

Respecting the Moral Agency of Women

The Importance of Choice

Modern readers of John Milton's 17th-century epic, *Paradise Lost*, usually wonder why God tempted Adam and Eve by placing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Paradise and then forbidding its use. Why didn't a loving God protect Adam and Eve from the opportunity to sin? Milton's response would be that, had Adam and Eve had no genuine choice, they would have been deprived of moral agency and the opportunity to love and serve God in a non-deterministic way.

As Bishop Henry King remarked in 1643, without the freedom and the means to disobey, Adam and Eve would have been nothing more than God's "marionettes." Milton's God explains in Book Three of *Paradise Lost* that Satan and the fallen angels had been created

*just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall...
Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.*

(98-103)

In the same way, according to the Bible and Milton, Adam and Eve were created "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall."¹

Like Milton, most Christian ethicists have understood that freedom of informed choice is a basic component of moral responsibility and growth. Without it, as Milton says, God could have taken no pleasure in humankind's cooperation, because without choice, people's will and reason are rendered "useless and vain," so "passive" that they are serving necessity, not God (*PL*. III 109-110).

Despite the almost universal consensus that authentic choice is an ethical necessity, citizens of the United States are witnessing powerful, repeated

attempts to deny women precisely that most basic component of any conscious cooperation with the will of God. If abortion restrictions continue to grow in number and frequency, society will have succeeded in denying to women integrity of procreative conscience and will have returned, in effect, to the time when abortion was a crime.

To force any human being's conscience is an act of violence. To coerce a woman to bear a child she feels she cannot adequately care for is a violent function of sexism. To coerce an impoverished woman by denying funding or blocking her access to information is a violent function not only of sexism but also of classism.

Gen. 1:26-28 informs us that God gave to Adam and Eve the responsibility for making decisions on behalf of the whole earth and all the creatures in it. If God thus limited God's own power by bestowing choice upon human beings, who are we to deny women the opportunity to choose the course of action that seems to them most responsible within their current circumstances?

To deny a woman the power to make decisions is to disrespect the integrity of her conscience and, ultimately, to deny her full personhood. To apply coercion because we believe she is making an immoral decision is to substitute our own conscience for hers, and thus to wipe out her presence as a person directly and primarily responsible to God and to human relationship as she perceives it.

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passive, useless, and vain. Whether she chose to carry her fetus to term or wanted to abort, she would be serving legal necessity, not God. She would be a slave to biological process rather than the responsible moral agent she was created to be.

In the entry for "abortion" in *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Martin H. Scharlemann says:

Incipient life may become a threat to the life of the mother. In that case, choice needs to be made between two beings; and its primary thrust must be to save that life which is already functioning as a developed person....The mother is already involved in many other responsibilities of life, where her presence and assistance are needed. Under such circumstances, abortion is the indirect and unfortunate consequence of an action undertaken to preserve life.²

Although the context here speaks only to the preservation of the physical life of the pregnant woman, the same principle is applicable to her moral life, to the procreative choice without which she is not able to do what she deems responsible within her complex situation. Only she and God can evaluate whether by giving birth at this time she will enhance or destroy the quality of her response to all her other commitments and relationships.

Most people would agree that it is a serious matter to force the conscience of another human being. If we ourselves were commissioned to make the rules for society, and if we had to set those rules without knowing how we would enter that society—as male or female; poor or rich; gay or heterosexual; black, white, red, or yellow; "Third World" or "First World;" able-bodied or otherwise—we all know in our hearts that we would rapidly develop a sense of justice many of us currently lack. Certainly we would want to protect ourselves from coercion by establishing the principle that those who must bear the physical consequences of a decision should have primary control over that decision.³

The very thought of being the despised and powerless "other" within society fills us with apprehension. Facing our personal fear of losing the opportunity to decide our own destiny in a responsible fashion, we must ask ourselves this question: What value could possibly be so great that in its name we would be willing to deny women the opportunity we covet for ourselves?

When Does Personhood Begin?

Anti-abortionists respond with a simple declaration that human life is the ultimate value; that human personhood begins at the moment of conception; that killing a fetus is therefore no more acceptable than killing any other human

being; and that protection of human life justifies the coercive and repressive use of law.

But such a statement short-circuits ethical discussion by assuming that one theological viewpoint has such validity that it must be imposed on people who in all honesty cannot agree with it. Anti-abortionists claim that the personhood of the fetus is a biological fact rather than a theological perspective. However, the fetus is biologically human only in the sense that any part of a human body is human: every cell carries the full genetic code. (A severed hand is genetically human, as well, but we do not call it a person.) By contrast in all but the most materialistic philosophies, human personhood is defined by a personal awareness that goes beyond biology.

The full human personhood of the embryo from the moment of conception is therefore a theological assumption that cannot be proved. Furthermore, it is not historically a Christian belief. Even the Roman Catholic Church did not declare early abortion a mortal sin until 1869, and then the declaration was more a matter of papal authority than of agreement among Catholic theologians about fetal personhood.⁴

Up through the 19th century in England and America, abortion was considered acceptable prior to quickening, usually during the fifth month, the assumption being that no murder could be involved until then because no "child" was involved until then. As Rosalind Petchesky points out, "the idea that [all] abortion is 'murder' and you are 'killing a baby' is a [recent] culturally generated one, not shared by many eras and peoples."⁵

Dr. Robert L. Johnson, Director of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine at New Jersey Medical School and chairman of the deacon board at Union Baptist Church in Orange, New Jersey, regularly performs abortions for young women who feel they need them. He explained in my presence that 600 million sperm are "aborted" in every act of masturbation or wet dream.⁶ Although an embryo is certainly a potential human life, so are those 600 million sperm; yet surely none of us would argue that the life of every one of them must be sustained. Furthermore, a healthy woman has the potential of bearing 30 children within her reproductive lifetime.⁷ Although the eggs "aborted" each month are surely alive and potentially human, the life of every one of them simply cannot be sustained. And what about the millions of miscarriages that occur, each of them a spontaneous abortion of potential human life? Physician Carolyn B. Coulam comments that "the magnitude of [naturally occurring] fetal wastage in humans is considerable, approaching a loss of up to three-quarters of fertilized ova."⁸

If the embryo is a person and has an absolute right to life, then don't we as a society have a responsibility to stem this "wastage" as well? Anyone claiming that an embryo has an absolute

right to life must carry the burden of proof by supplying the criteria for differentiating the embryo as a full human person from the millions of aborted eggs, sperm, fertilized eggs that fail to implant, and miscarriages.

The Decision Is Ours

I have studied the Scriptures used on both sides of the abortion debate when the debate is narrowly conceived as a matter of competing rights between mother and fetus, and I can find no passage, interpreted honestly within its context, that definitively settles the abortion issue.

Certainly no passage of Scripture tells us exactly when human life begins, unless we decide to accept Dr. Johnson's definition that human "life began only once, [when] life was created by the Creator."⁹ Since that time, Johnson says, every life has been a process of entering and exiting from human existence.

Science has now given humans the power to join an egg and a sperm outside the womb; even greater "miracles" are on the verge of being scientifically possible. Like it or not we can no longer rely on the limits of science to make our moral decisions for us. If Scripture will not answer our questions concerning reproduction, and if science will not answer our questions, then we must rely upon our own powers of moral reasoning. We must be honest enough to admit in our public discourse that more than half of all abortions are done before the embryo is 8 weeks old; over 90 percent are performed before 12 weeks. Furthermore, we do not and cannot know how God deals with embryos that are spontaneously aborted; but we do know what repressive laws have done to people and to the human spirit through the centuries. It is our responsibility to work with what we know rather than with what we cannot know.

Even if we were to accept the highly controversial and recent claim that an embryo is a person from the moment of conception, we would still be looking at only one very important value among many. Other very important values are the quality of life that the unborn could look forward to after birth; the probable impact of that birth on the welfare of the already existing family; the mental health, well-being, and conscience of the potential mother; and the impact on society of laws that repress obedience to the dictates of conscience and remove a woman's control over her own destiny.

In other words, morality cannot simply deal with separate individual occurrences, but must concern itself with the common good and with personal decisions taken within the context of moral field-thinking.¹⁰ A newborn infant needs not only physical care but also psychological attention and tender affection, and the covenant between mother and child is lifelong. Only the woman

involved is capable of deciding whether she can live up to that covenant.¹¹

At the Last Supper, Jesus compared his imminent suffering to the travail of a woman in childbirth (John 16:21–22). In 1973 the Supreme Court recognized that modern legal abortion is many times safer than childbirth; so any woman who chooses to give birth has chosen to run a risk much greater than the risk should she choose abortion, not to mention maintaining the covenant of caring after the birth. Can we, dare we, force another human being to make such a Christ-like sacrifice?

It is self-serving and exploitative for people in power to teach powerless people—those trapped in poverty or marginalization—that they ought to lay down any power they may have achieved in imitation of Christ's self-emptying of power. According to Philippians, Chapter 2, Jesus the Christ chose servanthood from a position of tremendous power, laying aside the very form of God in order to die the death of a slave. The lesson for Christians is that Christ-like servanthood can be chosen only by people who have the power to choose. To deny procreative choice to women is to deny them the opportunity to choose Christ-like servanthood, or, conversely, to recognize when for various reasons they cannot make the necessary covenant of caring.

It is true that when society affirms the moral agency of women, some will make choices that others will consider wrong or irresponsible. According to Genesis, the same thing happened in the Garden of Eden; God foresaw that Adam and Eve would make wrong choices, yet for the sake of human moral agency, God permitted it to happen. Every day people around us make choices we ourselves would not make and cannot approve, such as living extravagantly while others are in desperate need; yet we cannot seek to undermine the civil and human rights of these people, because then our own human and civil rights would be jeopardized.

Instead of trying to influence the state to impose a single set of moral and religious attitudes upon everybody, the religious community should join together to encourage social policies that will make the moral life at least a possibility for all people everywhere.

Because women must either control their fertility or be controlled by it, procreative choice is essential to the moral life of women. A commitment to protecting the integrity of the individual conscience would entail, among other things, opposition to all attempts to force sterilization or abortion on powerless women in developing and developed countries. It would entail ensuring the availability of legal, medically safe abortion services for those who choose them, and the availability of public funding without which poor

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women cannot exert their procreative responsibility. It would entail working for conditions that would improve the quality of life of the born as well as the unborn,¹² such as ensuring food, shelter, and clothing for poor families; reliable, affordable means of contraception; adequate, affordable childcare centers; thorough sex education, including healthy attitudes toward sexuality as God's good gift to be used in caring, responsible ways that honor human dignity; shelters for battered spouses and children; and overturning the unbiblical notion that might makes right, whether in the home, in domestic policies, or in relationships between nations.

According to Scripture, God knew that Adam and Eve would misuse their power to choose. Yet God chose to give them that power, creating them "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall." We human beings should follow our Creator's example by giving one another moral elbow room. Through the ages, a remarkable number of women have willingly and unselfishly devoted themselves to their children. The way to honor them, and to honor God, is to restrain ourselves from coercion and to seek government policies that support the moral agency of women as well as men, of people of color as well as whites, and of poor people as well as the affluent.

Endnotes

1. For a further discussion of how Milton handled the paradox of human freedom and God's sovereignty, see Virginia R. Mollenkott, "Free Will," in *A Milton Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3 (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1978), pp. 114-115.
2. *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. by Carl F.H. Henry (n.p.: Canon Press, 1973), p. 2. Emphasis mine.
3. This standard of moral measurement was developed by Jewish moral philosopher Ronald Green in "Conferred Rights and the Fetus," *Journal of Religious Ethics* (Spring 1974), pp. 55-74.
4. In *Abortion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), James Mohr shows that when anti-abortion laws were first proposed in 19th-century America, no clergymen or theologians supported those laws (p. 328).
5. Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, *Abortion and Women's Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984), p. 329.
6. See Virginia R. Mollenkott's article in *Life and Justice: Biblical Theology and the Nature of Human Life* (United Presbyterian Church U.S.A.: Synod of the Northeast, 1984), p. 23; and Dr. Robert Johnson's article in the same booklet, p. 27.
7. Judith Bruce, as quoted by Diane Schuller and Florynce Kennedy in *Abortion Rap: Testimony by Women Who Have Suffered the Consequences of Restrictive Abortion Laws* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1971), pp. 127 and 142-143.
8. *Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 29 (December 1986), p. 863.
9. *Life and Justice*, p. 27.
10. For a brilliant discussion of the Christian ethical complexities surrounding abortion, see Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).
11. For a detailed description of the way women arrive at their reproductive decisions, see Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
12. See Beverly Wildung Harrison's scholarly discussion of this interrelationship in *Our Right to Choose*, p. 244 ff.

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The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith in the United States. The Religious Coalition—comprising Protestant, Jewish, and other denominations and faith groups, the Clergy for Choice Network, and state affiliates throughout the country—works to ensure reproductive choice through the moral power of religious communities. In all programs, the Religious Coalition seeks to give clear voice to the reproductive health issues of people of color, those living in poverty, and other underserved populations.

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