

If God Intends You To Be Born

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Abortion Tolerance: The “If God Intends You to be Born, You Will be Born” Argument.

The current position of the majority of Western religious leaders is that abortion is an abomination, commonly compared to murder. The reasons for this have varied over time. In her “Adam, Eve and the Serpent”, Elaine Pagels linked the religious attitude to human sexuality to the body revulsion of early Church fathers such as St. Paul and St. Augustine.(1) St. Paul decried the demeaned dignity he perceived in men and women fornicating like animals, for instance, in his letter to the Romans, verses 1: 23-24. Additionally, St. Paul made clear, in his letter to the Corinthians, verses 6: 13-20, that human enjoyment of carnal pleasures detracted from the concentration of devotion and fervor with which we ought to be worshiping God. This is the cause of fornication being a sin. This also had the effect, intended or not, of imposing oppressive control, economically, socially and reproductively, over the behaviors of girls and women, (men less so) who then faced ruin and worse for committing sins such as promiscuity, witchcraft (often conflated with midwifery, and thus, control over reproduction), birth control and abortion.(2) The Church, with its key role in creating this oppression, would then create a dependency amongst the oppressed upon its message of salvation from that very oppression. This could be regarded as ironic if it didn't seem deliberate. In 1795, in “La Philosophie dans le Boudoir”, the first book in Western Europe to praise abortion, the Marquis de Sade attacked restrictions on abortion as superstitious.(3). His general aim, of course, was to encourage participation in consequence-free pleasure seeking. Abortion was seen as serving as a supplement to other forms of contraception, and to this, the Catholic Church reacted. In the nineteenth century, after biological discoveries involving fertilization, theologians such as John Gury, Thomas Gousset, Augustine Lehmkühl and Arthur Vermeersch argued as to the timing of the infusion of the soul. These debates, coupled with a humanistic movement placing greater value on human life, led, by 1895, to Pope Leo XIII coming down firmly on the side of all abortion being the murder of a human being.(3)

The theological basis for regarding the fetus as a full human-being is not secure. As Daniel Maguire, Professor of Theology at Marquette University, pointed out, the status of a “person” was not conceded to early embryos or fetuses throughout most of Christian history.(4) Even today, when miscarried or aborted, fetuses cannot be baptized or given Catholic funeral mass as if they were persons. Although abortion was practiced long before Christ's day, indeed, Aristotle pondered its legitimacy, there is no direct reference to it in the Bible. Only one passage remotely relates to abortion: Exodus 21: 22 says “if men quarrel and one strike a woman with child so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follows”, the punishment is a fine unless the woman is hurt. That, being mischief, is to be punished “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, foot for foot” etc.(21: 23-24) According to the Bible, a hostile abortion doesn't rise to

the level of mischief, let alone murder. The venerable St. Augustine in "On Exodus", made the following comment: "The law does not provide that the act pertains to homicide, for there cannot be said to be a live soul in a body that lacks sensation when it is not formed in the flesh." He wrote: "The timing of the fusion of the soul was a mystery known to God alone", and distinguished, as did Aristotle, between an "unformed" and a "formed" fetus following its "vivication". Nevertheless, Augustine considered abortion, contraception and infanticide to be frustrating to the God of marriage, and therefore to be debauchery and an "Evil work".(5) Christ, Himself, made no specific disapproval of abortion. That He may have said "Love thy neighbor as thyself" is irrelevant if He failed to specify the age at which a conceptus becomes our neighbor. He may certainly be faulted for failing to foresee the controversy that envelops us today and leaving no specific guidance. Jesus was not a single-issue anti-abortion crusader. He did not go to the Cross to save the unborn, He did so to redeem us from our sins. Pointedly, that includes the sin of abortion. But perhaps not.

The following argument is to show that if a Perfect, All-Knowing, All-Powerful, Benevolent God exists, it must be just as sinful in some cases to prohibit abortion as it would be in others to have one.

The argument begins at conception, with the statement "It is axiomatic that Life begins at fertilization". This claim is problematic in itself. Fertilization occurs when a living ovum fuses with a living spermatozoon to form a living zygote. Therefore, life does not begin, it continues. In fact, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, pregnancy does not begin until the zygote implants in the lining of the womb, a process that takes about 4 days and can begin from 6-14 days after fertilization. During this time, the zygote has split into 2 cells by the second day, and has formed a morula, a ball of cells resembling a mulberry, by day 4. Its cells continue to divide, forming a hollow, spherical blastula anywhere from about days 6 - 8 to day 9 after fertilization. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, about a third to half of fertilized ova fail to implant. In addition, many miscarriages happen later throughout pregnancy. The nagging worry in our minds when we consider fetal death, skillfully exploited in the emotional abortion debate, is, in so many words, the question "What if that had been me? Isn't it terrible to suppose that persons like myself should be snuffed out and deprived of even the briefest experience?" But it is possible to argue, and indeed, find comfort in the thought, that these worries are totally unfounded. I suggest it's certainly likely that an All-knowing Lord knows how many children each woman will bear and the eventual number that will make up her family. If this is so, it is reasonable to suppose that in His wisdom He will make provision accordingly, such that the first born child will have the same soul, no matter how many early embryonic deaths, miscarriages or abortions preceded him or her. Similarly for the second-born child, and so on. The choice of an abortion does not contravene God's plan, He already has planned for that. Or else, God is happy to watch half the souls He creates get flushed down the toilet. One really needs to suppose that if the Lord intends you to be born, you will be born, ready to live your best life.

No person knows whether the fetus has a soul. In medical terminology: Fertilization occurs when an ovum that lacks a soul fuses with a sperm cell that lacks a soul to form a zygote that ...? At what stage does God bestow the benediction of an immortal soul? How long will it be before we hear eminent theologians and politicians declare "It is axiomatic that the soul begins at fertilization"? We must also consider that zygotes can split, forming identical twins, typically

between days 2-6 but even up to day 9 post fertilization.(6) (When this splitting occurs after implantation, beyond the 12th day, it results in conjoined twins). Do these twins share one soul, each having only a half? Or is the soul bestowed later, as the fetus more nearly approaches the state of independent being, and is in less danger from the Russian roulette of early embryonic death? I submit that we mortals will never know the answer.

But, you might argue, what if soon after an abortion, the woman dies in an accident? Or if the first child has a different father than did the fetus that was aborted? In the first case, one has to assume that All-knowing God foresaw the problem, and has a back-up plan. Perhaps He'll use the soul in question for the pregnancy of a different woman that He deems in some way compatible. As to the question of whether the actual inherited genetic constitution of the fetus matters to the soul, an atheist would assume that it probably does, but if there is a God, it need not matter.

Anyway, if you accept that the maxim "If God intends you to be born, you will be born" is even possibly true, there are startling implications. And ramifications. Now, if a woman chooses to have an abortion, she may be not murdering an unborn child but merely delaying its entrance until such a time as circumstances prove fortuitous. Instead of being the stereotype example of a child brought up into a single-parent home on the dole in a poverty stricken neighborhood, only to grow up resented and unloved and driven to a life of violence, drugs and crime, the child may be held back until such a time as his or her mother completes her schooling, finds a stable relationship, and can provide the child with a loving, nurturing environment. Or instead of the soul being born into a body with severe, even painful physical or mental disabilities, it could wait one round and expect a healthy and productive life. (Delaying a disabled child's soul into an able body is different from simply terminating a disabled fetus). If you accept that the maxim even might be valid, it follows that preventing abortion in some cases might be at odds with the spirit of an All-benevolent God. The point is that no Authority on Earth, no Supreme Pontiff or Supreme Court Justice, can ever know what happens to the soul of an unborn child. Therefore women must follow the dictates of their own consciences as to whether a specific abortion is right or wrong. To quote Daniel Maguire again, "in the words of an old Catholic saw, *ubi dubium, ibi libertas* - where there is doubt, there is freedom of moral choice".(4)

The issue of abortion is, therefore, a classic existentialist dilemma. It pits the life of a mature human being with "jus prius", or prior right, against the life of an undeveloped potential human being. It is a question of whether life itself is sacred, or whether quality of life matters. If God exists, I argue that there is room for both life *and* quality of life to be sacred, and why not? If there is no God, well, nothing's sacred to God, but life is the be-all and end-all, and humanist principles advocate seeking quality of life first, even over quantity. Not to mention the population burden on the planet Earth itself.

There are other issues, of course. These include the subjugation of the rights of half of humanity to the force of State power, the subjugation of women's economic autonomy, the imperilment of women's reproductive health, the cruel disregard of the value of a woman's life in the case of miscarriage-associated emergencies or ectopic pregnancies, the wanton disregard for the actual anatomy of pregnant young girls, let alone their emotional health, and the unholy hypocrisy of insisting on more (economically disadvantaged) babies without any intention to provide for their welfare. In these examples, the demands of religious leaders seem uncoupled from any reasonable interpretation of the wishes of a benevolent God.

The freedom of a woman to seek abortion is a legitimate one. Efforts to block it are morally illegitimate because of the predictable victimization of the poor and the powerless, and the consequential entrapment of so many lives into a cycle of suffering. Abortion need not be a sin. On the other hand, for members of the Religious Right to insist that they know when God grants a soul is a grave sin - the sin of blasphemy! If they had the humility to admit that they do not know how their God intends to distribute souls among the zygotes of the world, they could surround the sometimes fraught discovery of unintended, or complicated pregnancy with offers of love and support instead of threats and prison. And to those who have lost a pregnancy they desperately wanted, they could offer this consolation: that if their God intends them to bring a human soul into the world, it will certainly happen. This much is reasonable, and has a good reason. Because all humanity deserves to live its best life.

References:

- 1) "Adam, Eve and the Serpent", Elaine Pagels, Random House, 1988
- 2) "Caliban and the Witch", Silvia Federici, Autonomedia, 2004, see p 183
- 3) "Abortion and the Catholic Church: A Summary History", John T. Noonan, Jr., Natural Law Forum Paper 126, http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/nd_naturallaw_forum/126, 1967
- 4) "The Bishop and the Governor", Daniel C. Maguire, New York Times, Jan 30, 1990
- 5) "St. Augustine of Hippo", Wikipedia, wikipedia.en.m.wikipedia.org, accessed July 7, 2020
- 6) "Incidence of monozygotic twins in blastocyst and cleavage stage assisted reproductive technology cycles", Fady I. Sharara, M.D., and Galal Abdo, Ph.D., HCLD. Fertility and Sterility, doi:10.1016/j.fertnstert.2008.12.130