

Book Review

Margaret D. Kamitsuka, *Abortion and the Christian Tradition: A Pro-Choice Theological Ethic* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2019), viii + 258 pp. \$40.00

Reviewed by Jack Kilcrease

IN *ABORTION AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION*, Margaret Kamitsuka attempts to develop a pro-choice Christian ethic in order to prove that the pro-life position is not the only option in the Christian tradition. Kamitsuka begins her quest for a pro-choice Christian ethic by critiquing the highly influential essay by John Noonan “An Almost Absolute Value in History,” which demonstrated historic Christianity’s consistent rejection of abortion. Kamitsuka attempts to undermine this position in a number of ways.

First, she notes that most pre-modern and early modern Christian authors took over Aristotle and Galen’s distinction between a “formed” and “unformed” fetus. The former refers to the fetus being ensouled after the quickening, whereas the latter refers to the pre-ensouled fetus prior to the quickening. Many early Christian authors and Canon Law, prior to 1869, did not consider the killing of the unformed fetus to be homicide, since it lacked a soul. What Kamitsuka fails to recognize is that first, this judgment was based on a now discredited medical theory that early Christians absorbed from their culture. It does not represent a lesser commitment to an ethic of life, but rather a historically contextual misunderstanding of the process of gestation. When medical science developed in the nineteenth century to the point where the process of conception was better understood, the formed and unformed fetus distinction was abandoned, and it was no longer justifiable to think that the fetus became an ensouled being any later than conception. It should also be noted that although most premodern Christians did not consider the fetus a human person prior to the quickening, most still considered it a sin to kill the unformed fetus. There are, of course, some rare examples of figures such as St. Jerome who did not consider it a sin to kill the unformed fetus, but it would appear that they were a minority.

Second, Kamitsuka argues that pro-life authors illegitimately assume that the reason why early and medieval Christians were against abortion was because they cared about the murder of the unborn. Since Christians prior to the modern period generally do not give their motives for rejecting abortion, Kamitsuka argues that one could just as easily assume that they wanted to control women’s sexuality, make them utterly subservient to their husbands, and cut down on sex for the sake of pleasure. This is a highly ideologically charged argument from silence.

Kamitsuka also tries to discredit arguments from the Bible and the Christian theological tradition. In regard to the Bible, Kamitsuka notes that pro-life exegetes point to verses about God knowing and having a destiny for the speaker in the text from the womb. Without any evidence, she suggests that these passages are merely hyperbolic. There are also passages in the Psalms that describe the sinfulness of the speaker from the womb which have often been employed by pro-life authors to show the fetus is a moral agent and worthy of dignity. Kamitsuka views these passages as also being hyperbolic and, therefore, of no value in establishing the personhood and dignity of the fetus.

Another argument Kamitsuka mounts against pro-life uses of the Bible is their appeal to the fact that all humans are made in the image of God. Hence, following Genesis 9, a fetus cannot be killed without defiling God's image. Kamitsuka is unimpressed with this argument because, whatever the image of God is, the fetus cannot embody it in its underdeveloped state. Turning to the New Testament, the image of God is something that believers are conformed to in Christ by the power of the Spirit. Since the fetus is not an active moral agent, this is impossible for it to do, and hence, therefore, cannot be made or be said to be in the process of being made in God's image. Kamitsuka forgets that Jesus tells believers that they should receive the Kingdom "like a little child," and that John the Baptist received the Spirit and was conformed to the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the womb of Elizabeth.

The section on the image of God is a particularly egregious example of Kamitsuka's tendency toward engaging in rhetorical sleight of hand. In other words, Genesis 1 and 9 are unequivocal that humans bear God's image. There is no restriction or qualification regarding which humans bear God's image. The only possible exception to the Bible's affirmation that all humans bear God's image is the aspect of the divine image that pertains to original righteousness, which, as the Lutheran Confessions affirm, can be eliminated or distorted by original sin. If fetuses are human beings (something Kamitsuka admits in a later chapter), then no logical reason exists to see the biblical texts as excluding them from possessing the dignity of all other human divine image bearers. Nevertheless, Kamitsuka rhetorically places the burden on her opponents to prove that all humans are made in God's image, when in reality the burden of proof lies with her to show that the Bible excludes some from possessing God's image—something she obviously cannot do.

This methodological sleight of hand carries over into her somewhat muddled discussion of the value of fetuses because of the Incarnation. As noted by a number of pro-life authors, if God himself became a fetus in the womb of Mary, this bestows a recognition of the value all fetuses have as possessing humanity and dignity. The presupposition of such an argument is that, in accordance with historic Chalcedonian orthodoxy, Christ exists as a complete substance of true man (body and soul) in full

union with the divine person from the moment of his conception. In tackling this argument, Kamitsuka seems confused about a couple of issues.

First, she insists that she does not believe in the duality of body and soul because it is a Hellenistic philosophical imposition on the biblical faith. The binary of body and soul invariably also makes the body inferior to the soul and therefore denigrates human sexuality. This argument represents one of the more crude examples of the informal logical fallacy of begging the question. Beyond simply assuming the unequivocal goodness of sexual self-expression, Kamitsuka does not seem to be aware either that the distinction of body and soul is present in the biblical texts (see Matt. 10:28), as well as in most world religions. Philosophically and religiously, body-soul dualism says nothing about the value of the body and the soul but simply affirms that ontologically they exist as distinct substances. One need not affirm a Platonic or Gnostic version of the dualism which would denigrate the body. Moreover, without proving it, Kamitsuka also assumes the exercise of sexuality is an unequivocal good and hence anything militating against it must logically be bad.

Second, Kamitsuka seems to confuse several issues with regard to the nature of the Incarnation. She decries traditional substantialist models of the Incarnation which speak of the two natures entering into union immediately at the conception of Christ. She wishes to hold to a developmentalist model where, because there is a gradual deification of Christ's humanity, the divinity only gradually enters into union with the humanity. Likewise, Kamitsuka supports the emergentist theory of the origins of the soul/mind, where the soul emerges from the complexities of the physical organism as a result of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Since both the soul and the union of the divinity and humanity emerge incrementally, the Incarnation or the existence of a soul in the fetus can only bestow value on the fetus gradually and by degrees.

Although there are several complex metaphysical issues here, Kamitsuka makes a series of category errors. Regarding the Incarnation, she confuses the glorification of Christ's humanity with the union of the humanity with the divinity. Orthodox Christians have always accepted that there are stages of glorification and, indeed, deification of Christ's humanity. The key is that in Christ there must always be a union of the divine nature with the human nature in a complete and final sense if one is not to risk the possibility of the early Christian heresy of Adoptionism. In Adoptionism, Christ exists first as true man and then is later adopted as God's Son. In the most sophisticated version of Adoptionism taught by the early Christian heretic Paul of Samosata, Christ's humanity and divinity gradually meld together, a teaching resembling Kamitsuka's proposal. With regard to the origins of the soul, Kamitsuka holds a problematic theory of how the soul comes about, since as J. P. Moreland has noted, it fails to explain how matter that is unconscious and material can give rise to the soul, which is immaterial and conscious.

However, whenever one thinks that the soul comes into union with the body, it does not logically follow that it is the soul that bestows dignity on the body of the fetus. Would not killing a living human entity, even if it theoretically did not yet possess a soul, still be evil? As previously noted, Augustine and many of the Church Fathers thought so. For argument's sake, one could theoretically suggest that it is the soul that bestows personhood on the fetus, and that one also does not know when the soul comes into the body of the fetus. Even if one took such a position, would it not be more ethically prudent to reject abortion and to err on the side of ethical caution regarding whether or not the fetus could be killed?

Moreover, Kamitsuka admits in the final chapter that the fetus is genetically a human being from the moment of conception. Nevertheless, she appeals to the common usage in popular Western culture of the concept of "person" and states that the fetus cannot be considered a person in this conventional sense. Therefore, it can be killed without sin. One wonders, first, why a conventional and popular definition of "person" should have any authority in ethical reflection, much less Christian ethical reflection; and second, why the rich theological resources regarding the concept of personhood (i.e., in Trinitarian and Christological debates) developed by the Christian tradition are never engaged?

Again, we see another rhetorical sleight of hand. With no justification from Scripture, Kamitsuka distinguishes between some human life that is personal and some that does not rise to the level of personhood. At one point, our author rather bizarrely claims that the fetus is neither a person nor a non-person. Historically, the idea that some humans do not have value as "persons" has had a rather bad track record, leading to genocide and slavery. It was the basis of the American and Nazi programs of eugenics in the early and mid-twentieth centuries ("life not worthy of life"). Beyond this, even if the concept of "human life" and "human personhood" could be separated, from where does she get the moral principle that we are under no obligation to respect the lives of only human persons, and not living human beings? It is a leap of logic that she never justifies.

Believing that she has demolished the arguments of pro-life authors in the first half of the book, Kamitsuka now turns to the task of developing a pro-choice Christian ethic. She insists that her goal is not so much to discredit pro-life Christian ethical theorists as it is to show that there is room for a credible pro-choice ethic within the Christian tradition. Not only are the arguments she offers in this section utterly unconvincing, but the major problem is that her theological/ethical resources are not really rooted in the principles of any of the historic streams of Christian ethics. The arguments that our author makes in favor of abortion as a valid option could be made by any secular ethical theorist.

Kamitsuka outlines three possible justifications for abortion:

1. One secular feminist theory holds that pregnancy is burdensome and harmful to women, so it is the moral equivalence of being under attack. One is, of course, morally justified in defending oneself against attack.
2. The second argument is that pregnancy is a phase of “pre-mothering” decision-making, wherein one still has a chance to decide whether or not one wants to be a parent. Kamitsuka rejects both arguments.
3. Instead, she feels one should fully admit that the decision for or against an abortion is a “mothering” decision. Since the fetus is physically dependent on the mother, it is subordinate to the will and best interests of the mother. It can therefore be legitimately killed if the mother (who is a full person, as opposed to the fetus) feels that it is in her best interest to kill it.

Pregnancy places mothers in danger and imposes extraordinary burdens on a woman. It is a matter of supererogation and heroics to be pregnant—and although noble, heroics can never be a moral requirement.

As dependent on the mother, the fetus has as much value as the mother subjectively accords the fetus. Hence, if the mother experiences the fetus as not possessing value as a person, then it will not have value as a person and can be put to death. This formulation raises two issues. First of all, if dependency means that one’s existence is at the mercy of the one on whom they are dependent, then Kamitsuka has the problem that she is not just justifying abortion, but also infanticide. Those of us who have had children know the radical dependency and constant attention needed by an infant. Likewise, an elderly spouse or parent may reach the point where they are radically dependent on another person for their continued life. Is Kamitsuka saying that the burden created by these persons would justify abandoning them to their death? Probably not—but based on her standards, how would these individual’s radical dependency not lower them to sub-personal status or mandate their possible abandonment to death if convenient?

Second, Kamitsuka’s concept of personhood as autonomous individuality is very much out of joint with that of historic Christian orthodoxy’s conception. Humans are human in their recognition of their radical dependency on God. One becomes a Christian precisely by receiving the kingdom like a “little child,” as Jesus states. Moreover, Kamitsuka assumes throughout the book, in a manner not dissimilar to the Enlightenment social contract theorists, that the only valid moral obligations are ones we enter into voluntarily. This is not biblical because Scripture consistently teaches that God’s commandments represent obligations for us irrespective of our choice. Neither is it true to the common human experience that our moral obligations are the only ones we choose to possess. Daily we are confronted with the fact that we are born into a society we do not choose and have obligations to past and future

generations. This being said, the autonomy of the individual appears and disappears conveniently when her argument depends on it. Not giving the option to abort is “enforced pregnancy”—but she forgets that, apart from those pregnancies that are the result of rape, every woman who is pregnant consented to the possibility of pregnancy by engaging in sexual activity, which by definition carries with it the risks and responsibilities of motherhood. Likewise, she oddly asserts that one cannot simply expect women to offer their children up for adoption if they cannot care for them, since they rarely do this and might find it too emotionally distressing. Of course this does not negate the fact that the choice not to give their child up for adoption is an autonomous one, or that it is as immoral as it is bizarre to argue that one should murder their own child rather than feel the distress of giving them up for adoption.

Throughout this book, not only is Kamitsuka’s reasoning fallacious and tangential, but it has precious little to do with the Christian tradition that it seeks to draw upon. Her chief argument for abortion could be articulated by any secular abortion advocate and makes no references to the Bible. Neither does she find any justification for her position in Christian tradition apart from the most tangential references to matters unrelated to her position. In the end, there is nothing within Christianity for her to draw upon because her foundational view of ethics, that humans autonomously pursue their own self-chosen individual good, is completely out of joint with the worldview and value system of the Bible and historic Christian orthodoxy.

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