

CHAPTER 20

RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE IN THE ABORTION DEBATE

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THOUGH violence has characterized the contemporary religious debate over abortion within North American Christianity more than anywhere else, it is an issue of ethical discussion within almost every religious tradition. In India, for instance, many modern-day Hindus find it morally justifiable even though some ancient Hindu texts oppose abortion. The issue in contemporary India is complicated with the ethical issues involved in the practice of using abortion as a form of sex selection, in terminating the gestation of girls rather than boys. Some Hindu theologians argue that a soul (Sanskrit: *atman*) is present in a fetus three months after conception, which would restrict some but not all abortions. Some Buddhists are tolerant of abortion (and in the Japanese tradition, *mizuko kuyo* is a ritual for the death of a fetus including one that has been aborted). Some traditional Buddhists, however, hold that life begins at conception, and therefore they oppose the termination of pregnancies. Tibetan Buddhism's Fourteenth Dalai Lama has said that the appropriateness of abortion must be decided on a case-by-case basis.

Orthodox Jews generally prohibit abortion except to save a mother's life. Conservative Jews usually allow abortion in a few other circumstances, and Reform Jews often state that abortion should be a matter of personal choice. Within Islam, there has also been a divergence of opinions. Many Muslim jurists argue that

abortion can be permitted only up to the fourth month, at which point the fetus is thought to have a soul, unless the procedure is done to preserve the mother's life.

As in these other traditions, Christianity also contains a variety of perspectives, ranging from not allowing abortion, even to save a mother's life, to understanding abortion to be at times a compassionate, though difficult, choice. Emerging from this diversity of viewpoints are social movements opposing and supporting a woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion. Often the differences between these movements are contentious. The use of violence to oppose or prevent abortion is unique to the Christian tradition and almost exclusively found in North American Christianity. For this reason, this chapter will focus on the North American Christian case in exploring the role of violence in the religious controversy about abortion.

In the debate about legal abortion, there are no neutral terms for the various factions. Those who are in favor of a woman's right to choose, the so-called prochoicers, argue that abortion opponents, the ones in favor of not terminating the life of the fetus and therefore prolifers, are not in fact prolife since some of them are in favor of killing abortion providers and many more favor capital punishment and the use of violence in police and military operations. That some prolifers would legitimate the use of violence and even assassination to stop abortion seems paradoxical at best. Critics question in what sense that position can said to be prolife and how it can be squared with any version of Christian ethical teachings. On the other side, prolifers argue that abortion rights advocates are not really prochoice as they consider only the mother's right to make a choice and ignore the "choices" of unborn babies. The closest one can get to neutrality is to use the labels the groups use for themselves, recognizing that each is trying to frame the debate in the very language they use.

This chapter will explore the religiously legitimated use of violence in the extreme wing of the American prolife movement. Drawing on the works of a handful of leaders who have made the argument for the legitimacy of the use of violence in public ways, I will show the degree to which this is an internally coherent and consistent framing of one particular form of Christianity and the relationship between abortion and violence. This chapter is not an abortion-related polemic but an effort to understand the logic of this point of view. If one only views the issues from the assumptions embedded in the prochoice position (be it secular or Christian), this line of reasoning may seem to be incomprehensible. But as an exercise in "making the strange familiar," from within the framework of the radical wing of the prolife movement, the arguments are strikingly rational.¹

CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTION

While some who engage in violence to stop abortion arrive at their convictions through Roman Catholicism, behind the most broadly disseminated philosophical and theological argument in defense of the use of violence lies an obscure form of

Calvinist Protestantism known as Christian Reconstructionism. The movement's central spokesperson in defense of the use of violence and author of the book *A Time to Kill*, Mike Bray has drawn on this tradition extensively. Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue and author of *Operation Rescue* (1988) and *The Judgment of God* (1995), was much influenced by this line of reasoning before he converted to Roman Catholicism in 2006. Paul Hill, executed in Florida for the killing of John Britton, was trained in a reformed seminary under Reconstructionist Greg Bahnsen and served in the ministry in the most traditionally Calvinist of the Presbyterian denominations, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America. Hill's writings share with Reconstructionists an approach to the Bible and an interpretive schema. That Hill found Christian Reconstruction compatible with his understanding of Christianity is demonstrated by a written exchange between Hill and Reconstructionist Gary North, which will be explored later in the chapter. Hill cited Rushdoony in essays supporting the use of violence to stop abortion, and he sent those essays to Gary North, seeking comments and, presumably, support. Hill wrote the essays in support of violence in the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. David Gunn by Michael Griffin. Just weeks after Hill had acted on the views he had articulated, North replied to his arguments rejecting their legitimacy on the grounds that the punishment of "evildoers" is, under biblical law, the responsibility of duly appointed civil authorities, not individuals, and that Hill's strategy was ultimately futile.

Despite North's rejection, leading to the potential conclusion that the argument in favor of the use of violence is a misapplication of Christian Reconstruction, it remains clear that for those who see such actions as legitimate, Christian Reconstruction is one of the underlying influences.

This version of Christianity understands the Bible to be a coherent whole. The Old and New Testaments together form the record of God's revelation of himself in history. Reconstructionists explicitly reject a modern framing of the text in which the wrathful God of the Old Testament is supplanted by the loving, forgiving God revealed in the person of Jesus in the New Testament. Ancient Israel, and the Law God laid out for it in the Old Testament, are to be the model for the Christian life today. As postmillennialists, they believe that ultimately the entire world will be Christian or that, as the Bible says, "every knee shall bow, every tongue confess."² The character of God is understood in distinctly Calvinist terms in which God is both a wrathful judge and a loving savior. Judgment is necessary to reflect God's justice and is deserved by utterly depraved, fallen, human beings. That some of those human beings are lifted from their depravity by God's grace to salvation that they can in no way earn is a testament to God's love.

The legitimization of the use of violence to stop abortion finds its most public expression in an organization known as the Army of God, a loose affiliation of activists who have taken credit for numerous acts of violence, maintain a website and a series of links defending those who have been convicted of abortion related violence and promoting their writings, and raise money to support those convicted and their families. But the arguments made by the Army of God are, in many ways,

the logical conclusion of the arguments put forth by the explicitly (if paradoxically) nonviolent Operation Rescue a decade earlier.

ABORTION AS VIOLENCE

The foundation of the argument that the use of force to stop abortion is potentially legitimate is the assertion that abortion is violent. The comparisons made by pro-lifers to slavery and the Holocaust are not mere rhetoric, and they are not held by only the extreme wing of the Right to Life movement. They were made effectively by Francis Schaeffer and former surgeon general C. Everett Koop in the book and film *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* (1979). Mainstream Evangelicals were persuaded by Schaeffer and others that, when a society devalues the lives of a category of human beings, making them effectively less than human, they make room for atrocities such as the Holocaust, slavery, and abortion. Moreover, legalized abortion is understood as part of a larger cultural transformation that is labeled a “culture of death,” in which, in the context of increasing opportunities and life choices for women has changed notions of childbearing. Marriage and childbearing, once thought of as the only options for women, are increasingly understood in the context of many other legitimate, alternative choices. Many opponents of legal abortion also oppose the use of contraceptives and do so on the basis that many contraceptives work, in part, by preventing the implantation of a fertilized egg and are, effectively, very early abortions. More broadly, though, contraception is challenged on cultural grounds as contributing to a “Planned Parenthood mentality” in that children are to be planned rather than welcomed as blessings from God. This argument is rooted in mainstream Catholic thought, articulated in the papal encyclical *Humane Vitae* and also in the Protestant movement known as either the Quiverfull or Biblical Patriarchy movements (Joyce, 2009, Ingersoll forthcoming). This Protestant movement, again tied to Christian Reconstruction, promotes a social order where submissive wives live out their lives seeking to produce as many children as possible.

OPERATION RESCUE AND NONVIOLENT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

When Randall Terry launched Operation Rescue in the 1980s, the effort to prevent specific abortions by using the tactics of nonviolence such as civil disobedience to close down abortion clinics, by blocking access to clinic doors, the organization had pre-“rescue” training sessions in which rescuers were taught Martin Luther King’s principles of nonviolence. Rescuers were taught to passively resist arrest by “going

limp” to delay the efforts of police to remove rescuers from the premises and reopen the clinic. All participants were required to sign a pledge, which read, in part:

I understand the critical importance of Operation Rescue being unified, peaceful and free of any actions or words that would appear violent or hateful... I understand *for the children's sake* each Rescue must be orderly and above reproach. I commit to be peaceful and non-violent in both word and deed. Should I be arrested, I will not struggle with police in any way (whether deed or tongue), but remain polite and passively limp, remembering that mercy triumphs over judgment. (Italics in original, Terry, 1988, 228)

Intended to both prevent specific abortions and create social tension that Terry believed could bring about an end to legalized abortion, Operation Rescue was, perhaps contradictorily, explicitly nonviolent. Member training also included role-playing activities designed to help rescuers live up to their pledges.

In keeping with King's views on civil disobedience, rescuers often pled guilty and often accepted sentences, sometimes choosing jail time over fines to further “clog the system.” In his book *Operation Rescue*, Terry explains that the civil disobedience effort to end abortion developed from his own repentance when he realized that he and other prolife Christians had been calling abortion murder but “not acting like it.”

Pro-lifers were saying that abortion was murder, and yet all we were doing about it was writing a letter now and then. If my little girl was about to be murdered, I certainly would not write a letter to the editor! I would dive in with both hands and feet to do whatever was necessary to save her life. (Terry 1988, 22)

But as a growing number of prolifers (many of whom had been leaders in Operation Rescue) came to see the command to “act like abortion is murder” as inconsistent with nonviolent civil disobedience, the numbers of violent incidents in opposition to abortion rose.

Even more, Terry argues that the United States is in a state of war; it is a defensive war against “philosophies and lifestyles that are destroying the nation,” but, he says, “we need to ‘declare war’ on the child killing industry” (Terry, 1988, 182–184).

The most crucial need in the war against abortion is for *front line soldiers* who are willing to place their bodies where the battle rages. Rescuers who have been motivated Higher Laws and a burning desire to save children who are scheduled to die *today* are answering the call to the trenches. (Terry, 1988, 184)

Terry, now director of Insurrecta Nex, maintains that he is committed to nonviolence and “the rule of law,” yet he perpetuates ambiguity in regard to his position on the legitimacy of the use of violence. In statement at Scott Roeder’s 2010 trial for killing Dr. George Tiller, Terry asserted that Tiller deserved to be killed and that Roeder had not been given a fair trial:

The worst that can be said is that George Tiller was a mass murderer, and he reaped what he sowed: A murderer was murdered. Beyond that—after days of sitting in the trial—it became clear to me that Mr. Roeder was not being given a fair trial. In my opinion, he should have been given the chance to present what he knew about Tiller to the jury; how their bodies were torn limb from limb; how they were decapitated; how their mangled lifeless bodies were disposed of. (Terry’s press release)

THE USE OF VIOLENCE TO STOP ABORTION

At the center of violent wing of the prolife movement is the Army of God, and the architect of the argument that violence can be legitimately used to stop abortion is Mike Bray. Bray is a graduate of Denver Seminary and a former pastor of Reformation Lutheran Church in Bowie, Maryland. In the 1980s, he was convicted and served time for arson in the destruction of seven abortion clinics. The actions for which he was convicted occurred at night when the clinics were closed and, according to Bray, the goal was limited to property destruction. He has never been implicated in actions to kill abortion providers but has been the primary advocate for the legitimacy of the actions on the part on people “who are so called.”

Bray is reputed to be the author of the anonymous *Army of God Manual*, an apologia and tactical manual. While not claiming responsibility for the work, Bray refuses, in “solidarity with one who is being maligned for writing such a book,” to disclaim it as well (Juergensmeyer 2003: 21). He is, however, the acknowledged author of *A Time to Kill* (Bray 1994) in which he marshals historical, theological, and biblical examples in which the faithful have legitimately violated civil law and even used violence to protect the innocent. In Bray’s framing, the legitimate use of violence is not a political strategy to end legalized abortion or a vigilante action to avenge an act of abortion but a direct action to prevent specific abortions and thereby save specific lives. In that sense, they are “defensive.”

Bray begins by drawing a distinction between “the use of force” and “violence,” making the case that Scripture and Christian history consistently support the use of force under specified circumstances (Bray 1994: 34).

Force, even lethal force, is not only commanded by God and performed by Him on innumerable occasions in the older scriptures, it is also prescribed in the Law for citizen’s participation. When a man sacrificed his own children to a false God, the whole community was obligated in an execution by stoning. (*cf Lev. 20:2–4*) The use of lethal force is not only commanded as a judicial act, but granted to the individual in cases of self defense and defense of others. (Bray 1994: 41)

He engages anticipated objections from those who see the New Testament as distinctly separate from and a replacement of the Old and from those who argue that the ministry of Jesus (in the Sermon on the Mount, for example) might require a pacifism on the part of those who would follow him (Bray 1994: 37–52). He cites examples in which Jesus told his disciples to take up swords and examples in which Jesus used force against injustice (Bray 1994: 43). “Neither the life of Christ, nor his teachings, abolish the Law regarding godly force. Jesus of Nazareth came in humiliation to die. Yet even in that role, He had occasion to act forcefully” (Bray 42). Bray invokes the notion of role distinction to explain what others might see as contradictions in the ministry of Jesus:

There is a time to kill to protect oneself and others, and there is a time to suffer and die voluntarily. In another passage, the account of Jesus commanding His

disciples to take swords with them illuminates both the continuity of the biblical teaching on legitimate force and the principle of role distinction. (Bray 1994: 43)

In response to the criticism that biblical law limits the use of force to civil authorities operating in their God-ordained sphere of authority and that individuals usurp that authority when acting on their own, such as in Gary North's argument previously discussed, Bray acknowledges that the "distinct role of the state is to punish evildoers" but then asserts that the "duty to defend an innocent person rests with anyone who is standing by" (Bray 1994: 46).

In like fashion, Bray addresses each of the texts that seemingly prohibit the use of force and asserts that there is a "gross inconsistency" on the part of right to lifers who call abortion murder and then deny the "preborn child...the defense afforded any other person" (Bray 1994: 78). So a violent act against abortion, whether it be against property or against the person of an abortion provider, is legitimate, in Bray's terms, in that its goal is not to protest abortions but to prevent one or more from taking place. Bray has thus argued that there is a difference between killing a retired abortion doctor and one who continues to practice (Juergensmeyer 2003: 24).

Bray takes the argument a step further, though, in exploring the legitimacy of revolution. He begins by correcting what he sees as a misreading of the Bible on the character of God. God is a "God of War" and a "God who slays His apostate people," who "commands the slaughter of idol worship(ers)" (Bray 1994: 153). While much of it is drawn from the Old Testament, Bray asserts that this is the revelation of the character of the "pre-incarnate" Christ (Bray 1994: 153). The Bible, he argues, includes plenty of examples of God's involvement in war. And while Christians are admonished to obey civil authorities, "[t]he principle is qualified from the beginning. The people of God are never enjoined to unconditional submission. When tyrants ruled, God sent deliverers to the people. The Scriptures are full of examples of righteous disobedience and revolution" (Bray 1994: 158). Citing examples from Scripture and from history, he asserts, "There are times for resistance, times for revolution and times for assassination of heads of state." He gives the examples of Hitler and Pol Pot (Bray 1994: 171). Yet, Bray says, this is not such a time; not because revolution cannot be justified but because it is impractical in the context of an "emasculated Church" that cannot even see the legitimacy of the use of godly force (Bray 1994: 172).

ANTICIPATED VIOLENCE BY GOD IN JUDGMENT FOR THE SIN OF ABORTION

Another dimension of the relationship between abortion and violence is the inherent violence in the understanding of the character of God held by the activists who argue that violence to stop abortion is legitimate. The God envisioned by these Christians is a wrathful, vengeful God. The God who commanded the genocide

against the Canaanites in the Old Testament, a God whose greatest act of love is the violent execution of his son (himself?) as the only adequate resolution to sin, a God who promised to bring vengeance to bear on a disobedient nation that allows the continued slaughter of babies in the womb (and a host of other social ills, the most significant of which is homosexuality).

Bray and Terry are each critical of contemporary Christianity, which sees God as a “jolly old perennial gift giver,” a “semi-senile heavenly grandfather,” or a “Cosmic Watchmaker.” According to Terry, God is the awesome, fearful, **dread** sovereign Lord of the universe to whom all men will give an account. “It matters not to Him whether we acknowledge Him... He is our judge” (Terry 1995: 3–4). In *The Judgment of God: Terrorism, Floods... Droughts... Disasters*, Terry argues that the travails facing the United States are God’s judgment on our nation and that the only way to avoid destruction is through repentance. While, in 1995, Terry warned of Islamic terrorism, at that point the greater threat was the AIDS epidemic:

In light of the Holy Bible and in view of our nation’s state of moral anarchy, I have come to the conclusion that A.I.D.S. is the judgment of God. I could be wrong, but I believe this horrifying plague is the chastening of the Lord against our nation as a whole and against the homosexual lifestyle in particular.

The thought of A.I.D.S. being a judgment from the Almighty might violate every concept of God you have ever had. You might ask, how could a God of love send such a disease? The answer is because He is also just. And holy. And righteous. (Terry 1995: 25)

From the beginning, Terry urged fellow Christians to participate in Operation Rescue, in part, to forestall God’s judgment on our society. He writes:

The question is *not*, will America be judged? Judgment is inevitable because the blood of the children already killed must be avenged. Even if abortion were outlawed today, our nation will still pay for the blood of the past. The real question is, will we be judged and then restored, or will we be wiped out never to be restored? What form will God’s judgment take? (Terry 1988: 161)

CONCLUSION

While contemporary scholars and many believers see the religiously justified use of violence by Christians to stop abortion as somehow inherently at odds with Christianity, such an argument can only be made by presuming a contemporary, modern, **version** of Christianity as normative. Christians in the larger prolife movement, who believe abortion to be murder, embrace within their worldview the necessary components to arrive at the same conclusion as Mike Bray, Randall Terry, and Paul Hill, including the conviction that abortion is violent, a religious worldview that has at its core the violence of the Crucifixion and the worship of a wrathful, vengeful deity.

NOTES

1. Scholars have sometimes described the field of Religious Studies as an effort to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange.
2. Isaiah 45:22–23 and repeated in the New Testament in Romans 14:10 and Philippians 2:9.

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