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Abortion and our Attitude to the Foetus

Lee Gatiss

...it is our evaluation of the foetus which will largely determine our attitude to abortion. John Stott¹

In March this year abortion hit the headlines in Britain, stirred up by an interview with the main political leaders in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Michael Howard of the Conservative Party seemed the most radical in his opposition to what he called ‘abortion on demand’, and his support for reducing the legal limit for abortions from 24 to 20 weeks. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, backed Mr. Howard’s call saying—

I am very pleased that this has been brought out on to the public agenda and that there is going to be a debate about it, both in the lead-up to and after the next election. It is a key issue. The position is that we are totally opposed to abortion... [Mr. Howard’s view] is something we can commend on the way to a full abandonment of abortion.²

The Archbishop of Canterbury, a member of the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, soon joined the fray, adding his voice to the demand for a public debate.

It is vital, if there is to be a public debate on abortion, that Christians are crystal clear about their position, and the biblical assumptions about human nature which lie behind calls for abortion to be abandoned or at least curbed. This article will explore both pro-life and pro-choice positions on the central issue of our attitude to the foetus, which as John Stott says, will largely determine our attitude to abortion. Our attitude to the foetus will also affect our attitude to other issues such as euthanasia, embryonic cloning, and stem cell research. As Archbishop Peter Jensen says, “the crucial element remains the status of the human life that is being commercialised and then destroyed by these procedures”.

The Central Issue

The pro-life position often sees the status of the foetus as the central issue in the abortion debate. ‘There are three basic positions on abortion,’ says Geisler, ‘and they all center [*sic*] around the question of the human status of the unborn.’³ For Christians, once the question of the foetus’s humanity has been decided, the abortion question seems decided. Save for some exceptional cases, the absolute command not to murder applies and the problem is resolved: deliberate abortion is wrong because it is murder. This is the consistent position of the Christian church since its beginning.⁴ Undergirding this view are the distinctive Christian doctrines of God and humanity.⁵

The pro-choice position, however, whilst not unaware of this issue and its importance for pro-lifers,⁶ does not focus on it in the same way. This is unsurprising, since many approach the subject without the Christian doctrine which underlies much of the pro-life position. Thus it is possible for one pro-choicer to say that ‘the moral status of the unborn is central to the abortion debate’,⁷ but she is talking about something quite different from Stott. For Stott, moral status is determined by the humanity of the unborn. If it is human, then it bears the image of God: its life is sacred. For others, whether the foetus is human is incidental;⁸ what they are asking is, ‘When does human life matter?’⁹

I propose to examine the underlying assumptions which can lead both pro-lifers and pro-choicers to make similar statements about the centrality of this issue. My general thesis is that Stott’s statement is significant, for three reasons:

1. It is clearly based on Christian theological and ethical principles.
2. It speaks of our total attitude to the foetus, not just of its ‘status’ however defined.
3. It does not ignore other issues which may affect our attitude.

Assumptions of the Christian Pro-life Position

The first premise of the Christian pro-life position is that life begins at conception. Other starting points for human life have been suggested, including implantation, quickening, brain function, viability, and first breath.¹⁰ It is argued that the Bible conceives of the start of human life in this way. In Genesis 4:1, Cain’s personal history begins at conception.¹¹ What Psalm 51:5

describes is ‘a *person* who is in the process of becoming, not a *thing* that is in the process of becoming a person’.¹² It is suggested that Exodus 21:22-25 treats the unborn as having less than fully human value¹³ but this interpretation is debatable, and most probably wrong.¹⁴ Montgomery clinches this argument: ‘Should a passage such as Exodus 21 properly outweigh the analogy of the Incarnation itself, in which God became man at the moment when “conception by the Holy Ghost” occurred—not at a later time as the universally condemned and heretical adoptionists alleged?’¹⁵

Scientific and philosophical evidence is enlisted in support of this argument,¹⁶ but space prevents us going into detail. Other suggestions are also critiqued. Meilaender opts for *implantation* as a more suitable starting point for life on the basis that the embryo has ‘not yet decided how many people it is going to be’.¹⁷ The best that can be said for this argument from potential ‘twinning’ is that it can be used either way.¹⁸ The worst that could be said is that it risks (by the consequent use of IUD contraceptives and chemical abortifacients) killing not just one human being, but two. The argument for *quickening* confuses life with motility.¹⁹ The argument for *viability* is also open to pro-life response: ‘The unsubstantial lessening in dependence at viability does not seem to signify any special acquisition of humanity.’²⁰ It is pointed out that Luke uses the same word (*brepho*) to describe both a non-viable foetus and a newborn baby.²¹ Viability tells us more about the state of medical science than it does about the foetus.²² Other arguments against conception can also be countered.²³

The second assumption of the Christian pro-life case is that human life is sacred. This is established from several angles. First, Genesis 9:6 establishes murder as wrong because every human is made in God’s image.²⁴ Murder is also specifically prohibited in Exodus 20:13.²⁵ Exodus 21:23 sets the penalty for murder as ‘life for life’, thus showing it to be worthy of the highest punishment; yet, ‘both life-giving and life-taking are divine prerogatives’.²⁶ The command not to kill is not quite absolute, but life-taking is so serious that it requires God’s specific mandate.²⁷ All human life is precious because all humans are made in God’s image. Alongside the assertion that human life begins at conception, it follows that to abort is to kill someone made in God’s image, which is morally wrong.

These two assertions must go together: the foetus is human, and all human life

is sacred. We must put the two assumptions together explicitly, since it is possible to argue that although the foetus is human from conception, its life is not as precious and worthy of protection as other humans. Such argument agrees on the humanity of the foetus, but not on the crucial issue of its concomitant worth. Although this is not an argument based on 'rights', it can be phrased that way: a human has a right to life, whether it is a six week old foetus, a six week old baby or a ninety-six year old pensioner. Without straying into the euthanasia debate (another hot political topic in America as well as Britain), this reminds us that 'how we think about the unborn baby is a pointer to what we think about the rest of us'.²⁸ Putting 'life begins at conception' alongside the concept of the sanctity of life gives us a comprehensive picture, a total attitude to the foetus as worthy of protection and care.

Boyle suggests, however, that the sanctity of life is not the real issue when it is raised.

If we adopt a definition of abortion which accepts that it destroys life, then we uncover a set of silences and inconsistencies which are very difficult to reconcile with anti-abortionists' stated concern for the sanctity of life but which become understandable when we consider the possible implications of abortion for women's social roles.²⁹

These inconsistencies include 'the striking relationship which has been found between opposition to abortion and support for measures which allow state killing or facilitate illegal killing'.³⁰ She suggests that to regard the foetus as 'life' is to be 'culturally and philosophically naive', stating as an absolute what is merely a provisional 'cultural construction'.³¹ The ultimate reason for pro-life opposition to abortion, in her eyes, is to make an unwanted child 'serve as an instrument of both punishment and deterrence for women who consent to intercourse but reject pregnancy and motherhood'.³² Such a desire to control female sexuality by those who strongly support patriarchal structures is, for her, the real reason why people oppose abortion: the sanctity of life argument is just a cover.

Boyle makes an emotionally charged and suggestive case. Luker has also argued that sexual issues like the 'proper' role of women are what really divide the two camps on abortion.³³ We cannot ignore the fact that there may be

social, political and psychological influences at work in our thinking as we approach this emotional minefield.³⁴ Boyle does not help us very much in this area. She does not examine any of the psycho-sociological motives underlying the pro-choice stance, admits no *pro-choice* inconsistencies (perhaps correlating a pro-abortion stance with a ‘no animal testing’ one?) and she resolutely fails to interact with the *arguments* of pro-lifers. As Steinbock says, recognising background influences on our thinking ‘does not preclude rational assessment of the arguments’.³⁵ What Boyle’s exposé does encourage, however, is consistency in applying the sanctity of life argument in all areas of public policy.³⁶

One other very sobering point ought to be made in this regard. It is striking that abortion, touted by pro-choice feminists as a tool for opposing male social and political dominance, is being employed in China and in many Asian cultures as a way of ‘getting rid’ of unwanted *female* babies. So, paradoxically, widespread abortion serves as a very powerful tool to *reinforce* male dominance in those societies where a girl baby is thought by some to be less valuable than a boy.

Assumptions of the Pro-choice Position

It is self-evident that if the foetus is held to be less than fully human then our attitude to abortion is decisively altered. Classically, this leads to the kind of three-way split over the issue portrayed by Geisler (the foetus as fully human, potentially human, or subhuman).³⁷ Arguments from ‘potentiality’ inevitably lead to philosophical problems, and have no biblical warrant.³⁸ Arguments relying on a subhuman view of the foetus can lead to scientific problems, not to mention the enormously counter-intuitive conclusion that a foetus is morally equivalent to a mere commodity (or at best, a ‘guppy’).³⁹ Contemporary pro-choicers, however, can assert the full humanity of the unborn without inconsistency. Their interest is not so much in when life begins, but when it *matters*. They do not argue that the foetus is only ‘potentially’ human, or that it is subhuman, yet they still consider abortion justifiable. What has changed is the attitude to the sanctity of life. So, our total attitude towards the foetus must consist of more than a simple determination of its humanity.

Several pro-choice arguments actually beg the question of whether the unborn is fully human.⁴⁰ Mollenkott’s position, for example, based on a woman’s

supposedly God-given unrestricted free agency, would simply not work if terminating the pregnancy was murder.⁴¹ Emotive arguments on consequentialist lines ('Shall we return to back-streets and coat-hangers?') similarly refuse to actually address this question. Some pro-choicers can, however, say that the foetus is fully human; the difference comes when the value or status ascribed to the unborn is discussed. This is why Stott's statement with which we began this article is significant.

Recent pro-choice advocates have argued that humanity and personhood are not equivalent notions. In various ways this argument underlies the approaches of Warren,⁴² Wennberg,⁴³ Mollenkott⁴⁴ and McKay.⁴⁵ This is an arbitrary distinction involving semantic special pleading. It accepts a functional view of personhood: consciousness, relationships and/or various other qualifications need to be met by an applicant for 'personhood'. Genetic humanity is necessary, but not sufficient to qualify.

Aside from the inadequacy of defining persons functionally,⁴⁶ this leads to two damning questions: first, what about the senile, the retarded and the unconscious?⁴⁷ They do not qualify as persons on most presentations of this type. Second, even if the foetus is a non-person, should it not receive at least the same consideration as non-personal animals and trees rather than being treated merely as an unwelcome 'growth'?⁴⁸ It is clear that issues of abortion and euthanasia will always be linked. As I have already said, how we think about the unborn baby is a pointer to what we think about the rest of humanity. To propose that a human being may not be a 'person' involves making a value judgement based on arbitrary and ill-defined categorization. There is even no general agreement amongst those of this view as to when a human *does* become a person!

Steinbock admits the humanity of the unborn. She then uses an ingenious philosophical argument to get around this so that she can continue her pro-choice argument.⁴⁹ She uses a combination of the argument for bodily self-determination and the 'interests' view of the foetus. Some feminists 'regard the inquiry into the status of the foetus as irrelevant to the problem of abortion', she says, but what they actually do is change the subject.⁵⁰ She maintains their bodily self-determination argument but combines it with the view that only when a human becomes sentient does it have moral status,

because only then can it have an interest in its own life, and care about what is done to it.⁵¹ Before then it can be killed, but not harmed—in the sense that a being without care cannot be harmed.⁵²

Without a hint of inconsistency Steinbock then asserts that the debate on abortion centres on the moral status of the foetus.⁵³ A being without interests may have an ill-defined ‘right to life’ but, she avers, ‘the right to life does not imply a right to use another person’s body’.⁵⁴ From the sanctity of life standpoint she has failed to recognise that an abortion concerns not just the woman’s body, but the unborn’s too, something which recent three-dimensional pictures of fetuses in the womb on television has made much more powerful in the mind of the public. This is why, as Rowan Williams asserted recently, there is a ‘groundswell of distaste’ about abortion.⁵⁵

The pre-sentient foetus is entitled to some protection, Steinbock claims, but it is not inviolable. There are three major problems with this view. First, sentience is not at all easy to pin-point: all she can say is that it arrives *sometime* in the second trimester.⁵⁶ Secondly, sentience is an arbitrary philosophical category which merely serves what seems to be her preconceived convictions on the subject.⁵⁷ Thirdly, it is difficult to objectively discuss the ‘moral status’ of anything, since it is such a subjective concept. Yet these are the kind of assumptions on which the pro-choice position is built.

Conclusion

On its own, a determination of the humanity of the unborn is insufficient as a way of delineating the positions of pro-life/pro-choice advocates. It is not enough for us to agree that the foetus is human. I have therefore examined the underlying assumptions made by both sides. What determines our attitude to abortion is the value we place on the foetus. If it is a live human being, the Christian pro-lifer invokes various arguments to oppose abortion as murder. Assuming the same premise, pro-choicers are nevertheless able to come to a different evaluation of the foetus, invoking concepts such as conflicting rights (the mother’s right to bodily self-determination vs. the foetus’s right to life) or moral status.

Stott’s opening statement that our attitude to the foetus determines our view of abortion appears to refer only to the humanity of the foetus. Read in the context of his whole discussion, however, he makes it clear that what he is

talking about is ‘our evaluation of human life’.⁵⁸ In that sense, the statement he makes is highly significant, correctly and effectively piercing to the heart of the issue. Since there is such moral confusion on this issue at the present time (because the public assumption of an underlying biblical worldview has been abandoned in society at large) we must be careful in debates on abortion to carefully and clearly say both that human life begins at conception, and that *all* human life is sacred. In any public debate on abortion, therefore, these two premises must go together for a sufficient articulation of the biblical view.

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ENDNOTES

1. John Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today* (Fully Revised Edn.) (London: Marshall Pickering, 1999).
2. Quoted in Ruth Gledhill and David Charter, “Cardinal tells Catholics to reject Labour over abortion,” in *The Times*, March 15th, 2005.
3. N. L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995), p. 135. Cf. F. J. Beckwith, “A Critical Appraisal of Theological Arguments For Abortion Rights,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*: 338; N. M. de S. Cameron, *Is Life Really Sacred?* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1990), p. 18 amongst others.
4. See the quotation from W. E. H. Lecky in G. Meilaender, *Bioethics* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), p. 27 and the thorough investigation of the historical position in M. J. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1982), *passim*.
5. Cf. Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 345.
6. See for example, M. Boyle, *Re-Thinking Abortion* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 46. I use the rather loose terms ‘pro-lifers’ and ‘pro-choicers’ as shorthand for ‘advocates of the pro-life or pro-choice positions’ throughout. I am aware that these are politically loaded terms, particularly in the American scene, but they are used here merely as shorthand.
7. B. Steinbock, *Life Before Birth* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), p. 44.
8. See J. Rachel in Beckwith, “Abortion and Public Policy,” *JETS* 32/4 (1989): 509.
9. Cf. N. M. de S. Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 18; Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 45; Boyle, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
10. See D. Cook, *The Moral Maze* (London: SPCK, 1999), p. 95 and Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 48 and Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
11. Cf. Beckwith, “A Critical Appraisal,” p. 338.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 341 (italics mine).

13. Even David Cook accepts this interpretation, *op. cit.*, pp. 97, 125.
14. Beckwith shows the extent of the uncertainty ("Abortion and Public Policy," pp. 512-4). Geisler (following Cassuto) convincingly reinterprets the passage (*Christian Ethics*, p. 145). For a thorough examination of the text in the context of this debate, see Robert N. Congdon, "Exodus 21:22-25 and the Abortion Debate," in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 146 #582 (1989).
15. Quoted in Beckwith, "Abortion and Public Policy," p. 513 and "A Critical Appraisal," p. 344.
16. See especially K. Moore, "Abortion: Logical and Theological Considerations," *Bibliotheca Sacra* Vol. 148 #589 (1991): 112-15.
17. The words are Mary Warnock's (in Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 50) but Meilaender's argument is the same, *Bioethics*, p. 31. He is the Christian exception that proves the rule on this point I think.
18. Geisler uses it as proof of life beginning at conception! *Christian Ethics*, p. 153.
19. Cf. Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 47. (Motility is the unborn's ability to move.)
20. According to Noonan, quoted in Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
21. John the Baptist was certainly non-viable by 1st century medical standards at somewhere between 20-24 weeks (Luke 1:41). Jesus the baby is referred to by the same word in Luke 2:12.
22. Cameron, *Is Life Really Sacred?* p. 45.
23. See Geisler and Beckwith for the most convincing rebuttals.
24. See also Genesis 1:27.
25. Cf. Deuteronomy 5:17 for the Pentateuchal parallel and Romans 13:9 for a New Testament repeat of the command.
26. Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 345.
27. See Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 345 and Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 22 for the exceptions to the commandment, such as war or capital punishment.
28. Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 18. Cf. p. 53, and especially p. 62 for a similar comment on handicapped foetuses and adults.
29. Boyle, *Re-thinking Abortion*, pp. 60-61.
30. Boyle, *ibid.*, p. 55 referring to support for the Vietnam War and capital punishment, and opposition to gun-control.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 50. I had to read this whole section several times to believe she was serious.
33. Cited in Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
34. D. Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
35. Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
36. Which is, I believe, the argument of M. Meehan, "Will Somebody Please Be Consistent?" in *Sojourners* (Nov. 1980) which is cited in Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 95 footnote 5 as part of an exhortation to consistency in this very area.

37. Geisler, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
38. Aply demonstrated by Steinbock, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-68. See also Geisler *op.cit.*, pages 142-147 for a rebuttal of supposedly biblical arguments for thinking of the foetus as "potentially human".
39. Such is the view of Mary Anne Warren, refuted in Meilaender, *op. cit.*, p. 32; Steinbock, *op. cit.*, pp. 51ff.
40. For this critique see Geisler, p. 139; Steinbock, p. 5; Moore, p. 114; Beckwith, "Abortion & Public Policy," p. 504.
41. Cf. Beckwith, "Abortion and Public Policy," pp. 506-17 for further devastating demonstration of the logical inconsistencies of Mollenkott's position, cf. "A Critical Appraisal," pp. 342-3; Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
42. For M. A. Warren's view and a refutation see Steinbock, *op. cit.*, pp. 51ff.
43. For R. N. Wennberg's view and a refutation, see Beckwith, "A Critical Appraisal," pp. 339-41.
44. For V. R. Mollenkott's view and a refutation, see Beckwith, "Abortion and Public Policy," pp. 506-9.
45. For Donald McKay's view and a refutation see Stott, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-62.
46. On which see Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
47. Cf. Geisler, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
48. Cf. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
49. It sounds cynical put that way, but she does admit up front that she is a determined pro-choicer, see *op. cit.*, p. 44.
50. Steinbock, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
53. Following the same assertion by Judith Jarvis Thomson. Cf. Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 78 quoting Thomson.
55. BBC News Online (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4366501.stm>) reported on Sunday, 20th March that Dr. Williams said that the large majority of Christians considered abortion 'the deliberate termination of a human life' and 'the current law had created a 'groundswell of distaste' in the country at large'. He added that 'technological advances had provided a clearer picture of foetuses' consciousness and sensitivity to pain, and helped to keep prematurely-born babies alive'.
56. She acknowledges the problem herself. Cf. Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
57. She almost admits this too! Cf. p. 44.
58. Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 346 in the context of his discussion of the two doctrinal issues at stake on p. 345.