

## ABORTION AGAIN/STILL: RESPECT FOR "HUMAN LIFE"? ----- ELLIOTT #1905

A few days ago (Nov/84), the election went away, but the abortion issue didn't-- and won't, because it touches all the bases of our human feelings, opinions, and convictions.

On the positive side, how wonderful that there is such an issue! Not even the weapons debate is comparable: only abortion touches all the bases, and so abortion is the issue on the basis of which we can struggle toward a truly human ethic (that leaves nobody out) within the biosphere (that leaves out no life) within reality (and so does not leave God out).

And I do mean "nobody": Nobody, in either sense, should be left out of this struggle toward a global, truly human ethic. Everybody's existence should be in the struggle: it's a struggle "for all." And everybody's convictions should be in: it's a struggle "by all."

And all the experts should be in the struggle. An expert is somebody to whom society has granted the leisure to obtain special knowledge and skill in some field and who has responsibly so used the leisure. In my case, the expertise is in religion; and I've been quietly amused that, in recent weeks, many letters-to-the-editor in our local Cape Cod press have lectured me on religion in their attacks on my position (as they imagined it) on abortion.

But the experts (e.g., in medicine and theology) disagree, so why listen to them? Nothing prevents pushing the question to absurdity: why should anybody listen to anybody? Some children treat this nonsense question as an invitation to anarchy touching parents and teachers, and the social consequences are horrendous.

But can there be any experts on abortion--since it touches all the bases, and nobody can be expert on all the bases? No, there can be experts only on aspects of abortion, and the situation is worsening: since the circumference of our ignorance expands faster than the radii of our knowledge, the ideal of being "an expert on abortion" is receding farther and farther into unreality. To compensate for this increasing disability to comprehend, i.e., to master all aspects of abortion (or any other issue!), we need to improve our listening and co-operating abilities.

Another complicating factor: An expert on religion may master the religion factor and angle or perspective on abortion, yet distort data/interpretation/dialog because of a taboo, an absolute negative. E.g., almost all RC theologians stand pat against any interference with the conception-gestation-birth process; so of course no abortion, but also no conception-control (which, accordingly, is absent from the Am.RC bishops' pastoral on economics (1st draft just issued, Nov/84)--though population control is an increasingly important factor not only to quality of human life but also, as now in subSahara Africa, to human survival). So the public should listen honestly and patiently only to taboo-less experts--which means to us, not to them. No wonder we're in danger of public action based on taboo: how it cuts through the Gordian knot! Gov. Reagan of Calif. signed a pro-abortion bill, but Pres. Reagan regrets it and may try to press a new prohibition era on America.

And a final complicating factor is that the quality of public discourse has deteriorated. "1984" Orwellian "Newspeak" is impatient of complexity and sold out to persuasion by slogan. In this patois, articulated ideas slump down into gooey symbols, codewords for nondialectical polarizations: right/left extremism is supported by, and supports, this bastardized speech compounded of media punchdrunkenness, ad-agentry, social zealotry, impatience for action, and intellectual laziness. For me, Election '84 raised the question whether the American language, in its present condition and praxis, is capable of honesty, clarity, and nuance.

Here, now, are some reflections of mine in light of my recent participation, in print and face-to-face, in the Great Abortion Debate:

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1. Abortion is tragic--for many of the same reasons divorce and war are tragic. Efforts to remove the sense of tragedy demean humanity. ("Respect for 'human life'" includes the fetus not as "human life" but as bio-life in process toward "human life." The distinction is no quibble; fail to make it, and abortion is just what "pro-life"ers say it is, viz., murder.) Further, a particular abortion may be a sin against God and (depending on the laws) a crime against the state. But while every abortion is tragic, in some cases/situations NOT to abort is a sin and/or crime. The category of tragedy is inherent; the categories of sin and crime are relational.

2. The Bible's mood (reverence for God, respect for self and fellow-creatures, etc.) is pertinent to the abortion debate, but the Bible as mine of proof-texts muddies the forensic waters and tempts the interpreter to evade the questions of action--such as What is this pregnant girl/woman to do? What is "the neighbor" to do? the family? the church? the citizen? the state? the trans-local church (i.e., denomination, clusters of denominations, councils of churches at all levels)? Two days before Election '84, I heard in NY a pastor preach a learned and biblically sound sermon on abortion, without any action analysis (to say nothing of action guidance)!

2. In astrophysical perspective, the biosphere is doomed--so our species is only temporary. Some folks get all worked up about this, but it doesn't seem particularly important to me. It's God's universe, not ours. Dante's "the Love that moves the stars" will outlast us. Whatever we yield up to God in return-love will never be lost: that is my ultimate comfort, peace, joy. But I have no "reverence for human life": I reserve my reverence, as does the Bible, for God alone. And in this I oppose those who believe in "the ultimate worth and dignity of every individual."

3. Every fetus is unique, but how illogical to argue from that the sacredness of the fetus! Such argument could be applied as easily to mosquitoes, which then should not be swatted (as indeed Jainism teaches). More important: The argument implies also pacifism and opposition to capital punishment, though few pro-lifers would follow it that far: the uniqueness argument is emotional, without intellectual substance.

4. Science-technology, expanding our powers to preserve and destroy life, can add nothing to the values aspects of the abortion issue. We now have more methods of aborting, both active ("killing") and passive ("letting die"), but the religious-ethical issues remain the same. Throwing scientific facts/statistics at your opponents can't weight for your position or against theirs, though it may seem to if one side (1) has more facts/statistics and/or (2) can talk faster and/or louder. Nor can science remove the argument from the religious or political arena.

5. I am "pro-life" in being for God's life, the biosphere's life, human life, and fetal life--in that order of priorities and triage. Antiabortionists collapse all that, like an old-fashioned multi-ring picnic-cup, flat down into the defense of fetal life; and their argument can't hold water any more than could that collapsed picnic-cup. I'm frightened when I hear fetolatrists (fetus-worshippers) screaming their denunciations. If they could prevail, in the name of their primitive taboo would they not burn me at the stake? They are only further enraged when I ask them questions about the social context (e.g., equal-access fairness for the poor), and about the future of the earth God made good and we are polluting and wasting to the threat of all of tomorrow's fetuses, and about the quality of human life as necessarily declining with the declining of environmental quality (as now, again, sub-Saharan Africa), and about triage (in Ethiopia's present starvation-death camps, is it "pro-life" to neglect starving children in order to attend to the flood of new-borns?).

6. On several fronts (nukes, flood-control of human flesh, desertification, pollution), our species may be a case of unviable hypertrophy: we may have "had it." "With God all things are possible"--but with us, are the things necessary to survival (not to say, rising quality of life) possible?... In spite of its emotional charge, I hope we can walk all 'round the abortion statue and view it (and discuss it) from every angle.