When Life Begins — a Cultural Perspective

By Lyna M. Morgan

ABORTION is not only a moral and religious issue, it is a cultural issue. People from other cultures hold different beliefs about when a fetus or young child becomes a person.

If we agree that cultural diversity is one of America’s strengths, then we should be content with existing laws, which can accommodate a range of cultural traditions. In hopes of giving us another way of thinking about the abortion issue, anthropologists have looked at how other cultures have resolved the question of when life begins. They have found such enormous variations that the terms of the United States abortion debate look rather circumscribed in comparison.

Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion during the first two trimesters of pregnancy, dismayed pro-life activists, because the court determined that the fetus does not become a person under the law until viability, in the last three months of pregnancy. The court’s decision would also have shocked the Chippewa Indians of North America. To them, even a barely formed embryo was a person. If a Chippewa woman miscarried — at any stage of pregnancy — the fetus would be washed, wrapped, buried, and mourned.

The Manus of the western Pacific named all miscarried fetuses and exchanged gifts in their honor. To the Chippewas and the Manus, induced abortion was unthinkable. Fortunately, American pro-life forces do not take their position to these extremes. If they did, they would insist that we name and hold funeral services for a miscarried or aborted fetus.

The customs practiced by the Chippewas and Manus are relatively rare. Far more common are cultures where life begins sometime after birth. Many societies separate biological birth from social birth. The infant does not become a person until days, weeks, or even months after it is born. Then, if the child survives it ready to be born socially and welcomed into the community.

The Todas, living in south India, keep their newborn indoors for three months. They do not publicly announce the child’s sex or name. The sun must not touch the child’s face. After three months, the relatives hold a “face opening” ceremony. They bring the infant outdoors then by showing it has the vigor, health, and emotions of a “person.” Only if the newborn survives is it ready to be born socially and welcomed into the community.

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Ashanti live in New York City alone. With such cultural diversity in the US, it is not surprising that we cannot agree about when life begins.

Yet American law does set limits. Life begins somewhere between conception and birth — not earlier, not later. We already have sufficient legislation to protect this American consensus. The 14th Amendment of the Constitution guarantees the rights of personhood from the moment of birth, and other laws prohibit induced third-trimester abortion and infanticide. This range is as close as we can come to agreement while still respecting the cultural and religious differences among us.

To legislate further the definition of when life begins would be to violate one of our most deeply held American values: tolerance for the beliefs of those who migrate to our shores. The impease over abortion could be solved only at the expense of cultural diversity. Let’s leave the law the way it stands, and leave the finer distinctions to parents, who have the greatest stake in making the best choice in their pregnancies.

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