Revue de recherche en civilisation américaine

8 | 2018
Mapping the Landscapes of Abortion, Birth Control, and Power in the United States: Body Politics since the 1960s

---

An Abortion Minister: the Reverend Spencer Parsons's Struggle for Abortion Rights before *Roe v. Wade*

Anne Légier

OpenEdition
Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/rrca/1062
ISSN: 2101-048X

Publisher
David Diallo

Electronic reference
Anne Légier, « **AN ABORTION MINISTER: THE REVEREND SPENCER PARSONS'S STRUGGLE FOR ABORTION RIGHTS BEFORE *ROE V. WADE*** », *Revue de recherche en civilisation américaine* [Online], 8 | 2018, Online since 18 December 2018, connection on 05 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/rrca/1062

This text was automatically generated on 5 May 2019.

© Tous droits réservés

An Abortion Minister: the Reverend Spencer Parsons's Struggle for Abortion Rights before *Roe v. Wade*

Anne Légier

Introduction

1 In a Dec. 14, 1969 article entitled "Guidance for Women in Trouble," *Chicago Sun Times* readers learned about the existence of a group of Protestant and Jewish clergymen helping women secure safe, albeit illegal, abortions in the Chicago area. The article, written by Linda Rockey, featured a large picture of the Reverend E. Spencer Parsons, who was then Dean of the Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, in his office at the University of Chicago. The article, which launched the group's public existence, quoted Parsons extensively. In the following years, Spencer Parsons went on to become the most visible advocate of the abortion rights movement in the Midwest, as the Chairman of the Chicago area and Illinois Clergy Consultation Service on Problem Pregnancies (CCSP).

2 His individual trajectory as a seemingly unlikely abortion rights advocate embodies both a movement and its time: the story of his spiritual, political, and very practical involvement in favor of the legalization of abortion is symbolic of the way in which the clergy shaped the social landscape of the 1960s and 1970s.

3 As a man of God whose faith was rooted in the Baptist tradition known for stressing free will, Parsons was enticed by the ideas of civil disobedience developed by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Just like the civil rights icon, his profession gave him an aura of respectability, more freedom to express subversive ideas and enabled him to be heard in ways others could not be.

4 In this article, I will try to explain how a well-respected middle-aged minister came to embrace an issue mostly seen as a young women's struggle. I will also try to highlight how, through practical activism involving civil disobedience and public advocacy for

abortion reform as well as theological reflection, Spencer Parsons reshaped the abortion landscape before *Roe v. Wade.*

Becoming an Abortion Minister

5 From a contemporary perspective, the idea of a minister devoted to defending abortion rights might seem incongruous. However, in many ways, Spencer Parsons's involvement in the abortion rights struggle makes perfect sense: his theological background, his position as a university minister, and his connection to the political movements of the 1960s shaped his approach to the issue.

6 As a Baptist, Parsons belonged to a religious tradition emphasizing freedom of conscience. The Southern Baptist leader, Albert Mohler, explains that Baptists consider "each individual soul is independently competent to adjudicate all matters of religious importance" (Mohler n.d.). This idea of "soul competency" is so central to the Baptist faith, argues theologian E. Y. Mullins, that it distinguishes it from other Christian faiths (Mullins 1908, pp. 68–73). This theological framework allowed for very diverse views on social issues such as abortion.[1] In 1968, Parsons and his friend Howard Moody, who had founded the first chapter of the *Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion* (CCS) in New York the previous year, successfully submitted a proposal to the *American Baptist Convention* stating early abortion should be "at the request of the individuals concerned, and be regarded as an elective medical procedure governed by the laws regulating medical practice and licensure" ("Early Resolution on Abortion, American Baptist Convention, Boston, MA" 1968; Gorney 1998, p. 72; Kaplan 1997, p. 62; United Press International 1968c, 1968b, 1968a).[2]

7 Parsons did not only benefit from a religious tradition encouraging individuals to make their own moral choices: as a university minister, he was awarded even more freedom than his colleagues with more traditional congregations. Before joining the University of Chicago, Parsons had been a university chaplain for most of his adult life.[3] In an interview he gave in 1993 to Paula Kamen, he mentioned the fact that the position afforded him a great deal of freedom: "Well, I think a university community is more open to something like that than other communities. And I didn't, I really wasn't answerable to a local congregation. Being Dean of the chapel at the university, I was pretty freewheeling in terms of what I chose to do" (Parsons 1993).[4] Nanette Davis, a sociologist who studied the Clergy Consultation Service in Michigan, argues that "highly autonomous positions" like Parsons's were common among early members of the CCS because they "offered relatively little public surveillance and maximum personal freedom" (N. J. Davis 1985, p. 130).

8 The University of Chicago of the late 1960s did offer Parsons "maximum personal freedom" for his abortion ministry. The university, notably founded with contributions from the American Baptist Education Society and John D. Rockefeller, had a long tradition of encouraging freedom of expression. In a 1902 speech delivered on the university's tenth anniversary, President William Rainey Harper stated that "complete freedom of speech on all subjects" had from the start "been regarded as fundamental in the University of Chicago and was a principle that could never be called in question" (Stone et al. 2015). When, in 1971, Parsons faced legal challenges as a result of his involvement in favor of abortion rights, the university's administration quietly offered support. Parsons had been subpoenaed to testify in front of a Grand Jury in the hope that he would name abortion providers (O'Connor 1971); the chief counsel for the university called

him "unofficially for a chat" and offered strategic advice (Good 1971; Dirks and Relf 2017, p. 95).[5]

9 As Dean of the Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, Parsons also benefitted from a long tradition of open Christianity and social activism. According to historian Frederik Borsch, who authored a book devoted to religion at Princeton and other universities, the very architecture of the Rockefeller Chapel reflects a spiritually inclusive approach meant to appeal to a religiously diverse student body: the stained glass windows feature geometrical forms instead of Christian iconography and the great front doors include representations of Plato and Zoroaster[6] with additional iconography offering tribute to philosophers, artists, and scientists (Borsch 2012, p.179). The chapel's tradition of social activism was constructed by its deans, all of whom were involved in the issues of their time. During the Depression, the first dean, Charles Gilkey, organized a fund for the university's employees who had been laid off and provided assistance for Chicago's poorest residents. The second dean, John Thompson, was a white southerner famous for his involvement in favor of civil rights (Borsch 2012, pp.181–82) who invited Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to preach at the Rockefeller Chapel twice, in 1956 and 1959 (Allen and Drapa 2012).[7]

10 Reflecting many years later on the university's quiet support for his abortion ministry, Parsons suggested that the administration might have had a practical motivation: "The university supported me all through that period and there were people working in the Dean of Students' Office who had dealt with students who had unwanted pregnancies" (Parsons 1993). Unintended pregnancies were indeed a possibility for young people experiencing life away from home for the first time. University chaplains, to whom students sometimes turned for advice, were well aware of the personal turmoil associated with not being able to control one's fertility. As early as the 1950s, when he was a university chaplain in Boston, Parsons had embraced the issue of reproductive rights, campaigning against Massachusetts's ban on contraceptives (Kaplan 1997, p. 61; Parsons 1993).

11 Because it was likely to have some practical knowledge of the difficulty of securing a safe abortion, Parsons theoretical congregation—the student body of the university—was also more likely to be supportive of abortion rights. A 1970 opinion poll conducted among college students across the country indicated that 64.5% of them supported abortion "regardless of circumstances" while 30.3% agreed that it should be legal "only in certain cases" (Huffman 1970; Beggs and Copeland 1970; Finlay 1981).

12 Parsons, like many university chaplains was immersed in the student culture which, at the time, questioned authority in general. Like many of his colleagues, he was involved in the movements embraced by the students of the 1960s: the civil rights struggle and the anti-war protests. In 1963, while he was a minister at Hyde Park Union Church, he published Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* in the church's newsletter only a few weeks after it was written (Johnson 2012). In 1967, he invited King to preach again at the Rockefeller Chapel. In the invitation letter he wrote to the civil rights leader, he added a "personal note" congratulating him for the leadership he had given to the Clergy Committee Concerned about Vietnam and informing him of a "Memorial Day Peace Service" conducted at the Chapel attracting close to 800 people (Parsons 1967). Parsons's involvement in the draft resistance movement was also underlined in a 1968 *Chicago Sun Times* article mentioning a sermon in which Parsons encouraged young men "to so examine the moral implications of the Vietnam War that

they will be moved to declare their conscientious objection and refuse to be drafted" and an October 1969 photograph shows that a draft protest organized at the Rockefeller Chapel drew a very large crowd (Brant 1969).

13 Parsons recalled in a 2003 interview that people who were interested in the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement were undoubtedly "also interested in the rights of women in terms of the abortion problem" (Dirks and Relf 2017, p. 57). In doing so, he echoed the idea, expressed by Howard Moody and Arlene Carmen in their 1973 book, that the strategy of the CCS was to draw on the network of clergymen involved against the war and in favor of civil rights to find members: "It was apparent from the start that the clergy who would be the most likely to become involved in a project of this kind would be the same ones who had been the most active in the school integration battle in New York, in the civil rights battle both here and in the South, as well as other areas of civil liberties. It was to those clergy whose liberal attitudes and commitments had been clearly established that we turned for help in developing the original nucleus of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion" (Carmen and Moody 1973, p.21).

14 In the years before he launched the local chapter of the CCS, Spencer Parsons widened the scope of his progressive activism to include abortion rights. At first, his focus was on the legal aspect of abortion. However, he soon turned to a more comprehensive approach as he developed a real "abortion ministry."

Spencer Parsons's Abortion Ministry

15 Parsons began his abortion ministry as a founding member of the Illinois Citizens for the Medical Control of Abortion (ICMCA) (*The Chicago Tribun*e 1967). The group, led by a female doctor, Lonny Myers, and an Episcopalian minister, Don Shaw, campaigned for the repeal of Illinois's abortion ban, arguing that abortion should be a private matter between a patient and her doctor (ICMCA 1971; ICMCA leaflet, n.d.). In January 1969, Parsons, Shaw, and another member of the ICMCA, the Rabbi Robert Marx, wrote a letter to "Religious and Civil Leaders in Illinois" including Democratic politician Adlai Stevenson, philanthropist Abram Pritzker, and John Sengstacke, publisher of the *Chicago Defender*[8] as well as a number of ministers and rabbis who would ultimately join the effort to constitute the Chicago CCS. The letter urged them to offer their support to the repeal of Illinois's abortion law in order to "bring [...] abortion under competent medical control where it belongs" (Marx, Parsons, and Shaw 1969).

16 Like many who campaigned for legal change, Parsons was eventually confronted with the practical aspect of abortion. In the interview he gave to Paula Kamen in 1993, he recalled that his first direct experience with abortion occurred in 1968. A Baptist chaplain from Indiana University contacted him, hoping he could help secure an abortion for a graduate student. The Indiana minister believed that, since Parsons lived in "the old big bad Windy City," he would know where to go. At the time, Parsons did not. However, he tried to find a solution and, through people he knew from the Dean of Students Office at the university, came in contact with an underground abortion network organized by a feminist group called *Jane* (Parsons 1993). A letter kept by Spencer Parsons in his personal files dating from February 1968 and emanating from Bloomington seems to have been written by the young woman he remembered as being his first abortion counselee. The author of the letter (whose name was cut out to protect her privacy), thanked Parsons

and assured him the group had provided a "professional" service (Bloomington woman 1968):

> "Dear Dr. Parsons, I want to thank you very much. Without your help, I don't know what we would have done. Frankly, until we met you and your kindness, we had begun to feel like social outcasts. We did contact the first choice. This is a team operating in a manner most analogous to the proverbial crap game. I feel they were utter professionals and I could not have hoped for better treatment anywhere. All I can say is thank you. We are very grateful. Sincerely yours."

17 Parsons subsequently developed a relationship with the group "operating in a manner most analogous to the proverbial crap game"[9] and referred a number of women to the feminist underground service *Jane* before he founded the Chicago CCS in 1969 (Parsons 1993; Kaplan 1997, 62; Rockey 1969; Bloomington woman 1968). Parsons also counseled women whom he sent to the New York CCS, which had been founded in 1967 by his friend Howard Moody.

18 Moody eventually convinced Parsons that the demand for abortion in the Midwest was too great for New York to take on. The Dean of the Rockefeller Chapel embraced the project knowing that it had been successful in the Big Apple (Rockey 1969). He reached out to ministers and rabbis with previous political involvement, many of whom were connected to University of Chicago and its neighborhood of Hyde Park.[10] At the beginning of March 1969, Parsons, Ronald Hammerle—a divinity student at the University of Chicago—and Edgar Peara—a minister who was a graduate of a Hyde Park theological school and worked in the wealthy suburb of Wilmette—started contacting prospective members. They invited 50 Chicago area clergymen to a "formal organizational meeting" in Hyde Park, hoping to "lay the groundwork for the organization, cover all questions and recommendations, and set up a working structure" (Parsons, Peara, and Hammerle 1969). At the meeting, two "distinguished doctors" answered questions on the medical aspect of abortion. In the report he sent after the meeting, Parsons summarized the medical information which would be relevant for counselors: the difficulty in determining the length of a pregnancy, what do before the procedure and warning signs of a complication. According to Parsons's report, most rabbis and ministers who came to the founding meeting agreed that sending women to London, where the procedure could be safely performed in a medical facility, should be the preferred option. Parsons also mentioned the fear of being overwhelmed by calls once the service went public. He cited the example of the Cleveland CCS being "desperate" at receiving 50 calls per day after being featured in a CBS news report (Parsons 1969a).

19 In the months following its creation, the ministers and rabbis who constituted the group operated quietly and counseled more than 500 women (Rockey 1969). They opted to call themselves the Clergy Consultation Service *on Problem Pregnancies* (CCSP), instead of *on Abortion* like New York, a choice they felt better suited to the more conservative Midwest (Hammerle 2013). In December, the group—now composed of 30 clergymen—decided to go public. Parsons was tasked with contacting Linda Rockey from the *Chicago Tribune,* whom the group felt would write a positive article (Parsons and Leifer 1969).

20 By that time, the service had a phone number available through Directory Assistance (667-6015) (Rockey 1969) and an answering machine apparently located at Rockefeller Chapel (Parsons 1969b). The message provided the name of the ministers available for counseling as well as practical advice. An August 1972 tape message archived at the University of Illinois explained: "Before you see a counselor, you must have a urine

pregnancy test and a note from a physician stating the length of the pregnancy." It gave specific information about the cost of early and later abortions, mentioned the Midwestern cities covered by the Chicago area CCS and stated that counseling was free but that contributions were welcome (Chicago Area CCSP 1972). After scheduling an appointment over the phone, the women then personally met a clergyman, theoretically to discuss all options (getting married, keeping the baby, giving it up for adoption etc.) but in practice mostly to secure an abortion. Parsons explained that CCSP counselors did "not tell the women what to do" but "provide[d] information and guidance as to the alternatives available for abortion or adoption," acknowledging that most of the women had opted to have an abortion before contacting the service (Rockey 1969). The counselor outlined the procedure and gave women the name and phone number of a physician who had been vetted by the group (Rockey 1969; Carmen and Moody 1973; T. Davis 2004, p. 128). That included physicians both at home and abroad.[11] The women were also given extensive explanations on what to expect, from how to deal with cab drivers in a foreign country (CCS, n.d. p. 64; Carmen and Moody 1973) to the specifics of abortion techniques used by the provider.

21 The advice given was informed by the constant feedback the Chicago clergymen encouraged and received from the women who had previously gone through the service. The CCSP elaborated a form to help women report on their experience. The questionnaire, which could be filled anonymously, was very comprehensive. It included questions on travel, on whether receptionists and nurses were "sympathetic and considerate," on pain management, on specific testing performed by the facility and on the occurrence of complications (CCSP, n.d.). Some women also wrote letters to thank the clergymen and report on their experience. The letters that have been kept are wonderful windows into the journeys of women seeking help from clergymen. In a letter Parsons received circa 1969, a mother of nine from Monmouth, IL gave a detailed account of her experience. She started her letter, which she called a "report" by describing the long and complicated search for help. She explained that her husband, a chiropractic physician, unsuccessfully asked numerous colleagues where he could find information on abortion. She then wrote to a newspaper requesting a copy of articles mentioning abortion in the hope that they would provide practical information. After receiving the clippings, she called the local Planned Parenthood in Peoria, IL. She was told to call the Medical Society. The Medical Society referred her back to her ob-gyn. However, she "felt certain that he would find [her] fit [...] and mentally able to carry and deliver this [pregnancy] and that [she] would be forced[12] to accept his decision" ("Letter from Monmouth" 1969). By that time, she was almost three months pregnant. Luckily, she received more comprehensive information from the Chicago Planned Parenthood and was able to reach Parsons over the phone and plan a trip to London. The physician, Dr. Sopher, was able to perform a second trimester abortion ("Letter from Monmouth" 1969).

22 Following the model established by the New York CCS, Parsons played the role of a patients' advocate. He collected information on physicians, developed a correspondence with some of them and visited their facilities whenever possible. Safety was always the priority but Parsons also tried to drive prices down. While in 1969, an abortion secured through the Chicago CCSP cost between $400 and $500 (Rockey 1969), only a year later the group had negotiated a fee of $250 with their Kansas contact, Dr. Lynn Weller ("Letter to Lynn Weller" 1970). Parsons believed that cost was a very important part of the abortion issue because they determined who could have access to a safe, albeit illegal, abortion

(Rockey 1969; Carmen and Moody 1973). In 1969, he told Linda Rockey that he had one regret about the service: "We are still working with middle income people who can afford to leave the state or the country. It is very difficult for the poor to get safe medical abortions." He explained that he was hoping that, as the consultation services expanded and build up a network of licensed physicians, they would drive down the price for abortion (Rockey 1969).

23 Although the CCSP operated openly for 4 years, it faced very few legal challenges. In January 1970, only three weeks after the group announced its public existence through the *Chicago Tribune* article, one of Parsons's colleagues from the University of Chicago and founding member of the CCSP, Rabbi Max Ticktin, was accused of "conspiracy to commit abortion." The accusations stemmed from police investigation involving a Detroit physician named Jesse Ketchum. Ticktin's office at the university was raided and his files confiscated, causing widespread outrage *(The Chicago Sun Time*s 1970; Sprain Wilson 1970). Parsons told the press that the group was "solidly behind Ticktin" and believed it had "acted lawfully" in referring women out of state for an abortion *(Chicago Toda*y 1970). He expressed his "unqualified faith in Max Ticktin as a religious counselor" and said he was "greatly angered" at the violent tactics used by the Chicago police while searching the rabbi's office *(The Chicago Maroo*n 1970). The CCSP did not stop operating *(Hyde Park Kenwood Voice*s 1970) and the charges were soon dropped by the Michigan District Attorney (Glazer 1970).

24 This first encounter with law enforcement probably prepared Parsons for the legal problems he would face a year later. Parsons, who had testified in front of the House Judiciary Committee in favor of a bill that would have legalized abortion in Illinois, had mentioned the fact that he personally knew 12 men and one woman who performed abortions daily as well as an Illinois physician who had performed 20,000 abortions in his lifetime. Republican House Majority Henry Hyde, a Republican who was staunchly opposed to abortion,[13] called for a Grand Jury to force Parsons to reveal the names of the abortion providers he had mentioned (Good 1971). By the time he was subpoenaed, Parsons had had the opportunity to develop a religious defense of his refusal to cooperate with authorities. He told the *Chicago Daily News* "he would refuse to testify on the grounds that, as a clergyman, he [had] the right to keep such information confidential" and that he was prepared to go to jail if cited for contempt (O'Connor 1971). When in front of the Grand Jury, he did refuse to answer questions, saying "I am sorry I can't give you that information because it would violate the confidential character of my pastoral ministry" (Parsons 1993). Neither of the legal challenges faced by the CCSP had a significant impact on their activities: in the four years they operated, they never interrupted their abortion referrals, helping dozens of women a week secure safe medical procedures. However, Spencer Parsons's contribution to the abortion rights movement was not only practical. Through his sermons, speeches, interviews and writings, the minister developed a moral and religious defense of abortion which redefined how it was perceived.

Reframing the Landscape of Religious Perceptions on Abortion: Spencer Parsons the Abortion Theologian

25 In the years it was active, the CCS probably helped between 350,000 and 450,000 women secure safe abortions (Wolff 1998, p.110), a number no other group could ever have attained. The respectability associated with the ministry made clergymen like Parsons

almost immune from legal prosecution. However, the idea of morality was not only a shield protecting the rabbis and ministers of the CCS, it was also a powerful tool they used to reframe the perception of abortion. Parsons made a huge contribution to the abortion debate through the moral defense of abortion he promoted.

26 The first argument he used was inspired by the ideas of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement: he explained that Illinois's abortion law, like many others across the country, was unfair. In the article launching the public existence of the Chicago Area CCS, Parsons told Linda Rockey why the clergy decided to embrace abortion referral, emphasizing the need for direct action in the face of unjust laws:[14]

> "We decided that it was time to help people and not wait for legislative reform. While we are convinced that the law in Illinois must be repealed, between now and that time, an awful lot of women go through a whole lot of trauma over problem pregnancies, and many have dreadful experiences with back-alley abortionists. [...] We regard our ministry as one of counseling women with problems. [...] We want people to get trained, qualified medical assistance. What concerns us most are the 4,000 cases a year in Chicago of infection from induced abortion" (Rockey 1969).

27 Parsons was well aware that most infections affected the women who had the least resources. Abortion laws thus did not impact women equally. In a January 1971 sermon delivered at the Rockefeller Chapel, he talked about how the "excessive costs and difficulties" of illegal abortion "fell unequally on the poor and the rich." He then went on to describe all the "moral" reasons for terminating a pregnancy:

> "I have talked with the frantic parents of a twelve year old girl impregnated by her father's brother, I have seen a young war wife, lonely and foolish by her own admission, get herself involved with another man while her husband was overseas. She continued to love her husband and she believed the only possible way to save the marriage for her, her husband, and their two-year-old child was to terminate her pregnancy. A woman fifty-two, married at 49 for the first time without any intention of being a parent, found her whole relationship with her husband threatened by an unexpected and unwanted pregnancy. If you have ever listened to the frantic voice of a woman desperately seeking help for herself or a loved one, you will have sensed something of the intensity of the human agony tied up with the problem of an unwanted and rejected pregnancy" (Parsons 1971b).

28 In the same sermon, he also underlined the fact that, if the law was widely being violated by "the most competent and respected members of the medical profession," it meant the law was unfair and inadequate (Parsons 1971b).

29 For Parsons, abortion laws were not only unjust but also violated religious freedom. As a Baptist minister, Parsons belonged to a tradition that considered freedom of religion to be of the utmost importance. Baptist historian Robert G. Torbet argued that "Baptists have made a unique contribution to Protestantism, for which the world is their debtor, in their consistent witness to the principle of religious liberty" (Torbet 1973; Miller 1976; Patterson 1976). Parsons applied this theological tenet to abortion, making a very convincing First Amendment argument in favor of choice. In a 1971 article written for the publication of the University of Chicago's Divinity School, Parsons suggested the State should not interfere in theological debates:

> "[S]ince we are a people representing many diverse religious traditions, is it not the best public policy, out of respect for our different convictions on the matter, for the State to withdraw from regulating this area of human intimacy? The State Legislature is in no position to adjudicate between the theological claims which divide us" (Parsons 1971a).

30 Parsons did not limit his religious freedom argument to scholarly publications. Fearing that the Catholic Church's efforts to reinstate New York's abortion ban—which had been repealed in 1970—might succeed, Parsons made the following statement to the press:

> "We believe that mandatory child-birth by state law is a violation of religious and moral sensitivities of millions of liberal Catholics, Protestants, Jews and other Americans. [...] The Roman Catholic Church officially regards abortion at any moment after conception as murder. This is a theological and not a biological or legal statement of fact. It is a judgment not shared by most people in the nation. Yet the Church presumes to force by virtue of massive financial power and extensive network of local congregations, schools and hospitals its moral judgments upon the community by law" (Parsons 1973).

31 Parsons's fears that the Catholic Church might succeed in imposing its belief on a religiously diverse population did not become reality: only four days after this statement was released to the press, the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that abortion was a constitutionally protected right. However, in the years since *Roe*, most anti-abortion groups have used religious language and many have trusted state legislatures to "adjudicate between theological claims" that divide Americans[15].

Conclusion

32 Parsons was one of the many faces that shaped the abortion landscape before *Roe v. Wade*. Although he might seem an unlikely abortion-rights activists to the modern reader, Parsons viewed the issue as an integral part of his religious calling. Through direct civil disobedience and moral advocacy, he changed the landscape of reproductive rights in the late 1960s and early 1970s, bringing abortion from the margins of the underground to the mainstream of moral respectability.

33 After *Roe*, Parsons went on to found the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, an organization that is still in existence today and promotes ideas mapped by the Clergy Consultation Service. He continued to voice a progressive religious message on issues of reproductive rights, campaigning against the emerging anti-abortion movement as early as the 1970s and promoting new abortion techniques such as *Mifepristone* (RU 489) in the 1980s. Spencer Parsons died in Boston in October 2013.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, Susie, and Michael Drapa. 2012. "When King Made History at U Chicago" in *University of Chicago Magazine*, January 9, 2012. https://www.uchicago.edu/features/20120109_mlk/

Aronson-Rath, Raney. 2005. *The Last Abortion Clinic*. Frontline. PBS. https://www.pbs.org/video/frontline-last-abortion-clinic/

Beggs, Daniel C., and Henry A. Copeland. 1970. "Opinion on the Campus: Students in Favor of Legalized Abortion by a 2 to 1 Margin" in *Chicago Tribune*, December 12, 1970.

Bloomington woman. 1968. “Dear Dr. Parsons” February 18, 1968. Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service, the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Bonnasse, Pierre. 2016. “Zoroastre et Le Feu Éternel” in *Le Monde Des Religions*, February 12, 2016. http://www.lemondedesreligions.fr/savoir/zoroastre-et-le-feu-eternel-12-02-2016-5273_110.php.

Borsch, Frederick Houk. 2012. *Keeping Faith at Princeton: A Brief History of Religious Pluralism at Princeton and Other Universities* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press)

Brant, Mike. 1969. “Draft Protest” Archival Photographic Files, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center. http://photoarchive.lib.uchicago.edu/db.xqy?keywords=Draft+protest+rockefeller+Chapel

Carmen, Arlene, and Howard Moody. 1973. *Abortion Counseling and Social Change; from Illegal Act to Medical Practice: The Story of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion* (Valley Forge Pa.: Judson Press)

CCS. n.d. “A Guide to Mexico City” Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service, the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

CCSP. n.d. “Feedback Form” B3F44, Chicago Clergy Consultation Service records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Chicago Area CCSP. 1972. “CCS Tape Message” B4F54, Chicago Clergy Consultation Service records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Chicago Today. 1970. “U. of C. Rabbi Accused of Abortion Conspiracy” January 7, 1970.

Davenport, Elizabeth. 2012. *MLK's Historic Speeches at the University of Chicago*, The University of Chicago https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWy1a8qNc8Q.

Davis, Nanette J. 1985. *From Crime to Choice: The Transformation of Abortion in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press)

Davis, Tom. 2004. *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press)

Dirks, Doris Andrea, and Patricia Relf. 2017. *To Offer Compassion: A History of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion* (Madison, WI: the University of Wisconsin Press)

“Early Resolution on Abortion, American Baptist Convention, Boston, MA” 1968. Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service, the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Finlay, Barbara Agresti. 1981. “Sex Differences in Correlates of Abortion Attitudes among College Students” in *Journal of Marriage and Family* 43 (3): 571–82. https://doi.org/10.2307/351758.

Glazer, Sarah. 1970. “DA to Drop Charges in Ticktin Case” in *Chicago Maroon*, January 27, 1970. B6F80, Chicago Clergy Consultation Service records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Good, Mary B. 1971. “Battle for Abortion Reform: Opponents Win Latest Round” in *Daily Herald*, March 23, 1971.

Gorney, Cynthia. 1998. *Articles of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster)

Hammerle, Ronald. 2013. Phone Interview with Anne Légier.

Huffman, Dale. 1970. “Students Back Abortion in Poll” in *Dayton Daily News*, December 20, 1970.

Hyde Park Kenwood Voices. 1970. “Abortion Counseling Service Continues Despite Bust” January 1970.

ICMCA. 1971. “Abortion, an Elective Medical Procedure...Not a Criminal Act (ICMCA Policy Statement).” B5F72, Chicago Clergy Consultation Service records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

ICMCA leaflet. n.d. “Abortion, a Private Concern” Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service, the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Johnson, Susan. 2012. “Observing Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday” in *Hyde Park Union Church*, January 2012.

Kaplan, Laura. 1997. *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

“Letter from Monmouth.” 1969, circa 1969. Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service. Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections.

“Letter to Lynn Weller.” 1970, July 14, 1970. B2F14, Chicago Clergy Consultation Service records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Marx, Robert, Spencer Parsons, and Don Shaw. 1969. “Letter from Marx, Parsons and Shaw to Religious and Civic Leaders in Illinois” Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service, the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Miller, Elizabeth. 1976. “Religious Liberty and Abortion” Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service. Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections.

Mohler, Albert. n.d. “E. Y. Mullins: The Axioms of Religion.” http://albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/e-y-mullins-the-axioms-of-religion/.

Mullins, Edgar Young. 1908. *The Axioms of Religion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press)

O'Connor, Phillip J. 1971. “UC Minister Vows to Again Defy Jury on Abortion Quiz” in *Chicago Daily News*, April 22, 1971.

Parsons, Spencer. 1967. “Dear Dr. King (Invitation),” June 8, 1967. The King Center Archives.

———. 1969a. “CCS Report on Meeting of May, 8, 1969.” Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service, the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

———. 1969b. “Letter to Edward Levi, President of the University of Chicago: Installation of an Automatic Answering Service in Rockefeller Chapel” May 2, 1969.

———. 1971a. “Abortion: A Private and Public Concern” in *Criterion* 10 (2). B2F21, Chicago Clergy Consultation Service records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

———. 1971b. “Abortion: A Personal, Pastoral and Public Concern” B3F38, Chicago Clergy Consultation Service records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

———. 1973. “Statement by E. Spencer Parsons, Chairman, Illinois CCS” Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections Northwestern University.

———. 1993. Interview with Paula Kamen. F7, Paula Kamen Collection, the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Parsons, Spencer, and Daniel Leifer. 1969. "Notes on the CCS Meeting, November 8th 1969" Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Parsons, Spencer, Edgar Peara, and Ronald Hammerle. 1969. "Chicago Area Clergy Consultation Service" Papers of the Clergy Consultation Service, the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Patterson, W. Morgan. 1976. "The Contributions of Baptists to Religious Freedom in America" *Review & Expositor* 73 (1): 23–31.

Philbrick, Richard. 1965. "U. of C. Picks Baptist to Be Chapel Dean" in *Chicago Tribune*, February 14, 1965.

Rockey, Linda. 1969. "Guidance for Women in Trouble" in *Chicago Sun Times*, December 4, 1969. B6F80. Chicago Clergy Consultation Service records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Sprain Wilson, Jean. 1970. "Campus Rallies Behind 'Little Rabbi'" in *Detroit Free Press*, January 25, 1970.

Staples, Brent. 2018. "'The Defender,' by Ethan Michaeli" in *New York Times*, June 14, 2018.

Stone, Geoffrey R, Edward H. Levi, Marianne Bertrand, and Chris P. Dialynas. 2015. "Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression" (Chicago: The University of Chicago)

The Chicago Maroon. 1970. "Parsons Affirms Faith in Ticktin" January 9, 1970.

The Chicago Sun Times. 1970. "Accused Rabbi Defended" January 9, 1970.

The Chicago Tribune. 1967. "Hit Abortion Bill Veto" September 11, 1967.

The Green Highway Theater. 1999. "Jane: Abortion and the Underground Makes Official World Premiere" CWLU Herstory Project. https://www.cwluherstory.org/jane-on-stage-articles/the-green-highway-theater-press-release.

Torbet, Robert G. 1973. *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson Press)

United Press International. 1968a. "Baptist Group Urges Lenient Abortion Law" in *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1968.

———. 1968b. "Baptists OK Abortion Law Liberlization" in *Tucson Daily Citizen*, June 1, 1968.

———. 1968c. "Abortion Law Ease Urged" in *Courier Post*, September 30, 1968.

Wolff, Joshua. 1998. "Ministers of a Higher Law: The Story of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion." Amherst. http://classic.judson.org/MinistersofaHigherLaw.

NOTES

1. On how the fragmentation of the modern American Protestant Church enabled social activism, see N. J. Davis 1985, p. 129.

2. Kaplan, who mostly uses pseudonyms to refer to the individuals she mentions in her book, calls Parsons "Harris Wilson."

3. He worked at Harvard, Radcliffe, Wellesley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), then moving to Hyde Park, the neighborhood of the University of Chicago in 1959. He became the minister of the Hyde Park Union Church and in 1965 Dean of the Rockefeller Memorial Chapel at the University (Philbrick 1965).

4. When she interviewed Parsons, Paula Kamen was researching another abortion referral group from Chicago called *Jane* for a play she was writing. The Play, entitled *Jane: Abortion and the Underground* was performed at the Green Highway Theater in Chicago in the Fall of 1999. Spencer Parsons was featured in the play as a friend and ally of Jane's feminist members (The Green Highway Theater 1999).

5. The university's lawyer told him he did not believe the argument of privileged information would be considered legally admissible. Parsons nonetheless used it successfully.

6. Zoroaster, also known as Zarathustra, founded Zoroastrianism, is one of the world's oldest monotheist religions in Ancient Iran (Bonnasse 2016).

7. The 1956 sermon is believed to be King's first major address in Chicago. He stressed the need for resistance against political injustice: "There are some things we never intend to become adjusted to: lynch mobs, oppression, economic exploitation and political domination. I call upon you to resist with your heart and strength the forces of evil" (King in Davenport 2012).

8. The *Chicago Defender*, a weekly newspaper based in Chicago, was founded in 1905 to cater to an African-American readership. It quickly became "the most important publication in the colored press" (Staples 2018).

9. Craps is a game of dice. The author of the letter is here referring to "floating craps" an illegal operation of the game which was popular at the beginning of the 20th century. To evade law enforcement, the operators used portable tables and equipment that could be moved quickly. *Jane*, the Chicago abortion network used a "floating" strategy, using people's homes for a day, to avoid drawing attention to themselves. For more on the group, see (Kaplan 1997).

10. 15 of the 25 founding members of the Chicago CCSP were connected to the university or Hyde Park (Chicago Area CCSP "members list" 1970).

11. At the time, abortion was legal in places like Japan and England. While it was illegal in Mexico and Puerto Rico, some physicians there still provided safe abortions.

12. The word *forced* was underlined by the author of the letter.

13. This is the Henry Hyde who later sponsored the 1976 Hyde Amendment preventing federal funding from being used to pay for abortions.

14. The New York CCS's position statement, released in 1967, defended the idea of unjust laws: "Therefore believing as clergymen that there are higher laws and moral obligations transcending legal codes, we believe that it is our pastoral responsibility and religious duty to give aid and assistance to all women with problem pregnancies" (Carmen and Moody 1973, 30–31).

15. On the roles of pro-life Christian lobbies in shaping state legislation after *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey* (1992), see for instance how Americans United for Life explain their strategy in Aaronson-Rath 2005.

ABSTRACTS

Since *pro-life* activism has been mostly organized by conservative religious movements, the general public has come to believe spiritual positions on abortion are necessarily hostile to it.

By focusing on the individual trajectory of a Baptist minister's involvement in the struggle for abortion rights, this article will attempt to highlight the key role played by progressive clergymen like the Reverend Spencer Parsons in shifting the abortion landscape before *Roe v. Wade.*

Drawing essentially on archival documents, this paper will explore how Parsons's religious, professional and political background led him to embrace the ideas of abortion rights. It will then focus on Parsons's "abortion ministry" and how he organized the Clergy Consultation Service on Problem Pregnancies (CCSP ou CCS), a network that helped thousands of Midwestern women navigate the world of illegal abortion. Finally, it will examine how Parsons's theological contributions helped frame the issue of abortion rights in terms of ethical obligations and religious freedom.

Les mouvements « pro vie » américains émanant aujourd'hui essentiellement de groupes religieux conservateurs, le grand public a tendance à considérer que tout point de vue religieux sur l'avortement lui est nécessairement hostile.
En s'intéressant au parcours individuel d'un pasteur baptiste impliqué dans la lutte pour le droit à l'avortement, cet article se propose de souligner le rôle capital joué par des hommes d'Église, parmi lesquels le révérend Spencer Parsons, dans le combat pour la légalisation de l'avortement.
L'article, basé essentiellement sur un travail d'archives, s'intéressera d'abord au contexte spirituel, professionnel et politique qui permit à Parsons de s'impliquer dans le combat pour le droit à l'avortement. Il examinera ensuite son engagement concret en faveur de l'avortement : comment il organisa le Clergy Consultation Service on Problem Pregnancies (CCSP ou CCS), un réseau qui permit à des milliers de femmes dans le Midwest d'accéder à un avortement sûr. Enfin, il se penchera sur la contribution théologique de Parsons qui permit de resituer la question en termes de devoir moral et de liberté religieuse.

INDEX

Mots-clés: avortement, clergé, pasteur, théologien, baptistes, désobéissance civique, loi injuste
Keywords: abortion, clergy, referral, counseling, ministry, theologian, Baptists, civil disobedience, unjust law

AUTHOR

ANNE LÉGIER

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, EA 4399 Centre for Research on the English-speaking World (CREW). Faculté de droit et de Science Politique, Aix-Marseille Université (AMU)