Abortion: Revisiting an Enigma

It is a puzzle, it is perplexing; it is an enigma. How can our society which on the one hand is currently so sensitive—it would seem—to minority groups of all sorts, a society which laments a beached whale, which will take determined steps to save endangered species, and yet at the same time will enact laws which permit the destruction of a million and a half unborn human beings each year in this country alone? (The world wide figure is about 50 million.) How much larger would the number be if it were not for the determined opposition of a relatively small number of people who value and respect the life of each unborn child. Our society is schizophrenic on the subject of abortion.

In a recent article an anthropologist, with an attention-getting name of Lionel Tiger, asserted that:

- It remains disturbing that the abortion fracas has included virtually no discussion of the social science and biological dimensions that it is both intensely social and undeniably biological (Lionel Tiger, "On Human Nature—Living with Abortion," The Sciences, September/ October 1992, p. 12).
- He then proceeds to argue for a woman's right to an abortion based on her right to control her reproductive activities. He holds that the basis for opposition to abortion is not only because it is an attack on the fetus but also because "...in some measure it enables people—particularly women—to enjoy carefree sex without binding consequences" (ibid.). Lionel Tiger then concludes:

But I suggest abortion has less to do with libertinism than with a newly atomized socioreproductive system—in which the bond of obligation between men and women has weakened decisively—and with an economic system that forces all too many women to choose between bread and babies (ibid., p. 13).

Reproductive Strategies

Borrowing from recent biological theories, Professor Tiger introduces the notion of reproductive strategy as "a particularly insightful way of looking at abortion" (ibid.). He notes by way of a simple definition that "an animal's reproductive strategy is whatever the animal does to secure the means to pass on its genes to the next generation" (ibid.). Of course, he recognizes that in animals—the lower animals at least—it is not a conscious process. This also may be true in some human sexual activity. With regard to the latter, he notes that:

- there is firm evidence that people, like other mammals, take actions they may not understand, to achieve reproductive ends they may not foresee or even consciously desire" (ibid.).

According to this approach women may unconsciously engage in unprotected intercourse in order to find a reliable mate and to bear offsprings. Because women have a much greater investment in the bearing of children, it is important for them to search for a mate who will not only provide healthy genes but also a secure environment in which the children are to be raised. If it turns out that the male does not want the responsibility of rearing the child—however expressed—or if there is an indication that the unborn child is not healthy, or that it does not meet the expectations of the woman, she will be driven—in part by unconscious forces—to get rid of the unborn child. This action could be interpreted as the reproductive strategy taken to eliminate the mistake as quickly as possible in order to try again with a more promising mate who would provide both a healthy child and a supporting environment for both mother and child.

At one point in his article, Lionel Tiger laments "...why has the philosophical treatment of abortion remained so delinquently superfluous?" (ibid.). One is tempted to level the same charge at him. Nowhere in his essay does he consider, even for the briefest moment, the being who is being aborted. The focus is entirely on the woman on her tragedy, which no doubt is very real. But very real, too, is the death of the unborn infant, the death of an actual human being.

Reproductive Responsibility

Today's popular shibboleths—reproductive freedom, and its partner, reproductive control—lack a third member, reproductive responsibility. The biblical commandment, "Thou shall not commit adultery" could be called ancient wisdom's "reproductive strategy." It was directed to insure that the child engendered was truly the offspring of the husband and wife, and thus it was more likely that the child would be raised in a nourishing and secure atmosphere. The terrible situation of the single mother which Tiger rightly identifies as "...the hardest life available in the social system..." (ibid.) must somehow be alleviated. He observes that whereas in the United States "in 1960 only 8 percent of all children were living with their biological mothers alone; now [1992] that proportion is up to 33 percent" (op. cit., p. 14).

It appears that the vast majority of human society establishes some sort of provision or institution to ensure a more or less stable family unit: "Some form of marriage has been found to exist in all human societies, past and present" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th edition, 1991, vol. 7, p. 871). Vatican Council II observed "The Creator of all made the married state the beginning and the foundation of human society;"

(continued on page 4)
and "The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God himself" (Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, English translation in Vatican Council II—the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, edited by Austin Flannery, O.P., Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1975, pp. 778, 779). One could call this humankind's reproductive strategy, and it is one which the Church has blessed by the sacrament of marriage.

In this context, until recently (1973) abortion in the United States was not only recognized as morally evil but also as a social crime since the State has an interest in the life and stability of its citizens and institutions. Abortion not only destroys a human life but also weakens the bond between the husband and wife. If abortion is the action taken by a pregnant single woman who made a bad reproductive choice, one could view that decision as relieving the woman of a heavy burden. But the impact the abortion has on her and society at large is to cheapen human life and to trivialize human sexuality. Professor Tiger agrees that no one likes abortion. It is always a sign of inadequacy, miscalculation, shoddy resources—a bold essay turned bitter. Under some of the communist regimes of eastern Europe, dissidents in the medical community reportedly could be assigned to abortion detail as a form of punishment (op. cit., p. 15).

Why does no one like an abortion?

Why does no one like abortion? Not merely because it is esthetically messy, or painful, or a sign of inadequacy, but because there is a silent and unconscious awareness that it is the destruction of a human being. It is deeply ingrained in our nature not to kill our own kind. It is unjust; so much so that if one kills another born human being, there is a strong desire for revenge, to get even by killing the killer or one associated with him. The present world scene is a bloody testimony to that desire to get even: a life for a life.

What makes abortion different is that the one being killed is not visible or tangible and as a result its humanity is not only not perceived clearly but is also vehemently denied. In earlier days that humanity universally was taken for granted except, perhaps, in the earliest stages of embryonic development. Today we should know better since studies of the child's development from conception onwards to birth and beyond. The being produced is human from the beginning; it is not a tissue or an organ of the mother. It is an independent organism albeit at the earliest stages it is very dependent on its mother for continued life. (For a fuller discussion of this point, see Albert Moraczewski, op, "Personhood: Entry and Exit," in Russell E. Smith, editor, The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Vatican II—A Look Back and a Look Ahead, Braintree, MA, The Pope John Center, 1990, pp. 78-101.)

What needs to be recognized more fully by our society is that the ancient wisdom of humans throughout the world has opted for some form of marriage as its reproductive strategy. It is one which takes in a much larger view than that which is proposed by Professor Tiger. It recognizes the multidimensionality of human reproduction: the biological, psychological, sociological and even the spiritual dimension, at least implicitly. And it recognizes that marriage, and due respect for it, is an institution which presents, even with all the shortcomings of many actual marriages, the best that can be achieved in the real world to ensure the well-being of coming generations. Abortion is simply counter-reproductive! The enigma will remain until society and the State are willing to admit the unborn child once again as a full member of the human race.

ASM

186 Forbes Road,
Braintree, Mass. 02184

APRIL, 1993