

David R. Carlin

Can a Catholic Be a Democrat?

How the Party I Loved
Became the Enemy of My Religion

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This book is dedicated to:

David R. Carlin, Sr. (1909-1980)

Marion McGetrick Carlin (1911-1989)

Maureen Carlin Fitzgerald (1945-2003)



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Publisher's Note

A few months ago, I mentioned to a conservative Catholic friend that we planned to entitle this book *Can a Catholic Be a Democrat?*

My friend shot back, “Can a Catholic be a Republican?”

That’s a fair question, but it’s the subject of a different book. For our purpose here is not to endorse particular candidates, affect elections, or even support a particular party. (Like most Catholics today, we don’t agree completely with any of them — and we don’t even agree with all of our author’s political assumptions.)

Our effort transcends prudential judgments about war and peace, wealth and taxes, and the persons vying for office today; it’s deeper than any particular issue, contest, or political philosophy.

In a word, in publishing this book our purpose is Catholic. We hope by means of it to help Catholics see clearly the political choices they face, so that they can prudently work for policies consistent with the fundamental truths of the Catholic Faith.



As this book goes to press, we hear reports of shifts in the electorate. Stalwart conservatives and even many Republican

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moderates have begun to question their allegiance to the GOP; lifelong Democrats find it ever harder to vote Democratic. Catholics in both parties have wandering eyes and are open to being courted by political parties they might never have supported before.

To help them choose, and to help the parties themselves understand Catholics better and win their votes, author David Carlin here shows what it means to be Catholic in the public square. He explains the fundamental policies that Catholics must support and identifies ones that Catholics will never abide.

His arguments might not lead you to a more Catholic party, but they will help you make your party less hostile to the beliefs of Catholics.

And — whether you're Catholic or not — if you seek to win elections, you need to do just that. For in many elections, Catholics are the swing voters who determine the outcome.

The party that hears Carlin's voice today will win elections tomorrow.



Acknowledgments

In writing this book I have been aided by many people. First of all, thanks to Todd Agliandolo, my remarkably talented editor at Sophia Institute Press, who worked on both this book and my previous book (*The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America*). Thanks to Professor John Quinn of Salve Regina University, who read an earlier draft of this book and supplied many helpful comments. Thanks to former Rhode Island state Representative Spencer Dickinson, who also read an earlier draft and was the first to suggest an autobiographical framework. Thanks to the late Bill Kinnaman, a teaching colleague of mine who was both a professor of philosophy and an Evangelical minister. A month or two before his death Bill made a number of helpful comments on my “Liberal Christianity” appendix. And thanks above all to the woman who was my earliest political partner and has been the great love of my life: my wife, Maureen.



Preface

“We love our friends, but we love the truth more.”

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

This book is a complaint from a disappointed lover. It’s possible to love institutions as well as persons, and I once loved the Democratic Party — the party of Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal liberals, the party that once upon a time did wonderful things for blue-collar Americans like my parents, the party that helped immigrant Catholics and their children (my parents again) become real Americans. Later on I’ll tell the story of my love affair with the party and my gradual disillusionment, but for now let me simply record the fact that I’m writing with the political equivalent of a broken heart.

I haven’t taken up with another party; that is to say, I haven’t become a Republican. In fact, I haven’t yet left the Democratic house: I’m still a registered Democratic voter, I always vote in Democratic primaries here in Rhode Island, and I continue to participate actively in Democratic politics at the local level. But at the national level, and to a limited extent even at the state

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level, I find less and less to love in my party as it is today, and sometimes I have no choice but to vote for Republican candidates for high office. I think, or at least I hope, that someday the Democratic Party will once again become a loveable thing. But it takes a long, long time for a political party to change its orientation, and since I'm now in my late sixties, I doubt that the change I look for will take place in my lifetime. I expect to die a Democrat, albeit a very unhappy one.

The reasons for my unhappiness — and not just mine but the unhappiness of millions — I will explain in detail in the following pages. But a short way of putting the thing is to say that in the great “Culture War” currently going on between old-fashioned Christians and anti-Christian secularists, over issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and the role of religion in society, my Democratic Party has opted to side with the secularists.



I write this book as a Catholic who fears for the future of Christianity in America, but also as a Democrat who fears for the future of the Democratic Party. Already it has experienced a great decline, a decline that first became clear in the election of 1980, when Ronald Reagan, with great help from religious conservatives (many of them Democrats), won the White House and the Republicans gained control of the U.S. Senate.

True, since that time the Democrats have experienced episodes of prosperity, Bill Clinton's presidency being the most notable, but the long-term trend is clear. The Democrats used to be America's number-one party; they're now the number-two party; and if they continue to alienate religious and moral-conservative voters, they're likely to remain number two for a long time to come.

As the Civil War approached, the Democrats took the wrong position on slavery, and they found themselves, except for a few brief episodes of prosperity, America's minority party from the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 until the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. At the time of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Republicans took the wrong position on the social and economic welfare responsibilities of the federal government, and they remained America's number-two party until the coming of Reagan and Newt Gingrich in the 1980s and '90s. Today the Democrats are taking the wrong position on morality and religion, which may doom them to remain America's minority party until well into the twenty-first century.



I remember reading a magazine article in the early 1960s, a report of an interview with William Faulkner. The Civil Rights struggle was growing very intense at the time, and the interviewer posed to the famous novelist a hypothetical question: If it came to a shooting war between blacks and whites, which side would Faulkner take? As anybody knows who has read his novels, Faulkner had great sympathy for blacks and the injustices they suffered. Nonetheless he said that in such a war he would fight on the side of the whites. Why? Because, he said, although whites might have committed great crimes against blacks, in the last analysis the whites were *his people*.

I recognize that traditional Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant, have historically often done dreadful things — been guilty of violence, injustice, prejudice. But whatever their history of crimes and ignorance (and even in our day they're not all saints), old-fashioned Christians are "my people." I'm one of them, so it's quite natural that I should be on their side in the Culture

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War. Besides, the secularists don't have a sterling track record themselves,¹ and even if I had no formal attachment to Christianity, I suspect I would feel bound to support the Christian side in the Culture War because, bad as Christians have often been, a world dominated by secularists would be even worse.



In this book I offer no new information. I'm working with a set of facts everybody already knows — at least everybody who has been paying a moderate degree of attention to American politics and religion in recent decades. My role is that of the detective in a mystery story: I know the same clues known by everybody else working on the case, but I happen to see a pattern the others missed.

I feel as if I should offer an apology (in both senses of that word) for the apparent excess of appendices — five of them — in this volume. On the one hand, the topics covered therein didn't seem quite *essential* to the argument presented in the book. On the other hand, they were necessary for the *fullness* of that argument. Hence my compromise: drop them from the main text while keeping them in the book. I advise the reader to give almost as much attention to the appendices as to the main text.

And one last thing: I was, and remain, a bit embarrassed by the autobiographical content in this book. Autobiographies should be written by *important* people, and outside of the circle of my family and friends I'm rarely considered such. Nevertheless, if I'm not important as an individual, I might be important as an example of a *kind* of individual: the old hardcore Catholic Democrat who faces

¹ Consider the evil done by those twentieth-century anti-Christian faiths, Nazism and Communism.

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a conflict between his party and his religion. The story I have to tell is a story that could be told by millions of others. We once loved the Democratic Party, but our love has waned as we have watched it drift farther and farther away from what it once was. We're critical of the party from the inside; we're not galvanized Republicans but authentic Democrats.

Introduction



How I Lost My Faith (in the Democratic Party)

I'm not certain when it first dawned on me that the Democratic Party had transformed itself into the pro-abortion party,² but I think it was early in the 1984 presidential campaign. Ronald Reagan was president, and he was a pro-life Republican (even though, when governor of California, he had signed a liberal abortion bill into law). A number of politicians — most notably, Jesse Jackson, Sen. Gary Hart, and former Vice President Walter Mondale — were fighting for the Democratic nomination, and all of them were openly pro-choice on abortion. For the first time it fully dawned on me how fundamentally committed to abortion my party had become.

At that time I was a Democratic member of the Rhode Island Senate, having first been elected in 1980. I was pro-life, as were most of my Democratic colleagues in the Rhode Island legislature; at the time there was nothing unusual about this. Of course, ever since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, state legislatures had been taken out of

² In the course of this book I'll use the terms *pro-choice* and *pro-abortion* interchangeably.

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the abortion-regulation business, so our convictions made little practical difference. But my conviction was nonetheless strong, and as I slowly awakened to the increasing pro-abortion character of my party, I began to feel conflicted.

I was a Catholic, and so I had the usual Catholic reasons for being opposed to abortion. I was also a philosopher — I had spent three years in the early sixties as a graduate student in philosophy at Notre Dame, and since that time I had been a college philosophy teacher — and so I had purely rational reasons, too, for thinking abortion to be morally wrong. On the other hand, I was an elected official belonging to America's pro-abortion party. Even if there seemed to be no political mechanism for ending abortion, how could I, simply as a matter of principle, continue my support for and affiliation with such a party?

I justified (or rationalized) my party identity with a number of arguments. The national Democratic Party might be pro-abortion, I said, but the Democratic Party isn't a monolithic thing controlled from some national center; rather, it's a federation made up of relatively autonomous state and local parties. My state and local parties were *not* pro-abortion parties, and almost all of my political activity was at the state and local levels. Moreover, if I were to leave the Democratic Party, where was I to go? The state Republican Party was no more pro-life than the state Democratic Party, and was arguably even less so. Or could I become an Independent? Given the bad luck that almost always attends an independent candidacy, that would surely mean losing my Senate position in the next election; and as a senator, while I could do nothing about abortion, I could make worthwhile contributions to other social-justice causes.

Besides, supporting the national Republican Party, it seemed to me, would be nothing but an empty gesture. For the only thing

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that would really advance the pro-life cause would be for the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*; yet I saw scant evidence that the national Republicans were truly determined to bring about this result. (My suspicion was later confirmed when a number of Reagan and Bush (senior) appointees to the Court — O'Connor, Kennedy, Souter — turned out to be supporters of *Roe*.)

And so, armed with these justifications, I remained a faithful if slightly chagrined Democratic partisan and politician. After all, it was more than a party to me: it was, and had been since my infancy, my home.



I was born in 1938 (the year of Munich, the year of the great New England hurricane), the oldest of three children in a working-class family in Pawtucket, Rhode Island — a gritty, blue-collar town, devoid of the loveliness that Plato says should surround children as they grow up. But there were those who loved it, and I was one of them. At the time of my birth, before the mills had all either folded or gone to the South, it was still one of New England's great textile towns; at one time it manufactured more thread than any other city in the world. Politically, the most important demographic group in the city was the Irish-Catholics: Democrats, of course; they controlled city hall — but not the mills or the banks.

My family was Irish-Catholic. Strictly speaking, my father was Scottish, but from a part of Scotland (Paisley, very near Glasgow) that abounded with Irish Catholics, refugees from poverty and the potato famine. After he had come to America as a child, he lived in an Irish-Catholic milieu, and so it was perfectly natural that he should marry my Irish-Catholic mother, the third youngest of eleven children. Until I was about ten years old, my father worked

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at the Pawtucket Boys' Club — one of my favorite hangouts — and after that he held jobs at the Providence Gas Company and, for many years, at the Narragansett Brewery. Although my mother was a high-school graduate, my father had dropped out of school after the eleventh grade, not uncommon in his day.

And my family was Democratic. They weren't directly involved in politics, but they voted for Democrats — especially for the greatest Democrat of them all, President Franklin Roosevelt — and they were friendly with a few of the local Democratic politicians. In addition to having a blue-collar ethnic Catholic profile that made him ripe to be a Democrat, my father directly benefitted from a number of FDR programs. As a young man, before his marriage, he spent time in Vermont as a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Years later, now a husband and father, he sometimes found himself temporarily out of work, and he was able to receive unemployment compensation (he was able to “collect,” as the expression went). For many years in his working life, he benefitted from being a member of a labor union, a union that in all probability would not have existed had it not been for the Wagner Act (the National Labor Relations Act) of 1935. For my father, then, the New Deal wasn't simply an abstract ideal that he approved of. It was a concrete good.

I well remember a political lesson my father taught me when I was very young; I couldn't have been more than eight or nine. We're Democrats, he told me, because the Democrats are the party of the poor people, the Republicans are the party of the rich, and our family was poor.³

³ In those days the word *poor* had a different meaning. Today to say that somebody is poor is to say that he belongs to an underclass plagued by unemployment, crime, drug addiction, bad manners, and worse. Back then it simply

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My father's words to me that day provided the single most important lesson I've ever learned in politics. It cemented my attachment to the Democratic Party, and even though I realize that today's Democratic Party is no longer truly the party of the poor, it keeps me in the party today, more than a half-century later.



In 1989 I became the Senate Majority Leader, the highest position in the Senate and therefore one of the highest positions in Rhode Island state government. Three years later I decided to leave the state Senate and take a long-shot try at higher office: I became my party's candidate for the United States House of Representatives in my congressional district. I ran as a pro-life Democrat against a pro-choice Republican incumbent⁴ who overwhelmingly outspent me, and my "strategy" was to hope that Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton would carry Rhode Island by a huge margin and drag me in on his coattails. Because of his pro-abortion commitments, I was less than a great fan of Clinton. In fact, that summer I wrote an op-ed piece that appeared in the *New York Times*, criticizing the Democratic National Convention (a Clinton-controlled event) for its refusal to allow Bob Casey, the pro-life governor of Pennsylvania, to give an address. And by this date the Republicans, with Bush's appointment of Clarence

meant that you weren't rich or nearly rich; it especially meant that you belonged to the class of blue-collar workers that made up the great majority of ethnic Catholics.

⁴ This was Rep. Ronald Machtley, who, two years after defeating me, ran a losing campaign for governor of Rhode Island. He's now the president of Bryant University, in Smithfield, Rhode Island. The congressional seat I aspired to is now held by another Democrat, Rep. Patrick Kennedy (Teddy's son).

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Thomas to the Supreme Court, had shown that they were getting truly serious about overturning *Roe v. Wade*. But I voted for Clinton on Election Day, since it seemed indecent to ride his coattails without even giving him a vote.

Clinton won Rhode Island, but not by the huge margin I had been counting on; even if he had, it probably wouldn't have mattered, for I was trounced by the incumbent. After that, I remained a registered Democrat and usually voted for Democrats at the local and state levels. But 1992 was the last time I voted for a Democrat for president.



Around this same time, my public life as a Catholic, such as it was, began to follow a similar line of progression. In the early eighties I got into the habit of writing political essays and submitting them to national magazines, especially two Catholic publications: *Commonweal* and the Jesuit journal *America*. In 1985 I began writing a regular monthly column for *Commonweal*, at first just on political subjects. Then as now, *Commonweal* had a reputation as a liberal Catholic magazine, and at that time I was a political liberal on just about every question except abortion, and I was a true-blue Democratic office-holder, so I fit the magazine's profile well.

But as the years went by, I started writing more about religious issues, and as I did so, I became more religiously conservative. I wrote a column in defense of the male-only priesthood, arguing that it's but one of many articles of Catholic faith that seem unreasonable in the eyes of the world, yet we nonetheless must believe. Of course, no good Catholic liberal — for whom the ordination of women was at or near the top of the reform agenda — would write such a column. I also ran afoul of *Commonweal's* readership on

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those rare occasions when I wrote about the gay movement. For the most part, liberal Catholics in those days were not prepared to give homosexual conduct their stamp of approval; at the same time they had real sympathy for gays and lesbians, and they thought it was bad form, if not a downright lack of charity, to find fault with the movement and its agenda (which in those days did not yet include a vocal demand for same-sex marriage). But my career as a politician had left me suspicious of the gay movement, inasmuch as it pursued legislation designed not to protect basic civil rights but to use state power to endorse homosexuality.

I can't remember when exactly, but sometime rather late in my *Commonweal* career⁵ I began writing about the abortion movement and the gay movement together, and for good measure I included the euthanasia movement. I called these three the "unholy trinity of contemporary secularism."⁶ I no longer saw them as three separate issues; they were part of a single package, whose ultimate function was to marginalize traditional religion, especially old-fashioned Protestantism and Catholicism. If you were going to oppose one part of the unholy trinity, it seemed to me then, you had better oppose all three parts. It made no sense to say, as some

⁵ My career at *Commonweal* would come to an end in 1997, when I received a letter from the editor informing me that my column was being discontinued. I never asked why, but my guess has always been that I had become too conservative, both socially and theologically; I was no longer sufficiently liberal for a magazine that wanted to maintain its venerable reputation for liberalism. I never complained about my dismissal, and I never resented it. It seems to me they were right to let me go. I wasn't a good fit anymore.

⁶ For a definition of *secularism* as I use that term, see Appendix I.

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pro-life Catholics did, “I’m against abortion, but I don’t see anything wrong with the gay movement.”

When I wrote about links between these movements, understand, I didn’t mean to say that there was a vast anti-Christian conspiracy, a secularist politburo issuing weekly marching orders to the champions of abortion, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia. What I meant was that all three movements held values that are profoundly antithetical to traditional Christian values, and thus when they acted to promote their values, they were reinforcing one another’s efforts whether they knew it or not — all to the ultimate detriment of Christianity.

Before long I came to see a link between the “unholy trinity of secularism” and the national Democratic Party, from which I was becoming estranged, and from there it took only a few more logical steps to arrive at the conclusions that I will argue for in the course of this book. For it had become plain to me that the Democratic Party, whose agenda now strongly supported abortion-on-demand, increasingly endorsed the goals of the gay movement, including same-sex marriage, and was showing signs of growing support for euthanasia, had come under the control of forces utterly opposed to all traditional Christianity and to Catholicism in particular. The happy marriage between my Church and my party had soured.

Where did it all go wrong? I think that the divorce was long in coming. Its roots can be traced back to the 1960s, to the social upheaval and the changes in American politics that transformed the Democratic Party of my youth into the thing it is today.

Chapter 4



The Catholic-Secularist Abyss

“It is come, I know not how, to be taken for granted by many persons that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry; but that it is now, at length, discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment; and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world.”

Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (1736)

So it's manifest that the modern, secularist Democratic Party has embraced moral liberal principles — notably abortion, sexual liberation, and, increasingly, euthanasia — that directly counter those commonly known to be held by traditional Christianity. I've argued that these principles can prevail in American culture only at the expense of Christianity; thus, a Catholic, or any traditional Christian, who doesn't want his religion diminished should cease

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supporting the party until it renounces or moderates its affiliation with secularism.

Some might object that I protest too much. Surely on balance there's more for a Catholic to like than to dislike within the Democratic Party. And if secularists have made incursions into the party's power structure, well, that's unfortunate, but politics is always about compromise. So why can't Catholics and secularists, despite their very obvious and in some ways very important differences, reach a working truce and continue to work together within the same party? Why can't they both find a place under a big Democratic tent?

After all, can their differences be any greater than those which once existed between Southern white Protestants and Northern Catholics, most of these Catholics being immigrants or the children and grandchildren of immigrants? Neither group very much liked the other; in fact, they had rather a lively distaste for one another.

Yet from the end of the Civil War until the 1960s — a period of one hundred years — these were the twin pillars of the national Democratic Party. Both groups understood that they had to stick together to promote their separate interests. Their alliance splendidly illustrated the proverb about politics making for strange bedfellows.

Would an alliance between Catholics and secularists be any stranger than this old alliance? Secularists are hardly any more hostile toward the Catholic religion than Southern white Protestants were during the century following the Civil War. Granted, many secularists probably believe that the world would be a better place if Catholicism were to vanish from it. But didn't the old-fashioned Protestants believe the same — and with more vigor and venom? After all, among the core beliefs of the “old-time

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religion” was (and for some of its adherents, still is) that Catholicism is a false and perverted version of Christianity; a paganized syncretism; the “Whore of Babylon” prophesied in the book of Revelation. If Catholics for a century could sleep in the same political bed with Protestants of this stripe, why can’t they today sleep with secularists?

The answer is simple: Southern white Protestants didn’t like the Catholic religion, to be sure, and in their sermons and Sunday Schools they relentlessly found fault with it. But they didn’t use the Democratic Party to promote their anti-Catholicism. By contrast, secularists *are* using their position of dominance in the Democratic Party effectively to destroy Catholicism in America (and old-fashioned Protestantism too). Through the party, they’re vigorously promoting moral values that clash so directly with those of traditional Christianity that if they’re validated in American culture, traditional Christianity must be invalidated.

There has long been a serious gap between the religion of Catholics and the religion of conservative Protestants. There’s divergence on certain points of doctrine, authority, and worship. There are old grudges and prejudices. But the gap isn’t nearly so great as to preclude cooperation, for in fact they still agree on most articles of faith and moral beliefs. Between Catholicism and secularism, however, the gap of beliefs — of philosophies or world-views — is so deep that it may be called an abyss.

The nineteenth-century French philosopher-sociologist August Comte said, “Ideas govern the world.” It follows from this that people who differ radically in their ideas will find it difficult to cooperate on matters of importance. Catholics and secularists hold radically different principles about the limits of knowledge and the nature of reality, and from these differences flow conflicting — in fact, irreconcilable — theories of morality.

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Empiricism versus revelation

Let's look, first of all, at their contrasting theories of knowledge. With almost no exceptions, secularists are empiricists; that is to say, they hold that it's impossible to have any knowledge that doesn't come to us through the senses. "Unless I can see it or hear it or touch it or taste it or smell it, I can't believe it": this is the attitude of the typical secularist.³⁴ An empiricist won't believe that there can be any such thing as knowledge of immaterial entities — God, for example, or immortal souls. Being by definition immaterial, these are not the kind of things that could be observed, even if we had finer and more powerful senses. Nor will he believe that moral good and evil, or rightness and wrongness, are objective qualities; how could they be, if they exhibit no sense qualities? What color is goodness? How long is it? How much does it weigh?

³⁴ Of course, they don't mean that all objects of knowledge must be directly observable by the unaided senses; it's okay to use instruments such as microscopes or telescopes. Nor do they mean that all objects of knowledge must be observable at all. Some objects are so small (e.g., electrons) or so remote in space (black holes) or in time (the Big Bang) that their existence can only be inferred. But these inferences rest on data obtained by the senses, and the objects of these inferences have sense characteristics that could be directly observed if our senses were finer and more powerful. For a philosophical expression of a view almost identical with this, see A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936), especially chapter 1, "The Elimination of Metaphysics," where the famous "verification principle" is explained. Ayer's book was intended to introduce the English-speaking world to the philosophy of the Logical Positivists (or Vienna Circle), a school of thought that flourished in the years between the two world wars.

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Catholicism, by contrast, holds that the human mind is capable of obtaining knowledge of God — not complete or comprehensive knowledge, to be sure, but at least partial knowledge. It teaches that the existence of God can be proven by human reason; more important, it teaches that God has revealed to humankind, through the Church and the Bible, knowledge about himself. This divine revelation, moreover, contains instruction about many other matters than can't be known on an empiricist basis: knowledge about the nature (or rather, natures) of Jesus Christ, about life after death, about the conditions of salvation, about questions of morality, and so forth.

Further, Catholicism has always held that there's a “natural” or non-revealed knowledge of moral principles possessed by all humans. This is the moral knowledge referred to by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans (2:15), where he says of the Gentiles that they have “a law written in their hearts.” Knowledge of this “natural law” is not, to be sure, as complete a knowledge of morality as is given by divine revelation, but it will serve for most earthly purposes, and indeed has served for the great majority — the non-Christian and non-Jewish majority — of the human race. We apprehend this knowledge not through the senses but by the operation of what philosophers call “moral intuition,” more commonly known as the “conscience.”

Naturalism versus supernaturalism

Secularists are in almost all cases *naturalists*; that is to say, they believe that nature is all there is, that there's no realm of being that transcends nature — and hence, no God and no community of immortal souls. Catholics, by contrast, believe that there is a supernatural realm — that is, an afterlife. In its best section (heaven) are to be found God and his saints, in its worst section

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(hell) dwell fallen angels and great human sinners, and in its middle section (purgatory) live sinners who are undergoing a process of purification to prepare them for heaven. Moreover, Catholics believe that this super- or trans-natural realm is far more important than the natural world in which we live at the moment. We live *here* but a brief moment — eighty or ninety years at most. We'll live *there* forever. Catholics further believe that there can be a two-way communication between the two realms. God and the saints hear our prayers, and we receive God's graces.

I should add that when I say that "Catholics" believe in this Dante-like view of the supernatural universe, I don't mean that a Gallup Poll would discover that these are the actual beliefs of all, or even most, American Catholics. Many Catholics, like their Protestant fellow-Americans, have discarded the ancient Christian belief in purgatory, while others refuse to believe that a loving God could condemn any of his children to everlasting punishment in hell.

And I certainly don't mean that the average Catholic focuses more of his daily concerns on the supernatural realm than on the natural. He likely spends more time worrying about his job, family life, taxes, investments, diet, and tennis game than about how he stands in relation to the world of supernatural entities. I mean, rather, that these are the official teachings of the Catholic Church, teachings therefore that genuinely orthodox Catholics adhere to — even if they don't always live in accordance with those teachings.

And so we have these two contrasts — these two immense contrasts — between the secularist worldview and the Catholic: empiricism versus revelation, naturalism versus supernaturalism. These quite naturally lead to further contrasts in matters of morality.

Moral objectivism versus subjectivism

The first of these contrasts has to do with the question of whether moral values and rules of moral duty are *objective* or *subjective*. An objective moral value isn't a manmade creation; it exists independently of human wishes, just as much as does the roundness of the earth. Of course, its existence is a very different kind of existence than that of the earth: the earth is a material thing; a moral value or rule is not. And we know that the earth is round through sense experience, whereas we know that stealing is wrong by means of moral intuition or the conscience.

When we say that moral rules or values are subjective, conversely, we mean that they're manmade creations — invented by some group (a religion, a society, a sub-society) or individual. Thus, there can be no true knowledge of (or meaningful arguments about) rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness. We can know that this or that religion or society holds adultery to be wrong or courage to be right, but we can't know whether adultery really is wrong or courage really is right. The most a moral decree can mean is this: "We disapprove of adultery and approve of courage, and we strongly demand that you do the same; and if you don't, we'll find some way of punishing you."

Catholics believe that moral values and the rules of morality are objective, not created by humans but created by God. These rules and values are either the positive commandments of God or they're inferred from human nature (and thus also created by God, since God is the author of nature). Secularists believe that moral values and rules are subjective, rooted in nothing more solid than personal or cultural preference.

I must add by way of clarification that a secularist *should* believe this, if he is to be consistent with his empiricist theory of knowledge. But not every secularist is consistent when it comes to

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questions of morality; in fact, very few of them are. Rather, it usually depends on his attitude toward the conduct in question. If you tell him that abortion or fornication is wrong, he'll reply that it might be wrong according your subjective judgment or opinion, but it's right according to the subjective opinion or judgment of others. But if you stomp violently on his toe or take a sledgehammer to his automobile, he'll forget his empiricism and subjectivism and say that what you've done is really and truly wrong.

The secularist, it turns out, has a considerable rhetorical advantage. On the one hand, when he wishes to dismiss *your* views, he can adhere closely to subjectivism and tell you that your moral judgments are no more than an expression of the subjective preferences of you or your group. On the other, if he wishes to give vent to a temper of moral indignation, he can temporarily lay aside his subjectivist theory and denounce you for your genuine wickedness.

Absolutism versus relativism

Catholics will allow that certain rules of morality admit of exceptions or careful distinctions. For instance, it's wrong to tell a lie, but there are some circumstances — rare no doubt — in which it's morally permissible, even perhaps morally obligatory, to stretch the truth. We're duty-bound to obey the laws laid down by legitimate civil authorities, but again, there might be circumstances in which it's morally permissible, even morally obligatory, to disobey. Catholicism does not, however, have this flexibility with regard to all rules of morality. For example, murder (that is, the intentional killing of an innocent human being) is always wrong — no exceptions. And there are many other rules that do not admit of exceptions, that apply to *intrinsic* evils: one must never commit suicide, one must never commit abortion, one must never

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engage in acts of adultery or fornication or homosexuality; and the list goes on.

Catholicism, in short, has a long list of moral rules that are exceptionless or *absolute*. From this flows the traditional principle: do no evil, even if good might come of it. Suppose this (fortunately far-fetched) dilemma were posed to a Catholic: “If an alien civilization from a distant galaxy threatened to destroy the planet Earth and everything on it unless you consented to violate one of these absolute rules, what would be the morally correct thing to do: violate the rule, or allow the Earth to perish?” From a Catholic point of view, the correct answer would be: “Allow the Earth to perish.”

Secularists are not absolutists; if we take the word *relativism* to be the opposite of *absolutism*, they are moral relativists. Theirs is a very flexible system of morality; there can be an exception to any rule. This follows very logically from their subjectivism, for if all moral rules are nothing but man-made creations, then man can simply amend or suspend them at will. Society can change its rules, or the individual can replace society’s rules with his own.

Sex

Many of the moral disagreements between Catholicism³⁵ and secularism, quite obviously, have to do with matters pertaining to sexuality: fornication, cohabitation, divorce, abortion, homosexuality, and so forth. Why should there be so many disagreements on matters of *this* kind? After all, Catholics and secularists don’t disagree on the morality of murder or the morality of bank robbery

³⁵ In this chapter I’ll be speaking of disagreements between secularism and *Catholicism*, but it goes without saying that many, although not quite all, of these disagreements also hold between secularism and traditional Protestantism.

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or the morality of a hundred other things. Why, then, should they so violently disagree on the morality of sex?

The answer is to be found in the contrasting Catholic and secularist worldviews discussed above. These conflicting worldviews lead quite logically to two different attitudes toward sex. The secularist, who believes that we have only one life to live, a life that will last less than a century out of an infinity of time, sees sex as one of the great opportunities for enjoyment available to him. This isn't to say that secularists are libertines. The great majority of them believe in a certain degree of sexual restraint; after all, an imprudently conducted sex life can lead to all kinds of problems. But so long as prudence is observed, the secularist would argue, we should be quite free to indulge our wishes for sexual enjoyment. In a brief lifetime, why do otherwise?

And it isn't simply a matter of enjoyment, but a matter of experiencing personal relationships and personal growth as well. Without intimate personal relationships, what would life be? Sex can be a shortcut to this intimacy, or a means of deepening an already existing intimacy. Why would any rational man or woman refuse it? Further, why restrict ourselves to a single such intimacy? Downright promiscuity might be imprudent and immature, but a certain amount of sexual diversity, especially in the years of early adulthood, makes good sense to the secularist. These sexual relationships contribute to personal growth. Even relationships that turn out badly make such a contribution, for we can profit even from disappointment and heartache. The person who lives a life of traditional Christian purity, preoccupied with such typically Catholic considerations as marriage, procreation, and genital complementarity, misses out on valuable life lessons.

Catholicism sees sex, like everything created by God, as good in itself, and can agree with the secularist that sex can be a

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legitimate source of pleasure, intimacy, and personal development. But the Church would add an important qualifier: the utilization of this good thing is rightly reserved, according to Natural Law and divine positive command, to a permanent, exclusive relationship with a single member of the opposite sex, secured by the bonds of marriage. For in the Catholic worldview, even sex has ties to the supernatural world, and in the context of the marriage sacrament, it rises above being a purely natural activity and becomes a supernatural good.

At the same time, the renunciation of all non-marital sex makes good sense according to the Catholic belief in the afterlife. Since our brief lifespan is but a vestibule to eternal life, there's no need to maximize sexual experience and enjoyment (or, for that matter, any other temporal enjoyments and experiences) here below. By renouncing a notable amount of sexual experience here below, we demonstrate, both to others and to ourselves, that we truly believe in the life to come; if we had a merely lip-service belief in a higher world, we wouldn't endorse sexual renunciation.

This is why the life of consecrated celibacy — the life of the monk or nun or priest — has long been considered the ideal Catholic life, the highest calling. Such a life seems pointless from a secularist point of view: what could be more foolish than to throw away all opportunities for sexual experience? But it makes perfect sense for someone who believes that our earthly world, along with its pleasures and its experiences, is as nothing compared with the heavenly world that is our ultimate destiny. What are the sacrifices of a few short years, if they help attain the eternal blessedness of heaven?

And if — as the Church has always affirmed by teaching that the great majority of people are called to the married life — the life of religious celibacy is more than can reasonably be asked of

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ordinary Catholics, nonetheless the life of the monk or nun or priest can still serve as an example for ordinary Catholics, as though the celibates were saying to them, “We know that you’re called to the married state, but let our example remind you to live lives of marital chastity.” That is, the life of the ordinary Catholic, while it shouldn’t copy the monkish ideal, should at least be inspired by it: inspired to premarital abstinence, to marital fidelity, to avoidance of contraception, and in general to purity of thought, word, and deed. If the Catholic monkish ideal is first-tier Christian sexual renunciation, the Catholic marital ideal is second-tier Christian sexual renunciation.

As for the personal growth that comes, according to the secularist, from a diversity of intimate sexual relationships, Catholics have a twofold answer. One is that they doubt that the multiplication of sexual relationships truly produces genuine intimacy or greater personal growth; more likely, it leads to personal regression and to an impairment of the capacity for intimacy. The other is that pursuit of physical intimacy through multiple sexual partners serves to block the development of spiritual intimacy with God. For most people (with rare exceptions), there seems to be an inverse relationship between the life of prayer and the life of sexual adventure.

Human life

We’ve looked at sex; let’s now turn to the issues of abortion and euthanasia,³⁶ issues upon which Catholics and secularists differ

³⁶ When I speak of euthanasia here, I’m using the term in a broad sense, so as to include voluntary and involuntary euthanasia as well as passive and active euthanasia. As I’m using the word, physician-assisted suicide (such as is legally permitted in the state of Oregon) counts as a species of euthanasia.

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radically. The contrast here between Catholic and secularist is stark and telling. In making judgments about life issues such as abortion or euthanasia, secularists aren't moved (or at least, if they're logically consistent, *shouldn't* be moved) by the idea that the life of a fetus or a terminally ill person has intrinsic, objective value. From their empiricist-naturalist point of view, such a life can have only whatever "value" might be assigned to it by us humans. If a pregnant woman (assisted, it might be, by her husband or boyfriend and by other friends and relatives, not to mention her doctor and clergy- person) decides that the fetus in her uterus has no value — or, at any rate, a significantly lesser value than other values she's concerned with — it becomes thus. If, on the other hand, she "wants" the child enough, it takes on a completely different value.

Of course, in the case of abortion, the fetus itself has no vote, since it's incapable of having or expressing an opinion. But in the case of euthanasia, the patient ideally has the decisive vote. If, from a secularist viewpoint (i.e., a naturalist-empiricist viewpoint), he decides that his life no longer has value, or at least not enough value to warrant going on, then his life has indeed no value (or relatively small value), and thus, it's morally allowable — even laudable — to terminate it. In cases where the patient's condition has deteriorated to a point at which he's no longer competent to determine the value of his life, then a delegated agent (a close relative or perhaps the doctor) would — presumably in accordance with the patient's own last wishes or his best interests — make that crucial judgment.

The Catholic view is totally different. According to it, the fetus has its *own* value, intrinsic, objective, irrevocable: the value of every human person. Hence, it doesn't matter what subjective value or disvalue anybody — including the mother in whose womb

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it temporarily resides — might wish to assign to it. Therefore, abortion can't be morally permitted. Neither can euthanasia, whether voluntary or involuntary. It makes no difference whether the person to be killed expresses a clear wish to be killed, since, according to the Catholic view, even if a man expressly wishes to destroy his own life, his objective value as a living human being doesn't vanish thereby. Thus, he may not be killed even at his own request. It follows too that a trustee can't elect to kill an incompetent person, even if he does so in accordance with the person's putative desires or interests. For the human person has not only an objective value, but a very great and absolute value.

That's because, according to the Catholic view, the individual human person is created "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1:26) and thus carries a special dignity that sets him apart from the rest of nature. His human soul is immaterial, made not by any biological process but created directly by God, and so it won't cease to exist with the death of the material body. According to the doctrine of the Incarnation, so high was the value of this body-soul composite made in God's image that it wasn't unworthy of the Second Person of the Trinity to become human; and by taking human nature to himself, God in turn elevated it even further.³⁷ Finally, Christ's death in the flesh freed humanity from sin and made it possible for all of us to be eternal partakers of God's divine glory. Believing all this, and recognizing (as a point of biological fact) that the fetus, from the moment of conception, is one of

³⁷ As St. Athanasius wrote in his *On the Incarnation*, "You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored . . . Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body. . . ."

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these wonderful, grand, and noble things called a human person, how can a Catholic rate abortion as anything less than a tremendous evil? Likewise, how can the Catholic rate euthanasia as anything but a tremendous evil?

In fairness to the secularists, it must be acknowledged that, in their own fashion, the great majority of secularists also confer a very high value upon human nature and individual human beings. (At least this is true of present-day American secularists. It wasn't at all true, of course, of earlier secularists of the Nazi or Communist persuasion.) They can be just as shocked and outraged as Christians, often even more so, at certain great injustices and crimes against mankind. Secularists are as eager as Christians, and in many cases more eager, to end or reduce war, poverty, disease, malnutrition, racism, sexism, ignorance, tyranny, and other conditions that are incompatible with the great value and dignity of human beings. It isn't surprising that many of them, given their high regard for humanity, like to call themselves "humanists."

But as we've seen, the typical and logically consistent secularist deems all values to be subjective, the products of our collective or individual value preferences. His superstructure of ethical judgments, including his affinity for human beings, has no sure foundation. And so, at a particular moment in human history (the early twenty-first century) and at a particular place on the planet (the United States of America), the typical secularist might well have a high respect for the worth and dignity of the human person. But the creator of this subjective value can make exceptions (as he does today to allow for abortion and euthanasia), and he's also free to alter his preferences radically: so it's not impossible that someday, perhaps soon, he might decide that only those humans have value who are young and healthy, or sane, or productive, or not overtly religious. I don't say that this *will* happen. I just say that

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there's nothing in the subjectivist theory of value and morality that must prevent it from happening.

The value of suffering

Secularism, concerned with life in this world only, and rejecting the idea of a future life that might compensate for the sufferings of this life, sees suffering as useless, pointless, indeed the greatest possible evil. Conversely, Catholics believe that the suffering and death of Jesus was the most useful thing that ever happened in the history of the world, since it healed the breach between man and God that had opened with the fall of Adam and Eve. The crucifix, that instrument of ancient Roman cruelty, is the most common of all Catholic symbols; and the principal form of Catholic worship, the Mass, re-enacts the Passion (suffering) and death of Jesus.

From this it follows that if Catholics are to live in imitation of Christ, they're called on to suffer, and to suffer greatly — or at least to be ready and willing to suffer greatly when and if the need arises. The Catholic Church teaches that the connection between our suffering and Christ's goes beyond mere imitation: it has a mystical quality. St. Paul spoke of his own suffering as filling up “what was lacking in the afflictions of Christ” (Col. 1:24). This comes very near to saying that the Christian who suffers voluntarily participates in the redemptive suffering of Christ — that he becomes (to use a theologically controversial phrase) a kind of “co-redeemer” with Christ.

This isn't to say that Catholicism teaches that we must be indifferent to suffering, especially the suffering of others. Far from it. The Gospels are full of stories about Jesus feeding the hungry, curing the sick, giving sight to the blind, serving the poor, casting out demons, even raising the dead. The history of Christianity abounds with corporal works of mercy. What other group has

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done as much to feed, clothe, shelter, educate, and comfort other human beings as have Christian believers of the last two millennia? It can even be argued that one of the motives that lay behind the scientific revolution that swept the European world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a desire to get control of nature to ameliorate the bodily and material condition of the human race, and that this desire could have arisen only in a Christian culture, with its strong tradition of works of mercy.

Nonetheless, that's only to point out that Christianity is extremely broad (some might say paradoxically so) in its aims. For however important might be the universal Christian call to ease the temporal suffering of others, the willingness to accept suffering as something meaningful — if suffering is what God has willed for us — is at least equally important. Catholicism is a religion of Christ; hence, it's a religion of the Cross. For this reason Catholics, in fact, not only strive to bear suffering, but also may deliberately seek it out. In the season of Lent, for example, the Catholic is supposed to embrace a certain degree of self-denial, through fasting, abstinence, and selfless labors. And mortification of the flesh — including the intentional self-infliction of small and sometimes great physical discomforts — has been a central value in the monastic tradition since its earliest centuries.

The secularist view of suffering couldn't be more different. If, in the secularist approach to life, there's a certain amount of "active hedonism" (the pursuit of pleasure), there's an even larger amount of what may be called "passive hedonism" (the avoidance of pain). The great prohibition of moral liberalism — namely, "Do not harm non-consenting others" — illustrates this attitude of passive hedonism. If I must not inflict pain on *others*, why should I allow myself to suffer avoidable pain? (Except perhaps in those cases in which pain to myself is an inevitable byproduct of

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pursuing some other good — for example, the pain of strenuous physical exercise for the sake of good health, or the pain that accompanies hard work done for the benefit of others.) Secularists will grant that suffering is often unavoidable, but they'll never grant that it can be a positive good. The less pain and suffering in the world, the better — *period*. Motivated by this conviction, secularists have often made valuable contributions toward lessening the world's suffering. This explains why most of them would hold that compassion is the second greatest virtue, the greatest, of course, being tolerance.

The Catholic observes a strict prohibition against suicide and euthanasia, regardless of the suffering he or others might be enduring. But from the secularist point of view, it makes little or no sense for a terminally ill person to bear his suffering until the bitter end. If such a person wished to be euthanized, this would be a perfectly rational, even a praiseworthy choice — a triumph of human freedom. And if the dying person were no longer capable of making a choice, it would be rational for his trustees to choose euthanasia for him. Why prolong needless suffering? Here we have the flip side of the secularist's attitude toward sex: just as there's no reason not to maximize pleasure in our short passage through earthly life, so there's no reason to prolong pain.

The Catholic ideally views end-of-life suffering, so far from being pointless, as an opportunity to serve God and, through God, our fellow humans; as such, it's a kind of privilege God allows us. To suffer willingly is to imitate Christ, and not merely to imitate his good works in "those little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love," which, according to Wordsworth, make up the "best portion of a good man's life," but to imitate — in fact somehow to unite with mystically — the suffering of his Passion and death. This kind of "meritorious" suffering must be borne

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voluntarily — no Catholic is duty-bound to deny himself or others the full benefits of palliative care — and with a certain prayerful docility of spirit.³⁸

These contrasting views of suffering bear not only on end-of-life issues, but on the question of abortion as well. Although secularists hold that the “right to choose” is an absolute right that can be exercised for any reason and not just for a “good” reason, nonetheless when publicly defending abortion, they usually cite hard cases to dramatize their point — cases in which carrying and caring for the baby would be very burdensome for the mother. Why, they ask, should she have to endure this pointless suffering?

Catholics don’t have to deny that the baby might be a great burden to the mother, while insisting, of course, that no mere burden gives one the right to kill someone else. What they would deny is that her suffering need be pointless. Its meaning might not be immediately apparent, but, provided the burden is accepted in the right spirit, it might well turn out to be meaningful — to the mother, to other people, and to God. Consider the case of a mother who chooses to keep a baby who, prenatal tests show, will almost certainly be seriously retarded. To the secularist, the suffering that the mother will have to endure in taking care of a seriously and hopelessly disabled child (not to mention the suffering the child would have to endure throughout his life) is hard or impossible to justify. Yet, as countless cases have shown, if she embraces that suffering with an attitude of love, the mother can come to see her child as among the most precious gifts from God. The child can live to be a witness to God’s goodness and a mother’s love.

³⁸ The late Pope John Paul II provided such an example in his later years, as he bore, publicly and with apparently a great deal of patience, humility, and prayer, the great physical infirmities that befell him.

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And so the gap between Catholicism and secularism is no small one. It can't be ignored, set aside, papered over, or bridged by compromise. It's a gap between diametrically opposite views of reality: one naturalistic, the other supernaturalistic. It's a gap between opposing theories of knowledge: one strictly empiricist, the other allowing for trans-empirical knowledge. It's a gap between two moralities: a largely objective, absolute morality hostile toward fornication, cohabitation, homosexual conduct, abortion, and euthanasia, versus a subjective, mostly relativistic morality favorable toward all those things. It is, in sum, the gap between the City of God and the City of Man, and between these two there is a great gulf fixed: if one of them is right, the other is wrong.

No wonder, then, that there's a Culture War raging between them; each side is fighting furiously for its cultural life. If one side comes to dominate American society, the other will be pushed into the shade. The losing side won't necessarily vanish from America (although it might), but it will be consigned to the margins of American society; it will become a hole-in-the-corner thing. Neither side, of course, wants this to happen to itself, and each would be very pleased to see it happen to the other. For this reason, when the principles and allegiances of each side are laid bare, who can be surprised when Catholics — that is, Catholics of the orthodox variety — abandon the Democratic Party, the party that has become the ally and instrument of anti-Catholic secularism?