In his new book, *Life’s Work: A Moral Argument for Choice*, Dr. Willie Parker recounts his conversion from a fundamentalist Christian who abhorred abortion to what he calls his current ministry as an itinerant abortion provider working in some of the most underserved areas of the Deep South. It’s a trajectory that helps him make the case that supporters of legal abortion need to reclaim a moral and religious narrative for choice.

It’s a provocative argument in a nation that often equates opposition to abortion with religious faith. But Parker shows how supporters of legal abortion can draw upon faith practices and moral language to make the case for abortion rights. It’s a much-needed corrective at a time when abortion retains its power as the most pivotal wedge issue in modern political history, helping to corral many evangelical and Catholic voters for Donald Trump and once again tempting Democrats to equivocate in an attempt to woo “faith” voters.

Parker’s book shows that, while abortion will always be deeply entwined with religious and moral narratives, it’s up to progressives to rewrite those narratives in ways that highlight and respect bodily autonomy and free choice as absolute moral goods. And he makes a compelling argument that the much-launched “moment of conception” that undergirds so much religious anti-abortion rhetoric is smoke and mirrors. Parker challenges us to see beyond the fog of sentimentality and moralizing that allows opponents of abortion to cow even well-meaning progressive women to acquiesce to laws that reduce women’s humanity.

This July, he spoke with Patricia Miller for PRA:

**PM:** You write in your book that you believe that as an abortion provider you’re doing God’s work and compare yourself to a “twenty-first century Saint Paul, preaching the truth about reproductive rights.” This notion may seem challenging, even heretical, to people accustomed to seeing abortion as a secular practice, not only wholly divorced from people or practices of faith, but often antithetical to them.

**WP:** Most people are familiar with my identity as a women’s health provider, so they automatically assume that precludes an identity of ministry. But I dispense with the notion that there is a difference between the secular and the sacred. For me, I derive that sense of the sacred from my calling to help women in need realize their God-given gifts and agency. For me, that’s the faithful approach. To talk about my life’s work in these terms is a counter-narrative to all the mischief that is being done in the name of Christianity.

The book isn’t a polemic for abortion; it’s a defense of the agency that’s essential to what it means to be human. Abortion isn’t a bad thing or a good thing; it’s a thing. My sense of working through religious custom on reproductive rights is that there is nothing heretical about being a Christian and providing abortion care. Nothing about choosing to terminate a pregnancy puts a woman outside of God’s love.

**PM:** You write that it’s a lack of scientific understanding of reproduction and the idea of God as “a meddler” that allows people who oppose abortion to turn people of faith against themselves. This is the idea that everything is “God’s will” and that conception and birth are somehow uniquely miraculous and, therefore, not open to human interference. But you note that conception is a “morally neutral, purely biological event” and that a “pregnancy that intimates a baby is no more sacred than an abortion.”

**WP:** This book on a moral argument for choice is my attempt to diffuse the tension between a religious understanding of reproduction and a scientific understanding of reproduction. The fact is pregnancy is a biological process that happens to happen in women. But our culture also has a sentimental notion about the primacy of motherhood in women’s lives. This is why we have made reproductive health a moral issue. There is no other type of health care that we force people to ask permission for, often in humiliating and intrusive ways. Imagine if we asked a man to go through what we put women through to get an abortion.

**PM:** You write that it’s this sacralization of motherhood—not just among people who oppose abortion but also by upper-class liberal women who “became enraptured with the sonogram image they saw at the obstetrician’s office” and plunged full-force into competitive motherhood—that has allowed a widespread maternal conservatism, a “blurry consensus about the ‘sanctity of life’” to take hold.

**WP:** There is a cultish preference for motherhood embedded into our culture. If motherhood is always the higher value, then even liberal women don’t revolt when laws are enacted that force women to become mothers. And many women in blue states are somewhat insulated from
the devastating impact that anti-choice laws can have on Black women and poor women, especially in the South, so they look away.

**PM:** This strategy isn’t an accident. You note that the battle over choice is largely fought over the bodies of Black women and poor women because they’re the ones who most acutely feel the impact of waiting periods and other laws designed to discourage choice. But you say the real target of these laws is White women and that the “thing that all too many white anti-abortion activists really want...is for white women to have more babies, in order to push back against the browning of America.”

**WP:** The culture war over abortion is being fought over the lives and bodies of Black women and poor women. This can make women of means blind to the significance of poor women controlling their fertility [since wealthier women, and White women, are less likely to directly lose access]. But it’s a sleight of hand. The goal is to limit access to abortion for all women, especially White women. Men have to be able to assert control over all women’s fertility because the traditional family remains the repository of White heteronormative culture.

**PM:** At the same time, you criticize the “Black genocide” movement, launched by White anti-abortion activists to get Black people to see abortion as an “assault by white America on blacks,” as nothing more than a sham perpetrated by organizations like Priests for Life and Life Dynamics.

**WP:** The Black genocide movement is [a] joke, especially its claims that Planned Parenthood is the main perpetrator and Margaret Sanger its primary architect. Looking back to the days of Teddy Roosevelt, it was Eastern Europeans who were the target, not people of color. But the antis want [to] change the terms of the debate and frame abortion as systematic racism by health care institutions against Black people, which means even White women will acquiesce to new limits.

**PM:** You hold that one reason the anti-abortion forces have been so successful in the last decade is that “progressive and humanist people have failed to offer a moral, spiritual, ethical, or religious case for abortion rights and so have ceded those arguments to their opponents.”

**WP:** The antis seized the moral high ground 40 years ago with phrases like “pro-life,” and abortion rights activists haven’t mounted a significant moral or religious counterargument. But every great justice cause has been waged in moral terms. The reset is that abortion is a human rights issue, not a religious issue. Scripture is largely silent about abortion. The “sanctity of life” rhetoric was lifted from the Roman Catholic catechism and grafted onto the Moral Majority to create single-issue abortion voters.

We need to start with the premise that reproductive rights are human rights and that human rights are the kind of rights that are neither derived from nor provided by the state. Abortion is a process that happens to play out in the bodies of women and is a health and human rights issue for women. Women have a human right to decide their own futures and live their lives as they see fit. Women are entitled to both the negative and positive outcomes that come in a free society.

**PM:** Some Democratic strategists and politicians like Sen. Bernie Sanders are arguing just the opposite: that the Democratic Party needs to be more accepting of pro-life voters if it wants to be competitive across the country. They argue that supporters of choice need to be “reasonable” and allow the party to bargain away abortion rights like it was any other political chit. Is this the way forward for the Democratic Party?

**WP:** The Democrats are never going to out-Republican the Republicans. This formulaic approach to politics flies in the face of the need to generate genuine social capital. Rather than coming up with a progressive body politic, the Democrats decide if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. Their political moves are always reactive because they don’t stand for anything, so they latch on to abortion as the factor that made the difference in Republican wins.

A major plank in the Democratic platform is that the party is pro-woman and pro-reproductive rights. But then they decide that this is “an” issue not “the” issue. The Democratic Party says that women are central to their constituency, but then they equivocate on reproductive control and run the risk of isolating a key part of their base. This is a shameful thing to be talking about after the Women’s March, but if they accommodate the Blue Dog Democratic demands, there is no authenticity around reproductive rights. If the party is now supporting pro-life Democrats, that means we have one-and-a-half parties against reproductive rights and one-half of a party for reproductive rights. No political party is standing firmly for reproductive rights.

**PM:** What’s the solution here?

**WP:** I think there has to be a test of authenticity. Maybe women and people of color have to become single-issue voters—that’s how essential reproductive choice is. For me, reproductive rights are an issue because they determine so many other things. If Democrats are going to be the party of progressive values, then they need to rebrand reproductive choice as essential to progressive politics.

Patricia Miller is an award-winning author and journalist who writes about issues at the intersection of religion, sex, and politics. *She is the author of Good Catholics: The Battle over Abortion in the Catholic Church, and her work has appeared in The Atlantic, Salon, The Nation, and Huffington Post.*