

The War in Ukraine and Abortion: Two Cases of Historical Rhyming

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ABSTRACT: There is a parallel between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the brutality of the Roman occupation of the Holy Land during the time of Christ. In both cases, an imperial power is using terroristic violence to subjugate a smaller people group. The phrase “the crucifixion of Ukraine” is appropriate, and it is an example of the truism that “History does not repeat itself, but it does often rhyme.” In another case of historical rhyming, there are substantive parallels that can be drawn between slavery, the Holocaust, and abortion. These are modern era examples of illegitimate violence that are elucidated through the concept of dimensional anthropology, which posits that there are three main dimensions of reality as it is inhabited by human beings: the vertical axis, the horizontal plane, and individual selfhood. Each of these dimensions, if it is overemphasized, serves to facilitate violence against a group or class of human beings that is being “othered.”

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RUSSIA'S ATTACK ON UKRAINE can be described as the crucifixion of Ukraine. I refer not primarily to the crucifixion of Christ, but rather to the widespread practice of crucifixion and other forms of terrorizing violence inflicted by the Romans on the peoples they conquered. The Romans did not just crucify Jesus and the two thieves, but thousands of other inhabitants of that region. The purpose of this practice was to fill the subject peoples with fear and force them to acquiesce to Roman rule. The same principle is at work in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The widespread killing of civilians and destruction of apartments, homes, etc., is intended to terrorize the Ukrainian people into submission to Russia rule.

Historians inform us that various forms of crucifixion were practiced by the Romans and by other cultures for several centuries before the time of Christ. In some cases there was just one upright pole to which the persons were nailed, with their hands above their head. In some cases their hands and feet were tied to the cross with ropes instead of affixed with nails. There was usually a sign on the cross indicating the crime of which the person had been convicted. The public nature of this form of capital punishment, and its extended duration over hours or days, served to instill terror in the population that was forced to witness this display.

To describe the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian military in February 2022, and the horrors which followed, as the crucifixion of Ukraine is an appropriate use of a historical analogy. The Russians are acting in a manner that echoes the behavior of the Roman empire during the era before and after the life of Jesus of Nazareth, when it ruled the traditional homeland of the Jewish people. The Romans used crucifixion and other forms of violence to maintain their dominance over the various peoples that it conquered and ruled. In a similar way, the Russian army is using violence in an attempt to conquer and forcefully subjugate the Ukrainian people. The means that are used now involve modern weapons such as bombs, artillery shells, and machine guns, but the purpose and motivation are the same.

To draw this comparison, and describe the situation as the crucifixion of Ukraine, is not original with me. Consider these words, for example, from a homily by His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk, Head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church:

In these days Ukraine is experiencing her Golgotha, her crucifixion. Today I ask all of us, all Christians of the whole world, all people of

good will, do not turn your eyes away from the humiliation and suffering, the death and wounds of Ukraine. In these days before the eyes of the whole world there are gruesome scenes of war crimes in the cities and villages of Ukraine. Literally a few tens of kilometres from the centre of Kyiv we see today hundreds of killed bodies shot in the back of the head. We see the wounds of the Ukrainian people.¹

The bishop is drawing the appropriate historical comparison, by speaking of this situation as Ukraine's Golgotha.

The phrase, "History does not repeat itself, but it does often rhyme," is dubiously attributed to Mark Twain, but regardless of its source, it is an important observation. Human violence takes different forms in different historical contexts, but there is an element of similarity in the forms that is real and worth reflecting on. In Ukraine, we see a large country, Russia, acting in an imperialistic manner, seeking to expand its sphere of influence and control, and using barbaric acts of violence against civilians to achieve that end. The Roman empire acted in the same way. David Bentley Hart's book *Atheist Delusions* includes an extensive description of the moral sensibilities of the Romans; he described "the social order that the imperial cults sustained as one that rested, not accidentally but essentially, upon a pervasive, relentless, and polymorphous cruelty."² The current cult of Russian nationalism is expressing itself also as a relentless and polymorphous cruelty.

In the abortion debate, pro-life advocates have quite often used this type of argument of historical rhyming; they have argued that slavery, the Holocaust, and legalized abortion are like three peas in a pod. They are all based on an "othering" or dehumanizing interpretation of a group or class of human beings. It is a lesser-known fact that pro-choice advocates have made the same sort of argument in the opposite direction; they have accused pro-life advocates of having a way of thinking that is similar to the defenders of slavery and Hitler. Lawrence Lader and Andrew Koppleman, for example, have employed in their writings the notion that pro-choice advocates are

¹<https://uccmc.org/statements/his-beatitude-sviatoslav-april-5-41st-day-of-war/>

² David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 122.

today's abolitionists, while anti-choice advocates are today's defenders of slavery. Women need to be freed from slavery to their womb.³ Gloria Steinem also wrote an essay entitled "If Hitler Were Here, Whose Side Would He Be On?" in which she argued that the thinking of today's anti-abortion partisans is similar to that of Hitler.⁴ In other words, the abortion debate, in its polarized form, requires participants to engage in a type of "motive attribution asymmetry" in which my group has good motives and those who disagree with my group have evil motives.⁵ If slavery and the Holocaust are two of the most salient icons of evil in the modern world, then it becomes necessary to accuse those on the other side of the abortion debate as being similar to those icons of evil. Each side must see itself as promoting progress and the other side as promoting regress. In my view, the pro-life argument is vastly stronger along these lines, as I will seek to demonstrate below.

I have many times now taught a course called "The Abortion Debate," and when I introduce students to the idea that a comparison can be made between slavery and abortion, the first reaction of the pro-choice leaning students is almost always to say that this comparison is not apt when it is made by pro-life advocates, because the slaves were born human beings who could think, speak, enter into communal relations with others, and so forth. Embryos and fetuses, in contrast, are not developed enough to have these capabilities; the analogy is thus comparing apples and oranges. When pro-choice students are introduced to the argument of analogy also being made from the pro-choice direction, they are usually surprised and knocked slightly off balance, but they soon regain their footing and repeat what they said before about the inaptness of the pro-life analogy. I point out to them, however, that this response fails in a crucial way to understand the argument being made. The pro-life argument that finds a similarity between the *Dred*

³ Lader, *Abortion* (Boston: Beacon, 1966); Koppelman, "Forced Labor Revisited: The Thirteenth Amendment and Abortion," in Alexander Tsesis, ed., *The Promises of Liberty: The History and Contemporary Relevance of the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 226–44.

⁴ Gloria Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983).

⁵ Arthur Brooks, *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt* (New York: Broadside, 2019), 21–22.

Scott decision and *Roe v. Wade*, for example, is not claiming that slaves and fetuses are identical to each other in every possible way as victims; rather, it is claiming that there is a similarity in the thought-processes of those who are in a position of power relative to the slaves and the fetuses. The parallel at work in the thoughts is an interpretation of the *other* that labels and construes the *other* as different from and inferior to the one who is positing the interpretation. In other words, the similarity is in the realm of the subjective, the thoughts and deeds of the acting agent; the claimed similarity is not in the realm of the object being interpreted and acted upon.

The pro-life argument of historical analogy requires an anthropological framework to be understood more clearly. The needed framework works with the idea that there are three main dimensions of reality as it is inhabited by human beings: (1) the vertical axis, sometimes called the Great Chain of Being, that focuses on the physical and spiritual dimensions of human beings; (2) the horizontal plane, which constitutes the social interrelatedness of human beings; and (3) individual selfhood, which brings attention to the uniqueness and interior psychological life of discrete individuals as such. These three dimensions interact in complex ways to make up the fullness of what it means to be a human person. These three dimensions also need to be understood as set within the flow of time; our physical bodies begin with conception, grow in the womb, are born into the world, develop toward maturity, and then decay as we approach death. Our societies also inhabit time in that there are changes in ways of thinking and acting that are described in the works of historians. Individual selfhood has the physical aspect that was just outlined, but it also has a trajectory of development of its own that psychologists, philosophers, and theologians consider under the heading of our relative openness or closedness to growth toward personal and moral maturity.

When I speak of these three dimensions of reality as it is inhabited by human beings, I am not saying anything original. Discussion of these dimensions is found in the works of hundreds of thinkers, and it often forms the explicit framework of their commentaries on the human condition. I will point to just one example to illustrate this point. In his work *The Righteous Mind*, psychologist Jonathan Haidt describes three primary “ethics” that can be seen in the study of world cultures: the ethics of autonomy, community,

and divinity. These ethics shape thought and action using either selfhood or the horizontal plane or transcendence as the key social imaginary.⁶

The point I need to emphasize here is that the dimensions can and do function as vectors that focus and amplify the human tendency toward violence. The vertical axis, for example, formed the backbone of the defense of slavery. The apologists for slavery quite clearly and unapologetically argued that White people were created by God to occupy a higher rung on the Great Chain of Being than Black people. In the wake of the American and French Revolutions, this overemphasis on the vertical axis, twisting it into an ideology of oppression, began to be called into question; the era of democracy was beginning to develop, entailing a change to a horizontal plane social imaginary for political thought. In France, many thousands of priests, nuns, and other persons viewed as supporting the vertical axis way of living were murdered. Similar massacres took place in Mexico and Russia in the early twentieth centuries. These events illustrate the point that when there is a transition from one structuring dimension to another, those who see themselves as the avant-garde of the new reality are not content simply to seize power; they feel compelled to quite literally kill off the human beings they identify as being responsible for the old regime.

The middle of the twentieth century was the scene for the playing out of the horrors of collectivism, which can take both fascist and communist forms. When the horizontal plane is overemphasized, it also can become an engine for oppression and murder. This discrediting of the horizontal plane opened up a new era in the wake of World War II, an era that has seen the rise of strident individualism as the new regnant social imaginary. The ideas undergirding expressive individualism have been slowly but surely gaining traction in Western culture over the past two centuries, and this transition to the individual selfhood dimension of reality as the new dominant social and political imaginary took place in a powerful way in the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Psychologists have written about a phenomenon sometimes seen in an individual's life; the child who is abused often grows up to be an abuser of his or her children. The oppressed becomes the oppressor in a subconscious process of trading places. We have already noted this phenomenon in

⁶ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 116-117.

revolutionary movements, and the legalization of abortion was another kind of revolution that synthesized second wave feminism and expressive individualism. The woman, newly endowed with control over the human being developing in her womb, traded places with that human being as the reigning power, the sovereign, the master of life and death, the Lord of Time. The ideology known as the “pro-choice philosophy” is rooted in a new definition of the “person” built upon the *othering* of the inhabitant of the womb as a “non-person” before the law.⁷

Much of the pro-life literature has focused on engaging the pro-choice literature on this precise point; pro-life proponents have argued that various philosophical mistakes are being made when we deny that the life of persons begins at conception. I need to make clear that while my argument assumes the correctness of the pro-life side in this polemic, the key point I am making is somewhat different. I am providing an anthropological vision that explains why pro-choice advocates make the arguments that they make. This is different from saying simply that their arguments are wrong.

I have said that there are three main dimensions of reality as it is inhabited by human beings: the vertical axis, the horizontal plane, and individual selfhood. The essential flaw in human beings is the narrowness of our moral imaginations; we ought to inhabit all three of these dimensions in an open, complex, and rich way. To do so is to rise into maturity as moral agents. Human history has shown, however, that moral maturity is very elusive for human beings as acting agents. We usually choose, at some deep level of our consciousness that we are probably not aware of, to overemphasize one of the dimensions. Slavery overemphasized the vertical axis; there are myriad examples of overemphasizing our group belonging on the horizontal plane, which leads to wars and ethnic cleansing.

We are now living in an age of overemphasis on individual selfhood. When selfhood becomes the new trump card that is played, it is necessary to see the horizontal plane as a threat that must be fended off through the idea that the pro-life position is an example of some people “imposing” their moral beliefs on others. The inhabitant of the womb is described as “merely a clump of cells,” or as “the contents of the uterus”—language that others the

⁷ This is the central thesis in my book *Othring: The Original Sin of Humanity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020).

child-on-the-way as lower down on the Great Chain of Being. Even when pro-choice advocates admit, for the sake of argument, that personhood begins at conception, as Judith Jarvis Thomson famously did, this idea is set within the framework of expressive individualism, which assumes that individuals are discrete and separate entities that exist in external and contractual relations with others. These individuals may be in a zero-sum conflict with the rights of others, and those who have greater power, by virtue of their greater cognitive capacities, are declared to be the winners, which means that they can kill those with whom they are in conflict. When we consider the vertical axis, pro-choice thought typically takes one of two paths: (1) it may espouse secularism and describe the pro-life position as the imposition of dogmatic religious beliefs that limit the liberty of modern, autonomous individuals, or (2) it may express itself in a “pro-choice theology,” as seen in books such as Rebecca Todd Peters’ *Trust Women* or Margaret Kamitsuka’s *Abortion and the Christian Tradition*. A pro-life reader of such books, however, will see them as quite clearly Feuerbachian in their argument. The God they depict is the Great-Approver-Above whose role is simply to provide an imprimatur for whatever decision a woman makes with regard to having an abortion. This is really a god, with a lower case “g,” of human invention.

Dimensional anthropology, as I have applied it above, is both an interpretation of human behavior and also a moral critique of it. To overemphasize one dimension of reality is a narrowing of moral imagination that always entails a rejection or forgetfulness of various aspects of reality. The vertical axis pathology of slavery, for example, must reject the essential equality of all human beings on the horizontal plane, and it makes living according to the Golden Rule impossible. Horizontal plane othering divides the world into “we” who are good and “they” who are evil; it also rejects the Golden Rule and must fend off the moral imperative to live into the virtues of love and justice. The temporal othering that animates expressive individualism is rooted in a forgetfulness of one’s own past and a recognition that dependence on others is not a flaw within reality, but an essential ingredient of our humanity.⁸ All three forms of these pathologies, because

⁸ See O. Carter Snead, *What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Bioethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020).

they are rebellions against the truth of our existential situation as human beings, require an Orwellian use of language and rhetoric to be sustained as political projects.

In sum, we need dimensional anthropology to understand the truth in the phrase “History does not repeat itself, but it does often rhyme.” History does not repeat itself exactly, but the forms of human moral wrongdoing—such as Roman or Russian oppression, slavery, the Holocaust, communist purges, or unfettered abortion access proclaimed as “progress”—all share a fundamental refusal to synthesize the dimensions of reality in a way that is rich, symphonic, complex, and non-conflictual.