

LETTER TO AN ANTI-ABORTIONIST

Hi ----,

You know, I've held off responding to your deeply held beliefs and insistence on pushing the anti-abortionist line for a long time because really, it's none of my business how you spend your time. However, since I've suffered through yet another diatribe about the immorality of abortion today from you, I'd like to provide an uncensored view of how I see *your* views. You won't like it.

First, with respect to today's reference to selective abortion of girls as an argument against abortion, it seems to me that abortion (and infanticide) caused by misogynistic pressures that undervalue the existence of daughters in favor of sons are part of the many misogynistic cultural practices that demean women around the world. But banning abortion hardly constitutes *respect* for women. Equating patriarchal pressures against freedom of choice to respect for women is like equating *purdah* to anti-rape campaigns.

As for the inherent human rights of the fetus, when are you and your fellow believers in souls going to start carrying out funeral services for the used menstrual pads containing legions of fertilized eggs that *never* implant – somewhere around 40% to 60% of all the zygotes created through syngamy? Where is your compassion for all those poor little souls that magically appeared at the moment of fertilization and were sent home – returned to the great soul-hopper in the sky – when the zygote was ignominiously flushed out of the plumbing in the next menstrual flow? Are there plans to construct special liturgy for these untold billions of losses? Special prayers? Masses? Votive candles? Even now, the more extreme in your movement are shifting their position to argue against *all* contraception, not just post-coital anti-implantation drugs. And why aren't you proposing to criminalize all miscarriages?

And where, pray tell, is there the slightest basis in your religious traditions to suppose that the union of chromosomes from spermatozoon and ovum defines the existence of a being with independent rights and values? Where did you and your fellow believers get this idea, exactly? Certainly not in Jewish tradition, which will have none of it. Jewish tradition on abortion includes specific allowance for protection of a woman and the priority of the woman's concerns over the existence of the fetus.

And why aren't other diploid cells such as the epithelial cells of our mouth or lower intestines worthy of concern? Oh – because they can't turn into babies just yet? Better watch out: the fanatics have seized upon stem cells, about which they had never heard until a few years ago, as another battle-line in the war against the evil atheists: yep, Republicans have come down on the side of protecting cells from, say, the umbilical cord of newborns – cells which have normally been thrown away and shriveled up in garbage heaps for the last several million years of proto-human and human existence – and declared that they will protect the poor little things against abuse such as being used to grow replacement tissues and organs. Oh wait: no, they will protect only *SOME* stem cells; the ones from existing stem-cell lines are OK to, um, murder.

The notion that fertilization marks a turning point in the existence of protoplasm – the starting point for a soul-infused phase worthy *ipso facto* of protection and nurture – is in my view based in the misguided application of technology to religious doctrine. Doesn't your

view of cells imply that diploid cells each have a piece of soul lodged in them much as they carry other organelles such as mitochondria? Isn't it odd to be tying a spiritual concept such as soul to such a concrete entity as a single cell? And if it is appropriate for a diploid, differentiated cell to be granted legal recognition, then why is it inappropriate for a haploid, undifferentiated cell to be bereft of legal recognition instants before it gets injected with a full haploid set of additional chromosomes? Where's your compassion for unfertilized eggs? Or for that matter, millions of poor widdle spermatozoa who never get a soul?

The problem with the anti-abortionist view that depends on the survivability of the fetus is that it turns religion into a function of whatever technological development currently exists in society. You and the other dualists had better hope that no one invents a mechanism for taking diploid, differentiated cells and shifting them into pluripotency, because you're going to have to start praying over the little cells that are washed out of your mouth when you brush your teeth or – but need I go on?

What are you going to do if someone clones a baby from the cells of an adult, ----? Suppose a scientific group finds a way to reverse the histone-based inactivation of key genes in differentiated epithelial cells and allows them to become the equivalent of stem cells? Are you going to go through hoops explaining how these *particular* cells magically become infused with soul and worthy of legal protection whereas other cells from the same origins do not because they haven't been similarly treated? So specific technology will determine the presence of soul? Pretty neat: science actually finds a way to bring soul into a blob of protoplasm by the application of chemicals and radiation. Boy, that's a wonderful basis for a religious doctrine.

This entire legalistic fuss is a result of a profound confusion over categories – the confusion between forms of speech and ways of thinking. You see a word like “life” and assume that because it is a noun, it must imply a dualistic essence. You see the word “mind” and assume that it must imply an entity with independent existence rather than being a convenient description of activity – the results of brain activity, to be precise. So you see the word “soul” and assume that it must lead an independent existence because *it is a noun*. Heaven forbid that anyone admit that “soul” is a word applied to behavior, to action, not to objects. “Soul” and “life” would cause far less confusion of thought if they were verbs.

Anti-abortion activism is an expression of a particular view of the universe coupled with a complete unwillingness even to *contemplate* the possibility that any divergent view could possibly be correct. But be very clear: no abortion-rights protester has ever told someone that they must have an abortion. I wish the converse were true and that anti-abortionists would simply voice their opinions without trying to pass laws forcing everyone else to abide by their bizarre beliefs in reified verbs.

How would meat-eating anti-abortionists react if vegetarians decided to try to impose their views on the entire country? Many of the arguments about the rights of fertilized eggs and fetuses can easily be rewritten to argue for the protection of critters against being killed and eaten. Isn't it enough that vegetarians can eschew meat? Why isn't it enough that anti-abortionists can eschew abortion?

And don't even try the tired argument about how my position is an imposition on you: I'm not telling *you* what to do with your body – I'm telling you to leave women alone to decide for themselves. You might also have a word with the people who have been shooting abortionists; they seem to be unclear on the concept of rule of law.

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So in closing, it seems to me that the contention over abortion is rooted in a profound disagreement over the nature of human life. Anti-abortionists believe in a soul that is unique to human beings and therefore imbue even one-celled zygotes with special significance. But I view a blastocyst, a gastrula, or a 24-week fetus with about the same dispassion as I do epithelial cells. And anti-abortionists do not address the observation that 40% of all fertilized ova either never implant or are shed shortly after implantation in the next menstrual flow. They also fail to address the implications for women of legal rights for fetuses; we have already seen attempts to charge drivers who kill pregnant women with double homicides or manslaughters as a mechanism for conferring legal rights on fetuses. But will women then have to deal with the legal implications of miscarriages? Will we see legal limitations on permitted activities for pregnant women? No rock climbing? No flying in planes? No alcohol consumption? Why not? If screaming imprecations at women entering women's health clinics and shooting at obstetricians who disagree with the anti-abortion doctrine are OK, why should we stop there? Why not force pregnant women into confinement à la 19th century to protect the legal rights of the "unborn?"

On a side note, I'd be a lot more impressed with the anti-abortionists if there were a strong correlation between opposing abortion and opposing the death penalty or between opposing abortion and supporting societal support for good prenatal and infant nutrition and health.

I weigh the issues from a utilitarian standpoint and refuse to think that there is an easy, absolute line that removes the need for thought and analysis. I abhor any notion of imposing abortion on any woman for any reason against her will; but having believers in the rights of fetuses dictate what women can or cannot do with their own bodies is the naked imposition of other people's religious beliefs on those who don't accept those beliefs. Unwanted pregnancy is a complex situation that is already troubling enough to the women involved without imposing other people's beliefs on them, let alone screaming abuse at them, making them travel hundreds of miles for care, and threatening them with prison time.

Don't like abortion? Don't have one.

Regards,

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