

There is a fascinating history regarding abortion and how it became such a politically divisive issue. Katherine Stewart explains it well in Ch 3 of her book called, "The Power Worshipers."

<https://www.amazon.com/.../B07Y.../ref=dp-kindle-redirect...>

The most popular origin story, shared by many critics and supporters alike, explains that the movement was born one day in 1973, when the Supreme Court unilaterally shredded Christian morality and made abortion "on demand" a constitutional right. At that instant, the story goes, the flock of believers arose in protest and threw their support to the party of "Life" now known as the Republican Party.

The implication is that the movement, in its current form, finds its principal motivation in the desire to protect fetuses against the women who would refuse to carry them to term. This story is worse than myth. It is false as history and incorrect as analysis.

The religious right drew inspiration from a set of concerns that long predated the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* and had little to do with abortion. The movement settled on abortion as its litmus test sometime after that decision for reasons that had more to do with politics than embryos. From the beginning, the "abortion issue" has never been just about abortion. It has also been about dividing and uniting to mobilize votes for the sake of amassing political power.

Jerry Falwell, "throughout his career, up until the late 1970s, was resolutely apolitical... yet he had spoken against Martin Luther King, Jr., and the marching...he felt that Christians had, 'a higher calling,' and that higher calling was to preach the Bible and love people."

<https://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/transcripts/hour-six.html>

But Falwell's "apolitical" stance changed when the government tried to desegregate schools. Falwell and many of his fellow southern, white, conservative pastors were closely involved with segregated schools and universities, and they had come together as a political force out of fear that their institutions would soon be deprived of their lucrative tax advantages. To be sure, Falwell, the founder of the Thomas Road Baptist Church and Lynchburg Baptist College—later Liberty University—suffered from no lack of hot buttons. On his nationally syndicated radio and television show, he regularly fulminated against emblems of moral decay: divorce, pornography, sex education, "secular humanism," and public education. But the thing that got him up in the morning was the threat that the Supreme Court might end tax exemptions for segregated Christian schools.

<https://www.newyorker.com/.../2007/05/28/church-and-state-2>

In the first decades of his career, Falwell practiced segregation even in religion.

<https://www.vox.com/.../race-evangelicals-trump-support...>

In the early 1960s, when Black high school students attempted to pray at the Thomas Road Church, they were ejected by the police. When Falwell went on to set up a Christian academy, he made sure it stayed just as white as his church. He attracted national attention with a 1965 sermon impugning "the sincerity and nonviolent intentions of some civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King" and—with immense irony, in retrospect—arguing that ministers had no business getting involved in politics. He suggested that the faithful should concentrate their

reform ambitions on alcoholism rather than civil rights, since “there are almost as many alcoholics as there are Negroes.”

Bob Jones Sr., founder of the college that later became Bob Jones University, was an especially ardent segregationist, and he centered his defense of segregation clearly in his religion. In an April 17, 1960, radio address, “Is Segregation Scriptural?” he declared “God is the author of segregation” and called the practice “God’s established order.” He referred to desegregationists as “Satanic propagandists” and “religious infidels” who are “leading colored Christians astray” with their “Communistic agitation to overthrow the established order of God.”

<https://drive.google.com/.../0B6A7PtfmRgT7Q1kzZEV.../view...>

Bob Jones University excluded Black students, but this was not uncommon among southern educational institutions at the time. In response to the desegregation orders that flowed from the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, a number of white families in southern states wished to avoid sending their children to integrated schools. Public officials began promoting “schools of choice,” a euphemism for private schools that were, in effect, white-only. Such “choice” schools were also known as “segregation academies.” In many cases they were, like Falwell’s, affiliated with churches and other religious entities.

It would be hard to overestimate the degree of outrage that the threat of losing their tax-advantaged status on account of their segregationism provoked. As far as leaders like Bob Jones Sr. were concerned, they had a God-given right not just to separate the races but also to receive federal money for the purpose.

Emerging leaders of the New Right were prepared to defend them. They began to meet regularly, to discuss politics, and to look for ways to make their voices heard in Washington. This is how the Moral Majority was born. They would not shy away from controversy, nor would they yield to criticism; they would work with others to restore the moral foundations of the nation. But they had a problem. Building a new movement around the burning issue of defending the tax advantages of racist schools wasn’t going to be a viable strategy on the national stage. “Stop the tax on segregation” just wasn’t going to inspire the kind of broad-based conservative counterrevolution they envisioned.

They needed an issue with a more acceptable appeal. What message would bring the movement together? They considered a variety of unifying issues and themes. School prayer worked for some, but it tended to alienate the Catholics, who remembered all too well that, for many years, public schools had allowed only for Protestant prayers and Bible readings while excluding Catholic readings and practices. Bashing communists was fine, but even the Rockefeller Republicans could do that. Taking on “women’s liberation” was attractive, but the Equal Rights Amendment was already going down in flames. At last they landed upon the one surprising word that would supply the key to the political puzzle of the age: “abortion.” As the historian and author Randall Balmer writes, “It wasn’t until 1979—a full six years after *Roe*—that evangelical leaders, at the behest of conservative activist Paul Weyrich, seized on abortion not for moral reasons, but as a rallying-cry to deny President Jimmy Carter a second term. Why? Because the anti-abortion crusade was more palatable than the religious right’s real motive: protecting segregated schools.” <https://www.politico.com/.../religious-right-real-origins...>

More than a decade later, Weyrich reminded his fellow culture warriors of the facts: “Let us remember, he said animatedly, that the Religious Right did not come together in response to the Roe decision. No, Weyrich insisted, what got us going was the attempt on the part of the (IRS) to rescind the tax-exempt status of Bob Jones University because of its racially discriminatory policies.” <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php...>

“He was adamant that, yes, the 1975 action by the IRS against Bob Jones University was responsible for the genesis of the Religious Right in the 1970s.” It was only after leaders of the New Right held a conference call to discuss strategy, Balmer says, that abortion was “cobbled into the political agenda of the Religious Right.”

Robert Billings, in correspondence with Falwell, marveled with delight that abortion would “pull together many of our ‘fringe’ Christian friends.” Falwell, Weyrich, and their fellow operatives at last recognized that support for reproductive rights from feminists and liberals “had imbued the abortion issue with associations that could be tapped to mobilize a wide array of cultural conservatives,” according to Linda Greenhouse and Reva B. Siegel.

Abortion henceforth would be the key to unlocking power for the conservative movement. But before it could be used to control the future, it was necessary first to change the past. The flock would have to learn to forget that for decades abortion was just one among many moral concerns, and it played little role in dividing the faithful from the damned.

The Catholic Church first prohibited abortion at any stage of pregnancy by canon law in 1869. But when abortion was criminalized across most of the United States in the late nineteenth century, the sentiments of the Catholic Church had little to do with it.

Two groups in particular spearheaded the antiabortion cause. The first was Protestant nativists who feared an onslaught of immigrant and Catholic babies and saw a ban on abortion as a way of producing the more “desirable” kind of babies. Leaders of the eugenics movement, too, were initially hostile to both abortion and birth control, fearing they would suppress the birth rates of wealthy, “better” women. According to historian Leslie J. Reagan, professor of history at the University of Illinois, “White male patriotism demanded that maternity be enforced among white Protestant women.”

Standing shoulder to shoulder, if at times awkwardly, with these Protestant nativists was a faction of the medical establishment led by the Boston physician Horatio Robinson Storer, who sought to reverse widespread acceptance of early abortion. Storer also railed against the education of girls, asserting that “To stimulate a girl’s brain to the utmost, during the access of puberty, is a positive loss to the State.”

In a widely distributed tract, he lamented that “abortions are infinitely more frequent among Protestant women than among Catholic,” and wondered whether America’s western and southern territories would be “filled with our own children or by those of aliens? This is a question that our women must answer; upon their loins depends the future destiny of the nation.”

By the middle of the twentieth century, abortion was both mostly illegal and yet widely practiced in the United States. Somewhere between 200,000 and 1.2 million procedures took place every year (estimates vary), with a large number occurring in unsafe circumstances. One indication of the prevalence of the procedure was the death toll. According to the Guttmacher Institute, in 1930 there were an estimated 2,700 deaths attributed to illegal abortions—though some researchers suggest the true number was higher. With the invention of antibiotics, the procedure became safer, but in 1965 deaths from illegal abortion still accounted for 17 percent of all deaths attributed to childbirth and pregnancy.

The effort to reform laws criminalizing abortion was also driven by public health-minded doctors, who pointed out that the risk of injury and death from illegal abortion “disproportionately harmed poor women and women of color, who could not afford to pay the ‘right’ doctor or travel to a jurisdiction where abortion was legal,” according to Reva B. Siegel.

Many religious leaders agreed with them, and came together to form the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, which assisted women in obtaining abortions from licensed medical professionals. The effort to reform laws criminalizing abortion was also driven by public health-minded doctors, who pointed out that the risk of injury and death from illegal abortion “disproportionately harmed poor women and women of color, who could not afford to pay the ‘right’ doctor or travel to a jurisdiction where abortion was legal.”

“The early political battles over abortion in state legislatures pitted Catholic antiabortion lobbyists against Protestant proponents of abortion law liberalization, with most Republican legislators siding with the Protestants.”

As Williams goes on to note, “many Republicans supported the liberalization of state abortion laws, believing that abortion law reform accorded well with the party’s tradition of support for birth control, middle-class morality, and Protestant values.”

Billy Graham echoed widely shared Protestant sentiments when he said in 1968, “In general, I would disagree with [the Catholic stance],” adding, “I believe in planned parenthood.” Indeed, the most liberal abortion law in the country was signed in 1967 by California’s Republican governor, Ronald Reagan.

Contrary to myth, when the Supreme Court handed down its decision on *Roe v. Wade*, many secular and religious conservatives responded with delight. Here is what W. Barry Garrett, Washington bureau chief of the Baptist Press, a wire service run by the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote upon the announcement: “Religious liberty, human equality, and justice are advanced by the Supreme Court abortion decision.” <https://billmoyers.com/.../when-southern-baptists-were.../>

Garrett’s position wasn’t exceptional. The 1971 convention of the Southern Baptists endorsed a resolution calling for the legalization of abortion to preserve the “emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother” as well as in cases of rape, incest, and “deformity.” The convention approved the same resolution after *Roe*, in 1974, calling it a “middle ground between the extreme of abortion on demand and the opposite extreme of all abortion as murder,” and again in 1976.

Many leading members of the Republican establishment were thrilled with the outcome of *Roe v. Wade*. The first lady, Betty Ford, hailed it as a “great, great decision.” Conservative senator Barry Goldwater also initially hailed its passage. “I think abortion should be legalized because whether it is legal or not, women are going to have it done,” he wrote in a draft of a letter to a constituent in 1973. Goldwater’s wife, Peggy, was a founding member of Planned Parenthood in Arizona. In 1976 fewer than 40 percent of Republican delegates opposed abortion rights. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/461985>

Public opinion polls at the time showed that a greater percentage of Republican voters were pro-choice than their Democratic counterparts.

One thing that the politico-theological leaders of the movement appeared to understand was that the greatest danger to the antiabortion party might come from liberal Christian thinkers. The Bible and 2,000 years of Christian apologetics, after all, has provided ample material to those who argue that abortion rights are compatible with Christian belief and practice. It was therefore necessary to purge theology of any position inconsistent with the idea that all the moral and religious attributes of human life are invested in the zygote at the moment of fertilization.

This in turn meant making “life begins at conception” something close to a foundational doctrine—which in turn helped to bring about a convergence of the many variations on conservative forms of the Christian faith. The new dividing lines in American religious life were no longer between Protestant and Catholic, or between this sect and that, but between conservatism and liberalism—or, as the conservatives saw it, between the faithful and the godless, who came to be defined by their evident contempt for “life.”

Evidence of their swift success came in the response to D. Gareth Jones’s 1984 book *Brave New People: Ethical Issues at the Commencement of Life*.

In his book, which was published by the respected Christian publisher InterVarsity Press, Jones lays out a case that would have seemed unremarkable in an earlier time. The embryo, he argues, has moral value but is not the equivalent of a human child. He also takes the trouble to review the long and complex history of Christian approaches to reproductive health issues. Had the book been published twenty years previously, it would likely have received mild commentary on what would have counted as a mainstream position. But in 1984, with conservative hopes for power resting increasingly on unifying the religious right around abortion, Jones’s work met with brutal denunciations.

It was a “monstrous book,” the leaders of the religious right raged, and Jones was on a “bandwagon bound for hell.” For the first time in its history, InterVarsity Press felt compelled to withdraw a book from publication. As the pro-life view came to dominate conservative Christian theology, an alliance between conservative Catholics and conservative evangelicals that could scarcely have been imagined in the America of earlier times began to take hold. Fast forward to today. It is not uncommon to hear birth control characterized as abortion, or pronouncements that abortion is “almost never” necessary to save the life of the mother. And they characterize late-term abortions as whimsical decisions when the research shows that such abortions are almost always done in the event of complications that threaten the life and health of either or both mother and fetus.

Abortion has been made a litmus test of faith... both the religious and political. But understanding the history that has led to this current partisan divide is important...especially if we want to relate to this issue with honesty, compassion, and nuance.

*An update. It has been pointed out to me that the author's statement that "abortions are almost always done in the event of complications that threaten the life and health of either or both mother and fetus", is not necessarily accurate.

Late term abortions make up less than 1 percent of all abortions, but these abortions are not always about danger to mother or child. Research has shown that "Among women in the late-term abortion group, the most commonly cited reason for delaying the procedure was "raising money for the procedure and related costs." Two thirds of women in the late-term abortion group gave this reason, compared with one-third of the women in the first-trimester group."