

## The Fullness of Life: A Progressive Christian Formulation

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### ABSTRACT

The conversation on abortion in the United States is largely at an impasse, marked by a polarized dichotomy between “pro-life” and “pro-choice” frameworks. Traditional Christian pro-life theology defaults to a “sanctity of life” stance that decries all abortion as unequivocal murder, and therefore, to be legally criminalized. This essay formulates an alternative pro-life theology grounded in the Scriptural concept of the “fullness of life.” This theology incorporates available scientific data to embrace a pragmatic, evidence-based approach that promotes the actual flourishing of human lives.

*You are the one who created my innermost part; you knit me together while I was still in my mother’s womb. I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set apart. Your works are wonderful – I know that very well. My bones weren’t hidden from you when I was being put together in a secret place, when I was being woven together in the deep parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my embryo, and on your scroll every day was written that was being formed for me, before any of them had yet happened. Psalm 139: 13-16 (CEB)*

*Before I created you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I set you apart; I made you a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah 1:5 (CEB)*

*Do not kill. Exodus 20:13 (CEB)*

Abortion is one of the greatest flashpoints of social and cultural division in the United States. From a progressive perspective, the topic falls under the guise of “reproductive justice.” The SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, a national nonprofit activist organization, defines reproductive justice as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I first argue

that the traditional “sanctity-of-life” framework is grounded in a theologically and scientifically dubious foundational axiom, and that this framework fails to be pragmatically pro-life with respect to actual impact on individuals and communities. I then lay out an alternative pro-life vision grounded in reproductive justice: a “fullness-of-life” framework, in which we create conditions for the real flourishing and thriving of all human beings.

The Psalm, Jeremiah, and Exodus texts above are prominent in the imagination of those who decry all abortion as infanticide. To such individuals, these texts declare the “sanctity of life.” The fundamental axiom behind the sanctity-of-life framework is that if God foreknew a person from the womb, human life begins from the very moment of conception. The corollary is that any voluntary failure to carry a pregnancy to term is criminalized as willful murder.

The first problem with the sanctity-of-life framework is its absolute certainty regarding this notion of life from conception, often accompanied by an air of time-honored theological consensus. Yet, diversity on this issue has existed since early Christianity. In the late fourth century, for example, Augustine—a theological giant in Western Christianity—made a moral distinction between an unformed embryo and a fully formed fetus, arguing that only the latter possesses a soul.<sup>2</sup> It is also ontologically worthwhile to ponder the distinction between the life of an embryo at conception and the life of other living cells in the human body, including egg and sperm cells. Do we make the distinction based on sentient capacity, such as the ability to experience pain as frequently cited? The human brain does not possess even the basic autonomic apparatus to process pain signals until approximately twenty-six weeks into gestation, but without the presence of higher cortical consciousness to receive and interpret the signals, it is problematic to conclude that pain as we know it can be experienced even at twenty-six weeks.<sup>3</sup> I raise this observation, not to offer a definitive ontological answer, but to again demonstrate the inherent ambiguity of the issue even from a scientific perspective.

The second problem with the sanctity-of-life framework is the practical impact of criminalizing abortion. Does levying punishment, on women who have abortions, act as a deterrent to their seeking and having abortions? A review of abortion data worldwide provides a compelling corrective to this notion. The most restrictive abortion laws (i.e. abortion is criminalized) are present in parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Ironically, these are the areas with the highest incidence of abortion. From 2010-2014, North America reported 17 abortions per 1000 women aged 15-44; Europe reported 29 abortions per 1000 women aged 15- 44. These are regions with the most liberal abortion laws worldwide. In contrast, Africa reported 34 abortions per 1000 women aged 15-44, Asia reported 36, and Latin America/ Caribbean reported 44.<sup>4</sup> Since 1990, abortion rates declined by 41% in countries where laws are permissive but remained steady in countries where laws are most restrictive.<sup>5</sup> Research on a global level, specific to sex-selective abortions, has shown that banning abortion of female fetuses simply leads to the death of more female infants after the pregnancies are carried to term, due to neglect by their caregivers.<sup>6</sup>

Illegal abortions are performed without qualified medical supervision and therefore carry an elevated risk of death or serious morbidity. These abortions account for up to 1 in 8 maternal deaths worldwide. For every identified hospital case, there are more women who have a medically unsupervised abortion

and do not seek medical care due to fear of abuse, maltreatment, or legal reprisal.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is highly likely that the death rate from illegal abortions is underreported. Aside from death, genital trauma and infertility are common complications of illegal abortions. The United States has ample historical experience with the negative impact of criminalized abortion. The 1960s, prior to the advent of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, told a sordid tale: because of restricted access to medically safe abortions, women injured or dying from botched abortions poured into emergency rooms. In 1967, for instance, *ten thousand women* were admitted in New York City for complications secondary to illegal abortions. The crisis was such that half of maternal deaths that year in New York City were due to botched illegal abortions.<sup>8</sup> Such deaths dramatically decreased after the advent of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which legalized abortion and made it a safe, medically supervised procedure in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The conclusion is this: restrictive abortion laws do not reduce abortion rates. What they do is simply kill more women and leave other women seriously and, in some cases permanently, injured.

I submit, then, that a robust Christian ethic for life cannot rest on a sanctity-of-life framework because it lacks theological and scientific rigor. What has allowed such a non-rigorous framework to captivate the political and theological imagination of the present time? One reason is that a compelling counter-witness was not previously advanced, and so the sanctity-of-life framework simply filled the vacuum. Fortunately, the winds have begun to shift in that regard, though they are in very much a nascent stage. Another reason is the traditional methodology for engaging Scripture. In Western evangelical Christianity, a dominant voice of religion in the United States, abstract theological discourse via Biblical proof texting has been heavily weighted over careful analysis of a theological position's practical implications. It is easy enough to speak of an ethic for life, but is that ethic uplifting actual lives? An evidence-based outcomes approach is familiar to scientific and medical discourse but has yet to pervade popular American religious discourse. A more global theological perspective can be helpful. Feminist postcolonial scholar Kwok Pui Lan discusses the differences between Western and Chinese logic: "Classical Chinese thinkers spent very little time speculating about abstract propositional truth or constructing theories of metaphysics." She describes instead an Asian Scriptural hermeneutic that emphasizes "wisdom for practical living."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza proposes that the Bible must function "as a resource for women's struggle for liberation."<sup>11</sup> I add that the Bible must also function as a practical resource for *intersectional* struggle: the liberation of *all* persons into their full potential as human beings.

What, then, should be the alternative pro-life framework? I propose John 10:10: "I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live *life to the fullest*" (CEB). What does it mean to live life to the fullest? Another direct proclamation by Jesus about his mission provides clues: "He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19 CEB). Despite clear sociological implications, those committed to a hardline neoliberal ideology spiritualize (and in effect domesticate) these words, restricting their application to individual sin and eternal destination. What I find most inspiring about Jesus' proclamation is its original historical context. Though the immediate reference is Isaiah 61:1-2, the phrase "the year of the Lord's favor" connects the quotation to the year of

Jubilee. This year, described in Leviticus 25: 8-55, is when slaves are freed, the poor are to be economically uplifted by having their property returned to them, and “liberty throughout the land” is proclaimed. It is an inescapable fact that Jesus is referring to liberative socioeconomic policy—not merely individual morality or devotion—when he declares his mission. The earthly well-being of vulnerable persons is so critical in the gospel that it is equated to the well-being of the Christ himself: “I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was naked, and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick, and you took care of me. I was in prison, and you visited me. . . . I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of those brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me” (Matthew 25:35-40 CEB).

I wish to highlight two features of this fullness-of-life framework: liberty and well-being, especially of vulnerable or marginalized persons. Merriam-Webster defines liberty as “the power of choice,” “freedom from arbitrary or despotic control,” and the “positive enjoyment of various social, political, or economic rights and privileges.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, liberty and well-being are interdependent. This moral framework transcends a myopic obsession with the womb that characterizes the sanctity-of-life framework. As Rebecca Todd Peters, a feminist Christian ethicist, notes: “Life is not simply about being born, but also being named, claimed, and welcomed into community and nurtured into being.”<sup>13</sup> To call for the fullness of life is thus harmonious with the aims of reproductive justice: the freedom to have or not to have a child, and the freedom to parent in safe and sustainable communities.

Liberty is a fundamental human right, and an essential ingredient of human flourishing. “Choose life” is an oft-repeated motto of those who espouse the sanctity-of-life framework. To choose life, however, implies that there is an actual choice to be made. To make a choice requires free moral agency, not compulsion. Criminalizing abortion is essentially forced altruism. We must remember that pregnancy is not medically benign for women. The risk of mortality for women who carry pregnancies to term is fourteen times higher relative to legal, medically safe abortions. The risk of serious medical morbidity is also significantly higher with childbirth compared to safe, legal abortion.<sup>14</sup> The comparison of abortion to murder—that is, the willful taking of another’s life—is simply illogical. The fetus does not possess independent life, but quite literally borrows the life of the woman, who carries it at significant risk to her own health and life. A more apt analogy would be to legally require one individual to donate an organ to save the life of another, and to impose criminal penalties should the would-be donor fail to do so. Is this really the kind of despotic power we are willing to grant the state over our bodies?

More appropriate would be to consider what enables and supports the free decision to have a child. This is an angle often insufficiently considered by pro-choice and anti-choice activists alike. What is usually overlooked in this debate is how closely abortion is tied to socioeconomic oppression. Globally, the most frequent concerns women cite as a reason for seeking an abortion are socioeconomic in nature.<sup>15</sup> Women at or below the poverty level in the United States have abortions at a rate of 44 abortions per 1000 women, but women living above 300% of the poverty level have abortions at a rate of 10 abortions per 1000 women.<sup>16</sup> As Rebecca Todd Peters summarizes eloquently, “although it only takes nine months to gestate a baby and bring it into the world, it takes at least another eighteen years to raise that child into a

healthy, loving, and well-adjusted member of society. The degree to which a parent can accomplish these tasks successfully and without excessive stress depends on whether they have access to safe and affordable housing, an education system that teaches kids what they need to know to succeed in life, a job that pays a living wage, and a community where their race or ethnic background does not put them at risk.<sup>17</sup> A study published in 2019 reported that 44% of the United States population qualifies as low-wage workers, which means their wages cannot cover the basic cost of living.<sup>18</sup> This means that these workers can work a full-time job, and still be unable to put food on the table, pay rent, keep the electricity on, or afford medical bills. Known risk factors for abortion are disruptive life events such as divorce or separation, moving two or more times in a twelve-month period, losing a job, or domestic violence. The incidence of such life disruptions increases as income decreases. In 2014, seventy five percent of women who had abortions had annual household incomes in or near the bottom quintile in the nation—equal to or less than \$21,432.<sup>19</sup> People of color bear a disproportionate share of poverty and, consequently, have a higher rate of abortions. According to 2018 United States census data, people who identify as Native American, Black, and Hispanic each individually surpass white people in the poverty rate,<sup>20</sup> even though white people are the single most populous ethnic group. African American and Latina women have abortions at rates of 49 and 33 per 1000 women, respectively, in comparison to 13 abortions per 1000 for white women.<sup>21</sup>

Poverty increases the risk of death and morbidity due to concomitant health disparities. Maternal mortality rate, for instance, is three times higher in the United States for Black and Native American/Indigenous women compared to white women.<sup>22</sup> The impact of poverty on a vulnerable child's well-being is not trivial. Child poverty is highly correlated with poor academic achievement and school dropouts, behavioral and emotional problems, and developmental delays. It is also associated with asthma, obesity, physical disability, and premature death. Child poverty costs the rest of society dearly: about \$500 billion a year to the US economy by reducing economic productivity by 1.3 % of GDP, raising crime rates, and increasing overall health care expenditure.<sup>23</sup> These outcomes are due to the impact the chronic stress of poverty can have on children's developing brains—particularly the hippocampus, which is critical to learning, and the prefrontal cortex, which is critical to emotion regulation and planning.<sup>24</sup>

Again, liberty requires that the decision to continue or not continue a pregnancy is experienced by women as an actual choice between options that are both viable. Socioeconomic burdens like the ones we just discussed might result in a well-considered decision to terminate the pregnancy. They can also result in a reluctant or even desperate decision to terminate the pregnancy, even if the woman might otherwise desire a child. Available evidence validates women's socioeconomic concerns when faced with a pregnancy. Women who are denied access to safe, legal abortion are more likely to experience lasting economic insecurity and hardship, more likely to receive public assistance, and less likely to be employed full-time, compared to women who received abortions.<sup>25</sup> Safe and sustainable communities, as called for by reproductive justice advocates, are therefore an absolute prerequisite to women's free moral agency—whether the decision is to have a child, or not to have a child. Women are not motivated by convenience or a callous disregard for children's welfare. To the contrary, the very opposite is true. They understand the lifelong covenant that comes with childbearing, and this understanding informs their decisions. We should

take women seriously when they say they do not have the resources to parent responsibly; failure to take them seriously deals violence to women, children, and society at large. Merely to carry a pregnancy to full term is not to “choose life.” To “choose life” is to maximize opportunity for human beings to *thrive* (not merely survive) when they enter this world. In this sense, the sanctity-of-life framework fails to uphold the values of liberty and well-being promulgated in Matthew 25:35-40, Luke 4:18-19, and John 10:10.

Thus far, I have considered the evidence that criminalizing abortion causes active harm to women, without reducing abortion rates. I have proposed an alternative Biblical ethic of life grounded in human flourishing—what I call the “fullness-of-life” framework. In exploring liberty and well-being, the primary values underpinning the fullness of life, we have introduced a concept of choice broader than that which usually pervades political discourse—one which calls for the removal of oppressive socioeconomic barriers that inhibit genuinely free moral agency. I conclude the discussion by moving from the theoretical to the practical: how do we enact this new “fullness-of-life” theology that proposes to spread “liberty throughout the land” as imagined in the Jubilee of Leviticus 2?

For those of us who are Christians, it is *because* of our Christian faith—not despite it—that we support social policies that promote authentic freedom by advancing the well-being of women, children, and families. We advocate for accessible public transportation and affordable, high-quality childcare so that women, particularly those who face single parenthood, can sustainably earn an income. We invest in quality public education, especially for the most vulnerable and under-resourced school districts. By doing so, we no longer ignore the legacy of racist redlining practices such as those which resulted from the National Housing Act of 1934. Under that law, people in minority neighborhoods were systematically denied loans to purchase homes, making the building of wealth—and hence the building of good schools and other public services—impossible in those neighborhoods for generations to come. We advocate for a living wage that covers the cost of safe housing, basic utilities, and access to healthy foods. We insist on affordable high-quality health care that provides access to disease prevention, not just crisis management. This health care includes easy access to effective contraception (and contraception counseling)—a direct way to prevent unnecessary abortions<sup>26</sup> and enable women to plan their families thoughtfully.

Finally, we learn from global justice efforts to raise standards of living in impoverished nations. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) declares: “Women’s empowerment helps raise economic productivity and reduce infant mortality. It contributes to improved health and nutrition. It increases the chance of education for the next generation.”<sup>27</sup> Microfinance loans enabling women to start their own small businesses have been deployed with success globally, and more so than when the same strategy is deployed with men.<sup>28</sup> In a time when massive corporations use their disproportionate market share to practice economic exploitation, empowering women residing in low-income neighborhoods to start small businesses holds intriguing potential to decentralize economic power simultaneously as improving standards of living and the national economy. Now in this era, more than ever before, we need faithful and well-defined Christian witness such as this to spark the moral imagination of our political and theological discussions. May it be so, as we build and disseminate an evidence-based Christian theology for the fullness of life.

NOTES

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- 2 Rebecca Todd Peters, *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 93-94.
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- 6 Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky* (New York: Knopf, 2009), Introduction.
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- 17 Peters, *Trust Women*, 7.

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