ABSORPTION, ETHICS, AND THE LAW

Induced abortion is a dramatically effective mechanism for reducing birth rates, a fact amply supported by the results achieved via this method in many parts of the world. Further, there is general agreement among those concerned with the reduction of birth rates and the stabilization of human population numbers that voluntary abortion, in concert with improved contraceptive techniques, educational programs, tax and welfare benefits and penalties, and other measures such as present family planning programs, must be greatly and immediately expanded if we are to avoid those compulsory measures about whose effectiveness there is no doubt at all. Still, there is a tendency to see in the flurry of attention now focused on consideration of liberalized, voluntary abortion laws, achievements that really do not exist. A review is in order.

Two states, New York and Hawaii (as of the 1970 legislative session), now permit abortion by physician-patient arrangement although Hawaii has a residence requirement. Two others attempted passage of such legislation in 1970 (Alaska and Maryland), but the proposals were vetoed. At this pace, the remaining states could have similar laws in the next 24 years, and the earth's population will have increased by about two billion persons. Thirteen states allow abortion under certain conditions such as (a) damage to the physical or emotional health of the mother; (b) the possibility of a defective child; or (c) if there has been rape or incest. Only seven, however, fall into category "a." Abortion, except to preserve the life of the mother, is illegal in 35 states. This, then, is where we stand on abortion in our "enlightened" society.

Many feel that there are ethical questions involved, and such absurd terms as viable and nonviable fetus (relating to the age of the embryo) have emerged. Vetoing Alaska's abortion reform, Governor Miller stated: "Many have suggested that I allow the bill to become law without my signature. I cannot accept that advice when legislation involving the fundamental right to life is involved" (emphasis mine). Religious groups have vigorously opposed liberalization of abortion on ethical grounds, and one militant Catholic faction (the Sons of Thunder) has even resorted to violence to demonstrate their interpretation of the nature of ethics.

What are the ethics to be considered?

The programs proposed are voluntary; the prospective mother does not want the child. In most instances, abortion stems from a failure of contraceptive techniques, it does not replace them. Secondly, there is the question of the "taking of a life." A human being exists when those attributes of humanness associated with life apart from the mother begin, i.e., at birth. We are finally faced with only one ethical consideration, one I propose to call the Earth Ethic. This is the exercise of our responsibility to maintain the biological and physical integrity of this planet, including a moral obligation of all living things that share it with us. In the past disagreed (in part) with those who look to Judeo-Christian doctrine as especially significant in the development of global environmental deterioration, it is blatantly evident, however, that certain individuals and groups espousing such doctrine are currently attempting to block all efforts to put into effect one of the most effective methods of birth control. The doctrine thus fails to acknowledge that there exists an Earth Ethic and places in jeopardy all those special, fragile human qualities that are subtly destroyed by unlimited population growth and attendant degradation of the land, water, and air. The use of the word "dominion" in Genesis 1:26-28 implies responsibility, not destruction.

The law has a long history in dealing with the question of abortion. In Aristotle's Politics, it was written "that on the ground of an excess in the numbers of children if the established customs of the state forbid this (for in our state population has a limit), no child is to be exposed, but when couples have children in excess, let abortion be procured before sense and life have begun..." A pregnant woman has an undeniable right to choose whether or not to terminate a pregnancy. The law should help her to achieve that right, Wisconsin, South Dakota, and the District of Columbia have declared their present laws governing abortion unconstitutional. These rulings will be appealed and the Supreme Court will make a final decision. A decision that these laws are unconstitutional will not only protect individual rights, but will protect the rights of society as well, and will be in quest of fulfillment of the Earth Ethic.

FRANCIS S. L. WILLIAMSON

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