

Roe v. Wade: The Religious Response

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The US Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v Wade* has been framed as a victory for religion over secular liberalism (Dias, 2022). Under the Trump administration the combined social and political might of America's Catholic and Evangelical hierarchies grew considerably, finding footholds across US society on a scale that has not been witnessed in decades. Observing this, scholars and abortion rights advocates, had been warning for some time that *Roe v Wade* was vulnerable (Ziegler, 2020).

In societies where Christianity dominates, an adherence to beliefs derived from the Christian faith is often cited as the underpinning motivation for opposing abortion (Lowe & Page, 2022) with religiosity correlating positively with restrictive views on abortion in individuals and restrictive law and policy at a societal level (Bloomer et al, 2018). The intertwining of religion and politics is exemplified in the use of Biblical rhetoric from those opposing liberalisation, within political discourse as observed in Northern Ireland's Legislative Assembly (Pierson and Bloomer, 2018).

However, while religious opposition to abortion currently holds the most political power, it is not the position most representative of Christian believers in the US or elsewhere. Large scale survey data demonstrates support for legal abortion access across all faiths and denominations (apart from white Evangelicals) particularly when asked to consider specific circumstances in which an abortion might be requested (Lewis, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2022). Perhaps the most important evidence of incongruence between the dominant Christian positions on abortion and the lived experience of the faithful is in the data gathered on abortion seekers. The Guttmacher Institute report that 1 in 4 women in the US have abortions during their lifetimes and that 64% of people accessing abortion services express a religious affiliation (Jones, 2020). Despite most faiths containing some prohibitions on abortion, being

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religious does not appear to have a significant impact on abortion decision-making, except for white Evangelical women who are under-represented in this cohort.

To understand the reality of the religious response to abortion beyond the dominant discourse, it is important to consider the recent history of religious engagement with abortion in the US. Until the second half of the 20th century, most Christian denominations were ambivalent to the question of abortion, with many holding official positions that respected the complexity of the issue despite expressing moral misgivings. It was largely seen as a private matter, one which was only really of political concern to Catholics. Rev Tom Davis recounts the divergence between the Catholic and Protestant traditions in the early 20th century as Margaret Sanger built a strong network of clergy support for access to contraception, using the plight of poor women in poor health to appeal to their pastoral responsibility (Davis, 2005). In the 1960s, many state chapters of Planned Parenthood had clergy representatives on their boards. In 1967 a group of Protestant and Jewish clergy launched a national abortion support network and referral system called the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion (CCS). At its height it encompassed around 1400 active members and helped tens of thousands of women access abortion care from safe, if illegal providers. One of its founding members, Baptist Minister Howard Moody, opened one of the first legal abortion clinics in the country when New York state legalised abortion in 1970, bringing abortion out of hospital settings into accessible community spaces and driving down the cost of the procedure (Dunlap, 2016).

Following *Roe v. Wade*, those involved with the CCS evolved into a lobbying and advocacy organisation, the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR), and set about presenting religious opposition to the slew of legislative attempts to roll back on abortion rights following the historic decision by the Supreme Court. Using the establishment clause of the US constitution, they successfully argued that any law banning abortion would be tantamount to establishing the Catholic religious doctrine on fetal personhood in statute, by demonstrating that there are a range of interpretations on the beginning of life across different faiths and denominations (Mills, 1991).

However, by the mid-1970s Evangelical opposition to abortion began to consolidate. This rapid shift in the positioning of abortion in Evangelical churches has been well documented by cultural and political commentators and historians and can be attributed largely to the political opportunism of the Republican party who resourced Evangelical leaders to make abortion a vote winning issue (Balmer, 2014; Ronson, 2021). In parallel, RCAR continued to work in practical ways for greater access to abortion, drawing attention to ‘rogue’ clinics that aimed to prevent women from accessing abortion and producing tools for use by faith leaders who wished to facilitate choice affirming discourse in their communities and congregations. They changed their name to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice in 1993 and still present a visible alternative to religious opposition to abortion. Since then, a number of other faith-based organisations have taken up similar work. Faith Aloud is a network of clergy who provide all-options pregnancy counselling and listening support to people experiencing spiritual conflict over an abortion decision. The Religious Institute developed a large suite of interfaith resources to support pro-choice advocacy in religious settings, arguing that to deny abortion is immoral. A group of Black religious leaders and scholars, Interfaith Voices for Reproductive Justice, work with academic institutions, particularly religious seminaries, to develop theological scholarship and praxis based on the principles of reproductive justice. The National Council of Jewish Women’s ‘Rabbis for Repro’ campaign has remobilised support for abortion rights in the US Jewish community in recent years and the long-standing group Catholics for Choice continues to represent the majority view among US Catholics that abortion should be legally available.

Although these examples are heartening, we must ask, what do these efforts mean in a post-*Roe* America, in the context of a broader shift towards right-wing political ideologies and conservative discourse on issues of gender, sexuality and reproductive freedom? These pro-choice religious perspectives, although well-established in their own sphere of influence, have never been afforded enough political or media attention to significantly impact the wider public discourse. Additionally, the rhetorical shift of white Evangelicals towards what has been described as ‘Christian nationalism’, attaches a more explicitly religious dynamic to the agenda of some right-wing conservatives wielding political power. These feel like dangerous developments that appear to undermine constitutional principles like religious freedom and can attract significant grassroots support, particularly through social media.

However, when the legal right to abortion was presented for public vote in Kansas in August 2022 as a proposal to ban abortion in this traditionally Republican state, the ban was decisively rejected by the electorate (Doan, 2022). As well as exposing a gap between lawmakers and ordinary people, the aggressive roll back of reproductive rights under a religious banner has prompted more visible advocacy from within a religious framing, including faith leaders in states most impacted by abortion bans providing practical support to increase access to services, reminiscent of those clergy who did the same over 50 years ago (Vlamiš, 2022). President Biden's identity as a 'pro-choice Catholic' has been scrutinised, providing a platform for Catholics for Choice to reiterate both the evidence base of Catholic support for legal access to abortion and the theological basis in Catholic social justice teaching (Olander and Cadelago, 2022). Most significant of all, the reproductive justice movement led by Black feminist organisers has come to the fore, providing a national network of both practical support and political activism that has connected abortion holistically to other movements like those fighting for a living wage, against voter suppression or challenging state violence against Black communities (Luna, 2020). In this arena, faith leaders have always played an important role.

Finally, the local resonance of these religious dynamics cannot be ignored. Whilst the influence of the Catholic church on abortion attitudes across the island of Ireland appears to be weakening, here in Northern Ireland, the Evangelical anti-abortion movement is directly influenced by events in the US. In April 2022, Pastor Rusty Thomas of the extremist group Operation Save America addressed an anti-protocol rally in Lurgan, sharing a stage with leader of the DUP Jeffrey Donaldson. Thomas was also hosted at Parliament Buildings by TUV politician Jim Allister and preached outside Craigavon Area hospital at a protest organised by local anti-abortion activists.² Aside from these fringe groups, mainstream Protestant churches also oppose the new legal framework for abortion access, with the Presbyterian church particularly vocal in their engagement in the public arena.³ However, whilst the fall of *Roe v Wade* serves to motivate some sections of the religious communities here, Northern Ireland has also witnessed the growing visibility of alternative abortion narratives from within a religious framework. Research carried out with people of

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXN3NY71Qc0&ab_channel=AbolishAbortionNI

³ For example, [https://www.presbyterianireland.org/News/November-2021/Abortion-Services-\(Safe-Access-Zones\)-Bill.aspx](https://www.presbyterianireland.org/News/November-2021/Abortion-Services-(Safe-Access-Zones)-Bill.aspx)

faith who accept abortion is a part of life for many women, demonstrated diverse and nuanced attitudes with the majority of participants indicating that their personal views on abortion do not match the official position of their denomination or faith leaders (Bloomer and MacNamara, forthcoming). Following a facilitated engagement to discuss the findings of this research, a group of faith leaders established a network called Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice which aims to create space for alternative conversations on abortion in faith spaces and address abortion stigma (Turtle, forthcoming). This group has tentatively begun to develop new social, ethical and theological language around abortion in Northern Ireland and insert that into the public discourse through events, conferences and engaging with politicians and the media. Just as anti-abortionists take inspiration from their US counterparts, the holistic work of faith-based reproductive health, rights and justice advocates in the US has inspired and influenced this small group in Northern Ireland.

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