

Feminist Scholarship and Its Relevance for Political Engagement: The Test Case of Abortion in the US

MARGARET D. KAMITSUKA

Abstract

This essay explores how gender studies in academe, including in religious studies, might remain relevant to ongoing feminist political engagement. I explore some specific dynamics of this challenge, using as my test case the issue of abortion in the US. After discussing how three formative feminist principles (women's experience as feminism's starting point, the personal is political, and identity politics) have shaped approaches to the abortion issue for feminist scholars in religion, I argue that ongoing critique, new theoretical perspectives, and attentiveness to subaltern voices are necessary for these foundational feminist principles to keep pace with fast-changing and complex societal dynamics relevant to women's struggles for reproductive health and justice. The essay concludes by proposing *nativity* as a helpful concept for future feminist theological and ethical thinking on the subject.

Keywords

Abortion; feminist; pro-choice; pro-life; nativity; theology

Author affiliation

Margaret Kamitsuka is Associate Professor of Gender and Religion at Oberlin College, Ohio (USA). Her academic interests are the representations and

regulations of gender and sexuality in religion; the history and development of feminist and other self-named theologies that address gender, sexuality, and the body in religion. Email: margaret.kamitsuka@oberlin.edu

Introduction

As a scholar in religious studies I have followed closely colleagues' efforts to map paradigm shifts in the field of religious studies, which finds itself having to adjust to waves of feminism, post-feminism, and transdisciplinary gender-inflected analytical approaches.¹ A question that arises for me as a feminist scholar is: how might gender studies in academe, including in religious studies, remain relevant to ongoing feminist political engagement? I explore some specific dynamics of this challenge, using as my test case the issue of abortion in the United States.

The pivotal political event in abortion politics in the US was the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion. Since that time, there have been a myriad of new legal, societal, medical, and public policy developments related to abortion: legislation at the state level requiring waiting periods and parental consent; pro-life claims that medication abortion drugs such as RU-486 are unsafe and even that the Pill is an abortifacient; violence targeting abortion providers; grass-roots movements such as post-abortion repentance and recovery groups, to name just a few. Religious pro-life proponents are playing a role in all of these developments. Moreover, religion figures prominently in the demographics of abortion. Studies from the Guttmacher Institute reveal that in the year 2000, the majority of women having abortions in America self-identified as Christian – 27 per cent Catholic and 43 per cent Protestant.² Given the centrality of religion for abortion in America, this issue is ideal as a case study for reflecting on the interrelationship between feminist scholarship in religion and feminist activism. This essay approaches this issue by exploring three questions. What are the distinctive formative principles and methods that mark feminist academic research as *feminist*? How have these principles and methods shaped approaches to the abortion issue for feminist scholars in religion? What

¹ See U. King, 'General Introduction: Gender-Critical Turns in the Study of Religion' in U. King and T. Beattie (eds.), *Gender, Religion, and Diversity: Cross-cultural Perspectives*, London: Continuum 2004, 4-5.

² R. K. Jones, J. E. Darroch and S. K. Henshaw, 'Patterns in the Socioeconomic Characteristics of Women Obtaining Abortions in 2000-2001' in *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 34:5 (2002), 232; available at: <http://www.guttmacher.org/journals/toc/psrh3405toc.html>.

critiques are important to bring to bear upon these principles and methods so that feminist research can continue to produce insightful and relevant reflection on women's reproductive realities?

Feminist Formative Principles and Methods

Feminist research in academe originally emerged as an engaged form of scholarship. We can see this in religious studies where even the entry of women into PhD programmes in religion in the 1960s and 1970s was an exercise in challenging patriarchy and the so-called old boy's network.³ The names in this cadre are well known and include Mary Daly (deceased in 2010), Rita Gross, Beverly Harrison, Virginia Mollencott, Judith Plaskow, Rosemary Ruether, Phyllis Trible, and Delores Williams, to name just a few. The writings from scholars such as these from the late 1960s through the 1980s laid the groundwork for applying formative feminist principles from the women's liberation movement to the critical study of religion. Three of these well-known principles are: women's experience is feminism's point of departure, the personal is political, and identity politics. While subject to critique and debate in recent decades, these principles continue to resonate with many scholars – whether they self-identify (as I do) as white feminist,⁴ *mujerista*, queer, womanist, and so on.

The notion that women's experience is feminism's point of departure was pivotal for feminist scholars' efforts to challenge masculinist research that made male experience representative of human experience, relegating women's thought and cultural practices to the margins of scholarly attention.⁵ The focus on women's experience formed the basis for a wide range of feminist approaches in academe, from Nancy Hartsock's materialist feminist standpoint theory to Patricia Hill Collins's concept of how black women construct a standpoint as 'situated knowers.'⁶ 'The Personal is Political' is the title of a groundbreaking essay

³ See R. Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox 1995 and R. Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*, Boston: Beacon 1996, 45-49.

⁴ 'White feminist' is a critical self-reflexive term that acknowledges the impact of race in academic work. For further discussion of the term, see M. D. Kamitsuka, *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference*, New York: Oxford University Press 2007, 10.

⁵ See the critique of masculinist research in religion in C. Christ, 'Mircea Eliade and the Feminist Paradigm Shift' in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7:2 (1991), 75-94.

⁶ See N. Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism' in S. Kemp and J. Squires (eds.), *Feminisms*, Oxford:

first published by Carol Hanisch in 1970. This essay articulates how the outgrowth of women's talk therapy groups in the late 1960s was a realization that women's individual and private struggles are, in fact, society-wide women's struggles that need a systemic analysis and response: 'One of the first things we discovered in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.'⁷ When the collective of black feminist activists known as the Combahee River Collective published their manifesto in 1977, they articulated a notion that was operative in many sectors of women's and other political activist groups of the time: '[T]he most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity.'⁸ Even as feminist scholars today bring critiques to bear on these formative principles and turn their attention toward ever more complex globalized systems of gender and other dominations, they continue to reference these three principles and find insights and inspiration for how research and activism might relate and mutually enrich each other. Not all that is wise is the newly minted.⁹

While some feminist writing is professedly anti-methodological,¹⁰ many feminist scholars find that clarifying methodological issues is pivotal for maintaining the critical edge of feminist thought. Methodology is always specific to the particular discipline in question but, formally, we can define a feminist research project as that which strives to maintain a dialectical approach between referencing a stated set of feminist principles and ongoing critique of these principles. This dialectic has served feminist academic research well, propelling it from its early predominantly white,

Oxford University Press 1997; P. H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York: Routledge 1991, 17.

⁷ For a reprint of the original as well as a recent reflection on it by Hanisch, see: <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>. Hanisch comments: 'While trying to think how I would change "The Personal Is Political" paper if I could rewrite it with today's hindsight, I was actually surprised how well it stands the test of time and experience' (accessed 19 November 2010).

⁸ 'The Combahee River Collective Statement' in B. Smith (ed.), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press 2000, 267.

⁹ Note how this dialectic is displayed in C. T. Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity Through Anti-Capitalist Struggles' in *Signs* 28:2 (2002). Among the resources to which she turns to understand 21st-century social justice struggles are the three I have outlined here: the centrality of the experience of women and girls (514-15); the notion that the personal is political (530); and the Combahee River Collective's methodology (510n. 14).

¹⁰ See M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Boston: Beacon 1973, 7-12.

Western, universalizing, liberal-oriented defence of women's rights to a more analytically nuanced and, I believe, ethically responsible approach that is widely used today. This approach can be described as intersectional: using multiple theoretical tools – race, queer, postcolonial, environmentalist, and other critical theories – to complicate racial, gendered, ethnic, national, sexual, and other identities.¹¹ Furthermore, it is attentive to differences in women's experiences and to dynamics of power, and, lastly, concerned with the material conditions under which women live in a globalized world. I will argue that the three principles mentioned above (women's experience as feminism's starting point; the personal is political; identity politics) still pack a heavy punch. However, ongoing critique, new theoretical perspectives, and attentiveness to subaltern voices will be necessary in order for these foundational feminist principles to keep pace with fast-changing and complex societal dynamics relevant to women's struggles for reproductive health and justice.

Women's Experience as Feminism's Starting Point

Many feminist scholars in religion have insisted that theological and ethical reflection on abortion should be rooted in women's experience. I highlight the work of white lesbian feminist theologian and ethicist, Carter Heyward, who sets the appeal to women's reproductive experience within a sacramental theological approach. According to Heyward, women's experience of lack of control over their 'procreative options and choices ... is the backdrop from a feminist liberation perspective of developing a moral perspective on abortion.' Writing in 1986, Heyward insisted that the option of choice must be legally safeguarded, or else women will be robbed of the 'capacities to live as moral persons' – which is the mark of humanity par excellence. Moral choices are not just doing what is right; they are reflective processes open to the presence of God at work in human lives. From Heyward's Episcopalian orientation, moral choices are sacramental – with sacrament being defined as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.'¹² Heyward combined a feminist methodology of rootedness in women's experience with a sacramental view of human life to conclude that the reflectively made choice for

¹¹ For a good overview of intersectionality see M. T. Berger and K. Guidroz (eds.), *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, and Gender*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2009.

¹² C. Heyward, 'Abortion: A Moral Choice' in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 9:1 (1986), 42, 43.

abortion not only can be seen as a sacramental act, it 'should be a sacrament.'¹³ The fact that women may experience abortion as a tragic loss or moral ambiguity means that churches must work to safeguard legal abortion, because only therein are the material conditions created for pregnant women to live sacramentally. That is, deciding about an emotionally and morally fraught situation like abortion is a sacrament, if women are spiritually enabled to exercise freely their own moral decision-making – thereby instantiating God's grace in their lives.

A different pro-choice approach based on women's experience is found in evangelical white feminist Anne Eggebroten's book *Abortion – My Choice, God's Grace* (1994), an anthology of anguished, personal accounts of Christian women who struggled mightily with the abortion decision and finally received the inner religious conviction that God was with them in this tragic choice. Some women tell stories of long years of suffering before coming to terms with their abortion. A pastor's wife and mother of a young son remembers that 'the procedure itself was far more traumatic ... emotionally than physically' and that 'the lonely secrecy ... was one of the most difficult parts,' since she and her husband, a then seminary student, felt they could not talk about this to their Christian friends.¹⁴ Subsequent tragedies in this woman's life, such as her stillborn second son, were experienced as punishments from God. Finally, she was able to re-experience God as forgiveness and love, which motivated her to reach out to other Christian women suffering in silence: 'Often I have noticed that women like me who have come from fundamental, strongly religious backgrounds are more likely to suffer psychological trauma from abortion and to carry the emotional scars longer. Yet God is present to heal those wounds.'¹⁵ This example displays Eggebroten's intention for this anthology. As an evangelical, she does not use the language of sacramentality, but she does affirm that God gives humans free will to make moral decisions within the context of the 'overarching presence of God's grace.'¹⁶ To the extent

¹³ Ibid., 45. The Christian Right has lashed out at Heyward for this comment. See G. Forney, 'Episcopal Church Upholds Sanctity of Abortion,' *Virtue Online: The Voice for Global Orthodox Anglicanism* at: http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?storyid=4514&com_m ode=thread&com_order=0&com_id=49140&com_rootid=49137; accessed 19 November 2010.

¹⁴ A. Eggebroten, *Abortion: My Choice, God's Grace: Christian Women Tell their Stories*, Pasadena, Calif.: New Paradigm 1994, 77, 80.

¹⁵ Ibid., 81.

¹⁶ Ibid., 223.

that Christian women testify to being able to come through the trauma of abortion into an experience of God's grace that allows them to be at peace with their decision, Eggebroten makes her case that the exercise of women's reproductive free will is in God's sovereign plan.

Whether in a sacramental mode or an evangelical mode, the appeal to women's experience has grounded feminist theological pro-choice positions. A feminist critical method specifies that, as scholars, we need continually to deepen and broaden our understanding and analysis of women's reproductive health experiences in all their diversity. In this regard, two different sets of discourses related to women's reproductive experiences deserve closer attention by scholars in religion. The first can be labeled women's experiences of pregnancy loss. Linda Layne's *Motherhood Lost* is a deeply personal self-ethnography of the experience of miscarriage and pregnancy complications. It highlights an experiential phenomenon largely overlooked by feminist efforts to insist that embryos and fetuses are not fully human: the phenomenon of women's grief over miscarriage and infertility.¹⁷ The first analogous account by a feminist scholar in religion is Serene Jones's 2001 essay, 'Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss (Infertility, Miscarriage, Stillbirth).' Jones relays a personal account of a woman suffering through a pregnancy loss. Grieving with her, Jones hears to speech (as Nelle Morton might have said) this woman's 'sense of not being able to contain, of being fragmented and rupturing' and of carrying 'death within.'¹⁸ Jones makes this a feminist opportunity to reflect on the cultural scripts that construct even many die-hard feminists as women who want – even need – to bear a child, and therefore experience pregnancy loss as emotionally devastating and socially humiliating.

Jones's essay was quickly flagged by pro-life theologian Stephen Webb, who fired back with apparent I-told-you-so's to pro-choice feminists out there who supposedly want 'women to be able to use their power in abortion decisions in more or less unchecked ways.' I told you so, Webb seems to say, waving Jones's essay in the faces of these feminists: the fetus can't be 'treated as an abstraction' because even feminists who are pregnant feel in their gut that there is life in the womb.¹⁹ Webb's response

¹⁷ L. L. Layne, *Motherhood Lost: A Feminist Account of Pregnancy Loss in America*, New York: Routledge 2003.

¹⁸ L. S. Jones, 'Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss (Infertility, Miscarriage, Stillbirth)' in *Modern Theology* 17:2 (2001), 235.

¹⁹ S. H. Webb, 'Response to L. Serene Jones, "Hope Deferred"' in *Modern Theology* 17:4 (2001), 509.

makes one understand why many women turn to women's safe spaces to share deeply personal experiences of reproductive trauma. That said, this is a feminist learning moment. If pro-choice advocates find that depictions of women's grief over pregnancy loss sit uneasily with their pro-choice platform, then maybe that platform is, so to speak, too narrow and too high off the ground. If abortion can be a sacramental moment, as Heyward affirms, or if God is with women in their decision to abort, as women in Eggebroten's book testify, then why do women feel so bereft of God and overtaken by death when a wanted fetus miscarries? Webb is right in noting a disconnect. The issue here is a hermeneutical one: how to interpret the data of women's experiences. Should the phenomenon of miscarriage grief be used to bolster the ontological claim that the fetus is a baby? Or should the phenomenon of grief for the loss of a wanted child be understood primarily as the psychic effect of a culturally constructed compulsory-reproductive-heterosexual desire? These are questions that demand further feminist theorizing, which would include questioning the presuppositions of the questions themselves. Hopefully this reflective process can proceed in a way that does not pigeonhole the mourning process, as Webb does, when he simplistically interprets women who 'mourn a fetus' as implicitly acknowledging the existence of a baby.²⁰

We need a more robust and complex analysis of mourning within the context of what Judith Butler (almost theologically) calls humanity's 'common human vulnerability.' Butler's reflections on mourning were prompted by America's post-9/11 cultural malaise, but one can apply them more widely to other cultural issues, including abortion. According to Butler, 'we' (meaning her fellow Americans) tend to prioritize some people as 'grievable', while others who stand outside our 'normative notion of the human are condemn[ed] and effac[ed].'²¹ Here I would add: others who stand outside our normative notions of motherhood. Women, for many complicated reasons, mourn miscarried and aborted fetuses. Women who unintentionally miscarry a wanted child receive societal support for their grief. Women who abort unwanted fetuses do not receive nonjudgmental support for their grief; instead, their fetuses are mourned as dead babies, implying (and at times explicitly being stated) that these women are baby murderers. This rhetoric can be traced to an unreflective response to the phenomenon of women's grief. Moreover, it sets up a binarism between

²⁰ Ibid., 510.

²¹ J. Butler, 'Violence, Mourning, Politics' in *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4:1 (2003), 19, 20.

seeing aborted fetuses as grievable and, on the other side, refusing to accept any vulnerable human connection to women who abort.

A second question that arises under the rubric of attending to women's experience is: whose experience? Jones relays the phenomenon of grief and religious bewilderment over pregnancy loss. Other authors tell different stories that have come to be grouped under a subspecies of the psychiatric condition known as post-traumatic stress syndrome: post-abortion stress syndrome. One of the chief defenders of the scientific soundness of this syndrome is David Reardon, evangelical author of numerous popular as well as scholarly essays on the psychological and medical effects of abortion.²² While there continues to be scholarly debate on the nature and extent of lingering trauma or adverse medical effects related to elective abortion, most scholarly studies note some negative psychological effects but generally no long-term, worsening, or debilitating effects.²³ However, even if Reardon does not seem to win the day in most scholarly psychological or psychiatric circles, his writings have a wide following in conservative Christianity, bolstered in part by their extensive Internet presence.²⁴

Reardon promotes the message that women who have aborted are, whether they suspect it or not, deeply psychologically and spiritually scarred. This message floods the Internet, bookstore shelves, and even YouTube.²⁵ While some secular feminists might discount post-abortion

²² See, e.g., D. C. Reardon, *Aborted Women: Silent No More*, Chicago: Loyola University Press 1987; D. C. Reardon, 'Abortion Decisions and the Duty to Screen: Clinical, Ethical, and Legal Implication of Predictive Risk Factors of Post-abortion Maladjustment' in *Journal of Contemporary Health Law and Policy* 20:33 (2003), 33-114.

²³ See B. Major, et al., 'Psychological Responses of Women After First-Trimester Abortion' in *Archives of General Psychiatry* 57 (2000): 777-784. Some scholars question Reardon's studies in particular (see Deborah L. Billings, 'Problems in Conceptualization of Analysis' and Robert S. Kahn, 'Three Concerns,' in the Rapid Responses to this Article section in *British Medical Journal*, at: <http://www.bmj.com/content/324/7330/151.full>).

²⁴ See AfterAbortion.org at: <http://www.afterabortion.org/>; the Un-choice Campaign at: <http://www.theunchoice.com/intro.htm>; <http://www.stopforcedabortions.com/index.htm>; Silent No More Awareness at: <http://www.silentnomoreawareness.org/resources/index.html#affects>; accessed 24 October 2010. Some pro-choice groups claim Reardon has questionable academic credentials (Cynthia Cooper, 'Medical Right Watch: Who Is David Reardon and Why Is He Living in Missouri?' The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, at: http://www.rccrc.org/issues/MedRt_Reardon.cfm; accessed 21 April 2010).

²⁵ See the YouTube video representing an aborted child (a girl actor wearing a halo) singing to her mother from heaven 'Mommy I love you; I can forgive you too' at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck1AfJhPNT4>; accessed 24 October 2010.

stress syndrome literature and post-abortion recovery programmes as brainwashing and guilt-tripping, many religious studies scholars would pose critical questions about this reductionist approach to religion that categorizes non-feminist religious beliefs and practices as opiates of the masses, so to speak. Feminists committed both to the principle of women's experiences and to scholarly-analytical approaches to gender and religion cannot selectively pick and choose only the experiences that match their ideological bent. Rather than automatically discounting post-abortion women's trauma, feminist scholars of religion must look more deeply at these discourses and try to analyse what Foucauldians would call the disciplinary power/knowledge in evidence therein. There are many such feminist scholarly studies of ostensibly oppressed religious women—studies that display a more complicated picture of how insurrectional knowledges and practices can emerge from otherwise disempowered or marginalized women.²⁶ Feminist ethnographers should not overlook the voices of bloggers on abortion recovery websites or of the attendees of abortion forgiveness retreats, on the presumption that these women are simply lackeys or automatons of the Religious Right.

The Personal is Political

The principle of the personal is political has guided feminist scholars in their endeavors to bring to light and analyse women's public and private (unpublicized) experience, often with widespread socio-political effect in the advancement of women's rights. Feminist scholars in gender and religion likewise follow this principle, with attention given to the ways in which religious and political dimensions are intertwined in many religious adherents' thought and practice. In the years immediately preceding and following *Roe v. Wade*, there was significant scholarly activity in religious studies, notably in theology and ethics. The theoretical division in these publications that I want to highlight is not between the pro and con camps on abortion but within the pro-choice camp. The (mostly female) feminist scholars employed, overtly or implicitly, a personal-is-political theoretical framework. The (mostly male) non-feminist scholarship does not show any indication of this principle at work; in addition, the pro-choice position of the latter is marked by a paternalism that views women as victims needing

²⁶ See M. M. Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology*, Minn.: Fortress Press 1994, especially ch. 4 and 5; R. M. Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1997.

to be protected by state-supervised institutional authority. Two representative essays will illustrate this.

Self-described Orthodox Jewish feminist Blu Greenberg wrote a short but powerful essay in 1976 that is both a halakhic defence of the right to abortion as well as an implicit instantiation of the principle that 'the personal is political'. The essay begins with an almost ontological claim that the world is essentially a place of conflictual, overlapping interests with respect to macro-political as well as personal issues. Regarding the latter realm, Greenberg testified to conflictual realities in her own life 'as a mother who is daily nurtured by the sights and sounds of her children' but who also knows 'the overwhelming and exclusive claim that a child makes on a woman's life for many of her strongest years.' Given the public and personal agonistic reality within which all people live, one can expect no unambiguous position to emerge on abortion; nevertheless, not taking a position is not an option. In life, 'one is forced to make choices. Because everything in life is a trade-off and all decisions, halakhic and otherwise, are made with competing claims in mind, I must tenuously come down on the side of legal abortion.'²⁷ Greenberg disputed grounding a pro-abortion argument on an appeal to women's 'rights to control their own bodies'²⁸ because, presumably, this approach does not adequately grapple with the fact that we live amid competing claims in all levels of existence. The feminist politics that emerges from a recognition of life's tensions will not be simplistic or ideological; it will focus on making politically possible what the woman deems is personally necessary in her life – even though neither the personal nor the political will be without moral ambiguity.

By contrast, we see a very different defence of legalized abortion in some non-feminist literature, for example, Unitarian minister and social progressive George Huntston Williams's essay proposing a 'politics of abortion'.²⁹ Although Williams's essay, written in 1970, was socially progressive in its pre-Roe-v.-Wade call for broadening legalized abortion options, his essay was regressive in that it obscured the feminist principle of the personal-is-political. Instead, he promoted the notion of the victimized pregnant woman, arguing that if a woman is imperiled (dangerous pregnancy) or victimized (rape, incest, immaturity, mental defect), then societal representatives (presumably, mostly male doctors,

²⁷ B. Greenberg, 'Abortion: A Challenge to Halakhah' in *Judaism* 25:2 (1976), 201.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁹ G. H. Williams, 'Religious Residues and Presuppositions in the American Debate on Abortion' in *Theological Studies* 31:1 (1970), 11, 54.

clergy, lawyers, psychiatrists, and so on) should assume a kind of ‘regency’ over woman and fetus. The ‘doctor-advocate’ in particular should intervene with the necessary medical actions so that ‘health may be restored which the suffering person could never bring himself [sic] to do.’³⁰ Missing from Williams’s ‘politics of abortion’ is the personal agency of the woman herself, with only a few exceptions *in extremis*.³¹ Thus, what was presented by Williams as an attempt to broaden legal abortion options for women, turns out to be a proposal that undercuts the feminist notion of the personal-as-political, because it so eclipses the sphere of women’s personal agency and political control over her body as to make it almost non-existent.

The personal-is-political principle would have functioned in a critical way vis-à-vis Williams’s assumptions in his context, but does it still have validity in today’s world? A 2009 survey from the Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life shows that in the US ‘the abortion debate has receded in importance, especially among [white] liberals,’ while the most conservative – mostly religious – abortion opponents (those insisting on a ban on all abortions) have become more entrenched in their belief in the moral correctness of their pro-life views.³² How should feminist scholars in religion, who situate themselves on the pro-choice side of the abortion debate, respond to the challenges underlying this cultural shift in terms of the personal is political? Blu Greenberg’s personal-is-political approach goes far within her Orthodox Jewish context where halakhic debate had already carved out legal space for termination of a pregnancy, based on when a mother’s claims overrule a fetus’s.³³ However, the principle of the personal-is-political needs additional theorizing beyond the concept of competing claims. One resource for how one might go about this can be found in the scholarship of feminist ethicists rethinking the relationship between the personal and the political in terms of maternal *hospitality*.

³⁰ Ibid., 62, 64.

³¹ For example, he described the extraordinary woman who chooses not to abort even though her life is endangered by the pregnancy: ‘[I]n this most poignant of moments the mother would be sovereign in her final decision and without peer, for the state may not interfere with the exercise of a religious conviction in conscience’ (ibid., 68).

³² ‘Results from the 2009 Annual Religion and Public Life Survey’ Wash., D.C.: Pew Research Center (2009), 1. African American Protestants are statistically in between white liberals and white evangelicals on this question, though slightly closer to the former than the latter (11).

³³ Hence, although abortion and access to it are restricted in the State of Israel, abortion is not deemed to be murder. See Y. Yishai, ‘Public Ideas and Public Policy: Abortion Politics in Four Democracies’ in *Comparative Politics* 25:2 (1993), 217.

In recent years several feminist philosophers have made proposals for how the very personal experience of pregnancy and motherhood can be affirmed as a powerful labour of hospitality, without however overlooking what feminist philosopher Lisa Guenther describes as ‘the long history in which women have been coerced, both directly and indirectly, to produce children.’³⁴ Guenther gives a feminist reworking of Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of the Other, arguing for an ethics and politics of non-coercive maternal hospitality. Levinas describes gestation and birth as a time when ‘the Other invites me to “mak[e] a gift of my own skin.”’³⁵ This gifting is ethical not because a putatively autonomous subject makes a moral choice generously to gestate and to birth. Guenther, along with Levinas, challenges the modernist notion of the autonomous ‘I’ and instead sees maternal hospitality as ethical because one accords to the Other an ethical priority: ‘Ethically, the Other is prior to the self.’³⁶ Guenther objects, however, to Levinas’s praise for the suffering maternal ‘becoming-for-the-Other’, which could be seen as echoing ‘the patriarchal image of the ‘Good Mother [as] a quiet and patient martyr.’³⁷ She emphasizes the fact that we live in imperfect communities of many Others, and this is where hospitality must be balanced with a ‘politics of justice’. Guenther extrapolates from this directly to a politics of reproductive justice for all female Others for whom maternity can become ‘slavery...[and] the pure and worst violence.’³⁸ The gift of the maternal body must, ethically speaking, have as its necessary material precondition a politics of reproductive choice. Guenther’s theorizing on hospitality brings the personal-political relationship to bear in a new way on abortion debates. This viewpoint affirms maternal hospitality as an instance of recognition of an Other but also specifies what must be in place politically for this hospitality to be a viable ethical position – namely personal choice. Guenther’s philosophical feminism, in this way, echoes Heyward’s theological argument for choice being the political grounding for women’s free exercise of sacramental moral decision-making.

³⁴ L. Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*, Albany: State University of New York Press 2006, 140.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 149, 143.

Identity Politics

The notion that abortion is a 'woman's right' has been the basis for an identity politics of reproductive choice for decades. A classic articulation of this identity politics approach to abortion can be found in a statement of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU) from the early 1970s, 'Free Abortion is Every Woman's Right.' It affirms: 'Abortion is every woman's right, may she be rich or poor, married or unmarried; and it is a decision which she alone can make.' While this statement recognizes the difference in access to abortion services for 'middle class' as compared to 'poor and black women,'³⁹ there is a strong assumption that the right to safe legal abortion services is a common need and that achieving this legal right for one group alone would be a betrayal of 'sisterhood.' The 1969 founding conference of the CWLU issued this women's identity politics affirmation: 'I am all women, I am every woman. Wherever women are suffering, I am there. Wherever women are struggling, I am there.'⁴⁰ It is a classic clarion call for women to unite and work powerfully together for the good of all women.

Critiques of a women's identity politics of abortion have materialized in very divergent sectors. On the one hand, activists from groups of women of colour have challenged how the abortion rights movement has reflected the needs and ambitions of predominantly middle-class white women, neglecting the needs and cultural commitments of disadvantaged women of colour.⁴¹ On the other hand, conservative evangelical and Roman Catholic pro-life activists have mounted a highly visible fetal rights campaign, creating in essence a fetal identity politics to challenge a women's identity politics of reproductive choice. Thus, women's identity politics of abortion is under attack from both sides. Will a pro-choice women's identity politics survive – and should it? Let us look at examples of both of these challenges in turn.

³⁹ CWLU Herstory Website Archive, at: <http://www.uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/CWLUArchive/abortionrights.html>; accessed 28 October 2010. The CWLU existed from 1969 to 1977 and consisted of a loose network of chapter organizations and working groups devoted to grass-roots organizing, lobbying, and medical, legal, and social services for women and children.

⁴⁰ CWLU Herstory Website, CWLU Overview, at: <http://www.uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/CWLUAbout/cwluintro.html>; accessed 28 October, 2010.

⁴¹ See, e.g., D. E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, New York: Pantheon 1997.

Andrea Smith, a Native American (Cherokee) activist and religious studies scholar, outlines a continuous pattern of exploitative and dangerous reproductive control policies and practices toward Native women from the era of forced and coerced sterilizations to the marketing of unsafe contraceptives, such as long-acting hormonal drugs like Depo-Provera and Norplant.⁴² In addition, abortion is legal for Native women but de facto inaccessible for most because the 1976 Hyde Amendment outlawed any federal funding for abortion, except to save the mother's life, and most Native women rely on the federally funded Indian Health Services (IHS). Even then, access is a problem since 'sixty-two percent of the [IHS service] units did not provide abortion services.' Native women need reproductive justice and political advocacy. Nevertheless, Smith argues, the discourses of most pro-choice and pro-life groups do not speak to Native women's reproductive needs within the context of ongoing US neocolonization of Native tribes. The lack of adequate reproductive health services is just one element of Native women's systemic oppression, since most Native women live 'in communities in which unemployment rates can run as high as 80 percent, and where life expectancy can be as low as 47 years.'⁴³ Native women do not see single-issue abortion rights or pro-life lobbying as reflecting their battle for tribal survival. In one informal ethnographic study, Smith posed this question, 'Would you say you are pro-choice or pro-life?' to which one Native woman responded, 'Well, I would say I am pro-choice, but the most important thing to me is promoting life in Native communities.'⁴⁴ Promoting life may mean an anti-sterilization and anti-abortion stance in one tribal context. In another tribal context, it may mean demanding abortion services and combating the decimation of Native family life, because Native children are subjected to removal into a non-tribal foster care situation at disproportionately high percentages.⁴⁵

⁴² Smith notes that even after forced sterilization was outlawed, medical providers used Depo-Provera for Native women with mental disabilities before it received FDA approval. Depo-Provera and Norplant were vigorously promoted in Native communities and prescribed to Native women for years without written and sometimes even without oral consent obtained and without proper monitoring of side effects. See A. Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, Cambridge, Mass.: South End 2005, 92-93.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 96-97, 98.

⁴⁴ A. Smith, *Native Americans and the Christian Right*, Durham: Duke University Press 2008, 232.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Conquest*, 41ff.

Furthermore, pro-life and pro-choice advocates have not fully appreciated how reproductive oppression of Native women is a function of larger colonialist realities that are ongoing in the US context, where Native populations must eke out their existence displaced from their original tribal lands, which are also sacred spaces. Smith points to the indigenously run Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center's approach to reproductive justice, which situates women's reproductive issues in the context of Native beliefs.

The core of decision-making for the Indigenous woman is between her and the Great Spirit. Within traditional societies and languages, there is no word that equals abortion. The word itself is very harsh and impersonal. When speaking to traditional Elders knowledgeable about reproductive health matters, repeatedly they would refer to a woman knowing which herbs and methods to use 'to make her period come.' This was seen as a woman taking care of herself and doing what was necessary.⁴⁶

Native women's anticolonialist struggles should not be seen as an exception to the identity politics of choice that most (predominantly white) feminists consider as representing the majority of American women's interests. Rather, identity politics of the majority must be approached with self-critical reflexivity to ensure that political expediency does not drown out minority women's voices. Smith calls this a 'recentering' approach to identity politics that does not try to insert a slice of Native women's concerns into the majority viewpoint but rather attempts to carve out shifting points of coalition-making between groups with different identity politics.⁴⁷ For Native women, these coalitions could mean strategic alliances with the Religious Right as well as with pro-choice feminist groups – all the while understanding that neither group shares a Native worldview nor has Native women's tribal interests as their prime focus.⁴⁸

At the other end of the identity politics spectrum is pro-life advocacy for what some consider the ultimate silent partner of the abortion controversy: the fetus. The Religious Right in America has

⁴⁶ See the NAWHERC website at: <http://www.nativeshop.org/programs/reproductive-justice.html>; accessed 25 October, 2010. Some Native women disagree with Smith. Cheryl Long Feather, a Standing Rock Sioux, claims: 'It would be difficult to find an American Indian person who knows and follows their culture who could be called "pro-choice"' ('American Indians Regard Abortion as a Crime' in M. K. Derr, R. MacNair, L. Narango-Huebl [eds.], *Pro-life Feminist: Yesterday and Today*, n.p.: Feminism and Nonviolence Studies Association 2005, 351).

⁴⁷ Smith, *Native Americans*, xiii.

⁴⁸ See *ibid.*, 248.

mobilized a number of factors to develop what is essentially an identity politics of fetal rights. These include the increasing use of sonograms⁴⁹; the publicizing of images of the human-like developing fetus, made most famous in Lennart Nilsson's *Life* magazine photos of an 18-week-old fetus⁵⁰; the development of fetal surgery techniques beginning in the 1960s⁵¹; legal appeals to fetal protection⁵²; and the use of posters with fetal images in public demonstrations at women's clinics.⁵³ Feminist scholars have tried to combat this fetal identity politics approach by unmasking the discursively constructed nature of both identities,⁵⁴ by arguing for the gender-biased context for pitting one against the other,⁵⁵ and by suggesting that this binary funds extremist and violent anti-abortion ideologies.⁵⁶ It remains to feminist scholars in religious studies to continue to analyse the identity politics in religious discourses that assert the fetus as human. This task is far too vast to undertake completely here, but I will discuss some key components in Roman Catholic and Protestant discourses.

⁴⁹ R. Petchesky, 'Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction' in *Feminist Studies* 13:3 (1987), 263-292. See also C. Sanger, 'Seeing and Believing: Mandatory Ultra Sound and the Path to a Protected Choice' in *UCLA Law Review* 351 (2008), 351-408.

⁵⁰ For images from this April 30, 1965, issue, see: <http://www.life.com/image/85576582>; accessed 25 October 2010.

⁵¹ See M. J. Casper, 'Operation to the Rescue: Feminist Encounters with Fetal Surgery' in L. M. Morgan and M. W. Michaels (eds.), *Fetal Subjects/Feminist Positions*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1999.

⁵² See D. Mathieu, *Preventing Prenatal Harm: Should the State Intervene?* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic 1991.

⁵³ See, for example, the images proudly displayed on the side of Operation Rescue's 'truth truck' at: <http://www.operationrescue.org/archives/343/>; accessed 24 October 2010. The organization Priests for Life has extensive multimedia resources with detailed instructions for the use of graphic abortion images in activist work; see: <http://www.priestsforlife.org/articles/graphicimages.html>. In their online essay, 'Let's Talk about Graphic Images,' T. Burke, PhD, LPC, and J. K. Burke, MSS/LSW, write: 'Graphic images of aborted children present disturbing, yet factual documentation of what abortion does to a baby ... These real pictures of aborted children have tremendous value in documenting why the pro-life movement is against abortion' (<http://www.priestsforlife.org/images/post-abortion-healing.htm>; accessed 25 October 2010).

⁵⁴ See B. Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1993.

⁵⁵ See R. Roth, 'Women, Work, and the Politics of Fetal Rights' in C. J. Cohen, K. B. Jones, J. C. Tronto (eds.), *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader*, New York: New York University Press 1997.

⁵⁶ See C. Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-life Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2002.

The Roman Catholic rejection of abortion historically is twofold, entailing the condemnation of the sin of sex outside of procreative marriage and the condemnation of the sin of killing. It is the latter teaching out of which a fetal right-to-life Catholic argument emerges. While early and medieval canon law maintained a distinction between the ensouled (human) fetus and the fetus before ensoulment (not fully human), the church has moved slowly but steadily toward a definitive stance that was articulated in the 1917 canon law pronouncement about 'immediate animation,' which asserted conception as the point at which human ensouled life begins.⁵⁷ Subsequent Vatican pronouncements have reaffirmed this position by invoking the principle of probabilism, arguing that the prohibition of pre-implantation embryo abortion is justified because 'it suffices that this presence of the soul [in the embryo] be probable (and one can never prove the contrary).'⁵⁸ This probabilistic argument ostensibly leaves little manoeuvring room for Roman Catholic ethicists wishing to find some exceptions where maternal rights might win out over fetal rights. Theologically traditional but socially progressive Roman Catholic theologians are left hunting for equally strong probabilistic counterarguments⁵⁹ or for gaps and ambiguities in canon law that might allow for some limited pregnancy termination options without, however, committing the sin of direct killing.⁶⁰ In other words, some Catholics would say, we do not know scientifically or theologically when to begin asserting a fetal identity politics. The Vatican, however, has only become more entrenched. With the condemnation of abortion in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) many Catholic pro-life advocates

⁵⁷ S. Nicolson, *Abortion and the Roman Catholic Church*, Knoxville, Tenn.: Journal of Religious Ethics, Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Tennessee 1978, 14.

⁵⁸ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Declaration on Procured Abortion,' n. 19; at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_d oc_19741118_declaration-abortion_en.html; accessed 29 April 2011.

⁵⁹ See C. A. Tauer, 'Probabilism and the Moral Status of the Early Embryo' in P. B. Jung and T. A. Shannon, *Abortion and Catholicism: The American Debate*, New York: Crossroad 1988.

⁶⁰ Canon law currently permits medical intervention, which could result indirectly in a therapeutic abortion, in the case of ectopic pregnancies, cervical cancer, and other extreme cases. See K. Bowring, 'The Moral Dilemma for Management Procedures for Ectopic Pregnancy' in *Life and Learning (University Faculty for Life Conference Proceedings)* 12 (2000): available at: <http://uffl.org/vol12/contents12.htm>.

believe they finally have an anti-abortion pronouncement that rises to the level of infallible doctrine.⁶¹

Evangelical and mainline Protestant views on fetal life do not engage in the kinds of theological and canon law casuistry found in some Roman Catholic debates. As might be expected, Protestant arguments are more biblically oriented (as I will discuss below), but others are significantly supplemented with appeals to medical science. One representative of the latter approach is popular evangelical writer Randy Alcorn in his book *Why Pro-life?*⁶² Alcorn cites medical professionals' opinions about human life beginning at conception and then argues that even the 'earliest means to cause abortion, including Mifepristone (RU-486) and all abortion pills, are too late to avoid taking life.'⁶³ Once Alcorn has scientifically established, to his satisfaction, that the embryo is rightfully to be referred to as a 'preborn child', the identity politics tilt ineluctably, he would claim, away from the woman's right to choose and toward the preservation of unborn life.⁶⁴ The argument is definitively won by the proof Alcorn believes he has found that abortion not only kills babies but also harms women. To make this case, Alcorn cites medical studies that indicate increases in ectopic pregnancies, pelvic inflammatory disease, and cancer, to mention just a few of the medical problems women supposedly have higher chances of facing after abortion—not to mention the psychological problems (Alcorn cites Reardon on this).⁶⁵

The Bible says nothing about abortion. Therefore, pro-life evangelicals turn to scriptural arguments for fetal personhood to make a biblical anti-abortion case. Their biblical interpretations have come under criticism from biblical scholars who argue that pro-life evangelicals are reading select Bible passages out of context and misapplying them to the

⁶¹ There is debate on this issue. For an argument that the pope's declaration is infallible, see Fr. F. Pavone, 'The Church's "No" to Abortion,' *Priests for Life*, at:

<http://www.priestsforlife.org/articles/churchsnotoabortion.html>;

accessed 22 November 2010. For an opposing view, see F. A. Sullivan, 'The Doctrinal Weight of *Evangelium Vitae*' in *Theological Studies* 56:3 (1995), 560-565.

⁶² R. Alcorn, *Why Pro-life?* Sisters, Or.: Multnomah 2004, 32.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27, 42, 29.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁶⁵ See *ibid.*, 69-74; 131n. 17; 132nn. 24, 24, 35. Most studies contradict Alcorn's overstated medical claims. See National Cancer Institute, 'Fact Sheet: Abortion, Miscarriage, and Breast Cancer Risk' at:

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/risk/abortion-miscarriage>; J. Virk, J. Zhang, and J. Olsen, 'Medical Abortion and the Risk of Subsequent Adverse Pregnancy Outcomes' in *The New England Journal Of Medicine* 357:7 (2007), 648-653.

present-day fetal personhood debate.⁶⁶ Some progressive evangelicals have called into question whether a clear-cut pro-life position can be found in the Bible at all, and they contend that a biblical case can be made for abortion in some limited instances.⁶⁷ Strongly arguing against this progressive evangelical position is Francis Beckwith, who was a leading evangelical in the 1990s and early 2000s, at which point he converted to Roman Catholicism. Beckwith outlines what he believes is a clear biblical view of the personal existence ascribed to the just-conceived.⁶⁸ When one then considers the unambiguous (in his estimation) early church condemnation of all abortion, Beckwith argues that he has a strong case for a correct hermeneutical approach to abortion and the Bible: when read through the eyes of the early church authorities – the so-called fathers of the church – the Bible unequivocally asserts the personhood of the fetus and, by logical extension, refutes abortion.⁶⁹ Beckwith uses this biblical basis as part of his argument against the pregnant woman having any claim over the life of the innocent preborn.

Do fetal identity politics always mean eclipsed rights for women? It depends upon the discourse. Note, for example, how some appeals to fetal identity have served pregnant women's interests. American Catholic bishops have taken a fetal identity politics stand in order to lobby against any approaches to immigration reform that would include statutes for denying non-emergency medical care for illegal immigrants. One bishop condemned any such laws, calling for guaranteed medical care for illegal immigrants 'from conception to natural death.'⁷⁰ At a time when some public sentiment is turning angrily against pregnant illegal immigrants for supposedly sapping the resources of maternity wards to give birth to

⁶⁶ See C. Baughman, "'Yahveh Called Me from the Womb": Does Isaiah 49:1-6 Furnish Proof that the Fetus is a Living Human Being?' in *Christian Social Action* (July-Aug 1996), 26-29.

⁶⁷ D. Dunnett, 'Evangelicals and Abortion' in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33:2 (1990), 215-25; R. N. Wennberg, *Life in the Balance: Exploring the Abortion Controversy*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans 1995.

⁶⁸ F. J. Beckwith, 'Brave New Bible: A Reply to the Moderate Evangelical Position on Abortion' in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33:4 (1990), 490-93 and 'A Critical Appraisal of Theological Arguments for Abortion Rights' in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:591 (1991), 338-42.

⁶⁹ Beckwith, 'Brave New Bible,' 494.

⁷⁰ C. Muth, 'Bishops Say Health Reform Should Include All Immigrants, Legal or Not' in *Catholic News Service* (22 September 2009); <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0904223.htm>; accessed 28 November 2010.

‘anchor babies’,⁷¹ this Catholic use of fetal identity politics is not completely without social justice merit, even if some feminist Christians might disagree with the theology behind it. Nevertheless, if one is referring to attempts to establish principles or legal precedents for when citizen rights begin, then a fetal identity politics could result in some chilling outcomes, ranging from incarceration of pregnant women involved in risky behaviours (such as drugs and unprotected sex),⁷² to court mandated surgeries and other medical interventions for the ‘fetal patient’ without the consent of the pregnant woman.⁷³

If one is referring to philosophical, ethical, or theological discourse, then the notion of fetal identity should not simply be taken off the table. Discussions of fetal identity and pregnant women’s identity should be conducted by philosophers, ethicists, and theologians – and perhaps by all three groups together as much as possible. Such discussions might take place at the intersection of a number of complex – if not age-old – questions. Who is a subject? What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? Because these philosophical, ethical, and theological issues have been for so long thoroughly hijacked by masculinist systems of thought, feminist scholars are still formulating ways of approaching fetal and pregnant women’s identities in a feminist mode.

Feminist pro-choice proposals about fetal personhood, which have mostly come from white feminist ethicists and theologians, fall into roughly three camps: developmentalist, relationalist, and hybrid developmentalist-relationalist approaches.⁷⁴ Beverly Harrison proposes a developmentalist approach in which ‘full human value’ is not accorded to the fetus until certain ‘functional requisites’ of ‘discrete biological existence’ are

⁷¹ See the description of this term in the website of the right-wing group known as FAIR, Federation for American Immigration Reform: ‘Anchor Babies: Part of the Immigration-Related American Lexicon’ at: http://www.fairus.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=16535&security=1601&news_iv_ctrl=1007; accessed 28 November 2010.

⁷² See R. A. Strickland and M. L. Whicker, ‘Fetal Endangerment Versus Fetal Welfare: Discretion of Prosecutors in Determining Criminal Liability’ in *Expecting Trouble: Surrogacy, Fetal Abuse, and New Reproductive Technologies*, Boulder: Westview 1995.

⁷³ See Casper, ‘Operation to the Rescue.’

⁷⁴ There are also feminist pro-life proposals, such as S. Callahan, ‘Abortion and the Sexual Agenda: A Case for Pro-life Feminism’ in A. Soble (ed.), *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002; F. Mathewes-Green, ‘Pregnancy Care Centers: Sisterhood is Powerful’ in B. Stetson (ed.), *The Silent Subject: Reflections on the Unborn in American Culture*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger 1996.

achieved.⁷⁵ Marjorie Maguire takes a relational approach, arguing that while human life may begin at conception, personhood begins at the point at which the mother commits to a relationship with that life within her, which for some women may be an embryo in a petri dish and for others a much later fetus (though Maguire rejects abortion for viable fetuses).⁷⁶ Tina Beattie exemplifies a hybrid developmentalist-relationalist approach, arguing that the eighth week is decisive both for the embryo ('the primitive streak has emerged and there is no longer any possibility of twinning') and for the mother, since most women 'will know they have conceived within the first eight weeks.' Hence, she argues, abortion after this point is ethically 'increasingly problematic.'⁷⁷

Nativity and Abortion

In the remainder of this essay, I propose another way of reflecting on fetal personhood and identity via the philosophical concept of natality. I myself have written critically about the role of natality in a feminist imaginary, as proposed by feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen, now sadly no longer with us.⁷⁸ Ongoing feminist theorizing about this concept in the past few years, however, leads me to believe that there may be more productivity to the concept than I at first realized, especially in relation to abortion debates.

Hannah Arendt is credited with formulating natality as a philosophical concept.⁷⁹ Arendt proposed natality in an effort to

⁷⁵ B. W. Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion*, Boston: Beacon 1983, 193, 194. These requisites roughly equate with viability, prior to which the fetus should be accorded some but not full human value (see, *ibid.*, 216-217). Carol Tauer cautiously supports a developmentalist approach, focusing on fetal neural markers. See C. A. Tauer, 'Abortion: Embodiment and Prenatal Development' in L. S. Cahill and M. Farley (eds.), *Embodiment, Morality and Medicine*, Dordrecht/Boston: Kluwer Academic 1995, 82-84. A developmentalist position is also argued in D. A. Dombrowski and R. Deltete, *A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2000.

⁷⁶ M. R. Maguire, 'Personhood, Covenant and Abortion' in *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1983).

⁷⁷ T. Beattie, 'Catholicism, Choice and Consciousness: A Feminist Theological Perspective on Abortion' in *International Journal of Public Theology* 4:1 (2010), 70.

⁷⁸ See my discussion of G. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press 1996, in Kamitsuka, *Feminist Theology*, 84-85.

⁷⁹ See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958; 1998, 8-9.

counteract the prevailing Heideggerian philosophy of her day, which defined humankind as Being-towards-death. Natality, she argued, provided a better grounding for communal political responsibility and respect for human freedom and dignity, especially in a post-Holocaust world. Arendt defined natality as two-fold: it is a beginning and an appearance. Natality is a beginning of a unique, individual embodied life (*'zoe'*), and an appearance, in the sense of being born and physically entering a community of others with whom one will have the capacity to interact as a political being (*'bios politikos'*).⁸⁰ Arendt wanted to make natality, in its most basic 'givenness' of *zoe*, to be the foundation of human rights, so that even when individuals for some reason are stripped of their political capacity to assert their own rights, the human community should accord them human rights by virtue of 'mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies.'⁸¹ In contrast to developmentalist approaches to fetal personhood, the *zoe* aspect of natality does not depend on benchmarks of viability or sentience, about which considerable scientific and ethical debate exists.

The notion of natal appearance was a compelling idea for Arendt because it validated the public space of every new *bios politikos* within the human community at birth. Pro-lifers of the Religious Right, on the other hand, have tried to move the start date of the political being up nine months to the moment of conception, so that the fertilized zygote would qualify as being called a preborn baby with the same human rights that would be accorded to an infant. Pro-life proponents assert that human rights begin at the point at which human embryonic development begins. Because fetuses must grow *in utero*, this perspective unavoidably pits fetal claims against those of pregnant women. Instead, I suggest looking at fetal and pregnant women's identity in terms of natality, which reduces this competition of identity claims, without however devaluing the coming-into-being of nats. Jantzen defined natality as a moment of welcoming the infant 'into a whole 'web of human relationships.'⁸² Jantzen did not develop an ethic of abortion, but it is implied: 'We came into being at birth, before which we did not exist. There is nothing terrible in that recognition.

⁸⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 97, 13. See the discussion of *zoe* and *bios politikos* in P. Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt & Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006, 70ff.

⁸¹ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1973, 301.

⁸² Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 149.

The acceptance of life is an acceptance of limits.⁸³ The fetus is not without life *per se*, but it is not a natal; it lacks the qualities Arendt calls beginning and appearance. Inseparable from its maternal host, it has not yet begun as individual *zoe*, and it has not appeared to the human community – even if it has been seen on a sonogram. The human community can anticipate its coming – from decorating the nursery to making sure there is clean running water in the village – and such acts are good because they nurture communal hospitality. Nevertheless, the anticipation of natality does not make it so. One cannot wish fetuses into existence, though every parent of a stillborn child has prayed thus. Nor would we want to think of natal status as something that can be conferred by onlookers. What can be conferred can also be revoked, as Arendt suggests in describing the *modus operandi* of Nazi extermination camps, which pronounced Jews to be nonbeings and treated them ‘as if they never existed.’⁸⁴ In this way, a natality approach to fetal personhood differs from the relationist approach where personhood is conferred by the pregnant woman’s commitment to or acknowledgement of the life within her. Instead, natality is not something others confer upon us; we are nats by virtue of the simple fact of being born into the world.

In addition, the notion of natality allows us to see even more starkly that the pregnant woman is also a new and unique being who has come into the world. She began as a natal; as a pregnant woman, she is, as it were, a new and unique creation once more, who has been newly ‘insert[ed] into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth.’ Her pregnant body is sustaining a complexity of interconnected life, and yet this mysterious and unique *zoe* is not all that the pregnant woman is. She also has a capacity, as *bios politikos*, to act and to ‘respond by beginning something new on [her] own initiative.’⁸⁵ To take from the pregnant woman her speaking and acting initiative in relation to her pregnant existence is the worst of all possible oppressions – not the loss of life, which will eventually happen to all mortals – but the loss of one’s full natality as a political actor in the human community.

Arendt’s notion of natality, with its emphasis on being born, does not solve all issues related to fetal and pregnant women’s identities. It does, however, allow feminist scholars to think in new ways about pregnant women’s reproductive rights. Feminist theorizing about abortion

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁸⁴ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 442.

⁸⁵ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 176-177.

must strive to avoid denigrating what many pregnant women experience as the mysterious givenness of life in the womb to which they feel morally obligated in various and sometimes ambiguous ways. On the other hand, there is need for a more robust philosophical and ethical grounding for abortion rights than an appeal to privacy or to the priority of pregnant women's claims over all fetal claims. Arendt's notion of *bios politikos* could be mobilized to support a pregnant woman's right to act in the public sphere on her own behalf and on the behalf of her dependents. Women who have supported other women in the crisis of unwanted pregnancies have always known this: most women who abort do so, in some capacity, out of a prior natal commitment – a commitment to their own natal survival, to the well being of their born children, and to their extended family and community.⁸⁶ A choice for abortion that contributes to a woman's own necessary 'flourishing' and that of her other dependent nats is not only a social good but a theological good.⁸⁷ This is not to say that those women who have, in a self-sacrificial way, brought unwanted or difficult pregnancies to birth have not contributed to human flourishing as well. It is not an either/or situation. However, a feminist analysis of pregnancy for Christian women cannot overlook the disciplinary force of the deep-seated normativity of self-sacrificial motherhood – in part because of the iconic status of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Women need resources to balance that larger-than-life figure of God-blessed womanhood.⁸⁸ Among other things, women need feminist scholarship that will attend to their ordinary and subaltern experiences, that will advocate for politics grounded in the richness of their diverse personal knowledges, and that will theorize new models for flourishing and mourning, hospitality and resistance.

Conclusion

This essay analysed the ongoing salience of three feminist methodological principles (women's experience, the personal is political, and identity politics) for current scholarly reflection on the abortion issue. We have

⁸⁶ 'The majority of women who have abortions (61%) have children' (R.K. Jones, L.F. Frohwirth, and A.M. Moore, 'How Issues of Motherhood Influence Women Who Have Abortions' in *Journal of Family Issues* 29 [2008]), 79).

⁸⁷ Jantzen proposed moving away from the 'idiom of salvation' in Christian theology and toward the notion of 'flourishing' (see Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 156ff.).

⁸⁸ Note one Catholic pro-life prayer: 'Mary, we pray today for all mothers who are afraid to be mothers...' (Circle of Prayer – Abortion Prayers at: <http://www.circleofprayer.com/abortion-prayers.html>; accessed 1 December 2010).

seen the deep embeddedness and even the political necessity of these classic principles; however, new reflection is needed on how these and other principles might continue to apply to feminist debates on abortion. I have gestured toward possible theoretical resources that feminist scholars might use to move the discussion forward. I have suggested that it is important not to underestimate or overlook the diversity of women's reproductive experiences, which necessitates using theoretical resources that take a nonreductive approach to the abortion experiences of deeply religious women. While a strong defense of individual privacy will continue to be the legal cornerstone for abortion rights in America, feminists should continue to explore other ways of construing the personal-political connection, as seen in the discussion above of Lisa Guenther's less individualistic proposal for maternal hospitality. No matter how much momentum there is for seeing identity in a cultural constructionist, postmodern mode, it behooves feminist scholars to revisit again and again the issue of identity and personhood, especially when new claims of underrepresented constituencies are brought forward. Feminists should not lump together all religious discourses of fetal claims as extremist ravings of the Religious Right; rather, feminist scholars should take up the challenge to continue to refine their theories of what it means to be a person (or as I have suggested, a natal) within the context of communal ethical obligations. In short, the present essay has offered some brief proposals on all three of these feminist principles in relation to abortion. My hope has been to display an approach that strives to acknowledge complexity and ambiguity and to foster socio-political relevance and ethical gravitas in relation to women's embodied specificity in the circle of life.