

My Seminar on Abortion at New York University

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses a seminar on abortion called “Abortion: Examining the Issues” that Professor Evelyn Birge Vitz has given three times at New York University and that she hopes to give again in the future. The article explains the logic and purposes behind the seminar, its structure and content, and reviews the seminar’s results.

ABORTION: EXAMINING THE ISSUES. This is the title of a seminar that I have given three times (spring 2008, 2009, 2010) at New York University. It is an Advanced Honors Seminar, offered through the office of the Undergraduate Dean of the School of Arts and Science.

Let me describe the course in some detail and then discuss what I believe to have been its impact. My basic purpose in writing about the seminar is to promote the giving of such courses elsewhere. This sort of course could be given at many colleges and universities, and with some modifications, at the high school level. I believe, further, that it provided a real service to the students, on several levels.

1. The Course

First, a few basic facts. This seminar drew upper-classmen from a wide range of disciplines including English, journalism, law, pre-med, politics, psychology, statistics, and women’s studies. Self-identified pro-choice students were substantially more numerous than visibly pro-life students, and were generally more outspoken – not surprising at an institution like New York University. One goal in the course was to provide a forum for discussion that was both informed and civil, and the first day of class the students signed a sheet of paper promising that they

would be unfailingly courteous to each other even when they disagreed (as in fact they often did). With rare slips into what one student termed “snarkiness” they all kept that promise.

I maintained a position of neutrality with regard to abortion, and I think this was extremely important. This neutrality is certainly the only way that a course like this could have happened at NYU. I also believe that this is the only way the course could be truly effective, intellectually speaking. I never discussed with the students where I stood on the issue. I took it as my job to provide them with information of all kinds and with major arguments on both (sometimes all!) sides of the issue. I was there to ask questions and invite thoughtful discussion. I did not want to browbeat them in any way, or make them fear that if they did not agree with me their work would be judged negatively. (We know that professors, sometimes unconsciously, can punish students who disagree with them.) One year, on the last day of class, a student asked what my position was. I said: “When the course is entirely over – when you have turned in all your work and received your grade – then if you still want to know where I stand, you can come talk with me.” That one student did, and we had a frank and interesting discussion.

As to the texts: the textbook that made the course possible (though it is expensive) is *The Abortion Controversy, 25 Years After Roe v. Wade*, co-authored by Louis Pojman and Francis J. Beckwith.¹ This book contains arguments and information from both sides of the issue, and we used the book extensively. Among its powerful sections is a series of chapters on *Roe v. Wade* that quote from, summarize, and evaluate, this fundamental ruling. I supplemented Pojman and Beckwith in various ways. First, we had a reader containing many short texts that I thought would be useful, including newspaper and magazine articles, pieces from the internet, and articles from the *Human Life Review*. All these texts provided information and arguments – and in some cases stories – representing different viewpoints that we discussed in class. Most recently, I also added a section on fetal development, which turned out to be very relevant to class discussions as to when life begins. (I am

¹ Louis P. Pojman and Frank J. Beckwith, *The Abortion Controversy: 25 Years after Roe v. Wade: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1998 [1994]).

happy to share further details with those who are interested.)

I also had the students buy *Unprotected* by Anonymous, M.D. (now known to be Dr. Miriam Grossman of UCLA).² This extremely readable volume shows how incompetently, and indeed how dishonestly, most college medical centers deal not just with abortion but, more generally, with sexual issues that confront college student populations.

I got them all free copies of Nat Hentoff's *Insisting on Life*.³ It was interesting for them to see that series of pro-life articles written by a Jewish atheist. I also got them copies of "Criss-Cross: Democrats, Republicans and Abortion" by Prof. George McKenna.⁴ This article provided the students with an extremely valuable historical perspective concerning the positions on abortion taken by the Democratic and Republican Parties over several decades.

Finally, we used a wide range of internet sites and live links. One reason why I put together the reader, after the first year of teaching the course, is that live links can go dead. The reader allowed me to store the contents of fragile links as texts. Our internet use was substantially facilitated by recourse to a teaching website called "Blackboard." Many colleges use this or a similar internet tool that allows students to access information and post responses. I invited the students to draw to the attention of the class news items bearing on abortion, and there are always a great many of them, ranging from political races and votes in Congress, to local tragedies (often, women who die from abortions, at the hands of callous or incompetent doctors). Together, we discussed and evaluated these news stories.

Let me focus briefly on three of the internet sites and resources that we used. Two were websites focusing on women's experiences of

² *Unprotected: A Campus Psychiatrist Reveals How Political Correctness in Her Profession Endangers Every Student* by Anonymous M.D. (New York NY: Sentinel, 2006).

³ Nat Hentoff, *Insisting on Life* (New York NY: Human Life Review, 2005).

⁴ George McKenna, "Criss-Cross: Democrats, Republicans and Abortion," available at: http://www.humanlifereview.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=67:criss-cross-democrats-republicans-and-abortion-&catid=29:2006-summerfall&Itemid=6.

abortion. One is called “I’m not sorry.”⁵ Women tell their abortion story. This site does make it abundantly clear that many women do not experience sorrow or regret after having an abortion. The women’s expressions of relief, even occasionally glee, can, however, make for somewhat chilling reading. This website is tightly controlled: no one is allowed to voice regret, only relief and similar emotions. A story is removed from the site if a woman posts saying that she regrets her abortion – that she is, in fact, sorry. The students noted that, though many women concluded their narrative with the words, “I’m not sorry,” quite a number of them did talk about negative emotions and painful experiences. The students also recognized that a woman who said, “I just had an abortion today, and I’m not sorry” might be speaking too soon.

The other major website we used that gives voice to women’s experiences and feelings is “After Abortion.”⁶ This site is harder to access. To navigate it fully, one must register as a visitor. But this is a complex and interesting website, well worth the effort. It was set up by a woman who is pro-choice but who felt that her suffering, and that of many other women, after having an abortion was ignored or belittled by the pro-choice establishment. To admit to suffering after abortion was seen as betraying the cause. This site is also rather tightly controlled, but not with regard to feelings. Women can express any and all emotions very openly. Many thousands of post-abortion women have done so. They receive words of support and consolation and virtual hugs – from other women, and occasionally from men. What is controlled is that political and religious comments are prohibited on the site. (Women can, however, get in touch with each other via email, and have private exchanges.) Another interesting, and very moving, kind of control exists on this site. When describing their experiences, women are encouraged to identify “triggers” – things that might be emotionally upsetting for other women to read about. One can therefore read a post choosing either to hide or to reveal the triggered details.

A third internet resource that I wish to mention briefly is Fr. Pavone’s “YouTube” clips in which he discusses how abortions are

⁵ “I’m Not Sorry” available at <http://www.imnotsorry.net/>.

⁶ “After Abortion” available at <http://www.afterabortion.com/>.

done.⁷ These are informative and effective video clips, especially perhaps for college students to watch since they are low in drama and heavy rhetoric, and high both in visual clarity and in clear presentation of the issues.

I took the students on two field trips. These were possible by virtue of being in New York City, but it might well be difficult to find equivalent places in other cities. The first visit was to Planned Parenthood NYC, located very near New York University in Greenwich Village. The second was to the Sisters of Life on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The two visits were high in contrast. At Planned Parenthood, security is extraordinarily tight; indeed it is very hard to get in unless one is a woman wanting an abortion. (I was able to arrange this visit only because I know someone who knows someone there.) Two pleasant young women talked with the students. Not too surprisingly, our guides wanted to talk more about contraception and safe sex than they did about abortion. The information they provided was also curiously outdated and incomplete, and the students saw this clearly for themselves. For example, the PP-NYC guides were totally unaware of the existence, let alone the importance, of *Doe v. Bolton*. This major ruling, which came out the same day as *Roe v. Wade*, allows a woman to have an abortion at any time in a pregnancy, for any reason, whereas *Roe v. Wade* emphasizes the state's legitimate concern for fetal life after viability. By contrast, the Sisters of Life were warm and welcoming – of course, they don't have to worry about being bombed or shot. They offered cookies and iced tea to the students. They talked about their vocations and their mission to help pregnant women. On each visit, a different young woman came to talk about her experience of being pregnant, alone, and afraid, and of coming to the Sisters for help. There they found such help in abundance.

I turn now to the shape of the course and lay out the basic syllabus. We took up issues in this order. One could, of course, proceed differently, but I wanted to start with the basic facts. It became clear to me early on that most students knew almost nothing in fact about

⁷ One can find the Youtube videos on abortion by Fr. Pavone at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBOAPleF1t0>, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=us_y9GP_-DA.

abortion, beyond the slogan “A Woman’s Right to Choose.”

Law: We examined the jurisprudence behind *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*. We also read some recent Supreme Court rulings. I supplemented the texts in Pojman and Beckwith with texts available on “Find Law” and elsewhere on the internet. The first time I taught the course I brought in a constitutional lawyer whom I trusted and who clarified a number of important issues for us.

Medicine: We spent some time looking at what an abortion is and what it does. We discussed various types of abortion. Interestingly, one of the great shocks to a number of students was the realization that an abortion does not simply “terminate a pregnancy” in some vague fashion. It must kill the fetus and remove it – in pieces or whole – without damaging the mother. We then took up some difficult issues such as fetal pain and infants who survive abortion (one strongly pro-choice student became obsessed with this latter issue). We read about clinic safety and the lack of safety because of lack of regulation. The students noted that in many abortion clinic ads what is emphasized is safety: “We are safer” – or “the safest.” This very emphasis points to some serious problems in clinic safety. We looked at the issues of women’s physical and mental health after abortion, and among other issues we took up the abortion/breast cancer controversy and that surrounding “post-abortion syndrome.” This is when I gave the students several chapters of *Unprotected* to read.

Women and abortion: We read many accounts of women’s experiences of abortion, as discussed above. Then we turned to *Men and abortion* – a topic that proved to be very interesting to the students (and not just the males) in the class. We looked at articles and websites about men’s reactions to abortion, which can be deep and painful. Other men, of course, are casual, or callous, about it; many men never even know their partner was pregnant. The students struggled with the fact that women have the legal right to an abortion, whatever the father may wish – but men are responsible for supporting a child whom they have fathered, whether they welcomed this or not.

Abortion, the family and society: historical and political issues. This large section was particularly open to the intrusion of current events. We took up such issues as the abortion of female fetuses (especially in China and India), the comparison of American abortion

law with that of other countries (there is a useful Wikipedia article on that), and pro-life violence. I had them read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" to put the issue into a larger perspective. This is when they read McKenna's "Criss-Cross" article, which they loved.

Religious perspectives on abortion: The students read from a few documents and visited numerous assigned websites about the position on abortion of various religions: Catholicism and Protestantism, the Quakers as well as Judaism (including its different branches), Islam, and Hinduism. The students noted in many of these religions the conflict between the religious principles that prohibit abortion in all (or almost all) cases – since life is seen as coming from and belonging to God – and the impact of modern feminist principles that freely allow abortion.

Philosophical and ethical views on abortion: Here I was able to draw on many articles in Pojman and Beckwith, including the famous pro-choice piece by philosopher Judith Jarvis Thompson. In it, she compares a woman's being pregnant to being attached, against her will, to a famous violinist on life support. Pojman and Beckwith also provide interesting critiques and defenses of this often-reprinted article.

Arguing from Analogies: Slavery, The Holocaust, Infanticide: In this section we again took up some highly controversial issues, such as similarities between abortion and slavery, and abortion and the holocaust. These issues provided extremely interesting class discussion, bearing essentially on the issue of who is a human being. Readings were taken from Pojman and Beckwith, as well as from Hentoff and several valuable websites.

Feminists and Abortion: Feminists on Both Sides of the Barricades. Here, we returned to J.J. Thompson and to other pro-choice feminists in Pojman and Beckwith such as Naomi Wolf. We read (on the internet) a co-authored piece by Frances Kissling and Kate Michelman on the need for pro-choice women to reclaim the moral high ground on abortion.⁸ We also read pieces by Mary Ann Glendon and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (in the Reader and on-line). Large issues included such topics as these:

⁸ Frances Kissling and Kate Michelman, "Abortion's Battle of Messages," available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jan/22/opinion/oe-kissling22>.

What is good for women? and Is abortion good for women?

Abortion in fiction, films, poems, and songs. This was another somewhat variable section. Each time I included rather different things. In the discussions of poetry I consistently gave them: Gwendolyn Brooks: "Abortions will not let you forget"; Anne Sexton: "The Abortion"; Spike Milligan, "Unto Us" (readily available on-line).⁹ In films I particularly recommend "Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days."¹⁰ It is a very powerful Romanian film. The only piece of fiction I have done each time is Harlan Ellison's strange and disturbing science fiction story, "Croatoan" (it is hard to track down. I have a copy and will share).¹¹ In songs, I got very good results from having them each bring in to class the lyrics and a recording of a song about abortion; that made for useful discussion.

Work for the course. This course was moderately heavy in reading and called for a lot of zipping around the internet. It was, of course, very heavy in classroom discussion demands (students simply could not come to class unprepared). I also made the students post frequent written responses to the "Discussion Board" on Blackboard. There was a take-home midterm with prepared questions. Each student also had to develop and present to the class a final research project, which was then turned in as a final paper. I have had some very good final papers, on such topics as: "Abortion and the Gay Gene," "Abortion in Russia," "Fetuses That Survive Abortion," "Doctors and Abortion," and "The Impact of Abortion on Siblings." Several students have written on men and abortion. Students also have a final oral interview with me, in which we review key issues and readings in the course.

⁹ Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Mother" ["Abortions will not let you forget"], available at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172081>. Anne Sexton, "The Abortion," available at <http://vmlinux.org/ilse/lit/sexton.htm>. Spike Milligan, "Unto Us," available at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/unto-us/>.

¹⁰ Cristian Mungiu, "Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days," video-recording (Australia: Force Entertainment, 2008).

¹¹ Harlan Ellison, "Croatoan," *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1975), reprinted in *Strange Wine: Fifteen New Stories from the Nightside of the World* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1978).

2. The Impact of the Course on Students

I divide this issue into two parts – one relating to the students' sense of intellectual stimulation and satisfaction in the class, and even their enjoyment of it; the other as bearing on their views on abortion as they exit the course.

A number of students in this seminar wrote in their final evaluations (which I saw later) or told me in person that this was the most exciting course they took in college. This statement reflects the fact that in this seminar the students felt free to say what they thought but also that they participants were open to serious (but courteous) challenges to their views by their fellow students. They quickly learned that, as much as possible, they had to back up their opinions with data. They learned that they could examine a really difficult issue, reading and thinking about it carefully and responsibly, and arguing it up one side and down the other. This seminar was, I believe, an important learning experience for them on these dimensions alone.

This is a course that had wide impact – far beyond the classroom itself. Many students told me that they discussed the course constantly with their roommates, friends, and family members. I invited them to interview people they knew who had had abortions; several did, and posted them for us all to read on-line. This is a class that, I believe, plants seeds: that is, it plants, in students' minds large and disturbing questions that they will be thinking about and returning to for years to come.

In this class, both (sometimes, all) sides of the issue received thoughtful attention and examination – which is, in my view, quite rare in college courses that treat controversial topics. I gave them readings and websites representing a wide variety of views. Pro-choice arguments did not come generally as news to them, but it was striking how little the students knew about facts and arguments against abortion. I think many of the students (this is of course at a large, secular university in New York City) had simply never imagined that an intelligent, informed person could possibly be pro-life; virtually everything they had ever read or seen was pro-choice. This is why it was particularly interesting to give them articles by journalists like Hentoff, or a piece by Mary Ann Glendon.

What about their views on abortion at the end of the course? A

small handful changed from being pro-choice to being pro-life; no one turned around the other direction. I would say that almost all of them came away shaken from what they had learned and seen. In a good many cases, I would say that while they did not want to be, or be thought of by their peers as, “pro-life” – and of course in ’09 almost all of them wanted very much to love Obama – their minds and their hearts were now out of synch on the issue, as in the case of the pro-choice student who wrote a moving paper about the negative effects of abortion on siblings. In some cases, their pro-choice commitment had eroded in interesting ways. For example, even those who labeled themselves pro-choice were, nonetheless, by the end of the course, generally in favor of such things as making sure the father was consulted by the mother before having the abortion, having a 24-hour wait period before an abortion, having teenagers inform their parents before an abortion. Almost all thought that late-term abortions are wrong – indeed, even abortions after about ten weeks. Shifts in position could take a very personal form. One female student came to me, ostensibly to discuss her final paper, and said, “You know, I lied on the information sheet you passed around the first day asking why we took the course. I really took it because I wanted to be sure that if I got pregnant by my boyfriend, I could have an abortion. Now I know I never could.” She also told the class publicly that she had told her boyfriend that an abortion was absolutely out of the question for her (alas, she did not tell us what his reaction was).

Not many students in the course have been self-identified pro-lifers. My guess is that at a place like NYU, they don’t dare announce, at the start of a course, that they are pro-life, especially perhaps to a female professor. In any case, there were not enough of them for me to make large generalizations about the impact of the course on them. But all the students, I think, became aware of the sorrow and suffering that many women – and men as well – have experienced through abortion. And, of course, failures of imagination and sympathy exist on both sides of the abortion issue. It is important for pro-lifers to recognize how terrified, alone, and unsupported pregnant women can feel (this is why the visit to the Sisters of Life was particularly important). Unmarried women who choose to keep their babies as single mothers and those who give their child up for adoption as well suffer too. There is much heartbreak

here. It was also eye-opening and disturbing for pro-life students to recognize how frequently people who declare that they are strongly opposed to abortion nonetheless go off to an abortion clinic – or take their girlfriends or daughters there – when an unwanted pregnancy tests their pro-life principles. They too can think of abortion as a quick fix.

The future of this course. In writing about this seminar, I have hesitated between past and present tenses. I may not be able to teach the course again at NYU. The program that offered it is being discontinued. I do hope to give it again, and I hope that others will also offer similar courses. This seminar has been the most challenging and important course I have ever taught. I think that, on many dimensions, it is a very good one for the students to have taken.