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# Discussing the underlying concerns in the abortion debate: searching for an effective model of discourse

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# DISCUSSING THE UNDERLYING CONCERNS IN THE ABORTION DEBATE: SEARCHING FOR AN EFFECTIVE MODEL OF DISCOURSE

by

Angela Annette Chipman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Religious Studies in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

December 2011

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

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# INTRODUCTION

Sometimes it seems impossible to have productive conversations about topics that have polarized American political culture. People of contrary opinions who approach each other for conversation are often so set in their modes of thinking and believing that they cannot hear what each other has to say. It sometimes appears that they do not want to hear, although they expect the people with whom they disagree to listen to them and to take their views seriously. Inflexibility commonly leads to contention, which if left unchecked, can lead to a hardening of feelings, animosity, and in some cases tragic events. This is the case with much public American discussion of the abortion issue. The rift between those who do and do not believe that abortion can be a morally justified act has only grown over the years. The strong feelings and beliefs held by persons on both sides of the issue often lead to acerbic exchanges. In some extreme cases these exchanges have been linked to acts of violence. It was a growing number of such acts—and the threat of increasing violence—that gave rise to an organization known as the Public Conversations Project (PCP).

The PCP was created in 1989 in Massachusetts when Laura Chasin, a family therapist and faculty member of the Family Institute of Cambridge, decided to bring the insights and strategies of family therapy to public conversations about abortion and other polarizing issues.[1] The group first came to wide public attention when a 2001 *Boston Globe* article revealed that a group of committed pro-life and pro-choice advocates had been meeting secretly for several years to talk about the abortion issue.[2] They had begun meeting in response to a local tragedy. In 1994 John Salvi, claiming to be a pro-life

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[1] Public Conversations Project, http://www.publicconversations.org.
[2] Public Conversations Project, "Talking with the Enemy." *Boston Globe*, January 28, 2001.

advocate, had murdered two people in two different women's health care clinics in Boston. He had seriously injured several other people as well.

The Public Conversations Project set out to create an atmosphere in which people who found themselves on opposite sides of the abortion debate could come together and discuss the issue with the intention of minimizing the propensity for animosity and violence within themselves and also within other people of their respective camps. The Project brought disputants together for the kind of dialogue that shifts relationships from ones of mistrust, defense, withdrawal, or attack to those of curiosity, respect, and the compassionate understanding of differences. The PCP did not seek to shift people's core beliefs and commitments regarding abortion, but instead sought to change the atmosphere in which those beliefs and commitments were expressed.

This model allowed prominent leaders of local pro-life and pro-choice movements to come together, not as spokespersons for their "cause" but as individual persons with religious and moral convictions that often go unarticulated in heated public debates. Over the course of nearly six years, the groups met eighteen times and shared meaningful conversations about how and why they held particular views on the morality of abortion. The willingness of these individuals to leave behind their public personas and political agendas and speak as persons who have rather complex religious and ethical sensibilities led to a number of enlightening and fruitful talks. Many participants commented on the way their attitudes about their opponents changed as a result of their dialogues.

An example of one such shift was offered by one of the participants, Frances X. Hogan, who was a lawyer and president of an organization called Women Affirming Life. She explained in a National Public Radio interview regarding the anniversary of the

PCP dialogue that while she still believed that abortion was killing, she no longer insisted on calling it "murder." She realized that using such language was deeply offensive to people who saw themselves defending women's health and basic liberties. It was also counter-productive. Her respect for her opponents grew to the point that she simply did not want to use language that caused them pain. Hogan said, "Toning down the rhetoric is critical. It's not just better manners, but it turns out it's also better politics....We reach people we may never otherwise have reached with the message."[3]

While deeply held convictions of those who participated were not changed, the discussion did allow both sides to articulate and hear each other's reasons for viewing abortion as they do, giving a personal face to a debate that had become quite abstract and impersonal. Instead of instantly viewing their opponents as the enemy, those who were a part of the conversation gained a greater sense of the complexity of the other's argument. This PCP conversation serves as an example of what could happen more frequently in American society if people cared enough to engage each other seriously and respectfully as fellow citizens and human beings. By focusing on shifting one's own attitude toward those with whom one disagrees, rather than focusing on changing another person's mind on a controversial issue, it becomes possible to reduce a significant amount of animosity toward others and thus open up channels of both communication and cooperative action that could otherwise not be discerned.

Since the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, when abortion burst into the American national consciousness, the abortion debate has raged. Much of this debate has been around matters of law and public policy. Pro-life and pro-choice rhetoric is generally a

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[3] Public Conversations Project, http://www.publicconversations.org. "Talk of the Nation." National Public Radio. January 22, 2007.

mesh of legal rights talk and speech aimed at expressing moral values, some of which are grounded in religious beliefs. These different strands of the argument are sometimes offered separately, but most often they are woven together in such a way that it is difficult to know whether people are arguing more about questions of law and legal rights or about questions of morality. In this thesis my concern is primarily with the morality of abortion, that is, with the question of whether it is ever morally justifiable for a woman to obtain an abortion, and what sort of basic social structures must be in place for women to be encouraged and empowered to make the best possible moral choices with respect to unwanted pregnancies.

It is clear that there are many things that motivate people to take the positions they do on the morality of abortion. It is tempting to employ a hermeneutic of mistrust and look for the "real" and not-so-noble reasons why people fight so hard to gain moral as well as political ground on this issue. This project employs a hermeneutic of generous-mindedness that takes seriously the possibility that people are motivated *in part* by what they regard as serious religious and moral convictions that cannot be reduced to non-moral impulses to grab power for themselves. Of course, this debate *is* about power. But it is partly about the power to shape society in accordance with one's religious and moral views concerning what a good or ideal society looks like.

Pro-life and pro-choice advocates tend to express their views in ways that both propel their own arguments and repel their opponents. Most disputes concern the relative moral value of a fetus and a woman who is carrying the fetus. Those who believe what is at issue is the life of a nascent human being see it as a travesty to claim that what is growing inside the woman is anything but a human life of moral value equal to any other

human life, while those who counter are adamant that it is women, their status and their experiences, that are paramount. In the latter view, anyone who fails to grasp the moral superiority of a conscious and relationally responsible woman fails to give women the respect they are due as mature moral agents.

The starkness of each argument, however, does not reflect, in most cases, the often subtle underlying concerns of those who take these positions. By discovering some of what each side is actually saying or implying, underneath the talking points, I hope to give voice to some formal moral concerns that most people share about the importance of justice, respect for persons, and the protection of vulnerable humans from harm. If these concerns are brought to the fore, and if people are encouraged to pursue discussions that highlight the concerns they have in common, more people will likely be drawn toward a middle ground in which both the woman and the fetus are shown as much moral regard as the conflict-ridden situation allows. Where serious differences remain regarding the more specific *content* of the norms, there is still the possibility of a growth in tolerance and civility among those who trust that their opponents are doing their best, not simply to control other people to suit their own selfish ends, but to shape society in accordance with their ethical commitments.

My strategy is to put into conversations three prominent scholars of ethics, more specifically Christian ethics, who have taken up the discussion of the morality of abortion. Additional voices will be introduced to flesh out aspects of the main authors' views. My hope is to glean from all of these authors some of the deep convictions that are held by people who care about this issue—convictions that shape their own views and, I believe, shape our broader social debates, but are not often articulated clearly or

with care. By exploring these convictions, raising critical questions along the way, I hope to assist readers in articulating some of their own religious and moral concerns and better understand the concerns of others with whom they disagree. In the process I hope to point the way to possible areas of unrecognized agreement or, at least, some ways of bridging disagreements with reference to some important, albeit largely formal ethical concerns.

I have chosen scholars who hold strong views on each side of the issue, as well as a scholar who articulates a mediating position that softens the hard-lines often drawn in this discussion. John T. Noonan, Beverly Wildung Harrison, and Lisa Sowle Cahill have each stepped into the arena of abortion conversation and have offered ideas about why abortion is or is not an appropriate response, under any circumstances, to an unwanted/unplanned pregnancy. Noonan will stand as one articulate representative of a pro-life stance, while Harrison will serve the same role for the pro-choice position, with Cahill representing one possible voice of the middle ground.

In seeking to capture and begin thinking critically about these perspectives, I will focus initially on surface-level representations of what is important to each author, religiously and morally, and then move progressively into deeper or more implicit layers of what I take to be the authors' intended meanings. In so doing, I hope to provide an example of the kind of patient inquiry from which members of American society could benefit in an effort to better understand what other members of their society think about this issue. By working with scholars who have put a lot of thought into their positions, I hope also to empower people to do a better job giving voice to their own treasured moral values, rather than settling for slogans. Finally, my purpose is not to argue for one

position or another but rather to show what becomes more visible and meaningful as a possibility when one cuts through familiar rhetoric and explores religious and moral concerns through interactions of the sort that the Public Conversations Project makes possible.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE PRO-LIFE VIEW OF ABORTION

Many people who identify with the pro-life view hold that a fetus conceived of human persons is itself a person and has been so from the moment of its conception. In this view, abortion in all cases constitutes the killing of a person, where a person is defined as a full-fledged member of the moral community who has a moral status equal to every other member of that community. Abortion in all or nearly all cases violates a human fetus's equal and inalienable right not to be killed unjustly. This perspective can be found among many religious traditions but may find its most consistent and powerful formulation in the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. The Magisterium has consistently held that fetuses are created by God with a dignity that makes it morally wrong to kill them directly. They are persons who are innocent in the sense that they are free of any personal wrongdoing, so it is not possible to justify killing them as one might justify, for example, killing a soldier in war or an intruder who deliberately threatens one's life. The Magisterium asserts that human life must be protected and nurtured from the beginning, just as at all subsequent stages of its development.[4]

The Catholic Church has offered in response to changing times and social circumstances numerous statements addressing the questions of both the faithful and those willing to listen to the Church's understanding of what is most important to the future of society and humanity. A statement that focuses sharply on the matter of abortion is the November 1974 *Declaration on Procured Abortion*. This writing by the

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[4] Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration on Procured Abortion," 6, *http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19741118_declaration-abortion_en.html.*

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is part of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, offers a response to obvious concerns about new scientific evidence and changes in moral sensibilities in American and European societies. The statement points to the Church's long held beliefs about human moral worth. It calls attention to the many times the Church has refused attempts to make exceptions to the prohibition of the direct killing of human embryos or fetuses. It is the utter consistency of this teaching that seems, to many people, to give credence to the teaching, particularly at a time of dramatic social change and the perceived loss of a moral center or the absence of moral absolutes in contemporary society. The statement speaks to persons of faith, but it also insists that the Church's convictions about human dignity are evident to all people of good will who have and are willing to exercise the power of reason.[5]

Section fourteen pointedly addresses many of the pro-choice arguments about the grave difficulties that girls and women face when they find themselves pregnant and in very difficult social and personal circumstances. Yet the document insists, in response, that "Life is too fundamental a value to be weighed even against very serious disadvantage."[6] The Church acknowledges that if the factors that place women in dire circumstances were not so serious and widespread, the effort on the part of many people to defend the moral and legal right to abortion would not be so vigorous. However, even as it concedes that circumstances can be difficult, the Church still holds that no one is morally permitted directly to take the life of an innocent person, even if that means losing his or her own health or life in the balance. The document identifies problems that lead

[5] Ibid.,8.
[6] Ibid.,14.

women to think that abortion is their best or only option, and it seeks to apply the Christian virtue of charity to the resolution of these problems.

> [One cannot] remain indifferent to these sorrows and miseries. Every man and woman with feeling, and certainly every Christian, must be ready to do what he can to remedy them. This is the law of charity, of which the first preoccupation must always be the establishment of justice. One can never approve of abortion; but it is above all necessary to combat its causes….it is necessary at the same time to influence morality and to do everything possible to help families, mothers and children.[7]

It is with statements like this that one can see the possibility of a small piece of common ground between conservatives in the Church and some persons on the other side of the abortion debate. Of course, a central cause of unwanted pregnancy is consensual heterosexual intercourse without the use of effective birth control, and the Church does not permit (morally) the use of artificial contraception. This will be a major sticking point. Yet the basic claim to be concerned about alleviating human suffering and its causes, and the claim to be committed to social justice, will win the Church some attention among those who wish to improve the lives of women and children. There is a shared recognition that one cannot simply look at the problem of abortion without also examining the problem of unwanted pregnancy and the related problems of poverty and lack of social support for women's and children's healthcare. These are some of the shared values that permitted the PCP abortion discussion group to make considerable progress in reaching a point of mutual understanding and respect.

Another writing from the Church that has had a significant influence on pro-life views of abortion is Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*.[8] The focus of this writing is on the

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[7]Ibid., 26.
[8] Paul VI, "Humanae Vitae," http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html.

proper function and form of sexual relations within the context of marriage. Paul makes explicit the Church's stance that using artificial means of birth control, including abortion, is a grave sin. In the section entitled "Illicit Ways of Regulating Birth," Paul says that "we must once again declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun, and, above all, directly willed and procured abortion, even if for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as licit means of regulating birth."[9] "For therapeutic reasons" means "in order to preserve the health or life of a woman." The teaching is that the *direct* or intentional killing of a developing embryo or fetus is never morally licit. If the presence of a developing fetus clearly threatens the life of a woman, then morally speaking the woman must be allowed to die. The Pope leaves open the possibility that taking measures necessary to save the life of a woman, which have the *foreseen* but *unintended* or indirect effect of ending the life of an embryo or fetus, can be licit. Such circumstances would be extremely rare. Examples developed by Catholic theologians include those of an ectopic pregnancy and a cancerous uterus: to remove either a fallopian tube or a uterus from a woman, as a necessary life-saving measure, may indirectly involve letting a fetus that is present in one of these organs die. However, it would not under any circumstances be licit to remove a fallopian tube or a uterus with the intent of ending or even preventing a pregnancy (sterilization).[10] This hard line on the direct killing of innocent persons has attracted many people to the pro-life movement.

Among those within the Church who subscribe to this traditional view, in most respects, is canon lawyer and ethicist John T. Noonan. Like the Magisterium, Noonan

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[9] Ibid., 13.
[10] John T. Noonan, "An Almost Absolute Value in History." In *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 57.

believes that a fetus born to humans must be considered human from its beginnings. He is explicit that there is a conceptual distinction between being genetically human (having a genetic makeup derived from one's parents) and being a person, (having full moral status or equal moral rights). That is, he admits that genetic humanness is a biological reality, which can be determined by scientists, while personhood is a moral reality, which can be determined only by moral judgment. Yet he argues for the normative view that genetic humanness is sufficient for full moral personhood. Having a human genetic code is all one needs to be counted a full and equal member of the moral community. [11]

Noonan argues on principle that it is wrong to kill innocent persons. It is therefore wrong to kill innocent human fetuses, at any stage of their development. He qualifies this view, however, by arguing that it is morally permissible to kill persons in situations where doing so is necessary to save one's own life. That is, it is permissible to kill another person in self-defense. It is therefore morally permissible for a woman to kill her fetus if doing so is necessary for preserving her life. By extension, it is permissible for a third party such as a physician to assist a woman in killing a fetus in defense of the woman's life. It is not simply that a fetus may be killed indirectly, when removing part of a woman's body as needed to save her life; it is that a fetus may be killed directly, but only as a necessary means for preserving the woman's life.[12] In making this qualification, or allowing for this exception, Noonan departs from the more conservative view of the Magisterium. The latter holds that any direct killing of a fetus, even in self-

[11] Ibid., 58.
[12] Ibid.

defense, is unjust killing. [13] Yet Noonan remains faithful to the rest of Catholic teaching as he discusses abortion. I will return to his exception shortly, but for now the focus is on his argument for the immorality of almost all instances of abortion.

In his book chapter, "An Almost Absolute Value in History," Noonan attempts to persuade his readers that by looking back through the Catholic tradition one can find an enduring ethic that is centered on the protection of innocent human life.[14] Beginning with the Bible and the Apocrypha, Noonan seeks to illustrate a continuous teaching that has viewed abortion, in all its forms, as morally impermissible. He reaches back to some of the more obscure texts of the Christian faith to show how, from its earliest beginnings, the Church has opposed abortion as an affront to God, the giver of life. It has done so in response to practices in the greater societies of which Christianity has been a part. This consistency in doctrine, like any other uniformity throughout time, has not been perfect; there have been minor differences in viewpoint. Noonan acknowledges this when he explains that context and time do make for differences in emphasis among theologians. Yet he argues that these differences do not undermine the claim to remarkable consistency in the Church's teachings on abortion. He strives to show that the heart of the Christian community with respect to innocent life has been constant. The moral law itself has remained constant.

Noonan argues that historical insights and contemporary experiences ought to guide reflection on moral values. Although certain values remain constant, within an

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[13] Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration on Procured Abortion," 14, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19741118_declaration-abortion_en.html.

[14] John T. Noonan, "An Almost Absolute Value in History." In *The Morality of Abortion*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 7.

institution such as the Catholic Church, each generation does have to interpret those values and determine what it means to act in accordance with them, and these interpretations and determinations can change somewhat, depending on circumstances and growth in knowledge. [15] Noonan warns that refusing to appreciate this element of historical change, with respect to certain values, can result in a "single-mindedness that would lead to the endangering of other values."[16] There is an opening here to the possibility that, under certain historical conditions, certain values can and ought to be called into question in light of other, more important and stable values. At the same time, Noonan wants to uphold the notion that there are moral absolutes. There are features of human nature that never change. At issue is how one determines which values are to be held stable and which are to be allowed to change or evolve.

In his book, *The Church that Can and Cannot Change,* Noonan makes a strong case for understanding that certain moral values are changeable and *need* to change.[17] The focus of the text is on the question of slavery, on the question of how the Church came to recognize that it had been wrong on slavery. Yet his argument has implications for the abortion issue. Noonan discusses the way in which certain historical changes slowly brought about a growth in empathy, which changed how white people viewed black people in America. Empathy enabled an important shift in white people's values that eventually led to the recognition that slavery is counter to human dignity. Noonan describes empathy as something that "enlarges experience, enabling the individual to

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[15] Ibid., 3.
[16] Ibid.,1.
[17] John T. Noonan, *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 216 .

identify with some human beings in a particular way."[18] He argues that "Empathy with those seen as brothers and sisters leads to a rejection of practices formerly considered to be compatible with Christianity…."[19]

A discussion of the growth of empathy, and the way in which empathy can lead to a change in a person's sense of what is important, naturally raises questions about the implications of Noonan's view for the morality of abortion. The protection of innocent life and the upholding of human dignity appear to be moral absolutes, or near absolutes, in his view, and all Noonan is saying is that empathy once led the Church to be true to its own deepest values. It led the Church to recognize that all human beings, regardless of the color of their skin, are equal in human dignity. Similarly, the church recognizes today that all human beings, regardless of their level of physical development, are equal in dignity. Yet there is a sense in which greater empathy toward women who are in situations of unwanted pregnancy could cause a shift in values or in the way one understands "the protection of human dignity." One wonders if such empathy could at least complicate a person's understanding of what is morally right or permissible in a situation of conflict between a woman and her fetus.

Noonan makes a case for why the practice of slavery was finally recognized as unacceptable, despite its historical acceptance within a great deal of the Church's teachings. Empathy led to a more direct encounter with and appreciation for the dignity of particular people. Why couldn't a similar approach be taken to the Church's long-time practice of tying women to their reproductive processes? That is, why couldn't empathy toward women lead to a reconsideration of the idea that the moral law requires all women

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[18] Ibid., 13.
[19] Ibid., 215.

to submit to any and all embryos they happen to conceive, even if through rape or incest? Women's roles in society have changed dramatically over the past decade. If women are to have full and equal opportunities to flourish as members of a given society, if their full human dignity is to be upheld, then they need to be able to exercise some control over their reproductive functions. They need to be empowered to take responsibility for their sexual powers, even as their partners are to be encouraged to do the same for themselves. Many women have become respected leaders and active members of their societies, with more and more responsibilities beyond the home. This has been possible only because of a growth in the availability and practice of birth control, including abortion as an option of last resort. In the wake of this historical shift, it is time to ask anew what it means to value life and the protection of human dignity specifically with respect to women.

"An Almost Absolute Value in History" does not acknowledge that persons are morally required to exercise empathy or compassion toward women while trying to help women to moderate their reproductive powers and vulnerabilities. With all of his focus placed on the fetus and *its* moral value, women and their value garner little of Noonan's explicit concern. This is particularly interesting given that women are conscious beings who are capable of a great deal of conscious suffering, whereas first-trimester fetuses (at least) are not capable of conscious experiences. They are capable relatively early on of reflex reactions, as are the simplest of biological creatures, but prior to significant brain and neurological development, they are not capable of the conscious awareness of pain. It is easy to imagine having empathy for women, and harder to say what empathy for developing fetuses involves, for humans generally feel empathy toward beings who are like them specifically in their ability to be conscious of pain. There are good scientific

reasons to doubt that first-trimester fetuses have the ability to be conscious of anything. In short, there is no attention paid by Noonan to the changing social situation of women as a group, or the experiences of particular women who face unwanted pregnancies in a wide variety of difficult circumstances. The need for this empathic recognition of women is serious. Without it, genuine discussion about the morality of abortion cannot even commence.

Noonan quotes a number of ancient texts as well as Catholic scholars who have addressed the abortion issue throughout the centuries, emphasizing the historicity of the topic and the particular arguments and debates. Yet he does not seem to recognize the historicity of the experiences that molded and anchored these views and debates. For instance, he reaches back to the beginnings of the Church with reference to a text known as *The Didache* in order to strengthen his claim to the church's depth of history and authority in these matters. From this work, also known as the *Teaching of The Twelve Apostles*, he quotes a list of sins that are believed to set Christians apart from the "heathens" of the Roman Empire at the time. Among them is a specific prohibition against abortion. The second commandment of the *Teaching* states, "Do not murder a child by abortion or kill a newborn infant."[20] It is by harkening back to some of the earliest records of Christianity that Noonan endeavors to convince the Catholic faithful that the Church's moral teaching on abortion has never really changed, and because of that consistency they can trust that it is true.

Noonan does offer contexts for such teachings by discussing the situations in which they were promulgated, specifically as a response to what early Christians viewed

[20] Cyril C. Richardson., ed. *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Westminster Press, 1996), 172.

as the decadent ways of the Roman Empire. Abortion then was viewed by the Church as a way for women to get away with sexual promiscuity and shirk the responsibility of parenthood. Yet Noonan does not consider the historical context of the extreme vulnerability that women have experienced with regard to pregnancy, throughout history. He does not consider the extent to which these documents were framed at a time when women were largely enslaved to their biology, and bringing babies to term could easily threaten their lives. He does not call attention to the extreme poverty that characterized the situations of many women, historically. While many pro-life persons today, including women, value the institution of motherhood greatly and want to preserve it in its traditional forms, there is a growing need to recognize that many conservative views of women and mothering, looking back and also in the present, are overly romantic. Not all women can become mothers, and not all women who can become mothers wish to do so. Moreover, not all women who wish to become mothers have the luxury of doing so safely. Nor do they have the luxury of being full-time homemakers or women of means. They can be struck hard by an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy, as can their other existing children, and they need to find tangible solutions to their problems.

In summary, "experience" appears to be an important source of moral insight, in Noonan's view. The experience of empathy, in particular, can cause a person to call into question some common moral convictions and traditional teachings of the Church. Yet the experience of women facing unwanted or unplanned pregnancy in diverse social and historical circumstances remains invisible in Noonan's analysis. Noonan repeatedly claims that all human life is precious and equal in moral worth, yet when it comes down to considering the well-being of the woman carrying the fetus, this moral concern comes

up short. Only saving a woman's biological life is considered important enough to justify the taking of fetal life. No other aspect of her well-being, mental or social, even receives extended reflection. This focus on the fetus and its humanity seems to be in line with the Church's view of biological life being sacred, but it stands in some tension with the Church's mandate to care for all human beings in the world, as spelled out in its social teachings.

Robert P. George is another prominent conservative who shares Noonan's view about the moral centrality of the fetus and its biological life. In his book, *The Clash of Orthodoxies,* George argues that "Human life is a good in itself, not merely an instrument of good and therefore morally viable."[21] Without biological life, no other good can come into being. Life itself must therefore be respected and protected before all other goods, such as happiness and security.

Biological life and its persistence as a unique form of human life correlate with the recognition of the full moral status of the fetus from conception.[22] George counters the claims of pro-choice advocates who argue that his view is based wholly on religious faith, and it will not be compelling to people who do not share that faith. He argues, in response, that faith and reason are not at odds, but are in fact two sides of the same coin. For him religious faith itself can be proven valid through reasoning, and he insists that both faith and reason are needed to discern what is true and right.[23] In his view the separation of faith and reason would lead to a false understanding of any issue examined.

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[21] Robert P. George, *The Clashes of Orthodoxies*: Law Religion and Morality in Crisis (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2001), 4.
[22] Ibid., 11.
[23] Ibid., xiv.

He holds the "Judeo-Christian moral view" to be rationally superior to the morality of what he calls "orthodox secularism."[24]

Both of these men have strong views about what is at stake when discussing abortion. Neither is willing to give much ground when advocating for the overriding moral significance of human biological life over all other goods. It is with respect to biological life alone that women and women's well-being even enter the conversation. It is only when the biological life of a woman is at stake, that either man, grudgingly, makes a concession. Noonan offers an instance in which a woman seems to have a greater right to life than the fetus, namely, when a woman needs to abort a fetus to save her life. However, he immediately goes on to suggests that even if she could justly defending herself against the fetus, it may be better for her to follow the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice and give her life for her unborn child.[25] He makes the willingness of the woman to lay down her life for her child appear as the morally superior option. There is no mention of the social circumstances that would need to be in place for this child or other of the women's children to be given the care they need when their mother dies. The pro-life view as it is currently presented leaves something to be desired for the woman who is ultimately faced with such a choice.

Women's experiences should be considered, and they should not be considered simply in the abstract. Women's experiences are all unique. They are all informed by different personal, social, and historical circumstances. What is good for a particular woman ought to be considered with respect to the practical realm in which she actually

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[24] Ibid., 8.
[25] John T. Noonan, "An Almost Absolute Value in History." In *The Morality of Abortion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970),59.

lives. Women's voices must be heard in order to identify why abortion appears as an option for many of them, and in order to imagine alternatives that might satisfy women themselves, and also be acceptable to persons on both sides of the abortion debate. Because they are the bringers of life, women must be at the center of any discussion of abortion. Noonan and those who share his view would do well to take into account women's voices not simply because women have a "right" to do with their bodies as they see fit, but because it is through listening to the specific moments that define women's decisions that one can come to an appreciation of the impossible situations in which many women find themselves. Abortion is not generally a decision that women enter into lightly. By attending more to the diverse experiences of women, pro-life advocates might begin to see that many women who opt for abortion do so with a heavy heart and no malicious intent. Maybe by hearing these women in their own words people would reconsider the idea that it is appropriate to apply moral ideals to specific cases without extreme care in considering the details of a given case. It is when the highly complex situations and multi-faceted experiences of diverse women are taken into consideration and evoke empathy that the pro-choice argument enters the conversation.

## FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND THE PRO-CHOICE VIEW OF ABORTION

Those who affiliate with the pro-choice perspective seek to ensure that women facing unwanted pregnancies are treated as full moral agents with tremendous capabilities and moral worth. Actually, what matters most is not the special moral status women gain by doing what they do, but rather the moral status that they possess by virtue of the sorts of beings they are, namely, beings who are capable of thought, emotion, imagination, judgment, and changing relationships to other persons. For most pro-choice advocates, it is the possession of these sorts of capacities, in some degree, that defines the members of the moral community. Biological humanness is not sufficient or even, for some, necessary for having the dignity that comes with being a rational, emotional, relational being. Some people regard various higher primates as persons in the moral sense. The pro-choice view seeks to empower women to use their remarkable capabilities partly to take control of their procreative powers and use them responsibly in light of their full knowledge of the circumstances they confront. From this stance, the woman and her moral agency become the most important consideration.

Organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Feminist Women's Health Center (FWHC) seek to endow women with the confidence to stand up and claim their proper and equal role in society. It is these groups and other groups like them that illustrate what the pro-choice view entails. Being pro-choice is primarily about treating women as capable moral agents who are able to make their own decisions, the "right" decisions, about tough moral matters such as abortion. It is about women having the option to decide what happens in and to their own bodies. In part, being pro-choice is about ensuring the right to abortion, which is partly a matter of law

and public policy. But our concern here is primarily with the morality of abortion—with whether it is morally justifiable, under certain circumstances, to remove a developing fetus from one's body. Being pro-choice is partly a matter of granting women the moral right and the moral authority to make abortion decisions for themselves, with the support of their loved ones, and in light of all of the details of their situations of pregnancy. On the FWHC website, their stance is succinctly stated: "We have a vision of a world where all women freely make their own decisions regarding their bodies, reproduction, and sexuality—a world where all women can fulfill their own unique potential and live healthy *whole* lives."[26]

The desire is not to destroy human life, as is often portrayed on the pro-life side of the conversation, but to recognize a woman's moral right to exercise her full and capable judgment in making the decision for or against abortion. The aspiration is for women to be treated as adults, rather than as children who need to be led by the hand to do the right thing. Where women are free and empowered to make their own choices, there is the trust on the part of pro-choice advocates that most women will make good choices—choices that reflect considerable thought and moral concern for all parties involved. Pro-choice is about trusting women. It is about giving women a voice in their own lives and destinies and not simply leaving their lives or those of their family to the chance happenings of biology.

Feminist theology steps into the pro-choice position on abortion to offer the opportunity for women and men to reevaluate their religious traditions, particularly what these traditions teach about women, the body, and sexuality. Seeking to move away from

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[26] "Feminist Women's Health Center," http://fwhc.org/ (1996)

male-centered understandings of religion and the world, feminist theology projects a world in which women define themselves as persons, and they determine for themselves and with each other what it means to flourish as women. Feminist theology articulates views of society in which both men and women are revered as being in the image of God.

For many religious believers, the feminist movement was and continues to be seen as an attack on true religion. Feminism is viewed as an attempt by immoral forces to undermine God's plan for creation and God's desire to see people behave in prescribed ways. Patriarchy, which has for so long stood as the foundation of most human societies, is viewed as instituted by God for the good of all. Throwing feminism into the mix with theology makes no sense to many people who see theology as being linked rightfully to patriarchy. Yet there are many religious thinkers who can and do see theology differently. Over the last several decades, feminist theology has grown tremendously as a sub-discipline of theology or religious thought. It has allowed many religious women and men to find a way to stay in their traditions while addressing the tendencies of their traditions to sacralize patriarchy and undermine the well-being of women.

One scholar who identifies as a feminist theologian or, more specifically, a feminist theological social ethicist, is Beverly Harrison. Grounded in the Protestant Christian tradition but also in the feminist movement, Harrison advances a pro-choice view that reflects a feminist liberation theology, namely, a way of understanding the relationship between the divine and the human that is rooted in experiences of people who suffer various forms of social oppression and seek liberation from oppression.[27] Harrison does not so much articulate a positive theological view, however. She focuses

[27] Beverly W. Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Towards a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 6.

on critiquing theologies that sacralize male control of social power—and male control of women and women's bodies. Harrison argues that women alone have the authority and the responsibility, in relation to a God of liberation, to determine what happens in and to their own bodies. No one has a moral right to expect or force a woman to incubate a fetus that she does not wish to carry for nine months. Abortion is not about the fetus' right to life alone, but also about women "as a group having the same basic standing as 'rational moral agents' as men do, with all the rights and responsibilities attendant upon that status."[28] Harrison seeks to change the ways in which women are viewed within the Christian tradition and show that these changes will not harm but will rather advance the church and society as a whole.

Harrison believes that respect for persons requires providing equality of opportunity so that all persons, regardless of gender and other distinguishing characteristics have the chance to realize their full potential. The institutionalized patriarchy that frames the question of what is morally right with respect to the abortion issue too often limits or usurps these opportunities for women and diminishes their humanity in favor of a being that has yet to gain similar moral standing. In other words, in much of the discussion of the morality of abortion, the fetus appears to Harrison to be placed ahead of the woman in the moral pecking order when it has hardly even begun to realize its potential. Women are effectively relegated to a secondary status and treated as though they simply do not matter as much as fetuses. The systemic patriarchy she decries sets standards that fail to acknowledge a woman's place as an actual person. It often leaves her feeling as though she has no claim to the same opportunities as her male

[28] Ibid., 7.

counterpart because of a biological fate over which she has little and sometimes no control. Harrison believes that the procreative power of women is being stifled by men who are seeking to control women's bodies and maintain a social order that maximizes male control over life and death.

Harrison notes that traditional Catholic teachings on abortion characterize procreation as a special divine blessing.[29] The product of procreation is thought to be sacred from the moment it is conceived. This view, in her historical interpretation, arose primarily in response to the desire of men to control women, especially to control the power of women to procreate the species. By making procreation sacred, men, who long held a monopoly over religious authority, appeared to gain the moral authority to insure that women would submit to their procreative roles. The product of procreation was thought to be a gift from God, not to be hindered by anyone. Harrison believes that under the guise of valuing life the Church's sacralization of procreation has devalued women's authority over their own bodies and their unique procreative power. In her book, *Our Right to Choose*, she summarizes what she sees as really at stake when the Church discusses women within this context.

> The very thought of abortion (within in the orthodox Christian understanding) conjures up images of women's cosmic rebellion against a divinely prescribed theological and moral destiny. From this perspective, every abortion represents a heinous act of self-assertion, a bloody wicked renunciation of all that women were created and born to be.[30]

Harrison emphasizes that this masculine theological worldview seeks to hold women in a subjugated role that cannot be changed because it is God-given, as indicated in scripture

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[29] Ibid., 6.
[30] Ibid., 62.

and confirmed by tradition. Harrison, though, refuses to accept this worldview because she believes it comes not from divine revelation but rather from a man-made patriarchy that has established itself on behalf of men's exclusive control of the most significant forms of social power. A vision of the male as the representation of God on earth with the authority to control social relationships is nothing more than a projection of men's desire for domination over women onto the heavens and into the mind of a deity that is constructed in men's own image.[31]

The traditional Christian view of male/female relations has often left women at the mercy of men in positions of power, especially men in the Church who claim that their superior positions have been divinely instituted. Women are unique individuals with their own destinies and not, as patriarchy would have them believe, simply complementary to men, supporters of men and men's drives to reproduce themselves and their ways. The value of women has its basis in their capacity for the exercise of moral agency, not in their capacity to give birth to children and create comfortable homes. For Harrison, until this moral fact is acknowledged and addressed, no genuine discussion of abortion can begin.

Harrison suggests that pro-choice and pro-life advocates do generally share a moral concern for the value of human life. She acknowledges that while a fetus is not a person, it is a potential person, and for that reason it has remarkable moral value.[32] But she argues that while anti-abortion proponents advocate for the full moral standing of the fetus, they often do not give the same consideration to the women whose lives are forever affected by a pregnancy. The concrete experiences of women's lives are ignored, she

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[31] Ibid., 8.
[32] Ibid., 214.

claims, in the debate about abortion, because value is abstractly assigned to biological life rather than to actual, personal and relational lives. The systemic influence of male privilege within society constantly places women in a position of having to fight for basic necessities of their own lives. For instance, the fact that a woman who does similar work to her male counterpart makes less money means she has less income to secure her well-being or that of any children she might have. The social structures that deny women fair access to the fundamental building blocks of a well-lived life place undue burdens on women and exacerbate situations of unplanned pregnancy. Meanwhile, pro-life proponents are granting full personhood to a first-trimester fetus.

Harrison cannot be charged with ignoring the considerable moral status of the human fetus, although she does deny that this status is exactly equal to that of the woman carrying it, particularly during the fetus's first trimester of development. What she does is to change the conversation, so that women are not left out of the abortion debate, as if they were not the central actors involved. What she does is to treat women as subjects of their own lives, rather than as objects of other person's interest and manipulation.

Rosemary Ruether shares many of the same convictions as Harrison. From her progressive Catholic perspective, she too criticizes the patriarchal structures within society and in the Church's handling of the abortion issue. Like Harrison, Ruether sees the essential issue in the abortion discussion as women's reproductive self-determination. It is only when women have the ability and are granted the moral authority to choose when and if they bear children that they can establish their "full human dignity and

capacity for self-determination in other areas of their life."[33] Ruether stresses that this self-determination, at its core, deprives the patriarchal system of its power. She states in her book *Contemporary Roman Catholicism* that, "For women to become the decision makers over reproduction is to overthrow the material and ideological base of the entire hierarchy of male power over women based on control over women's capacity to bear children."[34]

Ruether clearly shares Harrison's concern about the way in which abortion is debated in society. With patriarchy as the backdrop of the conversation, women are already at a disadvantage. From this premise, women's primary role is that of mother, and if she is not fulfilling this role, then she is going against a divine mandate or natural order. For Ruether, this view is dangerous for many reasons, but especially because of the burden it places on those who are poor and uneducated about their sexuality. She strongly criticizes the pro-life worldview for seeking to limit access to abortion, but also for seeking at the same time to limit access to the discussion of birth control which might prevent the need for abortion in the first place.[35] The advocates for the elimination of abortion, in her estimation, are not convincing advocates for the elimination of unwanted pregnancies. Again, she suggests that abortion is not something seen as desirable by the majority of women who do it, nor is it done carelessly but it is often done in response to a previous loss of reproductive freedom and self-determination. It is when "an unplanned pregnancy is forced upon them against their will by a combination of ignorance, sexual

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[33] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Contemporary Roman Catholicism: Crises and Challenges* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1987), 42.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 43.

coercion and inadequate medical means"[36] that women turn to a procedure that can be sad and even traumatic for them.

As evidenced throughout history, those with power—including the power to define others and their proper places in society—are slow to relinquish it, if they ever do. The realization that the patriarchal system will not be easily or speedily abandoned turns the conversation now to the third major view in the abortion debate. Those who stand in the middle ground hope to change the larger system, but they are also committed to doing what they can now, while much of the system is still in place, to advance greater equality and justice for women. With respect to the problem of abortion, they seek to help women grow in self-determination while also acknowledging and respecting the significant moral worth of the fetuses they are carrying, and appreciating how vulnerable these fetuses are.

Both the pro-life advocates and their pro-choice counterparts operate with a vision of how the world ought to be. The pro-life world is one in which a God-given order is in place and it is followed joyfully by God's subjects. This order is one in which women are happy to be the bearers of children and the primary raisers of the next generation of humans. The pro-choice world is one in which patriarchy is seen to be a human construct that actually injures human beings and cannot possibly reflect the will of a loving and just God. The pro-choice world is one in which liberty and creativity are valued more than the maintenance of a pre-ordained social order.

For the pro-life advocate what is at issue is not only the protection of social order or tradition, but also the protection of nascent human life—the protection of the processes and persons that will insure the continuation of the traditional society and the traditional

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[36] Ibid., 41.

family. For this group, there is no option when it comes to protecting innocent human life: nothing is more important than this. For the pro-choice advocate what is at issue is changing the current social order to allow a greater number of persons to have the opportunity to thrive as unique individuals who have different goals for their lives. For this group, there *have* to be options when it comes to protecting fetal life, for there are so many other, extremely important things at stake, including women's well-being. Fetal life does not automatically trump all other values.

Both pro-life and pro-choice advocates have a vision of the way the world should be, and they seek to impose this ideal on American society as it currently exists. In many ways, seeking after the ideal society is a noble endeavor. At the same time, however, one often has to make do with partial measures and compromises that reflect the reality of the situation at hand, including the reality of substantial moral disagreement. There is a need to temper our desires for a better world with the realities of the world in which we actually live. Protect life, yes, but sometimes protecting already-born life and the quality of life stands in conflict with bringing additional babies into the world. Promote justice, yes, but many people disagree that justice requires giving women sole moral authority for making decisions of life and death for other human beings.

The middle position observes the current state of the world, including the fallibility of humanity, our current social inequalities, and our moral disagreements, and seeks to find some concrete ways in which to deal with the problems at hand. It seeks to make progress toward moral and social ideals that are worth aiming at, but may never be fully realized and cannot in any case be forced. This position allows individuals to hold views that are both pro-life and pro-choice, in certain respects, while recognizing that the

world we live in is not ideal and therefore in our imperfection we must occasionally seek imperfect solutions.

## THE PROGRESSIVE CHURCH AND A MEDIATING VIEW OF ABORTION

A mediating position in the abortion debate appreciates opposing ideas concerning the ideal society, and most people who seek the middle ground have a moral vision of their own. But they focus on making positive changes in the world as it is now presented. A mediating view seeks to show that even in such an imperfect world there are means to deal with issues that trouble us. There are ways to uphold or improve the conditions of human life by working together. Some of those who hold a middle-ground position stand inside a religious tradition. They often turn attention to the social teachings of their tradition, while inviting others to do the same in relation to their own traditions. For Christians, this often means looking at the life of Jesus and seeking to propose solutions to problems that reflect his core teachings. There is room for disagreement here. But the need to nurture and protect the least among us, and to show love and charity to others, including those with whom we disagree, are staples of the Christian message. These staples tend to be brought into focus by people who seek a middle ground.

Groups such as The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) try to use "the moral power of religious communities to ensure reproductive choice through education and advocacy."[37] For this association, religious beliefs become tools for finding practical answers to tough life questions. The RCRC's goals include educating women on their options and rights when it comes to unplanned/unintended pregnancies as well as offering them assistance in finding access to safe abortions should they make the decision to seek abortions. The organization does this while maintaining certain faith

[37] The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, "Mission." http://rcrc.org/about/index.cfm. (2011).

commitments and using those commitments to offer compassion and support to women who find themselves facing difficult decisions.

Lisa Cahill can be interpreted as a scholar who holds a middle-ground position on the morality of abortion. While continuing to embrace much of what the Catholic Church teaches, she acknowledges the shortcomings of some teachings especially when it comes to women and their equality. She recognizes that within the current societal context there are serious inequalities that hinder the poor and oppressed overall and women in particular. It is these inequalities that sometimes make abortion necessary and justifiable, if also morally tragic. These inequalities lead to situations in which abortion can be the best choice for a particular woman. In "Abortion, Sex and Gender: The Church's Public Voice," Cahill says:

> I believe that human life has significant value, even if not the full value of a "person" from conception, and that a woman's right to reproductive self-determination is not absolute in the face of that value. I also affirm, however, women's right to equality in society and in the family, and I appreciate that abortion is often an act of desperation for women who can find no viable alternatives to safeguard their own futures or those of their children.[38]

Instead of idealizing the moral status of fetuses or women, and pitting fetuses and pregnant women against each other, Cahill seeks to locate both entities within the context of an imperfect world—a world in which both matter immensely, but both are also very vulnerable and need the help of others. Cahill realizes that the world in which we live does not always offer women many options that might allow them to keep an unplanned

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[38] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Abortion, Sex and Gender: The Church's Public Voice." *America* 168, no. 18 (05/22, 1993), 6-7.

pregnancy, and it is naive and wrong to treat the protection of nascent, biological human life as if it were the only or most important moral concern. Just as Harrison holds that it is morally unacceptable to neglect women's circumstances and treat abortion decisions in the abstract, Cahill holds that current social structures make it problematic to be a moral purist and to apply universal moral principles in a wooden way, without serious attention to complications of circumstance. Yet Cahill believes that within current social structures there are means to bring about some changes that could empower the disenfranchised and reduce the need for abortions. She advocates for the development of social policies that insure access to affordable health care for everyone. Cahill envisions a concerted effort in which both pro-life and pro-choice persons are willing earnestly to pursue, together, ways to make the world more equitable and also more humane.

Cahill joins Noonan in holding that the Catholic Church has much to offer to the discussion of abortion, but whereas Noonan's focus is on establishing the full moral status of the fetus and protecting fetuses at nearly all costs, Cahill emphasizes the social responsibilities that often go hand in hand with protecting vulnerable human life. She discusses the responsibilities of women, some of which just come with the territory of having bodies and reproductive capabilities. She discusses also the responsibilities of other members of society to support women, rather than placing all of the emphasis on women's independent responsibilities to make choices for themselves.[39] It is of little practical use, she says, "To proclaim the right to life of the unborn without addressing that message to high-profile cultural concerns about women's equality and economic

[39] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Abortion, Autonomy and Community," In *Abortion: A Reader*, ed. by Lloyd Steffen (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 359.

pressures on families. A single-issue focus on the rights of the unborn ends by marginalizing the pro-life message."[40] She acknowledges the Church's position on what it means to be a person, while also pointing to its kindred focus on the social well-being of those persons. If abortion is to be discussed fairly and honestly, it must be discussed within the context of the lived experiences of all persons involved as well as their societal standing.

Lloyd Steffen shares much of Cahill's vision of how to address the abortion issue. For him, abortion is a moral problem, but the moral meaning of it is not as clear as public policy discussions might indicate.[41] He suggests that there are some shared moral concerns at the center of the abortion issue. However, when it is discussed in public there is a tendency for people to fall into one or another extreme position, rather than exploring the possibilities of a common moral ground. Like Cahill, he acknowledges that the world we live in is imperfect and, because it is, some of the moral goals aimed at by the pro-life and pro-choice camps cannot realistically be achieved, at least not in the short term. Most human beings live and die in the short term.

In *Life/Choice: The Theory of Just Abortion*, Steffen discusses how the urge to arrive at moral certainty has been one of the biggest obstacles in the abortion debate and in the effort to formulate a social policy with which most people can live.[42] On both the pro-life and pro-choice side there is a felt need to make their view appear to be the only true or humane view. Accordingly there is an inability to participate in the kinds of conversation necessary to arrive at reasonable compromises. He recommends thinking

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[40] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Abortion, Sex and Gender: The Church's Public Voice." *America* 168, no. 18 (05/22, 1993), 11.
[41] Lloyd Steffen, *Life/Choice: The Theory of Just Abortion* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 3.
[42] Ibid., 4.

about moral presumptions rather than moral absolutes. Moral presumptions are general moral guidelines that hold a community together, and they should be considered generally binding, but they are not static. They can be adjusted as more information and morally vague situations arise. While it is important that these presumptions be adhered to whenever possible, they can be set aside in serious situations where adhering to them, or to a particular understanding of what they require, would cause more harm than good.[43]

Steffen claims that pro-life and pro-choice advocates share some similar moral presumptions, but rarely recognize what they have in common because of their desire to win arguments and effect their own visions of the ideal society. Most people agree that there are numerous goods of life that all members of the moral community should enjoy. These goods make a pleasant and contented human life possible. Steffen suggests that most people regard biological life itself as a basic human good.[44] Biological life is intrinsically valuable and a preeminent value among the other goods of life.[45] He echoes the views of Noonan and George when he says that life is valuable because it allows one to pursue the other goods that are also of great worth. Yet having rejected the idea of moral absolutes, Steffen adds that this does not mean that life cannot and ought not to be destroyed if other valuable goods are in conflict with it. Being preeminent does not, for Steffen, equate to being absolute or unchallengeable. Because moral presumptions such as the good of biological life are not absolutes they can, if there is strong moral reasoning offered, be superseded. He offers criteria by which a person can determine whether one

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[43] Ibid., 52.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 28.

is justified, in a particular case, in lifting the presumption in favor of preserving the good of biological life.[46]

Insisting on moral absolutes in situations of moral conflict and great moral ambiguity retards the ability of rational beings to make good decisions about their lives. Moral absolutists generally fail to encourage others to ponder and contemplate what a given value or ideal really means for them, within the context of their complex lives. Cahill and Steffen call out to their contemporaries on both sides of the debate to examine each other's views in a patient and generous-minded way, and attempt to work through their differences civilly and with the goal of creating a discourse that is informed by an appreciation for human finitude and for the ways in which people actually make moral decisions. People make such decisions by wrestling with real difficulties and ultimately settling for solutions that are not always ideal, but are as good as can be hoped for in the situation.

[46] Ibid.,52.

## EXAMINING MORE UNDERLYING CONVICTIONS

Having laid down some basic understandings of the abortion issue, viewed from three different perspectives, I want to explore further some of the religious and moral concerns that inform the thinking of each of the authors we have examined. By looking more deeply at some of these concerns and convictions, I hope to generate increased understanding of important differences and also to locate some additional points of contact between opposing sides. By engaging in this exercise with respect to our chosen authors, we might be able to envision doing something similar in our own conversations with people in our communities. By taking a closer look at some of the underlying beliefs that inform people's views on abortion, we may get to a point where we are able to lay aside the usual pro-life versus pro-choice rhetoric and discover more of why each of us thinks and feels the way we do. In the end, advocates of pro-life, pro-choice, and mediating positions might not change their core beliefs as the result of such conversation. Indeed, such change is unlikely. However, we might learn in the process of listening and examining to become more respectful of each other, even when we disagree strongly, and less prone to caricature our fellow human beings.

In light of the PCP model discussed earlier, I want to encourage members of various communities, especially in the contemporary American context, to view their opponents not as persons who are ignorant, driven by ideology alone, or driven by some other nefarious motives, but rather as persons with genuine concern for the persons and ways of life that they seek to protect. While it is undeniable that motivations are almost always tainted by selfish wants, and by the desire for power and control, the purpose here

is to encourage people to converse with each other on the working assumption that all parties, to some extent, have the greater good at heart.

As we have seen, pro-life convictions that appear to drive arguments against the morality of all or nearly all abortion include a basic belief that all human life is precious. Those who share this belief take seriously the vision that all men and women are created in God's image and reflect, to some extent, the goodness of God. For those who hold such a belief, to take an innocent human life is to spit in the face of the almighty and his gift of life. What is meant by "innocent life"? The Christian belief that all human persons are conceived in sin, due to the original sin of Adam and Eve, does not, from this viewpoint, take away from the fact that some persons are innocent of specific acts of wrong-doing. Fetuses, in particular, have had no opportunity to form evil intentions or perform evil actions. Their mere presence may threaten a pregnant woman, but fetuses cannot rightly be characterized as aggressors with destructive intent. It is therefore wrong to treat them as if they were criminals, and it is certainly wrong to treat them as if they were worthy of death.

Inasmuch as pro-life advocates succeed in drawing strong, imaginative connections between developing fetuses and newborn babies, they evoke a natural loving response to tiny, vulnerable beings who are pure and innocent and ought to be treasured. Nearly everyone who has a stake in the abortion debate agrees that it is wrong to kill newborn babies. It may be worthwhile, in promoting productive conversation, to explore different people's intuitions about the extent to which developing fetuses do and do not resemble babies. It is hard to demonize someone who loves babies, and sees developing fetuses in his or her mind's eye as tiny babies. At the same time, it is hard to demonize

someone who loves babies, but can articulate several reasons for saying that the moral status of a very early fetus is simply not equivalent to that of a baby.

For Noonan and for others, an exception to the rule against abortion can and should, in some cases, be made where the presence of a fetus threatens a woman's life, and only its removal can save her life. A woman, like a man, has a right to self-defense. Yet there is a concern, shared with the Magisterium, that a seeming lack of respect for life, which appears to be at work in many abortion decisions, challenges Christian teachings at their core. In Noonan's summation, the willingness of persons to regard abortion as morally permissible under a wider range of circumstances threatens the moral foundations of society. It threatens the belief in human dignity itself. It puts everyone at risk of being disregarded the next time his or her life comes into conflict with the interests of more powerful persons. For those with a pro-life view of the world it often seems that people who are opposed to them seek to redefine what it means to be human, as a way to justifying doing things that it is never or almost never right to do to humans. The line-drawing that opponents sometimes engage in, saying that some humans are included in the moral community and some are not, troubles people like Noonan because once any such lines are drawn, then all sorts of arbitrary lines start to seem possible, and all sorts of people are at risk of being counted as less than human, unworthy of societal protection.[47] We noted previously Noonan's recognition that this very thing happened to black people in America, who were regarded by white people as outside the bounds of humanity; but this terrible moral mistake was eventually corrected.

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[47] John T. Noonan, "An Almost Absolute Value in History," In *The Morality of Abortion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 54.

The need to acknowledge that human beings are intrinsically valuable and therefore entitled to a high level of moral respect propels Noonan's notions about why abortion remains an act unthinkable except in mortal situations. Without this recognition of equal human dignity, in the pro-life perspective, humanity is left to a sea of relativism that could lead to more and more people being considered less than human, such that their destruction appears to be justifiable. The fear is that not just unborn individuals but also older persons and those who are mentally challenged might also become targets of a society that measures human worth based on mental and physical capabilities, rather than on membership in the biological human community. The driving force behind much of the pro-life imperative is to protect nascent life, as part of a long continuum of vulnerable human life, to preclude a spiral into a moral abyss.

As noted, Robert George articulates a view that "human life is a good itself and not strictly a means to an end."[48] He, like Noonan, subscribes to the opinion that life itself is something to be protected and preserved whenever possible. George suggests that without making a special plea to religious faith it is possible to convince people that abortion is unacceptable in almost every instance. He argues that a natural law governs human attitudes and actions toward what is most valuable in the universe, and all humans who are capable of rational reflection can discern this law. In *The Clash of Orthodoxies*, he states, "Religious faith, especially religiously informed moral judgments, can be based upon and defended by an appeal to publically accessible reasons…these principles are available for rational affirmation by people of goodwill and sound judgment…."[49] Both

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[48] Robert P. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies: Law, Religion and Morality in Crisis* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2001), 4.
[49] Ibid., 7.

Noonan and George affirm through faith and reason that life is something that can and must be defended even in its most elemental stages. Living human beings that do not "measure up" in one way or another to prevailing social standards are especially vulnerable and must be protected. Only if the weakest among us are protected can the rest of humanity continue to believe that all of human life has dignity, regardless of how people and circumstances might change.

By attempting to define human beings with respect to their capabilities, rather than their biology, it does seems that pro-choice advocates leave themselves open to the risk of limiting, more and more over time, the beings who are included in the category of full moral persons. Noonan and George have good reason, on the face of it, to see this as a slippery slope. Peter Singer is an example of a philosophical thinker who probably appears to Noonan and George to be sliding toward a kind of moral oblivion. Singer argues in *Practical Ethics*[50] for the moral permissibility of abortion, under various circumstances. He values various animals more than he values early human fetuses because he values sentience (consciousness of pain) and intellectual capabilities more than the mere possession of a human genetic code. Singer then slides further on the slope of tolerating the destruction of human life to argue for the permissibility of infanticide as well, particularly in cases where newborns are seriously mentally disabled and will never be able to attain the mental capabilities of, say, the average chimpanzee. Singer's arguments need not concern us here: the point is that it is not unreasonable to worry that with a greater tolerance of abortion could come a greater tolerance of infanticide and other forms of human life-taking, in cases where humans place great burdens on the rest

[50]Peter Singer, "Taking Life: Humans", *Practical Ethics,* 2nd Ed. Cambridge, 1993, 175-217.

of society. Today fetuses are excluded; tomorrow senile people may be excluded; then people with other mental disabilities may be excluded. How is such a progression to be stopped if the very foundation of morality, respect for persons regardless of their capabilities, erodes? For these pro-life thinkers, the slide down this slope must be stopped immediately, with attention to tiny humans who have the least claim to having accomplished something important—fetuses who do not even have brains yet, but have the biological make-up of humans, which is enough to place them in the moral community. For many pro-choice advocates, biological humanness is valuable, but it is valuable precisely because the human genetic code allows for the development of the organs necessary for such things as thinking and feeling. For Noonan and George, any link between capabilities and moral value sets people up to discriminate against other humans. Noonan and George try to keep the focus on biological humanness per se, arguing that this was created by God and ought to be valued for its own sake.

Another conviction that appears to drive the abortion debate from the pro-life perspective is the concept of the proper family structure. The Bible is a source on which persons commonly rely to argue in favor of patriarchal family norms. There is a long tradition in Christianity of viewing men and women as different in kind and called to perform different social roles for the good of the greater society. Drawing inspiration from the Bible, many thinkers have argued that women were created by God specifically to be the helpers of men. One of the primary functions of women is to procreate and also to nurture and educate men's offspring. Noonan touches upon this fundamental value when he discusses early understandings of Christian life. Women were expected to have a certain dominion within the home, but in public life they were expected to be

subordinate to men. The traditional exclusion of women from public life reflects the complementary roles men and women were thought to hold. Each person was allotted specific duties and it was only when each fulfilled these duties that the world could be in the sort of balance that God intended.

The concept of the complementary nature of men and women continues to be a matter of contention between the Church and many women whose self-understanding is not consistent with traditional Christian ideals of who they should be. While it appears to the Church that the roles assigned to each group are rooted ultimately in the natural law, in the will of God, and make for a more balanced world, it appears to others that these roles have been determined by human males in order to ensure the submissiveness and meekness of women, while affording men control over most of the matters of "their" households and in the world at large. In one breath the Church states that women have an "irreplaceable role in all aspects of family and social life involving human relationships and caring for others"[51] while in the next breath it states that, when their role is looked at in relationship to men, it is evident that men are to wield the most significant forms of social power, for the good of women and for the good of society. When their desire is to stand as an equal with men or occupy the same space men do, the actions of the Church appear to contradict its own words: "Man and woman have the same dignity and are of equal value."[52] Yet it is possible for persons on both sides of the abortion debate to have a serious conversation about whether there are any differences between women and men

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[51] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, "13. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html.

[52] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church," 111. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

that are rooted in their very different bodies and biology, which persons ought to take into consideration when trying to determine how best to balance all of the responsibilities of adulthood, including those of parenting.

In a "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World," the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith speaks of what it means to be a woman, someone who signifies in a special way what it is to exist *for others*. Both men and women are called to exist *for others*, it says, but women naturally excel in this, and they do so partly because of their biology, which allows them to grow up faster than males and have a greater sense, earlier than males, that they are responsible for bearing and nurturing life.[53] Women are also better, by nature, at dealing with human finitude and thus providing care for the elderly and the infirm; they have a stronger emotional constitution when it comes to dealing with pain. The Letter speaks of how it is appropriate for women to be either in the home or in the world outside the home, improving society through acts of self-giving and peace-making. They are free to collaborate with men in all spheres of life.[54] Yet this view of women as being essentially for others, in a way that is rooted in their biology, leaves little room for women who do not care to bear and nurture children, or wish to find a good balance between home and work, to take charge of their reproductive powers and set limits to their parental responsibilities, unless they find partners who are willing to remain celibate for a lifetime, or they choose to become nuns. Although pro-choice advocates will be

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[53] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World," 13. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html.
[54] Ibid., 13.

opposed to most conceptions of gender complementarity inasmuch as they limit women's liberty, it does seem worthwhile to examine non-defensively whether there may be some physiological differences between most men and most women—differences that it would be foolish to ignore when working toward maximal liberty and opportunity for all.

The "Letter to the Bishops" warns about women falling into patterns of competition with men, rather than collaboration. One could interpret the very effort of women to control their reproductive powers as putting them in competition with men, who rely on them to be the helpers and nurturers in the family. Noonan and George focus in their discussions on women as bearers of new life and keepers of the home. They celebrate women in this role. They acknowledge that it is appropriate for women to seek to make a difference in the world beyond what they do in the home, but women who leave the home to effect change in the world come across as less than ideal. To further the conversation on abortion, however, it will be critical for all participants to reconsider religious teachings on womanhood in light of actual women's experiences. It will be critical to consider what sorts of familial and social structures need to be in place to empower all women to contribute actively to the shaping of society beyond the domestic sphere, even as women who choose to be full-time homemakers receive the support necessary to make that choice a reality.

The conservative Catholic authors we have examined do not emphasize traditional Christian views about the headship of the male relative to the female within the marriage and family relationship. The Congregation does make reference to the relationship between Christ and the Church as a symbolic relationship between male and female, as reflecting the complementarity within the Trinity itself, and it suggests that Christ in his

maleness can be represented at the altar of the Church only by male clergy.[55] But it does not press for a model of the home in which the male is seen as ruler. It is aware that this is often misinterpreted to be a justification of male domination over women. In the Congregation's view, this domination is a reflection of sin, not a reflection of the proper order of male-female relations. This could provide a valuable starting-point for discussion if all parties were to agree that domination as such does not reflect the rule of God, but rather it reflects the human violation of this rule. The Congregation makes plain that the rule of God is a rule of love, and it is to be reflected by humans in the practice of mutual love.[56]

It must be said that there are many Catholics conservatives and other religious conservatives who do hold to older, cruder ways of representing the proper form of marriage and family. In the understanding of many people who identify as pro-life, Adam was created first, and Eve was created as his helpmate.[57] This becomes the divinely-ordained model that is to determine the relation between men and women. The man as coming prior to the woman takes on the role as the head, while the woman as coming after the man is to be thought of as defined in relation to the man and well-suited to serve his needs. It is inherently problematic, in such a perspective, for women to think of themselves as defining themselves and living their own lives, partly for their own sake as well for the sake of others. This is perceived by the church as an act of setting themselves in competition with men, in a manner that violates the God-given order of things. Obviously, these commitments are not shared with very many pro-choice

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[55] Ibid., 11.
[56] Ibid., 12.
[57] Genesis 2:4-25.

advocates. Having identified the commitments, however, it becomes possible to address them squarely, to see if the Congregation's language of "collaboration" can perhaps be used to examine the temptation to "domination."

There are ways in which pro-life convictions do connect up with certain pro-choice convictions, in ways that are often not noticed. Most people on both sides of the abortion debate agree, to a significant extent, on the value of biological human life, as that which makes personal human life possible. They also agree that it is important to protect members of the human community who are vulnerable to the abuse of power on the part of others. Harrison and many of those who share her views hold that persons who are powerless or locked into positions of submission relative to others make a moral claim on others to bring about more equitable situations. A shift occurs, however, when the focus turns from protecting the vulnerable fetus to protecting vulnerable women and, indeed, restructuring relationships of social power so that it will one day be unnecessary to regard women as vulnerable and in need of special protection.

In Harrison's view, a woman who finds herself caught in an unwanted pregnancy is an "at risk" party in the abortion equation. Indeed, women are at risk of unwanted pregnancy long before they actually become pregnant. Women, because of their vulnerable place within a sexist society, are likely to be told by others and pressured to believe that, just as it is their role to serve their husbands, so it is their role to become mothers and serve their children, to give their lives to the nurturing of other people's lives. For Harrison, this is an oppressive message inasmuch as it does not allow and encourage women to think for themselves and determine for themselves what they want to do with their lives. Women are free to choose the role of wife and mother, but they are

also free to reject this role. They should not be told that it is their proper place to adopt this role even when it is inconsistent with their personal desires and dreams. Harrison thinks that because of the current social structure, established and dominated by men, it is women who are in the greatest danger of being exposed to continued marginalization and in jeopardy of losing more of their moral agency.

To Harrison, coercing women psychologically and socially, if not also legally, into the role of mother when they are not willing or ready to play this role, is tantamount to treating them like brood mares, like something less than human whose chief function is to reproduce the species.[58] This, in turn, is the same as denying and even destroying their potentiality as persons. While conservatives focus on protecting the fetus's potential to become a mature moral agent by protecting the biological basis of such agency, Harrison calls attention to the fact that women, too, need support if they are to develop their full potential as moral beings. Specifically, women need to be treated as responsible if they are to become fully responsible. Moral responsibility is something humans acquire by being encouraged by those who care about them to make their own decisions, including their own mistakes. To treat women like children who need to be told what to do disables women. It kills an important aspect of their humanity. In Harrison's view, conservatives either do not recognize this or they do not care inasmuch as they wish to keep women childlike and dependent.

Harrison sees a push to value the unborn equally or even more than women as just another means of male control. She observes a patriarchal structure that is fearful of any attempt by females to gain control over the creation of life. She states, "The

[58] Beverly W Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Towards a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 197.

denunciations of abortion as homicide and murder in Christian theological writings were often just rhetorical flourishes, while the moral reason for opposition was condemnation of women's sexuality."[59] While this sort of rhetoric is unlikely to open up dialogue with persons who identify as pro-life, it seems important to say that this is how many women feel—they do not feel honored by conservative views of them as natural-born nurturers. They feel trapped by these views. They may be incredibly nurturing people, but they do not want to be defined by others as ordained to serve them, while paying no attention to their own needs or desires.

In Harrison's view, women, from their childhood and youth through to adulthood, are given messages via toys, mass media and even relatives of older generations that betting married and having kids should be their goal. This social conditioning makes a serious discussion of the morality of abortion very difficult to even get started. If girls are already socialized to think of themselves as wives and mothers, rather than persons in their own right, then they are likely to believe that becoming their own persons involves hurting other people, selling themselves short, acting against their nature, or the like. The conversation is biased before it ever begins. Harrison goes on to comment,

> Many religious ethicists, moral theologians and moral philosophers, mostly male, have discussed the morality of abortion, or of social policy related to abortion without reference to contemporary scholarly evidence that the devaluation of women is deeply embedded in western culture and constitutes an unacceptable moral heritage that requires correction.[60]

Until this bias is acknowledged and purged, the abortion conversation will proceed in a confused, dishonest, and manipulative way, ultimately to the benefit of men and to the detriment of women.

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[59] Ibid., 128.
[60] Ibid.,6.

For Harrison, sexism is the elephant in the room that affects every aspect of the abortion debate. Harrison revisits sexist interpretations of biblical and theological works and reinterprets them or reconsiders their significance in light of feminist critical thought, including feminist biblical criticism. Those who have held the place of authority in such discussions for so long, mainly white males, must be invited to acknowledge the prejudice embedded in much of the discussion and come back to the table with a desire to give equal and fair time to female voices that have been largely ignored or silenced. It is noteworthy that even the "Letter to the Bishops" acknowledges feminist voices. It does not agree with them, but it realizes that if the Church is to have any credibility in the modern world, it will have to at least consider the possibility that some of its teachings about women are open to interpretations that lead to the denial of women's full humanity.[61]

In Harrison's view the anti-abortionist claim to be concerned for the vulnerable is suspect because it does not take into full account the vulnerable nature of both parties involved. The woman seems to be perpetually lost in the conversation, her autonomy disregarded. Rosemary Ruether also shares this suspicion of the Christian church's claim to be most concerned about protecting the vulnerable. She argues that those who claim a pro-life view of abortion often do not continue this fervor after the birth of the much-defended fetus: "That the essential issue in the abortion issue is control over women becomes evident when we see that the anti-abortion movement not only does not support pro-life issues after birth but also consistently opposes contraception and sex education

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[61]Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, " 14. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html.

for youth."[62] It would seem that a deep concern to protect the most vulnerable of human lives would require a serious financial and social investment in the provision of adequate healthcare, daycare, early childhood education, and the like. It would require shared investment in a healthcare system that successfully inoculates all children, not only in the U.S., but around the world, to protect them from life-threatening diseases. In fact there is much common ground here, concerning the protection of the vulnerable, and yet much to be discussed to make sure that all parties are being morally consistent.

Ruether and Harrison are hesitant to take the pro-life claim to protection of the vulnerable at face value because of what they both see as an inconsistent ethic. In fact, many members of the pro-life movement are opposed to a universal health care system that keeps in place a significant safety net for the most vulnerable of Americans, including people who for diverse reasons are unable to work, or unable to work as much as other people do.[63] The lack of trust in the sincerity of each other's motivations tends to deepen the polarization between the sides.

A significant and deep difference remains, even among those who believe in protecting the most vulnerable members of human society from neglect and abuse. Scholars such as Harrison and Ruether simply do not value embryonic and fetal life as much as already-born life. They regard the embryo or fetus as a potential person, and they ascribe it significant moral value, but they regard women as actual persons, by virtue

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[62] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Contemporary Roman Catholicism: Crises and Challenges* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1987), 42.
[63]Gallup Poll, "Americans Still Sharply Divided on Healthcare Reform" (Sept. 2009) http://www.gallup.com/poll/122822/americans-sharply-divided-healthcare-reform.aspx

of their distinctively human capabilities, and thus they ascribe women more value.[64] They do have to answer to worries about discrimination due to forms of incapacity: if moral value is based on capacity, there are many adult humans who appear to fall short of the conditions of personhood. At the same time, persons on the other side of the abortion divide need to answer to the fact that most people, if they could save only one person in a situation of moral conflict, would choose to save a full-grown woman over a very early fetus that has no brain and no capacity to experience pain. The situation becomes more ambiguous with second-trimester fetuses and even more ambiguous with third-trimester fetuses, but the vast majority of abortions occur in the first trimester of pregnancy. There are conflicting views in the medical community about what fetuses can and cannot experience at various stages of development, but most pro-life advocates believe that during the first trimester, there is a substantial moral difference between a fetus and a woman.

The middle or mediating position shares many concerns about valuing or respecting life, protecting vulnerable persons, and insuring justice and equal opportunities for women. It seeks to uphold these values by working within current social structures that are acknowledged to be unjust, but also very difficult to change. Many members of the mediating camp seek to improve the conditions of human life for all, and they do envision structural changes, such as the establishment of universal health care; yet they also tend to be realistic about the fact that more improvements can probably be made by dealing with particular problems and seeking compromise among various parties, rather

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[64] Beverly W Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Towards a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 214.

than focusing on bringing about radical structural change aimed at the creation of an ideal society.

Cahill and those who share her position believe that it is unproductive to set the protection of human life or the promotion of social justice for women as moral absolutes. Each of these are moral principles that make a claim on us, but what they require in a given situation is open, to some degree, to interpretation, and sometimes these principles come into conflict with each other, and one or both must be compromised. Cahill makes the interesting claim that women ought to think twice about what justice for women really means. They ought to think carefully before insisting that they have and ought to have complete autonomy over their reproductive choices—that they ought to be allowed to make their own decisions and accept the consequences of those decisions for themselves. The problem with this view is that it effectively forces women to function as atomistic individuals, rather than the relational beings they are. It gives them the power to choose abortion, but it gives them no social support if something goes wrong with the abortion. And if they choose to have a baby, it gives them no support in birthing it and nurturing it. Cahill argues that leaving women on their own is not the work of social justice. It is rather a form of social abandonment. The most pro-woman approach to this matter, in her view, is one that provides social support for all of the reasonable choices a woman might make. In this way, Cahill acknowledges that women are relational beings, but without arguing that they are and ought to think of themselves as complementary to men by nature. She prioritizes justice for women, but without supposing that this lets the rest of the community off the hook in helping to provide women and their possible children with the support they need for life and well-being.

The term social justice has many connotations, depending on the context. For our purposes social justice requires the fair distribution of benefits and burdens in society. It requires not placing a huge burden on persons who are least able to bear it. Social justice demands that persons in positions of power and with more economic means than others do what they can to assist others in at least getting on the playing field, in having an opportunity to realize their human capabilities. For Cahill and those who support her views, it is not enough to say what should be done, but also necessary to provide practical solutions and to do what one can to make those remedies a reality. If even a portion of the energy that currently goes into outlawing or criminalizing abortion were to go into providing affordable healthcare for women and children, there would be much less need for abortion and fewer abortions in fact.

Cahill's approach implicitly calls attention to the need for the whole of our society to contribute what we can to the prevention of unwanted pregnancies. It is unfortunate that she does not elaborate on this issue. As a Catholic theologian at a Catholic university, she has certain responsibilities not to speak against established Catholic teachings in a way that could undermine respect for the Church among the faithful. This may be part of the reason why she does not emphasize the importance of artificial birth control. But her reluctance to argue for the promotion of fair and easy access to birth control will cause some loss of credibility with pro-choice women, such as Harrison.

## STEPPING INTO THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION PROJECT MODEL

Having briefly laid out what convictions I see present in the arguments of each of these scholars, I now turn my attention to placing these authors and their concerns within the conversation model introduced by the PCP. In doing so, the hope is to offer readers, whether they are pro-life, pro-choice or hold a middle-ground position, the opportunity to appreciate further that, like them, their fellow humans have some legitimate concerns that deserve consideration. My hope is to illustrate to readers who hold competing views that while there are significant differences in these views, there is rational thought and human concern behind each of the views. Neither we nor our fellow human beings ought to be presumed irrational or malicious agents who seek to harm others, but rather persons with legitimate concerns for humanity and its continuing evolution in this world.

The PCP focuses on doing "work that results in shifts, not shifts in people's deeply held beliefs, but in the way they perceive those who hold different views and the way they choose to interact with those who stand on the opposite side of political fault lines."[65] The PCP model seeks to promote calm, civil discussion about the deeply held beliefs of all parties. It seeks to ensure that no one who participates in the conversation is governed by a fear of attack or disparagement, but rather by a growing trust and respect for each other's humanity. By fostering curiosity, connection, and the compassionate understanding of differences, the PCP gives hope that an often contentious conversation can be made less so. Again, the PCP does not seek to shift people's core beliefs and

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[65] Public Conversations Project, "Public Conversations Project: History." http://www.publicconversations.org/who/history.

commitments around the issues that have divided them,[66] but to create a neutral field for discussion, which allows all parties to listen to and acknowledge the other's point of view.

Visualize a scenario in which each of the three main scholars discussed , Noonan, Harrison and Cahill, are now brought together in a relaxed atmosphere devoid of the usual rhetoric and drama that encircles the abortion debate. Each is asked to introduce himself or herself and tell a short story about how he or she first got involved in the abortion debate. The mediator would make it clear from the start that what is said in the room stays in the room, so that no one has to worry about outside parties mistaking an interest in conversation with an interest in political capitulation. The mediator would also clarify that the duty of the two persons who are not speaking is to listen and try to hear what the person who is speaking is saying, so that when asked to respond to the concerns of the speaker the others are able to remain focused on what has actually been said, rather than on what they expected they would hear. I think in this sort of setting, where outside pressures and possible political repercussions are minimized as much as possible, it could be possible to have genuine discussions about the morality of abortion and why the issue has the ability to excite so many intense passions.

Let's begin with one of Noonan's concerns, that of the sanctity of human life. As discussed earlier, Noonan and others who share his view believe humanity is created in the image of God. *Genetic* humanity is created in the image of God. Any being with a human genetic code is deserving of automatic and almost limitless respect. He would likely say that he got interested in the issue of abortion because he saw it as a test case for

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[66] Ibid.

an adequate understanding of respect for persons: If we cannot respect fetuses as persons, then all of us are at risk, for none of us can be regarded as having a personhood that is beyond suspicion. Noonan would appeal to both Harrison and Cahill with the argument that by attempting to distinguish the moral value of fetuses from that of babies, with reference to the lack of development in fetuses, they are undermining the foundation of respect for persons: we cannot look at the community of genetic humans and begin to draw lines, insisting that some humans count morally and some do not. We have to insist that they all count, and they count equally.

For Noonan, it is gravely dangerous to draw lines between genetically human entities, claiming that some are persons and some are not, some are worthy of full moral respect and some are not. He worries that drawing any such lines will make it easier to draw other, similar lines in the future, leading to a serious risk of discrimination. Part of the worry is that persons will be judged, morally, for lacking certain capacities; part of the worry is that person will be judged for not contributing much to society; and part of the worry is that persons will be judged for being too dependent on others, unable to take care of themselves as well as others. This leaves persons with serious incapacities and dependencies on others in a very vulnerable position, at risk of being judged expendable or too big of a burden.

Those persons who cannot care for themselves, or need more care than others, allow persons who are more self-sufficient the chance to demonstrate compassion. In this respect those who are most needful of care play a very important social role. They keep the rest of the community humane. Persons who are unable to make the most obvious sorts of contributions to society, such as economic contributions through work, also give

the rest of the community the chance to affirm that life is not just about working and accumulating, but it is about enjoying a variety of human experiences, including experiences of helping and being helped. Noonan's concern for the dignity and sanctity of human life reflects a worry that people will succumb to utilitarian notions of humanity if they are not challenged to see humans as priceless, no matter what they have contributed or not contributed, and no matter how dependent they are on other members of society.

Harrison might be willing to begin the conversation with the comment that she, too, is concerned to undermine utilitarian assessments of human value. She, too, has an interest in making sure that all persons are recognized as having a dignity that ought not to be violated. Yet she would also ask that the group think about what the ground of human dignity is. In her view, it cannot simply be the possession of a human genetic code. It has to be the possession of at least certain human capacities. Yet she might be willing to acknowledge the danger of this approach, that it seems to put at risk even full-grown persons who happen to be, say, comatose or severely mentally handicapped. Harrison would perhaps clarify that she does not so much want to undermine the moral status of human fetuses as she wants to assert women's moral equality with men. Her view is that the latter is such a serious need in our society and around the world that it must take precedence over extending full moral status to beings that do not yet have brains or the capacity for sentience.[67] She would suggest that, were women to be accepted as full moral equals to men, then the conversation would probably shift dramatically. Then there would be much more interest in discussing what both women

[67] Beverly W Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Towards a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 199.

and men owe to developing human fetuses. At this point, however, to offer to fetuses what the women who carry them have spent years trying to earn and have still not fully gained is to injure women deeply; it is to devalue their humanity.

Cahill would likely speak up at this point to agree with Harrison. She would agree that seeking justice for women and already-existing children in a culture that is still deeply sexist has to be a top priority, and it is perhaps more a priority than bringing every fertilized egg to term. She would explain that promoting women's equality with men and promoting reproductive responsibility go hand in hand. Perhaps Cahill would feel free, given the conditions of confidentiality, to say that she really does believe it is important to provide women with access to safe and affordable birth control so that there are fewer unwanted fetuses conceived. This is the only way that women can effectively compete with men in a variety of careers they might choose to pursue. In addition, it is the only way to protect poor women who are otherwise subject to unfair social burdens. Yet she would also urge that people need to think more deeply about human sexuality and the sorts of commitments that ought to be present with sexual activity, for she does not want to see sex being used simply for recreation.[68]

Cahill would also say that genuine concern for women, and a real commitment to women's freedom, requires making sure that women, including poor women and women who have been abandoned by the biological fathers of their offspring, can choose to bring their pregnancies to term if they want, and can keep and raise their children if they want. It is up to society as a whole to make this a viable possibility. Arguments about dignity

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[68] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Abortion, Sex and Gender: The Church's Public Voice." *America* 168, no. 18 (05/22, 1993), 9-10.

and sanctity ring false and feel manipulative when they are not combined with an obvious concern to empower women to make the best of a very difficult situation.

This would leave an opening for Harrison to voice one of her own deeply held concerns, namely, the way in which current social structures deny women the ability to make decisions for themselves, instead evoking some ancient standards that restricted their range of choices. Women are cast in a certain role from which they cannot break free without being deemed sinful or malicious. The idea that a woman who has lived and experienced so much of life ought to have little or no say in how that life can go forward is off-putting to many of those who share Harrison's view. Harrison would probably be moved by Cahill to agree that they should work together to make abortion unnecessary, and they should work for the establishment of healthcare protections that make it possible for women who want to have babies to have them, in light of a concern for environmental sustainability. Yet she would want to go deeper to discuss the way girls are raised in this country and they ways in which they are set up to make mistakes for which they will be punished.

Noonan would agree with the importance of limiting human births, but would probably not be willing to bend on the question of artificial birth control, for too many other Church teachings are tied up with that prohibition.

The necessity to break the mold of man as the original and woman as secondary or contingent is a powerful driving force for Harrison. Women need to be viewed as fully capable rational beings in their own right who have the authority to make decisions concerning their own moral lives. By society, and men specifically, attempting to dictate when women become pregnant and how they should deal with an unplanned pregnancy,

this authority is usurped. Noonan, I believe, would counter that the desire is not to strip women of their free will or rational moral capacity but to offer them proper moral guidance. The goal is to empower women to be good, responsible moral agents. Noonan might suggest that it is because of the rational moral capabilities of women that they should be able to see why acts such as abortion are morally wrong. He would admit that women have a legitimate interest in being happy, and it is best if they can exercise some control over their reproductive capabilities, by choosing to avoid sexual relations during times of fertility. But he would say that a desire to be happy or a desire to avoid difficulty or struggle could never count as a sufficient reason to destroy another, innocent person.

Perhaps this group of people would get closer to the heart of the debate and talk about why it is that, for some people, quality of life is more important than the mere continuation of life itself. Honesty would require some reflection on the fact that most Americans, including most American men, do spend their resources enhancing their own quality of life while allowing other persons who are without resources simply to die. Again, part of the challenge is to strive toward moral consistency.

Cahill would be willing to at least entertain quality of life considerations. She would ask Noonan in particular to spend some time thinking seriously and with compassion about the actual lives of diverse women, and the severe difficulties they face in not being able to control their reproductive capacities. She might ask him to consider specific instances of rape and incest, and more subtle cases in which women do not feel empowered (partly because of their socialization) to resist the constant sexual advances

of their husbands, even when neither they nor their husbands are prepared to have another child.

Harrison would agree and ask Noonan to acknowledge that it is only by taking into account what women are actually going through in their lives that any real understanding of the problem of abortion can be reached, and any solutions can be offered that will be taken seriously by women. Noonan might be willing to extend his compassion in this direction. He would also ask, however, that Cahill and Harrison spend the same amount of time looking at pictures of developing fetuses, viewing sonograms, and listening to women who have already established relationships to their fetuses after only a few weeks gestation. He would ask that the potentiality inherent in the developing fetus be imagined with an open mind and an open heart. Abortion is the ending of something precious and irreplaceable. No one should, by shifting all attention to women's lives, seek to cover over this reality.

Evidenced by some of his writings on slavery mentioned earlier, Noonan might indeed be willing to consider that a more accurate picture of women's lives is needed by anyone who hopes to pronounce on the morality of their actions. A more compassionate approach is needed. While the moral law is not man-made in Noonan's view, it does have to be applied with some sensitivity to the particular context in which humans find themselves. It cannot be applied by formula and without attention to the persons involved. The hope would be that by being in a room with women who have faced abortion decisions or know other women who have faced such decisions Noonan and those who share his view might begin to see the issue not as something abstract, but as something that has a human face, often reflecting pain, fear, and worry.

Shifting the conversation slightly, Cahill might ask Harrison some pointed questions about what goes into making a good decision about an unwanted pregnancy. Harrison would reveal that she is not far from Cahill in thinking that women should take into account the concerns of others when it comes to making such a decision. Although she thinks that no woman should be pressured to value her fetus more than her own chosen future, this does not mean that she thinks women should give no consideration to their fetuses or to other people who might wish to raise their fetuses. I see Harrison agreeing with Cahill about the ways in which certain other factors must be considered when the choice of abortion is contemplated. In her article, "Theology and the Morality of Procreative Choice," Harrison states, "To claim that we have a moral right to procreative choice does not mean we believe women can exercise that right free from all moral claims from the community."[69] She would concur that very little of what people do is done without having an effect on others. Even with respect to an abortion decision, undergoing this procedure is likely to affect not only the woman, but also the people with whom she shares her life. The interdependence of persons and the complex consequences of our moral acts ought to be taken into careful consideration when making moral choices.

Speaking of interdependence and the complex effects of our choices, Noonan would perhaps like to explain to Harrison and Cahill that the feminist critique of what has for a long time been considered the traditional family is something that cannot be ignored or dismissed by many people who have pro-life commitments. Noonan speaks for a vast number of conservative moralists when he promotes the notion of a family made up of a

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[69] Beverly W. Harrison and Carol Robb, "Theology and Morality of Procreative Choice." In *Making the Connections* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 130.

man, woman and their offspring, with each having a specific role to be played within that structure. There is a need to recognize that a decision for abortion not only destabilizes the traditional structure of a family by denying offspring membership in that family, but it also undermines the authority often believed to be that of the males in choices of what is best for the family. To many people, such thoughts seem dated and indefensible, but to other people who hold strong religious convictions along these lines, such a belief is a large part of their lives. If respect is to be extended on all sides of the argument, then even views that some people find antiquated must be given air. They must not be dismissed out of hand, especially when millions of women uphold them and ask other women to respect their differences as women.

Noonan would point out that when a woman chooses abortion it is not just her offspring she is destroying; she is also injuring her spouse and the family as a kind of bulwark of civilization. The notion of man as the head of the household, which many people take to be divinely instituted, is not easily overcome. Ridiculing it or seeking to shame the people who think this way will not permit the kind of respect that makes it possible for diverse people to live together in relative peace.

Harrison would explain that it is difficult for her to respect individual women's decisions to allow themselves to be subordinate to the men in their lives. The decision to be submissive is not simply a personal decision. It is a decision that upholds a social structure that has done a lot of damage to women. Yet in the end she may be willing to accept that there are some very intelligent and strong women who choose to uphold the traditional family form, and respect for women in all of their diversity requires that Harrison not immediately dismiss their life choices. She will have to ask them, however,

to show the same regard for other women who do not want to live within the constraints of a forced patriarchy.

Cahill would join Harrison in recognizing that the contemporary family has taken on a multiplicity of forms and meanings. In acknowledging this, it is important to figure out ways to work within the current reality, supporting women as much as possible in the very different sorts of choices they make to live with others. Cahill would ask Noonan to focus less on the ideal family, how it must be upheld as the best relational context for all women, and focus more on learning about and being able to see some good in other family forms that may not be ideal, in his understanding, but do allow for people to nurture and enrich the lives of others in unique and personal ways. If a woman was able to receive support from an "unorthodox" family that caused her to reconsider abortion couldn't it be justified if the end result was that she chose to continue the pregnancy?

Trying to meet Noonan part-way, I think Cahill would suggest that, even if the family structure Noonan touts is somewhat dated and not, in fact, ideal for women, it is true that families of some kind—genuinely loving and supportive families—are the best contexts in which to raise children, for children require enormous energy and attention, and it is very difficult for people to provide this without being part of an extended network of care. In addition, supportive families are the best contexts to support the growth of women. Whatever choices she makes, she will make partly by virtue of the fact that certain other people have provided her with the support to get to the point of having a choice. Though the family structure Noonan prizes might not be as palatable as other options, for Cahill and for Harrison, the idea behind it—that a support system is valuable in making big decisions about procreation—cannot reasonably be denied.

It seems that all parties to the conversation would agree that contemporary American society is still characterized, to some extent, by patriarchy. That patriarchy is real, and it really affects the well-being of women and men, is not in dispute, even among those on the pro-life side of the debate. The effect patriarchy has, though, seems to be interpreted very differently by different people. For instance, many people continue to see patriarchy as the best available form of social order, and best not only for men but also for women. Many women continue to see things this way. Patriarchy appears to them to provide a security that allows them to feel safe, and it provides structure to the human impulse to create. It has allowed for the creation of much that is good in the world. For persons who hold this view, to focus on only the negative aspects of patriarchy is to deny the good that has been accomplished because of it. Harrison might note that the system has wrought some good, such as the ability to provide social stability, but she would question: at what cost? At the cost of women being relegated to a secondary status that does not allow them to explore what is really possible for them. She would try to persuade Noonan to consider that ideas about the family and about human relationships must be adjusted to reflect the changing landscape of human life.

Noonan might reply to her concerns by reiterating his belief that the Bible is for him an important source of wisdom. The Bible is divinely inspired and therefore not subject to human standards of fluidity or the desire to make adjustments. For Noonan, acknowledging that the patriarchal system has some disadvantages for women would not, by itself, justify overturning it. It would, however, require separating what is sinful in patriarchy from what is truly consonant with the will of God. He might suggest that the best of patriarchy gives women a chance to take on roles that allow them truly to thrive; it

keeps them from being tempted to do things that they are not, in fact well-suited to do, and it thus assists them in finding happiness. Patriarchy is not something meant to demean women, but rather something that nudges them to find what is best for them while contributing to a social order that is ultimately more important than their individual wants or desires. By having each individual take on a specific function it creates an atmosphere in which balance is maintained and chaos is avoided.

Recognizing that patriarchy has shaped the context of the abortion debate, Harrison and Cahill would ask that Noonan take this dynamic more seriously. They would be pleased if Noonan were to admit that sinful distortions of the ideal patriarchy have infected men and women's relationships, and they have infected people's ways of understanding what is possible and good for women. Recalling Noonan's reflections on slavery, they would discuss the fact that there have been times in the past when beliefs about certain humans being superior to other humans were called into question and found to be misguided. The would suggest that something similar could happen with respect to patriarchal views of men and their relationships to women. If this is possible, it ought to be pondered. The very act of pondering a shift in understandings of women and women's roles in society has the power to bring a deeper awareness of diversity among women and the importance of considering women's differences.

Harrison and Cahill would suggest that it is possible to reevaluate the patriarchal norm without upending everything else one reads in the Bible. Cahill in particular would look to Biblical teachings to emphasize the importance of insuring justice for all persons, especially those who have been most injured by disordered social structures. She would call attention to Catholic social teachings. Many of these teachings uphold the moral

necessity of providing for women the social conditions necessary to insure their full participation in society, and their access to the social benefits, both spiritual and material, that make up the common good.[70] It is in this way that all three of our authors could find significant common ground: they could commit themselves to seeking a more just and humane society for women and for the children they raise (should they choose to raise children).

By referencing the Catholic social teachings, Cahill may bring people into the discussion who were previously reluctant to take part. She invites people to do what they can, in their daily lives, "to create conditions for the marginalized voices to be heard, to defend the defenseless, and to assess lifestyles, policies and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor and oppressed."[71] The social teachings allow persons who are most interested in protecting the vulnerable to think broadly about what this requires, not simply in general but from them personally. It challenges people to think not only about what they rightfully ask of women who face unwanted pregnancies, but also about what these women rightfully ask of them, such as providing financial support for them to raise the children they birth. Showing empathy for and being willing to make one's own sacrifices on behalf of both fetuses and women leads to more open conversation that is characterized by less suspicion and cynicism.

With respect to the tradition's teaching on social responsibility, Cahill envisions that the systems and structures that have for so long left many women feeling powerless and unsupported can be reconfigured, one decision at a time. The church can find a way

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[70] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Abortion, Sex and Gender: The Church's Public Voice." *America* 168, no. 18 (05/22, 1993),9.
[71] "Center for Social Concern," http://socialconcerns.nd.edu/

to balance the call for the protection and promotion of life with the call to honor women and support their full development as persons, with greater openness to rethinking what women are really like. The Catholic understanding is that the right to life includes a right to the basic goods that are necessary for life, such as adequate food, shelter, and work. Returning to the "Letter to the Bishops," it is worth noting that the Congregation suggests that women may actually play a special role in making sure that these goods are provided to others through well-wrought social and political means: "…women should be present in the world of work and in the organization of society, and…women should have access to positions of responsibility which allow them to inspire the policies of nations and to promote innovative solutions to economic and social problems."[72] Humans are by nature social creatures, and they live and die within the context of interdependent relationships. In the end, all of our authors would agree that it behooves everyone, inside and outside the Christian tradition, to create social structures that make it possible for the most important human needs to be met, and to be met reliably and consistently.

Harrison might provide an example of something relatively concrete that could be done to improve the lives of women and also lessen the need for abortion. She would note that women who do the same work as a man are still compensated less for that work. Yet this lack of financial stability leads many women to be concerned they will be unable to provide for a future child. Indeed, it leads many of them to be unable to provide for the children they actually have. The hope would be that Noonan would want to do

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[72] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, "13. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html.

something tangible to improve the lives of women so that they are in a much better financial position to handle surprise pregnancies, should they occur. The hope would also be that he would acknowledge the very real difficulties, in situations of poverty, of urging women to bring their fetuses to term. Is it better that a woman should bring a child into poverty and instability than delay her parenting until she is able to provide for herself and her offspring? If so, what social structures could be put in place immediately to make sure that she and her child have their basic needs met? I think these questions might at least give Noonan and his fellow pro-life advocates pause to think. Women's plight within the greater society must be discussed realistically and with a genuineness that makes the conversation to follow less about lips service and more about honest dialogue about how to make the situation better.

At some point Harrison would likely come back to a central concern of hers. She would say that if those in the pro-life camp are indeed serious about finding a practical solution to the problem of abortion, they would do well to think about the ways in which their social practices shelter young women and do not encourage them to take full responsibility for their sexuality. It is not enough, in this day and age, simply to tell girls they must remain virgins until they are married. One has to give them the information they need to make intelligent decisions about their sexuality before they find themselves in a situation where a choice is necessary. This ties into the idea of justice in that, without the proper information being given to them, and without being encouraged to use that information to shape their own futures, girls are left at a disadvantage. They become trapped in a cycle from which it is difficult to break free. There is a need for conversation in society and in families that holds nothing back and seeks to enrich and

prepare everyone for the challenges of life, so that they can avoid some of the worst situations, and deal with such situations responsibly when they nevertheless arise.

The PCP model of open and honest dialogue, aimed at listening and speaking the truth from one's own background and experience, can be effective in helping people better understand why those who stand across from them on matters of tremendous social controversy might hold the views they do. By allowing each person or group to voice the concerns that are driving their words and actions, and by asking others to consider the possibility that these are genuine concerns, not mere covers for nefarious motives, it becomes possible to build a little trust. It becomes possible to stop demonizing the other and caricaturing his or her views. It may even be possible to find some common cause for fashioning a better world in which everyone does a little better. The conversation can become less about who is right or wrong and more about why someone who does not share my view might feel that way. The model allows people who might normally be unable to sit down together to come to the table as persons with notable commonalities and the ability to view each other, not as evil beings who seek to destroy them and their way of life, but as persons with genuine concerns.

# CONCLUSION

The abortion debate has raged for decades and will likely continue for decades to come. Many people who subscribe to pro-life, pro-choice, and middle-ground positions are likely to remain staunch in their views of what is moral when it comes to abortion. Yet if each person could come to view his or her opponents as persons with equal vested interests in the good of their community I believe that less acrimonious discussions of the abortion issue could take place, to the benefit of all.

Noonan, Harrison and Cahill all make good cases for their own positions, using the rhetorical tools expected in a vigorous debate. But when we strip away excesses of rhetoric, grandstanding, and the drive to focus on political objectives over the search for understanding, we find at the heart of the debate diverse persons who are attempting to express a vision they have for their lives and for the world in which they live—a vision that includes protecting persons from unjust harm, respecting their fundamental dignity, and treating them fairly. By following the PCP model and placing Noonan, Harrison, and Cahill in a conversation about deeper convictions and concerns, we can glimpse a way to hold difficult conversations that allows all of us to feel heard and respected.

Why is this sort of discussion necessary? The need for such discussion is evidenced by the usual fierceness and offensiveness of the debate. As a topic, abortion has proven to be disturbingly divisive. Few of the parties who are involved in the conversation seem to be willing to concede much ground to others. In this refusal, there are many lost opportunities to hear and ponder other vantage points. The lack of effort to understand the other side leads to stifled, angry conversations and it deprives both groups of the chance to see new and different ways to view the issue.

By closing oneself off from any position but the one favored, one falls into extremist and absolutist views. If left unchecked, these views become the foundation, not for a just and peaceful community, but for a community that is fraught with animosity and violence. It is impossible to realize an ideal society by forcing the ideal on millions of people who see it as anything but ideal; yet it is possible to make progress toward certain shared goals by learning to engage in civil dialogue.

Each of the authors we have examined would like to have the world look a certain way. In fact, most people in American society have somewhat different ideals of how things should be, now and in the future. The only likely way to improve the quality of life for everyone is to accept that we hold a mix of ideals. We need to look for and find common ground, while continuing to press each other for truthfulness and a consistency in our differing moral beliefs. We are members of a community, who owe something to each other, and all of us have an interest in the maintenance of social order, but we are also individuals with our own circumstances to deal with. Everyone wants and needs some space to pursue his or her own life goals without being overly constrained by social ideals with which he or she simply does not agree.

The reality of the world as it stands is the context in which the conversation on abortion must take place. The fact that many women find themselves afflicted with an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy, and the fact that this situation has complex causes for which all of us have some responsibility, needs to be taken into account. Our problems and the sources of our problems need to be discussed sincerely and non-defensively, and solutions need to be sought in which each of us plays some role. Each of us must be willing to make some concessions and sacrifices.

The sort of conversation that the PCP model fosters offers the opportunity for pro-life and pro-choice advocates to each have their convictions heard. The model offers an atmosphere in which all sides can converse about their deeply held convictions without fear of rude dismissal, venomous retort, or backlash. By creating a neutral ground where political associations and specific political agendas are left at the door, the PCP model sets aside some of the major roadblocks to discussion about such notoriously difficult issues. It asks that persons speak from their own personal experiences with the goal of both helping others to understand their view and clarify for themselves just why they believe as they do.

Of course, most of our public conversations have tremendous political implications, and it is very difficult to set one's agendas aside. In addition, it is potentially politically disastrous to appear too conciliatory toward one's opponents. Yet there are ways in which spaces of dialogue can be set up to allow for exchanges that are less political and more interpersonal. Churches and classrooms and particular websites and blogs, for example, could guide conversations that are self-consciously concerned with asking people to take certain political risks in order to move serious conversation on the abortion issue forward.

The question of whether such a conversation would have any actual influence on the abortion debate is answered poignantly by the PCP. As noted previously, this sort of conversation will not likely change anyone's core beliefs about the issue, but it could create a "shift in in the way they perceived those who held different views and the way

they chose to interact with those who stood on the opposite side of political fault lines."[73] So the change would come not in the form of some grand epiphany that the other side is right, but instead it would come as a gradual modification in attitude towards those who share opposing views. It would not entail the decline of political struggle, for in the end each side does have goals for which it is willing to fight. But there is a hope that the fight could become a little more humane, a little less prone to inspire hatred and violence.

The PCP found success in creating an atmosphere in which those on both sides of this issue were able to feel as though their views were being appreciated and respected. To respect the views of others is not necessarily to agree with them. It is to realize that these are the views of a thoughtful person who has reasons for thinking the way he or she thinks—reasons that cannot simply be dismissed out of hand. By allowing each person with specific commitments to voice what truly mattered to her, the conversation turned from talk about rights and conflicts of rights to the deeply embedded values each person held. Values were uncovered that helped the parties to acknowledge each other's good intentions and begin to trust each other as persons. No longer did they perceive their opponents as nameless, faceless entities that could easily be demeaned and dismissed. Now they perceived each other as human beings with many of their same desires, fears, and concerns. The conversation changed because they began seeing in each other a reflection of their own humanity. As noted earlier, this shift did have an effect on the way in which various participants re-entered the political arena and talked about their opponents in that arena.

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[73] Public Conversations Project, "Public Conversations Project: History." http://www.publicconversations.org/who/history.

I believe that the authors I have chosen, if they were all still alive, could be capable of this sort of dialogue. I have shown how such a dialogue might proceed. Noonan and Harrison exemplify some of what is most difficult about this debate, but it is possible that each of them would be willing to view the other not as an enemy to be vanquished but as a fellow human being who is seeking, like them, to build a world in which human life and the goods of life are honored and their broad enjoyment is promoted, especially among those who have historically been kept from this enjoyment.

Will the discussion really transfer to the political arena? If there are people of goodwill, who sincerely want what is best and not simply to have their own way, then I believe conversations about strongly held moral conviction can go a long way toward bridging the gaps that have been created by this debate. Again, it will not keep people from fighting for the power they need to protect what is most important to them. But it may make it more difficult for them to destroy each other while trying to build the good society.

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