

Jesus v. Abortion

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Abstract: There are four main approaches for relating the Bible to the abortion debate: (1) the Bible is not relevant because it was written so long ago, in a different cultural context, (2) the Bible can be viewed as supporting the pro-choice cause, (3) the Bible can be viewed as supporting the pro-life cause, though this is usually done via “proof-texting,” (4) the Bible is not relevant because all religious arguments should be excluded from the public square. This essay critiques options (1), (2), and (4) and argues in favor of option (3), but by employing a much more serious reading of the fullness of biblical anthropology and moral theology rather than simply proof-texting.

IN THE ABORTION DEBATE in the United States today, there are four possible approaches to the question of the relevance of the Bible to the debate. (1) Some people argue that the Bible is not relevant to the debate because it was written so long ago and in such a vastly different cultural context from our own. The authors of the Bible were simply not addressing the nest of problems that we are facing in our contemporary debate. We must therefore use our faculty of reason to wrestle with the important questions of moral, political, and legal philosophy that the practice of abortion raises. Andrew Fiala articulates this position effectively: “The most important issue remains the ontological and moral status of the fetus. But Jesus really has nothing to tell us about this issue, which is why we need to go beyond Jesus and use reason to think critically about this complicated issue.”¹

(2) A different approach – rare though not unheard of – is to use the Bible to support the pro-choice cause. Groups such as Catholics for Choice and the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice employ a biblical hermeneutic that supports abortion rights, even though their usual mode of argument tends to downplay religious concepts. This

¹ Andrew Fiala, *What Would Jesus Really Do?: The Power and Limits of Jesus’ Moral Teachings* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 73.

position might cite, for example, a passage in Exodus that describes a situation in which two men who are brawling cause a pregnant woman to have a miscarriage (Exodus 21:22). This passage supposedly establishes a lesser value for fetal life.

(3) Yet another approach is offered by those pro-life Christians who quote certain verses from the Bible as “proof-texts” such as these: “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13) or “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5) or the account in the gospels in which Elizabeth, pregnant with the future John the Baptist, says to Mary: “as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:41).

(4) The fourth possible approach maintains that whether or not the Bible has anything substantive to say about abortion is irrelevant for the public debate about the issue. Discussion about a controversial topic such as this in a modern, pluralistic society needs to be conducted without drawing on religious beliefs. According to this position, there must be a neutral public square within which only “secular” arguments are allowed to be made. To introduce religious ideas from the Bible is either a conversation-stopper or an intractable-argument-producer. Religious belief must therefore be privatized. This approach is advocated by John Rawls and other contemporary academics and legal theorists.² Many pro-life advocates also employ this approach. They write articles and books that say: “Even though I’m a religious person, the arguments that I will make against abortion are strictly secular and rational.” In doing so they accept the idea that in a modern, pluralistic society, the public debate about abortion in books, academic journals, and legislatures must employ non-religious arguments only. These proliferators would not dream of quoting proof-texts from the Bible in the public debate. This agreement to avoid referring to the Bible can, at least in a vague sense, be traced back to the aftermath of the American Civil War, which produced what historian Mark Noll has described as “an implicit national agreement not to base public policy of any consequence

² See the thorough discussion of these issues in *Natural Law and Public Reason*, ed. Robert P. George and Christopher Wolfe (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2000).

on interpretation of Scripture.”³ The fact that both abolitionists and defenders of slavery quoted Scripture to make their case led to the discrediting of the Bible as a voice in public debates.

Of these four possibilities, I favor the pro-life approach that unapologetically quotes verses from the Bible in the context of public debate. In practice, however, this approach tends to quote too few verses and to employ them as “proof-texts.” In so doing it fails to mine the full riches of what the Bible teaches about theology, anthropology, culture, and ethics. But this lack can be remedied, and this remedy is precisely what this essay wants to identify.

The central flaw of the first possibility, which held that the Bible is too archaic to be relevant, is that it is quite simply false. René Girard says – quite perceptively I believe – that the Bible was not only ahead of *its* time, it is still ahead of *our* time. He means that the Bible contains moral teachings and insights into human behavior that were far in advance of the general state of knowledge in the ancient world. Scapegoating behavior, for example, was very common, but the Bible contains remarkable texts that unveil the error of such behavior. Even after thousands of years have passed since the writing of the texts, there is a sense in which the Bible’s insights are still more perceptive than the writings of many modern social scientists.⁴ We are still struggling to catch up with the wisdom that the Bible contains. The Bible is not only a text that we read. It is a text that reads us.⁵

The central flaw of the second possibility, which attempts to use the Bible to support the pro-choice agenda, is that it is an utterly hopeless cause. Marjorie Reiley Maguire provides an example of pro-choice exegesis when she says that the personhood of the inhabitant of the

³ Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 161.

⁴ “The Gospels, in fact, are not only superior to all the texts placed in the category of magical thought but are also superior to all the modern interpretations of human relationships.” René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), p. 195.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre makes a similar point: “The reader is put to the question by the texts as much as the texts by the reader.” *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 233. This is an idea that the Bible-quoting defenders of slavery in the nineteenth century simply could not grasp.

womb begins at “the moment when the mother accepts the pregnancy.” This means, Maguire says, that the Virgin Mary’s words “let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38) indicate the moment at which *she created* the personhood of Jesus Christ.⁶ It is difficult to imagine a more absurd and obscene example of heretical exegesis of scripture. In general, the attempts by pro-choice advocates to employ the Bible for their cause are like trying to use the writings of Karl Marx to advance free-market capitalism.

The “naked public square” concept makes two crucial mistakes. (1) Its call for speech to be policed in a “pluralistic” society is deeply anti-pluralistic. The gag order that it wants to place on speech would prevent a Buddhist from speaking about abortion from his or her perspective as a Buddhist. It would prevent a Muslim from speaking as a Muslim and a Christian from speaking as a Christian. On the contrary, everyone *ought* to be able to speak their mind about the topic of abortion from within their own worldviews and to express how they understand God, creation, morality, and law. Atheists should be able to speak about abortion as atheists and to explain what their non-belief in God entails for public policy. This rich conversation of voices expressing varying views *is* pluralism; it *is* democracy. The idea that people must distance themselves from their most deeply held understandings of reality as the price of admission to the public square is a false and unworkable plan that does not advance genuine dialogue and debate.

(2) This approach is also in error simply by calling for the impossible. The Bible – and religious ideas more generally – have influenced the thinking and language of everyone within Western culture in ways too many and too subtle for a proscription of religious language to make any sense. Religious ideas have functioned for

⁶ Marjorie Reiley Maguire, “Personhood, Covenant, and Abortion” in *Abortion and Catholicism: The American Debate*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung and Thomas A. Shannon (New York NY: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 109-10. Paul Simmons provides another example when he says that according to his reading of Genesis 3:22 (“See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil”) personhood should be defined as the human capacity to make good *or* evil choices. It does not seem to occur to him that the source of this post-Fall definition of personhood is the Serpent. Paul D. Simmons, “Personhood, the Bible, and Abortion” in *The Ethics of Abortion, 3rd ed.*, ed. Robert M. Baird and Stuart E. Rosenbaum (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), p. 210.

millennia like yeast worked into dough. The yeast cannot now be separated from the bread in the way that a coin hidden in a loaf could be.

The influence of the Bible can be seen in certain phrases and stories that everyone knows unless their biblical illiteracy is so profound that they have never even heard of figures like David and Goliath. Consider how common it is for pro-choice advocates to draw on the biblical idea “judge not, that ye be not judged” when they make the case that pro-lifers are guilty of imposing their morality on others. They may or may not be aware that they are quoting from the Bible (Matthew 7:1), but that they do so shows how entrenched the Bible is in this culture.

Pro-choice advocates also love to use the word “freedom,” but can they actually do so without in any way drawing on the ways in which the New Testament has influenced the concept of freedom in Western history? Everyone wants to be against tyranny, but our notion of what constitutes tyranny has roots in the Bible. Ideas from the Bible have influenced the development of Western culture in so many subtle ways and for so many centuries that biblical ideas are in play in the thinking and behavior of all of us, regardless of whether we describe ourselves as religious or secular, pro-life or pro-choice. To say, then, that the Bible must be bracketed and put to one side is to call for the impossible. What we need is a clear understanding of how the Bible has already shaped, in subtle and subconscious ways, the thinking of people on all sides of the debate.

Another angle on this problem can be illustrated by a course called “The Bible as Literature.” Such a course might well be taught by an atheist professor with a group of largely non-religious students at a state university in such liberal States as Massachusetts or Washington. The Bible – like the Quran, or the Bhagavad Gita, or the writings of Plato – can be studied as an important historical text. Those studying such a text may not be religious believers, but they can still assess what they are studying in terms of its influence on the development of culture in a certain area of the world. Such students might come to the conclusion, for example, that certain stories in the Bible convey a message about the wrongness of human beings treating other human beings as scapegoats and that this notion can be traced through history as a vitally important

idea that has led to the greater sensitivity about unjust victimization that is such a prominent aspect of modern Western culture.⁷

A secular historian could agree with the idea that rights language was not invented in the Enlightenment but can be traced back to the Middle Ages, and even further to the biblical concept of the creation of all human beings in the image of God. This crucial articulation of equality was expressed in verses such as those that forbid the mistreatment of widows, orphans, and foreigners. The secular historian could admit that rights language is an example of yeast baked into the bread of Western culture. But if people at various points on the spectrum of the abortion debate use rights language, and if that language has roots in the Bible, then what sense does it make to forbid any discussion of the Bible? Would we also have to forbid the use of rights language? In other words, the person who demands that all discussion of abortion must be “secular” would still have to face the idea that the influence of the Bible in human history can be studied in a “secular” way and that the results of that study may actually have great relevance for the abortion debate.

At yet another level we find that even what “reason” is has been shaped very deeply by the Bible and by religious traditions. Likewise, the meaning of the word “person,” which is obviously a crucial term in the abortion debate, arose out of debates in the early Christian centuries on the divinity of Christ and the three members of the Trinity. John Milbank, Charles Taylor, Michael Gillespie, and Larry Siedentop have argued, on a very high philosophical plane, that even the concept of “the secular” has theological roots.⁸ Some scholars have made the case that

⁷ Here I am pointing to the thought of René Girard, which has led to a huge secondary literature of cultural and historical commentary. David Dawson’s *Flesh Becomes Word: A Lexicography of the Scapegoat or the History of an Idea* (East Lansing MI: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2013) offers an extended commentary on this topic. The student might also come to believe that the modern realistic novel, as a form of consciousness, has roots that can be traced back to the parables of Jesus. See James Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1989).

⁸ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007); Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008); Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins*

what we think of as the “secular” natural sciences arose within the Christian West in response to theological influences. Science was made *possible*, they claim, by the belief in a transcendent, Creator God who fashioned an orderly cosmos. Further, they hold that science was made *necessary* by belief in the fallenness of human beings, for that condition required that we devise strict methods of inquiry in order to overcome intellectual bias and sinful distortions.⁹ If these claims are plausible, which they surely are, then they cast doubt not only on the *advisability* of trying to prohibit all religious language in public discourse but more fundamentally on the *possibility* of doing so.

The title that I have chosen for this essay – *Jesus v. Abortion* – came about in part from the experience of encountering a book by Scotty McLennan entitled *Jesus Was a Liberal*.¹⁰ The book has a section on abortion. I read it with great interest, wondering if it might give the author the opportunity to say something like this: “If Jesus were here today, he would support a woman’s right to choose because...,” followed by an argument based on the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the gospels. The book does not do that. It simply presents the author’s view that abortion should be allowed because (in his opinion) personhood begins at birth. There is no substantive attempt to tie in that opinion with the teachings of Jesus. I suspected that this would be the case when I became aware of the book and my suspicions were confirmed. I doubt

of Western Liberalism (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2014). This summary of Siedentop’s work makes the point effectively: “Here, in a grand narrative spanning 1,800 years of European history, a distinguished political philosopher firmly rejects Western liberalism’s usual account of itself: its emergence in opposition to religion in the early modern era. Larry Siedentop argues instead that liberal thought is, in its underlying assumptions, the offspring of the Church. Beginning with a moral revolution in the first centuries CE, when notions about equality and human agency were first formulated by St. Paul, Siedentop follows these concepts in Christianity from Augustine to the philosophers and canon lawyers of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and ends with their re-emergence in secularism – another of Christianity’s gifts to the West.”

⁹ See, for example, Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Scotty McLennan, *Jesus Was a Liberal: Reclaiming Christianity for All* (New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). McLennan is a campus minister at Stanford University, where both René Girard and Eric Voegelin have taught.

that it is possible to make an intellectually coherent case that Jesus would approve of abortion. I have found only one article that even attempts to do that, and I find its argument highly inept.¹¹ *I believe that if we could bring Jesus forward from first-century Palestine in a time machine and ask his opinion, he would clearly and unequivocally reject legalized abortion.* That will be my view until I am persuaded otherwise.

Jesus was not a philosopher like Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, or Kant, but that does not mean that his teachings are devoid of philosophical content. Many verses in the Bible are rich with meaning that can very profitably be drawn out and applied to today's debate over abortion. Any consideration of Jesus and abortion needs to address topics such as these.¹² The command to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39) points to what can be called dimensional anthropology, for we are embodied, psychological, spiritual, and social beings. Differing interpretations of these dimensions and how they ought to interact constitutes the heart of the abortion debate. The verse "those who want to save their life will lose it" (Matthew 16:25) has great relevance for modern notions of "autonomy" and individualism. A commentary on "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1) serves well as a response to the charge that pro-lifers are guilty of imposing their morality on others. "You are descendants of those who murdered the prophets" (Matthew 23:31) is a verse that echoes in the background when pro-lifers assert an analogy between slavery, the Holocaust, and abortion. A careful analysis of the Golden Rule in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:12) can be used to establish the essential validity of this analogy, for the many shape-shifting forms of violence within human culture are all rejections of the Golden Rule. Pontius Pilate's "I have the power to crucify you" (John 19:10) and "What is truth?" (John 18:38) serve well as pithy summaries of the *Roe v. Wade* and *Casey* decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court. Christ's words from the cross "they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34) lead us to reflect on the

¹¹ Daniel R. Bechtel, "Women, Choice, and Abortion: Another Look at Biblical Traditions," *Prism* 8/1 (1993): 74-89.

¹² See my book *Jesus v. Abortion: They Know Not What They Do* (Eugene OR: Cascade, 2016).

tension between conscious and unconscious forms of scapegoating violence.¹³

The verse “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:38) points in the direction of the many thinkers in the modern world whose thought exposes the falsity of the philosophical ideas that underpin the legalization of abortion. I am thinking here of Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Eric Voegelin, Simone Weil, Emmanuel Levinas, Giorgio Agamben, and many others who could be mentioned. These thinkers form a kind of Trojan Cavalry in that their ideas are studied and taken seriously in the academic world where the pro-choice way of thinking is hegemonic.

The verses from the gospels “The eye is the lamp of the body” (Matthew 6:22) and “You must be born again” (John 3:7) lead me to reflect that conversion is not simply a spiritual phenomenon; it is also epistemological. Without conversion, we quite literally cannot understand reality clearly. We would live in a murky darkness that we would prefer to the light which shines from above. Just as a blind person during the day, or a seeing person at night, cannot see a rainbow, so also are we unable to see clearly what human rights are and whose lives they ought to protect when we live in the darkness that is imposed on us by the dogmas of modern secularism.

This is the best way of articulating why I choose to reject the “naked public square” rule of debate. That rule leaves us trapped in Plato’s cave, in that state of diminished consciousness that Jesus forgave from the cross.

¹³ An application of Girard’s thought to the idea that abortion is a form of scapegoating is found in Bernadette Waterman Ward, “Abortion as a Sacrament: Mimetic Desire and Sacrifice in Sexual Politics,” *Contagion* 7 (2000): 18–35.