

Are You Pro-Life When Life Hurts?

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ABSTRACT: In being “pro-life,” the Church expects far more of her own than she asks of the world. Of her own she expects affirmation of human life as good in all of its parts, pains as much as pleasures. Of the world she asks merely that civil society rise above the level of barbarism and not engage in such utilitarian homicides as abortion, euthanasia and destruction of embryos. To affirm life as good, pains as much as pleasures, is one pivot of biblical religion (the other is history). Following Edward Hobbs, the chief pains come as exposure (when I can be seen by the world for what I am), limitation (when my plans and desires are frustrated), and need (when other people make demands on my time and resources). The result is a process of conversion of life, in which I am by stages transformed into blessing all of life, even the parts that I had formerly rejected as evil.

THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

The Catholic Church is sometimes accused of trying to impose its values on society with respect to being pro-life and anti-abortion. In truth, the church could not do that even if she commanded all the coercive power of the state. What the church asks of her own and offers to civil society is much more than she asks of civil society. It is an affirmative answer to the question, “Are you pro-life when life hurts?” This is about much more than just abortion. It requires a change of heart, and it goes well beyond anything within the province of the law (here, wrongful homicides). What the church asks of civil society is merely the minimum necessary to rise above the level of affluent barbarism: the prohibition of utilitarian homicides.

We live in a time when some would desensitize society to such utilitarian homicides as abortion, euthanasia, and research on embryos that involves their destruction. When utilitarian homicides are allowed in law, the weak are not safe, and all human relationships are threatened. We tend to think that we are better than our grandparents because we

have more toys than they did. Those of us who are old enough remember those years and their civility and courtesy with nostalgia. But instead we should be alarmed about our own time and not nostalgic for theirs. We have been coarsened and desensitized, and we are content with our state.

BEING PRO-LIFE

But civil or uncivil society aside, what about the church's catechetical responsibilities to its own and its kerygmatic obligations to the world? Consider the question "Are you pro-life when life hurts?"

Beyond the minimal requirements for a civil society, this question is about a way of life, not just about occasional events in some people's lives. It is about a basic life-orientation. It is about an attitude to life, to oneself, and to one's neighbors. To be pro-life when life hurts is to affirm human life in full view of all its pains, suffering, afflictions, and wrongdoing—sometimes horrific wrongdoing. That is what is at stake in central biblical texts, as we shall see. Is this world to be affirmed as good, without exception, without qualification, without reservation or remainder, without conditions? Do we trust that life is good despite its pains, or do we say that it is wholly or partly defective? This is what the doctrine of creation is about.

Consider again the question, "Are you pro-life when life hurts?" Nobody has what it takes to answer in the affirmative. Some want what it takes, and some do not. Secular society is usually trying to get out of the pains of life, and that is its ultimate goal, the default meaning of the life that is shared in public. To the world, to catechumens, and to the faithful alike, the church says: If you ask for what it takes to affirm human life as good, to be pro-life when life hurts, it will be given to you, as it is given to anyone who asks. Naturally, every one of us would like as little pain as possible. But for Christianity, that is not the most important thing in life. (Judaism is arguably no different, as we shall see.) We ask for what it takes, and what it takes will be given to us, one day at a time. Sometimes we accept what it takes, sometimes we do not. We are willing to be judged by our own standards. We are committed to affirming human life in this world as good, without qualification.

The immediate corollary of the unconditional affirmation of the

goodness of human life in this world is that some acts are wrong—those that construe things in the world as evil. If something really is good, it is good whether I like it or not. If “good” is to mean something more than preference, it seems to me that calling evil something that is in fact good is wrong, disapprovable. And if all of human life is good, what about the hard and painful parts? And so the pain of affirming life is made excruciatingly difficult: We would affirm some human acts *qua* being as good, while at the same time disapproving of them *qua* acts, sometimes in the strongest terms. The temptation can be overwhelming either to write off the pains of life as barren and evil, or to rationalize meaningless suffering so that it comes to have a rational meaning by our own decision. The first is simply a form of despair, even if there should be some extenuating circumstances. The second erects a sacred canopy to protect the believer from the full pains of metaphysical dread and existential chaos.¹

THE BIBLE AND HISTORY

¹ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967). A sacred canopy protects the believer from the anxieties that come with responsibility for a socially constructed reality.

It may help to begin with some background in the history of religion. Merold Westphal outlined three qualitatively different kinds of religion. Call them world-affirming nature-religions, world-affirming historical religions, and world-deprecating religions. Westphal called nature-religion *mimetic* because it takes the basic life-task to consist of imitating nature, fitting into nature smoothly, and disturbing the harmony of nature as little as possible. Ancient and modern examples abound, and this appears to have been the aboriginal religion everywhere. Westphal called world-affirming historical religion *historical-covenantal*. World-deprecating religions he called *exilic*, because they see this life as a state of exile from something better.² One can find

² Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion* (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), esp. the last three chapters. The term “exilic” comes from Paul Ricoeur.

parallels in other authors.³ The biblical record then becomes the emergence of historical religion from the aboriginal nature religions of the ancient Near East. As Westphal said, most religions in practice are of mixed type.

³ Reinhold Niehbur, *Human Destiny* (New York NY: Scribners, 1943), pp. 1-15, speaks of religions of history, religions of nature or of philosophy, and religions that treat this life as a corruption of eternity. H. Richard Niebuhr in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York NY: Macmillan, 1940) is not quite parallel to Westphal, but there is a large measure of overlap. In *Cosmos and History* (New York NY: Harper, 1959; French original, 1949) Mircea Eliade examines the differences between mimetic religion and historical-covenantal religion.

The process of conversion, both from nature to history and from selective to categorical affirmation of human life in this created world, is gradual. The prophets started out as shamans, experts in divination, a phenomenon that survives in the Bible until the Exile. Affirmation of the world in full view of its pains appears gradually in a sequence of texts from *Qoheleth* through *Job* to *Deutero-Isaiah* and the Priestly creation story in chapter one of *Genesis*. Chapters two and three of *Genesis*, the Yahwist's creation story, though older and subtler, is no less world-affirming. *Isaiah* 45.7 ("I make weal and create woe") is as close to a categorical statement as one finds in the Bible. *Romans* 8 ("All things work for good for them that love the Lord") is more nuanced, but says the same thing. Beyond Paul, the *Talmud* asks, "What is meant by being bound to bless for the evil in the same way as for the good? ... Raba said what it really means is that one must receive the evil with gladness."⁴ In between, in the Gospels, we see the theme elaborated in detail in both the teaching and the miracles of Jesus. The teaching begins with a call to repentance: the jig is up, you are about to be exposed, and so it is time to repent! (see Mark 1.15). Jesus enjoins us to accept life in gratitude and joy and to stop making invidious comparisons between ourselves and our neighbors.⁵ Lastly, we are to love (i.e., help) our neighbor in need, as many passages attest.

In the miracles Jesus cleanses, raises, and feeds Israel. The cleansings typically use the verb *katharizo*, the raisings *egeiro* (even though the English translations do not always preserve this usage). Whether a given interpreter takes the miracles literally or not, their message is no less central to the theology of the Gospels.⁶ In either case,

⁴ Bavli, *Berakhot* 9.5, folio 60b. The translation is from pp. 379–80 of the Soncino edition (London: Soncino, 1978).

⁵ Matthew 20: 1–16 is typical.

⁶ Edward C. Hobbs, "Gospel Miracle Story and Modern Miracle Story" in *Gospel Studies in Honor of Sherman Elbridge Johnson*, ed. Massey H. Shepherd Jr. and Edward C. Hobbs, *Anglican Theological Review Supplemental Series* #3 (March 1974), pp. 117–26. Available online at <http://www.pcts.org/journal/miracle.html> and .pdf.

the believer who takes the Gospels to heart lives in a process of *conversio morum*, conversion of habits and conversion of heart, in which we give blessing for life and blessing to the ultimate reality that stands behind human life in this world.

THE CARDINAL PAINS OF LIFE

The process of conversion can be focused in three kinds of experience, which we might call the cardinal pains of life: exposure, limitation, and need. *Exposure* is getting caught out in the open for all to see. *Limitation* is frustration, not getting what one wants. *Need* is encounter with other people in need of one's time, efforts, and resources. We should respond to exposure with openness and honesty, in repentance as appropriate, ending in freedom. We should respond to limitation with creativity, ending in gratitude and celebration. We should respond to others' need with open eyes, open hands, and open hearts, ending in fellowship and community. These things are not original with me; I learned them from my New Testament teacher, Edward Hobbs.⁷

⁷ A brief summary can be found in Andrew Porter and Edward Hobbs, "The

Trinity and the Indo-European Tripartite Worldview," *Budhi* (Manila) 3:2-3 (1999): 1-28; also <http://www.jedp.com/trinity.html>. The organization was mine, but the ideas were Edward Hobbs's. Longer treatments are in my own *Unwelcome Good News* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004) and *Elementary Monotheism* (Lanham MD: Univ. Press of America, 2001). The three-part schema appears to come from ideas endemic to Indo-European cultures. Whether or not that is true, these parts of life are exemplary of what *conversio morum* has to work on. Even if the comparative mythology is correct, the Indo-European tripartite ideology is a social construction imposed on reality, and other cultures divide up the parts of life differently. Rabbinic Judaism, as exemplified in the writing of Joseph Soloveitchik, offers a welcome contrast, as *Elementary Monotheism* noted. For what it is worth, Georges Dumézil, who discovered the Indo-European tripartite ideology, did not much like it but instead preferred the Greeks, who, though heir to it, routinely broke its symmetries in order to make sense of things. Edward Hobbs was the one who saw the connection between Dumézil's comparative mythology and the emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity, but he does not agree with me in inferring the wrongness of abortion, and my debts of gratitude to him should not be misinterpreted to claim his agreement at this point.

We do not know our own life-stories until we work them out, and even then we do not entirely know the larger context into which our lives fit. Sometimes we cannot tell our own stories without help because what we do know hurts too much, or because we cannot stand what we have made of ourselves. Then what we do know about the larger context matters, such as the Exodus, the Exile, and the Disasters of the First Century. Those events can transform our lives into something that we would not be and could not be without them. Without them, we would be stuck being the persons we have made ourselves. Those events transform our lives into something world-affirming, even if we accept that transformation only at the cost of penitence and compunction. And that is why we welcome exposure as a means of grace.

This faith is not a faith that I can get out of limitation. This faith is a faith that the limitations themselves are the means of life and peace. Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane is the paradigm: we would like as little pain as possible, but we will accept what we must, in faith. We ask to get out of limitations in life, but we offer up our pains when we cannot honorably get out of them, and we trust that they are part of a life that is good.

Need is the entry into community. Others in need are not my competition in a zero-sum game. Together we are more than any one of us ever is alone. The task in face of others is often not first to help the other person but rather to see myself in the other. That task is most important when the other is unattractive: a crook, a cripple, a schizo, a bag-lady—or even just a manipulative salesman.⁸

THE CONVERSION OF LIFE

This will not be an easy religion, for we are destroyed by limitation in the end, and what colloquial usage is pleased to call “quality of life” can be destroyed by all three cardinal pains in the meantime. The challenge is put to us: Do we trust that the pains of life bring blessings or do we say instead that life in this world is good only partially and that the pains

⁸ Cf. Andrew Porter, “On Being an Inkblot: Disability Meets Euthanasia,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 43:4 (2004): 338-43.

are simply barren? The labor of faith and conversion of life find me pro-life some of the time, in some parts of life. I am working on the rest of life, with help that comes in the events themselves. They carry within themselves the blessings that they bring, and the labor of faith is to accept that blessing.

It is not as if to participate in the life of Christ, we have to go out and find more pains than we would otherwise have. There is quite enough involuntary disappointment. Yet many have leaped to embrace the pains that do come. When the Book of Common Prayer was revised in the 1970s, the Episcopal Church Standing Liturgical Commission found collects for the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week that rung changes on the traditional collect for Palm Sunday:

Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection.

Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace.

Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ.

Give us grace to take joyfully the sufferings of the present time, in full assurance of the glory that shall be revealed.⁹

These collects are the heart of the 1979 Prayer Book.

We can easily become confused about this commitment in a kind of error that comes naturally with Western philosophy. A truth of reason applies equally to everybody. But confessional commitment does not exactly work this way. Just because I think that all of life (my life, at least) works for good, that does not mean that I can simply tell you that all of your life is good. You have to say that for yourself, if you are going to say it at all. The most that I can do is to make an offer, extend an invitation. The form of the offer is something like this:

⁹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977).

We affirm your goodness and the goodness and worth of your life, whether or not you do. We will support you in that goodness, although that is not a blank check. We won't support you in attempts to deny your own goodness.

Peter can argue with his fellow Jews in his sermons in the beginning of Acts because they share common commitments. But without that shared faith, argument is seriously confused, pointless, disrespectful, or worse.¹⁰ This faith is neither a deduction nor an induction. It is not the endpoint of an argument at all, but the starting point. It is a choice. There is another way to see the difference between this kind of commitment and those propositions that can logically be imposed on other people. It appears as the real test of someone's faith in the goodness of life in full view of its pains. When you encounter another in pain, are you willing to share in the other's pains in order to share in the other's blessings? Are the other's pains good enough and blessing enough so that you are willing to share in them?

TRANSFORMING THEOLOGY

I remember when I first heard these things, wool-gathering and tipped against the back wall in a beginning Bible class. Someone had asked the inevitable question about "miracles." Edward Hobbs, who was lecturing that day, answered that the difference between Israelite religion and Canaanite religion was not that one religion and its God provided "real" miracles whereas the other provided only fakes or none at all. To the extent that any in the ancient Near East believed in "miracles," they all did. The differences were matters of basic life-orientation.

¹⁰ Aquinas raises the issue in *Summa theologiae* 1.1.8, an inquiry into "Whether sacred doctrine is a matter of argument." In the course of his answer, he says: "If our opponent believes nothing of divine revelation, there is no longer any means of proving the articles of faith by reasoning." H. Richard Niebuhr stipulated something very similar in *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York NY: Macmillan, 1940) in the preface when he abjured apologetics in favor of a confessional position. The great Deuteronomic covenant renewal sermons, of which *Joshua* 24 is typical, do not argue or prove, but instead just ask: "What is your pleasure? Which gods will you serve?"

For biblical religion, God comes to you with blessings in all of life, pains included, not just in the fun parts. By contrast, in the aboriginal nature-religions, the gods come to you with blessings only in the happy parts of life. When life hurts, it is time to plead, placate, bargain with your gods, or just trade them in for more effective gods. But if everything comes with a blessing, then everything is transformed. Many problems in theology were dissolved for me and replaced by other and more interesting problems. Problems between “science and religion” just evaporated.

The term “faith” overlaps hope, belief, loyalty, trust, and trustworthiness. It is both cognitive and voluntary, and it is about interpersonal support. If we look at it as a choice to view human life in historical terms (rather than in the terms of nature alone) and as a choice to affirm human life in this world as good, then it seems to me that no problem is hopeless. Life comes with its blessings within events themselves. Our labor is to find that blessing, and to work through the pain that comes with it. We know that we have help, both from within the events themselves and from the larger context of history that transforms us and our lives into something that we could never be in the light of nature alone. You cannot live this way without some kind of transcendence. But however transcendence is conceived, it should be seen as a way of affirming the goodness of this world rather than as deprecating this world in favor of some other that is better. Deprecation of this world is on the way to Gnosticism. Affirmation of this world is not easy.

Jacob wrestling with the angel at the ford of the Jabbok (*Genesis* 32) is exemplary. Indeed, one meaning of the name “Israel” is “he who struggles with God.” The Bible seems to like that struggle, but with a somewhat subtle distinction it explicitly disapproves of “putting God to the test,” that is, setting conditions on what God has to do for us if he is to qualify as provident and good. If we are pro-life, even when life hurts, we do not set conditions on God.

Appendix: Conversion of Life

encounter of God in	exposure	limitation	need
as	Son, judge, redeemer	Father, creator	Holy Spirit, need-giver, community-creator
response: original sin, seeking secure	legitimacy	power	self-sufficiency
motivated by	blindness	stubbornness	hard-heartedness
response of faith	confession, repentance, remorse, joy	innovation, initiative, grace, gratitude	open eyes to neighbor, open hands that help him, open heart that hurts with him, celebration together
redeemed man	humility my self! salvation through judgment	gracefulness my father! salvation through weakness, creativity through contingency	fellowship my brother/ sister! self-fulfillment through self-offering, receiving through giving

This table is modified from Edward C. Hobbs's instructional materials, "The 'Syntax' of Christian Theology," 1975 version, printed here with permission.