

Arnim Polster's Lutheran Case against Abortion

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Introduction

HISTORIANS AND COMMENTATORS REGULARLY argue that conservative Protestant opposition to abortion was a comparatively late-breaking phenomenon. According to such observers, while the Catholic Church's rejection of abortion was a longstanding position, many Protestant denominations did not coalesce around that view until the Supreme Court's 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade*.¹ For most conservative Protestants, these observers contend, the resulting rejection of abortion lay essentially downstream of opposition to desegregation and other racial integration policies—such that anti-abortion activism had more to do with building a coalition to defend racial hierarchy than with the status of unborn life.²

The case of Arnim Polster offers a notable counterexample to that claim. Polster, a pastor in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, served as co-chair of the Right to Life League during the decade preceding *Roe*, and engaged extensively in political efforts to prevent the liberalization of California's abortion laws.³ Those efforts took a wide variety of forms, from organizing and writing to testifying before the California Assembly.

Though Polster's stances clearly followed from his theological commitments, his core argument against abortion did not primarily rely on religious claims or startling medical facts. Instead, it was a comparatively dispassionate argument, rooted first and foremost in the principle of the inviolability of human life. This approach to critiquing abortion reflected what, for Polster, was a longstanding concern for grounding emotional appeals in rock-solid first principles—a concern that specifically animated him in his role as a Lutheran minister.

While Polster is a virtually unknown figure today, his work exemplifies a distinctly Lutheran mode of engagement with the moral question of abortion. That question remains as contested now as it was in Polster's day. Now, with *Roe* no longer a live issue, Lutherans once again find themselves debating abortion “on the

merits” in state and federal political arenas alike. In the midst of such controversies, Polster’s work may prove to be a valuable lodestar.

Arnim Polster’s Life and Career

ARNIM HENRY POLSTER WAS BORN in 1922 in Antelope County, Nebraska.⁴ While an infant, he suffered from a severe case of polio that left him permanently disabled, walking with a serious limp even forty years later.⁵ Though the son of a Lutheran minister, Polster did not begin his career in the ministry.⁶ Rather, Polster practiced as a lawyer in Missouri for five years before he was called to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.⁷ At the Seminary, Polster obtained a Bachelor of Divinity degree and was subsequently ordained in 1956.⁸ Following his ordination, Polster pastored three Lutheran churches over the course of a career that ultimately took him to the San Francisco area.⁹ In 1962, he was installed as pastor of Hope Lutheran Church in Daly City, a congregation he would pastor for nearly two decades.¹⁰

Shortly thereafter, Polster’s convictions led him to enter the public arena. In 1963, California lawmaker Anthony Beilenson introduced AB 2310, the “Humane Abortion Act,” which sought to liberalize California’s abortion laws by allowing abortion in cases of fetal malformation, among other rationales.¹¹ Polster himself, while serving as public relations director for the Missouri Synod’s California and Nevada districts, testified against the bill in a 1964 hearing.¹² Before the Assembly, as historian Daniel K. Williams recounts, Polster acknowledged the ambiguity of the question of when exactly human life begins, but argued that policymakers should err on the side of preserving life—albeit with exceptions for cases of rape or where the mother’s life was at risk.¹³

Most notably, Polster strongly opposed the bill’s provisions allowing for abortions in cases of fetal disability, pointing to his own experience as a rebuttal of the bill’s implicit premise that disabled life was not worth living. “My deformity was far worse than some of those for which abortions could be performed under this bill.... Yet I believe my life has been as purposeful as if I had not had polio.”¹⁴ A state policy approving abortions in cases where a child might potentially be born disabled, Polster contended, was an essentially eugenic regime that bore an eerie resemblance to prior historical evils. In Polster’s words: “How far is it from such destruction of life proposed in this bill to the destruction in force in Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany under the guise of ridding society of the undesirable and defective?”¹⁵ Staunch opposition from Polster and others, however, failed to dissuade then-Governor Ronald Reagan from eventually signing a version of Beilenson’s bill into law.¹⁶

Despite this setback, Polster’s testimony before the Assembly was not the culmination of his anti-abortion activism. Rather, it was a beginning. In 1967, the Right

to Life League began meeting in northern California—just a few months after the formation of its southern California chapter—with Polster at its helm.¹⁷ Originally, the organization’s board was composed exclusively of non-Catholics—Greek Orthodox and Methodist members were specifically solicited, Williams explains, “in order to convince state legislators that theirs was not merely a Catholic cause.”¹⁸ Far from being merely a convenient post-Roe rallying point for southern evangelicals opposed to racial equality, the abortion issue managed to galvanize theologically conservative non-Catholics in much further-flung locales.

Also in 1967, Polster published a bracing article, “Abortion: Mercy or Murder?” which was syndicated across multiple periodicals, Lutheran and Catholic alike.¹⁹ This article represents the most developed treatment of his opposition to abortion. It is a concise philosophical exposition of what Polster viewed as the central issue in the debate—the ontological status of the unborn—and that issue’s logical implications. As will be demonstrated, the piece resonates with a distinctly Lutheran theological tone that mirrors Polster’s overall philosophy of preaching.

Polster died in 1982, survived by his wife and three children.²⁰ Hope Lutheran, the church he pastored for almost twenty years, remains an active congregation to this day.²¹

Polster’s Theory of Persuasion

MISSOURI SYNOD LUTHERANS ARE NOT generally known for their political engagement. But what makes Polster’s activism on the abortion issue particularly distinctive is not simply the fact of its existence in the first place, but that his developed arguments against abortion eventually took on a distinctively *Lutheran* form—a form that reflected the philosophy of preaching he had developed nearly a decade earlier at Concordia Seminary.

In June 1956, as part of his Bachelor of Divinity degree program, Polster presented a thesis entitled “The Importance and Means of Achieving a Balance in Appeals to Intellect and to Emotion in Preaching” to the faculty of Concordia Seminary’s Department of Practical Theology.²² In this thesis, Polster outlined a model of rhetoric ostensibly within the context of Lutheran preaching, considering how pastors ought to appeal to their hearers’ heads and hearts, so to speak. However, the principles of rhetoric that Polster articulated in his thesis are not clearly restricted to the ministerial context. Rather, they go to the issue of persuasion as such. And Polster’s later anti-abortion work in the public sphere would go on to bear them out.

Early in the thesis, Polster avers that, between appeals to the head and heart, one cannot be held up as primary. He insists that “appeals to intellect and appeals to emotion are found to be equally important, inasmuch as each complement and

strengthen the other. Achieving a balance between the two appeals is not only possible, but necessary, in every preaching situation” so as to “engage the total personalities of the hearers.”²³ Polster’s observation here is likely true, but the bare claim that “both intellect and emotion are important” would not make for a very compelling thesis. And indeed, despite the fact that Polster’s introduction pays lip service to the “equal importance” of appeals to the intellect and emotions, a closer read of the thesis suggests a more nuanced position.

For Polster, while emotional appeals may have some merit, intellectual appeals appear to clearly enjoy pride of place as the thesis unfolds. In his words, “while there are few who would agree that appeal to emotion can be entirely dispensed with, yet the fact remains that the intellect plays perhaps the fundamental role in the Christian faith.”²⁴ Where Christian preaching is concerned, “the first requirement is the intellectual spadework—the intellectual foundation upon which appeal to the congregation is based.”²⁵ Forgetfulness of this priority necessarily undermines the preacher’s credibility, and if one is to err in one direction or the other, it is more suitable to err on the side of stolidity than frivolity: “It is far better to be considered a solid and substantial thinker than to have a reputation as a flashy speaker, who nevertheless is superficial, lacking in deep convictions, and careless with facts.”²⁶

The underlying reason for this, Polster argues, is that appeals to emotions will produce no lasting results unless they are backed up by objective truth claims. “Content is basic in preaching; ideas must be presented. The need to reach the argumentative can be met primarily by intellectual treatment. And no lasting influence can be hoped for unless an appeal is based on solid conviction.”²⁷ Conversely, emotional appeals run the risk of “sentimentaliz[ing] and soften[ing] spiritual concepts, to offer this sentimentality to tired and troubled people as if it were escape from battle, to make it delicate and tender, or emotionally rousing or absorbing.”²⁸ Where this occurs, the preacher has failed in his work.

To be sure, Polster is by no means an enemy of emotional appeals—he insists that preachers should “examine and study the psychological analysis of emotion, motivation and drive, and the relationship of these to self-interest, wants, needs, and desires.”²⁹ The importance of doing so is especially true in light of the fact that human beings are not purely rational actors: they “will seldom respond to purely logical or rational motives, because of the maze of subconscious motives that constantly affect or influence the power of reason.”³⁰ Consistent with the Lutheran tradition as a whole, Polster is strongly skeptical of humans’ own independent critical faculties. In the end, though, for Polster, it remains true that “emotion is always coupled to some sort of conviction—it never stands completely alone.”³¹

While Polster does not draw the point as finely as he might, the thesis makes clear enough that this overarching emphasis on the primacy of intellectual appeals—that

is, efforts to establish in the hearers certain settled convictions regarding objective reality—is ultimately rooted in Polster’s sense of the *objectivity* of Law and Gospel, a recognizable Missouri Synod Lutheran motif.

Preaching solely to wants is futile when, as is often the case, a preacher must lead his hearers to deny various basic, primitive human wants, and to substitute biologically newer and weaker desires. He must have logical support if he is to produce not only an immediate effect, but also the more remote effect of keeping his hearers from backsliding the next day.³²

In speaking of “logical support,” Polster highlights the need to articulate the *objective reality* of human sinfulness—the Law—in a manner likely to inspire action or, at the very least, rouse his listeners from spiritual apathy.

In parallel fashion, a similar point can be made regarding the Gospel. “The need of man is still conviction—conviction upon which he can rely and upon which he build[s] his life,” Polster writes.³³ As C.F.W. Walther and generations of Missouri Synod preachers after him stressed, Christians must be assured of their acceptance by God, and that assurance must be grounded in the objective work of Christ, irrespective of any feelings that ebb and flow.³⁴ For Polster, this appears to be a primarily intellectual point *from which* emotions arise—not vice versa.

Taken as a whole, Polster’s thesis likely reflects the fact that its author was formed by the argumentative standards of the legal profession, and brought those skills with him into the work of Lutheran ministry.³⁵ In general, law runs on stark facts, not emotions. Doctrinally speaking, the Missouri Synod’s emphasis on the objectivity of justification, and the implications of that principle for preaching, allowed Polster to articulate a distinctly Lutheran explanation for a rhetorical method in which he had already been trained. It was an approach he would later take with him into the public square.

Polster’s Critique of Abortion

IN HIS 1967 “MERCY OR MURDER?” article, Polster provided the most developed statement of his philosophical opposition to liberalized abortion laws, considering and rebutting a myriad of potential objections in turn. In so doing, Polster deployed the rhetorical approach he had previously defended in his thesis on the philosophy of Lutheran preaching: immediately identifying the objective reality at the center of the debate through an intellectual appeal and working out the logical implications of that principle for other domains.

After framing the ongoing controversy over California’s abortion laws, Polster states the central point up front: “One basic issue, however, remains at the heart of

the controversy: Does an abortion destroy a human life?"³⁶ For Polster, the issue comes down to this. If an abortion does *not* destroy a human life, then no restrictions on it can be justified: "it would be difficult to deny an abortion to any women [sic] who wants one, for whatever reason."³⁷ But if an abortion does destroy a human life, then "it would be difficult, if not impossible, to justify the taking of that life through abortion," with the lone exception of a case in which one must "choose between the life of the mother and that of the child," which Polster describes as a "tragic dilemma."³⁸ The nature of the unborn is the relevant objective fact, on the basis of which all other questions regarding abortion become peripheral.

In support of the proposition that the unborn ought to be considered human life worthy of legal protection, Polster puts forward two linked claims. First, there is no clear point during gestation at which something nonhuman abruptly—or even gradually—"becomes human." "From the moment of conception, through 9 months in the womb, birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and up to old age," Polster argues, "we can speak only for phases of growth. At no time is there a change in kind, only in degree of growth."³⁹ Second, in the *absence* of such an identifiable transition point, Polster argues the law ought to default to treating the unborn as human (and so entitled to legal protection). Though "it can be neither proved nor disproved that human life begins at conception," still the point holds that "human life may exist at conception and that an abortion may destroy the life of a human being."⁴⁰ And this *possibility* is all it takes for Polster's legal argument to get off the ground:

So long as the possibility exists that a human life is at stake, can the law ever legislate the human guess that this possibility does not exist? Must not the law regard the fetus in the womb as a human being and a human life and grant all the rights and protection that our laws extend to all human life? The fundamental principle of the sanctity of human life would seem to demand that conclusion.⁴¹

A rationally grounded recognition of the humanity of the unborn is the key intellectual scaffold upon which all of Polster's arguments hang. From there, Polster proceeds to rebut the various defenses of looser abortion laws put forward by proponents.

First, Polster addresses the argument that abortion restrictions are "archaic and barbaric" because high numbers of desperate women die in illegal abortions.⁴² Against this, Polster points out that "most illegal abortions are obtained by married women who simply do not want another child," undercutting the supposed "humanitarian" rationale.⁴³ The lives of the unborn are not being sacrificed for some higher goal but in service of convenience.

Second, Polster considers the argument that abortion is justified when the "mental or physical health of the mother" is at risk.⁴⁴ Having already acknowledged that abortion may be warranted in the single case where the life of the mother is

endangered, Polster is primarily concerned here with the “mental health” rationale. In his telling, this is an exception so large that it swallows any rule. “The normal mental and physical stresses of any pregnancy could be held to qualify, depending on the individual views of the doctors who make the decision.”⁴⁵ Indeed, Polster points out that this was already happening, through “a process called dissimulation” in which “a case for the danger of suicide is built up in instances where the real reason is not one which would qualify.”⁴⁶ Because the mother’s life is not really at risk, invoking “mental health” as a justification for destroying unborn life entails that “the value of a human life is made subordinate to a lesser value”—which, for Polster, is unacceptable.⁴⁷

Third, Polster considers the argument that the possibility of fetal deformity justifies abortion. As previously noted, Polster has little patience for this argument: “Can a defect or handicap ever be a legitimate ground for destroying human life? The Nazis [sic] in Germany carried this principle to its logical conclusion.”⁴⁸

Fourth, Polster addresses cases of rape or incest—which he describes as “tragic” and “deserv[ing] the utmost in sympathy and concern.”⁴⁹ However, in a revision of the position he took before the Assembly in 1964, Polster declines to accept this scenario as a justification for abortion, appealing instead directly to his first principle. “If a human life has been created, can the circumstances of its inception be a valid ground for destroying that life? Can we name the crime committed by a newly conceived child, even in cases of rape and incest?”⁵⁰

After offering some comments on the urgency of a Lutheran witness against abortion, Polster concludes the piece with a rousing statement of the full implications of his argument: “To deal with human life as if it were of no value cannot be right in the eyes of God or man. The gift of life is God-given. Can it be mercy to destroy life? Or shall ‘liberalized’ abortion be given its rightful name—murder?”⁵¹

Viewed as a whole, Polster’s 1967 argument against abortion closely tracks the “Lutheran” rhetorical paradigm elaborated in his thesis on preaching. The article is characterized by an overarching emphasis on the centrality of intellectual appeal, rooted in a first objective principle. Emotional appeals leaven the argument rather than constitute it: the conviction that underpins the article’s highly charged language—such as “murder” and the invocation of the Nazis—is necessarily the conviction that *unborn life is human life*. There is no sentimentality or shock value here, but merely the sheer stark recognition that if Polster’s objective principle holds, his conclusions logically follow.

In short, as far as discursive strategy goes, there is little daylight between Polster’s understanding of hortatory preaching as a Missouri Synod churchman and his style of political engagement. For Polster, what matters first and foremost is the underlying reality of the matter in issue, and all else follows from that.

Implications and Conclusions

BOTH AS PREACHER AND ACTIVIST, Polster captured the distinctively Lutheran insight that human beings always stand within a complex of realities that are always extrinsic to them, and upon which all theological judgments and sentiments ought to be predicated. In the case of abortion, that extrinsic reality is the objective reality of unborn human life, which is thereby worthy of legal protection.

Significantly, Polster did not view engagement on the abortion issue as illicit meddling by the church in public affairs. Quite the contrary, he argued that “Lutherans, as responsible citizens, ought to reflect the unchanging morality of God’s law in deciding whether to support or to oppose these drastic changes in official public morality.”⁵² This is not a call for special privileges or prerogatives for the church. Rather, it is a simple acknowledgment that, given the objectivity of the point in issue, a “middle ground” position on abortion is essentially untenable. Either unborn human life is protected, or it isn’t:

You have the right, under our laws, to believe whatever you choose to believe so long as you do not infringe upon the rights of others. These proposed abortion laws would most certainly infringe upon the rights of the unborn. It thus becomes the moral obligation of all Americans, regardless of religious belief or lack of belief, to urge our lawmakers to protect those least able to protect themselves—the unborn.⁵³

While the case for life can be pressed in “religious” or “non-religious” language, Polster was well aware that politics is not a domain somehow untethered from moral concerns. The law, in short, should track the objective reality of God’s created order.

That point remains significant today. The objective question that was so foundational for Polster—the nature of the unborn—remains essentially unsettled even after the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, as Hadley Arkes and others have pointed out.⁵⁴ In seeking to navigate the complexities of abortion debates, both present and future, Lutherans ought to foreground that question once again—and, in so doing, learn from Polster’s thoughtful example.

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Notes

1. See, e.g., Randall Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), ebook ed.
2. See *ibid.*, *passim*.
3. Sue Bird, “Kessel Co-Chairs Anti-Abortion Group,” *San Francisco Foghorn*, April 28, 1967, p. 2.
4. “Rev Arnim Henry Polster,” *Find a Grave* (2008), <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/30552894/arnim-henry-polster>. Accessed July 30, 2024.
5. “Rev Arnim Henry Polster,” *Find a Grave*; Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement Before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 53; see also Charles K. Bellinger, *Othering: The Original Sin of Humanity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 73.
6. “Rev Arnim Henry Polster,” *Find a Grave*.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. “About Us,” *Hope Lutheran Church and School* (2023). <https://www.hopedalycity.org/about-us>. Accessed July 30 2024.
11. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn*, 52–53.
12. *Ibid.*, 53-54.
13. *Ibid.*, 53.
14. *Ibid.*, 53.
15. *Ibid.*, 53-54.
16. See Donald T. Critchlow, *In Defense of Populism: Protest and American Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 155.
17. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn*, 78.
18. *Ibid.*, 78.
19. Arnim H. Polster, “Abortion: Mercy or Murder?” *The Voice* 9, no. 16 (June 30, 1967): 5. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/community.12943863.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Ac416e0cd8c74f619f05d91ac664bf7ab&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1. Accessed August 1, 2024.
20. “Lise Nichols Obituary,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (2005). <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/sfgate/name/lise-nichols-obituary?id=8491057>. Accessed July 30, 2024.
21. “About Us,” *Hope Lutheran Church and School*.
22. Arnim Henry Polster, “The Importance and Means in Achieving a Balance in Appeals to Intellect and to Emotion in Preaching” (B.Div. thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1956). <https://scholar.csl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1530&context=bdiv>. Accessed August 4, 2024.
23. Polster, “Appeals to Intellect and to Emotion,” 2.
24. *Ibid.*, 40.
25. *Ibid.*, 73.

26. Ibid., citing Robert T. Oliver, Dallas C. Dickey, and Harold P. Zelko, *Communicative Speech*, Rev. & Enl. Ed. (New York: The Dryden Press, 1955), 124.
27. Ibid., 77.
28. Ibid., 26.
29. Ibid., 27.
30. Ibid., 43.
31. Ibid., 46-47.
32. Ibid., 41.
33. Ibid., 38.
34. See, e.g., C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), lecture 19.
35. Polster even writes at one point that, “as a general rule, the most influential and capable members of the audience, the successful business and professional men, the educators, are most susceptible to a reasoned approach, and may be alienated by a speaker who ignores appeal to their intelligence.” Polster, “Appeals to Intellect and to Emotion,” 39. Given Polster’s professional background, it seems highly likely that he is speaking from his own experience here.
36. Polster, “Abortion: Mercy or Murder?”
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. See, e.g., Hadley Arkes, *Mere Natural Law: Originalism and the Anchoring Truths of the Constitution* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2023), 235-36, 268.