

Criss-Cross:

Democrats, Republicans, and Abortion

George McKenna

Suppose this: suppose a politically savvy Rip Van Winkle in say, 1965, perceiving that a movement to legalize abortion was gaining strength in the country, were asked, “Which of the two major political parties will eventually identify with that movement?” What would he answer? I think he would mull it over in his head for awhile and then say: “the Republicans, probably.” Why? “Well, in the first place, it fits pretty well into the Republicans’ private-property philosophy. ‘Let’s keep government out of a woman’s most personal property.’ Secondly, consider the demographics. The Republicans draw heavily from the upper-middle class WASPs, where the drive for population control has always come from. Abortion fits very well into the old eugenics mythology—the belief that you can improve the health of the ‘race’ by limiting the breeding of ‘undesirables.’ You can still hear echoes of that in the conversations of bicoastal Republicans. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if the Republican Party came out with a plank saying ‘We support abortion, in certain cases, for the nation’s overall health and well-being.’ Finally, consider the Republicans’ emphasis on the need for law and order and their conservative approach to welfare. The Republicans may not say this out loud but it slots right into their conservative ideology: abortion is good because, by holding down illegitimate births, it will cut down on crime and welfare costs.”

What about the Democrats? “Well,” Rip would say, “let’s start again with demographics. Consider the heavy concentration of Roman Catholics in the Democratic Party. The Church hierarchy would go bananas if any prominent Catholic Democrat—or any Democrat at all—came out in favor of abortion. The Church has consistently held that abortion is one of the gravest moral offenses because it involves the direct killing of an innocent human being. No way is a Catholic Democrat, or any Democrat who wants Catholic support (and what Democrat doesn’t?), going to support abortion. It might even be smart politics for the Democrats to pick a fight with the Republicans on the abortion issue. Democrats like to boast that they protect the weak and

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the vulnerable. You remember Vice President Hubert Humphrey's characterization of his party as the advocate of those 'who are in the dawn of life; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.' All they have to do is insert 'unborn children' into that list and they can beat up Republicans every time on the abortion issue. I can hear them now: 'Let the Republicans pick on the weak and vulnerable, killing children in the womb to cut welfare costs. We Democrats are the party of compassion, the party that sticks up for the little guy, including the littlest guy of all, the child in the womb [Applause].'"

Having delivered himself of this well-considered prophecy in 1965, Rip Van Winkle goes down for his nap. When he wakes up and we tell him how the abortion issue finally sorted itself out between our two major parties, Rip says, "Huh? How could *that* have happened?"

So how could it? I will take a stab at this thorny issue. It will be an essay, which literally means "a try." To try, to "essay," is not necessarily to succeed. But the hazard is worth it, because we really need to understand what happened during a critical period in American party politics.

Let's start with an all-too-easy answer to Rip's question. It goes like this: abortion ended up in the Democratic Party because feminists piggybacked it onto the Democrats' civil rights agenda. By 1965 the Democrats, despite the remaining segregationists in their own ranks, had begun to claim ownership of the civil rights agenda. The defining event was the Republicans' nomination of Barry Goldwater for President in 1964. When Goldwater publicly opposed passage of the Civil Rights Act of that year, Northern Democrats gleefully hung an "anti-civil rights" sign around the necks of the Republicans and, fairly or not, they've been doing it ever since. The term "civil rights" acquired an almost religious aura. Everyone is for it, so just about everyone claims it. There are Latino civil rights, Native American civil rights, gay civil rights, civil rights for women, civil rights for stout people, and so on. But the feminists were among the first and—so the argument goes—they dragged abortion with them.

This explanation sounds plausible at first, but it begs some critical questions. First, it assumes that the Democrats in the 1960s were prepared to take their marching orders from pro-abortion feminists. This is the fallacy of presentism—reading the present into the past. Democrats today are in thrall to the feminists but they weren't then. Democratic conventions in those days were dominated by hard-boiled union leaders and city bosses who didn't care a whit about feminist causes. If we go back historically we see that American feminism was always more popular with Republicans than with

Democrats. The Republicans were the first party to support a gender-based Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, which they did as early as 1940. Feminism was an upper-middle class phenomenon, one of the many “civic” movements championed by Republican women, while the Democratic agenda tilted more toward the desires of the party’s working-class base, like minimum wage laws and the protection of unions. Even the McGovern-stacked presidential convention in 1972 shied away from an abortion plank. McGovern favored it—his own daughter had had one, a family secret at that time—but he knew it was political poison, so he and other party leaders killed off attempts to put it in the platform. Ted Kennedy, then as now the lion of progressive Democrats in the Senate, wrote to a constituent in 1971 that “the legalization of abortion on demand is not in accordance with the value which our civilization places on human life. . . . When history looks back on this era it should recognize this generation as one which cared about human beings enough to halt the practice of war, to provide a decent living for every family and to fulfill its responsibility to its children from the very moment of conception.” Even in 1976, three years after *Roe v. Wade*, Kennedy insisted that “abortion is morally wrong. It is not a legitimate or acceptable response to any problem of society. And if our country wishes to remain true to its basic moral strength, then unwanted as well as wanted children must be unfailingly protected.”

The second big hole in the thesis that abortion got piggybacked by feminists onto the Democrats’ agenda is its assumption that feminists were in the vanguard of the “abortion rights” movement. Far from it. You’d never know it from media celebrations of the early feminists, but if you check the website of Feminists for Life (<http://www.feministsforlife.org/history/foremoth.htm>) you’ll see how anti-abortion the “feminist foremothers” were. Susan B. Anthony called abortion “the horrible crime of child murder,” and Alice Paul, one of the leaders to getting the women’s suffrage amendment into the Constitution in 1920 and the author of the first Human Life Amendment in 1923, considered it “the ultimate exploitation of women.” Even modern feminists at first stayed away from promoting abortion. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, usually credited with being the opening manifesto of modern feminism, didn’t even mention abortion in its first (1963) edition. Imagine Karl Marx writing his *Communist Manifesto* without saying anything about class struggle. The “statement of purpose” for the National Organization for Women (NOW), written by Friedan and others a full three years after *The Feminine Mystique*, denounces prejudice against women, demands equality of women in the workplace, schools and colleges, calls for more women to serve in government, and seeks “to open a reexamination of laws and mores

governing marriage and divorce”—but says nothing about abortion. This would be like Thomas Jefferson writing the Declaration of Independence but forgetting to put in the part about separating from England. The truth is that neither Friedan nor any of the women who founded NOW in 1966 were thinking that they were founding a pro-abortion organization. It was two *men*, Lawrence Lader and Bernard Nathanson, who later pushed a reluctant Friedan to make abortion one of her organization’s planks. Nathanson, a gynecologist, was moved by compassion for women with unwanted pregnancies. (Later, thanks to ultrasound, it occurred to him that there was another person deserving compassion, and now Nathanson is on the other side.) Lader had grander ambitions. A veteran of far-left politics—in the ’40s he was district leader for Vito Marcantonio, the radical congressman from East Harlem, and then ran for New York State Assembly as a candidate of the Communist-run American Labor Party—Lader wanted to move American society into a more “progressive” future by combating the forces and institutions that inhibit change. While writing an admiring biography of Margaret Sanger in 1955, he became attracted to her eugenics-based birth control movement, and wanted to take it a step further by providing abortion on demand. Shortly after the publication of Lader’s book, *Abortion*, in 1966, he and Nathanson held an historic meeting with Friedan. They promised her that if she would put an abortion plank in the next (1967) convention platform, they would, in the meantime, work the media to dramatize the plight of desperate women who had to resort to dangerous “back alley” abortions. True to their word, they made themselves the sources for articles in mainstream magazines at the time, such as *Newsweek* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, exaggerating, by at least a factor of ten, the number of deaths from illegal abortions. (Nathanson has since confessed that he and Lader simply made up the statistics.) Friedan kept her part of the bargain, getting the abortion plank into the 1967 platform, though even then it was given low priority. Not until 1968 did NOW make it central, and thereafter, with a convert’s zeal, Friedan made it number one. But she always acknowledged Lader’s leadership on the issue, calling him (apparently without conscious irony) the “father” of the abortion-rights movement. His paternal influence was quite considerable. Because he was a skilled and fluent spokesman who could boil down complicated issues for non-specialists, he reached a very large audience during the late ’60s and early ’70s. He was cited no fewer than eight times in Justice Blackmun’s majority opinion in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, and was frequently quoted in the media as if he were an objective source rather than a dogged advocate.

But Lader was not the only father of the abortion movement. You could

not take or teach a college course on environmental politics in the late '60s without encountering Garrett Hardin's 1968 article in *Science* magazine on "The Tragedy of the Commons." It was a huge hit in academia, probably because it combined the gloss of science with the passion of social commitment. In it, Hardin argued that unless the state got involved in "controlling the breeding of families" a worldwide ecological disaster loomed ahead. "The only way we can preserve and nurture other and more precious freedoms is by relinquishing the freedom to breed, and that very soon." Hardin was the father of "the population bomb" thinking; the book by that title, by Paul Ehrlich, a Hardin acolyte, was a huge best-seller.

There was a kind of aerosol effect to abortion advocacy in the early '70s; it was sprayed all over the air by Lader, Hardin, Friedan, Ehrlich, and lesser lights. We had only three TV news networks then, and they were all saying the same thing. The message blowing in the wind was that the time had come for "abortion reform." It was good for women, good for men, good for population control, good for the environment. It was the responsible thing to do, and responsible people advocated it, much as they advocate embryonic stem-cell research today. At that point the issue was in equipoise between the two major parties; it could have gone either way. Friedan was a leftist Democrat, though NOW professed to be nonpartisan and did attract many high-status Republican women. Lader was to the left of the Democrats, but Hardin was a staunch Republican who took a number of positions usually considered conservative, such as calling for a ban on immigration from the Third World and opposing foreign aid (which, in his view, just encouraged more breeding). Some Republican leaders in the early '70s made a pass at tying abortion to the Democrats—Senate majority leader Hugh Scott called the McGovern Democrats "the triple-A party: abortion, amnesty, and acid"—but it was generally low-keyed because too many powerful Republicans favored it, among them Colorado governor Richard Lamm, Senator Bob Packwood, then-Congressman George H.W. Bush, Senator Charles Percy, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and National Security Advisor (later Secretary of State) Henry Kissinger. In fact, back in 1967, then-Governor Ronald Reagan of California signed a bill that virtually decriminalized abortion in the state.

We do not know for certain what Richard Nixon thought about abortion, but both he and his successor, Gerald Ford, were very keen on "population control." In 1970 Nixon appointed John D. Rockefeller III, to head up a commission on the "challenge" of population growth in America, and two years later the Rockefeller Commission issued a report proposing no fewer

than forty-six measures for cutting down on births. With typical Rockefeller-inspired arrogance, the commission boldly advocated a nationwide program of contraceptive “services” to minors and government-subsidized abortions. That proved to be a fatal overreach, for it set off a firestorm of criticism from Catholic bishops, and Nixon, facing reelection in 1972, ended up renouncing the whole report. But he never abandoned his commitment to population control. Early in 1974 he set in motion another commission, headed by Henry Kissinger, to study the “Implications of World Population Growth for U.S. Security and Overseas Interests,” more commonly known as NSSM 200 (National Security Study Memorandum 200). This commission issued its report in December of 1974, with instructions that it was to remain classified until 1989. Just as the Rockefeller Report had Rockefeller’s fingerprints all over it, this one was unmistakably Kissingerian. It was based on the premise that the population explosion in “LDCs” (less developed countries) poses a security risk to the United States. Why a security risk? Because high birthrates mean large numbers of young people, and young people are the ones most likely to jeopardize our investments, block U.S. access to strategic raw materials, and generally challenge existing world power structures. So we have to induce these countries to limit population through contraception, sterilization, and abortion. But we must be careful! With their long memories of colonialism, these people can get touchy about Western interference. So a kind of stealth program was recommended. It was to be presented in terms of the “rights” of individuals “to determine freely and responsibly their number and spacing of children.” It also recommended using the U.N. and other multilateral institutions as fronts to disguise U.S. involvement. Finally, in spite of its recommendation that population limits be wrapped in the rhetoric of individual “rights,” it added that “mandatory programs may be needed.”

The NSSM 200 didn’t come in until December of 1974, three months after Nixon’s resignation, but Ford signed off on it in 1975. Ford also appointed Nelson Rockefeller, the Republicans’ most public abortion cheerleader, to be his Vice President. So, if our friend Rip Van Winkle were to wake up in 1975, or even early in 1976, he might still cling to his earlier prediction that the Democratic Party would become the pro-life party and the Republicans the party of abortion. At about the same time Gerald Ford was endorsing NSSM 200 and placing Nelson Rockefeller a heartbeat away from the presidency, Ted Kennedy was declaring that abortion “is not a legitimate or acceptable response to any problem of society.” Despite restive rumblings from some quarters in the party, the leaders were in no hurry to accommodate them, and most Democratic voters were pro-life. But by

the end of the 1980 conventions everything turned around: clearly and unambiguously, the Republicans had become the pro-life party and the Democrats were now so committed to abortion that they would not consider any arguments against it.

What caused the turnaround? Here we enter difficult terrain. To go further we must detour back into the history of our two major political parties.

All kinds of shorthand labels have been used to describe them: the Democrats are liberal, the Republicans conservative; the Democrats are working class, the Republicans fly business class; Democrats are the mommy party, Republicans are the daddy; and so on. All of these categories are pretty broad-brush (John Kerry, working-class?) but they are useful in one respect: they get us started with a big picture, which we can later trim and modify to suit the greater, more complex, array of facts. Here is my own broad-brush treatment: when viewed historically, the Democratic Party has been the Catholic Party and the Republican Party the Protestant Party.

There have always been plenty of Protestants in the Democratic Party, especially in the South and in rural areas of the lower Midwest. But in the real growth areas in the country over the last century, the Democratic Party has been run largely by Catholics. There were clear historical reasons for this. From the 1840s, when Democratic ward-healers greeted the first great waves of Catholic immigrants on the wharves of New York City, Boston, Philadelphia and other East Coast cities, Catholics found a congenial home in the Democratic Party, one which permitted them at first a seat at the table of a great national party and finally a chance to preside over it, divvying out the patronage and the power throughout much of the North. In the old days the majority of Catholics were blue-collar, and from the time of Andrew Jackson in the 1830s Democrats had gone out of their way to cultivate support of what Jackson called the “laboring classes of society.”

But to understand the Catholic-Democratic synergy we have to go beyond demographics, to the core values of the Democratic Party. At least during most of the last century, those values have been highly congenial to Catholic social teaching. From *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII’s famous encyclical on the rights of labor in 1891, to Pope John XXIII’s progressive pronouncements in *Pacem in Terris* and *Mater et Magistra*, the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church have always been on the same wave length as regards social and economic rights, particularly the rights of the poor, weak, and vulnerable members of society. The high point came during the New Deal period of the 1930s, when a Democratic Congress and White House put through major legislation promoting social welfare, legitimizing unions, and regulating the practices of big business, but the congeniality continued

through the next three decades. The great majority of Catholic clergy were Democrats. Born in working-class homes, they attended Catholic schools and were usually the first generation in their family to get higher education—mainly in Catholic colleges and seminaries. Even the least reflective among them could see that the social teaching they absorbed in those colleges was strikingly similar to the domestic platform of the Democratic Party. As for the Catholic laity, by the 1940s their tie to the Democrats was so strong that one of the jokes of the time had two Irish ladies gossiping over the back fence: “Did you hear that Timmy Breen became a Republican?” one said. “Couldn’t be,” said the other, “I just saw him at Mass last Sunday.”

The next decade saw some erosion in Catholic support for Democrats, at least in national elections; among Catholic voters President Eisenhower was running almost even against Democrat Adlai Stevenson in 1956. But the Catholics were back on board in 1960, with at least two-thirds and perhaps as many as three quarters of them (depending on which survey you consult) helping to put the first Catholic in the White House. As usual, blue-collar Catholics voted more heavily Democratic than those in business and managerial positions, but there was a segment of the Catholic population that didn’t show up on the voting statistics because its members were too young to vote: Catholic college kids. John F. Kennedy exerted a particular influence on these Catholics because he was such a cool guy. They loved his grace and derring-do, the way he carried himself and made speeches and (especially) the relaxed way he bantered back and forth with reporters. Kennedy was Catholic but he was not *too* Catholic. He was not parochial, not part of the “immigrant church.” He had gone to Harvard and the London School of Economics; he had written books and even got a Pulitzer Prize for one of them. (The book, *Profiles in Courage*, was written by an aide but very few knew it at the time.) These young people were proud of Kennedy as a representative of their religion. They had been brought up in the era of Pius XII but were coming of age in the time of John XXIII and Vatican II. In their minds it all seemed to fit together: the Catholic Church was throwing open its windows to the modern world and here was this classy young Catholic occupying the highest seat in the land. It brought young people to the Democratic Party in a way that their forbears had not. Their parents and grandparents were simply born into it, accepting it as part of their patrimony, but they came to it as adventurers, finding in it a spirit of dynamism and openness, a secular counterpart to the Church’s *aggiornamento*.

These young people believed in progress, and not just the technological kind. They believed in the moral and spiritual progress of the race. The more

intellectually ambitious among them tackled the work of a French Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin, who was also a paleontologist. In *The Phenomenon of Man* Teilhard sought to demonstrate by scientific principles that the world was evolving toward increased synthesis and unification, which might well propel man into the “noosphere,” a place of expanded human consciousness. There were strong hints that this process would involve the Second Coming, though the specifically religious parts were opaque enough to permit the main thesis to be endorsed by Sir Julian Huxley, grandson of T.H. Huxley, Darwin’s close collaborator, who wrote the introduction. The book was a big hit, and even those who couldn’t get through it had read or heard enough summaries to catch its optimistic spirit.

If the Democratic Party was always welcoming to Catholics and in tune with their social doctrines, the Republicans had an even closer relationship to Protestantism. Historically, it was not just open to Protestantism. It was suffused with it.

The Republican Party was born in a Congregational church in Ripon, Wisconsin in 1854. At a meeting called by opponents of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which threatened to extend slavery into the new territories, a group of Whigs and Free Soilers, plus a few antislavery Democrats, decided that the time had come to form a new party opposed to the spread of slavery. That was the main Republican plank throughout the rest of the 1850s and into the 1860 election. But the party also drew from a deep well of cultural inheritances that the sons and daughters of the Puritans brought with them when they left the stony soil of New England and trekked across the upper Midwest. There was Sabbatarianism—no working, or even playing, from sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday—derived from a strict reading of Leviticus; there was “temperance,” which in practice usually meant prohibitionism. The first of these, when enforced by law, was vexing to Catholics, who saw nothing wrong with having fun on Saturday night or Sunday afternoon, and the second was simply incomprehensible. Together they reinforced their general Catholic view that Protestants were strange people. This ill-will was more than reciprocated from the Protestant side. The leading Protestant sects in the nineteenth century came from a tradition of Reformation theology that read Church history through the lens of Revelations, particularly the part about the Second Coming. That is where it predicts that Jesus will come back to earth and throw into hell the Antichrist, the Whore of Babylon. In the Reformed tradition the Whore of Babylon was the Pope, who uses his legions of bishops and priests to make the Catholic laity march in lockstep with his orders. Much of this theological scaffolding fell away in the nineteenth century but the overall view of American Catholics

as a kind of fifth column still remained. It was no marginal view but a highly respectable one. There were political parties devoted to anti-Catholicism, most prominently the American, or Know-Nothing Party. There was also plenty of No-Nothingism in one of the two major parties, the Whigs, who later formed the core of the Republican Party. (Abraham Lincoln was one of the few former Whigs who wanted no truck with Know-Nothingism, writing to a friend that he was not going to trade racial bigotry for religious or ethnic bigotry.) The Whigs reached into the same demographic well as the Know-Nothings, and in 1856 they actually ran with them on the “fusion” ticket backing Millard Fillmore for President. The Whig Party has been called “the ghost of Puritanism” because it preserved and nurtured the Puritans’ evangelical determination to reform, educate and generally uplift everyone, which they saw as doing the Lord’s work and their critics regarded as damnable meddling. White Southerners and Catholics, who particularly tended to this latter view, were thus regarded by Whigs, and their successor Republicans, as the chief obstacles to reform. In 1884 a Presbyterian minister named Samuel D. Burchard struck off a famous alliterative phrase when he told a gathering of the Religious Bureau of the Republican National Committee, “We are Republicans, and don’t propose to leave our party and identify with the party whose antecedents have been rum, Romanism, and rebellion.” Historians usually treat this as an unfortunate gaffe that cost the Republican presidential nominee, James G. Blaine, the crucial New York City vote (and thus the election); Burchard himself later tried to explain it away as “a mere rhetorical flourish” improvised on the spur of the moment. But he would not have shared those sentiments with a Republican audience if he didn’t know that they would please the choir. Less noticed by historians was the remark of President Grant to his Republican base in seeking their support for reelection in 1872. Grant warned of the possibility of a new civil war—only this time, he added, “the dividing line will not be Mason and Dixon’s, but it will be between patriotism and intelligence on one side, and superstition, ambition and ignorance on the other.” Everyone knew what he meant, and it reminded Catholics of why they were Democrats and why they were going to stay that way. This was the kind of jibe that sank deeply into their collective memory. At some level they never forgot the nastiness of nineteenth-century Republicanism.

Republican Catholic-baiting eased somewhat during the early twentieth century, when Protestantism in the North lost much of its crusading zeal. The mark of status then was to join theologically relaxed but liturgically decorous Protestant churches in the large cities of America. Retro-Gothic architecture was brought to perfection in Episcopalian churches during that

period, and H.L. Mencken's crack about the Episcopal Church being "the Republican Party at prayer" was not without a kernel of truth. Now Catholics had less to worry about from Republicans than from some fellow Democrats in the South. It was Southern fundamentalists who preserved much of the Reformation's anti-Catholic eschatology, which Northern Protestants had sloughed off decades earlier. So "the Whore of Babylon" was still being fought, but the battleground had moved southward. Protestant Klansmen hated Catholics as much as they hated Jews and "uppity" blacks, and in the 1928 presidential election the Democrats, though they still managed to hold the Deep South, suffered heavily in the polls there because of their nomination of Catholic Al Smith. The Depression and the New Deal largely papered over these divisions in the party, but by the end of World War II a new crack was opening in the Democratic coalition. Fifteen years after that, in the early 1960s, the crack became a chasm: segregationist Southern Democrats were squaring off against Northern liberal Democrats.

Could there be any doubt about which side the young Teilhard-reading Catholics were ready to join? They were on the march for civil rights (not all of them, of course, physically marching, but marching in spirit, virtually marching). They were once marching in religious processions; now they joined in secular marches. But wasn't it all the same thing? God's work had to be done here on earth—this was a religious calling. But there was one difference between their childhood processions and their marches today: today many of their fellow-marchers, while they might call themselves "spiritual," were not at all religious. Some of them were even opposed to religion, especially Catholicism, which they considered superstitious and reactionary. Yet this did not stand in the way of amicable relationships. In different ways these young people admired each other. The secular humanists were impressed by the dedication and seriousness of the Catholics. They figured that in this fight Catholicism was harmless, maybe even useful; afterwards their new friends might outgrow it, or at least not take it so seriously. The Catholics, for their part, liked the style and the dash of their secular comrades; they liked their gift for summing up the conflict in sharp, militant phrases that always got on the nightly news programs. And, perhaps above all, they liked the fact that their secular comrades liked them. If there was a touch of condescension in the secularists' attitude toward Catholic liberals, there was none going the other way. The Catholics wanted very much to be liked by their new friends.

The bonds of unity between the two groups were strengthened during the Vietnam War. They had been singing "We Shall Overcome," and now they

were singing, "Give Peace a Chance." But this time they got little support from a Democratic White House and even from the Northern Democrats in Congress. The Democratic Party bosses hated them and they hated them back. But in 1972 the old bosses were defeated. Liberals took over the party, nominating the antiwar George McGovern, and, despite McGovern's 49-state loss, the McGovernites stayed in control. By 1975 the Democratic Party became the party not only of social welfare and business regulation but of a whole bag of causes: environmentalism, consumer protection, affirmative action, gun control, arms control, multilateralism, rapprochement with the Soviets, and the Equal Rights Amendment. But the Democrats had not yet become the party of abortion. Not yet.

The young Catholic students who cheered Kennedy in 1960 were in their thirties now. They had gone into business, medicine, law, academia, the media, and, despite mass defections in the late 1960s, the clergy. In a few more years some of the priests would become bishops, and even now some were staff members and advisors to bishops and cardinals. There were nuns with doctorates who were professors and college deans and presidents; they were teaching, writing, trying out different roles. None would forget the struggles of the '60s and the friends they had made across religious lines.

The abortion issue discomfited them. They were shocked that so many of their antiwar friends simply dismissed their concerns about killing unborn children, regarding abortion simply as "a woman's choice." They tried dialoguing with them but the dialogue got so tense that they gave it up. Meanwhile, other Catholics were organizing anti-abortion protests, and that raised a question: Should they join or sit this one out? The pro-life activists were different from the activists of the 1960s. Few of them had ever been involved in demonstrations before. They had never marched against racism or the war, and some of them might have even been on the other side. In any case, all they seemed to care about now was abortion. It didn't look like there were many college students in the anti-abortion demonstrations (though there were plenty of Catholic high schools kids, who'd been given the day off to come), and most of the older demonstrators didn't sound like college graduates. They were the Catholics they had left behind when they went off to college at the start of the '60s. Their accents, their interests, their outlooks—nothing had changed since then. Even their Catholicism seemed to have come from an earlier era; it had a Tridentine quality. But why should that matter? It was enough that they were right on the abortion issue.

Somehow, though, it did matter. It didn't matter but it did matter. Cognitive dissonance can produce frustration, and in this case the frustration led to some angry ruminations: "Where were these people in the 1960s when

we needed them? What were they doing when the U.S. was napalming villages in Vietnam? They were home watching *Hogan's Heroes*. Now they've found a cause they care about, a single issue, and they expect us to join them because we're Catholics. Well, the Church should care about a lot of things—poverty, racism, exploitation, nuclear armaments, world hunger. Why just abortion?"

While these still-young liberal Catholics were wrestling with their consciences over whether to get involved in the anti-abortion campaign, the American bishops were speaking out. They started blandly enough in 1968, expressing the hope that society would "always be on the side of life." In the years that followed they kept increasing the volume. In 1969 they worried about the "widespread effort to 'liberalize' the present laws that generally prohibit abortion," warning—prophetically, we now know—that the killing of the unborn eventually "endanger[s] the lives of persons who are senile, incurably ill, or unable fully to exercise their faculties." By 1970 the bishops' statements were becoming categorical: "The life of the unborn child is a human life. The destruction of any human life is not a private matter, but the concern of every responsible citizen." In 1973, after the Supreme Court sought to end all argument (the *New York Times* announced that *Roe v. Wade* "settled" the question), the bishops stated "as emphatically as possible, our endorsement of and support for a constitutional amendment that will protect the life of the unborn," and in 1974 no fewer than four cardinals testified before the Senate Judiciary committee in support of an amendment. In 1975, in their most ambitious pro-life undertaking, the bishops published a "Pastoral Plan for Pro-life Activities," an elaborate document setting forth a strategy of education, pastoral help for women who had had abortions, and "a public policy effort" aimed at curbing them.

The bishops' most conspicuous muscle-flexing came during the 1976 presidential campaign, when they found themselves anxiously courted by both presidential candidates. President Ford announced his support for a constitutional amendment protecting life. During the Democratic primaries in Iowa, a state with a large right-to-life movement, Jimmy Carter emphasized his personal opposition to abortion; but once he got the nomination he reassured the prochoicers in his own party that he would not support a constitutional amendment, and so said the Democratic platform. This was painful to the bishops, who by conviction were Democrats. The basic thrust of the Democratic platform—emphasizing workers' rights, extension of government aid to the needy, government-subsidized health care, restraint in military spending, reliance on multilateral diplomacy—reflected Catholic thought, yet here was the Democrats' refusal to endorse the major prolife goal, a constitutional

amendment to reverse *Roe*. As one liberal writer smugly put it, “the bishops agreed with the Republican party on abortion, and with the Democratic party on virtually everything else.” If they could only get the Carter campaign right on abortion, they could wish both candidates well and vote Democrat with a clear conscience.

The prospects looked good. Carter was now trying to “clarify” his position. He insisted that he wasn’t against *all* attempts to amend the Constitution to protect the unborn; it was only the *current* proposals that he found unacceptable. Indeed, he added, the wording of the abortion plank (written by his own campaign staff) “was not in accordance with my own desires.” Back-channel communications between the bishops and the Carter campaign produced plans for a face-to-face meeting between Carter and the bishops. Soon the meeting took place, with the bishops’ executive committee sitting silently as Carter made his pitch. He once again shared his view that abortion was immoral; all he disagreed on was the question of strategy. He recited all the areas that they did agree upon, from health care to minimum wage laws. Surely, Carter reasoned, those areas also affected human life, and the Democrats had a much better record on them than did the Republicans.

It didn’t work. At that time one of the most influential figures in the then-called National Council of Catholic Bishops was Archbishop Joseph Bernardin. The Bernardin of 1976 developed a very powerful case for abolishing abortion. Appearing before a subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee in March of that year, he went out of his way to refute the argument (later advanced by Mario Cuomo) that opposition to abortion is a purely “religious” position which Catholics must not try to impose on non-Catholics. Abortion, Bernardin said, “is not wrong simply because the Catholic Church or any church says it is wrong. Abortion is wrong in and of itself. The obligation to safeguard human life arises not from religious or sectarian doctrine, but from universal moral imperatives concerning human dignity, the right to life, and the responsibility of government to protect basic human rights.”

With the election fast approaching, Bernardin kept up the fire. Some weeks before Carter met with the Bishops’ executive committee, he issued a statement anticipating Carter’s argument that the Democrats’ other positions were in accord with Church doctrine, aimed as they were at countering the threats to life from hunger, disease, drug and alcohol abuse, and other ills. Bernardin agreed that human life is threatened in a number of ways in our society. Abortion, however, stands out because it is “a direct assault on the lives of those who are least able to defend themselves. . . . [I]f we become insensitive to the violation of the basic right to life, our sensitivity to the entire

spectrum of human rights will ultimately be eroded.” After the meeting Bernardin repeated those views, reminding his listeners that the bishops had expressed strong disagreement—“indeed outrage”—with the Democrats’ abortion plank. “We . . . repeat today, with all the moral force we can muster, the need for a constitutional amendment to protect the life of the unborn.”

This was the high-water mark of the bishops’ campaign against abortion. Their power was not quite enough to stop the Democrats from putting the abortion plank in their platform, yet the plank’s reference to abortion was hardly an endorsement. It merely suggested that it was “undesirable” to attempt to overturn the Supreme Court’s decision “in this area,” and Carter’s own gloss on it suggested the possibility of some other means of curbing abortion. Even so, the bishops were not appeased; they remained firm in their opposition—“indeed, outrage,” as Bernardin put it.

The critical year was 1980. In two different places in their 1980 platform, the Democrats, forthrightly and affirmatively, endorsed a license to abortion. Under “Reproductive Rights,” they proclaimed that “a woman has a right to choose whether and when to have a child” and announced their firm support for (not merely their feeling “that it is undesirable to overturn”) *Roe v. Wade*. And, under “Privacy,” the platform called abortion “a fundamental human right,” and insisted that any funding for “reproductive” services must not exclude funding for abortion. This time neither Carter nor any other party leader had even bothered to meet with the bishops, much less attempt to appease them. The Democratic Party was now the abortion party and, in case the bishops had any objection, there was an implied response: stuff it.

The bishops were literally dumbstruck. There was no expression of “outrage” from them, though it would have been far more appropriate now than when Carter was dancing around the issue in 1976. Abortion was thrust right in the bishops’ faces and they said nothing—not that year, not for the next three years. And when they finally did speak, abortion was no longer their main topic. We’ll get back to that shortly. For now we have to ask: What could have occurred between 1976 and 1980 to cause the Democrats, who had been waffling on the issue, to become so firmly and confidently on the side of abortion? Here we have to make our way partly by speculation, though there are clues along the way. One event, or series of events, was a widespread campaign of vilification by pro-abortion feminists. The late 1970s marked the high season of American feminism; triumphalism was in the air, and so were displays of rage at any who dared stand in their way. A torrent of abuse was therefore unleashed against the Catholic clergy: What right did these celibate males have to talk about women’s reproductive rights? What did they know about bearing children? What did they even know about sex? Get

your rosaries off my ovaries! Mixed with these taunts was what appeared to be a resurrection of the old Know-Nothing charge that the Vatican was trying to “meddle” in American politics—only this time it was not coming from Republicans but from people associated with the left, people who usually voted Democrat. And that was what really hurt. It was coming from people who had marched with them in the '60s, mourned with them when Nixon beat McGovern, cheered with them when Nixon was forced from office. It was coming from their friends.

The Democratic Party has always been a coalition, and, at least since the time of the New Deal, it has consisted of four major groupings: African-Americans, Southern whites, liberal intellectuals, and Catholics. Each was in it for different reasons: blacks joined it in the 1930s not for civil rights (the Democrats had a miserable record there) but for economic assistance; Southern whites were in it partly for the same reason, though they also counted on the national party not to interfere with state racial segregation. Liberal intellectuals had grander ideas: they wrote treatises envisioning a better future for America and they believed that the Democratic Party could be the vehicle for realizing it. The Catholics were more or less contented with the political power they had built up over the years and wanted to make sure their gains were protected from Know-Nothing backlash.

Of the four components, two were conservative, the Southerners and the Catholics; but conservative in different ways. The Southerners were conservative on race, which translated into political conservatism. The Catholics were conservative culturally, for they were loyal to a Church which resisted many of the cultural fashions of the twentieth century, from sexy Hollywood movies to eugenics, birth control, forced sterilization of the mentally impaired, and abortion. In effect, Catholicism functioned as the Democratic Party's immune system, fighting off certain cultural trends they deemed toxic but which attracted many of the party's secular liberals.

What happened between November of 1976 and August of 1980 was the breakdown of the Democratic Party's immune system. It was subverted from within, by liberal Catholics, who could not put aside the friendships they had formed in the 1960s. They started the process after their friends burst out with crude, nasty polemics against the Church for standing in the way of “reproductive rights.” Instead of asking whether there might be something wrong with their friends they began asking whether there was something wrong with their Church. Was it too dogmatic, too uncompromising? Was there too much focus on abortion, to the exclusion of other issues where the Democratic Party—*their* party—was more clearly in line with Catholic so-

cial doctrine? As the young Catholics of the '60s approached middle age at the close of the '70s they were still mulling over these questions when the thunderclap came. The thunderclap was Ronald Reagan.

No Republican leader annoyed Catholic liberals as much as Ronald Reagan. An ex-B movie actor, an ex-New Deal Democrat, he deserted his party for the Republicans and turned on many Hollywood leftists during the Communist investigations of the 1950s. In their minds, his geniality was phony, his economic philosophy heartless, his anti-Communism mindless and profoundly dangerous to world peace. Now he had—whether through genuine conviction or political opportunism, most likely a mixture of both—assembled his own coalition of conservative Catholics and Southern evangelical Protestants, and added them to the traditional fiscal conservatives already in the Republican Party. The Catholic liberals were appalled. Reagan was raiding both their church and their party, pulling right-to-life Catholics, who traditionally voted Democrat, into the Republican fold. He was getting them to join the party of the rich, the party that had looked down its nose at Catholic immigrants and tried to Protestantize their children. Worse, he was getting Catholics into bed with white Southern evangelicals, who only a few years earlier had been calling the Church “the Whore of Babylon.” And what did these Southerners think about blacks? Their private “Bible” schools, which they set up in the wake of school desegregation in the South, seemed suspicious. They said they established them because public schools had eliminated God and Judeo-Christian morality, but the Carter administration was investigating them, suspicious that they might make end-runs around desegregation. Indignant, these former Democrats also moved into the Republican fold. Liberal Catholics, convinced that these Southerners were indeed racists, were appalled that Reagan was marrying them up with the anti-abortion Catholics, bringing both into the new Republican coalition.

In caring for and feeding the coalition, Reagan's team made radical changes in the Republicans' abortion plank. In place of its namby-pamby 1976 plank (devoted almost entirely to explaining how complex the issue was, how even Republicans differed on it, and how important “public dialogue” was), the 1980 plank put the complexity part into a dependent clause—“despite the complex nature of its various issues”—and then forthrightly declared that abortion “is ultimately concerned with equality of rights under the law.” Now, at last, the two parties made their positions starkly clear: For the Democrats, abortion was “a fundamental human right”; for the new Republican Party, unborn children deserved protection under civil rights law.

Logically, we might expect liberal Catholics to applaud the Republicans' new position and urge their party to re-write its own plank along similar

lines. After all, they agreed with their Church that abortion was evil because it killed human beings. But logic can become strangely inverted during times of social conflict. In *Wayward Puritans*, the sociologist Kai Erikson, borrowing an insight from Emile Durkheim, notes that social “deviance” can actually be used to reinforce the community’s boundaries.

The deviant is a person whose activities have moved outside the margins of the group, and when the community calls him to account for that vagrancy it is making a statement about the nature and placement of its boundaries. It is declaring how much variability and diversity can be tolerated within the group before it begins to lose its distinctive shape, its unique identity.

In themselves, the boundaries can be quite fuzzy at times. Anne Hutchinson’s “antinomian” doctrines differed only in degree from orthodox Puritanism; the same was true of the doctrines of the Quakers. But by fastening upon certain specific differences, in manner or dress, the community boundary-police is able to draw everyone in line by saying, in effect, “You don’t want to be like *them*, do you?”

Erikson’s thesis can be applied to a variety of communities today, and even to smaller groups. Among inner-city black teens, those who show too much interest in school may be accused of “acting white.” Everyone gets the message and avoids such deviant behavior. In this way the cohesion of the group is actually reinforced by the deviant. Orthodoxy thus consists not so much of affirmation of a philosophy or way of life but in *not* being like people the community scorns. This may explain why Catholic liberals in the Democratic Party uncomplainingly accepted the party’s pro-abortion plank. To have protested would have been “acting Republican” or “sounding like Reagan.” It also helps to explain why the bishops, who made such a fuss over the mild 1976 plank (which merely opposed a pro-life constitutional amendment) shut their mouths for three years in the face of a much greater provocation in 1980.

Anyone who thinks that the bishops operate independently, handing down decrees and getting those below to obey, has it almost exactly backwards. The bishops’ pronouncements well up from currents of thought circulating among people below them, in some cases from those far below them. Not from the pews, though. From Catholic seminaries, from Catholic journals and theological associations, from philosophy and theology departments in Catholic universities, and, most immediately, from the staffers who serve the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The overwhelming majority of those occupying these seats of influence are Democrats, and some are Democratic activists. For them, any move toward condemning the

Democrats' position on abortion only helps the Republicans, and helping the Republicans only helps to inaugurate or perpetuate social policies that are, in the final measure, un-Christian. Therefore, to single out the Democrats' abortion plank for condemnation is to side with the forces opposed to the Church's program of peace and justice. Objectively speaking, as the Marxists used to say, it is anti-Catholic.

That was the dialectic of liberal Catholics in the early 1980s, and it helps to explain the bishops' ambivalence toward the pro-life movement. Individual bishops and cardinals, like John O'Connor and Bernard Law, were stalwart in their support, but collectively there was a certain dismissiveness in the way the bishops regarded pro-life activists. James Robinson, the bishops' lobbying director, referred to them as "they," "the anti-abortion people," and expressed the hope that some day the U.S. might be able to find an "accommodation" on abortion. Robinson and others representing the bishops were particularly estranged from Republicans in Congress who sponsored pro-life legislation. Robinson complained that every time a representative offered an amendment, "they'd like everyone down here to drop what they're doing" and support it. Anyway, he added, most of the amendments "weren't going anywhere"—all the more likely because they weren't getting support from the bishops. Even leading pro-life Republicans in Congress like Senator Jesse Helms and Representative Henry Hyde from Illinois were often snubbed. Wilfred Caron, then serving as the bishops' general counsel, went to the length of circulating a memo—later leaked to the press—attacking the Helms-Hyde "human life bill" as unconstitutional. The usually congenial Hyde angrily charged that Caron had put himself in the company of the National Abortion Rights Action League.

So we had silence, three years of silence, from the bishops after the Democrats had made abortion "a fundamental human right." When the bishops finally did speak, it was in a different key. In 1983 they issued *The Challenge of Peace*, an extraordinarily long-winded letter endorsing a nuclear freeze, mutual disarmament, a comprehensive test ban treaty, and "maximum political engagement with governments of potential adversaries." It sounded like the work of an especially pious staff member of the Democratic National Committee, and in fact its proposals meshed perfectly with what congressional Democrats were proposing that year and what the Mondale presidential campaign would offer in 1984. Only near the end of the book-length document was anything said about abortion, a plea to "all those who would work to end the scourge of war to begin by defending life at its most defenseless, the life of the unborn." So abortion was to be folded

into the larger theme of “reverence for life.”

The chairman of the Bishop’s Committee on War and Peace, which drafted *The Challenge of Peace*, was Archbishop (later Cardinal) Joseph Bernardin. For those dismayed by what appeared to be the bishops’ retreat from the campaign against abortion, Bernardin had an answer. In two separate addresses, one at Fordham University in December of 1983 and the second at St. Louis University in March of 1984, Bernardin spelled out his now-famous “seamless garment” doctrine. By all means, he said, let us defend the right to life of unborn children; but we must be equally in support of the “quality of life” of other defenseless people: “the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker.” “Quality of life” translates into specific positions on “tax policy, employment generation, welfare policy, nutrition and feeding programs, and health care.” We can’t just oppose abortion “and then argue that compassion and significant public programs on behalf of the needy undermine the moral fiber of the society or are beyond the power or scope of government responsibility.” To be sure, he said in his St. Louis speech, we do not “equate” the direct taking of life through abortion with assaults on human dignity (though in his Fordham speech he had said that Catholics must be “equally visible” in fighting both), but we argue for “a continuum of life which must be sustained in the face of diverse and distinct threats.” A consistent ethic of life, then, means that Catholics can take a variety of routes in the protection of life. “No one is called to do everything, but each of us can do something.”

It was hard to believe that this was the same Bernardin who in 1976 had refused to fall for Jimmy Carter’s trick of listing all the “quality of life” programs that the Democrats supported. At that time, Bernardin’s reply was forthright: the right to life is the most fundamental, because once you abandon it, “the entire spectrum of human rights will ultimately be eroded.” But now that the Democrats had quite brazenly abandoned it, Bernardin was saying that Catholics can diffuse their energies into a wide variety of causes, from peace demonstrations to sheltering illegal immigrants. “Each of us can do something.”

Whatever Bernardin’s intentions, the effect of these speeches was to encourage pro-abortion politicians to use “the shopping cart defense” before Catholic audiences. Look at my whole shopping cart, they would say. Look at my votes against cutting welfare, standing up for the hungry and the homeless, and the undocumented immigrant. Look at my votes on tax policy, employment generation, welfare, nutrition and feeding programs, health care, the nuclear arms race. Then they point their finger at their opponent’s shopping cart, noting that he had voted “wrong” on all these “quality of life” issues.

Therefore, the pro-abortion politician triumphantly concludes, “if you’re looking for the most consistent right-to-lifer, here I am!” For twenty years, that has been the approach of Democratic politicians whose abortion positions came under fire. Cuomo, Ferarro, Mondale, and Kerry were especially fond of it. In 1998 the bishops finally remembered the reply to this ruse. In their 1998 pastoral letter they sharply reminded politicians that abortion, euthanasia, and assisted suicide can never be justified no matter how many meritorious programs are thrown into the cart. Programs addressing racism, poverty, hunger, unemployment, and health care should indeed be pursued. *“But being ‘right’ in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life.* Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community.” (Emphasis in the original.) Welcome words, no doubt, but a little late. Half of those calling themselves Catholic don’t go to church anymore (except for weddings and funerals) so they have few opportunities to hear the bishops, and even those who do are not likely to hear much by way of their pastors, who shy away from topics unsettling to their congregations. The anti-abortion fight has now really gone back to organizations unaffiliated with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops—old ones, like National Right to Life and Nellie Gray’s annual March for Life, and some of the newer guerrilla groups like Priests for Life.

Plus one more organization: the Republican Party. First under Reagan, and now under George W. Bush, the Republican Party has become the pro-life party. It is currently divided over embryonic stem cells, but in the congressional voting a majority of Republicans stuck with President Bush in opposing the funding of it, while Democratic support was overwhelming. On other issues involving the taking of innocent human life, such as euthanasia and assisted suicide, the breakdown is the same. Of course there are “pro-choice” Republicans; their names are well known. And, if it were not for the developments that occurred between 1976 and 1981, they might be in the mainstream of the party leadership today. Arguably, the Republican Party was headed toward pro-choice in the early 1970s, the very time when Ted Kennedy and younger Democrats like Bill Clinton, Jesse Jackson, and Al Gore were all on the side of life. But the parties finally criss-crossed in 1980. The Democrats decided to join “the party of death,” as Ramesh Ponnuru calls it, not only because abortion had become fashionable with the party’s cultural elites—the Republicans had the same types in their party—but because the countervailing forces within their party had abandoned the fight. The Catholic Democrats left the battlefield because they hated the Reagan

Republicans and refused to endorse anything in their platform, even the one plank they knew was right. Loyalty to their new friends and their old party trumped their religious and moral convictions. The Democrats' immune system thus broke down, and that was no less a causal factor in the party's embrace of abortion than a more direct, active cause would have been. The analogy to an immunodeficiency disease like AIDS, is apt. AIDS never directly kills anyone. What it does is to open them to opportunistic infections which their immune systems would normally have countered.

In the meantime, the bacillus of abortion is everywhere in America, and there is no guarantee that it will not finally take hold of the Republican Party. Pro-lifers have reason to be concerned about the desertion of key Republican leaders in the debate over embryonic stem cells. Also worrisome, particularly as the 2008 presidential race draws near, is the popularity among Republican voters of former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, whose position on abortion is identical to that of the Democrats. A Giuliani presidency would bring about a party realignment that could be fatal to the pro-life movement.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for hope, at least within the ranks of the Republicans. The Catholic-evangelical coalition of pro-life activists remains active, which is one important reason why Christine Todd Whitman was never talked of as a Republican presidential candidate, why Arlen Specter never had a chance of becoming Senate majority leader, and why Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe will never become co-chairs of the Republican platform committee. They are in the Republican "big tent," but nearer the exit flaps than the center, which is why the title of Whitman's recent memoir, *It's My Party, Too*, has such a whining sound.

And the Democrats? There are still some pro-life Democratic politicians, but they pretty much keep their heads down. In Congress they usually vote the right way, but don't make speeches about it lest they run afoul of the party's boundary-police. Pro-lifers can only wish them well, all the while keeping their powder dry for the real battle, which, if it comes, will be within the Republican Party.

Finally, what about the flagship of liberal Catholic Democrats, the class of 1960? The survivors are in their 60s and 70s now and try to make what sense they can of the tumultuous times they have gone through in the past four-and-a-half decades. The New Frontier ended abruptly in Dallas in 1963; the Great Society never arrived; the War on Poverty faded out even before 1976, the year that President Johnson predicted it would end in victory. Then came Jimmy Carter, with scores of legislative proposals that he could not

get through a Democratic Congress, followed by Ronald Reagan, who threw everything into reverse. Clinton's presidency seemed more a holding action than anything, and his personal monkeyshines left an embarrassing smudge. And now, God help us, Bush. Bush, they know, got into office and was kept there by a small sliver of votes, and a significant portion of those votes came from church-going Catholics who didn't like the Democrats' abortion plank. Well, dammit, *they* don't like it, either, but what can they do? They can't leave a party that pays homage to their dreams of peace and social justice. This abortion business was never even on the horizon when they first voted. Why did it have to come up, how did it get in there? Confusion, frustration, crankiness intrude into their recollections. Better to think about the past, when progress was the order of the day. Everything was so *clear* on that frosty day in front of the Capitol. A torch had been passed to a new generation—their generation—and didn't Kennedy say that he would not trade places with any other generation? The way was straight and they were starting on it. Yet somehow it got all twisted, all screwed up.

Anger and frustration can't last. At some point they give way to resignation, perhaps even to a kind of serenity. It could be that somewhere, right now, maybe in a pastor's study or a Catholic university's library, an elderly man or woman has pulled from the shelf a dusty blue-cloth edition of *The Phenomenon of Man* and has started reading again about the coming of the noogenesis, the movement of human consciousness into higher regions, with the Omega Point finally in sight. And now smiles, and reads more.