with evangelical Protestants and Orthodox Jews than with fellow Catholics such as Sens. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), who support abortion rights.” Peter Wallsten, *Battle over Benches Spills across Pews*, L.A. Times A10 (Apr. 25, 2005).

27. For an attempt to bridge those theological disagreements among evangelicals and Catholics, see Harold Brown, Charles Colson & Timothy George, *Your Word Is Truth*, First Things 38-42 (Aug.-Sept. 2002); Harold Brown, Charles Colson & Timothy George, *The Call to Holiness*, First Things 23-26 (Mar. 2005) (joint statements of participants in the “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” project).

28. See Perry, *supra* n. 12.

their churches' teachings both inspiration and a theoretical framework for scathing critique of our current political, social, and economic arrangements, and positive action for change that resonates with the Gospel. That critique and agenda for action can encompass both "life" and "social justice," showing that the underlying values are linked and not oppositional, and that a religiously-grounded passion for human dignity can be the key to unlocking the ideological straitjacket that binds our current politics. This new type of progressivism would converge at many points with secular liberal politics, but would not be identical with them, and would perhaps be more satisfying to those many Americans for whom religious language, imagery, and authority are very important.

But is that what people want today? Can the concept and imagery of life bridge the gap between liberalism's preoccupation with autonomy and Catholicism's commitment to solidarity? Can the two anthropologies meet, let alone merge in any meaningful way? They can, if Americans begin to feel more profoundly the disgust that emerged from the 2004 presidential election—disgust with a politics that sought to sever faith from a commitment to social justice. There are hopeful signs. The social justice strain within the evangelical tradition is becoming more visible, creating the possibility of common ground with like-minded Catholics, and broadening the evangelical focus beyond the core issues of abortion and "family values," while preserving a pro-life orientation toward abortion.²⁹ That strain shares all of the fervor of evangelicalism's new Awakening, and it can energize those Catholics for whom the consistent ethic of life is a moral and political touchstone. Pro-life progressivism could become a new type of politics that links rather than divides, and offers an important alternative to the frozen polarities of liberal/secular and conservative/religious. As dissatisfaction with those polarities grows, pro-life progressivism may become not only possible but important.

29. The Reverend Jim Wallis is perhaps the leading exponent of a "liberal" or social justice-oriented evangelicalism, as expressed in his popular book, Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (Harper Collins 2005), a clarion call for a new pro-life progressivism. For a pessimistic discussion of the possibilities of a left or liberal evangelicalism (and of Wallis' efforts in particular), see Michelle Cottle, *Prayer Center*, 232 *New Republic* 21, 21-25 (May 23, 2005); see also Alan Wolfe, *What God Owes Jefferson*, 232 *New Republic* 35 (May 23, 2005) (for a critical review of *God's Politics*, in which Wolfe chastises Wallis for infusing faith into left-wing politics in a way as inappropriate as other evangelicals' infusion of faith into right-wing politics). Wolfe has raised an important question about the appropriate role for religious faith in politics that requires a longer and more complex response than can be provided here.

Wallis is not the only proponent of progressive evangelical politics. See Thomas Bartlett, *Bush Policies Criticized at Evangelical College*, 51 *Chron. Higher Educ. Rep.* 38, A10 (May 27, 2005) (available at <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/i38/38a01005.htm>) (one hundred professors at Calvin College sign letter stating that they "see conflicts between our understanding of what Christians are called to do and many of the policies of your administration").