



The Churches' Response to Abortion

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Troublesome, divisive, conflictive as the current debate regarding abortion has proven to be, it has also become an opportunity for the churches to be of service to their people and thus, inevitably, to society at large. The churches' claim to possess moral wisdom is itself an act of courage, given the ethical confusions characteristic of modern society. But what is the character of that moral counsel? How does it serve us in the ongoing debate on abortion policy?¹

An examination of the social doctrine presented by major U.S. denominations will disappoint anyone looking for simple consensus or quick solutions. The churches have reached no moral agreement with respect to abortion comparable to the ecumenical statements on baptism, eucharist and ministry. Nor have they attempted to do so. Yet, with few exceptions, the churches have had the moral seriousness necessary to urge the truth as they see it, suggesting that theological diversity and ethical earnestness are not necessarily incompatible. It is not surprising that the churches lack a common moral doctrine in their understanding of a controversial issue. What is less obvious may be more important: basic differences in moral understanding effectively determine the shape of their witness. But before an assessment of the significance of that diversity can be made, an examination of the rationale for their differing postures is necessary.

A survey of the official positions of U.S. churches indicates a common recognition of the grave seriousness of abortion policy. At least seventeen communions have used the structures available in their polities to offer counsel that reflects their fundamental moral convictions.² Happily the seventeen do not

¹Abortion is understood to mean the termination of pregnancy prior to viability. *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, s. v. "Abortion." (New York: MacMillan & Free Press, 1978).

²Our list is broadly inclusive rather than exhaustive. The left wing of the Reformation is represented by the American Baptist Churches, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Church of the Brethren. The Catholic tradition includes the Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, and the Episcopal Churches. The American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and the Lutheran

present seventeen different positions. One group of churches, the prohibitionists (P), holds that abortion directly violates the biblical prohibition against killing and is therefore morally abhorrent and cannot be permitted. The prohibitionists hold that an individual human life begins at conception; the intentional termination of that life is a form of homicide. A second group, the qualified prohibitionists (QP), also seeks to affirm a clear anti-abortion stand but does so somewhat less rigorously. The physical danger of the pregnancy for the life of the mother, and

possibly rape and incest, may be seen as justifiable exceptions to the general prohibition. A third group is concerned with determining the moral weight of the various values which abortion policy arouses, and holds that it cannot be judged solely on the basis of the presumed human status of the unborn. The concern for a variety of values, including the possibility of conflict among them, is the focus of interest for these aretologists (A). For them abortion can be a moral option in specific cases. A fourth group concerned with the sanctity of conscience prohibits the intrusion of any religious or political institution into the individual's decision-making process. These individualists (I) find both religious and political grounds for their position.

The churches thus group themselves as follows:

Group P, the prohibitionists: Orthodox and Roman Catholic

Group QP, the qualified prohibitionists: Assemblies of God, Christian Reformed, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Southern Baptist

Group A, The Aretologists: American Lutheran Church, Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church

Group I, The individualists: American Baptist, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Unitarian Universalist, Church of the Brethren

This taxonomy allows for a range of views in each of the categories, but since QP is in principle a variation of P, no more than three distinctively different perspectives have emerged.

The most obvious conclusion is also the most important: the very diversity of moral judgment offered by the churches illustrates the complexity of the issues involved, and thus undercuts any particular argument's claim to be definitive for Christians. This lack of consensus in ethical judgment may appear a liability. It certainly forecloses making a quick movement from moral reflection to political action. This lack of unanimity has, however, other significance: It exposes a moral issue of sufficient complexity to require examination of each position's presuppositions.

Church-Missouri Synod include most U.S. Lutherans. The Reformed Churches surveyed: Christian Reformed Church, Reformed Church in America, Presbyterian Church in the USA and the United Church of Christ. Indigenous U.S. churches include the Assemblies of God, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the Unitarian Universalists. The United Methodist Church completes the list. Surprisingly, several conservative communions have not chosen to offer counsel to their people on abortion: The Evangelical Covenant Church, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., and the Seventh Day Adventist Churches.

I. VALUES IN CONFLICT

The diversity of judgments here demonstrated does not root in the inability of some churches to recognize the presence of moral excellence. It lies rather in the clash of values present in American religious history. What may be more surprising is the lack of coherence within the major theological traditions themselves. Thus Catholic churches can be found in groups P and A. Both the Lutherans and the Reformed are internally divided between QP and A. Notwithstanding the monumental theological differences that have characterized the theological history of the groups in P and QP, their understanding of abortion gives them a kind of pragmatic

consensus which they do not share with sister Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and evangelical communions. What is particularly striking is the evidence which suggests that the movement from theology to ethics may be only arbitrary. Ethics seems less deductive than most churches may have assumed. Apparently, factors other than doctrinal tradition have proven influential in shaping basic contours of Christian moral witness. A rough ecumenism that brings Roman Catholics, the Assemblies of God, Missouri Synod Lutherans and Southern Baptists close together is both surprising and puzzling. Do we actually have a moral consensus here, or at least enough agreement to prove politically effective? An examination of each of the four positions shows that a significant measure of ethical agreement can emerge even when a common theological basis is lacking.

The two major voices representing a prohibitionist posture are, of course, the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches. The former holds that “it has been the opinion of the Orthodox Church over the centuries that the taking of unborn life is morally wrong. This is based on Divine Law....”³ Furthermore, “human life begins at the moment of conception and all who hold life as sacred and worthy of preservation whenever possible are obligated at all costs to defend the lives of unborn children regardless of the stage of their embryonic development.”⁴

³A statement issued to the National Council of Churches by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, “Abortion, A Paper for Study” (National Council of Churches: New York, 1973) 11.

⁴Borichevsky and Chila, “Seminar in Medical Ethics,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 17.3 (1973) 246, quoted in John Kowalczyk, *An Orthodox View of Abortion* (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing, 1979) 40. This study has the imprimatur of the Most Reverend John, Archbishop of Chicago and Minneapolis, Orthodox Church in America. An episcopal authority in another Orthodox jurisdiction is equally clear: “The Orthodox Church’s official position was articulated first at the Council of Ancyra in 314, where it was stated that the practice from time immemorial in the Christian community was that women who aborted fetuses were excommunicated until the time of their death, but that the Council (i.e. of Ancyra) was reducing the penalty to excommunication for ten years. In 692, the Quinisext Council, which the Orthodox Church holds to be an extension of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, decreed that ‘whoever gives or receives medicine to induce abortion is a murderer.’ This canon reiterates the position enunciated by St. Basil the Great in two of his canons....He states: ‘Let her that procures abortion undergo ten years’ penance, whether the embryo were perfectly formed, or not’ (Canon 2), and ‘They that take medicines to procure abortion...are murderers’ (Canon 8).” A letter to the author from Bishop Gregory, Secretary of the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, 25 June 1984; for the full texts of the canons cited, see *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 14, “The Seven Ecumenical Councils.”

The Roman Catholic Church’s opposition to induced abortion is well known. The most succinct modern text was given at the Second Vatican Council: “From the moment of its conception, life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes.”⁵ “Since the fetus is regarded as a human being from the moment of conception, its destruction is a mortal sin and, in fact, ought to be declared illegal by governments.”⁶

Four conservative Protestant churches which traditionally have been highly critical of Roman Catholic doctrine (and, indeed, of each other’s) have in this instance adopted positions which are close to that of the Catholic bishops. Southern Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, the Christian Reformed Church, and the Assemblies of God all prohibit induced abortion “except when the life of the mother is genuinely threatened” (CRC); or “to save the mother’s physical life” (SBC), or because of the “physical health of the mother” (LCMS). Rape and incest do not

necessarily provide sufficient justification. These Protestant communions claim Scripture as the authority for their position. Unfortunately, the only explicit reference to induced abortion in the Bible is Exodus 21:22, where a clear distinction is made between the fetus and the human person. In the case of a pregnant woman who is caught up in strife resulting in a miscarriage “and yet no harm follows (sic), the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman’s husband shall lay upon him, (but) if any harm follows (to her) then you shall give life for life.”⁷ While it is not difficult to marshal legal precedence and medical science to support the qualified anti-abortion position,⁸ such testimony can also be utilized to support alternative views.⁹ But, of course,

⁵“The Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World,” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Guild, America, and Association Presses, 1966) 256. Note, however, that “a salpingectomy (removal of the fallopian tube) for ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy implanted in the tube) is a common practice...even in Catholic hospitals, where the operation is justified by the ‘principle of double effect’ as an ‘indirect’ abortion....Similarly, most diagnostic uterine curettages are performed in the late stages of the menstrual cycle...leading to the loss of thousands of fertilized eggs annually....It is often held, though far from settled, that intrauterine devices act by preventing implantation of fertilized eggs!” *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, s.v. “Abortion.”

⁶National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Documentation on the Right to Life and Abortion* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1974). This document includes testimony made to the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, March 7, 1984.

⁷The Jewish tradition has generally resisted regarding feticide as homicide. The classic rabbinical commentator on the Bible and Talmud, Rashi, held that only when the fetus “comes into the world” is it a person. Although the abortion referred to in the biblical text is accidental, it is the *sedes doctrinae* for the teaching that feticide is not a capital crime. Homicide, of course, could not be covered by a fine.

⁸As, for example, in “Abortion in Perspective,” Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Social Concerns Committee, 1984.

⁹Cf. *The Covenant of Life and the Caring Community and Covenant and Creation: Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion* (New York: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [USA]: 1983).

from a conservative Protestant position, such arguments rest on mere human reason and not on biblical revelation.¹⁰

Since the Orthodox and Catholic bishops can affirm churchly tradition¹¹ as a source of sacred teaching to support that of Scripture, their position is technically and logically stronger. The LXX translation of the Exodus text, a major influence shaping Orthodox and Catholic tradition, substitutes “form” for “harm” so that the verse reads, “if any form follows, then you shall give life for life.” Thus the reference to life is shifted from the mother to the fetus and significantly differs from the rabbinical interpretation. Augustine’s subsequent distinction between the “formed” and the “unformed” fetus (*embryo formatus* and *embryo informatus*) is clearly influenced by the LXX text as well as the general Hellenistic tradition which lies back of it. The Catholic Church has consistently taught that abortion is a sin although Thomas’ distinction between the formed and the unformed fetus, derived from Augustine and Aristotle, was typically understood to mean that the fetus became a person at “formation” (forty days for males; eighty for females) rather than at birth or conception. In 1869, Pius IX, impressed by new discoveries in embryology, made unequivocal the current Catholic teaching that conception is the moment of full hominization.

Two observations may be drawn from this brief overview of P/QP. Fundamentally antagonistic theological traditions can achieve near consensus on abortion doctrine (suggesting

that theological tradition may not be the actual basis for agreement in this matter), while the imperative to protect human life prohibits induced abortion and embodies the sole and decisive ethical issue present.

The traditions represented in group A demonstrate almost as wide a range in theological/ecclesiastical traditions as those in P/QP. Sister churches to the

¹⁰The QP churches seek scriptural authority for their positions but, understandably, do not choose to deal with Ex 21:22. Their actual references can be quite vague: “The Scriptures allude to the principles of divine blessing upon unborn infants, and divine displeasure on undue actions which result in the death of the unborn.” “Reaffirmation of Abortion Statement,” Assemblies of God, 1977. (A revision of the 1977 statement is in process.) Cf. “Biblical references indicate that human life begins at conception.” “Resolution on Abortion and Infanticide” (11), 1982 *Southern Baptist Convention Annual*, 65. Even specific citations appear to beg the issue: “Synod, mindful of the sixth commandment, condemn(s) the wanton or arbitrary destruction of any human being at any stage of its development from the point of conception to the point of death.” “Statement on Abortion and Birth Control,” *Acts of Synod, Christian Reformed Church*, 1971, 48. “Abortion in Perspective,” the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod 1984 statement, displays a wide range of texts as a basis for its counsel: The Lord vindicated Israel in her weakness: Ps 113:5, 7 and Prov 31:8, 9. God cares for what is weak: Rom 5:6; I Cor 1:27; John 15:22. Human lives are entrusted to our care: Ex 20:13. Freedom has limits: Gal 6:10 and Rom 3:18. Christians welcome children: Gen 1:28, Mark 10:13-16, Ps 127. God brings good out of evil: Rom 8:28-30; Gal 1:15; Heb 7:9, 10. The Christian acts in freedom and responsibility: Gal 5:1, 13-15. God cares for us before birth: Ps 139. The reference to Ps 139 is particularly suggestive. While “unformed substance” (v 16) means “embryo,” the reference to “the depths of the earth” is “possibly a reflection of the idea that the human fetus was made by God elsewhere before being introduced into the womb,” *The Interpreters Bible*, 4.716. The poet moves beyond biological theory to ontology. One’s origins lie in the primordial depths of the creation. Even there one is known of God.

¹¹The early Christian works *Didache* and *The Epistle of Barnabas* clearly prohibit abortion. “Do not practice magic; do not join in sorcery; do not murder a child by abortion or kill a new born infant” (*Did.* 2:2). A similar prohibition is given in *Barn.* 19:5.

Protestant traditions in QP are included in A as well as a tradition with a strong “Catholic” constituency. Churches in group A in general allow abortion “with reluctant approval” under certain circumstances. For example, United Methodists see the need to provide moral counsel that takes into account “the sanctity of unborn human life” as well as “the sacredness of the life and the well being of the mother.”¹² The United Church of Christ allows for abortions “within the first two or three months”¹³ and with the Presbyterians urges as a basis for ethical counsel a decision-making process that affirms both responsibility and freedom in the context of a caring covenant community. Similarly the Reformed Church in America and the Lutheran Church in America see abortion as a “tragic option”¹⁴ which is open to evangelical Christians “living covenantally, non-legalistically”¹⁵ as a caring community. The statement of the Episcopal Church permits the termination of pregnancy “particularly” for four reasons: rape, incest, the physical or mental health of the mother, or “where there is substantial reason to believe that the child would be born badly deformed in mind or body.”¹⁶ Other, undefined grounds may also be allowed. The American Lutheran Church through an extended process that produced three statements affirms that although “human life from conception (is) created in the image of God,” an induced abortion remains a “tragic option.”¹⁷

The theological basis for the communion in group A is remarkably diverse. Scripture is recognized as “the basis for...faith assumptions” (ALC) but not as speaking “directly to the abortion issue” (Reformed). On the other hand, the “Hebrew Christian tradition” is “helpful”

(UCC) especially as it portrays humankind as “relational beings whose true humanity is realized in faith and love with God and neighbor” (LCA). The Lutheran Confessions (ALC), particularly their stress on the order of creation and baptism (LCA), and “the Methodist tradition” in America (UMC), are also invoked, as is a rich triad of Scripture, Reformation theology and science (Pres. Church-USA). The affirmation of the value of human life (including the life of the unborn) as a sacred gift is seen not to exclude basic values of moral freedom and responsibility, especially

¹²“Social Principles of the United Methodist Church,” adopted by the 1980 General Conference of the United Methodist Church (Washington, D.C.: UMC Board of Church and Society) 7.

¹³“Freedom of Choice Concerning Abortion,” Resolution of the Eighth General Synod, United Church of Christ; “The Right to Choose,” UCC Board of Homeland Ministries (New York: United Church of Christ, 1981) 2.

¹⁴“Sex, Marriage, and Family,” Lutheran Church in America Fifth Biennial Convention (New York: LCA Division for Ministry in North America, 1970) 5.

¹⁵“Moral and Spiritual Issues Raised by the Practice of Abortion” (New York: Reformed Church in America General Synod, 1984).

¹⁶“Abortion,” Resolution of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church (New York: Episcopal Church Executive Council, 1982). “In those cases where it is firmly and deeply believed by the person or persons concerned that pregnancy should be terminated for causes other than the above, members of this Church are urged to seek the advice and counsel of a priest of this Church, and, where appropriate, penance.”

¹⁷“Abortion, A Series of Statements of the American Lutheran Church, 1974, 1976, and 1980” (Minneapolis: Office of Research and Analysis, ALC, 1980). The latest ALC resolution which as “A Statement of Judgment and Conviction” carries more weight than the two earlier actions is more rigorous in its counsel but still “acknowledges that there may be circumstances when, all pertinent factors responsibly considered, an induced abortion may be a tragic option.”

when exercised in the context of a caring, morally sensitive community. That the combination of these potentially conflicting values can lead to tragedy is not always explicitly recognized by each communion, but it can hardly be denied.

The so-called left wing Reformation is heavily represented among the theological independents (I). But again a very wide range of theological conviction undergirds the consensus here represented. Particularly impressive is the continuing fidelity to freedom of conscience as a fundamental religious value on the part of American Baptists and the Church of the Brethren. The former cite Scripture and their tradition: John Bunyan, Roger Williams, and Martin Luther King.¹⁸ And the Brethren are particularly concerned to underscore their judgment that while abortion is opposed “because it destroys human life...we offer our support and fellowship to persons who, after prayer and counseling, believe abortion is the least destructive alternative available to them, that they may make their decisions openly, honestly, without the suffering imposed by an insensitive community.”¹⁹ Conscious of its historic commitment to religious freedom, Baptists hold that the First Amendment is a “guarantee of the free exercise of religion (which) protects the right of a person...to make a decision of conscience for or against abortion.” The fellowship of believers is specifically urged “to minister compassionately with those facing the dilemma of whether to terminate a pregnancy by...respecting the right of persons to make their own decisions before God.”²⁰ The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) affirms a similar position stressing the importance of the Christian community to provide counsel and “full support to each person who must make (an abortion) decision” because “God calls us through Christ to responsible stewardship in all matters of our living, including matters of human

reproduction.”²¹ Seven General Assemblies of the Unitarian Universalist Association have pressed for political action to permit legal abortion in the U.S. and Canada. The 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on abortion deserves to be supported on the basis of moral principle: the “right to choice on contraception and abortion are important aspects to the right of privacy, respect for human life and freedom of conscience of women and their families.”²²

It is clear that the religious communities in group I have raised a fundamental religious and political issue: Morality is at least in part a matter of conscience; and conscience cannot be commanded by government or politically powerful institutions. The moral argument of group I is as ancient as biblical

¹⁸“American Baptist Resolution on Abortion” (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1981).

¹⁹“Statement on Abortion for the Church of the Brethren” (Wynona Lake, Ind., 1982). Key texts: Gen 1:27-28, Deut 6:5; Ps 51:5; Jer 1:5; Luke 1:44; Ps 139:13-16; Ex 21:22-25; Mt 5:21-23; John 8:1-11.

²⁰“American Baptist Resolution on Abortion.” Key texts: Gen 1:1, 27, 3:3; Luke 4:18-19, 10:27.

²¹“Resolution 8345 Concerning Responsible Birth Control,” Christian Church General Assembly, 1983.

²²“Abortion: Right to Choose,” Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly Resolution, 1978.

The Supreme Court decision of June 20, 1977 denying the use of Medicaid funds for abortion is seen as “seriously jeopardizing the right of legal abortion” and therefore as objectionable. In April of 1984, the president of the Association, Eugene Pickett, expressed in a letter to members of the U.S. Congress the “opposition” of the Association “to the Hyde Amendment as an abridgment of religious freedom and social justice for poor women in the United States.”

religion and is pervasively present in the social fabric of American society as a whole.

The values affirmed by the churches are fundamental both to the well being of society and to the integrity of religion itself. Unfortunately, there is no calculus available which would enable us to resolve the conflict among competing values. Sometimes a particular tradition may propose a hierarchy of values for its own constituency, but we are a long way from any such proposal winning common consent. How does one quantify the relative weight of (1) the value of the unborn, (2) the responsibility of persons to control their fertility, (3) freedom of conscience, (4) the responsibility of society for the victims of its own systematic poverty? Persuasive statements regarding abortion are frequently achieved only at the cost of suppressing alternative moral considerations.

All the churches claim to be ethically serious. That they reach significantly different conclusions in their grappling with abortion is not in itself tragic. It rather indicates that no ethical proposal that has so far emerged is sufficiently capacious to do justice to the full range of Christian ethical concern.

II. NORMAL DISSONANCE

The diversity of conclusions suggests comparable differences in methodology. Insofar as one’s choice of method will influence, if not determine, one’s perception of the issues leading to a definitive position, an examination of the character of the operative methodological assumptions can be revealing. Once more it appears that the churches’ arguments fall into three groups. Both prescriptive and deliberative frameworks encompass the arguments offered.²³ But our duty to do what is right struggles with our need to understand what is good.

A Divine Duty: Protect Life (Groups P/QP)

Jesus' summary of the Torah—love God above all things; love your neighbor as yourself—is unmistakably basic to the Christian ethical tradition. The command to love one's neighbor can be recast as a granting of permission to love (Barth) or a divine imperative to explore the variety of ways the neighbor's needs can be met (Luther). A prescriptive methodology has been commonly used in the shaping of abortion policy statements with a variety of results.

If the unborn is granted the status of a person, feticide is homicide and there can be little doubt that the general prohibition against the taking of human life is fully operative.²⁴ To be sure, the prohibition against killing of human

²³The designations are Edward LeRoy Long, Jr.'s in *A Survey of Christian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University, 1967), and generally parallel the classic distinction between deontological and teleological ethics. Cf. William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973). Contextual considerations are sometimes combined with deliberative arguments as, for example, in the Presbyterian statement.

²⁴At the same time, a tendency toward irrelevance in theological ethics needs to be recognized: "At all times in medical practice, and mostly also in ethics, the mother has been considered more important than the fetus....In medicine the induction of death in the fetus to save maternal life has had a long tradition, ranging from the performance of embryotomy for cephalopelvic disproportions to the removal of pregnancies implanted in sites other than the uterus (ectopic pregnancies)." *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, s.v. "Abortion."

beings has itself been traditionally modified—not least of which by those churches that in principle prohibit abortion. Killing to defend the innocent, or in self-defense, or in punishment against capital crimes or against the enemy in time of war have long been a part of the so-called justifiable war tradition in Christianity. Pacifists, the more rigorous interpreters of the command against killing of persons, are in principle not willing to permit such exceptions. Oddly enough, the communions which prohibit abortion as a violation of the divine commandment (such as the churches in P and QP) have not characteristically been advocates of the pacifist tradition. The question of inconsistency at this point has been raised with particular force by socially conscious Catholic clergy and laity within the last several years: If abortion is a sin, are not capital punishment and war equally prohibited for the Christian? Catholic pacifists hold that a church which bases its prohibition against abortion on the basis of the divine commandment against killing undercuts the credibility of that position if it is unwilling to assume a pacifist position generally. Indeed, if one grants the force of the current argument that the preparation for war makes one as culpable as war fighting itself,²⁵ then it would seem morally impossible to permit either abortion or national defense. Others, such as Cardinal Bernardin, have forcefully argued that a "seamless web" connects all "pro-life" concerns from protection of the unborn to moral opposition to the use of nuclear arms as deterrents in the cold war. The rich and careful discussion of abortion in Catholic academic circles suggests a nuancing of the official prohibitionist stance which, in searching for the affirmation of a more inclusive range of values, moves toward a recognition of arguments that would in special cases qualify an absolute prohibition.

While politically influential, the traditions represented in the qualified prohibitionist group appear to be in particular difficulty ethically. If the fertilized ovum is a human being, then the position of the prohibitionists that one cannot justify the killing of an unborn person would

appear secure. Attempts to justify the qualifications suggested by the churches in the QP group have been traditionally excluded by Catholic moralists. The QP communions appear to have pragmatic rather than principled reasons for their lack of rigor. If the fetus is a person, as QP holds, there can be no justification for killing her (him) simply because her father is a rapist or because he is also her grandfather. Does not QP need to deal with the rigor of the prohibitionist logic consistently? Killing an unborn person, even for the sake of saving his mother's life, is still homicide from this perspective and is thus impermissible.

Another Divine Duty: Stand Fast in Liberty (Group I)

It is difficult to see how any religious community would tolerate a denial of the integrity of the moral conscience. Not all religious traditions, however, have been willing to grant primacy of place to the imperatives of the inner voice. Roger Williams, Martin Luther, Joan of Arc all countered the religious/political institutions of their time in the name of a God who had revealed his will to them

²⁵Cf. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response" (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1983), esp. "Deterrence in Principle and Practice," 51 ff.

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with shattering clarity. The theonomous conscience can regard its repression as little other than a subversion of God's own beneficence. Thus conscience too can be prescriptive. And belief in its sanctity has a moral relevance embracing both evangelical and humanist traditions.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) "affirm(s) the principle of individual liberty, freedom of individual conscience, and sacredness of life for all persons" and "oppose(s) any attempt to legislate a specific religious opinion or belief concerning abortion upon all Americans." American Baptists, as a matter of public policy, "recognize that the First Amendment guarantee of the free exercise of religion protects the right of a person, in consultation with her advisor, spiritual counselor, and physician, to make a decision of conscience for or against abortion." Baptism counsel for members of the "household of faith" "recognize(s) that Christian persons of sensitive and informed conscience find themselves on differing sides of the abortion issue....(As) the integrity of each person's conscience must be respected,...we believe that abortion should be a matter of responsible, personal decision." The Statement on Abortion of the Church of the Brethren demonstrates a clear pastoral sensitivity: "Brethren oppose abortion because it destroys human life. Our position, however, is not a condemnation of those persons who reject this position or of women who seek and undergo abortions." "...We offer support and fellowship to persons who, after prayer and counseling, believe abortion is the least destructive alternative available to them, that they may make their decisions openly, honestly, without the suffering imposed by an insensitive community."²⁶

The 1978 Resolution on Abortion of the Unitarian Universalist Association specifically affirms the "right to choice on contraception and abortion (as)... important aspects to the right of privacy, respect for human life and freedom of conscience of women and their families."²⁷—a civil right consistently affirmed in all UUA abortion resolutions. If it can be shown that the life ended in an abortion is not a human person, there need be no conflict between P and I. This is in fact the position of the American Baptists: "We recognize that a human embryo is the physical beginning of a life which through a God-given process of development becomes a person."²⁸ But

the difficulty of determining the human status of the unborn is notorious. Is the *conceptus* a portion of human life, a potential individual, or a fully human person? The apparent insolubility of that question lies at the heart of the clash of values demonstrated in the debate between the prohibitionists and the advocates of freedom of conscience.²⁹ Conflicting impera-

²⁶“Statement on Abortion for the Church of the Brethren.”

²⁷“Abortion: Right to Choose.”

²⁸“American Baptist Resolution on Abortion.”

²⁹The crucial insistence by advocates of the prohibitionist stance that human personhood begins at the moment of conception appears in practice to be moot. Spontaneous abortions no less than induced abortions terminate the life of the unborn: “A large number, sometimes estimated to be close to 40 percent, of all fertilized eggs either do not implant in the uterine wall or do not continue to develop after the first few weeks of gestation. They die and eventually the woman’s body readjusts to the new state of non-pregnancy and expels the embryo or fetus in spontaneous abortion.” *The Covenant of Life and The Caring Community*. Does not the logic of P suggest the appropriateness of a funeral for every aborted *conceptus*—induced or spontaneous? And does not the preposterous character of that question indicate that in fact the prohibitionists do make a moral distinction between the human status of the zygote and a viable fetus?

tives are not easily resolved-least of all when they are held to be God given and ultimately non-negotiable.

Values in Concert? (Group A)

The third perspective in the debate over ethical norms comes from a wide range of churches, evangelical, catholic and liberal, which argue from a deliberative rather than a prescriptive stance. To deliberate over the nature of the good is to contemplate the significance of values. And that implies recognizing a diversity in moral qualities. Having to discern which values are primary and how they may best illumine the moral life is a task as old as civilization and as broad as religious history. The clash between Yahweh and Baal in ancient Israel was no petty squabble about nomenclature. The name of God was the sign by which the identity and meaning of God were revealed. The prophets raised the decisive question: which is the supreme value, fertility and hence security? Or salvation and hence righteousness? The meaning of the good is different for an apostle (“the greatest of these is love”) than for a chauvinist (“the greatest of these is my nation”). But one’s understanding of the good discloses one’s identity in either case. There is not, of course, complete unanimity among the communions concerned with value definition. But their common and most basic theme is the affirmation of the Christian community itself as being gifted by the Spirit to act with freedom and responsibility. The Presbyterian statement presents this deliberative position particularly well:

The responsibilities set before us in God’s covenant with us would be overwhelming if it were not for the power of the gospel. The gospel says that we have God’s grace in deciding which course of action to take. We have important responsibilities but we can trust, the gospel assures us, in the grace of God empowering us in the exercise of our free will to discern the appropriate course of action in a morally complex choice.³⁰

Unfortunately, the aretological focus on moral values lacks the immediate clarity displayed by prohibitionist (rigorous or qualified) and individualistic moralists. The critical issue here is not whether or not contextual factors are to be given a formal role in moral deliberation. Context is important for both deontological and teleological arguments. The problem is rather that while human life is held to be sacred by the prohibitionists, their position does not finally rest on that judgment but rather on the recognition of a transcendent obligation to protect the life of living persons. Aretologists assume, of course, that the *conceptus* is not a person and therefore its termination can not be homicide. The promise of a potential individual is weighted together with other values: The mother's well being, the family's capacity for the care and nurture of a new child, the probable quality of the physical health of the child-to-be all claim moral attention. In sum, the aretological moralists' concern for freedom and responsibility in the context of a caring community seeks to leave abortion open as a tragic option. Regrettably, there is among some aretologists a marked reluctance to explore the deep trauma which abortion generates, even though it is the recognition of tragedy that is the presupposition of any profound morality.

³⁰*The Covenant of Life and The Caring Community.*

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A diversity of norms is before us. Our two prescriptive postures sharply contrast the prohibition of killing and the sanctity of conscience. The deliberative position, more concerned with moral good than moral duty, seeks to achieve responsible decision-making in the human community. And no end to the debate is in sight. To be sure, the courage of individuals or churches to make moral judgments may have little to do with their long range effectiveness in society as a whole. But far more deplorable would be their indifference to the issues raised by the dispute, suggesting a reluctance to grapple with the dilemma of abortion and its political implications. Thus the willingness of the churches to take a stand in the midst of controversy is encouraging. And what would be even more commendable would be their capacity to learn to listen, and to learn from each other. And then, they will need to try again.