

Having arrived at my own pro-life convictions by the path I took (see “My Journey” <http://www.celiawolfdevine.com/prolife/my-journey/>), I am deeply troubled by the fact that as a result of the peculiarities of American politics the pro-life movement has become linked in people’s minds with Hawkish foreign policies, and indifference to the welfare of the poor and the claims of the environment. A German colleague of mine at Stonehill told people he was pro-life and they immediately concluded that he favored the war in Iraq. This makes no sense if one looks at the moral principles involved in the two cases. Conceptualizing the political landscape in this way weakens the pro-life movement, and neglect of the moral claims of unborn human beings weakens the progressive movement. Being a “progressive” in the current political climate has come to mean very little more than being approved of by other people who call themselves progressive.

Things have not always been like this. Progressivism flourished in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century. The social gospel Protestantism of Rev. Martin Luther King (expressed, for example in his “I have a dream” speech) was a good example. The abolitionist movement, the womens’ suffrage movement, the labor unions’ struggles to protect vulnerable workers in mines and factories, prohibitionism, agrarians trying to protect the way of life of small farmers – all these understood themselves to be progressive. And they all had something in common. They had a moral framework that stood above the opinions and practices of those around them, and provided them a vision of what a good society would be like, so that they could distinguish progress from regression or decadence. Without this sort of moral compass there is no way to tell whether a given change will make things better or worse.

Underlying these movements was a deep belief in human dignity grounded in our shared human nature. Black people are full human beings in the same way white people are, and that is why slavery is wrong. A society which favors human flourishing is preferable to one that does not, and our shared human nature gives us pointers to help us discern which of our potentials we should cultivate and develop if we are to lead flourishing lives. Christians understood our shared human nature as given us by God; being created in the image of God we each have an inherent and inviolable dignity. Many progressives were motivated by their religious (usually Christian, sometimes Jewish or Hindu) convictions, but a sense of a common human nature that forms our understanding of human flourishing can exist without an explicit religious basis.

Another shared element of progressivism was its special concern to protect the vulnerable and enable them live more humanly satisfying lives. This would include things like literacy and cultural advantages. It was the oppression of the powerless that fueled the moral fire in the reformers.

Somewhere in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, however, the Left (who thought of themselves as the progressives) collapsed into nihilism and despair. The reasons are complicated. Certainly the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Bobby Kennedy did much to dash the hopes of idealistic young people. But tensions within the Civil Rights Movement had been rising, and the solidarity among its members badly eroded. (On this read Todd Gitlin’s *The Twilight of Common Dreams*).

A little story illustrates what happened. The Lone Ranger and Tonto (his Indian sidekick) are ambushed suddenly. The Lone Ranger says "It's all over. We're surrounded by Indians!" Tonto replies "what you mean 'we' white man?" The "we" that bound the left together became more and more tenuous. Blacks began to say "what you mean 'we' white man?" Then feminists, reacting in part to the exploitative treatment they got from activist men, also said "what you mean 'we' white man?" Other groups split off, with gay and lesbian activists saying "what you mean 'we' straight man (or woman)?" The idea of a common human nature became viewed as oppressive, and the experience of each group something only other members of the group could understand.

When human solidarity is eroded, what is owed a person by virtue of his or her human dignity becomes impossible to distinguish from the demands of a particular group. We are left with nothing to set against the conventions of the larger society but the will of increasingly smaller groups. "My friends and I don't like it" is not an adequate reason to reject some law or policy. One possible result is a philosophy of "rights" founded on mere collective assertion, and the dismissal of doubters as bigots; another is collapse into hedonism and despair. Unless we can revive a sense of common humanity, including that of the most vulnerable, progressivism is doomed.

What can the pro-life movement contribute to progressivism? At this point it should be clear. Who is more helpless and vulnerable than the unborn human being in the womb? Who so fragile, needy, and so lacking in a voice of his or her own to resist the violence of abortion. Colin Harte uses a beautiful phrase for what it means to be pro-life. He says it manifests "solidarity with the last and the least." The pro-choice movement leaves the unborn at the mercy of the will of the mother and those she employs to destroy him or her, as well as those who pressure her to make this choice.

The pregnant woman is also particularly vulnerable, as is the woman with a young baby. Human solidarity would dictate that we step in and help them. In the absence of that solidarity they are abandoned. Abortion is, thus, a way of abandoning women as well as their children. A society that protects and cherishes its women and children is a healthy society. One that fails to do this manifests a heartlessness that begins to pervade every aspect of our common life. Individual will and power to control reign supreme. The disabled should have been aborted; those who were not exist at our mercy. Children exist only because their parents did not decide to kill them. Women should gratify men sexually without expecting them to take responsibility for their offspring. Employers have no responsibility to accommodate the needs of pregnant women or mothers of young children. Nor do colleges have an obligation to provide for the needs of parenting students. A woman can abort a man's baby without his even knowing it. Trust and intimacy in sex are thus profoundly undermined.

A revitalized progressivism would be coherent intellectually and have a guiding principle – a moral compass. A society is to be judged good to the degree that it protects and supports its most vulnerable members. This carries on beautifully what is best in the progressive tradition. And such a principle requires opposition to abortion. This also ties together many other progressive causes because they spring from a deep feeling for the value of each human life. Opposition to war, especially wars of choice under modern conditions where civilian casualties are high, and opposition to capital punishment are part of the picture. Providing medical and educational help for the disadvantaged, lunch programs

for poor children, a variety of services for the disabled, the elderly, migrant workers, and immigrants, are also important, as are insuring fair wages, safe working conditions for workers, and a more family friendly workplace. There must be some limitations on the practice of downsizing profitable business and sending the resulting jobs abroad. We must protect the natural environment for the sake of our children and grandchildren, if for no other reason. A humane immigration policy – though not open borders – is also needed.

Finally, we must foster a climate of mutual respect in which people with differing views can discuss the issues in such a way that, in the absence powerful reasons to do otherwise, we acknowledge that no party is grossly stupid, pathological, or in obvious bad faith. We should not throw things at one another, or indulge in name calling of any sort.

I have concentrated in this essay on why those who identify themselves as progressives ought to be pro-life, but I do not mean to imply that those who identify themselves as conservatives are to be praised. The inconsistencies conservatives are entangled in are different but no less serious. But that would be another essay. I'm addressing progressives in this blog because my own convictions are both progressive and pro-life and because the hostility and contempt with which most progressives have reacted to pro-lifers has left them homeless and therefore driven them into the arms of political allies who betray a consistent life ethic in other ways. Progressives should distance themselves from their extremist pro-choice wing and extend a hand to those who, out of compassion for vulnerable unborn human beings, have taken a stand and entered the political arena.