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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1986), pp. 42-45

Published by: [University of Nebraska Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3346130>

Accessed: 05/09/2012 19:30

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# Abortion: A Moral Choice

Carter Heyward

My role here is to be an example of how one pro-choice advocate wrestles morally with the issue of abortion.

My perspective on this issue is that of a feminist liberation theologian. Feminist liberation theologians maintain that the warp of theological truth is justice—the establishment of mutually empowering relations between and among people. Feminist liberation theologians look to earth and not to heaven for the activities of the divine among us. Moreover, we look especially to women's lives for signs of God's work in the world. We look primarily to women as that massive group of human beings who historically have been overlooked in the building of theological and moral systems. We work on the assumption shared by other liberation theologians in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and here in North America, that good theology and good morality go hand in hand, and that both are rooted in the experiences of those persons in society who historically have not been accorded the dignity or the rights to live as subjects of their own lives.

What distinguishes feminist liberation theologians from other liberation theologians is the extent of our commitment to the well-being of women as those who, in the vast majority of cultures, nations, religions, and classes of the world, have been posited near the bottom of the hierarchy of social, economic, and political control. Feminist liberation theologians are aware, moreover, of the extent to which the control of women's lives has been exercised in a fundamental way by the control of women's procreative options and choices. This, then, is the backdrop from a feminist liberation perspective of developing a moral perspective on abortion.

Although I am not Roman Catholic, my own church tradition, Anglicanism, shares with the Church of Rome a basic catholic respect for the sacramentality of life in the world. As a child I learned that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. This is, I think, a simple and uncluttered way of suggesting that a sacrament is a sign that the Holy One is at work here and now. To view the world through a sacramental lens is to see that the seeds of goodness and truth and beauty, even as we gather here, are being sown; and to recognize that the presence of God at work may be as simple, quite literally, as looking carefully at the lives and choices, work and play, difficulties and commitments of our sisters, brothers, and selves.

The question of the morality of abortion is steeped in the catholic sacramental fabric of life at once human and divine, created and creative, sometimes simple, sometimes complex. Like all moral matters—those in which human decision may play a decisive and critical role for better or for worse—abortion is, at the level of personal decision, embedded in a matrix of ambiguity and complexity. It is not always clear to a woman whether an abortion is for her more nearly right or wrong. Like all other moral matters, abortion's rightness or wrongness at the level of personal decision has much to do with how seriously the woman takes the relational, participatory, social requirements intrinsic to her life in the world both as a responsible self and as someone toward whom the society has a full range of economic and social responsibility, or *should* have a full range of economic and social responsibility.

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No moral decision is made in a vacuum. Morality is itself the dimension of our life *together* in which we consider the effects of our decisions and actions upon others and theirs upon us. All of which is to say that, at the level of personal morality, a woman's choice to abort or not is fraught with ambiguity and complexity, and that this is the case even when, as is often true, the woman is clear that for her the decision to abort is right. I would submit that the morality of abortion ought to rest in this morally ambiguous and complex realm of personal decision; specifically in the realm of the particular woman's personal decision. Moreover, I would argue that it is precisely the moral business of churches, synagogues, and other religious institutions to support theologically, pastorally, and politically women's legal and moral right to choose whether or not to have abortions. The failure of significant sectors of the religious community to support women's right to choose signals the depth of patriarchal religion's pernicious failure to value and honor women as fully embodied moral subjects of our own lives. This takes us beyond the realm of personal decision into the realm of public debate over abortion, where the heart of the problem—which has been generated in no small part by the agendas of Christian men—is the extent to which women's capacities to live as moral persons continue to be trivialized, obscured, and denied altogether.

From a moral perspective, a public policy on abortion cannot be shaped responsibly outside the realm of engagement with those persons whose lives are most directly and immediately affected by the policy. For churchmen to postulate, on the basis of natural law or any other law, the fetus as a person whose right to life is legally and morally competitive with the woman's right to live as a fully bodied and sacred moral subject is, at the very least, an indication that these churchmen and their concern for the well-being of the unborn fail to do justice to women—the 53 percent of the human species that has been born and continues to labor under the patriarchal canopy of misogyny. Not until leaders of the Roman Catholic and other Christian churches reflect by their actions as much respect and solidarity with women as they do with fetuses, men, and God, will self-respecting women be able to respect or act in solidarity with the moral consensus of Christian leaders. It is quite that simple.

From a feminist liberation perspective, what might be some of the issues that would be well considered in shaping a public policy on abortion—a public policy that would do justice to women's lives? Drawing primarily on the resources provided by Beverly W. Harrison in her extraordinary book, *Our Right to Choose, Toward a New Ethic of Abortion*,<sup>1</sup> I would like to offer several suggestions.

Sound morality, the heartbeat of good theology, begins in the daily context of human life as it is actually lived. Neither ethics nor theology can be adequately constructed out of the wispy, speculative realm of “good ideas.” We cannot live good, loving, just, decent lives merely on the basis of how life in this world “ought” to be constituted. Ethicists and theologians, of course, spend a good bit of time walking a line sometimes narrow, sometimes wide, between what is and what ought to be. But the best theo-

logians and moral teachers, I believe, begin with what is, in fact, the concrete situation here and now and work constantly in attention and dialectic between what is and what could be or might be in the best of all possible worlds.

If we are to take seriously what is happening in the social order in which we actually live our daily lives today, we are met by the fact that women have unwanted pregnancies for all kinds of reasons. Too often, they are the result of direct physical violence against women. More often than not, unwanted pregnancies result from the unavailability or failure of safe birth control techniques and, moreover, the failure of the society to provide resources of sexual self-awareness and self-respect for women or financial security and opportunity for poor women and men. To contend with many religious leaders that, in the midst of a sexist, racist, classist society, there “ought” to be a better way than abortion to avoid surprise pregnancies and that, because there “ought” to be such a way, abortion should not be permitted is to indulge in the sentimentality of a moralism without substance. It is like saying that the death penalty should be permissible as long as it is administered justly. People who insist that abortion is not permissible because there really ought to be other ways of avoiding unwanted births are not interested in serious moral reasoning. They are, rather, short-circuiting the complex of moral reflection, often for the purpose of arriving at the same conclusions with which they began on the basis of unacknowledged assumptions, such as the assumption that if a woman is going to screw around, she should take the consequences.

Thus, I suggest that a sound public policy on abortion must begin in the realm of engagement with actual human life in a society badly broken by forces of male gender superiority, compulsory heterosexuality, white supremacy, and economic exploitation. These social forces make sexual victims out of women, and especially poor women and women of color. A responsible ethic of abortion cannot disregard the reprehensible extent to which women's lives are put down and undone by social, economic, and political forces beyond their control as individuals.

But, in shaping public policy on procreative choice, we must move also beyond the notion of woman as victim. The fact is that women have always had abortions, and always will, legally or not. Rich women can fly to Europe; poor women hit the back streets and alleys of our own cities. While this fact does reflect the victimization of women, it testifies also to women's determination to maintain control over our own lives. In sexist and heterosexist society women are often pushed to a last resort in order to maintain this control over our lives and bodies. We are determined to be subjects of our own lives. We will be more than victims. This commitment is the first fruit of the feminist movement, and it contains the seeds of radical social transformation. This is, of course, why the resistance to the feminist movement has mounted so fast and furiously during the last ten years in, for example, the “Stop ERA” and the “Right to Life” movements, as well as in the reactionary politics represented by Reagan. Any public policy on abortion that takes women seriously as subjects of our lives will reflect creative wrestling with the following questions (and I would suggest that these questions be put not only to our religious and political leaders

but also to one another). I believe that until we who are pro-choice engage such questions, we cannot debate fully the morality of abortion.

1. To what extent do we trust women to live as moral persons? And I mean not just affluent, well-educated women, but all women—women as a gender-specific group—not just sexually monogamous women, but *all* women, women as sexual persons. To the extent that we tag certain qualifications onto our own understandings of when or if abortion is right, we are dabbling in a long standing distrust of women that is steeped in many generations of assumption about woman as mindless body, woman's natural role as wife and mother, woman's sexually insatiable appetites, and so forth.

2. As with all legal and moral decisions, we must ask, "Who is making this decision, and whose interests are being served by it?" The possibilities for public discourse on abortion would be greatly enhanced by the participation of strong, woman-affirming women, such as Geraldine Ferraro, in high places of public trust. Strong, self-affirming women and woman-affirming men and women cannot regard as morally credible the positions on abortion taken by religious or civil legislators whose ranks have been constituted so as specifically to exclude participation by women-affirming women and men. This has been true of the Christian church historically, and it is still the case today. Men, even men of good will, cannot theologize creatively about women's lives and well-being. Taking a conservative position here among some feminists, I would suggest that men can participate constructively in the public debate over abortion policy, just as a man can, in some circumstances, participate in making the decision about whether the woman who is pregnant by him will have an abortion. But in shaping public policy on abortion, men should be following the lead of women who are committed to the sacred value of women's lives, just as, at the level of personal decision making, the choice of whether or not to abort should rest first and finally with the woman herself.

3. Does the fetus have a right to life? If human life is sacred, as I believe it is, the fetus does, indeed, have its own sacred character as the beginnings of human life. But I do not believe that prenatal life can, or should, be accorded a full range of human rights such as those for which women, children, and other socially, economically, and politically marginalized people continue to struggle. This issue should not be sentimentalized by comparing, for example, the well-being of ten-week-old fetal tissue to that of sick, disabled, or elderly members of the human family. These *persons* have rights, or they should have them (including, some would argue forcefully, the right to die). The unborn fetus should not be empowered legally to make the same moral claims on our society as, for example, a retarded child. The latter *should* be, in the full legal sense, a person. The former should not be because, until birth, the rights of a fetus cannot be determined morally apart from those of the pregnant woman. The fetus' "rights" must be understood as relative to the woman's; and the woman must be understood as the

person best able to determine the *moral* relation between her own well-being and that of the fetus.

Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank has remarked that the most vocal opponents of abortion seem to believe that life begins at conception and ends at birth. The majority of the most vociferous advocates of the unborn are also the most adamant opponents of every piece of public policy that would provide nutrition, health care, education, and basic human rights for the vast majority of those who have been born into this world. Despite their pastoral letters on nuclearism and economics, I would include Catholic bishops as participants in this moral doublespeak. In their failure to see, much less acknowledge, women's lives and moral capacity as central to the abortion debate the bishops are failing as surely as the Moral Majority and the Reagan administration to take seriously the social, economic, spiritual, psychological, or survival needs of most members of the human family—women and children.

Thus, although questions about fetal life are not insignificant from a theological perspective, they cannot override the right of a woman as moral subject of her own life. Only if women were empowered legally and morally to act as moral agents could *women* then lead the way in helping shape public policy on behalf of the *well-being of the fetus*. The 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, by legalizing abortion through only the second trimester, protects both the woman and the well-developed fetus from late-term (third trimester) abortion. With Beverly Harrison, I believe that this is as close as our society *should* come in establishing legal parameters within which the morality of the act of abortion can and should be determined by the pregnant woman herself.

Finally, let me say a word about the sacramentality of women's lives. Florence Kennedy has remarked that if men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament. This is true. I suggested at the beginning of this presentation that a sacrament is a sign among us that the Holy One, she whom many of us call God, is at work here and now. Sacrament signifies the ground upon which we stand in our efforts to take seriously the sacred character of human life and all creation. Sacramentality does not necessarily imply happiness or pleasure; rather it involves the demands of love and justice that are often fraught with complexity and harsh effects. A woman's choice to terminate a pregnancy should be recognized for what it is—a serious moral choice with roots in the sacred character of moral agency; the ability to choose on behalf of what we believe to be right or best in a concrete situation. Abortion is frequently sad because it involves loss. It is not, however, always tragic. If women had made the rules, if women had written the sacred texts, if women had been architects of religion and state, sexuality would be understood as sacramental. So, too, would be the act of lovemaking, whether heterosexual or homosexual. So, too, would be conception, miscarriage, and birth. Each of these processes and activities can be an occasion of deep sadness or great relief, grief or gratitude, loss and gain. Often all of these strong human emotions are involved in a partic-

ular experience of loving, living, holding on, letting go, dying. Abortion should be a sacrament. I suspect that for many women and their spouses, lovers, families, or communities, it is celebrated as such: an occasion of deep sacred meaning.

## NOTES

1. Beverly W. Harrison, *Our Right to Choose, Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

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## Of Note

FRONTIERS is pleased to bring to the attention of our readers the following books that have recently appeared. The authors have published articles or creative work in previous issues of FRONTIERS.

Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition*. Beacon, 1986. \$24.95, cloth. See "Two Poems," FRONTIERS, 6, No. 3, 62-63.

Judith (Pildes) Arcana, *Every Mother's Son: The Role of Mothers in the Making of Men*. The Seal Press, 1986. \$10.95, paper. See "Mothers and Daughters: Understanding the Roles," FRONTIERS, 3, No. 2, 1-11.

Jan Clausen, *Sinking, Stealing*. The Crossing Press, 1985. \$16.95, cloth; \$8.95, paper. See "the poet's mother visits her in New York," FRONTIERS, 3, No. 2, 47; "From Today Is The First Day Of The Rest Of Your Life," FRONTIERS, 4, No. 3, 32; "Poem of My Naming, Poem of My Facelessness," FRONTIERS, 7, No. 2, 70.

The Coalition for Western Women's History, *Women's West Teaching Guide: The Multicultural History of Women in the Nineteenth-Century American West*. Women Studies Program, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington, 1986. \$8.00, paper. See "Women on the Western Frontier," FRONTIERS, 7, No. 3.

Sherna Berger Gluck, *From Parlor to Prison: Five American Suffragists Talk About Their Lives*. Reissued by Monthly Review Press, 1985. \$10.00, paper. See "What's So Special About Women? Women's Oral History," FRONTIERS, 2, No. 2, 1-14; "Women's Oral History, The Second Decade," and "Women's Oral History in the Classroom," FRONTIERS, 7, No. 1, 1-2, and 109-10; "Reflections on Linking the Academy and the Community," FRONTIERS, 8, No. 3, 46-49.

Susan F. Harding, *Remaking Ibiaca: Rural Life in Aragon under Franco*. University of North Carolina Press, 1984. \$24.95, cloth. See "Street Shouting and Shunning: Conflict Between

Women in a Spanish Village," FRONTIERS, 3, No. 3, 14-18.

Joan Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850*. Yale University Press, 1986. \$25.00, cloth. Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller, ed., *New Mexico Women*. University of New Mexico Press, 1986. \$29.95, cloth; \$14.95, paper. See "Family History and Oral History," FRONTIERS, 2, No. 2, 75-78; "What's In a Butter Churn? Objects and Oral History," and "Women's Oral History in the Classroom," FRONTIERS, 7, No. 1, 103-08 and 109-10.

Marilyn Krysl, *Mozart, Westmoreland, and Me*. Thunder's Mouth Press, 1985. \$13.95, cloth; \$6.95, paper. See "My Life with the Murderer," FRONTIERS, 4, No. 2, 49-58; "Lotus Will Bloom in Summer," 8, No. 1, 40-44.

Nancy Mairs, *Plaintext*. University of Arizona Press, 1986. \$15.95, cloth. See "A Letter to Matthew," FRONTIERS, 8, No. 1, 29-31.

Valerie Miner, *Winter's Edge*. The Crossing Press, 1985. \$16.95, cloth; \$7.95, paper. See "Writing Feminist Fiction: Solitary Genesis or Collective Criticism," FRONTIERS, 6, Nos. 1/2, 26-29.

Joanna Russ, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts: Feminist Essays*. The Crossing Press, 1985. \$15.95, cloth; \$6.95, paper. See Reviews in FRONTIERS, 1, No. 1; 3, No. 3; 4, No. 1; 4, No. 2; 5, No. 3.

Eliane Leslau Silverman, *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930*. Eden Press, 1984. \$14.95, cloth. See "In Their Own Words: Mothers and Daughters on the Alberta Frontier, 1890-1929," FRONTIERS, 2, No. 2, 30-35.

Anna Lee Walters, *The Sun Is Not Merciful*. Firebrand Books, 1985. \$13.95, cloth; \$6.95, paper. See "The Resurrection of John Stink," FRONTIERS, 6, No. 3, 68-72. **We are pleased to note that this book has won both the Virginia McCormick Scully Literary Award for 1985 and the 1986 "Before Columbus Foundation" American Book Award.**