

New York, abortion and a short route to chaos

It was the celebration that was particularly galling.

On the 46th anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision, the governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, signed into law a protocol that gives practically unrestricted access to abortion, permitting the killing of an unborn child up until the moment of delivery.

In the wake of the ratification, the legislators and their supporters whooped, hollered, and cheered, a display depressingly similar to the jubilation that broke out in Ireland when a referendum legalizing abortion passed last year. Of course, all of the rhetoric about women's rights and reproductive health and empowerment was trotted out, but who can fail to see what was at stake? If an infant, lying peacefully in a bassinet in his parents' home, were brutally killed and dismembered, the entire country would rightfully be outraged and call for an investigation of the murder. But now the law of New York confirms that that same child, moments before his birth, resting peacefully in his mother's womb, can be, with utter impunity, pulled apart with forceps. And the police won't be summoned; rather, it appears, the killing should be a matter of celebration.

An ideology, taken in the negative sense, is a conceptual framework that blinds one to reality. The purpose of any ideational system, obviously, is to shed light, to bring us closer to the truth of things, but an ideology does the reverse, effectively obfuscating reality, distancing us from truth. All of the buzz terms I mentioned above are ideological markers, smokescreens. Or if I can borrow the terminology of Jordan Peterson, they are the chattering of demons, the distracting hubbub of the father of lies. I recall that during the presidential campaign of 2016, Hillary Clinton

was asked several times whether the child in the womb, within minutes of birth, has constitutional rights, and this extremely intelligent, experienced, and canny politician said, over and over again, “That’s what our law dictates.” Therefore, by a sheer accident of location, the unborn baby can be butchered, and the same baby, moments later and in the arms of his mother, must be protected by full force of law. That many of our political leaders can’t or won’t see how utterly ludicrous this is can only be the result of ideological indoctrination.

As I watched film of Andrew Cuomo signing this repulsive bill into law, my mind drifted back to 1984 and an auditorium at the University of Notre Dame where Cuomo’s father, Mario — also governor of New York at the time — delivered a famous address. In his lengthy and intellectually substantive speech, Gov. Cuomo presented himself, convincingly, as a faithful Catholic, thoroughly convinced in conscience that abortion is morally outrageous. But he also made a fateful distinction that has been exploited by liberal Catholic politicians for the past thirty-five years.

He explained that though he was personally opposed to abortion, he was not willing to pursue legal action to abolish it or even to limit it, since he was the representative of all the people, and not just of those who shared his Catholic convictions. Now this distinction is an illegitimate one, which is evident the moment we draw an analogy to other public matters of great moral import: “I’m personally opposed to slavery, but I’ll take no action to outlaw it or limit its spread”; “I personally find Jim Crow laws repugnant, but I will pursue no legal strategy to undo them”; etc. But at the very least, Mario Cuomo could declare himself deeply conflicted, anguished, willing to support abortion law only as a regrettable political necessity in a pluralistic democracy.

But in a single generation, we have moved from reluctant toleration to unbridled celebration, from struggling Mario to exultant Andrew. And there is a simple reason

for this. A privatized religion, one that never incarnates itself in gesture, behavior, and moral commitment, rapidly evanesces. Once-powerful convictions, never concretely expressed, devolve, practically overnight, into pious velleities—and finally disappear altogether. In Robert Bolt’s magnificent play regarding St. Thomas More, *A Man for All Seasons*, we find a telling exchange between Cardinal Wolsey, a hard-bitten, largely amoral politico, and the saintly More. Wolsey laments, “You’re a constant regret to me, Thomas. If you could just see facts flat on, without that horrible moral squint, with just a little common sense, you could have been a statesman.” To which More responds, “Well...I believe when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties...they lead their country by a short route to chaos.” Abandoning the convictions of one’s conscience in the exercise of one’s public duties is precisely equivalent to “I’m personally opposed but unwilling to take concrete action to instantiate my opposition.”

And this abandonment — evident in Mario Cuomo’s 1984 address — has indeed led by a short road to chaos, evident in Andrew Cuomo’s joyful celebration of a law permitting the murder of children.