Religion and Reproductive Freedom: Towards a Feminist Ethic of Rights and Responsibility

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I have been asked to evaluate the ways in which religious institutions have aided or impeded the achievement of reproductive freedom during the past twenty years and to offer some suggestions regarding ways in which these institutions can participate effectively in future efforts to enhance and expand these freedoms.

I approach the task both enlightened and limited by my religious beliefs and values and by my own life history. I wish to share those with you so that you can better understand my perspective. First, my own hermeneutic, or principle of interpretation, is strongly feminist. Religious beliefs, historical events, social policy, and personal behavior are interpreted in light of their contribution to the overall well-being of women. Second, as a Christian who developed within the Roman Catholic tradition, I have a particular commitment to the gospels, the good news proclaimed by Jesus Christ. Along with Dr. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, one of our most respected feminist biblical scholars, I believe that the heart of the news is to be found in the establishment of church as a “discipleship of equals.” Within the church, distinctions between male and female, rich and poor, master and slave are to be eliminated. Moreover, the church is to struggle to eliminate those distinctions in society as well. This mandate is well expressed by liberation theologians today who seek within the church concrete expression of a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, including women. Third, these feminist and Christian principles have been applied to my own life as a self-identified “ever single,” heterosexual, white, First World woman with the firm belief that neither my life plan nor the Creator’s purpose for me included pregnancy, childbearing, or child rearing.

Thus began my search for a feminist, Christian ethic of sexuality and reproductive freedom that would respect my life plan and the reality of twenty-five to forty years of procreative risk, approximately 480 menstrual cycles unrelieved by pregnancy, lactation, or poor health. In my journey toward personal integrity, moral agency, and ethical control of that procreative capacity, religious institutions (in my case the Roman Catholic Church) played at best no role; at worst a prohibitive and censorious one.

Some might believe that such negativity is properly reserved for the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical Protestant faith groups. I would contend that even mainstream liberal Protestant and Jewish faith groups, in spite of their public support for family planning and legal abortion, have had and continue to have serious difficulty in supporting a theology and praxis of women’s liberation and reproductive freedom that meets the standard of feminism and scripture mentioned above. I would

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like to explore this contention by briefly examining three facets of religious institutions that affect women's reproductive and sexual freedom: first, theological principles and the ecclesiastical church structures that support those principles; second, the social justice mission or public policy initiatives of the various faith groups; and finally, the ecumenical activities of those churches.

In considering the theological principles governing human reproduction it is important to understand that the Judeo-Christian theology of sexuality and reproduction has been based on the concept of "father-right," nurtured by misogyny, and reinforced by church structures designed to exclude women from sacramental and policy roles. This was the reality that religious women faced twenty years ago, and—within the single exception of a modest opening of lower level opportunities for female priests, ministers, and rabbis—this is the theology and structure in place today. These facts have profoundly affected the internal response of religious institutions to women's demands for a reevaluation of our nature, role, and sexuality and for a re-visioning of the family as prerequisites to a new social ethic of human reproduction.

The effect of "father-right" in constructing social reality within the churches is described by Sister Marie Augusta Neal in her groundbreaking article, "Sociology and Sexuality: A Feminist Perspective." She notes,

"Our theological language is rooted in patriarchal family terms because of the generic masculine. Despite the fact that scripture admonishes us to call no one father but your Father who is in heaven we have used the word quite freely for heads of families, local churches and countries and have even permitted business magnates to take a paternal interest in their workers, psychiatrists in their patients, etc. In every case exploitation has followed. So far has the use of father extended that in some cultures a woman is subject first to her father, then to her husband, and in her old age to her son. This male dominance prevails with no disturbance to the mindset of the male who allocates the roles.¹

The hierarchy of some faith groups, notably Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, and evangelical Protestantism, desperately clings to "father-right." Indeed, they seek to expand patriarchal control within the church and to use the power of the state to enforce their values on the general public as well as their own members. These faith groups are deeply misogynist and maintain rigid sexual taboos. Sex involves a type of immoral pleasure that is redeemable only in the subordination of pleasure to procreation. Sex outside of marriage is totally prohibited, as is artificial contraception or abortion. Even natural family planning is to be used with caution. Women are either temptresses or mothers. One recent manifestation of this view can be seen in the 1984 decision of the Southern Baptists to deny women ordination because of Eve's role in corrupting Adam.

Among these faith groups, only in Roman Catholicism has a reproductive rights and women's liberation movement emerged. It has met not only strong resistance by the hierarchy but also a further rigidification of theology based on dominant male "natural" law. Thus women are denied a sacramental role because of the "natural resemblance theory"—we don't look like Jesus. Married Episcopalian priests who disapprove of their church's decision to ordain women, however, are welcomed into the Roman Catholic priesthood. The need to assert orthodoxy on the abortion issue, especially among women, is so central to the Roman Catholic hierarchy's control that Geraldine Ferraro, the first pro-choice woman to run for vice president of the United States on a major party ticket, faced an unprecedented and vicious attack by several U.S. bishops who were subsequently rewarded with the red hat of a cardinal. Equally under attack were the twenty-four Roman Catholic nuns who broke the taboo on bonding between celibate and sexually active women in the church and spoke out (in a full page ad in the New York Times) in favor of dialogue on the abortion issue. The "Vatican 24" made reference to the actual experiences that lead women to seek abortion as a basis for dissent from Roman Catholic hierarchical teaching on the issue. In response, the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes—the Vatican curial agency in charge of members of religious communities—demanded that they publicly retract or face dismissal from their religious communities. The Vatican official who made this demand is known to believe that women in America are the greatest danger facing the Roman Catholic Church today. And you know something—I think he is right. Most of the nuns threatened have resisted intimidation, and there are clear signs that the women's movement in the Roman Catholic Church is growing and includes reproductive choice as one of its demands.

Though mainstream Protestant and Jewish faith groups have a significantly better record of response to women's demands, they still lag far behind the challenge of feminism and scripture. At least in principle, the theology of "father-right" has been replaced by a theology of human rights. The human rights of women, however, are not as much a priority as are the human rights of Third World people or U.S. racial minorities. Heterosexual marriage is still the norm around which church life revolves, in spite of thirty-three million single women in the U.S. and growing ever-single and homosexual populations. The prohibitions against premarital sex are intact; they are simply not discussed by clergy. To a considerable extent a woman's life and her value are still related to motherhood, not personhood. A telling example of this can be seen in the Mishnah that mandates preservation of the mother's life and, in some interpretations, health over that of the fetus. This is more often than not based on her value as mother to already existing children or to future children rather than her value as an independent member of the human community.

The few Protestant and Jewish women received into ministry have found the opportunities to serve often limited to traditional women's roles—hospital chaplains, campus ministers, teachers, or associate pastors. Few have been integrated into their denominational decision-making bodies.

Opening denominational decision-making structures to women is critical to the full participation of religious
institutions in the struggle for reproductive freedom. As long as these structures are totally male, institutional commitment will be limited and episodic. The commitment of male religious leaders is further limited by their biological alienation from human reproduction, a condition that they share with all men. One feminist theologian has applied property theory to reproduction. She notes, "We might say that at conception mother and father each hold a 50-50 interest in the product. By the time a woman completes a nine-month pregnancy, I would venture to guess that a father has no more than 10 percent equity in the infant." This alienation contributes to continued romanticizing of pregnancy and motherhood, indeed, to its sacralization, so much so that we often forget that marriage, not conception, is the sacrament.

The effect of the dominant male theologies can be seen in the substantial participation by religious institutions on both sides of the public policy debate on reproductive freedom. The ERA, sex education, birth control, abortion, and government funding for both domestic and international family planning have all been the subject of religiously based concern. Unfortunately for women, religious institutions opposed to women's sexual and reproductive freedom have been far more committed to the debate than those supporting reproductive freedom. At present both the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical Protestant faith groups are the major advocates of an anti-reproductive choice public policy. The Roman Catholic Church alone has budgeted $1,000,000 for its national pro-life activities office. In addition, most of the dioceses also spend significant sums on state and local pro-life efforts. These direct expenses do not include the volunteer work of church employees, use of church space, and similar uncounted dollars. In contrast, the total budget and personnel expenditures of all pro-choice religious institutions—including the Presbyterian Church, Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, United Synagogue of America, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations—is a widow's mite. To the best of my knowledge not a single pro-choice religious denomination has a national staff person working full time on reproductive rights. The net available budget for program and operations of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, which includes among its thirty members twelve mainline Protestant and Jewish denominations and organizations, is nowhere near that amount, and most of it is raised from individuals and foundations, not the churches themselves. There is no excuse for this lack of significant denominational support for women's rights. The Catholic Church is no wealthier than Protestant and Jewish congregations; it is as active in providing financial resources for social services and in fighting the risk of nuclear war and world hunger as they are. Further evidence of a more significant level of commitment by religious institutions opposed to reproductive choice than by those on the record as supportive can be seen in the frequent activity of high-level officials of the Roman Catholic Church who appear on television, testify before Congress, and issue public statements. In the recent Senate effort to restore the requirement that U.S. Agency for International Development grantees fully inform overseas clients of a full range of family planning options and not offer natural family planning alone, even Mother Teresa made a lobbying call to Arizona's Catholic Senator Dennis De Concini. In contrast, again, statements and public appearances by Protestant bishops and heads of Protestant churches are especially infrequent.

Even though religious institutions opposed to reproductive freedom have allocated greater financial resources to participation in the public policy debate, their position has not been accepted by either the general public or their own constituency. In an attempt to mask the anti-sex and anti-woman basis of their opposition they have focused on the fetus as possessing an inviolable right to life. As early as 1967, the minority report of a Papal Commission on birth control stated that "contraception is evil because it is in some way analogous to homicide." That minority report was accepted by Pope Paul VI as the foundation of the Roman Catholic Church's opposition to artificial contraception in spite of the continuing pleas of Catholic couples, theologians, and even some bishops for a moderation of the Church's position. At the 1981 Vatican Synod on the family, South African Archbishop Dennis Hurley, a major opponent of apartheid, pleaded for the Roman Catholics of South Africa: "It is not easy to explain to them that the act of artificially limiting the exercise of one faculty of life [procreative capacity] is intrinsically evil while the act of exterminating life itself is not. For, in certain circumstances, a person may kill, as in self-defense or in a so-called just war."

The anti-woman bias in the Roman Catholic position is especially clear to women; the Church's appeal to the so-called "sanctity of life" has fallen on deaf ears. Theologian Marjorie Maguire has repeatedly noted that "the hierarchy's message to women is not that fetal life is precious, rather it tells us that women are of no more value than fertilized eggs." In practice, the hierarchical position has been resoundingly rejected. Over 90 percent of Catholic women have used or use artificial contraception. A little known but important fact is that single Catholic women who are sexually active and receive communion at least once a week are significantly more likely to use birth control measures than their sisters who never or infrequently receive this sacrament. The moral wisdom shown by these women far exceeds that of their church leadership. Although there is only scanty data on the religious affiliation of women seeking abortion, it is reasonable to conclude that Catholic women use abortion to the same extent as their Protestant and Jewish sisters.

On the other hand, mainstream Protestant and Jewish faith groups have maintained public policies in support of both family planning and legal abortion that have been extremely important in sustaining public opinion favorable to these options. Unfortunately those policies are not strongly based on an understanding of, or commitment to, women's freedom. Instead, they rest on such liberal principles as constitutional rights, family privacy, and freedom of religion. These are important values, and faith groups that defend them are to be commended. But religious women must lead their faith groups to a deeper commitment to women as moral agents and to an under-
standing of the central role fertility control plays in women's ability to function fully in church and society.

It is, I believe, especially important at this time that feminists be constructively critical of the role played by religious institutions that support reproductive choice. The right to choice in contraception and in the case of an unplanned pregnancy is under the most concerted political attack it has ever faced. The first victims of this attack were poor women in the United States, but now women in developing countries, in particular, are also under attack. Religious institutions have a special obligation to be advocates for these women. If they are to fulfill that obligation, they will need to challenge publicly the positions taken by their ecumenical colleagues. This they have been reluctant to do. So many other cooperative ventures for the good of the poor would be threatened, they claim. Housing, welfare rights, a nuclear freeze, civil rights—all take precedence over women's rights.

Without ecumenical assistance, the survival of a pro-choice Catholic movement will be difficult. The pressures that we face are enormous. I mentioned earlier the case of the “Vatican 24.” In addition, prominent and good Catholic theologians and scholars are being silenced, denied tenure, and not hired because they speak out on this issue. Priests and even bishops who do not actually engage in anti-choice activity know they will languish in bureaucratic limbo. Catholics need the support of our interfaith colleagues on this issue. Women's reproductive health cannot be bartered for support on other issues—foreign or domestic. Religious institutions that disagree with the public policy position on human reproduction taken by the Roman Catholic Church must pursue that disagreement publicly with the same vigor that they have pursued their disagreement with Jerry Falwell. Women in these faith groups must demand this higher level of commitment. The extent to which anti-choice efforts by some religious institutions can be neutralized and pro-choice religious institutions can be moved to adopt a more woman-centered approach to human reproduction in the next decade is very much dependent on the success of the growing feminist movement in all mainstream faith groups. Here there is reason to be hopeful, for these women and a few men are challenging church leadership on sexual and reproductive ethics in an unprecedented way. Simply and calmly, they are saying, “No good. Let's start over.”

Religious feminists have begun to “start over.” They are developing a new feminist ethic of reproductive rights and responsibilities. This ethic starts by respecting women's experience and trusting their integrity. The acceptance of this ethic will depend ultimately on the ability of men and women to give up no-longer-credible romantic notions of family and relationship. To quote again from Sister Neal: “The rules that will emerge will not resemble the obsolete regulations presently prescribed for men and women with regard to birth control, abortion, divorce, and sexual relations outside a context of love.”

Women have borne and raised children under the most difficult of circumstances; they can be trusted in their decisions not to bear or raise children. A feminist ethic places substantial emphasis on communal values and communal responsibility for childbearing and rearing. It seeks public policy that provides social and economic support for women who choose to bear children, as well as women who choose not to. It views human sexuality not with fear and dread, not as loss, but as a positive good given to us for our pleasure and growth as well as our survival.

NOTES

3. Neal.