

# Family, State, and God: Ideologies of the Right-to-Life Movement\*

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*This paper examines the differences between ideologies of elite and mass publics in the case of the abortion issue. It argues that within the Right-to-Life movement there exists two different conceptual frameworks: a "pro-life" framework advocated by the elite, and a "pro-family" framework advocated by the mass. Using ethnographic data from a Catholic Charismatic prayer group it shows that the pro-family framework demonstrates both range and centrality, but in regard to concerns quite different from those of the elite. These characteristics (range and centrality) have been ascribed to only elite publics by Converse and others who argue that coherent belief systems are the property of informed elites. This paper suggests otherwise: that both elites and mass publics have coherent belief systems although their contents may differ.*

In 1973 the United States Supreme Court decisions *Roe vs Wade* and *Doe vs Bolton* were heralded for granting pregnant women control over their bodies by making it their decision whether to carry a baby to term or abort the fetus. While public opinion on abortion has become increasingly liberal over the past fifteen years it has never approximated consensus with the Supreme Court's rulings. As recently as the spring of 1979 polls indicated that less than 25% of the population favors discretionary abortion.<sup>1</sup> The years since the Supreme Court's ruling have seen the development of a large movement to repeal that ruling in the name of the "right-to-life."

This paper is an examination of the ideology of the right-to-life movement with particular reference to its manifestations within the Catholic Church. I will argue the following: (1) Abortion, especially discretionary abortion, is opposed by a large proportion of the population; and it is a mistake to consider the right-to-lifers as a loud but insignificant fringe group. (2) There are really two different conceptual frameworks within the right-to-life movement: one is "pro-life" and ties opposition to abortion to other liberal peace and justice issues – this is promulgated by the elite, the liberal Catholic Press and, to a large extent, by the church hierarchy; the other is "pro-family" and ties opposition of abortion to beliefs about the sanctity of the traditional family – this is subscribed to by the masses of the right-to-life movement. (3) Within the pro-family conceptual framework, the opposition to abortion is a rational position since freedom to abort breaks the connection between sex and procreation, denies the sanctity of motherhood and the authority of the father, and implies that it is the individual and not the family which is the basic social unit.

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<sup>1</sup>The term "discretionary abortion" refers to abortion for the following reasons: when the family can't afford another child, when the woman is single, or when the couple has all of the children that they want (Westoff, Moore, and Ryder 1969:12).

These data are valuable because they increase our understanding of an important contemporary social movement. In addition, they contribute to the discussion of ideology in the social sciences. Philip Converse has argued that ideologies, or as he prefers, "coherent belief systems,"<sup>2</sup> are the property of informed elites. While the masses may venture an opinion if asked, they lack basic information about most political and social issues and are usually incapable of making connections between various ideas and issues, thus a particular opinion on one issue effects little constraint over opinions on other issues. This study suggests a different possibility: in the case of the right-to-life movement both the elite and the mass appear to have a set of tightly clustered beliefs tied to the basic proposition that abortion should be illegal; however, the clusters differ.

Converse (1964:206) presents his basic position in the following statement:

Our focus . . . is upon basic differences in the nature of belief systems held, on the one hand, by elite political actors, and, on the other hand, by masses that appear to be numbered within spheres of influence of those belief systems. It is our thesis that there are important and predictable differences in ideational worlds as we progress downward through such "belief strata" and that these differences while obvious at one level are easily overlooked and not infrequently miscalculated.

One of the most significant differences is that "idea-elements" exercise less and less constraint over one another as one moves from the higher to the lower levels. This is important precisely because constraint is the defining characteristic of a coherent belief system.

Converse (1964:229) offers range and centrality as two other important characteristics of belief systems. As one progresses downwards, any form of organization of individual attitudes into coherent belief systems covering a range of issues is absent. Converse also observed a change in the character of the objects that can be considered central in the belief systems: whereas the central objects of elites are likely to be abstract principles, for the masses the central objects are concrete and familiar. As Converse (1964:213) states, they move towards "the more obviously recognizable social groupings or charismatic leaders and finally to such objects of immediate experience as family, job, and immediate associates." This can be seen in the response of masses to certain issues (in terms of the centrality of visible social groupings in the belief system of the less well informed). Furthermore, given the idiosyncratic and personal nature of its "central objects" he (1964:245-6) postulates that the "mass public" is really not one public but rather is fragmented into a "plethora of issue publics." As a particular issue catches the interest of an individual, he or she becomes more or less informed about it and formulates an opinion. But, Converse argues, it is unlikely that the individual would then relate that to other issues and come to a more global understanding of the political situation.

While this seems to have predicted what political analysts of the 1970's have described as "single issue politics" the analysis of the right-to-life movement indicates that it is not necessarily what occurs. The differences that Converse predicts in the objects of centrality show up: the elite connects the abortion issue to "the right-to-life" and from this abstract

<sup>2</sup>Converse defines a belief system as "a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence." Converse admits some overlap between the terms "ideology" and "belief system" but argues the former has been too "muddied by diverse uses" to be of much use (Converse 1964:207).

principle draws out the logically implied positions on other social issues (for example, capital punishment, and euthanasia, nuclear weapons, and energy). The masses connect the abortion issue to something much more concrete and close to home: the importance of the family, the authority of the father and the divinely ordained sacredness of motherhood. Yet, they too have positions on other issues which they define as being related to their central concerns. Their belief system has range, but it is over a different set of issues than those identified by the elite of the right-to-life movement.

Data taken from the Gallup and NORC opinion polls over the last twenty years show (1) that the proportion of the population that concurs with the Supreme Court decision permitting elective abortion is small; (2) that a majority would, however, permit abortions in some cases, especially during the first trimester; (3) that the trend is towards acceptance of the Supreme Court's position (although the growth of acceptance has slowed in recent years) and can probably be explained by general liberalizing factors, primarily increasing levels of education in the population at large; and (4) that a somewhat smaller counter-trend can be seen among those who select circumstances under which abortion is permissible rather than accepting abortion under any circumstances. They are likely to cite fewer acceptable circumstances than they did previously (See Blake, 1971 and 1977, Gallup, and Stinchcombe).

In this last trend one sees the impact of religion. In the surveys the variable most closely associated with those who do not take the all-liberal stand on abortion is religion. Fundamentalist religion and Catholicism offer a different ideology. (The data show that those who are both educated and committed to fundamentalist religion or Catholicism are caught in between two competing ideologies: the liberal one promoted by their education and the fundamentalist one promoted by their religion.)

The strength of the religious influence is at least partly due to its explicitness. Stinchcombe (1976:18-19) speculates:

Education institutions . . . may explicitly teach reasoning and provide a hospitable climate for liberal opinions to grow, but much more rarely take an official position on the abortion question . . . And while added exposure to such parts of the liberal establishment that education brings does have a liberalizing effect, it does not apparently have as much effect on the *content* of liberal opinions as on the structure within which such opinions are embedded.

Religion, then, affects the attitudes on abortion in two ways. For educated fundamentalists and Catholics, religion offers a competing ideology (to liberalism) so that the process of deriving responses from liberal principles comes into conflict with other principles. Religious institutions also influence attitudes because they take a strong moral position on abortion and then use both their moral authority and their organizational strength to persuade their members to adopt their positions. Because of the impact of religion upon abortion attitudes it seems pertinent to examine these attitudes within the context of a religious institution.

The Catholic Church has long stood on record as being opposed to abortion. The official church has expended considerable effort and money in the recent campaign against legalized abortion and, while not all Catholics support the official position, there is considerable support for it. More Catholics show support for the official position on abortion than they show for the official positions on birth control, clerical celibacy, or remarriage

within the church by divorced Catholics (see Fiedler and Pomerleau, 1978:94–95). In this section of the paper I will first present the official position and then examine the treatment given to the abortion issue within a particular segment of the Catholic population. My data are from the Precious Blood Prayer Group which I have been observing for 3 years. This is a charismatic prayer community. PBPG is large, with 400 plus members. It meets in an affluent suburban parish, but it draws its members from 44 different towns in the area stretching south of a large midwestern city. The group is incorporated according to state law and is administered by a board of 12 lay members under the spiritual leadership of a priest assigned to a nearby retreat center. Membership encompasses a wide range of ages and occupational and educational backgrounds typical of the current Catholic population. Almost all are white and nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  are female. (Leaders tend to be professionals—the President, Vice President and Treasurer during the last 4 years have all been lawyers—and thus leadership tends to be male). The most important activity of the group is a weekly prayer meeting which lasts 3 hours and consists of celebration of Mass, a teaching, and a testimonial style prayer meeting, followed by fellowship in the parish hall.

This group is a part of the Charismatic Renewal movement and represents a particular segment of the Catholic population. I do not argue that it is representative of Catholics as a whole. I do argue that an understanding of the way this group responds to the official position is relevant because it allows a comparison of the conceptual frameworks within which opposition to abortion is placed.

In order to compare the framework within which the “masses” place abortion with the “elite” framework provided by convinced and informed members of the official hierarchy, it is necessary to start with a group that agrees with official opposition to abortion. PBPG is unanimous in its opposition to abortion, and although its members may deviate, in terms of certain religious practices, from other Catholics who oppose abortion, I suggest that the framework within which they place abortion is very similar to that of other Catholic right-to-lifers. (Data from the study by Fiedler and Pomerleau supports this). Although they do wear the red rose pin that is the insignia of the national right-to-life movement on their name tags, there are no direct ties between the charismatic movement and the right-to-life movement. Still, it is interesting to see what part abortion attitudes play (among people who are opposed to abortion) in a context that is not explicitly dedicated to the pro-life issue. In a sense, it is an indication of the centrality of the pro-life position in these people’s lives since the situation being reported is neither a survey in which an individual might give an opinion even though he or she doesn’t really have one, nor a study of a pro-life group in which one assumes that the issue is automatically in the agenda. What I am calling the “mass” conceptual framework, then, is one which emerges out of an observation of the abortion issue as it is presented in the on-going life of the prayer group.

The official position is presented most forcefully in the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities which was adopted by the National Council of Bishops in 1975. This meant that not only did the Catholic Church intend to employ moral suasion in the battle against abortion, but the Pastoral Plan offered, in addition, a consistent and highly coordinated means of deploying the considerable financial and organizational resources of the church in the battle against abortion.

The name “pro-life” is an indication of the initial success of the anti-abortionists in asserting their own definition of the situation and putting the pro-abortion forces on the de-

fensive. As a rhetorical device, the substitution of the label “pro-life” for the label “anti-abortion” has been effective: While it might be difficult for people to come to any kind of consensus about abortion, most people are pro-life. Whereas “anti-abortion” may sound like a conservative fringe group, the pro-life rhetoric makes the demand for an amendment prohibiting abortion one of a number of social justice issues that have been of concern to liberal and even radical Catholics over the past 15 years. For example, articles in *AMERICA* (a weekly news magazine published by the Jesuits), have compared the principle behind the pro-life movement to that of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, arguing that it is a case where the women’s movement has “come out against itself.” A recent article by Francis Meehan (1980) goes even further, using liberation theology to condemn abortion as an individual solution imposed by the technological imperative which has become the dominant idea of American culture.

The pro-life rhetoric provides a framework within which the “conservative” position on abortion can be seen as logically consistent with the “liberal” position on civil rights or the Viet Nam war. *RESPECT LIFE!* (the handbook designed to disseminate the pastoral plan among the public) fully embraces this rhetoric. It is addressed to all parishes, organizations and activities within the Catholic Church in the United States. It cites Pope John XXIII’s famous encyclical *PEACE ON EARTH* and it argues that justice and Christianity cannot be separated. Achieving a just social order involves: (1) establishing a system of justice which insures protection for fundamental human rights—primarily the right-to-life; and (2) establishing a social order in which all human beings are assured an equitable share of the necessities of life and equal opportunity to enjoy the cultural, material, and spiritual resources of the human family (Bishops Committee for Pro-Life Activities, 1976:46).

The program which is outlined in *RESPECT LIFE!* defines three “prongs” of the attack on abortion. The “first prong” mobilizes a sophisticated effort to inform the public that abortion is morally wrong, that the fetus is undeniably a human life, and that society suffers from the destruction of the unborn. The text offers cogent theological and philosophical arguments but most effective are the pictures of fetal development (at 49 days, the text suggests, the fetus has: “human hands, eyes, ears, nose, lips, and even milk-teeth buds” from *RESPECT LIFE!*, 1976:13), the soft focus photographs of radiantly pregnant women, beautiful babies, happy families, and the much used poster of the beaming grandmother holding her new-born grandchild. The pictures evoke an emotional level response that is hard to rebut in any medium.

The “second prong” of the Pastoral Plan is a service program that aims to provide women with alternatives to abortion. Specifically the plan suggests that the following be provided: educational materials promoting pro-life choices among pregnant women; nutritional information and care for mothers and their children throughout the first year of life; research on maternal diseases and fetal abnormality; genetic counseling and neonatal intensive care facilities; adoption and foster care facilities; pregnancy counseling centers; and special understanding and support for rape victims and unwed mothers (See *RESPECT LIFE!* 1976:27–30). Some of the services are provided in some areas by Catholic Charities and a few right-to-life groups established counseling centers for pregnant women. This second part of the Bishops’ plan, however, is the most difficult to implement and has seen the least emphasis.

The “third prong” of the Pastoral Plan proposes political action to insure protection of

the right-to-life. The Pastoral Plan describes this “right-to-life” broadly, connecting it with the establishment of a just social order. It emphasizes the need to insure that everyone has an equitable share in society’s resources and includes promotion of a program for income maintenance and welfare reform, and in general supports families and children both within and outside the political arena. The focus narrows, however, when it comes to the program suggestions that follow the discussion of the political responsibilities of the Catholic Church and the Catholic citizen in promoting social justice; what is discussed here is the effort to pass a constitutional amendment protecting the unborn.

The Pastoral Plan invokes theological, social and biological arguments and puts them in a slick, effective package that coordinates educational efforts with a social service program and a political campaign for the pro-life amendment. It places a central issue—abortion—within a coherent framework and it connects that issue with a range of other issues. It shows how these related issues derive from certain principles, and then backs up the whole package with the traditional moral authority of the Catholic Church. An understanding of the extent to which this has been internalized and acted upon by the Catholic population provides a base for reflection on Converse’s theory of belief systems in mass publics.

The theology of the Precious Blood Prayer Group is strongly Biblically based (the Bible is the only written source allowed in prayer meetings). The theological justification for opposition to abortion begins with Bible quotes which refer to God forming each individual in the womb and to God calling each individual by name in the womb. Abortion is seen as interfering with God’s plan, and as such is morally wrong. The Bible citations are used to substantiate the assumptions that life begins at conception, that God’s creation of an individual human life begins then, and that abortion is taking a life,—or as my informants are more likely to say, abortion is murder.

A more contemporary understanding of the opposition to abortion can be found in a teaching given by the leader of the Pro-life Ministry. He used “ADAPT” as an acronym for the evils of the modern world: Adultery, Divorce, Abortion, Pornography, and Television. His point was that the modern world pushes people to “adapt” by backing away from traditional moral positions on family and sexuality and accepting these evils. Adultery, divorce and pornography got the least mention; abortion and television (which offended by flaunting sexuality, especially during prime time when children would be watching) were the chief villains. This teaching emphasized two things: (1) a traditional morality, and (2) a defensive perception that it is “us against the world.” The two are related. In traditional moral terms, adultery, divorce, abortion and pornography are clearly wrong; in religious language they are sins. In the Catholic context, divorce (or rather re-marriage after divorce) and abortion have been used as grounds for excommunication, even in modern America, and that makes them very serious sins indeed. Traditional morality legitimates and buttresses the patriarchal family. A society which condones adultery, divorce, pornography, and abortion, and promotes them in the mass media is perceived as attacking the family. There is no room for adaptation to such a society: PBPG provides a base that can be defended and from which the larger (evil) society can be resisted.

However, such resistance is seen not just as a religious duty, but as a patriotic duty as well. A fourth of July meeting began with a monologue with one of the leaders saying that the greatness of this country could be accredited to its having been founded by Christians, and that the best way to serve the country is to pray for it. He explained that the prayers

are being heard: all one has to do is look around and see the sin and corruption all over – the only thing holding back the wrath of God is the intercessory prayer of Christians. He spoke about the duty to pray in general terms, but he also applied it to the abortion issue. He had read that the United States has the most liberal abortion policy of all Western nations, and yet it thinks of itself as a defender of human rights. Germany, on the other hand, is viewed as an oppressor of human rights, yet it has the most stringent abortion law. He said he knew no murderer could get into heaven, and he asked people to pray for pregnant women, so that they would see clearly their duty to preserve human life. But even more than that he urged people to pray for the country because he knows that if the nation continues to show such disrespect for human life, the country will be destroyed.

Members of the prayer group, then, support the church's position on abortion. They believe abortion to be morally wrong and are willing to sign petitions, send letters, give money (both individually and as a group) and offer prayers as ways of actively participating in the pro-life campaign. They tend to be as repulsed by some of the more militant tactics—like vandalizing clinics or dumping aborted fetuses on tables in front of those who support abortion—as “liberals” are. A few have participated in marches or demonstrations, a few have spoken out against abortion at meetings or on radio shows, but not many.

The opposition to abortion is present, and it is genuine, but at the local level it appears that the packaging is different from the pro-life stand of the Pastoral Plan. While these people do see opposition to abortion as part of their responsibility as citizens, they don't connect it with the other social justice issues (i.e., opposition to euthanasia, capital punishment, war, or racism) that are presented there as part of a broad “pro-life” stance. I never heard any of these issues mentioned during meetings, and none have ministries organized around them. Moreover, questioning people about these issues in interviews yields mixed results based on idiosyncratic factors rather than a general perception that such issues are all connected to an encompassing pro-life position.

Even if the anti-abortionists in the prayer group do not take the social justice rhetoric of the Bishop's committee seriously, they do connect opposition to abortion with other social issues. These are integrated into a coherent (if not always explicit) framework that can perhaps be best described as “pro-family.” This is hardly anything new, nor is it unique to the Charismatic Catholics. Concern with the family as a unit is certainly present within the Pastoral Plan but there the Pro-Family theme is subordinate to the social justice theme, whereas among the members of PBPG it is the strong sense that the family is the basic unit of the society (and a value system defined by the needs of the traditional family) that nourishes the opposition to abortion.

These people view the world in hierarchical terms. They recognize the authority of the pope, bishops, and priests within the church, and expect that, within their families, wives will follow the scriptural injunction and be in submission to their husbands. But authority is seen as a responsibility as well as a right, and individuals, both those in authority and those in submission to authority, are to serve the larger social units of family, church, and state. An explicit connection is drawn between submission to authority and opposition to abortion. As one prayer group member stated:

If the bishop said that (forbade meetings of Catholic Charismatics in the diocese) you have to abide by the bishop. And frankly, you have to abide by the pope too. I think that is a real thing

here, so many people getting away from the pope. And, these priests talking about getting married, and all of this junk. You have got to listen to the pope. And the abortion thing—you hear priests talking about it. You can't do it. It is the rule of the church.

As one might expect, along with their opposition to abortion, these people tend to oppose such order threatening practices as extra- and pre-marital sex, ordination of women and discontinuation of capital punishment. However, the pro-family stance is also manifested in positive ways. People express their concern for families, for example, through the prayer requests that are a part of every service: "Lord Jesus, help my son find a good Christian girl to marry;" "Help my daughter have a safe delivery;" "Help my husband with his alcoholism;" "Give my patience with my children." These requests and later testimonials about physical and spiritual healings also give witness to the primacy of family ties. Baptisms are occasions for celebrating in a public ceremony, the connection of the family to the community (in this case to PBPG) and also to the whole "Body of Christ," as in a very different way, are funerals. This connection is affirmed in every meeting, and is believed to be threatened by the legalization of discretionary abortion.

Members of the prayer group, then, agree with the church's official stand against abortion. Yet they place the abortion issue in a context which is quite different than that offered by the Bishops' committee through its Pastoral Plan and RESPECT LIFE! publications: the anti-abortion stand of the PBPG is rooted less in liberal concerns about peace and justice than in traditional familial values. The availability of abortion, then, is perceived as threatening, not only to the unborn, but to the family as social unit (under the headship of the Christian father), and also to the nation.

The pro-family framework embodies central ideas about the family as the basic unit of the society and about the authority structure of that society and ties together a range of issues—opposition to abortion, opposition to extra-marital sex, opposition to pornography (especially sex on television), opposition to the ordination of women, and support for capital punishment. These issues demonstrate considerable constraint upon one another (Converse, 1964:212); that is, in interviews and in casual conversations people show that they know that these issues go together and that they know why they go together. This is not to say that the pro-family framework is logically consistent in any strict sense, but rather to say that ideology is a package deal (as opposed to an isolated opinion) and that my informants display awareness of the whole package. This is in contrast to Converse's formulations about the naive belief systems in mass publics.

What, then, does an understanding of this conceptual framework tell us? First, it tells us something about the opposition to abortion. Abortion is seen as threatening family solidarity and family values. It invokes strong feelings because of the "innocence" of the fetus, and the assumption that the fetus is an independent, living being from conception onward and should be accorded human rights. It also evokes strong feelings because it can be seen as evidence of sexual activity (especially among single women since three-quarters of all abortions are for single women). Abortion, which makes having babies a matter of choice, is seen as good or bad depending to some extent on one's place in the society, what one values, and where one gets one's satisfactions. Making the having of babies a choice is antithetical to the pro-lifers because it undermines their sense of the God-given, natural order of things, denies the authority of male headship, and promotes individualism. From this, it should be obvious that "pro-choice" rhetoric on the other side is designed to put



these people off. If those working for legal abortion want to talk to the opposition at all, they need to develop a pro-family line.

An understanding of the nature of the opposition to abortion also tells us something about ideologies. The conceptual framework of what I have referred to here as “the elite” resembles Converse’s description: they begin with an abstract principle about a certain “right” – the right to life, and appear to logically deduce the implied positions on a number of social issues, one of which is abortion. While I am not sure about the cognitive process behind it, the argument is presented in a form that is recognizable in Converse’s terms: the ideas within the belief system exercise constraint over one another, the central object is an abstract principle and the belief system as a whole demonstrates range. The “mass public” also opposes abortion, but it has a different conceptual framework: the opposition to abortion is deduced from a different principle (perhaps a less abstract one) and is associated with other issues. Their belief system also demonstrates range and centrality.

Both conceptual frameworks, or ideologies, then, form coherent wholes, at least in the minds of their adherents. In both cases, however, to an outsider the content might seem somewhat arbitrary. This is not withstanding the abstract principles from which arguments are deduced in either case. Students of public opinion might be surprised to find right-to-lifers who are also very active in the antinuke movements, as one does among the elite public (see Meehan, 1980). In addition, one might be surprised to find that there is relatively little opposition within PBPG to homosexuality or the ERA, although such opposition could easily be justified in terms of the pro-family rhetoric of the group.

Both homosexuality and equal rights have been attacked by fundamentalist protestant groups on the basis of a similar concern with protecting the family and traditional morality from the incursions of modern society. Neither of these issues receive much attention within the prayer group. While abortion comes up at nearly every meeting, is regularly denounced and the babies, mothers, and medical personnel are regularly prayed for, homosexuals are simply not mentioned. While all demonstrations surrounding abortion are reported, elections closely monitored and petition drives regularly mounted, there are no parallel efforts to mobilize opinion against the ERA. My suspicion is that this points to the importance of social networks for group formation and the development of ideologies. Surely it is not inconsequential that the groups with which I have been concerned in this paper are Catholic groups, and whereas the church has taken a very strong stand against abortion, the National Council of Bishops has not taken a stand on the ERA or on homosexuality. In interviews individuals display considerable ambivalence on these issues, but the prayer group as a whole does not concern itself with them, either way. Neither issue has been incorporated into the ideology of the prayer groups.

Converse’s notion of ideology, then, is useful in alerting us to the importance of range and centrality: an attitude by itself is not ideology unless it is tied into a package with other attitudes all of which demonstrate some constraint upon one another. This paper indicates, however, that the construction of the package is somewhat arbitrary, dependent perhaps upon factors such as what issues are important to relevant others, as well as rational deductions from abstract principles. (I would argue that this is true for both elites and mass public). While opinions are properties of individuals, ideologies are perhaps better considered properties of groups. Understanding an ideology requires some understanding of the group which constructed it. The “mass” and the “elite” public make sense

of the abortion issue in different ways, but we cannot say that one is a coherent conceptual framework and the other is not. The ideas of the mass group are perceived as fitting together; it is necessary, however, to understand the group to understand how they fit together.

What makes the pro-family framework, and hence the right-to-life position, so powerful is that it gives meaning to people who live in a world that they feel is often confusing and chaotic. Clifford Geertz (1973:218–9) argues:

The function of ideology is to make autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render it meaningful, the suasive images by means of which it can be sensibly grasped . . .

. . . It is a loss of orientation that most directly gives rise to ideological activity, an inability, for lack of usable models, to comprehend the universe of civic rights and responsibilities in which one finds oneself located . . .

And so, in modern America we find people idealizing models of “The Family” with an ideology in which one of the key metaphors is “Abortion is Murder.” Like all metaphors, this one works on several levels: at an obvious level it proclaims the belief that life begins at conception and that none but God has the right to terminate that life. On another level it expresses a felt threat to a way of life: if murder is condoned then we are all doomed. These feelings that a valued and known way of life is being threatened are not without basis in social reality. None would deny that the changes accompanying the transition from traditional to modern society have had a strong impact on the family: changes in the relationship of the family to the economy (i.e., separation of familial and economic spheres and more recently, entry of women into the labor force); changes in the social relationships within the family (i.e., growing stress on expressive functions for both men and women); and changes in the ways that people have thought about their social roles. Furthermore, there is some reason for connecting the threats to the way of life to the abortion issue. The demand for “reproductive rights,” especially for contraception and abortion, is in some ways an attempt by women to gain control over their relations in both the spheres of family and work, and as such it requires thinking about their social roles in a new way. This can be “liberating” but it can also be threatening as it suggests that women have a choice. Contraception and abortion violate the notion that motherhood is an inevitable result of sexual intercourse. In trying to explain the widespread opposition to abortion Judith Blake (1971:545) argues:

. . . it is easy to see, for example, that many women and poor people would be “better off” with no children or with fewer children than they have. What is perhaps less apparent is that the norms supporting such reproductive behavior are in line with, and indeed, a part of the many noneconomic goals and interests of most of the population—in particular, a commitment to family roles and rewards. Since the majority of women and less advantaged persons derive most of their lifetime rewards from the family complex and the norms upholding it, and at the same time, experience little that deeply challenges this institutional arrangement, they tend to support it unconditionally. In particular, they appear loathe to admit the legitimacy of laws which would allow individuals the right to “turn off” such a hallowed institution as the family through the simple mechanism of abortion. The legal restriction on abortion (and on many other aspects of sexual behavior as well) carry a message for them—the state’s recognition and support of their life’s work. To most

Americans the potential gain in convenience for a few is not sufficient compensation for the loss of a sense of meaning for many should sexual behavior and reproduction become a matter of legal indifference . . .

Women whose chief career is motherhood (which would include many who are also in the labor force) may be threatened by legalized abortion because motherhood becomes a conscious decision, no longer mandated by a pregnancy that may have been "accidental." For some, this lessens their bargaining power in the sexual exchange where traditionally women have exchanged sexual relations with men for status and material support.<sup>3</sup> The Court's decision on abortion may be threatening to men because, potentially, it cuts them out of the decision-making process and denies their authority. It is threatening to both men and women because it removes some of the legal supports from the family, which may be, for many, a main source of life satisfaction. It may even be more threatening if parenthood is not all that satisfying but, as parents, persons are committed to it. Furthermore, the availability of abortion contradicts the ethic of service to others that Catholicism has traditionally stressed in its definition of women's roles in that it states that the desires of the individual woman could take precedence, and that it is her decision whether or not to carry the baby to term. This too may be threatening.<sup>4</sup>

Bane (1976:3) points out that the worry about the general state of "The Family" is a concern with generational continuity. "People are distressed by trends indicating a decline in family life not because they signal a decline in the quality and richness of adult life, but because they seem to threaten the next generation. If the trends continue will there be a next generation? Will it turn out all right? Will it be able to maintain and perhaps even improve the world?" The concern with generational continuity is probably important to everyone, but it fits well with the emphasis on other-directedness and the evangelism of the religious groups which oppose abortion. Furthermore it is functional for them as a group to stress the "decline of the family" rather than the stability of the family over time. It gives them a reason to band together against an evil world that aims at the destruction of all that is good—the family and even life itself. It gives them an issue around which they stand united and an evil against which they (as a group) can fight.

Geertz (1973:219) claims that it is through the construction of ideologies "that man makes himself for better or worse a political animal." The recent participation of right-to-lifers and others of the "moral majority" in the national political scene is the mobilization of the political potential inherent in any ideology. It is worth noting that the leader of the group I studied defines their activity as political and sees his participation in the prayer group (and its right-to-life activities) as a "patriotic duty." This is the case whether the political action in question is a petition drive or a prayer and fasting retreat.

What is the correct moral choice and what is the correct political choice have often been overlapping questions. Those who connect the right to life with opposition to nuclear war (consistent with what I have labeled here as the elite) are part of a long line of people

<sup>3</sup>See Luker's (1975:114–24) discussion of risk taking in the decision not to contracept.

<sup>4</sup>However, it is hard to say what people who oppose abortion on moral grounds do when confronted with an unwanted pregnancy. The available data is incomplete but it indicates that Catholics do have abortions about in proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole (see Luker, 1975:45; *Newsweek*, 1978).

guided by moral principles, which were articulated for them by a religious tradition, who worked for political issues from civil rights to opposition to the war in Vietnam. Now we have the appearance of a similar application of moral principles to political questions, but this time articulated by a different religious tradition.

To examine a group's ideology is to see the map that its members use to negotiate a problematic social reality. For the pro-family group, the social reality seems particularly uncertain. In this context the pro-family ideology of the right-to-life movement legitimates a way of life. The opposition to abortion is seen as connected to other issues, and the entire cluster provides a system of meaning on cultural, social and psychological levels. It implies certain values as absolute and unchanging in a changing society. It dictates certain political choices and it offers individuals reassurance about their lives and a sense of participating in "something larger than themselves": for these right-to-lifers that "something" includes, in fact binds together, the family, the state, and God.

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