

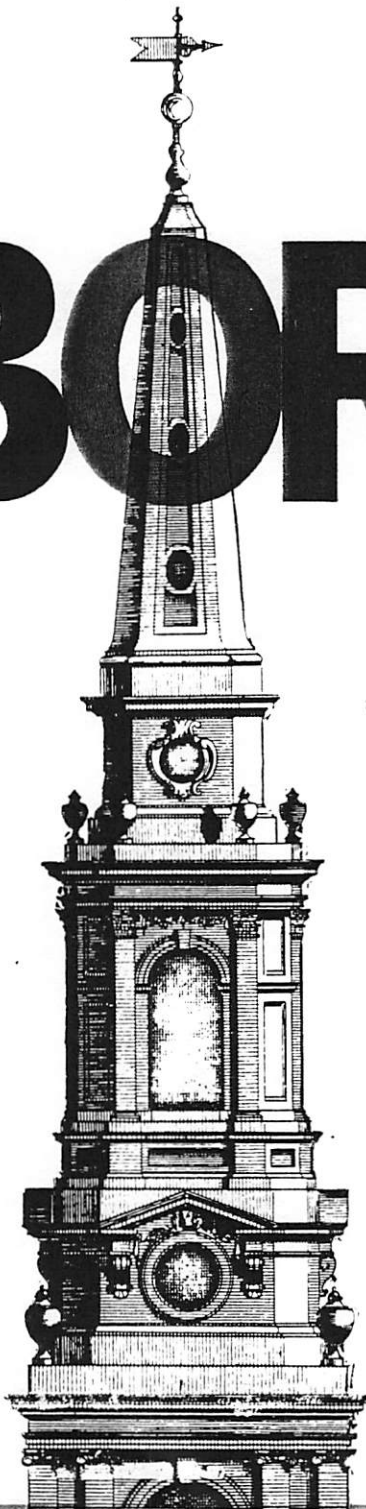
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NATIONAL REVIEW

ABORTION

♀
**AS A
CLASS
RELIGION**

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ABORTION: The Class Religion

A bit of defensiveness is the homage the heretic pays to the consensus.

Right now it is the anti-abortionists who are the heretics; but that can change

M. J. SOBRAN JR.

WE ALL have been warned against the *argumentum ad hominem*. Of course a point can't be settled by reference to the respective characters of the disputants: everybody knows that. Yet such arguments are politically potent. The question of a government energy policy boils down, for many people (including some senators), to whether the heads of oil companies are greedy. A campaign against pornography depends on disgust with pornography itself, no doubt, but it helps if the censorship advocate can excite repugnance against pornographers as a hateful class of men. Popular politics requires villains.

Abortion advocates have devoted a great deal of emphasis to what may appear to be defects in opponents of abortion. The purpose of this strategy is not so much to arouse hatred against anti-abortionists as it is simply to isolate them by making them seem to be the kind of people with whom you would be reluctant to associate yourself: narrow, sectarian (usually Catholic) sorts who are intolerant (they want to "impose" their "personal views" or "values" on the rest of us) and insensitive (abortion being, after all, a "complex" and "sensitive" issue, for which, as we all know, there are no simple or easy answers). This is a subtle strategy, for the gentleness with which it puts down its foes also has the simultaneous effect of making abortion's proponents sound like a higher order of being—educated, low-keyed, alert to the most delicate moral nuance; sympathetic, self-effacing, troubled by the burden of their realization that no slogan will do.

Say what you will: it works. Moreover, I think it is a mistake to sneer at it. This sort of appeal may not be logical, but in its own way I think it is legitimate. As Aristotle points out, the orator's character, as it appears to the audience, helps to determine whether he persuades them or not. Sometimes people instinctively mistrust a speaker or writer without being able to meet his argument, and this sort of prejudice, though it may not be laudable, is indispensable for the routine conduct of life. If we present ourselves as reasonable, others are prepared to agree with us. Even the appeal to snobbery can be defended, so long as it is not grounded in falsehood: Americans do not like to admit it, but there are social classes whose business it is to be enlightened. I can't blame members of those classes for trading on the presumption in their favor. My impression is that it is the upper middle classes—the most powerful and influential stratum, never mind that they are always

complaining that they are not powerful and influential enough—who are the social "headquarters" of pro-abortionism, as of liberal attitudes in general, in this country. Anti-abortionism is, numerically speaking, concentrated further down the social ladder. Let us not shirk the facts: advocacy of abortion is typically found among people who are, by most indices, more enlightened than the average man; opposition, among those nearer the average in income, education, life-style, and all the mannerisms of the working and lower middle classes.

TO PUT IT a little differently, opposing abortion is now, in strictly worldly terms, *bad manners*, a sign of inferior breeding (vis-à-vis others in the abortion debate). That is not to deny that it is permissible. But note this, that it is one of those issues on which there is a more, and a less, *respectable* side: and that if you take the less respectable, you are expected to take your stand defensively, apologetically, deferentially—not in the sense of abjectly, but at least with consciousness that the weight of enlightened opinion is against you, and with gestures demonstrating that you know it, and are not ignorant of what the enlightened consensus is. Otherwise you look like a fool. (To take a parallel, if bizarre, example: suppose you counted on your fingers and discovered that two and two actually made five. If you wanted to persuade the public, you could not merely *announce* that two and two made five, and leave it at that. You would have to begin by saying the equivalent of "I know this sounds crazy—I wouldn't have believed it myself—but . . ." Having thus anticipated the normal reaction to your position, you would be in a better position to get people to count their own fingers.) The rhetorical principle is this: you cannot persuasively dissent from the consensus unless you first demonstrate your awareness of—and also, preferably, your respect for—that consensus in its present form; otherwise your own opinion will be thought to issue from perverseness or naïveté.

In other words, there is such a thing as what Peter

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Berger and Thomas Luckmann call "the social construction of reality," a body of commonly accepted and more or less "official" truths. Society would be impossible without such a system. The burden of proof is always, therefore, on the dissenter to prove not only that he is right, but also that he has due regard for the social order. A heretic does more than err: he shows a want of social deference. This notion is uncongenial to rationalists who conceive of men as intellectual Robinson Crusoes, and abhorrent to liberals who think society ought to consist of nothing but bold heretics; but it is true anyway. Most of our ideas are, to borrow a phrase of Samuel Johnson's, "not propagated by reason, but caught by contagion."

NOW ALL THIS is only dimly realized by most people. In fact it is widely supposed that the opposite is the case. We tend to think that ideas are current because they are true, when they are often thought true merely because they are current: current, that is, among *socially authoritative people*, "right-thinking," "enlightened" people. In some cases (e.g., the physical sciences) it is probable that what the experts tell us is true, or at least the best guess available. That is so because in these disciplines it is relatively easy to determine who is, and who is not, an expert. It is different, of course, in the humanities, where there are abysses between rival schools of thought. Nonetheless, though both of two rival schools cannot be equally right, they can be equally respectable—and one may gain a derivative respectability by associating himself with one of the major schools, adopting its catch phrases and so forth, even if he cannot defend it rationally.

What I am getting at is simply this: even in a relatively open and tolerant society, where nobody is burned, hanged, or jailed merely for his opinion, there are very definitely social rewards and penalties (rank, ridicule, ostracism, in some cases money) attached to some opinions as against others. Again, this is a painful fact for some people to admit. There is irony in the way political liberals, for instance, like to think of themselves as having forged their views independently, each in the fiery furnace of his own intellect, when any outsider is struck by the way they all sound alike; and a further irony in the way each of them supposes that his fellow liberals share his views, and even express them in the same phrases, simply because they are all as independent-minded as he.

Pro-abortionists tend to be people of generally liberal attitudes, because pro-abortionism meshes comfortably with a number of other liberal views, which I will discuss later. For the moment, I merely note that pro-abortionists have found ways of subtly pulling rank in the abortion discussion. The most explicit example I know of was a column by Harriet Van Horne, in which she charged that anti-abortionists were hypocritical in their defense of prenatal life, because most of them supported the Vietnam War; she reasoned (if that is the word for it) that they were therefore an obviously atavistic class of people. This is an odd line of argument, coming from people who regard class distinctions as inherently invidious, and ideas as having the right to be taken on their merits—to say nothing of their views on guilt by association.

I find it odd that anti-abortionists have not seen all this more clearly, when they might have taken advantage of

it. If anti-abortionism is a class attitude, then so is pro-abortionism. Yet anti-abortionists have tried to argue their case strictly on its merits, without taking advantage of any of the auxiliary rhetorical tactics the pro-abortionists have exploited so skillfully. The reason the advocates of abortion have been so successful is not so much the way they have characterized their opponents as the fact that they have characterized them at all. To suggest that abortion foes are mostly Catholics is to enlist a certain amount of anti-Catholic feeling, it is true, but it also has a more generalized effect: it suggests that opposition to abortion can be dismissed, explained away, accounted for as a state of mind confined to people of a peculiar background (it hardly matters what that background is), whose arguments can be safely ignored. Even more important—and here is the really crucial point—this whole way of depicting the anti-abortion side, while not obviously invidious, promotes the impression that "normal" people—rational people, people without sectarian hangups or superstitions—just naturally tend to favor abortion.

To favor abortion? No. To favor *tolerating* abortion. Corner the pro-abortionist (as I have persisted in calling him), and you get a statement something like this: "I neither endorse nor condemn abortion as such. That would be simplistic and presumptuous, when it is a complex and sensitive issue that every woman must confront for herself, in accordance with her own deepest values. Far be it from me to impose my personal views," etc. And here is the self-portrait of the abortion advocate, as it has been allowed by his opponents, who have been too civil to attack him or even to call into question his delineation of his own finer qualities.

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In forbearing uncharitable attacks, the anti-abortionists have been praiseworthy. But in forbearing criticism, especially of the kind that deflates large claims and pretentious self-images, they have neglected a key strategic opportunity. For the surest way to discredit the pro-abortion movement requires nothing in the way of vilification; in fact, abuse would be self-defeating. What *is* effective is to *place* the opposition, to *localize* it, to point out that its own slogans are not emanations of pure reason, but rather proceed from a specific—and, in its own way, provincial—set of presuppositions which are themselves controversial. Controversial in the abstract, that is: for the habit of social deference toward the intellectual classes has allowed these notions to go almost unchallenged and, in time, unnoticed.

The first thing to remark is that abortion has long been regarded with horror. The very word "abortionist" was a byword for the vilest specimen of humanity, the man who capitalized on the misery of young women by killing the innocent within their bodies. One would think that there had been some violent revolution in the realm of sentiments when such a function came to be thought of as

beneficial, and was assigned to men not only legally authorized to perform it, but socially prestigious for doing so. In fact, however, the reversal on abortion appeared a natural extension of already existing tendencies, and appeared so even to those who hated it.

What are these tendencies? They issue from a concerted attempt to reform the world in accordance with a perception of man's nature that has become the orthodoxy of Western intellectuals. It has no explicit creed, though it has many slogans and platitudes. Those who hold this view of things would, in many cases, resist putting it into words, because the moment you do, it appears base and shameful. Still, that need not deter us from attempting to analyze it. For, as Bernard Shaw said, what a man believes may be ascertained, not from his creed, but from the assumptions on which he habitually acts.

They tell us that the question of when life begins is a "religious" question. It is not, of course; biological science is not a legacy of the Buddha or the popes

Abortionism, then, is part of an integral world-view that sees man as an animal; an animal whose destiny is a life of pleasure and comfort. Those who view things in this light tend to believe that this destiny can be achieved by means of enlightened governmental direction in removing (and discrediting) old taboos, and in establishing a new economic order wherein wealth will be distributed more evenly. It is interesting to note that they describe such a redistribution as being "more equitable," because that suggests that they ascribe inequalities of wealth to differences in circumstances rather than ambition, intelligence, fortitude, or any of the myriad other moral virtues that may lead to fortune: they do not understand production as the result of human effort and providence, and want to locate it either in the machine or in the laborer who executes the mechanical function. It is interesting to note, too, as a percipient friend of mine has lately done, that they never deride or censure human behavior as "bestial" or "animal," because they see man himself as an animal in essence, and cannot be indignant about behavior proper to an animal. They *are* indignant about suffering, which is to say animal suffering—pain, hunger, physical discomfort, and the frustration of animal appetites in general; and they speak of the cruelty or indifference that causes such misery, whether in animals or in humans, as "inhuman."

This is a morally passive view of man. Although it asserts the obligation of those who are well off to share their abundance with the "less fortunate," they can never make demands of the less fortunate themselves; and, indeed, are quick to ascribe the misbehavior of those they see as victims to victimization itself. If the poor rob, it is because they are, through no fault of their own (but most assuredly through *somebody's* fault), desperately needy. Never mind that crime rates increase along with the general prosperity, or that the truly needy—heads of poor households—commit relatively few of the armed robberies, most being perpetrated by young, single men. If the poor breed indis-

criminally, it is because they have been "denied" (by whom?) proper sex education and adequate birth control facilities, and can't afford a decent abortion.

People who hold this view of things are broadly what we term "liberals," and it is characteristic of them to invoke the poor early in any public discussion. And what it is vital to notice is, not only do they not hold the poor responsible for their poverty (which might be excusable as a charitable presumption), but they cannot bring themselves to hold the poor responsible for anything else either. As James Burnham has penetratingly put it, the liberal feels himself morally disarmed before anyone he regards as less well off than himself. Our public manners now make it appear a sign of priggishness bordering on "inhumanity" (or at least amounting to "insensitivity") to blame the poor for their imperfections. The middle-class virtues are assumed to blossom spontaneously under the right material conditions; progress comes inevitably, so long as there are not reactionaries "impeding" it; "new" and "change" are terms of approbation, for time itself ushers in improvements and progress is not a human achievement (except in the realm of government), but a self-propelling process. One establishes one's moral credentials by publicly exhibiting compassion for the poor, and indignation at their plight. It is safer to attack motherhood than to question the claims of (or claims in the name of) the poor; especially if motherhood can be shown to be somehow detrimental to the poor.

That, in fact, is approximately the position of pro-abortionists. If pleasure is man's destiny, it is his right. Nobody should have to endure any avoidable hardship, not even if he brings it on himself. Parenthood, when it comes unlooked for, is cruel and unusual punishment, and people who fornicate no more deserve to be assigned its duties than a man who kills somebody deserves to be hanged. Man is good, and pleasure is innocent. Birth control is therefore more than a convenience; it is a fundamental human right. For sexual ecstasy, with no strings attached, is our birthright. There is no special virtue in restraint; restraint is "repression." Nor is there anything sacred about monogamy or the family; these indeed are often "barriers" to full self-expression, self-fulfillment, self-discovery, self, period. Role "stereotypes" similarly impede the natural development that would occur if we indulged ourselves unstintingly. What is wrong with homosexuality? lesbianism? group sex? serial polygamy? incest? Nothing is wrong with them. Sample every exotic delicacy on the sensual smorgasbord. Sex is free.

HOW CRUEL, then, that some people—quite a few, really—should get stuck with the bill, when there isn't supposed to be any bill. In such cases what we want is some form of retroactive birth control. Abortion.

This whole view is sentimentalism, and it sentimentalizes abortion. Pro-abortionists seldom take the view that deliberately killing human beings can be justified. Abortion, of course, has to be presented as something else. They tell us that the question of when life begins is a "religious" question. It is not, of course; biological science is not a legacy of the Buddha or the popes. It is a scientific question, and it has received an answer: at conception. The question when it is permissible to *take* life is of course an ethical

question, as such of interest to more than just religious people.

Pro-abortionists as a rule cannot even bring themselves to use the word "kill." The embryonic child may be growing and taking form, but he is evidently not alive. I recently read Planned Parenthood's handbook on abortion, combining information and pro-abortion propaganda ("written with unusual insight and compassion," according to a *Time* reviewer cited on the paper cover), in which the word "kill" occurred twice: once to mention how pregnant women used to kill themselves in the dark ages before the Supreme Court spoke, and again in describing the operation of contraceptives that kill sperm (before they cause mischief). Not once was it used with reference to the child in the womb (the "fetus," of course). Instead there were the Orwellian evasions: "terminating a pregnancy," "termination of potential life," and so forth. You can kill yourself, you see, and you can kill a little tiny sperm; you can kill an elephant, and you can kill a bacterium; we even speak of killing cancerous cells. But you can't kill a fetus. You can only "terminate" it.

One exception to my generality is a philosopher named Michael Tooley, who uses the word "kill" forthrightly in his advocacy of abortion. He is not much help to his fellow pro-abortionists, however, inasmuch as he also favors infanticide, and for the same reasons for which he favors abortion.

Abortionism, then, is best seen—and rhetorically portrayed—as a tentacle of those secularist and anti-traditional creeds that are usually grouped together under the (in-

adequate) heading "liberalism," which affirms the claims of man's animal nature against the kind of restraints and responsibilities inherent in his distinctive humanity. Discrediting it requires at least two main lines of attack. First, abortion foes must point out that abortionism is indeed an "ism," a creed quite as specific and aggressive as any creed its proponents denounce, demanding not only tolerance but legitimization, complete with tax dollars to pay for human death. Its local habitation must be pointed out, and it should be given its own name, preferably a non-opprobrious and convenient label that may be used by people who do not necessarily oppose abortion (e.g., newsmen).

Second, and more important, perhaps, the public must be encouraged to see clearly what most of them dimly and confusedly believe already: that a healthy society, however tolerant at the margins, must be based on the perception that sex is essentially procreative, with its proper locus in a loving family. This is not a sentimentalized view but a rigorous and realistic one, because love must be sustained by the will, with charity, patience, fidelity, devotion; a marriage vow is not a prediction that the flames will never die down, but a mutual consecration which humanizes sexuality by absorbing it, in the solemnest way, into the system of social responsibility. It is based on the most fundamental sexual truth of all, yet one that requires a little courage to reaffirm in our day: that the purpose of sex is not fun—it is life. And this truth, harsh as it will sound to many, means that those who employ sexuality in frivolous ways may not demand that somebody else take the consequences of their doing so. □

Proverbs of Detente

The subjoined manuscript was found, evidently blown by an east wind, at a point which I am not at liberty to specify on the thick array of barbed wire through which the free movement of people and ideas is now expected to pass. The original is in English; and the unknown author seems to have a firm grasp not only of our language but also of our attitudes.

—ROBERT CONQUEST

The road to Helsinki is paved with good intentions.
A leopard changes its spots on request.
Words speak louder than actions.
Screw you, Czech, I'm all right.
Of course the emperor is clothed: his tailor should know.
Speak softly and throw away your stick.
A wise man and his wheat are soon parted.
There's none born any minute.
Put not your trust in principles.
Send not to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for someone else.
I am not my brother's keeper: the Serbsky Institute provides one.
How do I know who killed Cock Rabinovich?
One cuckoo makes a summer.
A man who smiles and smiles can't be a villain.
Robbery is fair exchange.
We do no dissemblin', say the bells of the Kremlin.

Suppress the truth and shame the devil.
And a smile on the face of the young lady of Riga, too!
(That's an internal affair, anyway.)
The fox doesn't want my grapes.
Don't look a Trojan horse in the mouth.
Once bitten, never shy.
The devil became a monk in all good faith.
Don't refuse any wooden kopeks.
Sure I'll come into your den. Bones? What bones?
Guns and tanks can't break my ranks so long as words don't hurt me.
But that was in another country, and besides, the democracy is dead.
The man who ups and runs away needn't fight another day.
Like a lamb to the Kremlin banquet.
The price of liberty is eternal somnolence.
Sheep's clothing makes the sheep.
Exit, accompanied by a bear.