

Abortion and the Christian Tradition

A Pro-choice Theological Ethic

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Introduction

How can theologians and ethicists defend a pro-choice stance on abortion today? *Abortion and the Christian Tradition* attempts to answer that question against the backdrop of a cultural environment, in the United States especially, where Christian pro-life discourse commands most pulpits and inundates all forms of the media and public spaces, from blogs to the sidewalks in front of women's health centers to the halls of Congress. This vigorous, well-organized, and articulate popular pro-life movement is paralleled in academic circles. Biblical scholars, theologians, and Christian bioethicists and philosophers disseminate a pro-life message that, they claim, has deep roots in the history of Christianity and is supported by Scripture, the church's creeds, and moral philosophy—namely, the unborn are persons from conception, who have a sacred right to life and, therefore, abortion is a heinous sin. On every point, my research tells me, pro-life claims are biblically weak, conceptually misleading, theologically mistaken, and even dangerous. Church history tells a more complicated story about abortion, and pro-life biblical, doctrinal, and philosophical arguments for fetal personhood fail to come close to making a compelling case that would justify removing or curtailing the reproductive rights that women currently have in most of the world. That pro-life rhetoric has proved successful in finding a committed pro-life constituency does not mean that they have faithfully represented the Christian tradition on the issue of abortion. To the contrary. They have distorted the central symbols and stories of the Christian faith, including creation in God's image, the doctrine of the incarnation, Mary's role at the Annunciation, the parable of the good Samaritan, and others. This book endeavors to reclaim these symbols and

stories in support of women's moral conscience and decision-making authority over their reproductive lives.

While Christian pro-choice voices exist, their numbers appear to be fewer and their influence is less widespread. Only a handful of book-length scholarly texts have been published over the past decades giving a defense of abortion rights from a Christian perspective—the late Beverly Harrison's well-known manifesto of feminist ethics, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (1983); Kathy Rudy's more moderate *Beyond Pro-Life and Pro-Choice: Moral Diversity in the Abortion Debate* (1996); oriented to a Roman Catholic audience, *A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion* (2000), by Daniel Dombrowski and Robert Deltete; and recently, Rebecca Todd Peters, *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice*.¹ A very few pro-choice books geared to a more general Christian readership have been published by writers willing to face the backlash.² A number of important feminist pro-choice essays have been published in recent decades on select aspects of the abortion debate in Christianity; however, as we will see in later chapters of this book, differences exist among some of their positions, especially regarding when and under what conditions abortion is morally justifiable. The combination of a paucity of in-depth pro-choice writings using Christian sources, and the lack of consensus among pro-choice advocates on the ethics of abortion, have left scholars, pastors, and ordinary believers without the tools to see pregnancy and fetal life from a perspective other than that promoted by the pro-life movement. I offer both a comprehensive critique of recent pro-life scholarship and, even more importantly, a constructive theological and ethical defense of women's reproductive rights based on authoritative texts in the Christian tradition.

The abortion debate is important to discuss not only because it continues undiminished but, even more significantly, because most women will face difficult reproductive choices at some point in their childbearing years.³ What

1. Beverly W. Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); Kathy Rudy, *Beyond Pro-Life and Pro-Choice: Moral Diversity in the Abortion Debate* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Daniel A. Dombrowski and Robert J. Deltete, *A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Rebecca Todd Peters, *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

2. See Anne Eggebroten, *Abortion—My Choice, God's Grace: Christian Women Tell Their Stories* (Pasadena, CA: New Paradigm Books, 1994); Kira Schlesinger, *Pro-Choice and Christian: Reconciling Faith, Politics, and Justice* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

3. In this book I use the term "woman" to mean a cisgender woman, or a person assigned female at birth and identifying as female. Statistics are only beginning to emerge about transgender people seeking abortion services; see L. Abern, S. Nippita, and K. Maguire, "Contraceptive Use and Abortion Views among Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Individuals Assigned Female at Birth," *Contraception* 98, no. 4 (2018): 337. However, it is uncontroversial to state that transgender people also are affected by reproductive stresses. This book will not address

does it mean to be a woman of reproductive age in America today? One Guttmacher Institute study finds that “on average, U.S. women want to have two children. To accomplish that goal, a woman will spend close to three years pregnant, postpartum or attempting to become pregnant, and about three decades—more than three-quarters of her reproductive life—trying to avoid an unintended pregnancy.”⁴ While the rate of abortions has fallen in recent years, it is estimated that about “one in five U.S. pregnancies ends in abortion.”⁵ Given that about half of women in America who have abortions self-identify as Christian,⁶ there is a disconnect between the rhetoric and claims of pro-life proponents and the actual lives of the many believing women who are getting abortions—quietly, secretly, and in substantial numbers. These women not only face the often agonizing decision to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, but they do so mostly in isolation and burdened by the onslaught of extreme anti-abortion accusations that women who abort are murderers. Even more moderate pro-life rhetoric that aims only “to stigmatize [so-called] casual abortion,” in effect, shames any Christian woman who has an abortion.⁷ An updated and comprehensive discussion of abortion—one that supplies a counterargument to pro-life fetal personhood claims, speaks to the burdens and risks of pregnancy, and attempts to alleviate the stigma that Christian women who abort are made to bear—is long overdue and much needed.

Since Christianity is a historically expansive and diversely lived tradition, the abortion question can never be answered definitively for all Christians. I enter into conversation with representatives from many different branches and denominations of Christianity, a range of academic and unaffiliated popular writers, as well as ordinary Christian women, whose views on abortion would probably never be known had they not been interviewed by researchers. My attempt to assess a gamut of current pro-life views has taken me to online sites ranging from moderate pro-life blogs to the Web pages of extremist anti-abortion groups that would appropriately be called domestic

the reproductive justice needs of the latter group, though some of the discussions here may be relevant for transgender and gender nonconforming people who can get pregnant and for whom Christian faith is a factor in their identity. For transgender reproductive issues, see Laura Nixon, “The Right to (Trans) Parent: A Reproductive Justice Approach to Reproductive Rights, Fertility, and Family-Building Issues Facing Transgender People,” *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 20, no. 1 (2013): 73–103.

4. “Unintended Pregnancy in the United States,” *Guttmacher Institute* (September 2016; updated January 2019), <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/unintended-pregnancy-united-states>.

5. Rachel K. Jones and Megan L. Kavanaugh, “Changes in Abortion Rates between 2000 and 2008 and Lifetime Incidence of Abortion,” *Obstetrics & Gynecology* 117, no. 6 (2011): 1358.

6. See Jenna Jerman, Rachel K. Jones, and Tsuyoshi Onda, “Characteristics of U.S. Abortion Patients in 2014 and Changes since 2008,” *Guttmacher Institute* (May 2016), https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2014.pdf.

7. David P. Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision Is Key to the World's Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), 360.

terrorism groups—the latter being the ugly underbelly of anti-abortion fringe Christian activism. I insist on the importance of both distinguishing the moderates from the extremists in the pro-life movement, as well as exposing how the former can, inadvertently, provide fodder for the latter. While the source material I use is predominantly Christian, I enlist Jewish ethical viewpoints at important points. I give some mention of other religions, and pro-choice proponents in those traditions may be served by some of the analyses offered here. Many secular and post-Christian feminists write off the Christian tradition as irredeemably toxic for women, especially on issues related to sexuality and reproduction, and they decide not to engage further with Christianity's images, symbols, and doctrines. My scholarship continues to wrestle with the ambiguities of the tradition, finding resources there that could be meaningful for believers who still make Christianity their spiritual home.

Some scholars object to using the terms pro-life and pro-choice in relation to abortion. Kathy Rudy has noted that these binary terms can obstruct attempts within and among Christian communities to “transcend the chasm” of that binary and find solutions to the abortion dilemma.⁸ I appreciate this sentiment, in part, because I find most binaries to be largely unhelpful for real-life ethical dilemmas. That said, while some occasional efforts have been made by pro-life and pro-choice Christians to talk across the divide, those opportunities have dwindled as people have retrenched into their opposing camps.⁹ I have chosen to continue using the terms pro-choice and pro-life because they offer a helpful shorthand for me to adjudicate the complex theological and ethical debates in this book. Moreover, these terms can be nuanced, as needed, and they are among the least inflammatory from among the many epithets that are used.¹⁰ I do not mean to suggest that all pro-life or all pro-choice proponents think alike. I will discuss important differences within each group, including where my pro-choice position builds on but sometimes differs from the positions of other pro-choice scholars.

8. Rudy, *Beyond Pro-Life and Pro-Choice*, xxii.

9. For one set of meetings in the late 1990s, see Anne Fowler et al., “Talking with the Enemy,” *The Boston Globe* (January 28, 2001), <https://www.feminist.com/resources/artsspeech/genwom/talkingwith.html>. For an evaluation of the 2010 “Open Hearts, Open Minds” conference at Princeton University, see Aimée Thorne-Thomson, “My Take on ‘Open Hearts, Open Minds,’” *Rewire.News* (October 21, 2010), <https://rewire.news/article/2010/10/21/take-open-hearts-open-minds-fairminded-words%E2%80%9D/>. See Charles Camosy, “(Final Post) The Princeton Abortion Conference One Year Later: Exchanges with Reproductive Justice Activist Hilary Hammell,” *Catholic Moral Theology* (October 9, 2011), <https://catholicmoraltheology.com/the-princeton-abortion-conference-one-year-later-guest-post-by-reproductive-justice-activist-hilary-hammell/>.

10. At some points, I use the term “anti-abortion” in order to reflect the real distinctions between extreme anti-abortion and moderate pro-life groups. I do not use polemical terms such as “pro-abortion” or “anti-choice,” which are negative epithets that groups on each side pin on each other.

I take seriously the objection that the pro-choice/pro-life binary is, in part, a white feminist construct that often silences the wider justice concerns of peoples of color. Andrea Smith records this revealing exchange she had while interviewing a Native woman:

Me: Would you say you are pro-choice or pro-life?

Respondent 2: Well, I would say that I am pro-choice, but the most important thing to me is promoting life in Native communities.¹¹

Many scholars of color writing on this issue have opted to use the term “reproductive justice” instead of “pro-choice” as an intentional political strategy for broad coalition-building efforts, encompassing a range of interrelated social justice agendas, including forced sterilization, the right to parent, disability rights, and access to abortion services.¹² Scholarship about reproductive rights and motherhood in recent decades has made significant efforts to move beyond liberal, white, secular, feminist abortion rights slogans, in order to probe the racial, economic, religious, and other complexities of a diverse range of women’s reproductive lives. For example, womanist scholars insist that pregnancy, reproductive rights, and mothering mean something different for African American women, who are still affected in overt and inchoate ways by the cultural legacy of enslavement, when “Black women’s bodies literally were not their own.”¹³ Scholarly commitments to listen to the diversity of women’s voices—on their own terms—have produced illuminating ethnographic accounts, and themes drawn from these ethnographies make a significant contribution to my pro-choice proposals.

In this project the reader will also find arguments that are informed by the work of leading secular feminist philosophers and ethicists writing about abortion, which is part of what makes this project an intentionally feminist one. Contrary to the ways in which many pro-life writers vilify feminism, feminist thinking on reproductive rights has moved significantly beyond the content and tone of pro-choice discourse in the immediate *Roe v. Wade* period, as exemplified in Mary Anne Warren’s too-blithe quip from the early 1970s that “if the right to life of a fetus is to be based upon its resemblance to a person, then it cannot be said to have any more right to life than, let us

11. Andrea Smith, “Beyond Pro-Choice versus Pro-Life: Women of Color and Reproductive Justice,” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 1 (2005): 119.

12. See Kimala Price, “What Is Reproductive Justice? How Women of Color Activists Are Redefining the Pro-Choice Paradigm,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 10, no. 2 (2010): 42–65.

13. Monica A. Coleman, “Sacrifice, Surrogacy and Salvation: Womanist Reflections on Motherhood and Work,” *Black Theology* 12, no. 3 (2014): 202.

say, a newborn guppy.”¹⁴ Current feminist ethicists are increasingly critical of the earlier feminist knee-jerk opposition to ever speaking about fetuses as, for example, unborn babies. Efforts to remain attentive to the discourse of women who abort reveal that their words rarely reflect politically correct feminist lingo. Jeannie Ludlow recounts that in her research, while working as an abortion clinic patient advocate, the discourse of women getting an abortion tends to be familiar, not clinical: “Very few patients say ‘fetus’ or ‘embryo.’ The majority say ‘baby,’ as in . . . ‘I just can’t have this baby at this time.’” Some even write good-bye notes, such as, “All my love, the mom you’ll never meet.”¹⁵ I take seriously the personal, often maternal terms used by these women—terms that belie both the older pro-choice avoidance of “baby” talk as well as the rampant pro-life caricature of women who abort as selfishly having no maternal regard for the being in their womb.

Some secular feminist philosophers are even willing to speak of a mode of ethical reflection about abortion in terms of “a work of mourning,” as seen in the writings of Karen Houle, who revisits her own abortion experience and elucidates how she was able to begin responding ethically to the death of a being who might have been her son or daughter, “the child-who-was not.”¹⁶ I see writings like Houle’s as marking a larger, significant feminist shift from earlier pro-choice rhetoric, and I affirm looking seriously at abortion as an experience of reproductive loss. This book reinforces all of these secular philosophical trends, with particular attention given to the impact of religious beliefs on Christian women who have an abortion.

Even secular scholars today concede that the religiosity of women who abort deserves to be theorized rather than merely discounted as false consciousness. As Ludlow notes, one clinic worker shared with her, “Sometimes, patients ask me to baptize their fetuses,” and she recalls that other patients “asked the deity to which they pray to send back to them the child they are aborting, at a time in the future when they are better able to care for it.”¹⁷ Secular scholars recognize that they do not have the theoretical resources to speak more than superficially to issues of religious piety and belief. If a woman using clinic services is a conservative Christian, she may want deeper

14. Mary Anne Warren, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion,” *The Monist* 57, no. 1 (1973): 58.

15. Jeannie Ludlow, “Sometimes, It’s a Child and a Choice: Toward an Embodied Abortion Praxis,” *NWSA Journal* 20, no. 1 (2008): 43, 44. Ludlow is also a board member of “Abortion Conversation Projects,” a national organization that works to reduce abortion stigma and enhance respectful public conversation about abortion. See <http://www.abortionconversationproject.org/mission-and-vision/>.

16. Karen Houle, *Responsibility, Complexity, and Abortion: Toward a New Image of Ethical Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 220.

17. Ludlow, “Sometimes, It’s a Child and a Choice,” 27, 43.

spiritual reasons to carry her through, during the abortion and afterward, than a generic affirmation that it is appropriate for her to “honor her life goals”¹⁸ or “exercise ‘fidelity to myself and its becomings.’”¹⁹ Believing women especially experience their abortion through the lens of ubiquitous pro-life Christian rhetoric that labels abortion as the sinful destruction of an innocent child who bears God’s image. Unbiased, professional pastoral counselors should be tasked with assisting these women with tools for whatever self-reflectiveness they wish to engage in, free from shame and self-recrimination.²⁰ Religious practitioners from various traditions have developed postabortion rituals to meet the spiritual needs of women who experience loss.²¹ In addition, pro-choice theologians and ethicists owe these women doctrinally and biblically based proposals to help them understand their rightful place in the Christian tradition in light of unwanted pregnancy and abortion death. This book endeavors to make a contribution to this difficult but important task.

CRITIQUE AND CONSTRUCTIVE PROPOSALS

Abortion and the Christian Tradition is structured in two parts. The first part delivers a sustained critique of two sets of arguments at the heart of the pro-life position: that the historical church maintained a continuous anti-abortion and pro-natal stance, and that a person exists from the moment of conception. Chapter 1 addresses one of the most repeated claims across popular and scholarly pro-life literature—namely, that opposition to abortion was “an almost absolute value in [Christian] history,” and it was motivated by a concern for innocent unborn life.²² This notion, promulgated by Catholic jurist John Noonan in the early 1970s, still forms the historical basis for almost all Christian pro-life polemics. A number of feminist scholars in past decades have challenged this reading of church history, arguing that most

18. Jeannie Ludlow, “The Things We Cannot Say: Witnessing the Traumatization of Abortion in the United States,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2008): 40.

19. Houle, *Responsibility, Complexity, and Abortion*, 218.

20. There is sparse unbiased published literature on this topic. See Jane Ranney Rzepka, “Counseling the Abortion Patient: A Pastoral Perspective,” *Pastoral Psychology* 28, no. 3 (1980): 168–80; Christie Cozad Neuger, “The Challenge of Abortion,” in *Pastoral Care and Social Conflict*, ed. Pamela D. Couture and Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 125–40.

21. See June O’Connor, “Ritual Recognition of Abortion: Japanese Buddhist Practices and U.S. Jewish and Christian Proposals,” in *Embodiment, Morality, and Medicine*, ed. Lisa S. Cahill and Margaret Farley (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995); Jeff Wilson, *Mourning the Unborn Dead: A Buddhist Ritual Comes to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

22. See John T. Noonan Jr., “An Almost Absolute Value in History,” in *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives*, ed. John T. Noonan Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

early church and medieval writings on abortion were not pro-natalist and were, instead, obsessed with controlling nonprocreative sexual practices. In addition, I present recent scholarship that sheds new light on a number of issues challenging this pro-life narrative, including: the apostle Paul's possible Hellenistic Jewish views on abortion, the compassionate aspects of medieval penitential practices recognizing women's struggles with reproductive issues, and some early church fathers' apparent acceptance of physicians' determinations about the necessity of therapeutic abortions to save a woman's life. These glimmers of understanding about women's reproductive challenges faded from church history with the rise of canon law—with pro-life proponents today suggesting good riddance. Recapturing a fuller historical picture of the church's various stances on abortion reveals that a Christian pro-choice position is not necessarily out of line with the theological and pastoral intuitions of some past church authorities.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 analyze and criticize three types of pro-life arguments for fetal personhood: biblical, doctrinal, and philosophical. In chapter 2, we see how scholarly and popular pro-life writers try to make the biblical case that each embryo, as human, must be asserted as bearing the image of God, who predestines it to be born. I demonstrate the inability of pro-life scholars to surmount the hermeneutical hurdles of explaining how the Genesis 1 and 2 creation stories about the first human beings created in God's image plausibly apply to fetuses at all, or explaining what the few biblical references to being called by God from the womb really mean. Pro-life scholars fail to provide a convincing biblical basis for fetal personhood from conception, and, in addition, their claims lack the support of the New Testament, which focuses on exhorting believers to be conformed to Christ's image. I strongly question the theological legitimacy of deriving from biblical uterine call stories the claim that God elects all in-utero life to be born. No proper understanding of a doctrine of providence or predestination would definitively link God's will to the biological event of conception.

A growing group of pro-life theologians is turning to the creeds of the early church in order to argue for the doctrinal necessity of accepting personhood from conception. These theologians claim that because an orthodox (Chalcedonian) view of the incarnation teaches that the Word assumed ensouled embryonic flesh in Mary's womb, the believer must accept that all human embryos are ensouled persons from conception. Chapter 3 refutes this theological claim by exposing how these pro-life scholars give a narrow reading of a few patristic sources and remain rigidly locked in a body-soul paradigm for defining the human person. Some pro-life scholars even draw the unwarranted, almost mythological, conclusion that because of Christ's incarnation as an embryo, all embryos should be seen as sacred. This chapter presents

an alternative, and still arguably Chalcedonian, interpretation of the incarnation that reflects a more modern evolutionary and historical understanding of human nature. It is not doctrinally necessary nor even widely credible anymore to say that the union of Christ's divine and human natures was fully accomplished in the blink of an eye in Mary's womb. I argue that seeing the incarnation as an emergent and historical process of deification occurring throughout Jesus' life adheres to Chalcedonian principles and provides a compelling alternative to the pro-life approach that tries (unconvincingly, in my view) to posit belief in personhood at conception as a requirement of doctrinally correct Christian faith.

Christian pro-life philosophers offer various arguments to ground the metaphysical and moral claim that a person exists at conception. Some argue for a substantialist view of personhood, claiming that the individual, self-directing human substance that comes into existence at syngamy is the same substance that exists continuously in the born person until death. If the (genetic) essence is the same, the rights should be the same. Roman Catholic moral philosophy makes a different sort of argument, appealing to the notion of probabilism—namely, even the probability that a fetus is a person at conception means that one must attribute to the fetus full personhood rights and dignity. Chapter 4 critically assesses both of these pro-life philosophical arguments. The most that substantialist philosophers succeed in showing is the abstract idea of a fetal person, but that idea bears little resemblance to any actual fetuses living in women's bodies. Probabilism, which is a mode of moral argumentation that in some situations is meant to justify the withdrawing of rights, is used in a backward way to grant fetuses more rights than they are due, given the Catholic magisterium's recognition that the personhood of the fetus cannot be definitively proved. In addition, some of these Christian philosophers see themselves as not simply offering philosophical proposals but also trying to prevent murder (to their way of thinking), which gives an ominous political undertone to their objectives about protecting fetal life, no matter what the circumstances of how that fetus came to be in whatever woman's or girl's body.

The chapters in part 1 of this book thus demonstrate that attempts to secure fetal personhood fail on the merits of each type of argument—historical, biblical, theological, and philosophical. Moreover, these pro-life arguments fail to meet any plausible burden of proof that warrants overruling a woman's right to make reproductive decisions about her body and the dependent fetus she bears. Pro-life proponents seem to assume that, based on their understanding of Christian sources, the default moral position on abortion is that it is immoral and should be banned—until pro-choice proponents prove otherwise. I argue the reverse. Given my reading of Christian sources, and

given the legal consensus in most all of the modern world about women having at least some reproductive rights, the burden of proof falls on pro-life proponents to give credible reasons why all abortions are immoral and should be banned. Part 1 of this book determines that, even on a Christian basis alone, pro-life proponents fall far short of meeting that burden of proof.

On one point, however, I am in agreement with pro-life proponents, and that is the intuition that a living fetus has value. However, that value will have to be delineated apart from spurious claims that the Bible, Christian doctrine, or philosophy can prove personhood from conception. Moreover, I insist that the concept of fetal value should not be used as a moral leash, so to speak, to restrain the actions of pregnant women, on the cynical and misogynous assumption that these women somehow do not understand what they are gestating and are incapable of exercising moral judgment and making reasonable practical choices for their lives and those in their care.

In part 2, I offer constructive ethical and theological proposals on themes I believe are central for a comprehensive pro-choice position. The chapters in this part of the book address three sets of topics: the pregnant woman's authority to make reproductive decisions and the nature of fetal value; the parameters of obligations, rights, and fairness pertinent to Samaritan acts of gestational hospitality; and the theological reasons for why abortion should not be categorized as *sin ipso facto*. Chapter 5 addresses the first set of issues, which I see as reciprocal: a pregnant woman's authority to abort and the nature of fetal value. The guiding question is this: How should we think of the pregnant woman—her identity, obligations, and bodily rights—such that she would be morally authorized to end the life of a fetus, whose value is not negligible? Some pro-choice feminists appeal to a woman's pre- or non-mothering consciousness early in pregnancy to justify abortion of a very unformed fetus. I argue, instead, that the decision-making authority a pregnant woman exercises in abortion is precisely a maternal one—a decision that no child should come into the world for whom she would have some kind of mothering obligations. The argument I make philosophically actually reflects the maternal tone in the words of ordinary women, many of whom speak of their abortion in terms of not feeling able to have the baby and not being ready to mother it. From this perspective, an argument for fetal value follows. Value inheres for an embryo and then a fetus because it is a genetically individual human being, existing contingently and contiguously to its gestating mother, and progressing toward being a born person. The fetus is best understood in terms of a tensive, dual claim: the fetus is not a nonperson without value, but neither is the fetus a person with the status of an already born child.

No comprehensive pro-choice position can ignore that, along with securing women's rights, one must address whether there is any moral claim incumbent

on the pregnant woman to offer her fetus gestational welcome. This issue is pertinent for Christian women, especially, given the teaching about love of neighbor found in the parable of the good Samaritan. Chapter 6 addresses the issue of the moral obligations and justifiable limits of Samaritan hospitality—of a woman to her fetus and of the church and society to the woman with an unwanted pregnancy. I strongly criticize the ways in which pro-life Christian writers have mobilized Samaritanism to suggest that the church is warranted to compel, or even try to persuade, a reluctant pregnant woman or girl to gestate an unwanted pregnancy. I propose instead a paradigm of gestational hospitality—based on ethical principles of caring, fairness, and justice. This paradigm is attentive to the profound message of Samaritan self-giving but also wisely insists that women in caretaking roles involving bodily self-giving need to make decisions and allocate their resources so that they will be able to emulate the Samaritan in the parable, who “finished his journey.”²³ Without moral limits and legal protections regarding pregnancy—the burdens and risks of which are not inconsequential—pro-life proponents will continue to allegorize the parable as a tale of a vulnerable fetus needing care, and women will continue to be relegated to the role of the beast of burden, carrying the wounded traveler to safety, with no say in the matter.

Beyond the need to set ethical parameters for gestational hospitality, a pro-choice position must theologically address the problem of the stigma borne by Christian women who have had an abortion or even considered a pregnancy to be unwanted. Chapter 7 offers specifically theological reasons for validating a pregnant woman’s decision making, her right to give consent, and the validity of choosing to pursue callings other than motherhood. This chapter addresses the widespread pro-life theme, based on the theology and spirituality surrounding the Virgin Mary, that gestating an unplanned pregnancy is a Christian woman’s spiritual calling and that even deeming one’s pregnancy unwanted is a kind of religious anathema. I offer two readings—of the birth narratives in Luke’s Gospel and the spiritual autobiography of medieval mystic (and mother of fourteen) Margery Kempe—in order to make the case that Marian spirituality supports the notion that not wanting to gestate and not wanting to mother are also acceptable spiritual callings for believing women. For women who do abort, however, there looms the pervasive and debilitating pro-life message that abortion is a grievous sin, indeed, murder. I argue for why abortion should not be labeled as *ipso facto* sin (and certainly not murder), and why Jesus’ definitive sacrifice on the cross

23. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, “From Samaritan to Samaritan: Journey Mercies,” in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 323.

should be seen as freeing women from offering their bodies for compulsory gestation. Finally, I address women's reproductive loss, including abortion loss, which many women experience as death within their womb. I interpret the crucifixion event through the lens of a mothering God in order to propose a theology of death that enables one to imagine how all reproductive losses, including abortion deaths, are taken up and healed within the womb of the Trinitarian God.

A PERSONAL NOTE

This book is unavoidably marked by my own perspectives and context. My theological proclivities are Protestant, feminist, and what has come to be informally called the postliberal "Yale school."²⁴ My philosophical and ethical commitments emphasize embodied relationality, attentiveness to contextual lived realities, and concern for issues of marginality as well as for ideals of the common good. I have a reproductive history. This book is not about my story, but I think it is important to say a few relevant things. I am a white, cisgender woman who, for many years in my young adult life, did not want to get pregnant and who, at a later point in my life, has mourned miscarriage, who has experienced the throes of reproductive challenges, but who has been able to birth two children, now teenagers, whom I am mothering with fear and trembling and great joy. Mentioning these aspects of my own reproductive experiences is not meant to establish my credentials to speak about abortion. Nevertheless, I deem it important that someone arguing for the justifiability of a pregnant woman ending the uterine life within her should be able to speak with some experiential authority about gestation, reproductive loss, birthing, and motherhood. That said, my subjective experience is only my own: thinking of my wanted pregnancies, from the earliest embryonic moment, in terms of "my babies" can never be imposed on how another woman thinks of her pregnancy. Moreover, when I subject my own reproductive experiences to rigorous analysis, I cannot but conclude that what makes one call an embryo or fetus a "baby" is deeply contextual and discursively constructed.

This book aims to analyze critically the fallacies and weaknesses in Christian pro-life discourse. I offer as a counterargument my feminist pro-choice theological ethic regarding pregnancy, fetal value, and the choice to abort. I

24. My reference here is meant to indicate that this so-called school shaped me to appreciate the theological, ethical, and political possibilities of continuing to engage closely with the Christian tradition, while critically "following at a distance," to adapt Gene Outka's felicitous phrase: "Following at a Distance: Ethics and the Identity of Jesus," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

do not presume to tell women with unwanted pregnancies what to think or do in this most difficult of decisions and life experiences, and I certainly will not pontificate on what God's mysterious will is. I hope this book provides theological, moral, and spiritual resources for Christian women, and perhaps women in other religious traditions as well, who have had an abortion or who may face an abortion choice (and those who support them). As I interpret church history, Scripture, philosophical ethics, and Christian doctrine, I see support for a number of principles that this book promotes: the importance of consent to pregnancy, an insistence that gestational hospitality be deemed a virtue and not a duty, and a commitment to fostering women's moral authority and spiritual agency—principles that do not negate the value of fetal life but remind us that there is no fetal existence without the embodied labor of a moral agent: the fetus's gestating mother. Most important is the persistent reminder from the biblical text that “just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything” (Eccl. 11:5). This verse about the inscrutability of God inclines me to listen all the more carefully to the needs and hopes of the person most intimately engaged with that breath and those bones—the mother who must decide her fetus's fate and her own.