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From the standpoint of the religious pacifist, Professor Zahn sees "elementary human rights" beginning at the "moment of conception marking the beginning of the individual's life process," and argues against abortion from this point.

A Religious Pacifist Looks at Abortion

Gordon C. Zahn

Prudence, if nothing else, would seem to dictate that a celibate male, especially one committed to pacifism, should avoid getting embroiled in controversy with the women's liberation crowd. Ordinarily I would be all set to go along with this and not only for reasons of such prudential restraint. I am in general agreement with the movement's objectives and principles and more than ready to give it the benefit of almost every doubt — even though I do wish at times that its principal spokesmen (?) could be a little more, if not "ladylike," at least gentlemanly in their rhetoric and tone. But these are minor reservations.

There is one point of substance, however, on which I must register

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strong disagreement, and that is the increasing emphasis being placed on "free abortion on demand" as a principal plank in the liberationists' platform. From my perspective as a religious pacifist, I find this proposal thoroughly abhorrent; and I am disturbed by the willingness of so many who share my political and theological approach in most respects to go along with or condone a practice which so clearly contradicts the values upon which that approach is based.

In the past I have criticized "establishment" Christians, in particular official Catholic ecclesiastical and theological spokesmen, for their hypersensitivity to the evil of killing the unborn and their almost total disregard of the evil of "post-natal" abortion in the form of the wholesale destruction of human life in war. The argument works both ways and with equal force: those of us who oppose war cannot be any less concerned about the destruction of human life in the womb.

In discussing this issue from a pacifist standpoint I do not intend to enter upon two controversies which, though clearly related to the problem of abortion, are somewhat peripheral to my essential concern for life and the reverence for life. Thus, the whole question of the morality of contraception, obviously one of the alternatives to abortion as a means of population control, involves moral principles of an altogether different order. More closely related but also excluded from consideration here is the legal question, that is whether or not anti-abortion legislation now on the statute books should be repealed, modified, or retained. One can argue, as I shall here, that abortion is immoral and still recognize compelling practical and theoretical reasons for not using state authority to impose a moral judgment that falls so far short of universal acceptance within the political community. On the other hand, there are equally compelling arguments upholding legal prohibition of what has long been considered by many to be a form of murder; and this takes on added force to the extent that repeal of laws already in effect will be interpreted as official authorization of the hitherto forbidden practice. Since the intention here is to discuss the objections to abortion itself, this very important legal question will be left for others to debate and resolve.

Nor will I comment upon what I consider the tactical blunder on the part of the liberationists to "borrow trouble" by making so touchy an issue — on emotional as well as moral grounds — a central part of their program. I must, however, reject the rationale that is usually advanced to support their demands, the "property rights" line which holds that because a woman's body is "her own," she and she alone must be left free to decide what is to be done about the developing fetus. Leaving aside the obvious fact that the presence of the fetus suggests a decision that could have been made earlier, this line of argument represents a crude reversion to the model of laissez-faire economics Catholics of a liberal or radical persuasion have long since repudiated. Even if one were to accept the characterization of a woman's body as "property" (is it not one of the liberationists' complaints that men and man-made laws have reduced her to that status?), the claim to absolute rights of use and disposal of that property could not be taken seriously. The owner of a badly needed residential building is not, or at least should
not be, free to evict his tenants to suit a selfish whim or to convert his property to some frivolous or non-essential use. In such a case we would insist upon the traditional distinction which describes property as private in ownership but social in use.

To use another example, the moral evil associated with prostitution does not lie solely, perhaps not even primarily, in the illicit sex relationship but, rather, in the degradation of a person to precisely this status of a “property” available for “use” on a rental or purchase basis. It is a tragic irony that the advocates of true and full personhood for women have chosen to provide ideological justification for attitudes which have interfered with recognition of that personhood in the past.

This is not to say, of course, that a woman does not have prior rights over her own body but only that the exercise of those rights must take into account the rights of others. In monogamous marriage this would preclude a wife’s “freedom” to commit adultery (a principle, it should be unnecessary to add, which applies to the husband as well). Similarly, in the case of a pregnancy in wedlock, the husband’s rights concerning the unborn child must be respected too; indeed, even in a pregnancy out of wedlock, the putative father retains parental rights to the extent that he is ready to assume his share of responsibility for the child’s future needs. In both cases, and this is the crux of the argument, of course, the rights of the unborn child, perhaps the most important claimant of all, must be respected and protected.

Human Rights

These categories of rights, I insist, are not to be put in any “property rights” or similar economic frame of reference. They represent elementary human rights arising out of an intimacy of union between responsible persons which transcends purely utilitarian or proprietary considerations. The governing consideration as far as the unborn child is concerned is simply this: when do these rights come into existence? The answer offered here, and I think it is the only answer compatible with a pacifist commitment, is that they exist at the moment of conception marking the beginning of the individual’s life processes.

This has nothing to do with the old theological arguments over whether or not the soul can be said to be present at conception; it rests completely upon the determination of whether or not there is now something “living” in the sense that, given no induced or spontaneous interferences, it will develop into a human person. We know for certain that this fertilized ovum is not going to develop into a dog or cat or anything else: whatever its present or intervening states, it will at the end emerge as a human child. One need only consider the usual reaction to a spontaneous or accidental termination of a wanted pregnancy. The sorrow of the prospective parents, a sorrow shared by friends and relatives alike, testifies not only to the fact that something has “died” but, also, that this “something” was human.

So, too, with the medical arguments over when the fetus becomes “viable” and, therefore, eligible for birth. It is the life that is present, not the organism, which should concern us.
most. Once we agree that society’s origin and purpose lie in the fulfillment of human capacities and needs, we have established the basis for a reverence for life which goes far beyond such purely technical determination. Should a life once begun be terminated (whether before or after the point of viability) because the prospective mother did not have adequate food and care or because she was forced by the demands of her social or economic condition to undergo excessive physical or psychological strain, we would have no problem about charging society with a failure to meet its responsibility. There is no reason to change this judgment when the termination is brought about by deliberate act, either to avoid some personal inconvenience or to serve what may be rationalized into the “greater good” of the family unit or, as the eugenicist might put it, society as a whole. Just as rights begin with the beginning of the life process, so does society’s obligation to protect them.

Recently a new and somewhat terrifying “viability” test has been proposed in arguments supporting abortion. No longer is it to be the stage of physiological development which determines whether or not life is to be terminated but rather the degree to which “personhood” has emerged or developed. Although strict logic might suggest that personhood can be established only after the fetus has entered upon its extra-uterine existence (that is, after the child has been born) advocates of this new test are apparently willing to extend it back into the later weeks of pre-natal development as well.

Two objections to this test should be immediately obvious. In the first place (and the “generous allowance” of pre-natal personhood serves as a good illustration of this point), we are caught up with the same old problems of judgment that plagued the older viability standards: if the fetus is to be considered viable at x-weeks, what about the day before that period is completed? If personhood can be manifested in the pre-natal period when, let us say, fetuses can be compared in terms of differential activity, what about the hour before such differences can be noticed? Is more activity a sign that personhood is advanced, or might the absence of much activity be a sign of equal, though different, emergence of personhood?

The second objection is even more troubling. Under the old notion of physiological viability, the child once born was unquestionably viable. The same may not be true — or may not remain so in the face of changing social definitions — once the emergence or development of personhood is the measure. My experience as a conscientious objector in World War II doing alternate service in a home for mental deficiencies introduced me to literally hundreds of individuals whose state of retardation was such that they could be described as “animals” or even “vegetables” by members of the institutional staff. Later, working in a hospital for mental diseases, I attended paretic and senile patients who had reached the state of regression and psychological deterioration at which the same terms could be applied to them and their behavior. However ardent and sincere the disclaimers may be, applying the test of personhood to the unborn is certain to open the way to pressures to apply that same test to the already born. In this sense, then, abortion and euthanasia are ideological twins.
In the old theological formulations of the problem, the condemnation of abortion was justified in terms of the “sanctity” or the “intrinsic worth” of human life. Today much of the argument supporting abortion rests upon similar abstractions applied now to the intrinsic worth of the prospective mother’s life or of siblings whose living standards and life-chances might be threatened by the additional pregnancy. These are valid concerns and deserve serious and sympathetic understanding; and society does have a responsibility to find answers to these problems that do not involve the sacrifice of the human life that has begun. Pacifism and opposition to abortion converge here, for both find their ultimate justification in the Christian obligation to revere human life and its potential and to respect all of the rights associated with it.

The developmental model used by those who propose emergence of personhood as the test is basically sound, but as used by the advocates of abortion it becomes a logical enormity arguing for a development from an undefined or unstipulated beginning. A more consistent approach would see human life as a continuity from the point of clinically determined conception to the point of clinically determined death. This physiological life-span is then convertible to an existential framework as a developmental pattern of dependence relationships: at the earliest stages of a pregnancy the dependence is total; as the fetus develops, it takes on some of its own functions; at birth, its bodily functions are physiologically independent, but existential dependency is still the child’s dominant condition. The rest of the pattern is obvious enough. As the individual matures and achieves the fullness of personhood, both functional and behavioral independence become dominant (though never total; culture and its demands must be taken into account). Finally, advanced age and physical decline returns him to a state of dependency which may, at the end, approximate that of his earliest childhood.

Society’s responsibilities to the individual stand in inverse relationship to the growth and decline of his independence and autonomy. It would follow, then, that the immorality of abortion (and euthanasia as well) lies precisely in the fact that they propose to terminate the life process when the dependency is most total, that it would do so with the approval or authorization of society, that it would seek to justify this betrayal of society’s responsibility on purely pragmatic grounds. The various claims made for the social utility of abortion (reducing the threat of overpopulation and now pollution; sparing the already disadvantaged family the strain of providing for yet another mouth; etc.) or the even less impressive justifications in terms of personal and all too often selfish benefits to the prospective parent(s) have to be put in this context; and once they are, they lose much of their force.

The earlier reference to the sorrow caused by the loss through miscarriage of a wanted child does not obscure the fact that most abortion proposals are concerned with preventing the birth of unwanted children. No one will deny that being regarded as an unwanted intruder in the family circle will be psychologically if not always physically harmful, but there should be other solutions to this problem than “sparing” the intruder this unpleasantness by denying him life in the first
place. If a child is "unwanted" before conception, science has provided sufficient means for avoiding the beginning of the life process.

Since the sexual enlightenment burst upon us a generation or so ago, we have replaced the old Victorian notions about "the mystery of sex" with a kind of mechanistic assumption that man is the helpless victim of his chemistry and unconscious impulses, an assumption which reduces sexual intercourse to a direct, natural, and almost compulsive response to stimuli and situations. The other side of this particular coin is the not so hidden danger that man himself will be redefined in strictly biological terms, a largely accidental event brought into being by the union of two adult organisms acting in response to the irresistible urge. This is reflected in many of the statements made by advocates of abortion in their references to the conceived child as a "fertilized ovum." The term is perfectly accurate in the strictly physiological sense; in the Christian perspective, however, it leaves something to be desired.

The act of intercourse, like any other human act, is and must remain subject to human responsibility. This means that those who enter upon it should consider the possible consequences of the act and acknowledge responsibility for those consequences if and when they come to pass. Ideally this would mean that unwanted children would not be conceived; where the ideal is not achieved — or where the participants change their minds after the child is conceived — it will be society's obligations to assume the responsibility for the new life that has been brought into being.

Unwanted pregnancies resulting from a freely willed and voluntary act of sexual intercourse are one thing; those resulting from rape require special consideration. Even here, I would hold, the reverence for life which forms the basis of this pacifist rejection of abortion would preclude the intentional termination of the life process begun under such tragic circumstances. The apparent harshness of this position may be mitigated somewhat by reflecting that pregnancies attributable to true rape (or incest) represent a small proportion of the unwanted. Certainly they do not constitute a large enough proportion to justify the emphasis placed upon them by proponents of abortion. This provides small consolation to the victim who has already undergone the physically and psychologically traumatic experience of the assault itself and must still suffer the consequences of an act for which she bears no active responsibility. Nevertheless, the life that has begun is a human life and must be accorded the same rights and protection associated with the life resulting from normal and legitimate conceptions. Here again society must do what it can to provide all possible assistance to the victim including compensation (if one can speak of "compensation" in this context!) for the sacrifice she has been called upon to make. In most cases we must assume the mother will not want to keep the child after birth, at which point society's responsibility for its future development will become complete. If a mother does decide to keep her child, society will still have the obligation to make some continuing provision for adequate care and support.
The position I have outlined here has been described as unrealistic and even irresponsible in that it absolutizes the right of every "fertilized ovum" to develop, as one critic put it, "in a planet which can no longer support that kind of reproduction and where it threatens the possibility of realizing the lives which exist." The adjectives unrealistic and irresponsible do not trouble me; they are fairly standard descriptions of the pacifist approach, and this is a pacifist case against abortion. What does trouble me is the rest of the criticism. The ability or inability of the planet to support present and projected population totals is still a contested issue, and even if the prospects were as desperate as the statement suggests, the question would still remain as to whether the termination of unborn life is a desirable or acceptable solution. And as for the "realization" of the life which exists, it is essential to face the prior question of who is to determine what that involves and by what standards. How long, we must ask, before the quotas now being set in terms of "zero population growth" and similar quantitative formulae are refined by eugenic selectionists into qualitative quotas instead? This is not an idle fear, and one would think that a movement dedicated to the elimination of long-standing inequalities based on the qualitative distinction of sex should be particularly sensitive to the possibility.

Beyond this there is that matter of "absolutizing" the right to life, and to this I am ready to plead guilty. At a time when moral absolutes of any kind are suspect and the fashions in theological and ethical discourse seem to have moved from situationalism to relativism and now to something approximating indifferentism, it strikes me as not only proper but imperative that we proclaim the value of every human life as well as the obligation to respect that life wherever it exists — if not for what it is at any given moment (a newly fertilized ovum; a convicted criminal; the habitual sinner) at least for what it may yet, with God's grace, become.

It is not just a matter of consistency; in a very real sense it is the choice between integrity and hypocrisy. No one who publicly mourns the senseless burning of a napalmed child should be indifferent to the intentional killing of a living fetus in the womb. By the same token, the Catholic, be he bishop or layman, who somehow finds it possible to maintain an Olympian silence in the face of government policies which contemplate the destruction of human life on a massive scale, has no right to issue indignant protests when the same basic disregard for human life is given expression in government policies permitting or encouraging abortion.