

COMPULSORY PREGNANCY
The War Against American Women
John M. Swomley
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Reviewed by PEG TITTLE

This is a collection of previously published essays and, as is often the case with such collections, it suffers from repetition: indeed, sometimes whole articles are nothing but a cut-and-paste of previous articles (now I know how some people get so many articles published!).

That Swomley can and does cut and paste so frequently is indicative of another problem: insufficient development. I'm not saying the separate bits and pieces aren't good; I'm just saying I would have preferred that he'd taken all his excellent information and his pretty good arguments and developed them into one cohesive and complete whole.

For example, I would have liked whole chapters, not just single paragraphs, for his refutations of the pro-abortion arguments. If indeed one of his purposes is "to demonstrate that abortion per se is not morally wrong" (11), then I want more than just two paragraphs (and always the same two) about fetal rights; ditto for fetal personhood; etc.

In any case, Swomley focuses more on the politics of the matter than the ethics. And again, his arguments for church/state separation, while wholly defensible, are often little more than claims.

He has a good eye (mind) for inconsistencies: his comparison of compulsory pregnancy (the result of inadequate contraception and unavailable abortion) to involuntary servitude (slavery, which is illegal) is excellent; I especially enjoyed, given the growing acceptance of paid surrogates, his pointing out that at the very least women forced to continue a pregnancy for adoption should be paid.

I was surprised, however, by two things which run counter to his oft-articulated recognition of women as equal and autonomous beings. One, he seems to emphasize their role as mothers: almost always when he describes a responsibly-chosen abortion, he refers to her concern for the health and welfare of the children she already has or he concludes with something like "...and she went on to have a healthy son/daughter later..."--as if that legitimates the abortion. Can't a woman just say no? No kids, not now, not later?

The other surprise (and disappointment) is that he, like so many others, skirts rape as the root of the problem. He says things like 'if we recognized that women are not the property of their husbands...' and 'if women had more control over their pregnancies...'--why not just say if women had more control over sexual intercourse?! Why not just say that the need for abortion would decline drastically if men would stop raping women. I simply cannot believe that women want a fourth child when the first three are starving and sick and all under six. Nor can I believe that a woman's sexual desire in such conditions of poverty is too strong to resist. Like so many others, Swomley acts as if sex is inevitable.

Occasionally Swomley seems biased in that he emphasizes the Catholics, or more accurately, the Vatican, as the bad guys. But perhaps I'm just guilty of an ad hominem here, knowing that Swomley is a Methodist minister; to be fair, let me note that he does identify Randall Terry, the bad guy of Operation Rescue, as a fundamentalist Protestant.

And perhaps his bias, or at least his status, as a Protestant/theist is a good thing: who more likely to persuade other theists not only that legislating against abortion is wrong, but that certain religious forces (the Vatican and the fundamentalists) are not as they seem (good, let alone Godly)?