

# Catholic Church is a house divided

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Two articles in the Feb. 27 issue of *America* magazine merit attention.

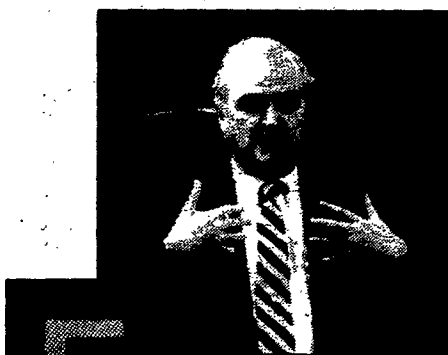
One of the articles, "Abortion, Gay Rights and The Social Contract," was written by David Carlin, former state senator in Rhode Island and a regular columnist for *Commonweal* magazine.

His thesis is that religious Americans are losing the battle against "the forces of secularism" on issues such as homosexuality and abortion, because the secularists have preempted the Americanized "social contract" argument; namely, that government and society must (1) treat everyone with equal "respect;" (2) respect "conscience" so that no one is punished for acting in accord with it and no one is forced to act against it; and (3) treat religion as a private matter, not to be interfered with or imposed on others.

Carlin suggests that homosexuals and gay-rights advocates, on the one hand, and pro-choice advocates, on the other, have successfully used the social-contract argument to gain the political high ground.

Thus, society must respect homosexuals because homosexuals have no control over their sexual orientation — anymore than blacks have over the color of their skin, for example.

But in appealing to the social contract, they are also violating it. Thus, the Rainbow Curriculum proposal for New York City schools makes no distinction between sexual orientation and sexual conduct. It says, in effect, that homosexual activity is morally acceptable.



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Carlin urges religious Americans to rebut this line of argument with a social-contract argument of their own; namely, privacy of religion and respect for conscience.

Forcing children to be taught that homosexual conduct is morally appropriate, he writes, is "a violation of the privacy of religion and respect for conscience."

Forcing children to be taught that homosexual conduct is morally appropriate, he writes, is "a violation of the privacy of religion clause, since it interferes with the rights of parents and denominations to instruct their children," as well as "a violation of the conscience clause, in that it compels the public to pay for the ideological defense of a practice that many taxpayers consider to be profoundly immoral."

Carlin refers, secondly, to the pro-

posed abortion-rights law that would require all abortions to be funded by Medicaid.

Those who favor the legislation appeal to the social contract. Abortion is a constitutional right and no one should be deprived of that right because of an inability to pay.

Instead of appealing to the Bible or divine law, opponents should object "on the ground that they are being compelled, as taxpayers, to pay for something profoundly opposed to their moral beliefs." And that's a violation of the social contract's conscience clause.

The social contract, he suggests, would only allow for an exception in a very small fraction of cases, namely, those abortions "sought by poor women in medically desperate situations — for example, to protect from death or grave injury."

Carlin's argument falters at the end when he adopts Patrick Buchanan's "culture war" rhetoric and lumps all religious Americans together. The "great struggle," he says, is between "religious believers" and "the forces of secularism."

But who are the "religious believers?" Are all religious Americans who are morally opposed to abortion to be lumped together with Operation Rescue leader Randall Terry? Or Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson? Or Phyllis Schlafly? Or certain high-profile leaders in the Catholic Church?

Carlin makes no mention of the fundamental divisions within the U.S. religious community. The fact that we are a house divided may be one of the main reasons why the pro-life posi-

tion is currently losing out.

Isn't it possibly the case, as Milwaukee's Archbishop Rembert Weakland has suggested, that the confrontational tactics of certain religious leaders have been counterproductive, that they've turned off even many Catholics?

To be sure, David Carlin's proposal deserves serious consideration: religious Americans might be more effective in public policy debates if they, like their secularist opponents, were to appeal to the social contract rather than to narrowly religious and moral claims.

But a more effective public posture will never be adopted without a more unified religious voice, and that will never happen without new leadership.

New leadership, in turn, will never emerge without open, honest and extensive dialogue within the religious communities themselves, and especially within the Catholic Church.

And this is where the second *America* article comes in — Ed Wojcicki's "A Great Place for Dialogue: Reflections of a Former Newspaper Editor."

The most important function of a Catholic paper, he writes, is to promote dialogue within the church. But you can't have dialogue if you suppress news stories and opinions you don't like.

It's no coincidence that the least effective leaders in the campaign against abortion are also the most censorious toward information and opinions of which they disapprove.

That's not very American. Which is why so many Americans don't listen to them.

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