

ABORTION AND THEOLOGY – AN IMPOSSIBLE CONCILIATION?

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Abstract: *Abortion has been the subject of intense debates over the years. Both the opponents and the sustainers of abortion have brought strong arguments in favor of their opinions. Because the abortion problem unveils important issues, such as the origin and the meaning of life, it was intensely analyzed by theologians. The theological doctrines usually forbid abortion, because human beings are considered to be alive since the moment of conception. Therefore, it is important to find out whether it is possible to reach conciliation between abortion and theology. Because religion has an important influence over people's lives, religious view on abortion should be based not only on abstract principles, but also on the necessity to solve real-life problems; otherwise, people may suffer. The most important theological argument that promotes abortion claims that abortion must be allowed, in certain circumstances, because reality shows that, sometimes, abortion is needed. For example, these situations when abortion must be done are those when the pregnant woman faced severe economic or social problems, or when the pregnancy was the result of the rape. In these cases, if it was born, the child would suffer on financial or emotional ground, and also the mother would have a heavier life. This entitles us to say that conciliation between abortion and theology can be achieved if theology understands that, sometimes, to allow abortion means to express a form of compassion.*

Keywords: *abortion, theology, right to life, women's rights, the legal regime of abortion.*

Acknowledgement: *This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/141699, Project ID 141699, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Abortion has been the subject of sustained debates over the years. The intense debate over abortion comes from the fact that abortion highlights a whole range of aspects regarding human life, far beyond abortion itself. In the first place, abortion raises the question of the humanity of the fetus and of our right to decide whether the fetus will live or die. Furthermore, abortion brings us questions about life itself, about human relations, about women's social role, about medical and legal issues. It seems that, once opened, the discussion over abortion brings endless debates, on a wide range of aspects concerning humanity. Although the aspects regarding abortion belong to an extremely wide range of problems, it is somehow surprising to realize that, in fact, all opinions on

abortion belong to one of the two major points of view: the one that forbids abortion and the other one, which considers that abortion, should be allowed.

It is easy to see that the abortion issue deals with some problems which are also of theological interest. This is obvious when we realize that, on the one hand, abortion brings into the light the problem of man's power over life, and, on the other hand, religion establishes that only God has the power to decide over life and death. This brings out a conflict, which is apparently impossible to solve, between those who believe that abortion should be permitted and theology. This is because most religions (and especially Christianity) strongly affirm that the fetus has its own right to life since the moment of conception.

Further, we will try to find out whether there is any possibility that abortion is accepted by theology.

2. THE MAJOR VIEWS ON ABORTION

In this section of the paper we will analyze the structure and the content of the opinions we take into account. In other words, we want to find out whether these well-defined views on abortion can be interpreted, in order to reveal tolerance towards the opposite opinion.

We start our search with what is, in our point of view, the easiest problem to analyze between the two: the secular opinion that allows abortion. The reason why we think it is easier to analyze this aspect, rather than the theological view on abortion, is that the secular view deals mainly with logical arguments, based on real problems which occur when people face abortion. In the theological speech, a great importance is given to the element called *faith*, which, in our opinion, is beyond any logical argument. Some thinkers have tried to prove the existence of God with logical arguments, but they had to admit that, acting this way, the conclusion is inevitable a probable one, and faith is needed when walking on theological ground [1].

a. The secular opinion that allows abortion

The secular opinion which considers that abortion should be allowed is actually a category containing various forms and shades, depending on the degree of tolerance and on the view shown towards the fetus and the pregnant woman.

We must say that we have rarely found an absolute tolerance of abortion, which is the allowance of abortion in absolutely all circumstances, whenever a pregnant woman would want to have an abortion. This is why we hope to find a convergence between the secular view and the theological view towards abortion. Mainly, the authors which firmly sustain abortion show rather concern for woman's freedom of choice instead of lack of concern for the fetus. This allows us to conclude that the tolerant attitude towards abortion is mainly a reaction to a social reality, and not an independent, self-grown attitude. And this is another element which makes us hope in a conciliation between the allowance of abortion and theology.

As we have already shown, the tolerance towards abortion embraces many forms. In the following lines, we will present the most important directions, taking into account the theoretical field and also the legal regime of abortion in different states, because we are convinced that a certain legislation on abortion reflects, either expressly shown or not, a certain moral and conceptual view on abortion.

Inside the category generally named the permissive attitude towards abortion there are two major systems: the system that shows absolute tolerance on abortion and the system that shows partial tolerance on abortion.

b. The absolute tolerance of abortion: theoretical and legal expression

The absolute tolerance on abortion is, as we have already sustained above, rarely seen. We have found it better expressed at legislative level, rather than at theoretical level. At theoretical level, it is relevant to mention the assertion of the Nobel Prize laureate Dr. James D. Watson, who claimed that, due to the finding of genetic abnormalities, the parents should be allowed to decide to kill their children even at three days after birth [2]. We conclude that, if this opinion allows killing newborn children until three days of life, it also allows abortion to be performed until the pregnant woman is about to give birth, at least if the fetus has genetic deficiencies. Still, we remark that, in this view, abortion is absolutely tolerated only in regard to the age of pregnancy until abortion can be performed; abortion is conditioned by a certain state of the fetus, which consists in the existence of genetic deficiencies. An absolute tolerance on abortion means, in our opinion, to allow the performance of an abortion anytime during pregnancy, with no reason at all, only because the pregnant woman (or other person) wishes so.

At legislative level, states usually avoid the explicit express of a large tolerance towards abortion. However, the reality proves that some states have a virtually absolute tolerance of abortion, although they do not officially recognize this regime. This is the case in China, where abortion is allowed, with no restrictions regarding the pregnancy age, as long as the mother gives her consent [3, 94-96]. Apparently, China gives great importance to mother's will refer to the fetus. Reality shows that, in China, the consent of the mother has been often neglected, and women have been going through abortion procedures against their will. This is because, since 1979, China has implemented the so-called 'one child policy', as an important part of its control over population-growth. This policy is not an official one, but has been highlighted by constant practices which encourage couples to have only one child. Moreover, China helps women to have abortions, because the state pays all the fees required and the women is granted a medical paid leave, in order to undergo an abortion. The main tool for controlling the population growth in China remains the use of contraceptive methods. Even Chinese Constitution provides that citizens must use family planning, which implies the use of contraceptives. And the Chinese Government helps people in the process of family planning through an organized system of sexual education and through free distribution of contraceptive products and services. But, in fact, the use of contraceptives has a high rate of failure, and abortion becomes a true backup plan for situations when contraceptive methods fail [4]. Some sources affirm that, in some cases, women were reportedly driven by force to

hospitals and underwent abortion procedures, if they already had at least one child, no matter the age of pregnancy [5]. The 'one child policy', combined with traditional Chinese culture, which requires that a couple has at least one male child, leads to an unusual, but predictable problem: the couples prefer to have a male child instead of a female child. Furthermore, due to this situation, it is logic that Chinese people do the so-called 'sex-selective abortion' [6]. This means that Chinese couples, knowing the sex of the fetus, may decide not to keep the fetus, if the fetus is a female. This practice leads to problems in the gender ratio among population, with a significant prevalence of males over females. Reportedly, in some provinces men are over 2 times more numerous than women [7]. In time, this unbalanced situation leads to problems concerning the foundation of a family. The Chinese Government is aware of this problem and tries to find solutions. For this purpose, it is forbidden to use modern medical techniques in order to observe the sex of the fetus. The physicians who don't respect the interdiction are subject to penalties. However, corruption or empathy makes the physicians to break the rules [8].

Still, China's 'one child policy' knows some exceptions. For example, in Shandong and Hebei provinces couples from rural areas are allowed to have a second child, if the first child is a female [9].

It results that the official Chinese point of view, that only the mother decides whether to have or not an abortion, remains only an empty slogan. In reality, abortion can be done whenever a pregnancy doesn't fit the official policy regarding population, which reveals an absolute tolerance on abortion.

Similar to China, North Korea shows a very tolerant attitude towards abortion. Still, this extreme permissibility is not expressly shown. Formally, abortion is allowed only if there are *good reasons* [3, 120-121]. The lack of any explanation regarding the meaning of these *good reasons* shows the intention to actually allow abortion on a wide range of reasons, because virtually any reason can be a good reason to have an abortion, from a certain point of view.

An extreme legal tolerance towards abortion, but for different reasons than those in China and North Korea, can be found in Canada. Here, there are no restrictions on abortion, regarding the age of the pregnancy or the existence of some reasons which would justify the abortion. This situation is due to the decision ruled by The Supreme Court of Canada in the case of *R. v. Morgentaler*, from 1988. In this case, Henry Morgentaler, a physician, has been accused of illegally performing a large number of abortions, because abortion was illegal at that time. The Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the ban on abortion was an infringement of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, thus an infringement of the Canadian Constitution, because it was an infringement to women's right to the security of the person [10]. The rule, which is still standing today, decided the total freedom of abortion in Canada. Furthermore, The Supreme Court of Canada, in the case *Tremblay v. Daigle*, from 1989, ruled that only the pregnant woman has the right to decide whether to have or not an abortion; the father has no right to decide on that matter [11].

It is interesting to compare the legal situation of abortion in China and Canada. Both countries have a high tolerance on abortion, but the reasons behind their legal status

of abortion are different. Although China officially claims that the decision to have an abortion belongs to the pregnant woman, in reality, the state controls women's right to choose. In Canada, the permissibility of abortion is also granted for women's interest; unlike China, Canada actually offers women a real right to choose, and the state does not interfere with a woman's intimate decision on having or not having a child. So, it seems that, unlike China, Canada really allows women to be free in terms of abortion. But, still, in Canada, things are not as good as it may appear. The problem here is that the cost of the abortion procedure, which is often high, is not always supported by the state. This leads to discrimination between women based on wealth. In China, the costs of the abortion procedure are generally supported by the state [3, 94-96].

It seems that, at least for now, the legal regimes which have a high tolerance on abortion are not perfect.

c. The partial tolerance on abortion: theoretical arguments and legal expression

The system that shows partial tolerance on abortion can be found on the most part of legal regimes around the globe. However, the degree of tolerance varies widely. Writing this section of our paper, we begin with the analysis of theoretical aspects, because the partial tolerance on abortion is well-represented in the theoretical speeches expressed over time. Then we will observe the characteristics of the legal systems which have embraced this view on abortion.

From the beginning we must underline that the authors that have tried to argue that abortion should be permitted have accomplished a hard task. That is because, while proving that abortion should be allowed, they must keep accordance with the accepted moral rules, and therefore, whatever their arguments may be, they must respect the idea that human life must be protected from the moment of birth [12].

It is surprising that, among authors that sustain the liberalization of abortion, we found an author that promotes abortion, although he declares himself to be a good Christian. It is the case of Roger A. Paynter, who believes that the allowance of abortion is an appropriate answer to real-life problems. In his view, it is difficult to say that a pregnancy which is the result of a rape, for example, is God's will. It results that, in difficult situations, a woman must have the freedom to decide whether to keep or not to keep an unwanted pregnancy [13, 236]. Based on the arguments exposed by this author, we tend to think that it is really possible to create conciliation between a tolerant attitude towards abortion and theology. After all, all religions promote kindness and compassion; therefore it is profoundly religious to understand the pain of a woman who gets pregnant against her will, as a result of a rape. We also tend to understand a woman who wants to have an abortion because she considers that, at least for the moment, she could not offer enough time or economically good conditions for a child, due to the fact that a child needs constant care and has some basic needs that have to be accomplished. So, our compassion aims also the child who would suffer if the mother did not offer him or her enough emotional or financial support. In this view, in order to justify abortion we don't

need to prove that the fetus is not a person and that abortion is not a crime. Instead, this view is based on choosing the lesser of two evils.

Not all opinions that promote abortion show compassion for the fetus. Actually, most of them try to explain that abortion must be allowed simply because the fetus is not a real human being.

Thus, it has been argued that the fetus only has the *potential* of becoming a human being, as his human abilities are not certain yet. Therefore, the balance between the fetus and a person which has been born is asymmetrical, in favor of the human being which has already been born. It has been argued that, although a newborn child is not aware of his or her own life, his or her existence is superior to that of a fetus, because the newborn child is valued by other people [14]. As far as we are concerned, we believe that this type of reasoning has the flaw of not taking into account the fact that, often, human beings are valued by people before their birth (for example, when a pregnant woman loves her child even before giving birth).

Other authors affirm that a human being gradually acquires the rights specifically own by a *person*. So, as long as the fetus does not have the specific features which define a person, it cannot be considered a person, therefore it does not have the right to life. Among the features which are thought to define a person there is consciousness, rational thinking and the ability to communicate [15]. We observe that, following this reasoning, we may conclude that a child, at least for a few months after birth, is not a real person, so it does not have the right to life. But this is a conclusion which obviously contradicts general moral rules. This way, we emphasize the idea that theories which have tried to rationally explain that the fetus is not a person are somehow far-fetched and have significant flaws. We prefer to admit that abortion must be tolerated, while considering the fetus a value which is worth to be protected.

An author which had a great influence over pro-abortion movement is Judith Jarvis Thomson. She compared the relation between the fetus and a fully developed person with the relation between an acorn and an oak: the acorn is not the oak, although it contains all the features which would help it to become an oak. She also compared the state of the pregnancy with the situation when a woman would be linked against her will to a violinist, through medical devices, for nine months, because this would be the only way to save the violinist's life. The author claims that no one would have the right to force the woman to stay in such a situation, therefore a pregnant woman must have the freedom to decide to have an abortion, if she wishes so [16].

In our opinion, the reasoning used by this author to justify abortion is wrong, because it uses a false premise. Unless the pregnancy is the result of a rape, the woman must always be aware that a pregnancy may occur, even when she uses contraceptive methods, so, somehow, she accepts this possibility. Furthermore, the state of a woman being pregnant is far from the state of a woman forced to stay linked to another person. Pregnancy is a natural state, which usually does not annihilate woman's abilities to live a normal life and, more important, usually pregnancy does not put the woman's life in danger. So, in our opinion, it is no use to argue that the abortion must be allowed, claiming that pregnancy is a brutal and unwanted change of a woman's life. Unless it is the result of a rape, pregnancy is a state which is *at least accepted as a possibility*, if not

wanted, by a woman. In spite of the fact that we do not agree the arguments offered by Thomson, we understand that Thomson, as a feminist, wanted to promote women's rights, in an era when women were just beginning to claim their rights (Thomson formulated her arguments in 1970's). So, her exaggerated arguments were a brutal response to the brutal reality that women found themselves under men's control over the years [17].

If we make a synopsis of the arguments used by different authors to sustain a wide liberalization of abortion, we observe that, in most cases, the arguments have some flaws. For example, the comparisons used by different authors in order to sustain that abortion must be allowed are strange and inappropriate. We have seen above how Judith Jarvis Thomson compares the state of the pregnancy to that of a woman connected against her will to another person, through medical devices. Another author compares the fetus with a cat and concludes that, because the cat is aware of its existence and the fetus does not have such awareness, the cat has the right to eat and to do other actions specific to alive beings, whilst the fetus does not have the right to life [18]. These comparisons are strange, unnatural, and they ignore the fact that pregnancy is a natural state. In our opinion, the relation between the fetus and the pregnant woman is unique; therefore it is useless to try to compare pregnancy with something else. The results of such a comparison can be nothing but wrong.

We also noticed that some of the authors who promote abortion use imprecise and unclear notions. It seems that, at one point, they get stuck in their own reasoning, because they find some weak points of their arguments, but have no solutions to strengthen them. For example, one of these authors (Mary Anne Warren) says that the fetus does not have a *significant* right to life. But can we divide the right to life in significant and less significant parts? The right to life either exists, or does not exist. Also, Judith Jarvis Thomson admits that, if a woman pregnant in seven months would want to have an abortion just because she wants to go on a trip, she should not have the right to do so. But Thomson does not offer any explanation for such an affirmation, which contradicts all her reasoning. After all, if we admit that a pregnancy is a real burden for the mother and that women must be free to have an abortion whenever they want, why should matter the age of pregnancy and the reason that determines a woman to have an abortion?

Even more, we remark that the majority of the sustainers of abortion act like pregnancy is the worst thing that could happen to a woman, ignoring what happens after birth. But the real problem of an unwanted pregnancy refers to raising the child, after birth. So, instead of forcing an explanation using weak arguments, they would rather focus their attention on justifying abortion on economical or social reasons.

The most plausible arguments in favor of abortion seem to be those that admit that the fetus has the right to be valued as an entity which has the potential of becoming a person. In this view, abortion is sometimes necessary, but not because women or men have an absolute right to decide on the course of the pregnancy. The necessity of abortion arises from the real life, which proves that there are good reasons, economical, social or medical, for a person to decide that an abortion must be done. Anyway, we think it is ridiculous to deny any value of the fetus, as long as the fetal stage is absolutely necessary for a human to come into being.

At legislative level, the most part of the states allow abortion, in certain conditions, which vary widely around the world. These conditions may be permissive (for example, in Romania, Australia, Austria, Bahamas, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cuba, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Iceland, India, Italy, Japan, Moldavia, Norway, Russia, Slovenia, South Africa, South Korea, Switzerland, The United States of America) or very restrictive (Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Iran, Ireland, Mauritania, Morocco, Poland, Syria) [3].

d. The theological view on abortion

Now we turn our attention to the theological view on abortion. Here, the things are much simpler. Although it admits some variations, theology considers that abortion must not be permitted, because the fetus has a right to life equal to a person which has been born. This is the view in Christianity, Buddhism [19], Hinduism [20], Islam [21], and Judaism [22], which are the main religions of the world.

As regards Christianity, we found out that the Bible does not directly forbid abortion. Still, it contains some references to accidental abortion and to fetal development, which have been interpreted in different ways [13, 234-235]. Inside Christianity, there are some differences between Orthodox Church and Catholic Church regarding abortion.

The Orthodox Church traditionally allow abortion only if it is necessary to save the life of the pregnant woman. This attitude has been constantly maintained by the Orthodox Church along the time [23].

The Catholic Church, in the present-day, totally forbids abortion, even if abortion would be necessary to save the life of the pregnant woman. The only situation tolerated by the Catholic Church is when, due to medical procedures used to save the life of the pregnant woman (other procedures than abortion), abortion occurs, as an unintended consequence [24]. However, this extreme attitude towards abortion of the Catholic Church dates back since 1869 [25]. Previously, the Catholic Church sanctioned abortion only if the fetus had passed the moment of *ensoulment*. The theory of *delayed ensoulment*, embraced by the Catholic Church under the influence of St. Augustine's teachings, claimed that the fetus can be considered a human being only when it gained all the features specifically human. It was generally believed that the moment of ensoulment coincided with the moment when the fetus had its first movements. It was thought that the moment of ensoulment occurred differently for male and female fetuses: while male fetuses gained soul at 40 days after the moment of conception, female fetuses gained soul at 90 days after that moment [26 and 27].

The theory of ensoulment presented above seems rather surprising. We believe that it was a way to bring religious rules closer to people's needs. Obviously, unwanted pregnancies occurred, while society was generally reluctant to accept children which were born outside social rules. In these conditions, we believe that the theory of ensoulment was an indirect acceptance of abortion practices by the Catholic Church, when the pregnancy was in an early stage.

At this point of our paper, we highlight what seems to be conciliation between abortion and theology, because the theory of ensoulment, adopted for a long period of time by the Catholic Church, actually allowed abortion, in specific conditions, established through a religious dogma.

The authors who adopted the Christian perspective on abortion and used rational thinking to sustain the anti-abortion movement claim that we must consider the fetus a human being with full rights since the moment of conception. Their arguments often use analogy, and we must say that, compared to those used by pro-abortionists, their analogies seem to be more natural. For example, our doubt about the state of the fetus is compared to the situation when a hunter points the gun to a bush, not knowing what may be inside that bush: an animal or a human being; he does not have the right to shoot, based on the possibility that it may not be a human being. Therefore, we do not have the right to allow abortion, based on our supposition that the fetus may not be a real human being [28].

Christian perspective on abortion has been the foundation for many legal regimes. There are a few states that actually embraced the extreme Catholic Church attitude that bans abortion in all cases. This is the situation in Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Malta and Vatican. Other countries in which the followers of the Catholic Church form the majority have a very restrictive legal regime of abortion. In these countries, abortion is allowed only in a few situations, usually to save the life of the pregnant woman, to prevent the birth of a child with genetic disorders or if the pregnancy is the result of a rape or incest. This is the case in the majority of states in Latin America [3]. As a consequence of the strict legal regime of abortion, in many countries where abortion is banned a large number of illegal abortions are performed, therefore putting the life of the pregnant women at high risk.

3. CONCLUSIONS: IT IS POSSIBLE TO FIND A CONCILIATION BETWEEN ABORTION AND THEOLOGY

We think that, whenever a religion allows abortion, even in very restricted situations, it occurs a form of conciliation between abortion and theology. A wider acceptance of abortion by the theological point of view is still scarce. Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism show greater tolerance to abortion than Christianity and accept abortion if it is necessary, mainly for medical reasons, but also for economic and social reasons.

A true conciliation between abortion and theology doesn't mean that theology must accept abortion in any circumstances. This would be contrary to the essence of religions, which generally promote love and care towards all people, even if they are not yet born. A true conciliation may take place if theology accepts to analyse real-life facts, which prove that, sometimes, abortion is necessary. It is no use to formally affirm that any being is a gift from God, and, therefore, it always has the right to be born. In the constant fight between Good and Evil, we cannot know when the Evil interfered in God's plans. Maybe God gave us the scientific knowledge in order to overcome evil situations. So, in our opinion, abortion is sometimes necessary, for example for medical reasons

(when the fetus has a severe deficiency or when the pregnant woman's life is endangered).

We agree that it is harder to justify abortion using economical and social reasons. Still, we believe that the economic reasons cannot be ignored. Raising a child implies financial support, otherwise the child would suffer. Do we have the right to force a human being to suffer because the lack of basic living conditions? It is arguable.

Also, the social reasons are strong. For example, if the pregnant woman has not finished her studies yet, and she could not offer to the child enough emotional support, the child would also suffer. So, we ask ourselves again: do we have the right to force a person to bear the lack of emotional comfort, which is so necessary for a balanced development?

Fortunately, in the present-day, modern societies offer the so-called alternatives to abortion, which are ways to overcome the economic and social reasons that would justify an abortion. For example, if a pregnant woman does not want to raise the child herself, the child can be adopted by other persons or can be cared of by the state, in special institutions. Even more, contraceptive methods have become increasingly efficient, so the number of unwanted pregnancies has significantly dropped. So, at least in most developed countries, women are rarely faced with the abortion problem. Still, when a pregnant woman decides to have an abortion, she must be free to do that, in a legal context, because, otherwise, as we have already said, it is likely that she and the child would suffer, from one reason or another.

It seems like, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we must admit that abortion is a true form of *compassion*, either for the pregnant woman, or for the fetus, if not for both of them. And we strongly believe that conciliation between abortion and theology may occur if theology accepts that, sometimes, tolerance on abortion can be considered a form of *compassion*.

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