

February 1984

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Recommended Citation

Duffey, Michael K. (1984) "Abortion and the Christian Story," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 51 : No. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol51/iss1/10>

Abortion and the Christian Story

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I. Introduction: Narrative Theology and the Issue of Abortion

Theologians are quick to admit — even before their audience that they are seldom able to speak eloquently of God. The poet, the novelist, and the playwright all do better. Yet contemporary theologians strive for a better way of talking about God. Their interest in religious language is more than academic. Theologians seek an expression capable of conveying “the terrifying distance and incredible closeness” between God and us.¹ When they get stuck or stumble in the task, they are only too happy to defer to characters like Motes and Francis Tarwater in Flannery O'Connor novels to articulate the intensity of our struggle with God. The current interest in stories and storytelling is perhaps revealing something about the theological enterprise itself. If theology is to be compelling, it must somehow be attuned to the storytelling dimension of life. It is not surprising, then, that both systematic and moral theologians have begun to view biography and autobiography as theology and to appreciate such light scriptural stories as the historical narratives of the Old Testament and the parables of the New Testament.

Although my focus here is not the renewal afoot in Catholic moral theology, let me suggest why interest in narrative has arisen among moral theologians. For some time, moral philosophers have been questioning the assumption that ethical inquiry ought to focus primarily

on theories of rightness and wrongness, a justification of such theories, and the moral decision-making process. Instead they seek to recover a classical mode of ethical inquiry in which the paramount questions are, “What is the good for man?” and “What are the virtues necessary for the perfection of human lives and community?” The conviction continues to grow among those who work in the field of ethics, both secular and religious, that the primary questions of ethics have to do with moral identity: Who are we? How are we related to others? Toward what end do our lives proceed? It is only by answering these questions that we are then able to speak of what we ought to do and what we ought to avoid.

The achievement of self-identity is in part a matter of recollection, by which we look to the past to understand our present circumstances in order to reform ourselves in the future. If our communal self-images are to make us morally better, they must provide us with a sense of our origins and original purpose. In that sense, Christian ethics is a conservative task, for it must concern itself primarily with revision — literally, with helping the Church to see its roots afresh so that it can commend a way of life and a set of virtues necessary for such a life. In part, it is by means of the scriptural narratives that we make the past available to the present. Together with our religious and national histories and stories of our families, these narratives help us to achieve our identities.

A long-standing tendency of Christian moralists has been to distinguish the “theological” from the “ethical” portions of the scriptures and to search the scriptures for moral teachings with which to solve our problems. The awareness is now growing that the scriptures are a collection of narratives and that their moral impact will only be felt if their narrative dimension is tapped. The moral insights of the scriptures become available to us when the characters and plots of the stories are made alive for us once more, for by knowing them and their challenges, the boundaries of our self-understanding are widened so that growth might occur. We seek to understand what is going on in the narratives so that we might come to a better understanding of ourselves. This interpretive task belongs to the entire community since it is the community's self-identity and way of life which is to be formed.

In this paper, I shall consider the practice of abortion in terms of adhering to a particular way of life. I shall suggest the kind of life to which we are called in certain Old Testament stories. It is, I believe, a way of life in which having and caring for children is an act of faith. In this context, to condone abortion is to risk losing faith in the very thing which has brought the Christian community together and continues to hold us together.

The stories Christians tell become all the more clear in their community-forming potential if we contrast them with the stories told by

our contemporaries who see abortion as expedient. In the following sections, let us first retell several episodes in the history of Yahweh's covenant-making with Israel and then consider certain modern tales.

II. Stories of Hope and Promise

I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you. Look up to heaven and count the stars if you can. Such will be your descendants (Gen. 12:2-3; 15:5).

The stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are also the stories of Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel, and other women who played key roles in the covenant drama. Despite abounding sex biases, the patriarchal stories are stories of women also. The story of the promise first made to Abraham in Genesis would be lifeless without the personage of Sarah. Craggy old Abraham, wandering in the desert, finally sighs, puzzled, to God:

My Lord Yahweh, what do you intend to give me? I go childless. See, you give me no descendants; some man in my household will be my heir (Gen. 15:1).

We are told that Abraham had no child by his legal wife, Sarah (implicitly no man-child), to be his heir. For her part, Sarah, no older and as barren as the desert of their wanderings, laughs at the prospect of producing a child and becoming "the mother of nations from whom the kings of many people shall spring" (Gen. 17:16). The laughter, reminiscent of a young maiden's, breaks through the normality of the narrative, and the vitality of the covenant is affirmed by the birth of Isaac (the name which means "he laughs"). Sarah's bitterness has been transformed into fruitfulness. She is the heroine who calls to mind the poem of Kazantzakis:

I said to the almond tree, "Sister, speak to me of God" and the almond tree blossomed.²

The religious importance of children suggested in this story continues to be underscored in subsequent stories. Rachel is barren until God intervenes and brings forth Benjamin and Joseph, who will rescue his envious brothers and their households from famine. Other Old Testament narratives, too, suggest that God blesses his people with children who will play their part in the fulfillment of Israel's destiny. Hannah mourns her childlessness and prays that God will remove her barrenness. She is blessed with the child Samuel, whom we are told God would raise up as a great reformer during the period of kingship (I Sam. 1:11). Conversely, when Michal mocked her husband, King David, for his dance of praise before the ark of the covenant, she was cursed with barrenness, which signaled her exclusion from participation in Israel's future.

The natural response of the Israelites to the covenant was their eagerness to provide for the continuation of the covenant. They and

the Christians who are also heirs to the promise have made provision through their commitment to having children, for if the people of the promise are to continue to exist, there must be children — unbroken generations of them — to populate God's history. The reports of Sarah's and Hannah's barrenness and the miraculous conception of their sons are more than poetic devices for enhancing the stature of Isaac and Samuel. For the coming of all of our sons and daughters is a gift which renews the covenant generation after generation. During the Exile, the Israelites feared that God had vacated His covenant with them. The Book of Jeremiah expressed their fear that they were without a future:

Lamentation is heard in Ramah, and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her sons. She refuses to be comforted: they are no more (Jer. 31:15).

To be childless or to become childless was indeed a calamity. Later chapters of Isaiah express the confidence that God will not forsake Israel, which is likened to Sarah herself:

Shout for joy, oh barren one, you who have borne no child; break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed (Isa. 54:1).

What is the impact of these stories upon our regard for children and our attitude toward abortion? For me, these stories suggest that our view of children is part of a religious vision. Bringing children into the world, welcoming them, and caring for them is a ratification of the covenant insofar as we recognize that children are necessary for its continuation. It is our children, we hope, who will "enter His gates" and sing hymns of praise before His altar.

The stories of God blessing our ancestors with children and calling them to great purposes helps us to answer the question, "Why beget children?" We delight in their arrival because we recognize them as gifts. Our stewardship of them requires that we teach them the meaning of the covenant. If we are not able to welcome children, we are no longer keepers of the covenant made to Abraham and Sarah and renewed by Jesus and by His Church's continued faithfulness.

While in the past the Church has never doubted that children are a blessing, today the question is routinely asked whether — and why — we should have them. Our answer must be more compelling than our simply "wanting them." For our answer also reveals why we reject abortion. Christians mourn the barrenness which is self-inflicted on those who choose abortion and those who, for their lack of support, encourage abortion. Christians resist the hopelessness which leads many people to render themselves barren. For we are confident in the future and desire to bring children into it. As Stanley Hauerwas writes:

In particular, a community's willingness to encourage children is a sign of its confidence in itself and its people, for children are a community's sign to the future that life, in spite of its hardship and tedium, is worthwhile. Also,

children are symbols of our hope — please note that they are not the object of our hope — which sustains us in our day-to-day existence. Life may be hard, but it can be lived. Indeed, it can be lived with zest and interest to the extent that we have the confidence to introduce others to it.³

The barrenness of Sarah, Rachel and Hannah was removed as a sign that the covenant was alive. We, too are assured that the future is worthy of our investment and that of our children.

III. Other Stories

Linda Bird Francke's book, *The Ambivalence of Abortion* (Random House, 1978), takes the reader to recovery rooms in abortion clinics across the country where women tell the stories of their abortions, present and past. A few say they have no regrets. Many mourn, with a pathological grief, the sons or daughters they "knew" they were carrying, which no subsequent children can ever replace. Almost all spoke with anger of the betrayal by and alienation from their husbands or lovers. What is striking is that in the dozens of taped interviews, one seldom hears the arguments made by supporters of legalized abortion. Arguments such as the right of women to bodily privacy and to autonomous choice in the matter of having a child. In dazed emotions on recovery room cots, these women seldom claim to have had abortions out of preference for personal autonomy or because they thought the world in general an unkind place for children. Instead of listening to these heady arguments for abortion, one hears instead that the decision to terminate their pregnancies was dictated by a lack of certainty about the future of their relationships with husbands or lovers. Many had hoped that pregnancy would bring with it a maturing of commitment or at least some common purpose with which to move forward. Now the lack of commitment was glaring. Many of the women expressed a two-fold emptiness as they reflected on their motives for having offered to get an abortion. One woman said, "I wanted him to talk me out of it, to reassure me we could make it." And another lamented, "I wanted him to say, 'You're going to have this baby' and he never did."⁴

If there is a common theme in all of these stories, it would seem to be that the couples involved have no clear reasons why they should have a child. Their reasons for not having a child — poor timing, economic considerations, interruption of career — were paltry. Finally, their lack of mutual commitment stands out as the central reason for which women sometimes regretfully, sometimes defiantly, other times secretly elected to make an appointment with an abortionist. Even the vast majority of women who express the desire for children in the future as they mourn the loss of this child, give few reasons for wanting a child other than they "had always wanted one." When husbands or lovers express regret, it is often over the loss of a potential son. Neither the women nor their men spoke of a child

terms of making room in their lives for new life or of sharing their love.

An unexpressed — and unfulfilled — hope of these heartbroken women seemed to be that the children they carried would bring new meaning and renewed commitment to their marriages. But couples who do not construe their marriages as a call to covenant cannot be expected to think of children as a means of making provision for the future of the covenant between God and the world. The sad stories of contemporary women and men suggest that their coming together seldom becomes an expression of covenant. Rather, these couples experience (or would like to experience!) marriage solely as a cuddly place from which to pursue other goals. Children have no particular place in the heavens they desire.

In contrast, stories of covenant-making invite Christian couples who would "hazard all" for one another to partake of a union that, like no other, melts the estrangement between self and other and between all selves and God. The covenant stories help us to see the potential for covenant in our marital unions. In conjunction with these stories, the tales of barren women renew our commitment to welcoming children. The joyous acts of God covenanting with creation explode our fears that we are alone, that the fruits of life are inadequate for sharing with others, and that the future is only the product of chance. The stories women tell of their abortions are told against a backdrop of broken relationships. The parents, husbands, lovers, and friends who did not support these women made their task of supporting a new life seem impossible. For when relationships prove untrustworthy, we lose our ability to trust that there is a deep covenantal character of human life which will support our endeavors.⁵

I have earlier noted that these women do not express the publicly held pro-choice positions when they discuss their own abortions. Similarly the Old Testament stories I have chosen do not address the moral issue at the level of the standard pro-life objections to abortion. The women tell us why they did not have it in their power to welcome children. They have described in poignant detail the lack of trust which now makes their lives and their wombs empty. In contrast, the scriptural narratives tell us why life is never finally to be counted as untrustworthy and why we need to welcome, care for, and instruct our children in the faith we possess.

The tragedy of those who do not welcome children lies in the fact that they have not experienced the covenant in their own lives. They are people who cannot see having children as an action affirming the reality of the covenant. In the aftermath of her abortion, one woman reflected about herself:

I have no moral handle on abortion — none at all. I've never been able to work it out. Is there a right and a wrong? I don't know what to tell my own children.⁶

Indeed, what she is least capable of telling them is what she and later they will stand for and be loyal to. Perhaps she recognizes that not only is the integrity of her own life in jeopardy, but that of her children as well.

IV. Biblical Narrative as Moral Appeal

What is the relevance of an appeal to particular Old Testament stories for the public debate over abortion? Do these stories provide Christians with an ambiguous position on abortion with which to influence those now supporting abortion on demand? Can they help to decide actual cases of contemplated abortion or to formulate a public policy on abortion? Let me suggest how I think these narrative appeals function ethically, considering both the limits and possibilities for such appeals.

I shall turn first to what are their limitations. Narrative appeals do not yield practical moral principles which tell us how to reason in every possible abortion situation. Nor will they ever provide us with the kind of syllogistic reasoning necessary to prove the unexceptionable prohibition against abortion. None of these stories depicts unwanted pregnancies or situations of conflict between the life of a mother and her unborn child from which we might deduce a proper course for our day. But I hope it is clear that the stories of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah being given children provide us with something more powerful than moral principles. If their prescriptive power does not give our arguments against abortion the certitude and force we would like them to have, we must reconsider why it is we need to contemplate the question of abortion. Do we want to understand abortion to maintain the integrity of our lives and as an example for our children? Or do we want an arsenal against the pro-abortion camp? The abortion debate is quite shrill, admitting only partial arguments that quickly become slogans and are penned onto placards. What arguments there are function as badges for identifying opponents in the debate and are not the subject of thoughtful exchanges. Thus condemnations of life-taking, assertions of the sacredness of life and defenses of the right to life of the unborn bring only counterattacks. Whose life? Whose rights? Whose well-being? To date, the heated debate has yielded no weakening of either side, no consensus about which moral principles are to govern, and, most sadly, little reflection among Christians about the connection between abortion and their way of life.

If Christians are to have an impact on the debate over abortion, their first task is to make clear to themselves what kind of life they wish to embrace and why abortion is a threat to that way of life. They must answer the questions: What kind of people must we become? What must our lives affirm? What kind of behavior would be contra-

dictory? Their answers will often be specified in terms of their marriages, sexual practices, and their reasons for choosing to have children. Ultimately, general principles neither settle the abortion debate nor provide a vision of the moral life. Stories, however, do have the power to clarify our visions. We must be attuned to them and be able to discern which are the most truthful from among the variety of narratives which vie to claim us.

The claim that having children is a religious affirmation needs to be clarified. If this religious affirmation is interpreted as having the force of religious obligation, our attention may be turned in the wrong direction, for obligations call us to consider what actions best fulfill them, minimally fulfill them, etc. But how would we determine how well couples fulfill such an obligation? Those who speak of child-bearing as a duty may face the conundrum of determining when and how many children fulfill this obligation in a marriage. Eventually the obligation involves us in making fine distinctions (e.g., what attitudes and acts may count as evidence that we are truly open to the possibility of having a child).

While natural law arguments suggest that procreation is an obligation by virtue of human reproductive capacity, the biblical stories do not suggest that having children is an obligation, say, by virtue of a divine edict. Instead, the stories regard children as a gift closely related to the gift of covenant itself. The language of obligation does not adequately comprehend the moral and religious vocation to have children. We may do adequately (or inadequately) what we are obliged to do, but having children is a kind of affirmation that cannot be required of us. The initiative must come from us, as we recognize new possibilities for our communion with God. God does not need us to have children. But we need to have them as a way to affirm our adventure, love affair and covenant with God. If we are able to make such a religious affirmation then we stand to become better people, and that is what the Christian moral life is about. If we think only of fulfilling obligations, we will strive merely to be minimally good people.

Our marriages, sexual practices and lifestyles are deficient when we are not welcoming toward children. We may be unwelcoming in a number of ways. Viewing children as a drain on our and the world's resources and regarding unwed mothers, welfare mothers, and large households uncharitably are some of them. Abortion is surely another unwelcoming act.

Making narrative-dependent moral claims is risky. Obviously, in a pluralistic society the Christian narratives are alien to some and have lost their imaginative power for others. But as Christians, we should not be discouraged from telling our stories of God. We continually need to hear them ourselves and have been commissioned to make them known to all. That our stories do not generate a universally

acknowledged moral claim about abortion is not a strike against them into the public debate. Our stories do not win del much as they cause a change of heart in others if certain th evident in the lives of the storytellers. Modern society, fright uncertain about its purposes and deeply divided in its loyalty well envy communities who self-consciously promote a way of themselves and for their children. This is the way in which th is to be a beacon to the world. In the words of Parker Palmer:

It is not the church's task to "Christianize" those who do not see thi way, but to live out the truth we are given — the truth that underne diversity we are one . . . We will find the common ground of public by destroying our particularity but by pursuing it, pursuing it to the where we encounter the ground of being which gave rise to and sus all. 7

Ultimately, it is the narratives which give our moral claim the compellingness and will make them attractive to others.

The use of biblical narrative is also risky insofar as there is a variety of scriptural stories which can be brought to bear on our moral reflections. What sort of principles of selection for choosing the most relevant stories might we use? No doubt choosing stories which are problematic, not because we risk grasping only part of the truth (that is unavoidable) but because we fear we might only select stories which confirm what we already believe to be true or interpret them in our own purposes, rather than allowing the stories to shape and reshape our vision of the truth. That fear should make us more honest in using scripture, but not less inclined to tell particular stories, for we are truth tellers together. To be found neither in the summation of what all the stories might tell, nor in the abstractions we might want to derive from them. The truth will be revealed only in the particularity of the stories. The problem of selecting some stories rather than others is not mainly a troublesome one. It is the narrative of our moral life. If the scriptural stories do not get a hearing, then other stories will surely take their place in the shaping of our moral identities.

In this essay, I have discussed the importance of the narrative dimension of the scriptures for the formation of the Christian life. I have also singled out particular stories which give us a perspective from which to reckon with the practice of abortion. Aware of the incompleteness of the discussion, let me first acknowledge that the Old Testament stories hardly exhaust the stories which could be told about those who have kept the covenant. While these may be the foundational stories we give prominence of place, there are countless other stories from throughout the ages that depict the ultimate truth and worthiness of the encounter between God, self and others. Indeed, we could tell stories of men and women whose lives and actions affirm that the covenant continues. For example, what stories there are

bring to mind the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto! These people, the first heirs of the covenant, have much to tell us by their willingness to rejoice in the birth of children, even as their world was being reduced to ashes! The stories I have recounted have many sequels which also should be told.

My second comment concerns the process by which the biblical narratives are made available to us. At some point in the distant past they became authoritative for the Christian community. The continued authority of the narratives depends upon the community's recourse to them. It is through its charisms of teaching and preaching that the Christian community is capable of being continually empowered by the scriptures. A question we cannot easily answer concerns how the Church's theologians, ethicists, preachers, episcopal leaders, and all those who read them together make the scriptures authoritative. It is a question as broad as the issue of how the diversity of the Church is necessary for its oneness.

In the fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus enters the synagogue at Nazareth and reads a passage from Isaiah which begins, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind . . ." Upon concluding the passage, He announces to the no doubt puzzled congregation, "Today, in your very hearing this text has come true." If we see in this text only a statement of Jesus' identity and only a reference to His mission of liberator, we miss something, for Jesus is also speaking of the power of the text for its hearers. The text will "come true" insofar as its hearers are empowered to join Him in the task of liberation. Like the Jews to whom the scrolls were recited in that synagogue, it is through *our very hearing* that the scripture's power is able to come alive. The stories of Sarah, Rachel and Hannah "come true in our very hearing" when we are transformed into a people who desire to be faithful covenanters with God and one another. One sign of our having heard and been transformed is our confident ability to say no to abortion.

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