

The Scriptures. It is difficult to derive a prohibition against abortion from either the Jewish or the Christian Scriptures. The Scriptures never condemn abortion by name. However, conservatives sometimes quote certain passages that seem to suggest that fetuses have full human status. One of the most frequently cited passages is from the first chapter of Jeremiah, in which Jeremiah quotes God as saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." These words are presented as though they were God's endorsement of the conservative position: it is wrong to kill the unborn because the unborn are consecrated to God.

In context, however, these words obviously mean something different. Suppose we read the whole passage in which they occur:

Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." But the Lord said to me,

"Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you."

This passage has nothing to do with abortion. Instead, Jeremiah is asserting his authority as a prophet. He is saying, in effect, "God told me to speak for him. I tried to say no, but he insisted." However, Jeremiah puts this point poetically; he says that God selected him to be a prophet even before he was born.

The pattern here is familiar: someone who is advocating a moral position quotes a few words from the Bible, out of context, and then interprets them in a way that supports their position; yet those words suggest something else entirely when read in context. When this happens, is it accurate to say that the person is "following the moral teachings of the Bible"? Or is it accurate to say that he has searched the Bible to find support for something he already believes, and has interpreted the Bible with this in mind? The latter, when true, suggests

an especially arrogant attitude—the attitude that God himself must share one's opinions!

Other biblical passages support a *liberal* view of abortion. Three times the death penalty is recommended for women who have had sex out of wedlock, even though killing the woman would also kill her fetus (Genesis 38:24; Leviticus 21:9; Deuteronomy 22:20–21). This suggests that the fetus has no right to life. Also, in Exodus 21, God tells Moses that the penalty for murder is death; however, the penalty for causing a woman to miscarry is only a fine. The Law of Israel seemed to regard the fetus as something less than a person.

Church Tradition. Today, the Catholic Church strongly opposes abortion. In many Protestant churches, too, abortion is routinely denounced from the pulpit. It is no surprise, then, that many people feel that they must condemn abortion “for religious reasons,” regardless of how Scripture is interpreted. What lies behind the Church's current position on abortion?

To some extent, the Vatican has always opposed abortion for the same reason that it condemns condoms, birth control pills, and other forms of contraception: All of these activities thwart natural processes. According to natural-law theory, sex is supposed to lead to the birth of a healthy baby. Condoms and birth control pills prevent this from happening by preventing pregnancy; abortion prevents it by killing the fetus. Thus, by the lights of traditional Catholic thinking, abortion is wrong because it disrupts a natural process. This type of argument, however, can hardly show that Christians “must” oppose abortion. The argument depends on natural-law theory, and, as we have seen, natural-law theory is based on a worldview that predates modern science. Christians today need not reject modern science—even the Catholic Church dropped its opposition to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution back in 1950. Thus, Christians are not required to oppose abortion based on natural-law considerations.

At any rate, to say that abortion disrupts a natural process is to say nothing about the moral status of the fetus. The pope does not merely believe that abortion is immoral, like

using a condom; he believes that abortion is *murder*. How did this position become dominant within the Catholic Church? Have Church leaders always regarded the fetus as enjoying a special moral status?

For most of the Church's history—until around A.D. 1200—little of relevance is known. Back then, there were no universities, and the Church was not especially intellectual. People believed all kinds of things, for all kinds of reasons. But in the 13th century, Saint Thomas Aquinas constructed a philosophical system that became the bedrock of later Catholic thought. The key question, Aquinas believed, is whether the fetus has a soul: if it does, then abortion is murder; if it doesn't, then abortion is not murder. Does the fetus have a soul? Aquinas accepted Aristotle's idea that the soul is the "substantial form" of man. Let's not worry about what that means, exactly; what's important is that human beings are supposed to acquire a "substantial form" only when their bodies take on human shape. So now the key question is: When do human beings first look human?

When a baby is born, anyone can see that it has a human shape. In Aquinas's day, however, nobody knew when fetuses begin to look human—after all, fetal development occurs in the mother's womb, out of sight. Aristotle had believed, for no good reason, that males acquire a soul 40 days after conception and females do after 90 days. Presumably, many Christians accepted his view. At any rate, for the next several centuries, it was natural for Catholics to strongly oppose abortion at any stage of pregnancy, because the fetus *might* have already acquired a human form, and so abortion *might* be murder.

Contrary to popular belief, the Catholic Church has never officially maintained that the fetus acquires a soul at the moment of conception. Around 1600, however, some theologians began to say that the soul enters the body a few days after conception, and so abortion is murder even at an early stage. This monumentally important change in Catholic thinking occurred without extended theological debate. Perhaps it seemed unimportant because the Church already opposed early-term abortions. Yet we understand little about why the Church adopted this position.

Today we know a lot about fetal development. We know, through microscopes and ultrasounds, that fetuses do not look human until several weeks into the pregnancy. Thus, a follower of Aquinas should now say that fetuses do not have a soul during the first month or two of pregnancy. However, there has been no movement inside the Catholic Church to adopt that position. For reasons that remain murky, the Church adopted a conservative view of the status of the fetus in the 1600s, and it has held fast to that view ever since.

The purpose of reviewing this history is not to suggest that the contemporary church's position is wrong. For all I have said, it may be right. The point, rather, is this: every generation interprets its traditions to support its favored moral views. Abortion is but one example of this. We could also have discussed the church's shifting views on slavery, or the status of women, or capital punishment. In each case, the moral stance taken by the Church seems not to be derived from the Bible so much as imposed on it.

The arguments in this chapter point to a common conclusion: Right and wrong are not to be understood in terms of God's will; morality is a matter of reason and conscience, not religious faith; and, in any case, religious considerations do not provide definitive solutions to most of the moral problems that we face. Morality and religion are, in a word, different. Of course, religious beliefs do sometimes bear on moral issues. Consider, for example, the doctrine of eternal life. If some people go to heaven when they die—so that dying is a good thing for them—then this might affect the morality of killing these people. Or suppose we believe, upon studying ancient prophecies, that the world is about to end. This might diminish our fear of climate change. The relationship between morality and religion is complicated, but it is a relationship between two different subjects.

This conclusion may seem antireligious. However, it has not been reached by questioning the validity of religion. The arguments we have considered do not assume that Christianity or any other theological system is false; they merely show that, even if such a system is true, morality remains a separate matter.