Book Review

Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), xiv + 365 pp. $40.99

Reviewed by John Ehrett

In American battles over abortion rights, pro-life Protestants regularly face the same charge: *Just a few short decades ago, your whole branch of Christianity didn't care about stopping abortion. In fact, they supported it! This means that, no matter what you say today, you're not really concerned about unborn life at all. Your "pro-life politics" are really about other issues, and abortion is just a convenient proxy*.

What are those "other issues" supposed to be? Answers vary. Some characterize the backlash to *Roe v. Wade* as merely a convenient rallying point for social conservatives, masking a far more robust backlash against school desegregation and the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. That is to say, the pro-life movement was *actually* about race. Others claim the pro-life movement is about preserving the patriarchy. Either way, the claim is clear: Protestant opposition to abortion began in bad faith.

In *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement Before Roe v. Wade*, historian Daniel K. Williams demonstrates the opposing view that challenging pro-choice views promotes a positive ethical decision. While the early pro-life movement was indeed led mainly by Catholics—though with a smattering of notable Lutherans in the mix—those who found themselves fighting pro-abortion perspectives were motivated by a complex constellation of values, many of which map uneasily onto contemporary partisan categories. In particular, Williams argues that the American pro-life movement was not always joined at the hip with social conservatism, instead constituting a distinctive bloc courted by Democratic and Republican presidential candidates alike. As such, Williams's volume is a welcome corrective to accounts of the abortion debate that see cynical maneuvering beneath every stone.

For the most part, Williams locates the origins of the modern pro-life movement in Catholic opposition to contraception. Once the abortion question emerged as a discrete issue, however, Catholic intellectuals made their public cases by blending two different juridical discourses, the traditional Catholic language of "natural law" and the liberal framework of individual rights inherited from the U.S. Constitution and the American political tradition (4–5). This move was prescient; Catholic or-

ganizing against contraception *as such* was kneecapped by the Supreme Court's 1965 decision in *Griswold v. United States*, which effectively put an end to anti-contraception activism, and by the modernizing effects of Vatican II (5). As a result, the abortion battle came to be framed as a clash of liberal values within a shared liberal tradition—the right to life versus the right to autonomy (4).

What initially inflamed American political battles over abortion, Williams argues, was the 1959 move of the American Law Institute to endorse abortion legalization through revisions to its Model Penal Code (39). Generally speaking, the Model Penal Code serves as a sort of "best practices" benchmark for state legislation, and its recommendations are highly influential across the U.S. Shortly after the Institute's revisions, an abortion legalization bill in California—the first of its kind—was filed (41).

At that point, Catholic opponents of abortion found themselves at odds with most Protestants—but not all (41). Notably, Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor Arnim Polster, one of the leaders of California's nascent pro-life movement, testified in 1964 against abortion liberalization, arguing for the value of all life, even disabled life, on the basis of his own experience as a polio survivor (53–54). The pro-life cause also began attracting support from some leading Protestant intellectuals, including influential Methodist theologian and Princeton University professor Paul Ramsey, Unitarian leader and Harvard Divinity School professor George Huntston Williams, and left-leaning Lutheran minister and Vietnam War opponent Richard John Neuhaus (later, the founder of *First Things* magazine) (98). However, those were isolated voices at the time, and many Protestant clergy joined in with the emerging abortion-rights movement (66–67). Mirroring those trends, mainline denominations grew increasingly institutionally supportive of abortion rights, with the United Methodist Church going so far as to endorse the legalization of abortion "upon request" (108). A string of successes for the abortion-rights movement followed, which included, perhaps most strikingly, California governor Ronald Reagan's signing of an abortion liberalization measure (83–84). Abortion rights advocacy, with the historical winds seemingly at its back, grew more and more aggressive.

The rise of fetal photography, Williams contends, proved a real game-changer for the pro-life movement, and that finally started to move the needle. "Instead of simply rehashing the philosophical and constitutional arguments against abortion legalization, the pro-life movement would use the power of fetal photography to convince the public that every abortion killed a human baby" (133). Opposition to abortion became not merely an emerging proxy for other cultural issues. The abortion rights movement, in shifting the battlefield from *liberalization* to the *removal of all abortion restrictions*, had overreached, and public opinion reflected this shift (142–45).

Between the late 1960s and the Court's 1973 decision in *Roe*, events unfolded at a feverish pace with momentum swinging back and forth between the two sides. Though sixteen states took steps to liberalize their abortion laws within a span of three years, the tide swiftly turned. In 1971, abortion liberalization measures failed in *twenty-five* states. Hence, the scene with which *Defenders of the Unborn* begins describes a 10,000-person rally in Central Park protesting New York's abortion law, signed into law two years previously by a Republican governor (1). Following that rally, New York legislators voted to *repeal* New York's abortion law (but the repeal was vetoed by the governor) (2). The momentum had shifted so dramatically that by 1972, Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern felt the need to attempt to "convince pro-lifers—and particularly pro-life Catholics—that he was not their enemy" (187). Today, with the partisans of the abortion debate firmly entrenched, it is hard to conceive of an issue cutting so starkly across partisan lines. However, Williams insists, that is exactly what history reveals.

Roe, of course, changed everything. The Supreme Court's 1973 decision immediately forced the pro-life movement to commit to a new top priority, overturning the ruling (205). From there, the partisan politicization of the issue was a forgone conclusion. Democrats favored *Roe*, and Republicans promised to reverse it. That didn't mean the pro-life movement was enthusiastic about this shift. In 1980, the pro-life movement's support for Ronald Reagan—who'd let down the cause in California— was a grudging bet that, perhaps, his election might give them "an opening to transform the Republican Party into the party of life" (241).

Something like that same political bargain has been repeatedly struck, election after election, as Democratic Party support for expansive abortion rights has grown more and more entrenched. Both Republicans and Democrats make their arguments about abortion within the matrix of liberal rights-discourse, Williams stresses, but the two sides simply argue for incommensurable positions. To affirm the priority of fetal life is necessarily to reject the priority of bodily autonomy (248). Along the way, the cluster of other Catholic-inflected "life issues" that animated much of the early pro-life movement—from healthcare reform, to federal support for mothers, to poverty relief initiatives, to antiwar organizing—was deprioritized (251–53). Williams notes wryly that, in the case of Neuhaus, "the once-liberal, antiwar Lutheran protestor became a conservative Catholic defender of the Iraq War" (253).

Revisiting this history from the vantage point of the 2020s, two elements are particularly noteworthy. First, the pro-life movement traditionally understood its relationship to politics as basically transactional. Many of the movement's early leaders were open to supporting whomever would advance the cause of unborn life, irrespective of partisan alignment. Second, many in the early pro-life movement understood the pro-life message to be embedded in a larger constellation of political commitments to the value of human life, such as opposition to the Vietnam

War. In light of this, Protestants inclined to view a "transactional" approach to the abortion question as morally compromised or (conversely) tempted to suspect that talk of a "seamless garment" of pro-life issues reflecting hesitance regarding the abortion question itself should have their opinions challenged by the history Williams recounts.

Defenders of the Unborn was published in 2015, with *Roe* still an active law and a Supreme Court largely disinclined to revisit its post-*Roe* abortion jurisprudence. Today, the landscape of the abortion debate looks radically different. In the wake of the Court's 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned Roe and its progeny, pro-life organizers find themselves once again making the case for protecting unborn life at the state level. For the most part, the pro-life side finds itself on the defensive. A string of ballot referenda has sought to overturn existing restrictions and enshrine abortion rights in state constitutions.

Today, the American pro-life movement stands at a crossroads. Can it once again appeal to a liberal tradition of "respect for human life" that *logically* cuts across party lines? As Williams reminds his readers, such a strategy came very close to succeeding once before. Contrastingly, and more worrying, have those common commitments degraded so profoundly that the abortion issue can *only* be conceived in starkly partisan terms? Time alone will tell.

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