

The Morality of Abortion

By Diana Alstad
and Joel Kramer

IT HAS BEEN almost 25 years since Roe vs. Wade affirmed American women's right to choose.

But for more than 20 years, that right has been increasingly curtailed because the pro-choice movement has taken the moral defensive and focuses mainly on rights instead of on morality, which is more powerful.

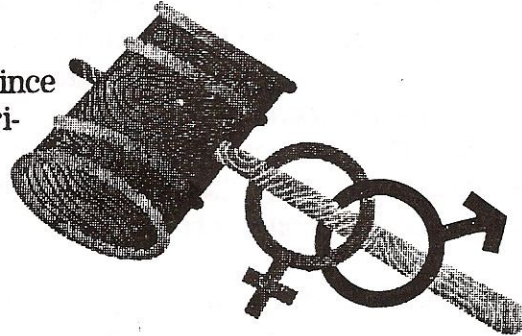
But rights exist only if society grants them, and thus can be eroded whenever the climate of moral opinion changes. Health and family planning justifications have also lost ground to fundamentalist moral rhetoric, which holds that fetal life always comes before a woman's choice.

But framing the issue as "pro-life vs. pro-choice" is wrong. The real dichotomy is between freedom and authoritarianism, between "pro-choice and pro-force." The real moral issue is this: Who has the right to force a woman to have a child she doesn't want, and what are the implications for society?

The reason abortion is moral is very simple, although its implications are complex: Forcing any woman to have a child harms the woman and all of society. It means creating another unwanted, potentially uncared-for child, while limiting the woman's potential.

Unwanted, inadequately cared-for children are one of the greatest sources of violence on the planet. To choose not to bear children when there exists little foundation for their well-being is a moral and protective act.

Abortion rights are interwoven with many other core issues: violence, poverty, democracy, quality of life, and the stresses on and breakdown of families. Tragically, as long as the focus stays on the dubious rights of zygotes, embryos and fetuses rather than on what's good for women, good for parenting and thus for children, and good for society, everyone will suffer. The abortion conflict also reflects a deep communicative gap be-



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tween fundamentalist and modern world views. The old order is built upon women's choiceless submission to biological destiny and traditional sex roles. Freeing women shakes up the old order as it changes roles, values, and thus power structures. Abortion is such a volatile issue in part because it erodes the very underpinnings of the old moral order.

But fundamentalist viewpoints have escaped much public scrutiny because of an implicit taboo against publicly criticizing any religion. However, candor can be established and religious tolerance maintained by adopting an attitude that we all are free to believe what we wish, and we are also free to criticize others' beliefs — especially if those beliefs are demonstrably harmful.

People have a right to believe abortion is wrong and to voice such an opinion. But it can and must be shown that it is morally wrong to force another's morality on any woman in this most personal and life-determining of all arenas.

The ability of women to control their reproduction is bringing about an unprecedented leap in social evolution. Choice is necessary for conscious reproduction, which in turn is essential to meet the momentous challenges that we and future generations must face.

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