

Book Review Essay

Margaret D. Kamitsuka, *Unborn Bodies: Resurrection and Reproductive Agency* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023), ix + 226 pp. \$28.99

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MARGARET D. KAMITSUKA (hereafter “the author”) is the Francis W. and Lydia L. Davis Professor Emeritus of Religion at Oberlin College. In her 2023 book, *Unborn Bodies: Resurrection and Reproductive Agency*,¹ she examines how Christian beliefs about the resurrection intersect with questions about reproductive choice. The author argues that both a right to life and the possibility of the resurrection extend to unborn bodies at all developmental stages. By reexamining traditional biblical interpretations, she seeks to build a more compassionate theological framework that respects human dignity throughout all stages of life. This approach aims to bridge divides in conversations about faith and reproductive rights.

The following book review provides a chapter-by-chapter analysis and critique of the author’s work. It begins with the volume’s Introduction and ends with its Conclusion, followed by an overall assessment of the publication’s contribution to the field of study.

Introduction

Summary

THE INTRODUCTION PRESENTS A CRITICAL feminist theological exploration of resurrection doctrine as it relates to reproductive loss and agency. The author challenges traditional Christian approaches to understanding the afterlife of unborn bodies, arguing that the church has historically failed to adequately address or theologize about reproductive loss. She positions her work at the intersection of feminist theology, traditional Christian doctrine, and contemporary reproductive issues.

Key Areas of Exploration

1. *Historical Religious Context*

- Women’s historical relationship with reproduction and religious authority
- The tension between patriarchal religious structures and women’s lived experiences
- The historical development of resurrection doctrine

2. Theological Gaps

- The absence of substantial theological reflection on reproductive loss
- The church's historical ambivalence about the eternal destiny of unborn beings
- The lack of pastoral and liturgical resources for reproductive loss

3. Contemporary Challenges

- The politicization of fetal afterlife by conservative Christian groups
- The disconnect between modern scientific understanding and traditional resurrection doctrine
- The need for a “nontoxic eschatology” that addresses reproductive realities

Potential Strengths

1. Historical Awareness

- Exhibits a functional knowledge of Christian theological traditions
- Acknowledges the complex historical development of doctrine
- Recognizes the influence of cultural contexts on theological formation

2. Pastoral Sensitivity

- Identifies real pastoral needs in contemporary church contexts
- Acknowledges the complexity of reproductive experiences
- Shows a concern for the spiritual well-being of believers

3. Theological Rigor

- Engages substantively with longstanding Christian doctrines
- Acknowledges the challenge of reconciling modern and traditional perspectives
- Attempts to articulate accurately various theological positions

Potential Areas for Improvement

1. Theological Foundations

- Could better acknowledge the traditional Christian understanding of human dignity from conception
- May underemphasize the church's historical care for mothers and children
- Could more fully engage with traditional biblical hermeneutics

2. Historical Balance

- Portrayal of church history could be more nuanced regarding women's roles
- Could better acknowledge positive historical contributions of the Christian tradition to women's welfare
- May oversimplify historical theological positions on ensoulment and personhood

3. *Doctrinal Clarity*

- Could more clearly affirm the traditional Christian teaching on the sanctity of life
- May need stronger engagement with biblical texts on the resurrection
- Could better integrate more traditional articulations of systematic theology about eschatology

4. *Methodological Considerations*

- Risk of allowing contemporary concerns to overshadow longstanding Christian doctrines
- Could better balance feminist critique with traditional theological methods
- May need stronger grounding in traditional Christian anthropology

Synthesis and Critique

THE INTRODUCTION SURFACES AN IMPORTANT lacuna in Christian theological reflection—namely, the question about the resurrection as it pertains to unborn life and reproductive loss. The author identifies how the church’s historical ambivalence and silence on this matter has left a pastoral and theological void, often filled problematically by politically charged rhetoric, rather than careful theological consideration. Her emphasis on taking seriously the lived experiences of women who have endured reproductive loss while maintaining the centrality of bodily resurrection in Christian doctrine demonstrates sensitivity to both theological orthodoxy and contemporary pastoral needs.

However, from a traditional Christian perspective, there are concerns about how the author frames the relationship between women’s reproductive agency and longstanding church doctrine. While she appropriately critiques certain historical distortions regarding female bodies and fertility, her apparent openness to abortion as a legitimate reproductive choice sits uneasily with traditional Christian teaching about the sanctity of life from conception. The author’s characterization of longstanding orthodox beliefs as primarily patriarchal control, while containing elements of historical truth, potentially understates the genuine theological and ethical principles underlying Christian positions on reproductive issues.

Finally, the author’s call for “nontoxic eschatology” that can speak meaningfully to reproductive loss while honoring women’s agency raises vital questions for contemporary doctrinal deliberations. However, a traditional Christian response would argue that such an eschatology must be grounded in the church’s consistent life ethic and understanding of human dignity rather than primarily in modern-day notions of reproductive autonomy. While the author’s desire to provide pastoral and theological resources for women experiencing reproductive loss is laudable, an

orthodox Christian framework would seek to do so while maintaining clear ethical boundaries regarding intentional pregnancy termination, even while extending grace and understanding to those who have made such choices.

Chapter 1: Leveraging Heaven when a Pregnancy Fails

Summary

THE CHAPTER EXAMINES THE COMPLEX intersection of theology, reproductive loss, and feminist thought through multiple lenses. The author critiques how religious institutions and society construct various identities for women who experience reproductive loss, particularly focusing on how heaven is leveraged in these constructions. The text challenges traditional binary distinctions between miscarriage and abortion while exploring feminist theological perspectives on reproductive endings.

Key Areas of Exploration

1. *Identity Construction*

- Examines four main constructed identities:
 - Murderous mother
 - Traumatized victim
 - Inconvenient mourner
 - Rights-bearing person
- Analyzes how religious authorities and society shape these identities
- Critiques how the role of heaven is used as a tool to enforce conformity

2. *Binary Opposition*

- Challenges the traditional dichotomy between miscarriage and abortion
- Demonstrates how this binary harms women and oversimplifies complex experiences
- Explores real-world examples that blur these distinctions

3. *Feminist Theological Perspectives*

- Examines the tension between bodily experience and ecological justice
- Discusses the role of community and anger in healing
- Explores various approaches to eschatology and reproductive loss

Potential Strengths

1. *Theological Framework*

- Engages with traditional Christian concepts while maintaining a critical analysis

- Demonstrates an understanding of diverse theological perspectives
- Considers the role of heaven in reproductive discourse

2. *Pastoral Sensitivity*

- Acknowledges the complex emotional and spiritual needs of women experiencing reproductive loss
- Recognizes the importance of community support
- Highlights the need for better pastoral care and resources

3. *Balanced Analysis*

- Presents multiple viewpoints without oversimplification
- Acknowledges validity of different experiences
- Maintains academic rigor while remaining accessible

Potential Areas for Improvement

1. *Theological Concerns*

- Could more deeply engage with traditional Christian doctrines of personhood
- May benefit from stronger engagement with biblical texts on life and death
- Could further explore orthodox Christian perspectives on the resurrection

2. *Pastoral Implications*

- Could provide more concrete recommendations for pastoral care
- May benefit from additional discussion of practical ministry applications
- Could offer more guidance for a meaningful congregational response

3. *Traditional Christian Response*

- Could more thoroughly address traditional Christian ethical frameworks
- May benefit from deeper engagement with historical church teachings
- Could explore more fully how traditional Christian communities might respond constructively

4. *Methodological Considerations*

- Could strengthen engagement with systematic theology
- May benefit from more extensive scriptural analysis
- Could provide clearer theological guidelines for addressing reproductive loss

Synthesis and Critique

THE CHAPTER PRESENTS A COMPLEX exploration of how religious and social constructs shape women's experiences of reproductive loss, particularly by focusing on the

intersection of theology, bodily autonomy, and eschatology. The author effectively demonstrates how various Christian frameworks have historically constructed and policed women's identities around pregnancy loss, whether through miscarriage or abortion, often leveraging concepts about heaven and salvation to enforce particular moral narratives. Her analysis reveals the problematic nature of rigid binaries between miscarriage and abortion, showing how these distinctions often fail to capture the complex realities of women's reproductive experiences.

While the author's evaluation of how the role of heaven has been "weaponized" in some contexts is valid, her deconstruction risks undermining legitimate Christian hope in the resurrection and eternal life. The orthodox understanding of the sanctity of life from conception, grounded in Scripture and church tradition, cannot be entirely reduced to a social construct or tool of control. While pastoral sensitivity is crucial, the author's apparent relativization of the moral status of unborn life poses challenges to longstanding doctrinal emphases.

The author's feminist theological framework provides intriguing insights into the pastoral inadequacies of many Christian responses to reproductive loss. Her call for more nuanced, compassionate approaches to women experiencing both miscarriage and abortion highlights real deficiencies in church practice. However, from a traditional Christian perspective, the solution lies not in abandoning clear moral distinctions, but in developing more sophisticated theological and pastoral responses that maintain ethical principles, while extending grace and understanding.

The author's treatment of eschatology raises important questions about how Christian hope intersects with bodily experience and social justice. While she rightly critiques simplistic or manipulative uses of the role of heaven, traditional orthodox teachings would maintain that hope in the bodily resurrection and eternal life remains fundamental to the faith, not merely a construct serving political ends. The challenge is to articulate this hope in ways that neither minimize present suffering nor weaponize eschatology against women's reproductive experiences.

Finally, while the author offers valuable insights into the complexities of reproductive loss and the need for more nuanced pastoral responses, her underlying theological framework appears to prioritize contemporary feminist theory over traditional Christian anthropology and ethics. A more constructive approach might seek to maintain a clear orthodox moral teaching, while developing more sophisticated pastoral responses. These would acknowledge the complex realities of women's reproductive experiences, yet without compromising core theological commitments regarding the sanctity of life and the hope of the resurrection.

Chapter 2: Closing Heaven to the Unborn

Summary

THE CHAPTER EXPLORES THE HISTORICAL Christian theological treatment of unborn and unbaptized infant salvation, revealing a consistent pattern of theological uncertainty or outright denial regarding their eternal destiny. The author traces this thread through major periods of Christian thought:

- *Early Church*: Demonstrated significant ambivalence about fetal personhood and salvation
- *Medieval Period*: Developed complex theories about limbo and the afterlife that generally excluded the unborn
- *Reformation Era*: Both Luther and Calvin remained notably reticent about fetal salvation
- *Modern Era*: Witnessed some softening of positions, but maintained fundamental theological tensions

The author contrasts official theological positions with what she terms “counterstories”—the lived experiences and perspectives of women throughout church history dealing with pregnancy, loss, and reproductive issues.

Key Areas of Exploration

1. *Theological Frameworks*

- *Ensoulment Theories*
 - Traducian view (soul transmitted through conception)
 - Creationist view (soul directly created by God)
 - Timing debates (immediate vs. delayed ensoulment)
- *Sacramental Issues*
 - Necessity of baptism for salvation
 - Emergency baptismal practices
 - Burial rights and consecrated ground
- *Personhood Questions*
 - Hominization theories
 - Hylomorphic understanding of human nature
 - Development of fetal personhood concepts

2. *Historical Progression*

- *Early Church*
 - Ambiguous attitudes toward the unborn
 - Development of baptismal theology
 - Influence of Greco-Roman cultural context

- *Medieval Period*
 - o Aquinas' theoretical framework
 - o Development of limbo concept
 - o Sacramental practices and restrictions
- *Reformation*
 - o Luther's incomplete treatment
 - o Calvin's systematic silence
 - o Protestant theological shifts

Potential Strengths

1. *Historical Depth*

- Comprehensive coverage of major historical periods
- Detailed examination of key thinkers
- Recognition of the historical context's influence

2. *Theological Analysis*

- Careful attention to theoretical frameworks
- Recognition of theological complexity
- Clear explanation of technical concepts

3. *Integration of Women's Perspectives*

- Inclusion of historically marginalized voices
- Recognition of lived experience
- Balance of theoretical and practical concerns

4. *Methodological Approach*

- Well-documented sources
- Clear progression of argument
- Balanced treatment of different perspectives

Potential Areas for Improvement

1. *Theological Concerns*

- Could better engage with biblical texts supporting infant/fetal salvation
- Might examine Eastern Orthodox perspectives more fully
- Could explore contemporary theological developments more extensively

2. *Historical Balance*

- Could provide additional positive examples of church engagement with these issues
- Might acknowledge cultural constraints more fully
- Could explore regional variations in practice

3. *Methodological Issues*

- Risk of anachronistic readings of historical sources
- Possible overemphasis on a conflict narrative
- Could provide more contextual balance

4. *Contemporary Application*

- Limited engagement with modern theological responses
- Could explore current pastoral approaches more fully
- Might address contemporary ethical implications more directly

Synthesis and Critique

THE CHAPTER DELVES INTO THE theological ambiguity that surrounds infant salvation and fetal personhood, highlighting how historical doctrines often reflect discomfort with women's reproductive bodies. The author argues that while the church has been silent or vague on issues surrounding the salvation of unbaptized fetuses, women have developed counterstories rooted in their own lived experiences, demanding that their unborn children be included in the hope of the resurrection. This author brings to light the tension between doctrinal tradition and the experiential reality of reproductive loss.

The author critiques Augustine's uncertainty about the resurrection of unbaptized fetuses, which reflects both his personal theological struggles and the church's broader hesitation to address reproductive loss. Augustine's influence, particularly on infant baptism, led to the exclusion of unbaptized infants from heaven, and the eventual development of the concept of limbo. The author's treatment of Augustine is incisive, showing how his theology set the stage for centuries of theological confusion. However, the analysis could benefit from deeper engagement with Augustine's own soteriological framework, which balances divine grace with human sinfulness, offering the possibility of a more generous interpretation of infant salvation.

The author's exploration of medieval theology, especially through the lens of Aquinas, is illuminating. Aquinas's hylomorphic anthropology, which views the human being as a composite of body and soul, raised questions about the status of fetuses that had not yet undergone "hominization"—the point at which the fetus is considered to have received a soul. This theological framework led to the conclusion that unborn souls could not participate in the resurrection. While the author's critique highlights the limitations of Aquinas's perspective, the author could engage more with the sacramental context in which these ideas developed, particularly the notion of baptism as the ordinary means of salvation, which shaped much of the church's thinking about fetal salvation.

The author then turns to the Reformation, noting that Protestant Reformers like Luther and Calvin remained largely agnostic on the fate of unborn souls. Despite Luther's emphasis on sola gratia (grace alone), which could have opened the door to a more inclusive theology of salvation for the unborn, neither he nor Calvin fully addressed the issue. The author rightly critiques this theological silence. Yet, a more charitable reading might acknowledge the Reformers' focus on the broader concerns of soteriology and ecclesial reform. The evaluation, while promising, could more thoroughly explore how Protestant views on predestination and election might indirectly impact the question of fetal salvation.

Finally, a key strength of the chapter is the integration of women's counter-stories, which challenge the church's historical abjection of women's bleeding and reproductive bodies. These stories offer a poignant reminder of the embodied reality of pregnancy and loss, and they push back against male-dominated theological narratives that have often dismissed women's experiences. The author's argument that women's lived experiences demand a rethinking of theological assumptions about the resurrection of the unborn is noteworthy. However, her critique of traditional theology could benefit from a more robust engagement with contemporary theological responses to these issues, particularly from longstanding pastoral perspectives.

Chapter 3: Finding Resurrection in Buried Grain

Summary

THE CHAPTER CRITICALLY EXAMINES the role of the soul in Christian theology, particularly in relation to bodily resurrection. The author argues that the traditional concept of an immaterial soul has hindered rather than helped an understanding of the resurrection. The text explores biblical, historical, and philosophical perspectives, ultimately advocating for a materialist approach to the resurrection that draws on Paul's seed metaphor, rather than soul-body dualism.

Key Areas of Exploration

1. *Biblical Analysis*

- Challenges the substance-dualist interpretation of soul in the New Testament
- Examines Paul's use of the seed metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15
- Questions whether New Testament writers promoted a disembodied soul state

2. *Historical Development*

- Traces various soul concepts through the patristic and medieval periods
- Examines the impact of Aristotelian hylomorphism
- Highlights the diversity of soul interpretations in Christian history

3. *Philosophical Arguments*

- Critiques both simple and Thomistic substance dualism
- Explores materialist alternatives to a soul-based resurrection
- Examines the challenges of maintaining personal identity in the resurrection

4. *Metaphorical Significance*

- Emphasizes the power of the seed/grain metaphor
- Contrasts metaphorical with conceptual approaches
- Suggests a return to organic metaphors for understanding the resurrection

Potential Strengths

1. *Historical Depth*

- Provides comprehensive coverage of historical developments
- Demonstrates a working knowledge of patristic and medieval sources
- Shows an awareness of various philosophical traditions

2. *Analytical Rigor*

- Carefully examines different interpretations of the soul and the resurrection
- Engages seriously with substance dualist arguments
- Considers implications for personal identity and continuity

3. *Theological Innovation*

- Proposes distinctive approaches to understand the resurrection
- Integrates biblical metaphor with contemporary materialist thought
- Suggests new ways of thinking about bodily continuity

Potential Areas for Improvement

1. *Theological Concerns*

- May underestimate the theological significance of soul language in church tradition
- Could more fully address the church's historical reasons for maintaining its soul doctrine
- Might benefit from deeper engagement with Eastern Orthodox perspectives

2. *Biblical Interpretation*

- Could further explore the full range of biblical soul language
- Might oversimplify Paul's complex anthropology
- Could more fully address other New Testament resurrection texts

3. *Philosophical Considerations*

- May not fully address the metaphysical challenges of strict materialism

- Could more thoroughly explore alternatives to both dualism and materialism
- Might benefit from deeper engagement with the contemporary philosophy of the mind

Synthesis and Critique

THE CHAPTER PRESENTS A THEOLOGICAL exploration of the concept of the resurrection by engaging critically with the traditional Christian notion of the soul. The author traces the historical development in Christian thought of the soul and its relationship to the body, scrutinizing the legacy of substance dualism and introducing materialist alternatives rooted in biblical metaphors. Her work provides a thoughtful examination of the tension between body and soul in Christian theology, while proposing a return to more organic metaphors for understanding the resurrection.

The author critiques the dualist interpretation that has long associated the soul with an immaterial, disembodied existence after death. She suggests that New Testament writers, particularly Paul, do not advocate for a disembodied soul, but instead emphasize the resurrection of the body, drawing upon metaphors such as the seed and grain in 1 Corinthians 15. These metaphors suggest a continuity between the physical and the spiritual, challenging the idea of an independent soul. This critique highlights the nuanced and metaphorical language of biblical texts, though it might oversimplify Paul's broader anthropology, which also reflects complex views about the spirit, body, and soul.

The author traces the shifting concept of the soul from early Christian thought through the medieval period, particularly as it encountered Aristotelian hylo-morphism, which integrated body and soul as a single entity. She argues that the prominence of the soul in Christian tradition often came at the expense of a positive view of the body, reinforcing asceticism and misogyny. This historical approach is one of the potential strengths of the author's work, as it highlights the diversity of views on the soul across Christian history. However, her critique of substance dualism might underplay the reasons the church maintained its doctrine of the soul, which had theological significance in debates about personal identity and the nature of salvation.

The author engages with substance dualism, particularly its Thomistic variant, which posits the soul as essential for the continuity of personal identity in the resurrection. She raises valid concerns about the metaphysical challenges of dualism, especially in reconciling the relationship between body and soul in a doctrine of bodily resurrection. The author proposes materialist alternatives, which emphasize the resurrection of the body without reliance on an immaterial soul. While this

materialist view aligns with biblical metaphors of the seed, it raises philosophical questions about how strict materialism can account for personal identity after death, a topic she addresses, but could engage with more deeply.

Finally, the author advocates for a shift away from the soul toward a more embodied understanding of the resurrection, drawing on the organic metaphor of the seed. This metaphor, she argues, resonates with the biblical vision of the resurrection as a transformation of the body, rather than the survival of a disembodied soul. This proposal is intriguing, offering a distinctive perspective that integrates contemporary materialist thought with Christian doctrine. However, it may underappreciate the theological depth of the soul concept in Christian tradition, particularly in how it addresses human personhood and continuity beyond death.

Chapter 4: Emerging into Resurrected Life

Summary

THE CHAPTER PRESENTS A MATERIALIST emergence theory of the resurrection that attempts to address how bodily resurrection might work without relying on the concept of an immortal soul. The author develops the concept of “budding emergent resurrection,” where cells from a deceased body are divinely enabled to emerge into resurrected life through a gradual process rather than an instantaneous transformation. This approach particularly aims to address the challenging question of the resurrection for embryos and fetuses who die before birth.

Key Areas of Exploration

1. *Materialist Emergence Framework*

- Rejects traditional soul-body dualism in favor of a purely materialist understanding
- Proposes that the resurrection occurs through a gradual emergence process rather than instantaneous transformation
- Uses the metaphor of seeds and organic growth from Pauline theology

2. *Personal Identity and Narrative*

- Develops a theory of narrative identity where personhood is maintained through God’s preservation of individual life stories
- Argues that God maintains the “story” of each person until their resurrected body can receive and remember it
- Addresses how this might work for embryos and fetuses who lack extensive personal narratives

3. *Theological Integration*

- Attempts to reconcile a materialist emergence with traditional Christian doctrines
- Engages with biblical texts, especially Paul's seed metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15
- Proposes reinterpretation of traditional creeds and catechisms through the emergence lens

Potential Strengths

1. *Scientific Integration*

- Makes a serious attempt to engage with contemporary scientific understandings
- Provides a potential bridge between Christian theology and a materialist worldview
- Addresses modern biological understandings of death as a process rather than occurring in a moment of time

2. *Ethical Consideration*

- Offers a theological framework for addressing the status of embryos and fetuses
- Provides hope for grieving parents who have lost children before birth
- Maintains the dignity of the human body without requiring soul-body dualism

3. *Biblical Engagement*

- Creative use of the Pauline seed metaphor
- Careful attention to the resurrection narratives
- Thoughtful engagement with scriptural metaphors and imagery

Potential Areas for Improvement

1. *Theological Concerns*

- Departure from the traditional understanding of soul may be too radical for many Christians
- Tension with biblical passages suggesting immediate post-death existence with Christ
- Challenge to a traditional understanding of the intermediate state between death and resurrection

2. *Philosophical Issues*

- Questions about how personal identity is truly maintained without a soul
- Complexity of the proposed mechanism may violate the principle of parsimony (also known as Occam's razor, which suggests that when there are multiple explanations for a phenomenon, the simplest one—requiring the fewest assumptions—should be preferred)

- Unclear how “story” preservation differs substantially from a soul concept

3. *Practical Considerations*

- May be too abstract for pastoral care and comfort of bereaved
- Complex theoretical framework might not translate well to congregational teaching
- Potential confusion about the timing and nature of the resurrection process

Synthesis and Critique

THE CHAPTER PRESENTS A MATERIALIST Christian framework for understanding the resurrection, specifically through the lens of emergence metaphysics. The author navigates a potential theological resolution to the tension between traditional Christian beliefs in the resurrection and a materialist worldview that rejects the soul-body dualism. She suggests that the resurrection should be understood as a gradual process, akin to the development of life itself, where living matter can “emerge” into resurrected existence over time. This emergent resurrection, built on Pauline metaphors of seeds and organic growth, attempts to propose a more integrated view of human embodiment and postmortem survival.

From a traditional Christian perspective, however, this framework raises significant concerns. Central to orthodox Christianity is the belief in an immediate and personal resurrection, often tied to the immortality of the soul. The author’s rejection of soul-body dualism in favor of a purely materialistic process seems to depart radically from this foundational doctrine. While her emphasis on the body’s material continuity has biblical echoes, particularly in Paul’s discussions in 1 Corinthians 15, the idea of a gradual, emergent resurrection may sit uncomfortably with passages that suggest a more instantaneous transformation upon death. The theological implications of delaying full resurrection in favor of a slow, evolutionary process may challenge the traditional Christian understanding of being “with Christ” immediately after death (Phil 1:23).

A possible upside of the author’s emergent resurrection theory lies in its scientific engagement. By incorporating modern biological understandings of life and death, she offers a materialist alternative to traditional dualistic views, providing a framework for the resurrection that speaks to contemporary concerns. In particular, her ethical consideration for embryos and fetuses, who lack fully developed personhood, is a thoughtful extension of her theory. The author posits that even these unborn beings possess a narrative identity that God preserves and develops in the afterlife, providing theological hope for parents who have experienced miscarriage or stillbirth. This reframing of narrative identity is a compassionate and inclusive approach to understand the value of life before birth.

Despite its potential merits, the author's approach to narrative identity presents a philosophical challenge. The idea that God preserves an individual's story in place of the traditional soul is imaginative. Yet, it raises questions about how personal identity is maintained without the soul as a metaphysical anchor. If a person is merely the sum of their life story, it is unclear how the author's theory fundamentally differs from the soul concept that she seeks to replace. Moreover, her reliance on divine intervention to ensure the coordination of living matter in the resurrection seems to complicate the process, potentially violating the principle of parsimony. Simpler, more traditional views of bodily resurrection and soul continuity may be more theologically and philosophically straightforward.

Finally, while the author's emergent materialist framework is innovative, its complexity may limit its practical application within Christian pastoral care. The abstract nature of her proposal, with its detailed metaphysical and biological considerations, might be too difficult to convey effectively in congregational settings. For Christians grappling with the loss of loved ones, particularly those mourning the death of infants or unborn children, the emergent process of the resurrection may not offer the immediate comfort and hope provided by traditional doctrines of the soul's presence with Christ after death. The theory's intricate theological and scientific framework may require further development before it can serve as a pastoral tool that resonates with the lived faith of believers.

Chapter 5: Envisioning Disabled Bodies in Heaven and Reproductive Agency on Earth

Summary

THE CHAPTER EXAMINES THE INTERSECTION of disability theology, reproductive ethics, and eschatology through the lens of what the author terms "emergence theory." Key themes include:

- The theological status of disabled bodies in heaven
- The moral complexity of selective abortion in cases of prenatal disability diagnosis
- The role of divine providence in reproductive decision-making
- The importance of women's moral agency and self-trust in reproductive choices

The author argues for a position that simultaneously affirms:

- God's ultimate welcome of all unborn beings (including those with disabilities) into heaven
- Women's Spirit-guided moral agency in making reproductive decisions
- The compatibility of these two positions within an "emergence" framework

Key Areas of Exploration

1. *Theological Anthropology and Eschatology*

- Challenges both “elimination” and “retention” models of disability in heaven
- Proposes an “emergence” view where bodies cross death’s threshold with their distinctive marks
- Rejects soul-based anthropology in favor of material emergence

2. *Providence and Moral Agency*

- Questions traditional models of divine providence in reproduction
- Argues for epistemic humility regarding God’s will in specific cases
- Emphasizes the role of Spirit-guided discernment

3. *Reproductive Ethics*

- Frames pregnancy as a “supererogatory act” requiring consent
- Critiques mandatory pro-life positions
- Defends selective abortion as potentially compatible with Christian faith

Potential Strengths

1. *Pastoral Sensitivity*

- Acknowledges the complexity of reproductive decisions
- Shows compassion for women facing difficult pregnancies
- Avoids simplistic moral pronouncements

2. *Theological Innovation*

- Develops a novel approach to bodily resurrection
- Integrates pneumatology with reproductive ethics
- Attempts to hold together seemingly opposing values

3. *Engagement with Tradition*

- Draws on diverse theological sources
- Demonstrates a knowledge of historical positions
- Maintains a focus on a Christian theological framework

Potential Areas for Improvement

1. *Theological Concerns*

- Weakening of the traditional pro-life position without sufficient theological justification
- Potentially problematic view of divine providence
- Unclear grounding for moral authority of the individual conscience

2. *Methodological Issues*

- Over-reliance on “emergence” as an explanatory framework

- Insufficient engagement with biblical texts on the sanctity of life
- Limited interaction with magisterial Christian teaching

3. *Ethical Considerations*

- Risk of undermining disability rights advocacy
- Tension between affirming fetal value and justifying abortion
- Possible overcorrection against traditional moral frameworks

Synthesis and Critique

THE CHAPTER NAVIGATES THE INTERSECTION of feminist disability theology, reproductive ethics, and eschatology, offering a nuanced framework for understanding the moral and theological complexities surrounding pregnancy, disability, and the resurrection of the body. The author's central claim, informed by disability theology, challenges both traditional Christian views of bodily resurrection and the ethics of selective abortion, framing the agency of pregnant women and the eschatological future of disabled bodies as central theological concerns. Her work seeks to honor the intrinsic value of all unborn beings, including those with disabilities, while simultaneously affirming the moral agency of women, particularly in the context of selective abortion.

The emergence model, which the author uses to envision postmortem identity continuity, is one of the intriguing innovations in her chapter. Instead of adopting the classical view that resurrected bodies will be perfected or free from disability, she proposes that disabled bodies will carry their distinctive marks into the afterlife, but with the possibility of transformation. This model counters romanticized or ableist views of heaven by reframing eschatology in terms of mutual care and vulnerability, rather than physical perfection. However, this shift poses a theological challenge. While it attempts to dignify disabled bodies, it remains ambiguous as to whether the "emergence" model sufficiently addresses the Christian hope of the resurrection, which has traditionally emphasized the renewal of all creation in the eschaton, including the healing of all infirmities.

The author's treatment of divine providence and moral agency also provokes both praise and critique. She argues for epistemic humility when discerning God's will in specific cases, particularly around reproduction, thereby resisting overly deterministic views of providence that link the divine will directly to biological events, such as conception or disability. The author's appeal to Spirit-guided discernment seemingly allows for the possibility that selective abortion could be an ethical act in some circumstances. While this reflects pastoral sensitivity, critics may argue that it risks weakening the traditional pro-life stance, which holds that life's intrinsic value should be preserved from conception. The author's rejection of a more deterministic providential view opens space for moral agency. Yet, the theological grounding for

this shift remains somewhat tenuous, particularly in relation to classical Christian teachings on the sanctity of life.

A notable contribution of Chapter 5 is the author's framing of pregnancy as a supererogatory act—that is, one that goes beyond moral obligation and requires consent. This approach challenges the mandatory pro-life positions that often emphasize the duty to bring all pregnancies to term, regardless of circumstances. Her defense of selective abortion within a Christian framework highlights the importance of consent and self-trust in reproductive decision-making. This move aligns with feminist theology's emphasis on bodily autonomy. Yet, it presents potential tensions when considering the theological affirmation of fetal value. How can one simultaneously affirm the value of unborn life, especially those with disabilities, while also defending the moral permissibility of ending such life?

Finally, while the author engages with a variety of theological traditions and sources, her over-reliance on the “emergence” model as an explanatory framework may limit the broader theological applicability of her arguments. The model risks straying from traditional Christian anthropologies that emphasize the soul's immortality and the body's resurrection. Also, her limited engagement with biblical texts on the sanctity of life may leave some readers questioning the scriptural foundations of her claims. Additionally, the author's treatment of divine providence, though suggestive, might benefit from deeper interaction with magisterial Christian teachings, particularly those related to the moral authority of individual conscience in decision-making.

Conclusion

Summary

THE CONCLUSION OF THE AUTHOR'S work presents a radical reimagining of resurrection theology through the lens of reproductive agency and embodiment. The author argues for abandoning traditional soul-body dualism in favor of an “emergent resurrection” framework that emphasizes bodily continuity and development. This approach is positioned as being particularly relevant to questions about fetal and maternal resurrection following pregnancy loss or termination.

Key Areas of Exploration

1. *Doctrinal Reconstruction*

- Advocates for maintaining a connection to tradition while reformulating core concepts
- Challenges soul-body dualism as inadequate for addressing reproductive realities
- Proposes emergence theory as an alternative theological framework

2. *Embodiment and Vulnerability*

- Emphasizes the centrality of bodily experience to human identity

- Critiques traditional soul-based anthropology as neglecting bodily reality
- Highlights the maternal-fetal relationship as being uniquely significant

3. *Reproductive Agency*

- Addresses the theological implications of pregnancy loss and termination
- Considers the resurrection hope in the context of reproductive decisions
- Proposes divine acceptance rather than judgment in afterlife reunification

Potential Strengths

1. *Pastoral Sensitivity*

- Shows a genuine concern for women's experiences of pregnancy loss
- Addresses difficult questions many believers struggle with
- Attempts to offer hope while acknowledging complexity

2. *Contemporary Relevance*

- Engages with modern scientific understandings
- Addresses pressing bioethical questions
- Considers the intersection of theology with current social issues

3. *Theological Creativity*

- Attempts to maintain a connection with church tradition while proposing new frameworks
- Engages seriously with historical sources
- Demonstrates a careful attention to theological method

Potential Areas for Improvement

1. *Theological Foundations*

- Dismissal of the soul concept may be too sweeping
- Could better engage with traditional theological anthropology
- Risk of reducing the resurrection to a purely material process

2. *Biblical Integration*

- Limited engagement with biblical resurrection accounts
- Could better incorporate broader scriptural testimony
- Need for stronger connection to the New Testament concept of hope

3. *Doctrinal Coherence*

- Tension between emergence theory and the traditional Christian doctrine of the resurrection
- Questions about personal identity preservation
- Need for clearer articulation of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural

4. *Ethical Framework*

- Risk of minimizing the moral weight of reproductive decisions
- Could better address the relationship between divine and human agency
- Need for clearer ethical guidelines while maintaining pastoral sensitivity

Synthesis and Critique

THE CHAPTER CHALLENGES TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN doctrines surrounding the resurrection of the body by focusing on the precarious realities of pregnancy and women's reproductive agency. The author's critique of the soul-body dualism in Christian thought highlights how this framework often neglects the embodied experiences of women, especially in the context of pregnancy, miscarriage, and abortion. By embracing an "emergence" model of the resurrection, she suggests that the resurrection is a dynamic, bodily process that transcends the limitations of the classical doctrine of the soul. This proposal engages with contemporary science and feminist thought, offering a more materialist view of the resurrection that prioritizes bodily experiences over abstract spiritual concepts.

From an orthodox theological perspective, the author's insistence on rejecting the concept of the soul may seem too sweeping. The soul, a foundational component of Christian anthropology, is deeply embedded in Scripture and doctrinal tradition as a means of explaining personal identity and the hope of eternal life. By relegating it to irrelevance, the author risks diminishing the theological depth of the resurrection as a holistic renewal of both the body and the soul. Moreover, while her proposal of an emergent bodily resurrection addresses the material realities of pregnancy and bodily vulnerability, it may overly rely on materialist philosophy, potentially undermining the transcendent aspects of Christian eschatology. The tension between her approach and the biblical hope of the resurrection, as seen in texts like 1 Corinthians 15, raises questions about the preservation of personal identity and the continuity between earthly and resurrected life.

Finally, the author's synthesis of feminist theology and contemporary science brings a much-needed pastoral sensitivity to the realities of women's reproductive health. Her recognition of maternal vulnerability and her critique of patriarchal structures offer an important corrective to traditional theological narratives that often neglect women's agency in reproductive decisions. However, her work would benefit from a deeper engagement with biblical and doctrinal sources to ensure a more coherent integration of Christian hope in the resurrection with ethical considerations around life and death. The author's theological method is distinctive. Yet, a stronger connection to the testimony of Scripture and traditional understandings of eschatology could provide a more balanced and theologically grounded approach.

Overall Assessment of the Author's Treatise

IN STEPPING BACK FROM THE PRECEDING synthesis, analysis, and critique of the author's treatise, the following overall assessment is offered.

To begin, the author explores the intersection of Christian theology, especially the doctrine of the resurrection, and contemporary debates about reproductive ethics. She offers a framework that seeks to reconcile traditional Christian beliefs with modern reproductive experiences, particularly by addressing the theological status of unborn bodies. The book touches on themes such as the resurrection, personhood, reproductive loss, and the role of women in theological discourse. While the author attempts to be pastorally sensitive and intellectually rigorous, a traditional Christian perspective may find several strengths and areas of concern in her approach, including the following.

1. Strengths of the Author's Work

- *Historical Awareness and Depth*: The author demonstrates a keen understanding of the historical development of Christian doctrines related to personhood, the resurrection, and salvation. By exploring various theological periods—ranging from the early church to modern times—she presents a broad view of how Christian thought about the unborn has evolved. This historical depth is essential for understanding the complex ways in which the church has wrestled with the destiny of the unborn, especially those who die before baptism.
- *Pastoral Sensitivity*: One of the primary strengths of the book is its sensitivity to real-world pastoral concerns. The author acknowledges the emotional and spiritual weight of reproductive loss—such as miscarriage and abortion—and the need for the church to provide better pastoral care. Her efforts to develop a compassionate theological framework that integrates the lived experiences of women, including the tension between traditional doctrine and modern experiences, is a notable attempt to bring healing and support to those in difficult situations.
- *Engagement with Resurrection Doctrine*: The author's exploration of the resurrection and the fate of unborn bodies is thought-provoking, especially in light of Paul's seed metaphor (1 Corinthians 15). The author's materialist approach to the resurrection, which challenges traditional soul-body dualism, presents an innovative way to consider bodily continuity. This has the potential to bridge theological gaps between contemporary scientific understandings of the body and longstanding Christian eschatology.
- *Feminist Theological Insights*: By addressing the patriarchal dimensions of traditional theological frameworks, the author highlights the often-overlooked experiences of women in relation to reproductive choices. Her feminist

critique adds an important layer of reflection on how Christian teachings about life, death, and the resurrection have been shaped by male-dominated interpretations, calling for a more inclusive theological approach.

2. Areas of Concern

From a traditional Christian perspective, the author's work raises several areas of concern, particularly in terms of theological foundations, scriptural engagement, and doctrinal coherence, as follows.

- *Theological Foundations and Personhood*: Traditional Christian theology holds that personhood begins at conception, and that every human life, regardless of its stage of development, bears the image of God. The author's more fluid treatment of personhood, particularly in her rejection of soul-body dualism and emphasis on bodily continuity, may challenge this foundational belief. By downplaying the theological significance of the soul, her framework risks undermining the traditional understanding of the sanctity of life, especially for the unborn. A stronger engagement with traditional doctrines of ensoulment, original sin, and the intermediate state between death and the resurrection would enhance her argument's theological grounding.
- *Biblical Engagement*: While the author uses Paul's seed metaphor to construct her materialist resurrection framework, her overall treatment of Scripture is selective and, at times, oversimplified. A traditional Christian perspective would call for a deeper engagement with biblical texts that affirm the sanctity of life and the nature of the soul, particularly passages that speak about God's foreknowledge and care for the unborn (such as Ps 139:13–16 and Jer 1:5). Additionally, biblical teachings about the immediate post-death existence with Christ (such as Phil 1:23 and Luke 23:43) are left largely unaddressed, creating a tension between the author's materialist resurrection theory and the traditional understanding of the afterlife.
- *Doctrinal Clarity and Coherence*: The author's emergent resurrection theory, while innovative, may lack coherence with traditional Christian eschatology. By rejecting the idea of an immortal soul and instead focusing on a gradual process of the resurrection, her theory departs significantly from the church's historical teachings about the resurrection of the body and the eternal destiny of souls. This raises concerns about the preservation of personal identity in the afterlife—a key aspect of Christian hope. Traditional theology affirms the unity of the body and the soul, as well as the resurrection as an act of divine power that transforms the individual at the eschaton, rather than a gradual material process. Clarifying the relationship between her materialist views and traditional supernatural doctrines would help bridge this gap.

- *Moral and Ethical Concerns*: The author’s ethical framework surrounding reproductive choices—particularly her defense of selective abortion—could be seen as undermining longstanding Christian teachings on the sanctity of life. The traditional pro-life position, rooted in biblical teachings and centuries of church teaching, holds that all human life is sacred from conception to natural death. By framing pregnancy as a “supererogatory act” requiring consent and defending selective abortion in cases of prenatal disability, the author risks overemphasizing individual autonomy at the expense of moral absolutes. This is particularly concerning from the perspective of Christian anthropology, which upholds that human dignity is not contingent on circumstances, but is inherent in every person as made in the image of God.
- *Divine Providence and Human Agency*: The author’s treatment of divine providence and human moral agency raises additional concerns. Her emphasis on women’s Spirit-guided agency in making reproductive decisions could be seen as diminishing the role of divine providence in guiding all life decisions, including those related to reproduction. The traditional Christian understanding holds that while human beings exercise free will, their moral choices must align with God’s revealed will, particularly in areas of life and death. The over-reliance on individual conscience as the arbiter of moral decisions could lead to moral relativism and undermine the authority of Scripture and church tradition in guiding ethical behavior.

Overall, then, the author’s work is a thought-provoking and pastorally sensitive exploration of how Christian theology can respond to the complex realities of reproductive loss and the status of unborn bodies. However, from a traditional Christian perspective, the book presents significant theological, ethical, and doctrinal challenges. While the author’s work is commendable for its historical depth, feminist insights, and creative engagement with resurrection doctrine, it may ultimately be seen as diverging too far from core Christian teachings on the sanctity of life, the soul, and divine providence.

Traditional Christians would likely call for a stronger integration of Scripture, a more robust defense of life from conception, and a clearer articulation of the church’s teaching on the resurrection and the afterlife. The author’s work invites valuable conversation, yet may require significant theological recalibration to align with the core tenets of the Christian faith.

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Note

1. The Logos Research Edition of *Unborn Bodies: Resurrection and Reproductive Agency* was used for this book review.