

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN RIGHT ACTIVISM

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For all the opprobrium cast on activists of all ideological stripes, remarkably little is known about how they behave in public forums. Certainly, Christian conservatives have never been systematically observed as they practice public activism. Even some of the most well received works on the subject, such as James Hunter's *Culture Wars* and Kristen Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, do not draw on participant observation or what Richard Fenno famously called "soaking and poking."¹ This chapter sheds empirical light on how Christian activists conduct themselves in public forums largely by observing them in their own element—on city streets, in front of abortion clinics, and other public places. In so doing, I hope to determine whether or not the democratic education discussed in the previous chapter really has political consequences. For example, how faithfully do activists embrace deliberative norms, especially the practice of civility, the pursuit of real dialogue by listening and asking questions, the rejection of theological appeals, and embrace of moral reasoning? Furthermore, do they really regard such norms as Christian and how much influence over rank-and-file activists do movement leaders actually possess?

This chapter focuses exclusively on pro-life activism for both practical and theoretical reasons. As a practical matter, pro-life activism is far easier to observe than other varieties of Christian activism for two reasons. First, the pro-life movement has remained vital and strong while the major multi-purpose Christian Right organizations, such as the Christian Coalition and Concerned Women of America, are now merely organizational shells. In fact, in most states these once large grassroots organizations do not have an organization at all and the Christian

Coalition does not even have an organization in Pat Robertson's home state of Virginia. By way of contrast, the National Right to Life Committee has organizations in every state, many of which are thriving. Second, pro-life activists are also more visible to social scientists as well as ordinary citizens because *Roe v. Wade* has effectively pushed abortion politics from state houses out into the streets. Practical reasons aside, though, pro-life activism is an ideal case because abortion remains the single most contentious moral issue in American politics. As James Hunter argues, "Abortion remains the knottiest moral and political dilemma of the larger culture war, contested now for more than two decades with little hope of a satisfying resolution."² Likewise, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson write that the abortion debate has created disagreement that appears "fundamental and irresolvable."³ Therefore, to the extent that Christian activists in general embrace deliberative norms, we might expect that pro-life advocates are the least successful at doing so.

Of course, the problems of selection bias do not end here since there is simply no way to assure that the pro-life activism I observe is representative of all such activism. However, I have tried to mitigate this problem by examining a broad cross section of pro-life activism, including campus outreaches, sidewalk counseling at abortion clinics, marches, counter demonstrations, and direct action. Significantly, though, these cases actually over sample the radicals. Missing from this study are the far less visible grassroots lobbying efforts of the rather moderate National Right to Life Committee and moral suasion inside crisis pregnancy centers. For all the sampling problems endemic to this kind of social science, then, they actually put my central research questions to a remarkably hard test. That is, even if many Christian activists actually do embrace deliberative norms and regard public belligerency as contrary to their faith, we still might expect them to be particularly scarce in many of the groups I examine. And rather than examining pro-life activism in a particular city or state as is often done, this study looks at activism in a wide variety of social settings. Some of the cases I examine are set in very liberal locations, such as

San Francisco, Boston, and Washington D.C., while others are found in conservative cities, including St. Louis and Denver. In addition to these urban settings, I also observed one case in the relatively small and working-class town of Granite City, Illinois. But like all qualitative research breadth is invariably sacrificed for depth.

There are equally difficult sampling problems out in the field. At a large march or abortion clinic protest, for example, there is no scientific way to sample exchanges between pro-life advocates and other citizens. But I have tried especially hard to carefully record any behavior that is contrary to deliberative norms, such as religious appeals or public belligerency. And, in any case, such activists are hard to ignore because they tend to be more visible and demonstrative than those who practice deliberative norms. Therefore, here, too, incidents of Christian radicalism are over sampled.

Aside from close participant observation, I also draw on 80 personal interviews with pro-life leaders and rank-and-file activists. In most cases, I approached activists after observing them for some time and was then able to acquire a better sense of how they understand their public behavior. Interviews ranged from ten minutes to many hours, depending partly on the willingness of these Christians to share their lives with a perfect stranger. In some cases, as well, I have benefited greatly from other accounts, such as media sources and well over one hundred written reflections by activists themselves.

This chapter organizes pro-life politics along three basic cleavages—deliberative, disjointed, and radical. Deliberative politics is found within campus outreaches where activists are careful to practice civility, avoid theological appeals, and ground their claims in philosophy and science. They are also Socratic in method in the sense that volunteers ask more questions than make philosophical declarations. Such activism is also highly coordinated, professionally organized, and tightly regulated by pro-life leaders. Disjointed politics, on the other hand, mixes a wide variety of civic appeals, including the secular and religious, civil and belligerent. It

includes sidewalk counseling, marches, counter demonstrations and tends to be only very loosely organized at best. In such cases, moreover, the behavior of aggressive activists is very difficult to control and regulate. Finally, radical politics can be found in the broken remnants of the rescue movement. Activists in the rescue movement systematically harass abortion providers in an effort to close abortion clinics. In many respects it is the exact opposite of deliberative politics, except for the fact that it too is highly coordinated and organized.

In all these cases, however, Christianity plays a central role in how activists understand what they are doing. Even deliberative activists on college campuses understand their activism through their Christian faith. In practicing deliberative norms, for example, such activists believe that they are sharing the love of Christ. And, in reflecting God's love, deliberative activists regard their behavior as a soft form of evangelism in addition to an efficacious means of changing minds on the morality of abortion. At the other end of spectrum, the radicals understand their belligerency through a Christian framework as well. For the handful of pro-life activists who practice direct action, true Christian love demands unflinching public condemnation so that the souls of abortion providers might be saved and America might be spared the wrathful hand of God.

I. Deliberative Politics

Pro-life groups, including Justice for All (JFA) and the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform (CBR), have initiated what is easily the most ambitious effort to engage ordinary citizens in deliberative discussions. Combined JFA and CBR have reached well over one million students at more than one hundred different college campuses. In fact, this is a rather conservative estimate since both groups have visited many of these campuses more than once. As discussed in the previous chapter, these organizations set up large displays that feature images of aborted fetuses on college campuses in an effort to provoke discussion and moral sentiments. Activists then man

these displays and initiate deliberative discussions. In doing so they avoid grounding claims in scripture, ask many more questions than express opinions, appeal to public reason, and are remarkably civil even in the face of hostility. Yet, even for these deliberative democrats, pro-life activism is understood through a Christian worldview. Civil behavior, for example, is not merely strategic; it is also a means of expressing the love of Christ. In fact, such civility is embraced with so much devotion partly because these Christian activists cannot evangelize in a traditional sense. That is, precisely because they cannot speak directly about Christ, they are so committed to revealing Him indirectly through their patience and compassion.

The following case study examines a Justice for All outreach at the Auraria campus in downtown Denver, which is home to the University of Denver, the Metropolitan State College, and Denver Community College. During my time there, I sat in on an activist training session, observed over one hundred conversations, conducted interviews, attended a Justice for All staff meeting, and dined with activists and staffers. I also benefited from the acquisition of 88 “volunteer reflections,” which JFA routinely administers to all of its volunteers.⁴ In the reflections, volunteers describe their experiences as an activist at the JFA outreach. What follows, then, is principally a layering of all these sources.

Justice for All

Although there is no vast right wing conspiracy, conservative institutions do show unusual coordination every year at Colorado-area campuses. Once a semester, the Focus on the Family Institute (FFI) in Colorado Springs, where evangelical college students learn how to defend a Christian worldview, provides upwards of one hundred volunteers for a Justice for All outreach. Local area Christian high schools further supplement FFI’s contribution with some of their own student volunteers. Stand to Reason, the Christian apologetic organization discussed at length in Chapter Three, is then contracted to train these volunteers on how to defend a pro-life view

philosophically and scientifically. Housing for these students is even provided by university-area families and local businesses cater lunches free of charge.

I helped Justice For All staffers set up their large, triangular display in the quad of the Auraria campus one icy Denver morning in April. As staffers quietly went about this work, a pro-choice student busily chalked up the surrounding sidewalk with such epithets as “Nazi Scum,” “Hatred of Women 50 Feet Ahead,” and “Taliban.” To my surprise, the JFA activists were remarkably unaffected by this demonstration.⁵ In fact, when I asked one activist what he thought about this kind of hostility he said, “I just pray that God will soften their hearts.”⁶ And once the display had been erected, the staffers formed a circle and collectively offered the same prayer.

This civility and compassion for others carried over into the exhibit itself and in the actions of more than two hundred student volunteers. Rarely did volunteers raise their voices or interrupt others. After the first day in fact some students were laughing with one another even as they disagreed and their conversations wandered well beyond the topic of abortion. The most dramatic gesture of civility came on the second day of the exhibit, however, when several of the JFA volunteers helped pro-choice counter demonstrators as they struggled to erect their large, cumbersome display that featured silhouettes of shapely women and read “Keep Your Laws of Our Bodies” and “We Won’t Go Back.” JFA volunteers also warmly greeted the pro-choice demonstrators as they set up their display each morning.⁷

Reflecting back on the outreach, some student volunteers emphasized the strategic utility of approaching pro-choice students with such civility and compassion. As David explained, “It was very helpful to learn the arguments but more helpful to hear the reiteration to be compassionate. Lives are not saved just because I could out debate anyone.”⁸ Rachel, a less intellectually confident volunteer, found that compassion helped to compensate for her philosophical shortcomings. She reflected: “I was a bit fearful, despite our training, that

extremely intellectual people would just rip me apart. I discovered that if you approach people with a kind, caring, non-argumentative demeanor you are far more likely to make progress with that person.”⁹ Likewise, Lillian observed: “I think that what made the outreach so effective was the willingness of volunteers to talk with students—and the loving way that they did so. It made a world of difference for the students to feel as though they were not being condemned but were being loved and listened to.”¹⁰

Other volunteers believed that JFA’s embrace of civility challenged popular stereotypes of evangelicals, if not abortion opinion. For instance, Mark explained that students expected “to hear from a militant, extremist group.” But quickly “they realize that they are speaking to someone [who] is loving, has a compassionate heart, and speaks convincingly without shouting. They have come with every defense and wall in place, and often leave with their walls broken down.”¹¹ Kimberley likewise noted that because the JFA volunteers really listened and were respectful to pro-choice students, “perhaps their views of pro-lifers, and even Christians [were] changed for the better.”¹² Making a cognate point Amanda reported more succinctly: “Arguing and changing minds without anger or excessive emotion I think made JFA look good.”¹³ Meanwhile, Stephanie thought that perhaps the volunteers’ minds had changed as well. As she put it, “a lot of stereotypes are broken on both sides when there is dialogue.”¹⁴

Most JFA volunteers, however, did not view public civility through a purely strategic lens. In fact, most emphasized that it served as soft form of evangelism, which allowed them to be authentically Christian in a secular arena in which they could not readily appeal to scripture. One of the volunteers, for instance, who helped the pro-choice counter demonstrators set their display up believed that the gesture provided him with an opportunity to “show Christ’s love.”¹⁵ Likewise April found that “the most important aspect of JFA for me was the availability and willingness of the staff and volunteers to listen and invest and love people by those conversations, an active way to exemplify Christ to a lost world.”¹⁶ Echoing April’s sentiments,

Patricia reported: “For me the outreach effectively emphasized the underlying purpose and reason we are on this earth: to bring God’s glory by engaging our culture in a way that Christ himself modeled for us.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, Elaine contrasted the soft evangelism at the JFA exhibit from more direct and traditional varieties: “Whether or not I spoke the name of Jesus did not matter. My entire countenance should have spoken louder than anything else.”¹⁸ Crystal similarly reported that the love and compassion of JFA volunteers were the qualities that distinguished them from secular activists. As she put it, the ultimate end of the outreach was “expressing God’s love. . . . Without that we would be no different than other pro-choice or even some pro-life arguers.”¹⁹ Making an identical point, Audrey observed that “personal attacks are never effective and they simply lower us to using the same tools that the world uses even though God has offered us so much more.”²⁰

Although the students who approached the exhibit often reciprocated the kindness of pro-life activists, such behavior was less common among the counter demonstrators themselves. In fact, when the JFA display was disassembled on the final day of the exhibit, some activists cheered and then chanted “pro-life fascists, get your asses off campus!” Another student activist with the anarchist group Creative Resistance mocked JFA volunteers by yelling: “cult members” are welcome at my parties once the “deprogramming” is over. JFA signs that had been posted some distance from the exhibit in an effort to warn students about the graphic nature of the images were also ripped and destroyed—a repeat of vandalism that had occurred at Baylor and UCLA. Yet another student wrote on JFA’s “free speech board” each morning “Get the fuck of our campus.” But the worst offender was probably Channey who screamed at a few female volunteers and then walked away without giving them an opportunity to respond. At a press conference held by the Feminist Alliance, she then accused JFA volunteers of “shouting” at other students and of even trying to “provoke a violent incidence.” Then Channey added, “fortunately we’ve all kept our cool.”²¹

JFA staff members took this treatment in stride and were accustomed to this kind of response from counter demonstrators. One staff member informed me that a pro-choice group at the University of Missouri worked hard to maintain the prevailing cultural image of pro-life activists by reporting to the student newspaper that JFA staff and volunteers hurled aborted fetuses at students and yelled “you’re going to hell.” Staffers in general, however, reported that pro-choice professors were often the worst offenders. At the University of Colorado at Boulder, for example, a literature professor took his entire class out to see the JFA exhibit and then proceeded to shout invective at staffers while his students snickered in the background.²² Likewise, an instructor at the University of New Mexico yelled at JFA volunteers “You are the American Taliban.”²³ Professors at the University of Texas at Austin also routinely screamed obscenities at JFA staff as well. As one of the offending professors at Austin confessed, “I am incandescent with rage.”²⁴ Most professors, however, keep a low profile when JFA visits and those who are vocal tend to come from the most politicized quarters of the academy, such as English and Women’s Studies departments.

Other pro-choice activists at the Auraria campus, however, were clearly disarmed by the civility of JFA volunteers. For example, Stephanie, a Mennonite from Los Angeles, reported that a lesbian student responded with disbelief at the discovery that she was a Christian conservative. According to Stephanie, she said: “I don’t understand—you’re so nice.”²⁵ Another activist with the student group Feminist Alliance realized that pro-life activists were “regular kids” rather than “monsters with horns.”²⁶ Meanwhile, Michael, a heavily tattooed anarchist and active member of Creative Resistance, claimed he even came to respect some of them, especially those who participated in humanitarian work abroad.²⁷ And Mishka, a lesbian pro-choice activist, found the JFA activists friendly and could muster no enmity toward them.²⁸

When I asked JFA volunteers how they remained civil and gracious even in the face of hostility, they invariably attributed it to God’s grace rather than their own efforts. One dramatic

example was a young student named Mary whose hands were deformed due to a genetic disorder. Mary kept her deformity concealed throughout the exhibit with the long sleeves of her shirt. When a student told her that embryos and fetuses with deformities should be aborted, Mary remained calm. In fact, when Mary provided a full account of the exchange she said that a week ago such a claim would have made her “really angry.” But because she “found grace,” Mary reported that instead she quietly revealed the deformity to the offending student and “changed her heart.”²⁹ Another example was Lisa who ventured over to the pro-choice camp of counter demonstrators “where a man was yelling and proclaiming that pictures were forced upon him” and using “foul language.” Lisa listened to him and remained calm because she wanted to share “Christ’s love” and because she saw someone who was “hurting, who needed the Lord.”³⁰

It is easy to see, moreover, why such volunteers would readily accept Stand to Reason’s instruction to be “ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entering through us,” since it fits so easily with their own sense of God in their lives. Throughout the volunteer testimonies, students described themselves as “vessels” for God’s love, grace, and wisdom—a belief that subdued public fears and frustrations. Elaine, for instance, reported: “In many ways it is a relief because we do not really have to do anything but be willing and the Lord is faithful to do the rest. When I opened myself up to be a vessel, the Lord gave me words, direction, and wisdom.”³¹ Crystal was likewise emboldened by God’s presence despite doubts about her ability to engage others. As she put it, “I trusted though that if I opened my mouth, God would fill it just with what was needed. He is faithful and can glorify Himself, even through the weakest vessels.”³² Similarly, Katherine confessed that she “experienced a weakness that caused me to humbly depend on the power of the Spirit of God.”³³

From the perspective of JFA volunteers, then, their public compassion and civility was not ultimately rooted in strategic calculations, but rather in a supernatural source. As Joy explained, “My only part was in being there, and willing to say what God put in my heart. He

took care of the rest, giving me the wisdom to counter lies, the words to say, and the grace to debate with love.”³⁴ Likewise Elaine attributed her compassion to God’s grace. As she put it, “The Lord was faithful to help control my tongue, frustration, facial expressions, and body language that the person talking to me would feel safe to share their heart on the subject of abortion.”³⁵ Indeed, JFA volunteers further believed that, as vessels for God’s love, it was the Holy Spirit rather than their own efforts that would ultimately change the hearts and minds of pro-choice students. Patricia, for example, made the following observation: “The staff taught us and showed us that . . . we were people talking to people and we needed to remember that God’s love and grace could and would penetrate the hearts and lives we were speaking truth to.”³⁶

On the final day of the JFA exhibit, however, the tolerance (or grace) of at least one staff member, Corrine Cords, was waning. Moments earlier she had been identified as a JFA staff member by a student bustling past who reported into her cell phone: “Oh, no wonder she’s pro-life, she’s a blonde.” Cords then asked Tammy Cook, the director of field operations, if she could cheer when the counter demonstrators marched past with their pro-choice display in tow. Cook responded, “Absolutely not!” and Cords obeyed.³⁷

What is most striking about the JFA exhibit, however, was just how much dialogue it generated. Over the course of three days, thousands of students lingered around the exhibit. And although some simply gazed silently at the images while others passed unaffected, the majority of students stopped and talked to a JFA volunteer or staff member. Some conversations lasted for hours and ultimately spilled into classrooms, university cafes, and the student newspaper. That so many students were drawn into discussions about abortion is partly due to the creativity of JFA’s tactics. For example, a “free speech board” was placed near the exhibit where students are encouraged to express their views. When pro-choice students write their opinion on this board, JFA volunteers are trained to approach them and ask them to explain their views more fully. Therefore, the free speech board is not set up principally as an outlet for

student opinion (although it is), but rather as a catalyst for moral dialogue. Similarly, a polling station is set up where students can vote on whether or not abortion should remain legal. Here, too, the point of poll is to create conversation since volunteers were trained to engage those students who voted on behalf of abortion rights.

On the opening day of the exhibit JFA volunteers were forbidden from talking to other students for the first hour. Instead, they were instructed to observe the more expert JFA staff and their conversations with students. In this way, the training discussed in Chapter Three was really extended into the first hours of the JFA exhibit. Only when students felt comfortable, moreover, were they encouraged to approach others. Some students immediately began talking to other students once the ban was lifted, while others spent as much as half the day watching and learning from JFA staff members.³⁸

The staff members prove to be great examples to the many volunteers huddled around them and clearly outmatched and impressed the undergraduates they talked to. JFA staff member Jeremy Alder, for example, engaged one young student as she busily scribbled something on the free speech board. She responded, “there is no point to talking because we can not change each other’s minds.” Alder replied, “I think you could change my mind if you can demonstrate that the fetus is not a human being.” They then talked for approximately forty-five minutes. Another Auraria student approached Alder and asked “OK, but what about a child that’s going to be born into a family where he’ll be terribly abused?” Alder responded: “I agree that’s a terrible, terrible situation.” And then pointing to an image of the remains of a first trimester abortion asked, “But is that the most humane solution to that problem? Is that the best we can do as a society?” Fellow staff member David France, a soft spoken African American evangelical from Minneapolis, challenged two students’ contention that the fetus must not be valuable because we do not grieve miscarriages in the sense that we mourn the loss of born children. France, like many black pro-life activists, was quick to draw parallels to racial injustice

and asked whether how society feels about a class of people should determine their value.

Later, France engaged two young women who quickly reported that they were pro-choice because “women have a right to control their own bodies.” France then pointed to an image of an aborted fetus and asked “But what about her body?” Clearly disarmed by this query, one of the women responded, “Oh, I see your point.”³⁹

As the volunteers begin engaging students on their own it became clear that they were not nearly as expert as JFA staff despite their extensive training. Consistent with their training, however, volunteers were generally good at asking questions rather than stating their own opinions. They also labored to focus their conversations on ontological questions. One common tactic volunteers used, for example, was to refer pro-choice students to a panel of the JFA exhibit that showed the development of human beings at different levels of gestation (e.g. fertilization, implantation, 4 week embryo, and so on). Volunteers would then ask students at what point human life should be protected and to justify their position. When students offered such answers as when a fetus begins to have a heartbeat, brain activity, or feel pain, volunteers would then ask why these various developmental markers were morally relevant criteria for separating valuable from disposable human life. For most Auraria students, it appeared that this intellectual exercise was altogether new and that most had never thought about the ontology of the fetus before.⁴⁰

JFA volunteers were especially careful to avoid defending their views with Christianity. As one bewildered anarchist and counter demonstrator put it to me, “they seem loath to talk about Jesus.” He further explained that he had tried to raise religion with the JFA volunteers, but they avoided the subject. Mystified, he then asked, “have they been trained?”⁴¹ Making the same observation, a JFA volunteer reported that the handful of untrained pro-life students who spontaneously decided to participate in the campus outreach tended to play “the religious card.”⁴² According to Audrey, one such outside activist who spoke to a student kept “[focusing] on God’s wrath and judgment.” Audrey further reported, “he had no evidence to back up his claims, but

the *gospel*.” However, she was able to steer the student away from this abusive citizen to a quiet bench where she “had a chance to do some damage control.” Reflecting back on the episode, Audrey found that it “premanently reinforced in my mind the need to present the scientific, philosophical arguments for the pro-life cause and to do that completely in love.”⁴³

Throughout the JFA reflections, volunteers consistently expressed enthusiasm for secular arguments. Ashley, for example, reported that “it was great to be equipped with sound and logical explanations and refutations for why abortion is wrong rather than Biblical or emotional reasoning.”⁴⁴ Mathew shared Ashley’s enthusiasm: “I love[d] using reason and logic to prove right and wrong instead of forc[ing] faith and scripture down people’s throats. . . . Many people thanked me, whether they agreed with me or not, for not pushing religion on them.”⁴⁵ Another volunteer named Sarah spoke with a girl who had an abortion but became pro-life after seeing the exhibit. Sarah described the efficacy of JFA’s embrace of public reason this way: “She told us that she supports Justice for All because [it does] not [have a] ‘religious’ approach. She didn’t seem to know that we were Christians. Five of us were talking to her but not none of us said anything about our faith in Christ.”⁴⁶ Yet another volunteer named Valerie shared her support for secular arguments more succinctly: “I really appreciated how we did not use Bible verses to argue, but philosophy.”⁴⁷ Of course, this did not mean that volunteers viewed their embrace of secular philosophy as contrary to Biblical mandates. In fact, some students argued that their avoidance of scripture is in fact grounded in the Bible. Sandy found that the most effective part of the JFA outreach was “sharing and asking questions in love, not arguing but reasoning with them like Paul did for Christ’s sake.”⁴⁸ Michelle even rooted the Socratic method in Christ’s example. As she explained, “I love to present people with questions. Jesus rarely lectured at them.”⁴⁹

Other volunteers shared cognate opinions when they emphasized the virtues of philosophy over sentiment. Michelle, for instance, thought the JFA exhibit was effective

because “an atmosphere was created where it was easy to bring up a controversial topic to engage people’s thinking, not just their emotions.”⁵⁰ A fellow volunteer named Cynthia similarly observed: “The most effective aspect of the outreach is its appeal to the intellect and logical side of the abortion debate.”⁵¹ Meanwhile, Eve elaborated the same point in her JFA reflection: “Many times I was told that the exhibit was factual, logical, and scientifically sound. I feel that was beneficial to the outreach because an appeal [was] not made to emotions or feelings, but to scientific and philosophical principles.”⁵²

JFA volunteers, however, were not excited by their newfound philosophical sophistication simply because they could be more persuasive in the public square. Their training also gave them the public confidence and courage to approach secular students. Therefore, although a deliberative education does temper the passions of some pro-life activists, for many others it emboldens. One such volunteer was Evelyn who reported: “I think the reason I felt the desire [to engage people] was not only God prompting me, but I felt well prepared to speak to the people. I believed that my argument had validity and a scientific basis. I had a *reason* for the people to believe what I was saying.”⁵³ Likewise, Barbara noted in her reflection: “I know now how to answer people and give reasons, proof, and concrete answers [for] why abortion is wrong. I can feel confident that I am equipped enough to speak up and not get shot down immediately. I have something to say besides quoting a Bible verse or simply saying that God values life.”⁵⁴ Echoing the same point, Leah reported: “I really loved just talking to people, knowing my arguments had grounding and could stand criticism. It also helped me to be able to engage, because I wasn’t worried about having my argument fail.”⁵⁵ For others, though, the training helped to direct and temper their moral passions. Joanna, for instance, explained, I “never knew how to effectively argue my position until the training took place. Since I am a very emotional person, knowing the scientific data helped me to be more concrete in my arguments.”⁵⁶

However, JFA volunteers did sometimes raise their faith when conversations moved beyond a philosophical debate about abortion into friendly personal exchanges about life more generally. These conversations tended to last many hours and were sometimes extended into the following day. A couple of JFA volunteers even gifted their new friends with C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, which they purchased from the student bookstore. In other cases, conversations about abortion quickly slid into larger metaphysical debates about natural law and postmodernism. Ashley found, for example, that conversations moved quickly from abortion to larger discussions about "relativism, worldviews, and morality."⁵⁷ Ruth similarly reported that her conversations often drifted from abortion into "a debate over moral relativism and postmodernism."⁵⁸ And Loren had an extended conversation that pivoted around whether or not anything exists external to human beings that confers worth on them.⁵⁹

Not all students, however, were willing to talk to the JFA volunteers. In fact, many Auraria students eschewed conversation, especially the counter demonstrators. Two pro-choice students, for example, walked away from three volunteers in disgust. At that point, one of the JFA volunteers pleaded, "please don't walk away."⁶⁰ I spoke with two pro-choice activists with the Feminist Alliance who refused to talk to any of the JFA volunteers. They set up a booth near the pro-choice display and circulated a petition to have the exhibit removed off campus because it was "obscene" and created "a hostile environment." These feminists also regarded conversation with JFA volunteers as "a waste of time" since they ultimately grounded abortion opinion in "personal experiences." Unlike many of the counter demonstrators who did engage the JFA volunteers, these women retained their negative stereotypes of Christian activists. According to one, they are "preachy" and just "trying to push religion on us."⁶¹ Another counter-demonstrating feminist who was approached by a JFA staff member said that it was a waste of their time to talk since neither would be able to persuade the other. When the staff member responded, "I think you can convince me," the counter demonstrator called him

“brainwashed” and walked away. The reluctance of the pro-choice activists to discuss abortion was further highlighted at a new conference held by the Feminist Alliance. At the press conference, members of Feminist Alliance and a professor called on university officials to remove the JFA exhibit from campus because it was “obscene” and “disruptive to the learning environment.” After a local press member questioned this reasoning, an agitated professor responded, “we are not here to debate.”⁶²

When I asked JFA staff members about this disinterest in dialogue among pro-choice activists, they said that is common but that there have been important exceptions. For instance, David France reported that when JFA visited the University of Minnesota, volunteers and staff members managed to immerse themselves in a large crowd of pro-choice activists. After a short period, this organized counter demonstration disintegrated into small circles of students peacefully sitting together and talking about abortion.⁶³

To be sure, however, such dialogue between activists is rare and the reluctance of the Auraria pro-choice activists to debate their pro-life opponents is actually part of a much broader phenomenon. Pro-life student groups at the University of Texas, University of North Carolina, University of Virginia, and the University of Albany, to name a few examples, complain that pro-choice campus groups will not debate them. As one student from the University of Albany put it when I asked him about the reluctance of pro-choice students to discuss abortion, “we have to beg them.”⁶⁴ Such frustration is fueled by NARAL and Planned Parenthood where elites discourage their campus affiliates from debating or even talking to pro-life students. NARAL’s “Campus Kit for Pro-Choice Organizers,” for example, gives this categorical instruction: “Don’t waste time talking to anti-choice people.”⁶⁵ Meanwhile, Jamia Wilson, the campus organizer at Planned Parenthood, recently informed me that she “discourages direct debate.”⁶⁶ And Scott Klusendorf, the former director of bio-ethics at STR, reports that he rarely succeeds in getting pro-choice advocates to debate him on college campuses. The director of the Pro-Choice Action

Network recently corroborated Klusendorf's account with the following admission: "along with most other pro-choice groups, we do not engage in debates with the anti-choice."⁶⁷

II. Disjointed Politics

To be sure, not all pro-life activism is as deliberative or as well organized as campus outreaches. Much pro-life activism, especially sidewalk counseling, marches, and counter demonstrations, are rather disjointed and loosely organized at best. Partly because of this lack of coordination, the kind of secular messages found in the campus outreaches mix with overtly religious appeals and belligerent activists are often hard to control. What is more, the citizens who participate in this kind of activism, especially sidewalk counseling and counter demonstrations, are drawn from the most committed and zealous wing of the pro-life movement. They are also self mobilized and participate for different reasons—some want to evangelize and be a Christian witness, while others carefully avoid religious appeals in an effort to reach secular citizens. Yet, for all these difficulties, pro-life activists do try and reform belligerent activists with varying degrees of success. And like the volunteers who participate in campus outreaches, many activists attribute their civility even in the face of hostility to their Christian faith.

Sidewalk Counseling

Whereas the campus outreaches grew out of a deep commitment to public reason, sidewalk counseling emerged from the ashes of the most radical wing of the pro-life movement—the rescue movement. But once activists could no longer physically prevent citizens from seeking abortions without incurring huge fines, they found that they had to persuade them instead. Persuasion meant above all that activists had to appeal to the concerns of men and women who sought abortions and to do so in a gentle way. The change from coercive obstruction to soft persuasion is even evident in the term “counseling” itself. Unlike rescuing, which underscores

the physical boldness and bravery that clinic obstruction demands, one who counsels must establish a relationship with others and offer compassion. As a result, the rescue movement, like so much of the pro-life movement, has embraced a woman-centered approach to fighting abortion.

However, sidewalk counselors, like the rescuers of the 1980s and early 1990s, remain among the most committed and radical activists in the pro-life movement. They are, after all, on the “front lines” and they often regard the patient lobbying efforts of the National Right to Life Committee and its annual conferences in luxury hotels as wasted time at best. As sidewalk counselors see it, they are “saving babies” today rather than laboring for the quixotic dream of a Human Life Amendment to the Constitution. It is a fact that is often unappreciated among the media elite and academics that those who are truly invested in overturning *Roe v. Wade* are the moderates, not the radicals. In fact, if many radicals had their way, lobbying efforts and litigation would be abandoned altogether and their fellow pro-lifers would join them in the trenches.

Like the rescuers before them, sidewalk counselors are also often disinterested in careful organizing. This does not mean that sidewalk counseling organizations do not exist or that activists are never formally trained. In most cities, however, sidewalk counseling is only very loosely organized as new activists learn the ropes from more senior counselors. And because no real chain of command exists, those activists who are committed to demonstrating the love of Christ are often left to control wayward and belligerent activists themselves, but enjoy very little authority.

This collective weakness was evident at the Hope Clinic for Women in Granite City, Illinois—an economically depressed and drug infested town just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. I spoke to Nolen, a retired, working class evangelical, who shared some of his concerns and frustrations. Although he said that he tries to approach clients with a “Christian

spirit,” not all activists follow his example. Nolen singled out John in particular as an aggressive and confrontational activist.⁶⁸ Many of Nolen’s fellow activists have tried to encourage John to be more compassionate with the men and women who seek abortions, but they have now given up. This collective resignation is encouraged by the conclusion that John is mentally ill. As one activist put it, “He’s crazy!”⁶⁹ And, indeed, John did not seem well. Glued to the front of his yellow hardhat is a plastic baby that is spotted with red paint. “The sky is falling” is printed along the side of John’s hat and nearly every inch of his pickup truck is covered with pro-life bumper stickers.⁷⁰

Other Christian activists at the Hope Clinic share Nolen’s tactics and concerns. Jessica, who is a soft-spoken working class evangelical, reported that she attempts to be “compassionate,” “kindhearted,” and argued that aggressive behavior does nothing to dissuade clients from entering abortion clinics. In fact, Jessica further speculated that if she sought an abortion and an activist approached her in an aggressive manner, then she would be even more likely to follow through with the procedure because of her “stubbornness.”⁷¹ Likewise, Heather, an evangelical college student, emphasized the importance of Christian love toward women seeking abortions. When I asked her if she thought some activists behave in unchristian ways, she responded emphatically “yes!” Heather especially dislikes it when Christians call other citizens “baby killers” or attempt to frighten them by raising the “judgment” of God. She was also one of many activists who had labored to control John and longed for more coordination with her fellow activists.⁷² Michaela, a very pregnant Charismatic Catholic who has spent much of her adult life in front of abortion clinics, approached clients as they exited their cars and is so soft spoken that I have trouble hearing her some ten feet away. She, too, hates it when Christians accuse women of “baby killing.” According to Michaela, women who seek abortions are “very fragile” and therefore need to be reached out to rather than condemned.⁷³

Unlike hopeless cases such as John's, however, other activists seem to reform themselves. For example, when I spoke with Chuck, a thirty-something Catholic, he confessed that he became "more merciful" after a year of pro-life activism. Chuck explained that activists need to be more "loving" and "tone down their rhetoric." He also said that Christians should care far more for the "broken souls" of those who exit abortion clinics rather than just the unborn life that enters them.⁷⁴ On the other hand, even the most veteran activists can lose their temper. Nolen, for instance, reported that he sometimes lost his temper with unusually confrontational clients, such as one who ripped his Bible from his hands and threw it to the ground. But he also seemed to sincerely regret those instances.⁷⁵

Activists use different methods to get the attention of the young men and women entering Hope Clinic. Many, for example, simply asked "Is it OK if we talk to you for a few minutes?" Other activists shouted, "Please do not go in there, we can help you." Most clients walked past without paying any attention to the sidewalk counselors, while a few were hostile and told the activists to "fuck off!"⁷⁶ But there have also been many success stories, which are recorded by local activists. Angela Michaels, who heads a local sidewalk counseling organization called Small Victories, estimates that there has been over one thousand "saves" since 2000.⁷⁷ It is, to be sure, a small fraction of those who enter Hope Clinic, but enough to sustain the energies of local activists.

When men and women actually stop and talk to the sidewalk counselors, they emphasize that medical services are available and that they should explore all their options before they agree to an abortion. Angela Michaels, for example, placed her arms around one young woman who was having second thoughts and invited her to participate in an ultrasound. Michaels then directed the ambivalent woman to her beat-up van, which has an ultrasound machine installed. After viewing the ultrasound the woman changed her mind and Michaels then directed her to Christian doctors just across the street from Hope Clinic who have agreed to treat without charge

any of the women the sidewalk counselors can divert into their offices.⁷⁸ The process for Michaels appeared very routine.

As clients got closer to the clinic entrance the pleas of activists became more shrill and desperate. Some activists, for example, yelled: “Do you know that your baby can feel pain?” Others made appeals that were explicitly directed toward men, such as “Be a man, care for your woman and her child” and “If he really loved you, he wouldn’t be bringing you to this place.” And, in stark contrast to the campus outreaches, Christian imagery and messages were everywhere. Nolen handed out copies of the New Testament to anyone who would take them. Catholics quietly prayed the rosary, while an evangelical activist held a large flag with a cross on it and yet another sported a hat that simply read “Jesus.” Other activists shouted “Jesus saves,” “God will forgive you,” and “God hates the shedding of innocent blood.”⁷⁹ Meanwhile, John is very subdued and the local activists attribute this fact to medication. As one put it, “he must have taken his meds today.”⁸⁰

Across the Mississippi river, some forty activists gathered at a downtown Planned Parenthood in a blighted neighborhood of St. Louis where many African Americans are accusing clinic staff of “black genocide.” Like many black pro-life activists, they are angered by the fact that abortion clinics are often placed in minority neighborhoods and that African Americans account for some 36 percent of all abortions but represent only 12 percent of the population. Zena, for example, showed up with all twelve of her children, eight of whom are adopted. She continually reported these figures to women entering the clinic. Zena also repeatedly emphasized that Planned Parenthood was founded by Margret Sanger, a “white supremacist” who wanted to “eliminate blacks” through abortion. These arguments, it should be noted, are circulated widely within the pro-life movement and especially well known to black activists.⁸¹ Connie, a working class African American and Salvation Army member agreed. She explained to me that the practice of abortion in America was both “classist” and “racist.”⁸² Meanwhile,

another African-American man named Leonard shouted to black citizens who walked passed the clinic: “Do you know that they are killing black babies in there? Black genocide is taking place!”⁸³

The decibel level has risen at the St. Louis Planned Parenthood, due mostly to the fact that activists are fenced out of the parking lot used by clinic clients. In Granite City sidewalk counselors could quietly approach clients as they exited their cars in an adjacent, public parking lot. But here in St. Louis activists must shout to be heard above the iron fence that separates them from Planned Parenthood’s enclosed parking lot. The result is that the soft-spoken activists who were effective at the Hope Clinic, such as Michaela, cannot be heard at all. Here and elsewhere the very layout of abortion clinics significantly shapes pro-life activism. In fact, one of the great ironies of abortion politics is that the more difficult abortion providers make it for pro-life activists to speak to their clients, the louder and more confrontational sidewalk counselors become.

Although no dialogue is taking place between Christian activists and Planned Parenthood’s clients, African American activists enjoyed some success talking to pedestrians, all of whom were black. The neighborhood residents and local police officers seemed very respectful and listened intently as sidewalk counselors stressed the racist dimensions of the abortion industry. White activists, meanwhile, expressed their gratitude to their black Christian brothers and sisters since they could not have come into an African American neighborhood and commanded the same attention and trust.⁸⁴

These important departures aside, though, the Christian activism at Hope Clinic and Planned Parenthood was equally disjointed and unorganized. While African American activists, for example, expressed rather secular claims of “black genocide,” a small group of Catholics quietly prayed the rosary and a group of evangelicals sung songs with the aid of an acoustic guitar. Meanwhile, an especially passionate black evangelical named David preached to the

Planned Parenthood escorts from the Book of Revelation. The white college students who volunteered as Planned Parenthood escorts were clearly amused and laughed at David's testimony. Below the din of this motley group were activists who gently labored to reach out to the young women seeking abortions.⁸⁵

From abortion clinics in the blighted neighborhoods of Granite City and St. Louis to a Planned Parenthood in the affluent city of Boston, abortion clinic activism appears much the same. Early one July morning a torrential rain pounded the solemn gathering of some sixty activists outside of a Planned Parenthood on Commonwealth Avenue. An elderly activist named Ruth departed from the low-key tactics of other activists by yelling at young women as they entered the clinic, much as John does in Granite City.⁸⁶ When I asked Tony, a retired Catholic, about Ruth's methods, he responded that there was simply little that others could do to control her.⁸⁷ Danny, who is the president of Boston Rock for Life, was much less critical. He shrugged his shoulders and said "different strokes, for different folks." But Danny also said that sidewalk counselors are only successful when they approach others with "compassion" and an "open heart."⁸⁸ Amid the downpour I spoke to Phil, who is a member of Albany Rock for Life. Ruth reminded Phil of a sidewalk counselor from Albany who is similarly belligerent. Phil reported that he and his fellow activists do their best to marginalize this radical by not inviting him to their activities.⁸⁹ I also caught up with the director of Operation Rescue Boston, Bill Cotter. With the demise of the rescue movement, Cotter's organization principally organizes what remains of the sidewalk counseling activity in the Boston area. According to Cotter, Operation Rescue Boston periodically conducts training seminars for local activists. And although seminars emphasize that activists should be "representatives of Christ," Cotter reported that some Christians still misbehave. In these cases, moreover, he has found that one's ability to control activists ultimately depends on one's "personal credibility."⁹⁰

Before the activists disbanded for the day, they gathered together and offered a prayer that was both conciliatory and judgmental for the clinic escorts who were within earshot: “We know that these escorts believe that they are doing the right thing and are good people. But please Lord soften their hearts so that they will turn away from baby killing.” It was prayer that clearly distinguished between the sin (“baby killing”) and the sinner (“good people”).⁹¹

As in Granite City and St. Louis, sidewalk counseling in Boston is greatly affected by the layout of area abortion clinics. This particular Planned Parenthood abuts a busy city street and it is often very difficult for local activists to determine which approaching pedestrians are headed inside. In fact, activists such as Lorraine, a middle-age Catholic, believes that some patients further attempt to evade sidewalk counselors by pretending that they are not Planned Parenthood bound until they dart inside at the last moment.⁹² And, of course, many of those headed inside are not seeking abortions. Unlike clinics such as Hope Clinic, which only perform abortions, Planned Parenthood clinics provide a wide variety of other services. Many Boston activists, therefore, are pleased if they can simply get citizens to take some of their literature and actual conversations are rare. Making matters perhaps more difficult for local activists is the fact that this is Boston and residents are not, in general, very sympathetic to pro-life activists. Unlike the working-class, Bible-belt town of Granite City where activists often enjoyed the vocal support of the surrounding community, here on Commonwealth Avenue I noticed many angry looks from the Bostonians who stroll by.⁹³

Many local sidewalk counselors do their best to pitch their message to Boston citizens. For example, Bill, a retired Catholic, asked women as they approached Planned Parenthood: “Did you know that abortion can cause breast cancer?”⁹⁴ Likewise, a pamphlet that sidewalk counselors attempted to give to Planned Parenthood’s clients reads “Women at Risk . . . Abortion increases the risk of breast cancer by fifty percent.” This is not to suggest that these pro-lifers are only embracing a woman-centered approach for strategic reasons. As Theresa, another retired

Catholic, informed me with much sincerity “the greatest lie is that abortion helps women.”⁹⁵ But in general these pleas fell on deaf ears. And after three mornings in front of Planned Parenthood I noticed only one actual conversation with a sympathetic African American who thanked activists for being there.

From the cold rain showers of Boston to the icy January snow of Washington D.C., hundreds of activists have gathered in front of a downtown Planned Parenthood to sidewalk counsel days before the annual pro-life march. The activists are primarily from Rock for Life and Saving Arrows, which are youth organizations with members who are far hipper than the Catholic retirees who frequent Boston area abortion clinics. Many, are clad in black, grungy, heavily pierced, and look much like the leftist youth found on Berkeley’s Telegraph Avenue asking for spare change. Their political opinions are also more varied, even leftist. For example, some are vegans, opposed to the Iraq War, and against the death penalty.⁹⁶ But all are deeply committed to ending abortion and devout Christians.

I talked at length with Kortney and Laura, both of whom are members of Rock for Life and very active sidewalk counselors in Ashland, North Carolina. They emphasized that they always try to be “loving” and “not condemn” any of the women entering abortion clinics. When I asked them if activists are ever too aggressive or judgmental, Kortney informed me that such activists are “regulated” by the leaders of Life Advocate, the local sidewalk counseling group in Ashland. By “regulated” she meant that all new activists are instructed in sidewalk counseling protocols and tactics. But she also conceded that such organization is unusual and that in fact in Charlotte, NC, she was aware of “one or two” belligerent activists who compromise the pro-life mission and image.⁹⁷ It is a dynamic that appears very commonplace.

The pro-choice escorts showed up in force. Some thirty escorts lined the clinic and as many as five or six surrounded patients who approach the clinics doors. In addition, chain link barricades were erected the night before, which push the pro-life activists even further onto the

street. The result is that the entire outreach became less of a sidewalk counseling outreach and more of a prayer vigil. It also took on a decidedly Catholic character as mostly female college students prayed the rosary. Many kneeled down on the icy sidewalk to pray as the escorts shuttled Planned Parenthood's clients indoors. They also softly sung hymns such as Amazing Grace and This Little Light of Mine. Such displays invited wry smiles from the escorts, but no words except for an occasional "keep the street clear!" As with all escorts at Planned Parenthood they have been instructed not to speak to the pro-lifers. Across the street, pro-life activists gathered in prayer before they departed on a vigil to the Supreme Court. One activist prayed that the womb would become "a sanctuary again" and another asked the Holy Spirit to bring "a revival" in the hearts and minds of Americans so that they might see the injustice of abortion.⁹⁸

Marches and Counter Demonstrations

Pro-life marches and counter demonstrations are unusual political phenomena. Unlike other varieties of pro-life activism, the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C. is not principally intended to change the hearts and minds of the American public. Instead, the march helps to sustain the difficult and sometimes dispiriting work of activism at colleges and abortion clinics by lifting the morale of pro-life activists. It is a chance for activists to network, feel their own strength, and be reminded that they are part of a national movement. Counter demonstrations, on the other hand, are an entirely different political animal. They are, in their very nature, confrontational. Partly for this reason, they attract a far smaller number of activists than the annual march. And because counter demonstrations clash with demonstrating activists, they represent some of the best evidence for the culture-war thesis.

The thirty-second annual March for Life began as it always does at the Ellipse with a host of speakers. Since Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 every Republican president has addressed the annual march from a safe distance and this year is no exception. From Camp

David George W. Bush addressed some one hundred thousand activists with a speech that was largely secular in message and even hit some leftist notes. The president advocated a “culture that will protect the most innocent among us and the voiceless” and one in which there is “compassion for women and their unborn babies.” And although Bush did highlight some of his administration’s legislative successes, such as a partial-birth abortion ban, he also stressed that abortion will not end through legislative means. Instead, Bush declared, “We need most of all to change hearts.”⁹⁹ And, indeed, more than three decades after *Roe v. Wade*, the pro-life movement now emphasizes moral suasion over legislative lobbying or legal action. In fact, even the partial-birth abortion ban highlighted by Bush was really conceived as a means of fostering pro-life sentiment in the larger public. After all, banning a particular procedure, even if accepted by the courts, will not have the slightest effect on America’s abortion rate.¹⁰⁰

The march down Constitution Avenue itself was relatively calm and quiet. When chants did occasionally break out among a small number of marches, they would die just as quickly. One such chant went: “What do we want? Babies! How do we want them? Alive!” There is, after all, very little to celebrate for these activists. The temperature is well below freezing, *Roe v. Wade* has survived yet another year, and as they see it well over a million human beings are now dead as a result.¹⁰¹ The march had almost nothing in common with the celebratory, almost carnival like atmosphere of the March for Women’s Lives the previous spring.¹⁰²

Nor was there any organized counter protest to raise the collective energy of the marchers, although there were one or two lone pro-choice activists along Constitution Avenue. What seemed to excite pro-life activists more was one woman seated at a bench who held a sign that read “35 percent of abortionists are Jews.” Activists continually broke from the march to speak to her, some calmly, others with more heated words. The episode was a reminder of how difficult it is to control the worst and most extreme elements of the pro-life movement. Further down Constitution Avenue another extremist antagonized the marchers who parade by with a

violent appeal. He held a large sign that highlighted the single most important scriptural passage to the violent fringe: “However sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed.”¹⁰³ Yet, the fact that these activists are found outside the march itself is symbolic of their marginalization from the pro-life movement.

Christian messages are everywhere, particularly Catholic and Orthodox ones. Groups of students, for example, held banners that displayed the name of their Catholic high school or local parish. A large papier-mâché of the Virgin Mary was hoisted above the shoulders of several men and many other Catholics prayed to Mary: “Hail Mary, full of grace, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” Another group of activists carried three giant wooden crosses, representing Christ’s crucifixion on Calvary. Eastern Orthodox Christians meanwhile carried icons of Mary, Christ, and various Saints. And two teenagers just behind me are talking about Augustine’s theology.¹⁰⁴

Mixed with these religious appeals are more secular, even woman-centered messages. For example, many marchers have Feminists for Life signs that read “Women Deserve Better than Abortion” and “No More Children Die, No More Women Cry,” while other women held signs that say “I Regret My Abortion.” Other secular appeals include the ubiquitous Rock for Life and Knights of Columbus signs that read “Face It, Abortion Kills!” and “Defend Life” respectively.¹⁰⁵ Bubba Garret, an activist with the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform, expressed his disappointment with how fractured the annual pro-life marches are. Before his first march Garret imagined that everyone would say the same chants and songs, not unlike the civil rights marches. What he found instead was small pockets of groups marching to their own beat—a fact that he regarded as symbolic of the larger disunity of the pro-life movement as a whole.¹⁰⁶ Or as Scott Klusendorf, the director of the newly launched Life Training Institute, once responded more generally to the charge of a vast right-wing conspiracy: “I only wish it were true.”¹⁰⁷

However, not all pro-life marches are as disjointed or emphasize religious appeals and themes to the extent that the Washington march does. In San Francisco that same weekend a smaller pro-life march of some 6,000 activists assembled to mourn 32 years of *Roe v. Wade* and it was decidedly more woman centered. The main speaker at the Walk for Life West Coast is Sally Winn, the vice-president of Feminists for Life. In her speech, Winn expressed the core conviction of Feminists for Life: “Pro-life feminists demand that society support the unique life-giving capacity of women so that no woman feels that she has no choice other than abortion.” Winn added, “Abortion is not the emancipation of women. Abortion is the ultimate degradation of women.” Complimenting Winn’s message, Georgette Forney, the president of Silent No More, claimed that her organization “want[s] women and men to know help is available if you are hurting from your abortion.” As Forney delivered her speech, moreover, women surrounded her with signs that read “I Regret My Abortion.” Other speakers, meanwhile, struck equally liberal notes, albeit not necessarily feminist ones. For instance, Clenard Childress, the director of a black pro-life organization called Life Educational and Resource Network (LEARN), declared: “We are standing for those who are denied the dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Likewise, Carol Crossed, the president of Democrats of Life, propounded: “We Democrats need to return to our roots and protect the vulnerable—and that includes the most vulnerable, pregnant women and their children.”¹⁰⁸ Video footage of the march itself revealed one that was unusually coordinated and on message. Although evidence of the activists’ faith could certainly be found, the vast majority of marchers held Feminists for Life signs that read “Women Deserve Better than Abortion.”

The pro-choice citizens of San Francisco, however, were not softened by these liberal appeals. In fact, in response to the march, the City and County Board of Supervisors unanimously declared January 22 “Stand Up for Choice Day” and officially declared San Francisco a pro-choice city. They also played an active role in planning a counter demonstration

in consultation with pro-choice organizations. Supervisor Bevan Duffy even insisted that pro-life activists were “not welcome in San Francisco.”¹⁰⁹ Likewise, Supervisor Tom Ammiano bemoaned the boldness of pro-life activists, which has reached such a high “point that they think they can come to our fair city and demonstrate.” Dian Harrison, president of Golden Gate chapter of Planned Parenthood, fretted that Christian activists have “been so emboldened that they believe that their message will be tolerated here.”¹¹⁰

These declarations set the tone for one of the largest, but hardly noted, confrontations between Christian conservatives and leftists in the larger culture wars. Some three thousand counter demonstrators greeted the pro-life activists by hurling condoms, shouting obscenities, spitting, extending their middle fingers skyward, and chanting, “Pro-life, your name's a lie! You don't care if women die!” Meanwhile, the pro-life activists, who were reminded beforehand by a march organizer to “return any sort of agitation with a smile,” did not retaliate.¹¹¹ Afterwards, the liberal *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that “the pro-choice contingent . . . berated the larger [pro-life] group with insults,” while “antiabortion ignored taunts from pro-choice marchers, smiling politely in response to jeers, flashing peace signs, and singing ‘God Bless America.’”¹¹²

Partly the discrepancies between pro-life and pro-choice activists in San Francisco can be attributed to the nature of counter demonstrations, which tend to be more confrontational than marches. And, in fact, some of the pro-life demonstrators at the March for Women’s Lives the year before were belligerent. For instance, the *Washington Post* reported that some pro-life activists yelled “your murdering innocent babies,” “choice kills,” and “you’re killing babies.”¹¹³ Likewise, *USA Today* reported that one counter demonstrator blared “It’s a good thing you didn’t kill her” to a pro-choice marcher carrying her small child.”¹¹⁴

However, those who counter protested described a reception by pro-choice marchers that was strikingly similar to the one in San Francisco. And like those who participated in the Walk

for Life West Coast, many pro-life activists were simply shocked by the behavior of pro-choice marchers in Washington DC. When Danny, the president of Boston Rock for Life, for example, arrived at Union Station wearing a pro-life t-shirt, one pro-choice activist yelled, “I hope you die!”¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, Sarah, who ventured to Washington from Hanover, PA reported: “Pro-choice marchers old and young shouted phrases such as ‘I hope you get raped’ as middle fingers popped up right in front of our faces. Others criticized belief in God and the bible, calling for the abortion of Christ.” Fred of Centerville, Ohio likewise reflected on the anger and hostility of the marchers as follows: “Priests were mocked and asked ‘how many little boys did you f—k today?’ Mothers with infants were ridiculed and insulted. We were continually given ‘the finger’ or told ‘f—k you!’” Fred was apparently so uncomfortable with this language that he couldn’t even write the word “fuck” in a written reflection, much less use it in public. John and Sandy of Manassas Park, VA echoed Fred’s account: “We watched in astonishment as we were angrily spit on, yelled at, cursed, cussed and accused of a wide range of ridiculous things. We did not respond in kind.”¹¹⁶ Pro-choice activists similarly dismayed Michael Ciccocioppo, the executive director of the Pennsylvania Pro-Life Action League. Ciccocioppo explained that although he was upset to hear reports of belligerent pro-lifers, in general he was saddened and struck by the “total lack of charity” from pro-choice activists.¹¹⁷ Finally, Reverend Childress, the director of LEARN, made the trip as well with some one hundred members of his African American church in New Jersey. According to Childress, he has never heard as many “expletives” directed his way in his life.¹¹⁸

But however the average pro-life demonstrator compares to her pro-choice counterpart, it is certainly true that pro-life counter protests can be very confrontational. And, like sidewalk counseling, such protests are relatively disorganized, mixing appeals that are secular and religious, civil and strident. The disjointed nature of counter demonstrations was on display in Boston where pro-life activists protested the National Democratic Convention in the summer of

2004. As activists marched down the city sidewalks with signs and graphic images of aborted fetuses, Pat Mahoney of the Christian Defense Coalition yelled into a megaphone: “What is going on in Iraq is terrible and tragic, but we are killing children within our own borders . . . Please look at these images. This is what choice looks like. Just look at the terrible mangled bodies, this is what Kerry supports.” Other activists embraced a more woman-centered approach. For example, some activists held signs that read “Abortion Hurts Women” and “Women deserve better than abortion.” Meanwhile, others still made religious appeals. Many Catholic demonstrators sported shirts and held signs that read “You can’t be Catholic and Pro-Choice” and another woman had a sign that said “Abortion. God Calls It Murder.”¹¹⁹

This motley variety of messages reflects deeper tactical divisions within the pro-life movement itself and, in general, the younger activists I spoke with were opposed to religious messages in the public square. One such activist is Paul who served as president of a pro-life group at the University of Albany. As we walked the streets of downtown Boston he explained, “the perception that abortion is just a religious issue has been a disaster for the pro-life movement” and has “alienated” liberal Americans who otherwise respect life in other contexts. Paul then concluded: “We have to find a way to work with these people, or else abortion will continue for another thirty, even sixty years.”¹²⁰

Phil of Albany Rock for Life shares Troianni’s general view. Like a growing number of young pro-life activists, he does not look even remotely like a stereotypical Christian conservative. Phil’s finger nails are painted black and is sporting torn camouflage pants. And like Paul he is also a vegan who is opposed to the Iraq War. In fact, he has even participated in the anti-war demonstrations. When I asked him about the utility of religious appeals in the public square, Phil made an astute observation: “Christians often get involved to oppose abortion and evangelize, but doing so may imperil both goals.” But many Christians, Phil continued, simply do not see it this way. From the perspective of many believers, “conversion opens the

door to respect for life and becoming pro-life opens one's heart to Christ.”¹²¹ Likewise, Melissa and Joy, two activists with Saving Arrows, firmly share Phil's orientation. In addition to being devout evangelicals, they are tattooed, heavily pierced, and Melissa has dreadlocks. As we sat together in the Boston Commons, these activists shared their frustration with some of pro-life activists, especially their facile acceptance of the war.¹²²

As the activists rolled through the streets of Boston, it was evident that such demonstrations simply do not provoke conversations the way that campus outreaches or even sidewalk counseling does. But occasional exchanges did occur. For instance, Danny, the president of Rock for Life, was approached by a young woman who asked him, “How can you take that position if you are not a woman?” When Danny responded, “because I believe that life begins at conception,” she turned and walked away. Other interactions, however, were more encouraging. Brandi Swindell, the director of Generation Life Boise, encountered a pro-choice woman who insisted that pro-life activists did not really care for women or their children. When Swindell protested that her claim wasn't true, she yelled, “I doubt it!” and proceeded to walk away. Moments later, the woman stopped, turned, and challenged, “How many children have you adopted?” Swindell informed her that she had not adopted any children, but that she had started an adoption referral program in her church. The tenor of the conversation then changed instantly and the two women had what appeared to be a long, respectful discussion and even embraced as they parted ways.¹²³

At times there were more serious efforts to cultivate actual dialogue, but they were halfhearted and poorly organized. For example, Pat Mahoney stood in front of assembled pro-life activists at Quincy Market where he used his bullhorn to inform passersby that “this is what democracy is all about, coming together and having a serious, civil discussion about great moral questions. We just want to dialogue. We are nice, friendly people.” Mahoney continued, “Please explain to us why you think abortion should remain legal.” Unlike the campus

outreaches, however, these pro-life activists had no way of drawing a crowd and no clever devices for creating conversations. The Bostonians simply ignored them.¹²⁴

The lack of commitment to dialogue was underscored by what was easily the most confrontational incident of the weekend. Pro-life activists decided to counter demonstrate in front of the very posh Harvard Club where the Feminist Majority was honoring a prominent feminist. Outside the club some dozen members of the Feminist Majority greeted guests as they arrived. The pro-lifers showed up in waves, including a large contingent of Catholics and many young and confrontational activists from Survivors—a California based, student pro-life organization. One such activist is Johanna, an eighteen-year old evangelical from Sacramento, California. As the feminists enter the Harvard Club Johanna extended her hand and offered this greeting: “Thank you for killing a third of my generation.” Meanwhile, Jeff White, who played an important role in organizing clinic blockades for Operation Rescue, scolded arriving guests with “shame on you!” Some of the feminists, who were mostly silent, lost their composure. For instance, one man shoved Brandi Swindell’s bullhorn into her face and another woman recited a favored chant of pro-choice activists: “Pro-life, that’s a lie! You don’t care if women live or die!” The pedestrians were similarly belligerent as one yelled “get the fuck out of our town!” and another very well dressed Bostonian screamed “rednecks!”¹²⁵

During all of this commotion Pat Mahoney grabbed the bullhorn, but then quickly decided that a woman should be the face of the pro-life demonstration. Mahoney then passed the bullhorn to Sauna, a seventeen-year old evangelical from southern California, who proceeded to deliver an extended critique of pro-choice feminism. Sauna belted into the bullhorn: “Do you know why men love abortion? Because they don’t have to take responsibility for getting women pregnant, because they can have free access to women’s bodies.” After catching her breath, Sauna continued, “Why doesn’t the Feminist Majority, NOW, and NARAL give a single penny

to poor women. . . . Is that all you can offer women? An abortion! I'm a feminist and pro-life! Please tell me that you can offer me more than an abortion!"¹²⁶

Like much of the counter demonstrations, Sauna's very secular pleas sat somewhat uncomfortably with the religious messages that surrounded her. A group of Catholics, who are far less vocal and confrontational than the evangelicals with Survivors, quietly prayed to Mary and said the Lord's Prayer. Another man held up large tablets of the Ten Commandments and staffers from Operation Rescue West instructed the feminists to "repent" as they circled Commonwealth Avenue in their "truth trucks," which are paneled with images of aborted fetuses.¹²⁷

Estranged from the main pro-life demonstrations is Randall Terry of Operation Rescue fame. According to those who coordinated the major pro-life protests, Terry is simply not welcome to participate because he divorced his wife to remarry a younger woman. The couple dozen activists who made the trek with him to Boston further highlight his fall from the center of movement politics. But the small demonstration also underscored just how far Terry has drifted from the radicalism of Operation Rescue. Like most of the pro-life movement, he encourages his activists to be civil and to love their neighbors. Terry's activists, moreover, seem to follow his orders. For instance, Jeff, an evangelical from Cincinnati, Ohio, approached a gay activist who was sporting a button that read "I'm Part of the Oral Majority." Although the activist accused evangelicals of bigotry, Jeff expressed his concern over the effects of AIDS on the gay community and reported that he harbored no ill will towards homosexuals. The two men parted with a handshake and pat on one another's backs.¹²⁸

III. Radical Politics

Although Randall Terry has long since abandoned direct action and with it political radicalism, others have not. But what remains of the rescue movement can only be found in very small

outposts, the most significant of which is Operation Rescue West—an organization devoted to harassing abortion providers in an attempt to close clinics. Unlike the varieties of disjointed activism just described, radicals in such operations are not nuisances to be regulated and controlled. Nor is Christian faith considered contrary to public belligerency.

Direct Action at Operation Rescue West

Operation Rescue West (ORW) is located in Wichita, Kansas, where its primary mission is to close what is easily regarded as the most infamous abortion clinic in pro-life circles. The clinic is Dr. George Tiller's Women's Health Care Services, which specializes in late-term abortions and attracts patients from around the country and even abroad. Many aspects of the clinic particularly invite the outrage of activists. For example, Tiller reported at a National Abortion Federation meeting that only 800 of the 10,000 abortions on fetuses at 24 to 36 weeks gestation his clinic oversaw over a five-year period were done because of a genetic anomaly.¹²⁹ Adding further fuel to pro-life opposition, Tiller disposes of the fetuses in a crematorium and retains a Christian chaplain on staff to perform "spiritual sacraments such as baptism . . . and blessings for the aborted fetus." "Remembrances" are offered as well, such as footprints and handprints, an urn for ashes, and a certificate of premature miscarriage.¹³⁰

However, ORW's presence is felt well beyond Tiller's clinic. In fact, I met ORW staff and activists in St. Louis, where they were organizing "rescue outreaches" at area abortion clinics. The term "outreaches," however, does not really capture ORW's brand of direct action. Outside the Hope Clinic for Women, Troy Newman, the director of ORW, showed local activists interested in ORW's methods the ropes. Newman yelled at the clinic director, Sally Burgess: "Sally, we're going to expose you in your neighborhood if you don't stop taking blood money!" To which, he added for good measure: "You're a profiteer on the blood of babies, Sally" and "You're going to go down in history with the slave owners and Nazis." Cheryl Sullenger, the

field director for ORW, then entered the mix and struck a less judgmental note: “How is this helping women?”¹³¹

Yelling in front of abortion clinics, however, is not really ORW’s bread and butter. Instead, staffers at ORW like to target abortion providers in their private lives, away from their clinics. As ORW sees it, such exposure will bring public shame on abortion providers and they will be compelled to quit. It also has the virtue of making abortion providers feel like they can’t leave their clinic and escape the harassment of activists. As Troy Newman informed me at a Steak and Shake in downtown St. Louis, “evil must be uprooted from its rat hole and exposed.”¹³² In support of this view, Newman especially likes to cite Ephesians 5:11-12 which reads, “Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; rather expose them, for it is a shameful even to mention the things done by them in secret.”

To this end, the band of ORW staffers and activists then traveled to Dr. Shah’s private office some miles away from the Hope Clinic. In an adjacent public parking lot, ORW parks its “truth truck,” which is paneled with images of aborted fetuses. Meanwhile, pro-life activists line the street in front of Shah’s office holding the same images. Newman, never one to mince words, then picked up a bullhorn and yelled: “Dr. Shah is an abortionist and child murderer, he has killed 100,000 babies!” Newman then turns his attention to the wider community and asked, “When will the community stand up and refuse to tolerate child murder?” Obviously agitated, Shah’s office quickly calls the police and one nurse comes out to investigate. The response from locals in Granite City is more mixed as some honk their horns in support while at least one woman rolled down her window and screamed “fuck you!”¹³³

Yet, for all the strident and judgmental rhetoric, ORW is actually rather calculating and systematic in its methods. For this reason, its staffers should not be confused with the occasional, self-mobilized radicals who scream at women entering abortion clinics. Instead, ORW applies very systematic methods to a concrete end, which is to close abortion clinics. For

instance, another favorite method of ORW is to send post cards to abortion providers' neighbors. In one recent case, ORW sent postcards that contained images of an aborted fetus and a note that read "Your neighbor Sara Phares participates in killing babies like these." The postcard also asked Sara's neighbors to call her and suggest that she get out of the abortion business. This initial postcard was followed by another that made this request: "beg her to quit, pretty please." Some time latter, ORW staff and activists showed up with the "truth trucks" in Sara's neighborhood.¹³⁴ Newman especially likes to catch abortion providers precisely when they feel most protected from public scrutiny. For instance, he reported that he shows up at Dr. Tiller's home on major holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. Similarly, Newman attended a conference for abortion providers in Washington, D.C. Just as Tiller helped himself to a drink at the bar, Newman approached him and shaking his hand said, "Why don't you get out of the baby killing business?"¹³⁵ It is this kind of relentless and systematic harassment that is at the center of ORW's strategy.

In addition to clinic staff, ORW also targets employers who do business with Tiller's clinic. In fact, Newman and his staff just recently compiled a list of 200 "abortion collaborators." The goal is to pressure these businesses into severing ties with Tiller's clinic so that it can no longer function. Some of these "collaborators" include large corporations, such as Wesley Medical Center where clinic patients are taken when an abortion goes awry. But the list also includes small business where even more personal and community pressure can be exerted, such as cab companies and cleaners. Such harassment, moreover, requires more than just the relentless stalking of citizens in their private lives. It also demands considerable research and intelligence gathering. After all, ORW must somehow discover the names and addresses of clinic staff and their ties to local businesses. And some of this research is not especially enticing, such as combing through the garbage of clinic staff for any incriminating information.

To be sure, Newman and his staff are well aware that most pro-life activists do not regard their methods as Christian. Newman, for example, reports that Christians often give him this response: “I’m Christian and pro-life but what you people are doing is not loving.” Staffers at ORW, however, argue that their public condemnations are “really an open act of love” and point to Proverbs 27:5, which reads “Open rebuke is better than hidden love.” Such rebukes, after all, give sinners an opportunity to turn away from evil. In addition, ORW staffers argue that too many pro-life citizens emphasize the importance of mercy and grace at the expense of justice. As Newman puts it, “Christians are often quick to appeal to grace but slow to seek justice.” But those who embrace direct action are not simply trying to save the souls of abortion providers and their patients, they are seeking their own salvation and the nation’s. As they see it, all citizens have blood on their hands because they are complicit in the crime of abortion. This bloodguilt, moreover, can only be absolved through public condemnation and rebuke. Only direct action can stay God’s wrathful hand.¹³⁶

IV. Conclusion

This chapter suggests that much of the received wisdom about the Christian Right is untrue. For instance, what is most striking about the varied world of pro-life activism is not the belligerency of Christian activists, but the degree to which they embrace the deliberative norm of civility. This flows from activists’ Christian commitment to demonstrate love and compassion for others. Indeed, as we have seen, even direct-action radicals try to square this value with their public belligerency. Their insistence that aggressive harassment is “really an open act of love” is a measure of the centrality and limitations of this Christian ideal. The largely secular pro-choice activists, on the other hand, appear far less charitable, perhaps partly because they feel no divine obligation to love or even respect their pro-life neighbors. And, as a subsequent chapter will

argue, the larger political system may provide pro-choice leaders less incentive to encourage civility than it does their opponents.

Pro-life activists have also almost single-handedly generated public deliberation about a controversial political issue while their pro-choice opponents often avoid dialogue. In fact, many pro-choice leaders explicitly discourage their rank-and-file from engaging in public debate. This discrepancy will be pursued in greater depth later. But it is certainly partly due to the fact that the pro-choice movement is a conservative one in the sense that it wants to maintain the status quo as enshrined by *Roe v. Wade* rather than change public opinion. This, of course, is a deep irony. While the left has long argued that the personal is political, it turns largely to elite allies to protect its interests. And while the right ultimately wants greater governmental intervention, it spends most of its time trying to change hearts and minds.

Not all deliberative norms, however, are respected equally. For example, although Christian activists find that promoting civil dialogue is easy to reconcile with their faith, avoiding religious appeals is more difficult to align with the gospel. For this reason many activists, especially sidewalk counselors and those who participate in marches and demonstrations, often make public professions of faith. And however much activists embrace philosophical reasoning, they do not become the kind of moral skeptics championed by deliberative democrats. Indeed, even in the most deliberative organizations, such as Justice for All, activists' confrontation with secular knowledge may leave them even more confident of their views. Whether these departures from deliberative ideals represent the Christian Right's democratic failings or are the inevitable cost of a more participatory democracy is a question this dissertation will return to in a subsequent chapter.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁵ John, JFA Reflection, 27-28
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- ⁵¹ Cynthia, JFA Reflection, 158-159
- ⁵² Eve, JFA Reflection, 118-119

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