How Abortion has Failed Women by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

Many like to pretend that abortion is a matter of no grave consequence to a woman. Abortion simply removes an obstacle to the real purpose of a woman’s life, whatever she takes that purpose to be. Yet as my friend’s experience suggests, women rarely take the experience of having an abortion lightly. For most, the reality of abortion exposes the bankruptcy of the claim that it is only a matter of convenience and expediency. The choice of abortion exposes a woman to a slew of physical risks, including permanent damage to her ability to bear children. (The feminists who like to remind of us of the dangers of “back alley” abortions in the days before Roe v. Wade never mention that women still die from abortions and those most at risk are poor.) In addition, abortion exposes a woman to a variety of psychological risks, notably guilt and depression. Beyond the physical and psychological risks, abortion confronts a woman with the great existential questions of being and purpose: Who am I? What am I intended for?

Like the stone crosses that once stood at crossroads, abortion marks the convergence of the most portentous social, political, and moral questions of our time. Those questions challenge us to define our attitudes toward the purpose of our own lives and of the society to which we belong—toward life, death, and our responsibilities to others. Just as the questions converge in abortion, the answers to them diverge, leading respectively, in the words of the Holy Father, to the culture of life or the culture of death.

The Supreme Court’s decision in Roe v. Wade effectively consecrated the triumph of the sexual revolution and drew a line between its opponents and its celebrants. Depending on whom you listen to, Roe v. Wade inaugurated the true beginning of women’s freedom, a major gain in their struggle to achieve equality with men, or it inaugurated an unprecedented increase in out-of-wedlock births, single-parent families, teen violence and suicide, and infanticide. The point of convergence between the two sides lies in their common understanding that abortion has proven a powerful force in the sexual and social liberation of women. The point of divergence lies in whether one believes that liberation has benefited women and society and even whether it can sustain a just and decent society at all.

The Feminist Ideal

The women’s movement defends abortion-on-demand as the cornerstone of women’s freedom and equality and rejects any limitation of it as an abridgment of women’s rights. Many activists like to insist on the diversity of feminism to show that they are open-minded and attentive to the beliefs of women with different backgrounds and convictions. Recent history confirms that in practice there are narrow limits to their tolerance, but in the case of abortion, they do not even pretend. Abortion ranks as the movement’s one nonnegotiable demand. Because feminists have cloaked that demand in the rhetoric of choice, it is easy to mistake their intransigence, and many have. Choice, after all, returns the decision to the woman, who alone can judge her situation. According to this view, the defense of abortion is nothing more than a defense of privacy and individual conscience.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) regards the “right to choose” as a “fundamental liberty.” In a briefing paper, the ACLU argues that abortion protects a woman’s constitutional right to autonomy and privacy. Roe, it says, “protects the right of women to make life choices in keeping with their conscience or religious beliefs,” and “By relieving American women of the burden of unwanted pregnancies, Roe has permitted them to pursue economic equality on a more equal basis with men.” Any attempt to restrict reproductive choice, it insists, “is not only an attack on personal autonomy but also on the principle of equality for women, and it is a grave threat to all Americans’ cherished right to privacy, bodily integrity, and religious liberty.”
These and countless other rhetorically loaded pronouncements underscore the feminist campaign to free women from binding connections that might limit their freedom. Thus, feminists have consistently refused to acknowledge that the fetus embodies human life. For obvious reasons, they find it more comfortable to dismiss the baby in a woman’s womb as a piece of tissue, which may be scraped or torn out and discarded without emotional or moral consequences. Confronted with evidence that even a very young fetus can feel pain, they respond with outrage. Not outrage that a defenseless baby be subjected to such pain, but outrage that a woman who wishes to rid herself of a baby be made to feel remorse.

One unusually candid feminist, Cynthia Daniels, has urged women to acknowledge the life of the fetus. This, she argues, does not weaken the case for abortion but strengthens it. In Daniels’s reasoning, the fetus is living, uninvited, off of the woman’s private resources and must, therefore, be viewed as an aggressor. Since every person is entitled to self-defense, the woman has a right to kill the fetus to defend her own life.

The women’s movement, sensing that this naked argument may repel more people than it attracts, has yet to adopt it in public debate, and most people do not know of its existence. The argument nonetheless exposes the core of the movement’s unyielding attachment to abortion as the foundation of women’s freedom. The view of the fetus as invader of the woman’s body and plunderer of her vital resources offers a chilling vision of women’s autonomy. More disturbing is the vision it offers of the human person. For this vision separates each of us completely from all others, unless we voluntarily suspend a measure of our autonomy by entering into a contractual relation with another. And, in the case of women, it separates us from our embodied selves.

It is difficult to determine if the women’s movement has shaped the temper of our times or merely reflects it; I suspect it is a measure of both. What remains indisputable is that the women’s movement’s unyielding stand on abortion offers us a desolate mirror of ourselves. Historically, the sanctity of the bond between mother and child has uniquely embodied the ideal of human connection and love. Cynics may protest that, in practice, the ideal has been honored in the breach as much as in the observance—that mothers have rarely, if ever, been saints and that more mothers than we know have fallen short of the ideal’s standards of devotion. History offers abundant examples of mothers who have abused, sold, or killed their children, not to mention those who have resorted to abortion. It would be comforting to say with assurance that such cases resulted from women’s hardship or desperation, but recognition of human sinfulness compels us to recognize that some mothers have simply chosen to rid themselves of the responsibility. Yet when all the caveats and qualifications have been filed, we are left with the chilling knowledge that our own time stands alone in celebrating a mother’s destruction of her child as an affirmation of human freedom and dignity.

The Illusion of Equality

With good reason, the radical women’s movement has insisted that responsibility for children has undermined women’s ability to compete equally with men for material goods and status. In insisting that no woman may be compelled to bear a child, the movement has sought to liberate women from the handicap of their bodies—indeed, so far as possible, to liberate them entirely from those bodies. This strategy rests on the disquieting premise that for women to achieve full dignity and freedom they must become as much like men as possible. Radical feminists inadvertently appropriate the very assumption they publicly denounce, namely that the true measure and embodiment of humanity is man. Consider the logic: For a woman to become the best she can be, she must become as little like a woman as possible.
Prudence and discretion suggest that we might best leave the full implications of that logic unexplored. Clarity nonetheless requires that we consider its predictable consequences, some of which are already shaping our lives. Contrary to feminist assertions, abortion has degraded the status of women more than it has elevated it. In recent years, women have made significant and overdue gains in education, employment, and politics that are to be applauded as a simple matter of justice. More often than not, however, women have secured their positions in the public world by adapting to the prevailing male pattern. The real adaptation has occurred in women’s private relations with men and children, and not all of it has been to women’s advantage.

Within a few decades we have repudiated all the rules that historically sheltered women from the predatory tendencies in male sexuality. Young women today enjoy virtually the same sexual freedom as young men, which leaves them largely defenseless against young men’s sexual demands. Feminists applaud this growing sexual equality and point to readily available abortion as its surest guarantee. Should a young woman make a “mistake,” abortion will painlessly free her from its consequences. This scenario rests on the assumption that girls—for they are the ones at highest risk—have the same sexual agenda as boys, namely, no-strings-attached adventure for its own sake. Typically, they do not. Girls and, for that matter, young women are much more likely to seek love and connection. Improbable as it may seem in our current cultural climate, surprising numbers still half-consciously hope that an unintended pregnancy will lead the boy to marry them.

However unrealistic, these dreams compound the emotional trauma of an abortion, which represents not merely the death of the child but an assault on the girl’s sense of herself and her trust in others. It is hard to match the devastation and abandonment traced on the face of the young woman whose boyfriend has just greeted her announcement that she is pregnant with a cavalier offer to split the cost of the abortion. No “Do you want to keep the baby?” No “Should we get married?” Not even a “How do you feel about abortion?” Only the complacent self-satisfaction of having offered financial compensation and thereby acquitted his obligations by behaving honorably toward an “equal.” This equality is not what the young woman had imagined when she acceded to his sexual demands.

The Role of Religion

Polls indicate that young women are beginning to rethink the feminist commitment to sexual equality. College students are less likely to favor premarital sex than they were a few years ago. Only 40 percent agree that “if two people really like each other, it’s all right for them to have sex even if they have known each other for a very short time.” More important, young people’s enthusiasm for abortion has dropped: In 1998, 53.5 percent of college freshmen believed that abortion should be legal, and this year, only 51 percent believe that it should, according to the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California. It is too soon to understand precisely what these changes mean. Possibly, they have more to do with an instinct for self-protection than with a heartfelt reverence for the sanctity of human life and the mystery of the sexual relations that lead to its inception. Possibly, they augur something better.

There has been a sharp increase in the number of American women who claim that religion plays an important role in their life. Today, three-quarters take this view, and half would like religious organizations to participate in public discussion of men’s and women’s roles in society. Almost half also would like religious organizations to participate in public discussions of abortion, and more than two-thirds favor restrictions on abortion, according to Princeton Survey Research Associates. Perhaps the most striking change concerns the rapidly increasing number of women who favor prohibition of abortion except in cases of rape or incest or even total prohibition and the declining number of women who believe it should be generally available to those who want it. Two years ago, 45 percent of
women favored one of the restrictive positions; today, 53 percent do, and less than a third (28 percent) believe that abortion-on-demand should be permitted.

Together with the findings about college students’ attitudes toward premarital sex and abortion, these statistics offer reasons for optimism about changes in our cultural climate, but they, too, present formidable problems of interpretation. For the women who acknowledge the importance of religion in their lives and who are coming to doubt the wisdom of abortion-on-demand do not seem to view their church’s teachings on sexuality and men’s and women’s roles as authoritative. The problem does not seem simply to be that women find their priests, ministers, or rabbis reactionary or punitive about women’s roles. More than half the women who attend religious services believe that their clergy favors equality between women and men, and more than three-quarters claim that their clergy offers instruction on what it means to be a good mother and wife. The real problem seems to be that many churchgoing women do not acknowledge their church’s teaching as influential, much less as binding, on their own life.

A mere third of the women who value religion and attend church believe their church has decisively influenced their view of abortion, but less than a quarter credit religion with an important influence on their understanding of marriage, and only 13 percent credit it with influencing their understanding of gender equality. At the same time, a majority claim that religion does offer moral and ethical standards (88 percent), helps with personal problems (85 percent), makes them feel that they belong to a community (84 percent), and offers them opportunities for leadership (75 percent).

At first glance, these findings may seem confusing. What are we to make of women who believe their church offers them moral and ethical standards but who are not influenced by its teachings on abortion, marriage, and gender equality? It seems possible that women primarily value religion for assistance with personal problems, a sense of belonging, and the opportunity for leadership. If so, we might conclude that they value religion for what it offers them rather than for what it demands of them.

The study concludes that American women are religious and becoming more so, but it never explores what women mean by religion. Its findings do suggest that women are finding a comfort and support in religion that they are not finding in the secular arena. Yet much of the secular mindset seems to have permeated the very religion from which they seek consolation and support. How else are we to explain that women who claim to value religion highly disregard their church’s teaching on abortion, marriage, and the equality of the sexes? All three topics figure centrally in Catholic social thought, moral prescription, and theology. All three owe their centrality to their foundational relation to the Catholic understanding of the human person and his or her place in the social and divine order. All three constitute building blocks of the Holy Father’s vision of the culture of life.

Degrading Marriage and Family

Abortion, marriage, and gender equality lie at the heart of the secular feminist worldview. Feminists have grounded their program for social change in the absolute equality of women and men, which, they insist, depends on the availability of abortion-on-demand. Marriage arguably matters less to them, except in the measure they have identified it, together with the family, as the cradle of women’s oppression. Insofar as they do focus on marriage, it is to demand the absolute equality and interchangeability of men and women’s roles within it. They reject marriage as a sacrament, much as they reject Jewish and Protestant understandings of marriage as a God-ordained institution, which is to say as an inviolable union between a man and a woman who rejoice in their complementarity and are open to the gift of children.

The revolutionary progress of sexual liberation, grounded in the availability of abortion, has shattered this understanding of marriage and family as sacred. Increasingly, sex is viewed as an end in itself, and sexual unions—or better, liaisons—are treated as temporary arrangements, entered into for immediate gratification and abandoned for new objects of sexual desire. In this climate, women—and
men—have learned to put their own interests ahead of those of even the most intimate relations with others. A woman, who knows that, at any moment, her husband may forsake their marriage without penalty or sanction, has scant reason to sacrifice her career to the marriage and children—or even to subordinate her interests to those of the family as a unit. Failure to protect her own earning power would be economic suicide for herself and perhaps her children. And the more open she had been to the gift of children, the more daunting the prospects would be. If these are the personal problems that women bring to religion, it is hardly surprising that they resist religious prescriptions, which seem calculated to exacerbate the problems. This is a world in which desperate women may well perceive abortion as an act of self-preservation and in which many women turn to religion for personal consolation rather than for reminders of how God enjoins them to live their life.

**Conquering the Culture of Death**

Women’s growing discomfort with abortion nonetheless signals their profound uneasiness about a world that seemingly requires them to become men. Many women are inadvertently discovering that sexual liberation and gender equality, which were supposed to ensure their happiness, have reduced them to objects and corrupted their most intimate relations with others. Although many cannot easily put words to their discontent, they intuitively sense that the bonds of intimacy have been replaced by the market, that love has given way to economic calculation. Nearly two centuries ago, the English poet William Wordsworth lamented, “The world is too much with us; late and soon,/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:/Little we see in Nature that is ours;/We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!” In our own time, Pope John Paul II warns us about the culture of death that is engulfing us.

Abortion begets and anchors the culture of death that threatens us all, but especially women, whose essence includes the ability to bear new life. Contrary to apocalyptic visions, the culture of death has less to do with the threat of nuclear cataclysm than with the market’s invasion of our lives and relations with others. By substituting economic calculus for love, we jeopardize our personhood, the essence of which lies in our recognition of others as persons made, like us, in God’s image. Abortion makes a mockery of personhood by licensing one person to dispose of another. For in denying the personhood of the baby a woman is carrying, we deny our own. In this respect, Jesus’ command to love your neighbor as yourself, echoed in His frequent injunctions to honor, protect, and emulate children if we are to have any hope of salvation, above all instructs us that we cannot wantonly kill another without simultaneously killing ourselves.

From the days of the Old Testament to our own, the world has consistently defied God’s commandments and provoked His wrath, but few societies have done so as blatantly as our own. Engulfed in an unprecedented material prosperity, we have fallen prey to the illusion that material goods offer the appropriate standard of our worth. Driven by this conviction, we increasingly measure others by that standard and, when they appear to fail short, mark them for sacrifice. In licensing the slaughter of babies, abortion legitimates the slaughter of all the others who are a drain on our wealth: the elderly, the terminally ill, and, sooner or later, the poor. A more complete repudiation of the Gospel would be hard to imagine.

The women’s movement has defended abortion as the guarantee of women’s freedom from oppression and their equality with men. In a period in which Americans have a bad conscience about the restrictions under which women have suffered in the past, feminists have readily gained the rhetorical upper hand. Who, these days, wishes to oppose women’s equality with men or to defend their abuse? The clock cannot be turned back, and most Americans no longer wish to. But the general willingness to expand women’s opportunities to develop their talents has induced many to take feminist rhetoric at face value, especially since pro-life rhetoric often sounds punitive. Too many Americans accept the feminist claim that opposition to abortion necessarily indicates a wish to return
women to a subordinate position. Trapped in feminism’s secular premises, they never consider that abortion might exacerbate women’s position rather than improve it.

Abortion provides many women with a quick solution to immediate problems. It does not improve the conditions that produced the problems in the first place. If anything, it reinforces them. Abortion begets more abortion—and more unhappiness for women. Women’s growing distaste for abortion demonstrates an emerging consciousness that women’s greatest need from society is that it facilitate their lives as women who are both equal to and different from men. But we should not delude ourselves: Women’s freedom to bear and nurture children is expensive. And, under present conditions, we should not expect the private sector to shoulder the entire cost. Having permitted the disintegration of marriage, we must now pay the taxes to underwrite support for single mothers. The great challenge will be to meet the needs of single mothers without encouraging the further erosion of marriage. The cultural and moral challenge is as daunting as the economic responsibility, and neither is likely to prove easy. Nonetheless, it behooves us to remember that we are our sister’s keeper, not least because in her prospects lie our own.

The moral and cultural problems and the economic problems are not two problems but one. It is time to relinquish the illusions that we can promote cultural and moral renewal without economic sacrifice or that we can provide effective economic support without cultural and moral transformation. The Church has always understood that the cultural and moral realm and the economic realm are one, and she has frequently engaged both simultaneously. Today, more than ever, her guidance is needed. If this is indeed the acceptable time and the time of salvation, we need the Church to insist that all of us be better than we are and, even as it forgives our trespasses and binds up our wounds, to remind us of the sacrifice and fidelity required of us.

Blessed Gianna Beretta Molla, beatified in 1994, was a woman of our times—a wife and mother, a pediatrician and surgeon in her native Italy. She was a vibrant and intelligent woman of the 20th century, noted for her works of charity and profound spiritual life. Expecting her fourth child, she was diagnosed with a life-threatening tumor. Rather than lose the child she carried, she forewent the treatment that could have saved her. She died in 1962, a few days after the birth of the baby more precious to her than life itself.

First published in *Crisis Magazine*, March 1, 2000