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**Abortion as tragic, legal, and good**

*The U.S. House of Representatives voted last week to eliminate federal funding for Planned Parenthood, which provides abortions, along with a variety of health care services for women. The Virginia General Assembly last week approved legislation that requires abortion clinics to be regulated as hospitals, and providers say the stricter regulations will force many of them out of business. Both measures were pushed by anti-abortion activists. Should personal and religious views be allowed to prevent women from having access to a legal medical procedure?*  
  
Every abortion is a human tragedy, a deliverance from delivering a baby, and a societal and environmental relief. Such a mix of values and motives hurls this issue to the bottom of a list of probably productive subjects for private and public debate. But, as your question implies, debate is unavoidable.

"Access to a legal medical procedure" may be impeded by legal counter-action.  
Ideally, there should be no other obstacles. All other efforts to impose obstacles are anti-legal - by definition, criminal. The "personal" or "religious" reasons for such criminal behavior are irrelevant to its criminality. But neither of last week's legislative actions to impede access to abortion was criminal: both qualify as "legal counter-action."  
  
That was easy. Now comes the hard part, weighing the three affirmations of my first sentence:  
1  
"Every abortion is a human tragedy."  
Every unwanted pregnancy is tragic, and threatens to become an even more tragic unwanted birth, which would be tragic for all (mother, father, child, society).  
Natural, moral, and religious values are inherently pro-birth, so the pro-death (i.e., abortion) position carries the heavy weight of proving that the counter-values are (in the particular case or situation) greater.

While the Bible doesn't mention abortion, the earliest Christian reference to it - Didache 2.2 - nails it as "murder" (in the same sentence in which "You shall not murder" is quoted from the Ten Commandments"); 5.2 ("murderers of children" by abortion and by infanticide). Or Barnabas 19.5 may be the earliest reference. All these references use the same Greek word, the regular word for "murder."

Those early Christians so valued human life that each morning they would go to the town dump to rescue unwanted newborns who had been "exposed" during the night. I honor their action, as did increasing numbers of their neighbors.

2  
"Every abortion is a deliverance from delivering a baby."

Being male, I could never have known the relief from being delivered of an unwanted growth threatening to emerge from my body as a human being I would have responsibility for. The closest I could come would be deliverance from an unwanted growth which, when removed, I would have no responsibility for - namely, a cancer.  
How would I feel about people dedicated to obstructing my deliverance from cancer, my access to cancer surgery?

To deny a women access to medically competent deliverance from the unwanted fetal growth within her is, in my opinion, a gross violation of human freedom and justice: I am pro-choice.

3  
"Every abortion is a societal and environmental relief."

Our species is so fertile, and so intellectually superior to our fellow-creatures, that we not only survived the food-chain but came to dominate it: as a human population-control factor, the food-chain has virtually ceased to exist except for microorganisms eating us (and control of them is increasing apace). Death by hunger, disease, war, and even aging has in modern times steadily lost population-control power. And the human masses are rapidly decreasing the quality of the biosphere by pollution, resources-exhaustion (potable water, productive soils, rare minerals, fossil "fuels"), desertification and flooding (both, by deforestation and global warming). / This inadequately controlled human fertility is responsible also for a steady decrease in the quality of societies as millions maintain a bare existence in slums around cities and governance increases in complexity and difficulty.

Yes, in a few areas the resident populations are decreasing by the education of women (the strongest force), birth control, abortion, and lessening interest in marriage and parenthood. And the opposite demographic in the Arab world, a population explosion, is now undermining strong-man and theocratic governments. Global generalizations need qualifying. But I hold with the generalization that uncontrolled human fertility is bad news both for the biosphere and for human society, and that abortion - in providing some relief for stressed humanity & our natural home - is good news.  
  
I reject the argument that abortion decreases respect for human life. Circumstances alter cases, and what was true in early Christian times is now reversed. When Japan's empire ("the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere") collapsed, forcing the Japanese back onto their islands, for some few years the number of abortions exceeded the number of births, and each birth was celebrated as a near-miracle. The value, the preciousness of each human life, rose. China? A few Sundays ago, six Chinese students (from our local university) visited our church and, in the youth meeting after worship, were eager to hold the youth pastor's baby: China's law of one child per couple makes each baby seem a precious near- miracle.  
  
Finally, I must object to the myopia of looking only at the fetus when considering "respect for human life." My wife and I avoided Catholic hospitals for the birthing of our children because of their then-tendency to respect the mother's life less than the baby's - a preference without biblical basis. Equally arbitrary, in the case of the death penalty, is the preference in "image of God" respect for the murderer more than for the murdered - the reverse of Genesis 9.6, which says the murderer should be executed for killing a creature whom God made "in his own image" (an idea that first occurs, in history, eight chapters earlier in the same Bible book). / In abortion, capital punishment, or any other multi-faceted societal issue, a right judgment in decision-making requires attention to all the facts and factors with all the ways of knowing God has given us - emotional, esthetic, moral, religious, rational. "New occasions teach new duties," and old attitudes from old duties can be hindrances to our perceiving and performing our new duties. Anti-abortion activists, with their single-issue politics, idolatrously overvalue the human fetus and undervalue human life today. Claiming to be "pro-life," they are narrowly pro-fetus and anti-life in the round and on the ground today.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  MARCH 6, 2011; 10:57 PM ET**

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Thank you, Dr. Elliot. I often disagree with you, but this time, I think you've got it right.

**POSTED BY: LEPIDOPTERYX | MARCH 7, 2011 8:26 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20lepidopteryx%20%20|%20%20Abortion%20as%20tragic,%20legal,%20and%20good%20%20|%20%204928334&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4928334%26blog_id=618)