
SCSS member David Carlin, a professor of philosophy and sociology at the Community College of Rhode Island, has produced another important book about the situation of Catholics in post-Vatican II America following his *The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church* in America (also published by Sophia). While the first book was about what has happened to American Catholics in the sacred order, this one concerns the transformation of one of the major institutions they had attached themselves to in the temporal order, the Democratic party. Carlin provides us with a valuable and insightful perspective on the topic as one both trained in sociological analysis and who was a long-time inside observer of the Democratic party (as a party activist, leader of his party in the Rhode Island Senate, and candidate for Congress). The book discusses what many already know about how the Democratic party in recent decades, because of its stands on life, sexual, and family issues, has ceased being a comfortable home for serious Catholics. It also explains what many are not so aware of: How this uncanny change in the party of the working class sons and daughters of the Catholic immigrants occurred.

Carlin first makes clear that, while the latter had a strong emotional attachment to the Democratic party (which he shares), it was not just this that motivated the historical connection of so many Catholics with it. He says that, especially as it emerged in the New Deal, the Democratic party “had a social and economic philosophy that largely coincided with the social teachings of the Church.” The New Deal had “followed a via media that avoided” both communism and laissez-faire capitalism (5). Like the social encyclicals, it supported the rights of labor while upholding private enterprise, stressed labor-management cooperation, and called for a fairer distribution of wealth.

What caused the later transformation? According to Carlin, it began with the decline of the old urban Democratic party machine. This decline was brought about by the demographic shift out of the cities and the enhanced education and upward mobility of the children and grandchildren of the immigrants (aided by the post-World War II GI Bill). With more education, the latter became less tolerant of the favoritism and corruption of machine politics and they no longer needed it as a career path. Left to the control of less capable men, the machines were bound to decline. (It is interesting that, in fictional form, Edwin
O'Connor captured the dynamics of this decline, almost as it was occurring, in the early 1950's in his noted novel *The Last Hurrah*, which was later made into a movie starring Spencer Tracy.

With the collapse of the old machines, in the early 1970s, Carlin tells us that a struggle went on for control of the Democratic party among three groups of liberals: the "FDR liberals" (in my own writing, following James Hitchcock, I have referred to them simply as the "old liberals"), the "civil-rights liberals," and the "moral/cultural liberals." The first group was essentially the one with which Catholics traditionally identified. The second was at the forefront of pushing the civil rights legislation of the 1960s and later affirmative action, and sometimes took an excessively tolerant view even of violent actions against race discrimination. The third group emerged in the 1960s and stressed especially sexual freedom. They swept into prominence in the universities, the publishing and entertainment industries, and the liberal churches before turning to politics. They were the leading activists in the fight for legalized abortion. The George McGovern presidential candidacy of 1972 galvanized the moral/cultural liberals as a permanent force in the Democratic party and eventually the other groups came to accept their objectives, even if they were not zealous for them. Carlin says that an important factor that began the unification of these three factions into a new Democratic party right after the 1972 election was their common enmity for Richard Nixon.

There were other dynamics at work, also. With the New Deal fading into the past and many affluent liberals attracted to the cause of racial civil rights, the character of the Democratic party changed from one of a party of the "non-rich" which focused on economic concerns to a more pro-business party whose concerns were now mostly social and cultural. The result, Carlin says, is that today the U.S. has "one strongly oligarchic party (the Republicans), one moderately oligarchic party (the Democrats), and no truly democratic party" (22). Now, many at the lower end of the socio-economic scale vote Republican because that party at least addresses their moral and cultural concerns even if not their economic ones.

The ascendancy of the moral/cultural liberals was cemented by the entry into the Democratic party of feminists, the new potent politico-cultural force of the 1970s. Carlin provides a good, brief explanation about why feminism emerged on the heels of the civil rights movement, how sexual liberation became one of its central themes, and why it was easy for the moral/cultural liberals to ally with them. Indeed, both embraced two central tenets: the personal liberty principle and the tolerance principle. These went on to become leading principles of the
contemporary Democratic party and have had a huge influence in current American culture.

The upshot of the take-over of the Democratic party by the moral/cultural liberals was that an ideological politics replaced an organization-oriented politics that had downplayed ideology. The new ideological nature of Democratic politics was effectively reinforced and augmented by the fact that the party organization was no longer strong or well-heeled enough to sufficiently support candidates, especially in an era of expensive media-centered campaigns. Candidates now had to go to the wealthy moral liberals and their interest groups to get their funds, and the trade-off was that they had to promote the latter's ideological agenda. This partly explains why today's American political discourse is so bitter, ugly, and polarized. Carlin calls it "Manichean politics"; both parties are now ideologically charged, and see their enemies as simply evil.

With its embrace of the agenda of moral liberalism, with sexual freedom, homosexualism, and pro-abortionism as centerpieces, Carlin tells us outright that the Democratic party has now become an "anti-Christian party" (67). Most of its activists, to be sure, are not specifically and avowedly such; but this agenda, and their misunderstanding of Christians opposing it as threats to the Constitution, functionally makes them so.

Carlin makes an astute historical comparison: What we have now in America, with the abyss separating traditional Christians and secularists, parallels the politics of the Third French Republic where the pro-monarchy Catholics squared off against the anti-clerical scions of the Revolution. The Republicans are friendly to the Christians, even while Carlin seems not to entirely trust their sincerity, and the Democrats are on the side of the secularists.

Carlin does an excellent job in a chapter entitled "The Catholic-Secularist Abyss" of going behind the public policy divisions to explain the more fundamental theological, philosophical, and ethical points of opposition between serious Catholics and the secularists. Secularists are "empiricists" and "naturalists" who reject or at least doubt the supernatural. They are moral subjectivists or relativists (even while Carlin notes that they can easily become moral absolutists on their pet issues). The secularists' view of sexual freedom reflects a deeper belief that, even while generally not favoring outright promiscuity, a certain amount of sexual experimentation is healthy and conducive to "growth." Their view, of course, results from their ignoring of the transcendent and denial of natural law. The latter is also responsible for the secularist's support of rights to abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. One result of his
secularism that leads him to support euthanasia, specifically, is his inability to understand the meaning of human suffering. Carlin points out, although I wish he had tried to explain further the reasons for it, the secular liberal’s selective and inconsistent respect for the dignity of the human person (e.g., the secular liberal is horrified at racism, poverty, and war, but not at the brutal killing of a child in abortion or even of the elderly and infirm in euthanasia).

Carlin also provides a very good chapter responding to the usual excuses of liberal Catholics (i.e., those attempting an accommodation with secularism in the public arena). This includes pro-legalized abortion Catholic politicians (he has a separate appendix just about Mario Cuomo). He also gives a good, insightful critique of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s famous “seamless garment” argument, even though he is personally very sympathetic to Bernardin’s social justice concerns.

Besides the one on Cuomo, Carlin provides four other appendices (which he says in the Preface are a crucial part of the book). The first looks further at the nature of secularism and its personal liberty and tolerance principles above (he rightly calls them less ethical principles than “items of effective propaganda” [p. 158]). The second examines the history of secularism in America, in which he points out different stages through which this phenomenon has moved. The third is a critical consideration of liberal Christianity, which he calls the “fellow-traveler of secularism” (175). In the fourth, he briefly considers the divisions within the American Jewish community about the culture war (i.e., between orthodox and religiously liberal Jews). He discusses this because he says that, sociologically, in certain ways the experience of Jews and Catholics in America is similar.

Carlin tells us not to expect the Democratic party to retreat from its secularism in the foreseeable future. The secularists are just too much in control of the party for that to happen. He says that they are even oblivious to the fact that they lose elections because of it. Like true-believing Marxists, they think that the winds of history are on their side in the culture war and when the struggle ends they will consistently be electoral winners. If Roe v. Wade/Doe v. Bolton were reversed by the Supreme Court and abortion were no longer a national political issue, Carlin believes that the party might be able to shift back to its traditional concern about economic issues and the interests of the working class. As far as Catholics are concerned, Carlin believes that even more of them will eventually leave the Democratic party as the reality of its secularism sinks in. He divides Catholics into three groups: the orthodox, the “wait and sees,” and the liberals. Over time, he believes that most of the first two groups will leave, but the liberal Catholics will remain.
For all of his criticism of the current Democratic party, Carlin has not left it, although he has not voted for Democratic presidential candidates for awhile. He says he is too old to change, but is also unwilling to let the Johnny-come-lately secularists evict him from the party the Catholic immigrants had first. He also maintains the view and suspicion of the Republican party that many old-time Catholics shared: it is not the party of the “little guy” and it will not reliably help him. His point is well taken. While both parties have advanced the current version of neoliberal economics—with its absolutization of free trade, exporting of jobs abroad, outrageous levels of compensation for CEOs, declining purchasing power of working and even middle class families, etc.—its strongest and most numerous philosophical defenders seem to be Republicans. At least, the Republicans nationally have not lamented or sought to seriously address these developments. Indeed, in my own research I found the “new liberals” of today clearly farther away from Church teaching generally than either the old liberals or conservatives. When it came to economics and social welfare policy, however, the new liberals were almost as close to the Church as the old (pre-1960) liberals were, and conservatism was the farthest (see my Liberalism, Conservatism, and Catholicism [1991, 1994]).

In short, Carlin’s book not only should help uncertain orthodox Catholic Democrats to evaluate whether they should stay in the party and enable Catholics in general to better understand what the state of the party is, but it also helpfully explains and traces the forces that have shaped the contemporary party. I wish Carlin had looked more carefully at the cultural forces that transformed liberalism in the 1960’s (e.g., precisely why liberalism became secular); while the collapse of the political machines was a significant factor, I believe these forces may have been more important in transforming the Democratic party. The book does not have the consistent depth of inquiry or heavy footnoting of sources that scholars may crave, but it achieves a good balance among scholarly inquiry, popular commentary, and personal reflection. A bibliography of further readings and a simple index would have added to the book. It is a substantial enough book at more than 200 pages, but it moves quickly, and is clearly written and easy for the non-scholarly reader to follow. It is a book that Sophia Institute Press should make every effort to widely disseminate in the American Catholic community.

Stephen M. Krason
Franciscan University of Steubenville