

# Historical Re-enactments: A Key Pro-life Argument

*Charles Bellinger*

ABSTRACT: Pro-life advocates sometimes say that there is an analogy between slavery, the Shoah, and abortion. I argue that the word “re-enactment” is preferable to “analogy” in such comparisons. I draw on a theoretical understanding of the roots of violent behavior that I have developed over the past two decades. This understanding employs key concepts from the philosophical anthropologies of Søren Kierkegaard, Eric Voegelin, and René Girard in making the case that the deep-level, unconscious motives that impel human beings toward violent acts can be comprehended. These deep motives remain the same while the expressions of violence vary with time and place as conscious ideologies shift and change. Forms of violence that occur later in history are thus re-enactments of earlier forms. Slavery was a vertical axis pathology; there are many variations on horizontal plane pathologies. Abortion is a pathology within the dimension of individual selfhood.

IT IS COMMON for pro-life advocates to say that there is an analogy between slavery, the Holocaust, and abortion. Slavery was rooted in dehumanizing attitudes toward blacks, the Holocaust in dehumanizing attitudes toward Jews, and abortion in dehumanizing attitudes toward unborn children.<sup>1</sup> Pro-choice advocates, on certain rare occasions, try to respond to this accusation, but sometimes rather ineptly. Joyce Arthur, for example, says that the analogy does not work because fetuses are parasites.<sup>2</sup> But that does not refute the analogy; it merely demonstrates it in action. Cathleen Kaveny says that the analogy does not work because the Holocaust was a result of governmental

---

<sup>1</sup> See William Brennan, *The Abortion Holocaust: Today's Final Solution* (St. Louis MO: Landmark, 1983) and James Tunstead Burtchaell, *Rachel Weeping and Other Essays on Abortion* (Kansas City KS: Andrews and McMeel, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Arthur, “No, Virginia, Abortion Is NOT Genocide,” *The Humanist* (July/August, 2000): 20–23.

action, while abortion is the result of the decisions of individuals.<sup>3</sup> She does not seem to realize that she is making the pro-choice position look even worse than it did before, because she is presenting the dehumanizing attitude as something spread throughout the population in general. Gloria Steinem says that Hitler's thinking has more similarities with that of pro-lifers than that of pro-choicers.<sup>4</sup> She argues that Hitler was hostile to the rights of women as a class, and to the rights of autonomous individuals. Her attempt, however, to link him with our era's pro-life advocates stretches the meaning of the word "preposterous" well beyond its breaking point.

I suggest that the pro-life case needs to be re-stated, and that it would be helpful for this re-statement to use the word "re-enactment" rather than "analogy." I will draw on a theoretical understanding of the roots of violent behavior that I have presented at greater length elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The key framework that we need is dimensional anthropology, which is the idea that there are three main dimensions of reality as it is inhabited by human beings. The first dimension is the vertical axis, or the Great Chain of Being, which is usually presented as pointing to God above and to nature below. The second dimension is the horizontal plane of society, culture, and relationality. The third dimension is that of unique individual selfhood, understood as a journey through time. The deepest root of violence in human psychology is a refusal to inhabit these dimensions in a way that holds them together holistically.

In the depths of the psyche, below the level of consciousness and in a way that is difficult to bring into articulation, human beings are inevitably involved in making choices to inhabit reality in a particular way. The slave-owner is choosing to inhabit the Great Chain of Being oppressively; the ethnic cleanser is choosing to idolize his group and to attack another group; the terrorist or mentally ill person is choosing to

---

<sup>3</sup> Cathleen Kaveny, "A Flawed Analogy: Prochoice Politicians and the Third Reich," *Commonweal* 135/12 (June 20, 2008): 6.

<sup>4</sup> Gloria Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983), p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> I draw mainly on Søren Kierkegaard, Eric Voegelin, and René Girard, e.g. in my *The Trinitarian Self: The Key to the Puzzle of Violence* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2008).

make his statement through blood. The word “choosing” here is problematic, for we are speaking of a level of consciousness that is below the normal level at which we make choices that can be rationally articulated. It is not as if violent people have read textbooks about philosophical anthropology and then have consciously decided to inhabit the dimensions of reality in an unbalanced way, but again and again they do choose to act violently. They know not what they do.

On a more surface level of the psyche we find the sphere of conscious articulation through rhetoric. The Marxist political leader, for example, may write an article or give a speech explaining why the latest purge is needed. Hitler writes *Mein Kampf*. A terrorist releases a YouTube video. Violent people will attempt to justify their actions through words, ideas, and arguments. This is the realm of rhetoric, within which the agent seeks to provide a rationale for violence that will inspire others to join in the struggle. Dimensional anthropology points out that this rhetoric will take a particular shape in accord with the dimension that is being emphasized. Slavery is justified with a rhetoric of higher and lower; ethnic cleansing is justified with a rhetoric that uses horizontal cultural labels to designate in-groups and out-groups; the lynch mob uses rhetoric to describe the scapegoat as an evil-doer who must be done away with. The dimensions of reality are like canals within which the water of rhetoric flows. What will remain constant across various forms of violence, however, is the need to engage in “othering,” the need to make a distinction between oneself and the one being killed. Self and other need to be separated, cut apart, interpreted as ontologically different. I am *this*; the other is *that*. The blanks are filled in differently in various contexts, but the need to make the distinctions is permanent.<sup>6</sup>

There is a deep level on which people are choosing to inhabit reality in a certain way. There we find the starting point of violent impulses. Secondly, there is a conscious level on which people are becoming rhetorically articulate. The third step is actual physical violence. But it is the second step that is crucially important. The

---

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre notes this phenomenon when he says that for the anti-Semite “the Jew only serves as pretext; elsewhere his counterpart will use the Negro or the man with yellow skin.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, translated by George J. Becker (New York NY: Schocken Books, 1948), p. 54.

language that is used to justify violence is a crucial component of the overall phenomenon of violence. Ideas have consequences.<sup>7</sup> Words pave the way for killing.

In the depths of the psyche, human beings are alienated from God and thus also from self and neighbor. That alienation is the engine powering violence. When violence arises from the depths of the psyche and comes closer to actually being expressed, it becomes a shape-shifting phenomenon that is guided by the particular dimension of reality that a person is rhetorically overemphasizing. Overemphasis of the vertical axis leads to slavery and other caste systems; overemphasis of the horizontal plane leads to ethnic cleansing or programs of social engineering such as Marxism. Our age's chief form of overemphasis is hyper-individualism, which enacts itself through abortion.<sup>8</sup> The inhabitant of the womb is labeled as a "potential person, not an actual person" – an example of *othering* within the temporal trajectory of individual selfhood. The pro-choice worldview, *as seen through its own argumentation*, is an attempt to control nature,<sup>9</sup> to fend off other human beings as "imposers," to construct a world without God, and to exalt the SELF as the new sovereign power, the controller of life and death.

What are the implications of this way of inhabiting the dimensions of reality? Consider the following passage:

[E]ven if the fetus is a person and thus does have a moral right to bodily integrity, the fetus is beyond the protection of the law. The fetus can be compared to a citizen of a totalitarian state whose freedom is taken away by the government. As a free society we would like the inhabitants of foreign countries to experience freedom. However, because we do not want to destroy our own society by imposing democracy on another government, we tolerate systems of government which are different than our own, and even governments we abhor.

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago, 1948) is a treatise that shows dimensional anthropology at work.

<sup>8</sup> See Chantal Delsol's insightful critique of individualism, as a morphed version of totalitarianism, in *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century: An Essay on Late Modernity* (Wilmington DE: ISI, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> A critique of modernity's flight from the perceived "shame of nature" and of the eclipse of awareness of God is articulated in Paul W. Kahn, *Out of Eden: Adam and Eve and the Problem of Evil* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007). See also John Wilcox, "Nature as Demonic in Thomson's Defense of Abortion," *New Scholasticism* 63/ 4 (1989): 463–84.

Similarly, a woman's body is like the borders of a foreign country.<sup>10</sup>

The author of this passage is looking for a way to triangulate the relationship between the pregnant woman, the inhabitant of her womb, and the broader society. She casts her glance around the modern world and finds what she thinks is the appropriate model to use: Nazi Germany.

The phrase "totalitarian womb" here comes from an essay written by a pro-choice advocate, Marjorie Reiley Maguire. Note that this is not a case of pro-life advocates hurling accusations at the other side by calling them "Nazis." This is a pro-choice advocate candidly outlining the implications of the pro-choice worldview. Earlier in the essay, Maguire had said that if a woman wants to be pregnant, then there is a person in her womb; if she does not want to be, then there isn't a person there. The passage just quoted unpacks the implications of unadulterated nominalism. Just as a totalitarian government such as Nazi Germany might decide to deprive some of its citizens of a right to life that is properly theirs and kill them, so also should the every woman's womb today be viewed as a totalitarian state where the gestating inhabitant is denied a right to life that is properly hers. Just as Jews were killed by the Nazis, so also should women today be able to kill the children developing in their wombs. Even if we may feel compassion for the children and want to protect them, we should refrain from "invading" the foreign country that is a woman's body. We should acquiesce to the situation and simply allow the killing of defenseless human beings to continue unabated. We ought to be passive bystanders while the holocaust is going on. Maguire considers this argument to be a positive contribution to the pro-choice cause. She seems oblivious to the idea that she is actually tearing the mask off of the cascades of euphemistic rhetoric that are usually employed to advance the pro-choice cause (liberty, autonomy, equality, progress, etc.). She is admitting the truth of the pro-life accusation that there is a substantive analogy between the Holocaust and abortion. The word "analogy" is actually too weak; this is a *re-enactment* within a different anthropological dimension.

We have arrived here at the key thesis that I seek to bring into

---

<sup>10</sup> Marjorie Reiley Maguire, "Symbiosis, Biology, and Personalization" in *Abortion Rights and Fetal "Personhood,"* edited by Edd Doerr and James W. Prescott (Long Beach CA: Centerline, 1989), pp. 11-19 at pp. 12-13.

articulation. The source of violence is like the tap root of a tree; the various forms of violence are like the branches of the tree. This accounts for the unity of violence at its deep starting point in the human psyche, and also for the shape-shifting diversity of the many forms of violence in human history. This means that violent practices that take place later in history cannot fail to be re-enactments of practices from earlier in history, for the nature of human psychology remains unchanged. My thesis holds that we can see this clearly in the abortion debate.

An article by Soran Reader, for example, argues that a pregnant woman should be viewed as in a position of sole authority over her child, so that she can legitimately decide to kill the child, not just in the womb, but even after birth.<sup>11</sup> This acceptance of infanticide is seen in other pro-choice advocates, and it is clearly based on the assumption that the child is a piece of property owned by another human being. This assumption is clearly a re-enactment of the core of the worldview that made slavery possible. We ought to have learned a crucial moral lesson from history, that it is illegitimate to think of human beings as the property of other human beings, but we have not.<sup>12</sup>

We see another example of historical re-enactment in the famous speech that Governor Mario Cuomo gave at the University of Notre Dame in 1984, in which he was re-enacting the role of Senator Stephen Douglas, by basing his case on the notion that *process* is more important than moral *principle*.<sup>13</sup> Douglas said that while he was personally opposed to slavery, each state should have the right to decide for itself whether it will be a slave state or not. Cuomo says that while he is personally opposed to abortion, each woman should be able to decide for herself how she is going to treat this piece of property that she owns.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Soran Reader, "Abortion, Killing, and Maternal Moral Authority," *Hypatia* 23/1 (2008): 132–49.

<sup>12</sup> Rowan Williams has learned this lesson; see his essay "Do Human Rights Exist?" in *Faith in the Public Square* (New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> See Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008), p. 313.

<sup>14</sup> Mario Cuomo, "Religious Belief and Public Morality: A Catholic Governor's Perspective," in *Abortion and Catholicism: The American Debate*, edited by Patricia Beattie Jung and Thomas A. Shannon (New York NY: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 202-16. See also Mario Cuomo. *Why Lincoln Matters:*

Mark 14:56 relates that after Jesus was arrested “many gave false testimony” against him, and “their testimony did not agree.” This verse points to another re-enactment, namely, the need for violent acts to be facilitated by mendacious words. A prime example here is the “*Webster Historians’ Brief*,” which is a train-wreck of scholarly malpractice.<sup>15</sup> The brief says that opposition to abortion in the nineteenth century was not based on a belief that abortion was a form of immoral killing, but rather on a cluster of other motives that are now passé. The drafters of the brief have admitted publicly that they were not speaking truthfully on that point.<sup>16</sup> Further, certain key signatories of the brief had published books that had demonstrated that opposition to abortion in the nineteenth century was rooted in a *moral* rejection of abortion as a form of early infanticide. Just as abortion has seduced and corrupted the medical profession to abandon its role as the protector of life, so it has also corrupted academia, leading scholars to commit perjury and betray basic standards of academic integrity.<sup>17</sup>

This reference to the trial of Jesus leads inevitably to the last form of re-enactment that I will discuss here. Justice Blackmun said in the text of *Roe*, “We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins.”<sup>18</sup> He was taking a stance not unlike that of Pontius Pilate’s question: “What is truth?” (John 18:38). They were both hiding behind a convenient agnosticism. Blackmun then contradicted himself by saying “the unborn have never been recognized in the law as persons in the whole sense.” This is a clear example of lying, for it is laws that recognized the unborn as persons that were being nullified by Blackmun. It was also a re-enactment of Pilate’s phrase: “I have the power to crucify you” (John 19:10). In *Roe*, the justices were exercising

---

*Today More Than Ever* (New York NY: Harcourt, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Clyde Spillenger, Jane E. Larson, and Sylvia A. Law, “Brief of 281 American Historians as Amici Curiae Supporting Appellees,” *The Public Historian* 12/3 (1990): 57-75.

<sup>16</sup> See Sylvia A. Law, “Conversations Between Historians and the Constitution,” *The Public Historian* 12/3 (1990): 11–17.

<sup>17</sup> See Gerard Bradley, “Academic Integrity Betrayed,” *First Things* (August 1990): 10–12.

<sup>18</sup> In *The Ethics of Abortion: Pro-life vs. Pro-Choice*, edited by Robert M. Baird and Stuart E. Rosenbaum, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2001), p. 68.

their raw judicial power by handing over unborn children into the control of those who want to kill them. The “sovereignty” at work here has been described very insightfully by Giorgio Agamben.<sup>19</sup> Just as Pilate washed his hands while knowing that Jesus was innocent, so also did the justices wash their hands by claiming that they were not mandating abortion but only allowing it to happen. Both Pilate and Blackmun lacked the moral backbone needed to defend innocent human beings from death. Both buckled under massive social pressure that was being placed on them, pressure that was arising out of the deep roots of the human impulse to direct violence against scapegoats who are unable to defend themselves. Justice Taney, in *Dred Scott*, also buckled under the pressure placed upon him to refuse to recognize that all human beings have the same rights simply because of who they are: human beings.

Both Pilate and Justice Blackmun seem to have believed that if they allowed the pressure building toward violence to be released, then things would quiet down. The killing of the scapegoat usually has a cathartic effect; it is supposed to create a new sense of social peace and camaraderie. Pilate did not know any better; he was raised in the system of Roman power in which only the powerful have rights and violence is a useful tool of social control. Justice Blackmun should have known better, for he was born and raised in a world that has been slowly but surely influenced by the story of Pilate and Jesus for two thousand years.

Jesus prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). As the centuries have passed, the Bible’s revelation of the deep roots of human violence has made unconscious scapegoating more and more difficult to engage in. We can no longer claim that we know not what we do, precisely because we live in a world that has been shaped by that prayer.<sup>20</sup>

On the night before he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, broke it, and

---

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998). See also his *Pilate and Jesus* (Stanford CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Two excellent elucidations of this point: René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2001); David Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2009).



said “Do this in *anamnesis* of me” (1 Cor. 11:24). *Anamnesis* can be translated as remembrance, recollection, or *re-enactment*. In the final analysis, the choice that faces all human beings is this: Are we going to re-enact variations on the forms of violence that we see in human history, or are we going to re-enact the way of speaking and acting that Jesus modeled and to which he called us: love of God, self, and neighbor, understood as inhabiting the dimensions of reality holistically? There is no third alternative.