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ABORTION

D.B. KNOX

"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

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You may have heard the debate in the Federal Parliament about abortion. Abortion is the deliberate terminating of human life, so it is a question of great importance and seriousness. Life is a process: every day we are a little different to what we were the day before. And at every stage of that process we are dependent on others. I do not now speak about our dependence on God which is fundamental, though so often we forget it and so many people do not even acknowledge it at all. But I am speaking about our dependence on one another and the obligations and responsibilities that this dependence creates. Take the case of the very old person, no longer able to earn his own living, or even perhaps to look after himself physically. He is dependent on other people for his food, for his housing, for his nursing. This dependence creates obligations on those who are able to help. Have we a right to wash our hands of these obligations? In some pagan societies the answer has been yes, and the old are just abandoned to die. But Christianity has taught us that we have obligations to those who are dependent on us; to the old and to the sick and we are not to get out from under the burden by terminating the burdensome life, but rather we are to provide for it. It is Christianity which brought into being alms houses and old age homes, and it is Christianity that brought into being hospitals with the care of the sick by those who are well. Or take the other end of human life: the young child is dependent on its parents for many years. This is the way God has made human life.

Those two principles of human life apply from the very beginning, from the moment of conception. The first principle is that life is a process with change from day to day from conception to death. The whole of that process is the same human life. And the second principle is that throughout this process there is always the unchanging principle of



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dependence on others. This dependence is more obvious at some periods of life, but it is always there. It is very obvious in the early stages of life, a foetus in its mother's womb is plainly dependent upon its mother for all its sustenance and it is dependent also on its mother for that care which will later ensure its safe delivery and birth. Birth does not bring about any drastic change in this state of dependence. The unborn infant, living in its mother's womb, is plainly dependent on its mother but so also is the new born babe, hanging on its mother's breast, needing its mother's care for the survival of its life and her affection for its proper development. This state of dependence on other people goes on throughout life. Even in adulthood when we appear to be at our most independent stage, we are in fact dependent on one another for affection, appreciation, support, as well as help for earning our daily food. And as the process of life goes on, our dependence becomes more obvious once again as old age diminishes our powers of self support.

This state of dependence calls out obligations from those amongst whom we live. This is the way God has made our life; we are bound up one with the other. These obligations which others have towards us and we towards them are mutual. Put the other way round, we may say that we all have rights which are not to be denied by others, but are to be observed and guarded. Now, applying this to the question of abortion, we should ask, What are the rights that the growing human life has while still in its mother's womb? What are our obligations to it? One of the most fundamental rights of human nature is the right to life and this right is not to be abrogated by others and our life taken away from us, except for the gravest causes.

The growing foetus shares in this right to life. It has claims on our obligations, just as other human life has, and we have duties towards it. Most of us would recognise straight away that a mother has a duty towards her new born babe, but this duty does not suddenly begin at the moment of birth, for

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life is a process and goes right back to the beginning of that life. Similarly most of us would recognise that society through its laws has the obligation to secure the right to life of a new born baby although as yet it has no self-consciousness or knowledge of its rights. To kill the new born babe is murder, and is punishable as such through our laws. We recognise that society has this obligation to protect the rights of the new born, just as the mother has the obligation to care for that child. And just as the mother's obligation of care antedates the birth of her child and goes right back to the moment of its conception, so too, we should recognise that the obligation of the State does not begin suddenly with the birth of the child but goes back to the beginning of the process of life, so that the State has an obligation to protect by its laws the unborn child, just as it has the obligation to protect the newly born.

As you know, this obligation of the parents and of the community towards the child growing in the womb is widely denied in some quarters today. The so-called Humanist argues that a mother has a right to do what she likes with her body. The Humanist recognises no obligations towards the growing life but argues that the foetus in the womb has to be regarded in the same light as any other part of the mother's body and just as she trims her finger nails, so she can have an abortion. According to the Humanists abortion on demand should be legalised for in their view the community has no obligation to protect the growing life within the womb.

These ideas are simply the revival of the concepts of pagan society, for example, those of ancient Greece. The essence of Greek ethics is the isolation of the individual against obligation and relationships with others which make demands upon him, or which could influence or affect him.



Greek stoicism isolates one from another, but Christian ethics unite us in love and therefore in obligation.

This stark Humanistic position has not yet taken firm hold in our community. Yet there are lots of Christians who unconsciously have adopted its premise, and who argue that the foetus may be killed, that is, that the abortion is allowable, if not at the absolute discretion of the mother but yet in a wide variety of circumstances which are not viewed in relation to the right of the foetus to life, or what our obligations are towards the foetus. For example some say it is right to kill the foetus if you think it is going to be deformed. The Greeks used to kill new born infants for the same reason, but what right have we to kill the newly born or the not yet born, simply because of some deformity. The Nazis accepted this principle, and killed the Jews simply because they were Jews. Have we the right to kill the foetus because we think it may be deformed? Or what shall we say when science is able to predict the sex of the child? Will we kill the foetus because, for example, we may not want another girl? Others think that the mother has a right to terminate the life of the foetus if it would be distasteful for her to bear the child. Sometimes, of course, the question here may be very delicate as in the case of conception following rape. But here again the starting point must be, what are our obligations to the life that has come into being? and what is the mother's obligation to the life which is dependent on her?

The question is not an easy one and we must give thought to just what our obligations are towards human life growing towards fruition. But it must be remembered that we are not justified in washing our hands of our obligations just because of the difficulty of the circumstances which surround our discharge of these obligations. God is in charge of circumstances, for He is sovereign, and He has promised that He will not allow our circumstances to develop beyond what we can bear, if we are trusting in Him and doing His will. On the other hand society certainly has a very strong obligation to assist in alleviating the

burden that family obligations impose. We recognise this by society providing free hospitalisation for the poor, child endowment to help parents and many other benefits. We have not done enough to help parents of defective children. This is where we need to give attention rather than liberalising the law so that children who would perhaps have been born defective have their lives terminated before birth.

There is, however, one situation in which it is lawful to terminate someone else's life, and that is when that other is an aggressor. For example, if a man is in the act of murdering another person he has already forfeited his right to life, so that if his victim shoots him in self defence he has not acted immorally or committed any crime. And this is true whether the would-be murderer is in his right mind, or whether he is crazy and does not know what he is doing but is doing it just the same. He has forfeited his right to life because he has become an aggressor, threatening the life of another.

The same consideration applies to the foetus; if through physical circumstances it is threatening the antecedent life of its mother it has in this way forfeited its own right to be allowed to continue to live; not that it is morally responsible any more than for example, a crazed madman threatening someone else with a revolver is morally responsible, but in both cases it is not wrong if the only way to preserve the threatened life is by taking away the life of the aggressor; in fact it is our duty to do so. This means that abortion is morally right if it is necessary to save the life of the mother. It is to be regretted that the Roman Catholic Papal Encyclical does not recognise this category of real, although unconscious, aggression of the foetus against the life of its mother. As a consequence Roman Catholics have been put in the position of saying that the mother must



be allowed to die rather than the life of the foetus be directly taken away. But this is an impossible position as most people recognise and the reason why it is mistaken is that it has failed to take into account the fact that the foetus when it threatens the life of its mother has itself lost its own right to life. Of course it is unconscious and does not come within the rules of morality but nevertheless our obligation to allow it to continue its life ceases when the foetus itself is a threat to the life of another. But unless there is a threat against another we have an obligation towards the life of the foetus just as we have an obligation towards all human life, whether the life of the aged or of the lunatic or of the Jew in Nazi Germany. It is not for us to take away the right to life unless this right has been forfeited by aggression. The inconvenience and expense of maintaining the aged or the lunatic or the deformed is no argument to support their killing though it is a very strong claim on society to assist so that the burden that these obligations involve should be shared more equitably. And the same consideration applies to the life not yet born. The unborn child lying in its mother's womb a few hours before birth is not to be killed any more than the new born child of an hour or two later hanging on its mother's breast, and the same immunity extends back to the beginning of the process of life right to the point of conception. Human life from its very beginning involves others in obligations towards it. Put another way, this means that human life has rights and the fundamental right is the right to be allowed to live. The foetus participates in this right to life; even for the foetus its right to be allowed to live is not automatically forfeited because of possible deformity or inconvenience which it may involve others in, though it is forfeited if its coming into being endangers the lives of others. The law at present reflects these distinctions and ought to be maintained. But in view of the agitation to relax it, and what has happened elsewhere, it will not be maintained unless Christians give their minds to understanding the principles involved.

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