

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

ABORTION, MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY, AND THE CHRISTIAN FAR-RIGHT: THE
HARMS OF RHETORIC AND MISCONSTRUING THE PAST

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN WOMEN'S STUDIES AND GENDER STUDIES

BY
MADISON GIVENS
CHICAGO, IL
MAY 2023

Copyright by Madison Givens, 2023
All rights reserved.

Words are active as well as reflective agents. When heard and understood, they can revolutionize the world.

— Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Disorderly Conduct”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	iv
NOTE TO THE READER	v
INTRODUCTION: RHETORIC	1
CHAPTER ONE: MEDIEVAL MISCONCEPTIONS	11
The Penitential of Theodore	16
Hagiographies	24
The Lives of St. Brigit, St. Aed Mac Bricc, and St. Cainnech of Aghaboe	25
St. Hildegard and St. Paul	31
CHAPTER TWO: ROE V. WADE	34
History of <i>Roe</i> (and <i>Doe</i>)	37
<i>Roe</i>	39
The Rhetoric of <i>Roe</i>	41
<i>Roe</i> and the Media	46
The Aftermath of <i>Roe v. Wade</i> and Modern Political Debates	48
CHAPTER THREE: CHRISTIAN FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM	51
The “Re” Emergence of the Christian Far-Right	52
Christian Far-Right Extremism and Abortion	53
CONCLUSION: CHRISTIAN FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM, ROE V. WADE, AND MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY	60
<i>Dobbs v. Jackson</i>	64
BIBLIOGRAPHY	65
VITA	70

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Theodore's Penitential Penances 1

20

Note to the Reader

Trigger Warning: This research discusses violence, including but not limited to police brutality, mass shootings, and forced sterilization. While no images are included, I recognize that the imagination and memories of traumatic events that were broadcast on national television news networks can be just as triggering.

INTRODUCTION

RHETORIC

The art of rhetoric, language, and words are all aspects that are integral to the structure of human societies. This has been the case for centuries. For this reason, rhetoric, and the way humans manipulate words to talk about people is very important. The overused quote, “The pen is mightier than the sword”, by playwright Edward Bulwer-Lytton, holds a lot of truth. Words and rhetoric can inspire and build nations, they can also destroy and end civilizations. The manipulation and misconstruction of rhetoric is what my research seeks to understand. Specifically in terms of abortion. I aim to look at the rhetoric surrounding abortion in the early and high medieval periods from the perspective and words of the Christian Church; and to compare this to more modern conceptions, such as rhetoric dealing with *Roe v. Wade* and the Christian Far-Right, related to abortion, in the United States of America. Much of the medieval religious documentation that I will utilize comes from medieval Ireland, and a couple of texts come from England and Germany. This is in part because Irish religious documents in the early and high middle ages seem to discuss abortion more often in hagiographies and penitentials (both of which will be discussed in detail later) of their saints than other geographical regions during a similar time frame. In England there is a prominent Archbishop that I will discuss in terms of their penitential. Theodore of Canterbury, in 690 AD, clearly outlines the varying levels of punishment for abortion in the penitential attributed to him, and this will allow me to dissect and directly compare the ideology surrounding the severity of abortion to other levels of punishment for other religious crimes and sins, from the perspective of this prominent religious figure.

Described by modern Christians, abortion viewed as a grave and unforgiveable sin, is contrary to popular belief, this is not something that has always been. I will prove this through the use of medieval religious doctrine and point out the ways in which the Christian Far-Right has not only misunderstood but utilizes rhetoric that can be dangerous and simply inaccurate in terms of the Church always being anti-abortion. I do want to recognize that abortion is something that is very personal to those who make, or decide not to make, that decision. The reasons behind why someone seeks an abortion vary greatly. In this sense, my research will tread carefully. In an ideal world, I would be able to find the perspectives and rhetoric from the women most closely involved with performing and receiving abortions. However, this is not an ideal world and as I look at the primary sources from the early and high medieval periods, I recognize that the Christian Church did not allow religious texts to be solely written and documented by women. This could also be due to the fact that in many cases women were not allowed to be educated and therefore many could not read or write. The leaders of the Christian Church only allowed the documentation of women's lives through a male scribe, with the exception of Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard was educated and able to document much of her own life, her own music, and even her own medical documents. While I will briefly touch on Hildegard's medical texts, as they relate to abortifacients, I will maintain the focus of this paper by mainly engaging with the dominant male gaze in its relation to rhetoric surrounding abortion. This strategy will allow me to recognize the parallels and discontinuities medieval religious leaders had in contrast to the more modern arguments surrounding abortion. The male gaze and male perspective of the lives of religious women, through text and words, leads me to recognize the importance of rhetoric and specifically controlling rhetoric surrounding abortion. Since abortion is so closely tied into biological women, the rhetoric surrounding abortion must be carefully studied as a potential

attempt to control women.¹ For this reason, I argue that rhetoric is extremely important and influential especially in relation to how rhetoric can be misconstrued and, in many cases, be harmful to individuals and communities.

I recognize that as I mention the harms that rhetoric can have on individuals and communities, I have failed to point out what specifically this “harm” is that I discuss. I also realize that this research is attempting to do something unique, and I want to ensure that it is clear where this thesis stems from. Before diving into the specifics, I want to take a step back, and recognize that the overall goal of this paper is to complicate modern Far-Right assumptions about women and the Church, and I want to look at the bigger picture in an attempt to articulate why this all matters. Ultimately, why should any of you reading this care about what I am writing? I recognize that the next statement is a bold one and something that might not make sense at first but bear with me. We should all care about rhetoric, abortion, and imagining a false past because people’s lives are at stake. It might not be your life or your neighbors, but people are dying because of harmful extremist ideologies.

I realize that the issues I am about to discuss did not begin, nor did they end, with the Trump administration. White Supremacy goes back to long before Trump, and I will discuss other hate groups in the post-Roe v. Wade era. However, there was a resurgence and emboldenment of white supremacy that the world witnessed in the United States during the Trump era. I am utilizing the Trump era as an example because it is very recent, and it is a dark history within this nation that I personally lived through. As a nation, most of us physically

¹ I want to recognize that, for brevity’s sake, I am writing this paper from the limited perspective of a biological man and woman binary. I understand the limitations of this perspective and the harm that this binary has had on individuals and communities. However, for the sake of this research I focus on the ways in which not only the Christian Church has historically used this binary, but also the Christian Far-Right in their discussions of people. These two groups generally come from the belief that there are only two sexes and only two genders.

survived the Trump administration. But not all of us made it out with our lives or our sanity intact because we witnessed, on a massive scale, a rise in Christian Far-Right extremism, and violence. Rhetoric spewed by a racist, sexist, bigoted president ignited something in his followers that left a trail of fire, destruction, and death. While some might say my beliefs are extreme, I say they are not extreme enough. I viewed people of color, men, and women, being murdered by police officers, I heard stories of forced sterilization of ICE detention prisoners – people being kept in cages for potentially being here “illegally,” and I heard rhetoric that labeled all Mexican individuals as drug dealers, rapists, and criminals.² I might not have been alive during the original Jim Crow, but I am living in something eerily reminiscent. Chants, and the rhetoric that surrounds, “Make America Great Again” haunt my nightmares as I recognize my ancestors lived in a time where lynching was seen as a common pastime. I question, is this the America we want “again”? All of this has been allowed to perpetuate because of rhetoric and an assumption of a false past. A slogan as simple as “Make America Great Again” incited young white men to burn crosses, to reignite fascist antisemitic statements, and brutally mass-murder African American church attendees. The rhetoric of one man, and his followers, created a massive rise in the visibility and mobilization of Christian Far-Right groups who are drastically misinformed and misguided by harmful ideological notions of the past.³ In many ways the past they claim never existed, and in other ways the past they desire is very dark for those of us who do not fit their ideologies. Instead, it is an idealized vision of a non-existent past for those who subscribe to this scary ideology. I have lived in an era that has seen rhetoric turn into violence,

² Trump, Donald. “Presidential Candidacy” (Speech, Trump Tower, New York, NY, June 16th, 2015).

³ Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*. New Edition ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. muse.jhu.edu/book/101717.

and that violence has turned into death. This all ties into my present research and why it matters. In order to do the least harm, we must understand and accurately represent the past. We must not take bits and pieces, out of context, in order to fit our ideological framework. We must stop spewing misinformation in the name of patriotism. We must stop using the past as a justification for denying people rights – such as the Christian Church always being anti-abortion. This misinformation about abortion not being natural, and Christian doctrine condemning any woman who receives an abortion is just inaccurate and dangerous. Denying a woman an abortion, and reproductive rights in general, denies a woman the right to have autonomy over her own body. I will further prove that denying abortion on the grounds of medieval church doctrine and rhetoric, is not only inaccurate, but is designed to harm women. Inaccurately portraying past ideologies and rhetoric only causes more extremism to take hold and is used to justify the actions of the extremists. I say this while recognizing that not only is the Christian Far-Right not a monolith, but the Christian Church is not either. For the sake of this research, I must in some ways generalize and take the most dominant and most powerful voices as I look to unravel the threads that have led me to recognize not only the harms of misinterpreting and mis-imagining the past for power and gain but also the events that have led me to my argument. The Christian Far-Right has dangerously re-written the past and drawn on a history that simply does not exist in terms of denying a woman an abortion on the grounds that the Christian Church has always been anti-abortion.

This research will follow a chronological timeline. It will begin, with chapter one, in the early and high medieval eras and take a very in depth look at the ways in which abortion, specifically “miracle” abortions, performed by saints and religious people were dealt with in the early and high medieval eras. Drawing on a plethora of primary and secondary sources I will

depict a world that in many ways diverges from not only our modern world but also one that complicates our understanding of early church doctrine. The notion of abortion in the Early Middle Ages is one that is very far removed from our modern understanding. While certain aspects parallel current discussions⁴ there are several differences and the notion of abortion being a criminal act, akin to homicide, is a newer conception. Arguments, levying homicide and comparing the fetus to a child, began to emerge very prominently in 1973 as pro-life movements formed.⁵ Chapter one will focus, and tease out the important aspects of medieval Christianity and abortion. The medieval literature, will reveal that while the church, might require penance for committing an abortion, it depicts little to no discussion in the law outside of religious “law”. Much of this is evidenced in Irish Penitentials, as early as the sixth century, and the eighth century English Penitential of Theodore of Canterbury.

Overall, the hagiographies and penitentials allow scholars to better understand the lives of saints but they also allow us to see misconceptions and make connections to our present day understanding of the Church. The second chapter will look at the ways in which *Roe v. Wade* discusses women’s agency and abortion. I will look at the rhetoric surrounding the Supreme Court decision but will also look at the media and briefly those who oppose the Supreme Court decision, in the present. By paying special attention to rhetoric in this legal sense I will deduce the ways in which the Supreme Court discussed women in relation to abortion and reproductive decisions. I will ultimately look at the rhetoric surrounding *Roe v. Wade* and those involved in terms of how they discuss women generally but more importantly the way men within this time

⁴ One example is the thought of the soul entering the fetus during a specific time of gestation.

⁵ The first evidence I can find that calls abortion murder is 1588 by Pope Sixtus V. In the United States it was first criminalized in 1910.

frame utilize rhetoric to discuss women, reproductive rights, and specifically abortion. I will dissect what I mean by Christian Far-Right and the significance this label and movement has on and for women, in my third chapter. I would be remiss not to mention class or race in this discussion. This is because when talking about abortion and women's reproductive rights, we cannot forget that women of color and low-income women and families are disproportionately affected by almost everything that occurs under capitalism and especially under a Far-Right regime.⁶

Scholars like Clarke Forsythe, in his book, *Abuse of Discretion: The Inside Story of Roe v. Wade*, discuss the high levels of controversy surrounding the landmark court case and ultimately how it further divided those opposed to abortion and those in favor of a woman's right to choose. While my research does not specifically look at this divide, what it does look at is how the rhetoric of those opposed to abortion affected not only women but society. I look at the question of how the ways in which society writes and talks about decisions that affect women restrict American society and cause harm to some of the most vulnerable populations. Other scholars that discuss aspects of abortion like Daniel Williams in their, *Defenders of the Unborn: the Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade* and Mary Ziegler's, *Beyond Abortion: Roe v. Wade and the Battle for Privacy*, aid my argument by giving me a starting point that allows me to look at what the *Roe v. Wade* controversy was really about. I take previous scholars' notions and the ideology of the *Roe v. Wade* era and really dive deep into the rhetoric surrounding the narrative. This ultimately leads me to a discussion of the Christian Far-Right and how they utilize medieval and religious figures incorrectly to label Christian tradition as always anti-abortion.

⁶ Paramore, Lynn. "Can Capitalism Work for Women of Color?" Institute for New Economic Thinking. Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/can-capitalism-work-for-women-of-color>.

Mark Juergensmeyer's research⁷ over many years has demonstrated that excessive sociopolitical and violent activity under the guise of religion does not simply happen inside communities seemingly foreign to the United States. Far-right organizations, especially those who support Christian Far-Right extremism in its various manifestations, have been increasing the likelihood of terrorism and the threat to national cohesiveness in America. In addition to Christian groups that have raised concerns about religious groups globally, groups that are commonly classified as far-right worldwide include those who support aggressive forms of Buddhism, Islamism, Judaism, and Hinduism.

The topic of abortion is one that is frequently debated in the international media. Savita Halappanavar's death in 2012⁸ and the instances of women who challenged Ireland's stringent abortion legislation in the Court of Human Rights in Europe in 2010 have kept abortion in the news. While I connect the dots between the past and the present, I dedicate some space to juxtapose reality versus rhetoric with reference to abortion laws, and how they affect women's reproductive health in America today. One example is the myth that, after 20 weeks, or around four and a half months of pregnancy, abortions are risky. In reality, only 1% of abortions occur beyond 21 weeks, making them very uncommon at this phase of pregnancy. However, when carried out by a qualified doctor, abortions carried out beyond 20 weeks are safe and frequently necessary for the mother's health.⁹ It is arbitrary for legislators to intervene in women's private

⁷ Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Global Religions: An Introduction*. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2003.

⁸ Smith, Patrick. "Death of a Dentist in Ireland Denied an Abortion Has Worried Doctors Who Say History May Repeat in U.S." NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group. Accessed January 28, 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/woman-died-ireland-abortion-ban-warning-americans-roe-v-wade-rca35431>.

⁹ President, Julia Cusick Vice, Julia Cusick, Vice President, Madeline Shepherd Director, Madeline Shepherd, Director, Emma Lofgren Associate Director, et al. "Limiting Abortion Access Contributes to Poor Maternal Health

decision-making by withholding necessary health treatment after twenty weeks. At various stages of their pregnancies, women should be assisted in their attempts to get a safe, legal abortion. Although these treatments can be challenging, they are frequently required due to late discovery of medical issues that could have been prevented by earlier abortion attempts, drastically altered life circumstances, or both. For instance, a lot of women who have abortions later than 20 weeks find out that their fetus has a disease that would prohibit it from surviving without the womb.¹⁰ Poor women and women of color are disproportionately affected by 20-week abortion bans because they are more likely to have issues obtaining a safe and legal abortion, due to factors such as lack of insurance, and financial insecurity.¹¹

Such factors are not always taken into account by those who wish to ban abortion in the name of Christianity. Scripture, practice, intellect, and experience serve as the foundation for Christian thinking, with the church and Bible serving as primary sources. Claims that cite Christian authority being directly linked to the abortion controversy in America, yet Christians have not always had the same opinions regarding abortion. Wide-ranging assertions about a prescriptive Christian perspective are undermined by the nearly total silence about abortion throughout the Scriptures and from the two major Christian religious scholars, St. Augustine in

Outcomes.” Center for American Progress, December 3, 2021. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/limiting-abortion-access-contributes-poor-maternal-health-outcomes/>.

¹⁰ Cha, Ariana Eunjung. “Tough Questions – and Answers – on ‘Late-Term’ Abortions, the Law and the Women Who Get Them.” The Washington Post. WP Company, January 24, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/uspolicy/2019/02/06/tough-questions-answers-late-term-abortions-law-women-who-get-them/>; Simmons-Duffin, Selena. “At 18 Weeks Pregnant, She Faced an Immense Decision with Just Days to Make It.” NPR. NPR, October 27, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/10/27/1131410832/abortion-law-exception-fetal-anomaly>.

¹¹ Boonstra, Heather D. “Abortion in the Lives of Women Struggling Financially: Why Insurance Coverage Matters.” Guttmacher Institute, August 30, 2022. <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2016/07/abortion-lives-women-struggling-financially-why-insurance-coverage-matters>.

the fourth century and St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. Prior to the 19th century, dogmatism and absolute moral certainty regarding abortion were uncommon.

As this research comes full circle and I find the deviations and congruities of the past and the present, I recognize that rhetoric has played such a major role in the ways societies treat reproduction and especially the right to an abortion. While my heavy focus upon rhetoric is not necessarily new, neither is my attention to reproduction or abortion in the medieval world or the present. What is new is recognizing the ways in which this rhetoric has not only emboldened a dangerous Far-Right movement but more so enlightening the deadly effects of such rhetoric and the dark hole this country will continue to slide down should we continue to falsely imagine this past in discussions about women's rights to things like abortion and controlling their own bodies.

In the concluding part of this thesis, I view the outcome of rhetoric on the reproductive rights of women in the United States. Women must be able to access their reproductive rights in order to exercise their human rights. These rights are focused on giving women the freedom to decide what is best for their everyday lives, including how many, if any, children they want and how far apart their children are born. Prenatal care, a safe delivery experience, and access to contraceptives are all part of reproductive rights. Access to safe and legal abortion services is also among them. Abortion restrictions go against the rights to privacy, family life, healthcare, and the right to life. Bans also have a severe impact on underrepresented groups like young people, persons of color, and communities who already struggle to obtain services like healthcare. Women should be trusted by governments to make choices that are beneficial for their body, their mental and physical health, and their lives.

CHAPTER ONE

MEDIEVAL MISCONCEPTIONS

Much like rhetoric, women, and humans in general, have attempted to control reproduction for centuries. Whether societies were trying to produce more children or control the rate and frequency at which women became pregnant and gave birth, there has always been a need and desire to control reproduction. Our modern understanding of birth control and reproduction while highly advanced is in many ways still incomplete. This is also true about our understanding of medieval reproduction and why we misconstrue the medieval past. As historian Roland Betancourt states:

Today, conversations around abortion in modern Christianity tend to take as a given the longstanding moral, religious and legal prohibition of the practice. Stereotypes of medical knowledge in the ancient and medieval worlds sustain the misguided notion that abortive and contraceptive pharmaceuticals and surgeries could not have existed in the premodern past. This could not be further from the truth. ¹

Our understanding of medieval abortion and reproduction often rests upon these stereotypes, that our modern era is somehow superior and more advanced than the past. While we have made great medical strides there is still much to learn from the past. Christine McCann furthers this notion and points out the flaws in this stereotype of medieval reproduction, arguing that, “It was once thought that during the Middle Ages the church provided the only opinion on matters of sexuality and reproduction, and women were obliged to get pregnant with uncontrolled frequency. On the contrary, many medieval people were aware of various methods which could

¹ Betancourt, Roland. “Abortion and Contraception in the Middle Ages.” *Scientific American*, December 11, 2020. <https://scientificamerican.com/article/abortion-and-contraception-in-the-middle-ages/>.

be used to limit the size of their families...”² For this reason I argue that our understanding of medieval reproduction and birth control is very inaccurate and incomplete. This is evidenced in research completed by several scholars but is also recognized in the ways that we misconstrue how and why medieval societies reproduced or died out from lack of reproduction. This chapter will continue to look at the ways in which medieval abortion and reproductive control were dealt with in medieval societies, how saints and religion played a major role in reproduction, specifically abortion, and lastly how rhetoric surrounding abortion was utilized by men (religious leaders) to control and keep the image of the church in good standing with the general population.

As this written journey unfolds, we must remember that we are traveling to a time that is so drastically far removed, in terms of timeframe, from ours that it may be hard to fathom and comprehend what the daily life of a medieval woman was like. Scholar Lisa Bitel states, “No trick of the light or lilt of the voice should lead us to think that the people of early medieval Ireland resembled their descendants...The fundamental ways in which men and women practiced love, marriage, family, friendship, and hatred were all profoundly unlike our ways.”³ Medieval women exercised several roles (public and private), rights, and responsibilities within their communities and societies.⁴ For this reason, I attempt to remove my modern ideals and notions as I dive into the following primary sources. This chapter will discuss penitentials, St.

² McCann, Christine. "Fertility Control and Society in Medieval Europe." *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 40, 2009, p. 45. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/cjm.2009.0004.

³ Bitel, Lisa, “Spirituales Medici.” In *Isle of the Saints*, p. 1. Cornell University Press, 2019.

⁴ Bolton, Brenda., and Susan Mosher. Stuard. *Women in Medieval Society*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812207675>.

Hildegard's *Physica*, several saints' hagiographies, and writings from the apostle Paul as they relate to reproduction and abortion.

Reproduction and abortion in the early and high medieval periods, in many ways, were very different from our modern conceptions.⁵ There is also a modern thread of thought that the church has not changed, that the ideals of Christianity, in many ways, have stayed the same. These ideals are simply misguided as the church and medieval reproduction both looked drastically different than we might think. The notion of abortion being akin to homicide is one example that is more modern, "[T]he church has consistently opposed abortion as evidence of sexual sin but has not always regarded it as homicide because Church teaching has never been definitive about the nature of the fetus."⁶ This suggests that abortion itself was viewed as a means to erase the evidence of a major sin, but not a major sin (such as homicide) itself. Fornication is an example of the sexual sin that abortion was used to "erase." Therefore, abortion was permitted, to "save face" for the church, which will be discussed later.

This changing ideology surrounding abortion and reproduction is evidence of the changing and evolving nature of church doctrine. There is also documentation⁷ about early versus late term abortions which leads one to recognize that medieval understanding of the body and reproduction were more advanced than certain mainstream thought believes was the case.⁸

⁵ A major difference is the fact that the understanding of the fetus. The fetus was not considered a human person prior to "quickening." Medieval Christian religion believed that after quickening, the soul entered the fetus and therefore before ensoulment and quickening an abortion was not as big of a sin.

⁶ "Abortion and Catholic Thought. The Little-Known History." *Conscience* (Washington, D.C.). U.S. National Library of Medicine. Accessed December 19, 2022. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12178868/>.

⁷ One example of this documentation can be evidenced in Theodore's Penitential which has differing levels of penance based upon how far from conception the fetus is.

⁸ The mainstream thoughts I am referencing is the notion that medieval people were backward in their thoughts and violent and brutish in relation to how we live today.

Etienne van de Walle writes, “[T]he distinction between early abortions (before the fetus was ‘animated,’ ‘formed,’ or ‘alive’) ... were more widely tolerated and more vulnerable to the action of plant substances, [than] late abortions.”⁹ The relevance and understanding of menstruation and abortion is further discussed in van de Walle’s research and sheds light on the prevalence but also the lack of stigma surrounding abortion.

While I am not saying that abortion was welcome or came without shame, I am saying that the ways in which women utilized and understood their bodies, including abortion, being pregnant, and bringing back menses, is highly impressive, considering the rudimentary medical technology they had access to at the time. This is further evidenced in John Riddle and J. Worth Estes research, *Oral Contraceptives in Ancient and Medieval Times*, as they take this discussion one step further and claim that, “Premodern people probably had knowledge about birth control methods that we do not.”¹⁰ This argument lends itself to the notion that medieval people were able to control their own fertility through means of abortion, in contrast to popular thought that their reproductive numbers were lower due to things like war, famine, and disease. Riddle and Estes go on to discuss why much of this history has been either lost or misconstrued, “[W]omen were the only practitioners of medicinal contraception.”¹¹ Due to the fact that women were not able to document their lives through writing (or that we have little to no surviving written work by women), much of this history is lost. I also recognize that Riddle and Este’s statement is very bold and one that I find difficult to prove. I do agree that contraception and reproduction fell

⁹ Walle, Etienne van de. “Flowers and Fruits: Two Thousand Years of Menstrual Regulation.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no.2 (1997): p. 183. <https://doi.org/10.2307/206401>.

¹⁰ Riddle, John M., and J. Worth Estes. “Oral Contraceptives in Ancient and Medieval Times.” *American Scientist*, vol. 80, no. 3, 1992, p. 226. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29774642>. Accessed 17 Sep. 2022.

¹¹ Riddle. “Oral Contraceptives,” 226.

largely within the realm of women and midwives. There is, however, evidence of male saints performing abortion miracles¹² and therefore we cannot with 100 percent certainty claim that men did not perform medicinal contraception.

While advances in modern medicine have created spaces where it is safer to give birth, and child mortality rates have dropped significantly, both benefits of modern reproduction, there are also similarities to medieval reproduction in the ways in which modern women are viewed in relation to birth and motherhood. One major example is how the male gaze upon the female body has perpetuated and dominated modern medicine and reproduction. In the medieval era, male religious leaders controlled much of the everyday life of women and were involved in the documentation of women's lives and even women's medicine. In the present, male doctors comprise the majority of medical professionals, at 64%,¹³ and make decisions for women relating to their bodies, reproduction, and overall health. While the focus of this section is not specifically on changes in the medical field, it instead looks at the rhetoric, predominantly the rhetoric of men, and the male gaze upon medieval women (and men) performing abortions and abortion miracles. This will tie into the misconceptions and assumptions of the modern era in terms of mainstream narratives and the ways in which the Church has dealt with abortion. The utilization of several primary sources allows me to glean the ways in which the Church dealt with and discussed abortion, utilizing the Penitential of Theodore, St. Hildegard Von Bingen's *Physica*, the hagiographies, or *vitas* of St. Brigit, St. Aed Mac Bricc, St. Cainnech of Aghaboe,

¹² Emmons, James BT. "Translation of the Vita Aidi/The Life of St. Aed Mac Bricc – Researchgate." Accessed January 6, 2023.; Markus, Gilbert. "The Life of St Cainnech of Aghaboe." Accessed January 7, 2023.

¹³ Larson, Jennifer. "Medical Specialties with the Most & Least Women Physicians: Staff Care." Medical Specialties with the Most & Least Women Physicians | Staff Care. Accessed February 25, 2023. <https://www.staffcare.com/locum-tenens-blog/news/women-in-medicine-specialty-choices/>

and the writings of the Apostle Paul. Through the utilization of rhetoric, I will demonstrate the ways in which the church dealt with abortion and understand why mainstream arguments misconstrue how the Church understood and historically dealt with abortion and women's reproduction.¹⁴

The Penitential of Theodore

The purpose of penitentials, in general, was essentially to create a road map for priests to utilize to punish, or give penance to, individuals after they confessed specific sins, "Penitentials listed specific sins and corresponding penances, usually in the form of periods of fasting."¹⁵ The penance ranged from fasting for specific amounts of time, or certain days of the week, to flogging and physically punishing oneself. Penitentials are important to my research because, according to Maeve B. Callan's article, "Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maidens Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials" the penitentials are records that should be utilized to supplement the lives of saints. By utilizing the penitentials, in conjunction with *vitae*,¹⁶ scholars can grasp a fuller image regarding the lives and times of saints. Callan's main reason for discussing penitentials is because she recognizes that they can be utilized to support the hagiographies and lives of saints. The penitentials give scholars a glimpse into the lives of people in the Medieval Ages. The

¹⁴ My research focuses on words and the construction of language much like Marianne Elsackers research, "The method of research used was 'close reading', because this method helps us to more easily pick up signals of textual change, modification, confusion, or distortion, and focus on the words used to describe the fetus, methods, motives and actors in the prohibitions and condemnations of abortion. I tried to discover what the texts themselves have to tell us about women and abortion in the early medieval West, as it were, to 'read between the lines.'" Elsackers, M.J. (2010). *Reading between the lines: Old Germanic and Early Christian Views on Abortion*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

¹⁵ Mistry, Zubin. "Medicine for Sin: Reading Abortion in Early Medieval Penitentials." *Abortion in the Early Middle Ages, c.500-900*, NED-New edition, Boydell & Brewer, 2015, p. 126. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt13wzsp5.10>. Accessed 17 Sep. 2022.

¹⁶ Latin for life, i.e., lives/life of saint/s

penitentials are punishments (written by religious leaders) for committing sins. The punishments give modern readers a chance to better understand what was deemed important to church leaders and religious people during their time. If a sin was not being committed in society, then there would be no reason to write a punishment for it in a penitential. Therefore, Callan, and I are able to use the penitentials to decipher how important abortion (and other sins) were in relation to what was being written in the hagiographies of the same time periods.¹⁷

Callan's article also provides a wealth of examples from medieval Irish Hagiography and penitentials, starting in the 6th century, that reflect medieval attitudes about women's bodies in birth and unwanted pregnancies. Callan argues that not only do the hagiographies have modern relevance,¹⁸ but also, that even the hagiographies have a tendency to revise rather than record history. This is evidenced when Callan states, "...for all its distortions and omissions, hagiography offers important perspective into the society that produced and perpetuated it in both its intentional and incidental details."¹⁹ Callan furthers her argument by pointing out that Catholicism has often been utilized to explain "archaic" and severe ideologies, especially surrounding abortion. While this is the case, it is in contrast with the hagiographies and penitentials as most, if not all surviving church documents from this time period consider abortion a lesser offense than birthing an unwanted child or even committing fornication (i.e.,

¹⁷ Callan, Maeve B. "Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maidens Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 21 no. 2, 2012, p. 285. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/sex.2012.0031.

¹⁸ Modern relevance is evidenced in this 1992 case utilized by Callan "The 1992 'X case' in Ireland made international headlines for what many considered to be 'medieval' and ultra-Catholic repressive policies regarding women and sexuality. A fourteen-year-old girl had become pregnant after being raped by her friend's father, and her parents decided to take her to England for an abortion, as it was illegal in Ireland...they were forbidden to leave the country. The government's harsh response sparked a tremendous outcry among the Irish public... [H]er case led to an Irish Supreme Court ruling that abortion was permissible if pregnancy posed a 'real and substantial risk to the life of the mother'" Callan, 282-283.

¹⁹ Callan, 286.

deviant sexual behavior). All of this leads us to understand that the notions of an unbending and strict church ideology surrounding abortion is not being utilized accurately in our modern time to explain the anti-abortion stances of the Church and the Christian Far-Right.²⁰ According to Callan, there is remarkable flexibility in these medieval texts toward abortion, virginity, illegitimacy, and even the female body.²¹

The penitential of Theodore (c. 700 AD), is no exception. This penitential passed on the judgements from the archbishop Theodore of Canterbury. This penitential also has varying degrees of punishments based on the sinners' level of success - successful attempts, partially failed attempts, and completely failed attempts. Also included are mitigating circumstances such as poverty, slavery, and a willingness to pay compensation to the victim or his/her family²². Theodore's penitential is cited as arguably the first of the penitentials from England that we have documented. The ideas surrounding not just abortion, but what a fetus is/was believed to be is evident in this penitential. There was a belief that the fetus passed through different phases and therefore the status of the fetus, during formation altered the level of punishment (or penance). Theodore's penitential in some ways contrasts Irish Penitentials. This could be due to the differing dates and societal ideals in England versus Ireland at the time of documentation.

Irish Penitentials were first developed by Celtic Monks in the 6th century. In comparison to Theodore's Penitential, Irish penitentials require three and a half years if a "conceptus" is aborted, seven years if the fetus is formed, and fourteen years if the soul has entered the fetus. I

²⁰ Callan, 284.

²¹ Callan, 284.

²² Van Rhijn, Carine, and Marjolijn Saan. "Correcting Sinners, Correcting Texts: a Context for the Paenitentiale Pseudo-Theodori." *Early medieval Europe* 14, no. 1 (2006): 23–40.

believe these differing penances rely on the understanding, or thought, of what the fetus is. The penitentials, Irish and Theodore's, ultimately seem to stem from a need to reign in society and control people. The punishments seem to come from a place of controlling the image of the church – regardless of when and where they were written. Therefore, the punishments and sins included in each penitential would differ depending on where one lived, and the societal issues going on that the church felt it needed to control to maintain its institutional power.

Penitentials attempted to instill fear in followers as priests were viewed as being a channel or gateway to God. Many penitentials opened with instructions about going to one's confessor and coming to God in fear and humility. Theodore of Canterbury opens his penitential by stating that one should go see the confessor in a weeping voice and with the utmost fear of God.²³ The focus on fearing God leads me to assume that the basis of this religion, grounded in shame and fear, was to portray a specific image of God and the Church. The use of the term fear, as a rhetorical tool, appears often throughout the opening sections of Theodore's penitentials as a means of controlling certain populations. This will be further evidenced in the following pages.

Theodore's penitential was arguably written within a decade, or two, following his death in 690 AD. While Theodore was not the original writer, the ideas and punishments within the penitential are still attributed to him. An interesting point is that most scholars believe the penitentials attributed to Theodore were written by one of Theodore's associates, Eoda.²⁴ However, for clarity's sake I will continue to refer to this specific Penitential as Theodore's

²³ "Early Penitentials the Canons of Theodore." Internet Archive. Accessed January 25, 2023. <https://archive.org/details/EarlyPenitentialsTheCanonsOfTheodore>.

²⁴ Mistry, Zubin. "Medicine for Sin: Reading Abortion in Early Medieval Penitentials." In *Abortion in the Early Middle Ages, c. 500-900*, NED-New Edition., 126-64. Boydell & Brewer, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt13wzsp5.10>.

Penitential. Theodore was very thorough with making sure he covered the bulk of sins that could be committed by laymen, laywomen, and clergy members. Theodore discusses abstaining from “sins” such as witchcraft and sorcery, to fornication, and pride, to name a few. Theodore relates these sins to evil and writes that his followers who commit these sins should feel shame and if not confessed they will meet the great judgement of God.

The judgement of God is clearly a rhetorical tool to ensure that the decisions of the priests are backed up by a higher power. The following chart depicts a small portion of sins related to sex and reproductive acts, and their punishments, or penances, in the Penitential of Theodore required for committing said sins.

Sin Committed	Penance
Fornicates on a Sunday	3 days
Married twice	1 year
Woman aborts fetus under 40 days from conception	1 year (or less)
Man aborts his own fetus (days after conception does not matter)	1 year + no fornication
Woman masturbates	3 years
False oath (oath made without a priest or bishop present)	3 years
Woman has an abortion 40 days, or more, after conception	3 years
Fornication with a virgin	4 years
Man fornicates with another man’s wife	4 years
Married three (or more) times	4 years - Life
Man fornicates with another man	7 – 10 years
Fornication with one’s sister	7 – 12 years
Fornication with an animal	10 – 15 years
Fornication with one’s mother	15 years - Life
Ejaculation into another person’s mouth	Life

Table 1. Theodore's Penitential Penances 1

Some interesting takeaways from these few sins, as there are hundreds in this penitential, is that fornication appears to be a great sin. When I say fornication, from the Latin *fornicatio*, what I mean is sexual relations similar to our modern conception of adultery, without the intent to procreate with one's husband or wife. As we see, Theodore states penance of one year or less if the aborted fetus had not reached 40 days of formation. Three years of penance would be the punishment for 41 days and over. This seems to be a light "sentence" compared to some other sins that one might think would be considered a lesser "evil," from our modern perspective.

When looking at other sins that the church viewed as greater sins, one example from Theodore's Penitential is that, "Whoever ejaculates seed into the mouth, that is the worst evil. For someone it was judged that they repent this up to the end of their lives."²⁵ A harsh penance like this tells a lot about what medieval Christian society viewed as a major problem within society. The Church attempting to control ejaculation in this manner portrays an image that ejaculation, to not procreate but simply for sexual pleasure, is viewed as worse than fornicating with one's sister, for example, or worse than abortion. Therefore, the stance the church had in medieval times towards abortion was more in line with something as simple as being married twice. While still deemed a sin, it was clearly viewed as a lesser sin than bestiality, for example, if we look at the length of penance as an indication.

To dissect this penitential a little more, we see that Theodore believed the soul did not enter the fetus until after 40 days. I am inclined to believe that this played a huge role in his decision for a lighter penance before that moment. The soul is a very important aspect of Christianity, the soul is something that God breathes into each living human. Therefore, by giving a lighter sentence for aborting a fetus (prior to the belief that the soul has entered),

²⁵ Penitential of Theodore, S75.03.01.

Theodore is ultimately stating that while not acceptable, this is not a major sin because God had essentially not breathed a soul into the growing fetus yet and therefore the fetus is arguably not a human/person yet. This also reflects the beliefs of society during this time. Societal issues could have included, but are not limited to, an increase in “illegitimate” pregnancies, war, lack of specific resources, an increase in fighting, or illicit sex scandals.

Considering, these potential societal issues and the society that Theodore is writing (or dictating) for, Theodore, as a bishop and male leader in the church, would have been a figure that other holy and lay men and women would have sought out for guidance. Therefore, his decisions would have needed to be in line with not only what his followers expected but also in line with church doctrine. An in-depth look at what the church was preaching then, would be beneficial to understanding what and why Theodore wrote what he did. For example, was Theodore heavily influenced by higher ups in the Church or was he more influenced by “sins” he witnessed in his community? These questions lead me to recognize that there are several takeaways from this source. One major takeaway is that this is one of the first church documents from England that specifically deals with abortion and discusses it in terms of a woman, or man, aborting their own fetus. It also ties into the misconceptions about the church and abortion that we experience today. Often the Church is associated with always being anti-abortion (in any capacity), but Theodore makes it clear that an abortion before 40 days is a relatively light penance/punishment. This leads one to deduce that Theodore saw early abortions as a lesser sin. This is obviously a deduction based upon my knowledge of church doctrine and lends itself to question what other limitations I am working with in terms of dealing with a document this old.

A glaringly obvious limitation of this source is that scholars do not know exactly who wrote this. While we attribute the ideas to Theodore – we cannot be certain since it appears to

have been written after his death. Another limitation is that since Theodore (or the writer) does not put this into context, we must do that ourselves and this can be tricky since we are reading it from our own time with our own point of view and bias. What this source does do is allow me to glean that the idea of abortion was becoming a societal issue. There must have been a power struggle, of some sort, going on for the church to step in and decide there should be a punishment for abortion. I say power struggle because the hierarchy of the church being male dominated would arguably not care about abortion or pregnancy (seeing as it does not directly affect them) if it was not in some way contradicting their teaching or diminishing their power over the people.

Another takeaway from specifically Irish penitentials is best articulated by Maeve B. Callan. She utilizes Irish Penitentials to point towards the ways in which sex and sexuality were discussed during this time period in, “The record of Irish saints’ Lives” which is supplemented by other sources on medieval sexuality such as the penitentials. This is further discussed by Callan with evidence that the terms sex and sexuality were not part of the vocabulary.”²⁶ Instead, *fornicatio* (fornication) appears throughout the hagiographies and penitentials in place of illicit sex.²⁷ This is important because, according to Callan, illicit sex²⁸ was viewed as a lesser sin by the Church. Fornication²⁹ was viewed as the problem plaguing the Church’s image. A pregnant woman, who became pregnant through *fornicatio* or having an affair, was proof that a sin had been committed, and therefore abortion was a way to hide the sin. The term *fornicatio* is

²⁶ “As Pierre Payer has pointed out, ‘the concept of sex or sexuality referring to a more or less morally neutral dimension of human persons is not encountered in the Middle Ages. Strictly speaking, the medieval did not speak about sex as such. To use terms such as *sex* and *sexuality*...is to use a vocabulary and a conceptual scheme that is foreign to the penitentials.’” Callan, 285.

²⁷ Callan, 285.

²⁸ Illicit sex meaning - sex outside of the rules of Christian marriage – i.e., sex for procreation and nothing more.

²⁹ Fornication is more in line with our modern term and understanding of adultery.

important for Callan’s discussion because she is pointing out the way in which sex is a modern conception that scholars and people in the modern day have inaccurately put in a medieval context. Through the dissection of the Latin terms utilized in the penitentials one can glean an interesting fact – fornication in this sense is not the same as sex and therefore we must read these penitentials with a removed sense of our present-day ideals. The penitentials have different punishments based on gender (male or female), they also express differing levels of severity, in punishment, based on things like wealth and status in society (slave, or free, etc.).³⁰ Callan’s research shows how the hagiographies and penitentials are in dialogue with one another and how they give scholars a glimpse into what was important to religious leaders and church followers.

Hagiographies

Hagiographies, much like penitentials, give us a glimpse into a society very far removed from our own. While hagiographies are not historical documents, in terms of accurately depicting the lives of saints, they do let us understand what was important to the Church and society during the time of writing. Hagiographies are not meant to document history but in some ways are meant to re-write it. They are meant to shed light on the lives of these religious individuals and get them canonized.³¹ So, there is an agenda behind hagiographies. Even so, they still give us deep insight into the societies that these hagiographies were written within.

As I look at three specific hagiographies, I recognize the role that not only abortion plays in these saint’s lives, but also the relation to chastity. Chastity was glaringly important for

³⁰ Callan, 285.

³¹ “Hagiography.” Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc. Accessed March 5, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hagiography>.

religious women, but it was also important for religious men.³² While this is the case, the Church recognized how difficult it was to control chastity, “Across the diversity of early medieval models of sanctity (and their modern interpretations), chastity was a crucial sign of religious distinction. But chastity was also fragile...”³³ This leads me to recognize why abortion miracles (saints performing abortions) were so important. The Church clearly recognized this fact as these saints were canonized with abortion miracles in their hagiographies.

The Lives of St. Brigit, St. Aed Mac Bricc, and St. Cainnech of Aghaboe

St. Brigit lived from approximately 451 – 525 AD and her *vita* was arguably written in 651 AD (approximately 100 years after her death). St. Aed, if he actually did live, died somewhere between 589 and 595. St. Aed’s *vita* interestingly enough is fairly reminiscent of St. Brigit’s. The third Saint this section will touch on is St. Cainnech, who was born around 515 AD and died in 600 AD. St. Cainnech’s *vita* was arguably written between 750-850AD. The lives of these saints, all Irish, are discussed here because they all have prominent documented abortion miracles. By analyzing these texts, I am also in dialogue with several scholarly works that discuss the ways in which abortion and reproduction were utilized as themes for Medieval religious women and men. These sources also focus on the ways in which the Church viewed abortion in the Early Middle Ages and the misconceptions that stem from an incomplete understanding, or deliberate misrepresentation, of Church doctrine in the modern era. This not only aids me in making my argument concrete but also conflicts at times – showing the dynamic

³² Karras, Ruth Mazo. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. 2nd ed. London;: Routledge, 2012.

³³ Mistry, Zubin. “The Sexual Shame of the Chaste; ‘Abortion Miracles’ in Early Medieval Saints’ lives.’ *Gender & History* 25, no. 3 (2013), p. 208.

nature of this topic and the ever-changing dialogue. As a reminder, these hagiographies are all written by men.

The hagiography of St. Brigit holds one of the first documented abortions made by a holy woman. This example is evidence of the understanding of abortion and also depicts the reason why women sought abortions. I do want to point out that scholar's label what St. Brigit did an "abortion miracle" and for the sake of consistency I will continue to call it this as well. However, during St. Brigit's life it was not called abortion. This is because the term abortion in the Irish penitentials of this time was *maleficium* and that term is not utilized in the *vita* of St. Brigit.³⁴

[She miraculously ends a pregnancy] When, however, this miracle is told, it provides a wonderful example. A certain woman who had taken the vow of chastity fell, through youthful desire of pleasure, and her womb swelled with child. Brigit, exercising the most potent strength of her ineffable faith, blessed her, causing the foetus to disappear, without coming to birth, and without pain. She faithfully returned the woman to health and to penance.³⁵

This was called "womb-healing" and the pregnant holy woman/nun who visited St. Brigit and was miraculously "healed" of the child in her womb was restored to health and made to be without sin again. This also falls into the realm of medical penitentials which discuss who should be performing healing care and how certain cures should be administered. This is further discussed in the *Medicamenta Paenitentiae*.³⁶ Scholar Lisa Bitel discusses this and the gendered dynamic healing/curing often took,

"[T]he medieval notion that external illness reflected inner decay, and monks were able to use their curative powers to reinforce the links between disease and, in this case, a

³⁴ Connolly, Sean, and J.-M. Picard. "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit' Content and Value." *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987): 5–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25508920>.

³⁵ Connolly, Cogitosus's, 212.

³⁶ Latin for medicines of penance.

gendered order. Thus, physical womb-healing served as a spiritual penance with unique administrative authority given to the female Christian nun, St. Brigit.”³⁷

This was in direct contrast with many of the penitentials because a woman (St. Brigit) was performing documented health care for women, and health care for others in general.³⁸ This was not generally within the realm of women’s “work” (especially not women’s spiritual work or role). This is significant because not only was St. Brigit (a woman) performing medicinal care and miracles, but she was specifically performing abortion miracles – this points towards the fact that causing a fetus to vanish (abortion miracle) was not worthy of condemnation or penance.

More in line with the gendered nature of medicine, we see how St. Aed and St. Cainnech are documented performing an abortion miracle, from St. Aed’s *vita*,

On a certain day, Aed, making a journey, came to another place of holy young women, which is called *Druim Ard*. He was received hospitably and with great joy. But Saint Aed, gazing at the young woman who was ministering to him, saw that her womb was swelling with child. And quickly he got up without food and fled from that place. Then in the presence of all she confessed that she had sinned secretly and made penance. Saint Aed blessed her womb, and immediately he infant in her womb disappeared just as if it had never been.³⁹

From St. Cainnech’s *vita*,

A certain nun living in his neighborhood committed fornication secretly, and her womb began to grow with the child conceived. She asked Saint Cainnech to bless her belly as

³⁷ Bitel, Lisa. “Spirituales Medici.” In *Isle of the Saints*, 173–. Cornell University Press, 2019.

Bitel also discusses the gendered nature of work in the Medieval period in this work as she points out the ways in which men were the main ones to document miracles and occurrences and therefore deducing the role and impact of women is a more difficult task, “I [Bitel] confront a larger historical problem: how to reach women of a society where men dominated formal culture and where all the written evidence about women was produced by a small group of literate men – in the case of early Ireland, mostly monkish men vowed to a religion that has always been ambivalent to the female sex.” Bitel, Lisa M. *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1996, xi.

³⁸ I say documented healthcare here, because scholars have found that women were performing reproductive style health care for other women but much of it was viewed as holistic or passed down orally. It was not documented or viewed in the same manner as men performing healthcare. This is why St. Brigit is so unique.

³⁹ Translation of the *Vita Aidi/The Life of St. Aed mac Bricc*, 17 (42).

though it was swollen by some pain. And when he blessed her, immediately the infant in her womb vanished, not appearing.⁴⁰

These depictions all lead me to deduce that the image of the Church was a more pressing and important aspect than abortion was at this time. The restoration of virginity/chastity and going back to a state of being “unpregnant” seems to be a very important theme for women within the church, from the viewpoint of the men writing about these miracles. It was best if women and men never fornicated but if the sin was committed and the woman became pregnant then a saint could reverse the pregnancy. This all alludes to the societal/Church acceptance of abortion miracles and while the nuns/religious women who received the miracles had to complete some sort of penance it was more about the sin of committing “youthful pleasure” (i.e., fornicating) rather than receiving the miracle of abortion. It might be thought that St. Brigit, St. Aed, and St. Cainnech are not prominent saints and that is why they were able to perform these abortions, but this is not the case. St. Brigit was (and is) very well known. Her cult and following is strong and she was often times viewed as a younger St. Patrick.⁴¹ St. Aed and St. Cainnech, while not as prominent as St. Brigit are still fairly well known. “Through the available material, she [St. Brigit] is revered as an exemplary virgin saint and founder of the great monastic community in Kildare and is portrayed as being a younger contemporary of Patrick.”⁴² This clearly depicts a highly revered and very well known saint, with an abortion-miracle included in her hagiography.

⁴⁰ Emmons, James BT. “Translation of the Vita Aidi/The Life of St. Aed Mac Bricc – Researchgate.” Accessed January 6, 2023.; Markus, Gilbert. “The Life of St Cainnech of Aghaboe.” Accessed January 7, 2023.

⁴¹ St. Patrick is arguably one of the most well-known and famous Saints, especially in Ireland and throughout Irish communities.

⁴² Roberts, Arica S. “Gendered Womb-Healing: Malevolent Magic and Spiritual Medicine in the Early Medieval Lives of St Brigit.”, vol. 31, 2020, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, pp. 193–208, doi: 10.1484/J.PERIT.5.124475.

Going back to Callan's work regarding abortion-miracles, Callan discusses the ways in which the miracles performed in the hagiographies not only violate the laws of nature but also question the very fundamentals of Catholic sexual morality. Present day Catholic moral teaching depicts abortion and premarital sex as being major sins. The notion that many present-day individuals have, relating these acts to an unforgivable sin grounded in the beginning of Christian teaching is inaccurate and/or imagined. Callan argues that through the celebration noted in hagiographies and stories of saints who perform abortion miracles, and restore virginity to women, there is a disconnect in the modern argument that these have always been sinful acts. The Irish Hagiographies Callan discusses celebrate several saints who "perform abortions, [and] restore female fornicators to a virginal state..." Other scholars have also utilized this argument to discuss why modern-day individuals might think the Church has always been anti-abortion, this is in part because those who make anti-abortion arguments are doing so based on only partial considerations of primary texts.

In following the thread of chastity and its relation to abortion and shame, scholar Zubin Mistry, in their article, *The Sexual Shame of the Chaste: 'Abortion Miracles' in Early Medieval Saints' Lives*, discusses in an indirect manner the ways in which sexual shame was used as a means for abortion being permissible. Mistry argues that by dissecting the miracle abortion in the *vitae* of St. Brigit and miracle abortions in two male saints' writings (Aed mac Bricc and Cainnech of Aghaboe), through the understanding of chastity and sexual sin in Early Medieval Ireland, scholars can better understand the significance of abortion to religious and secular individuals during this time period. Mistry points out that the previous scholarship has not been as in depth by not focusing on chastity, sexual sin, and abortion together – instead the three have been focused on separately. We must focus on them in tandem because a pregnant nun bore the

physical evidence that a sin had been committed. The pregnant nun carrying the fetus to term would have looked much worse and been harder to hide for the Church than having an abortion that few people knew about. By focusing on specific Irish hagiographies, this article explores “questions of chastity and sexual sin in examining an unusual ‘abortion miracle’ motif in the Latin hagiography of early medieval Ireland.”⁴³ This article is also in dialogue with the work of Callan and Lisa Bitel.⁴⁴ Mistry articulates that much like his work; Bitel also points out that abortion in the Medieval world has been misunderstood, misconstrued, and in many ways imagined. Mistry points to Bitel who claims that the suggested abortion miracles reflect a “blasé attitude toward abortion.” Mistry then states that Callan’s arguments surrounding hagiographic depictions of ‘abortionist saints’ reflects a very permissible attitude toward abortion.⁴⁵ I believe when Mistry and Callan reflect on this “permissible” attitude they use this word because within the church, chastity, especially for women, is so highly revered.⁴⁶ Having the opportunity to “restore” chastity and virginity is clearly deemed more important than the potential life of the fetus – for these scholars, and my, interpretations of the Medieval literature. This all ties into the steps that Mistry takes to further this discussion by incorporating ideals of chastity and sexual sin to further our knowledge of abortion in the Early Medieval Age.

Another article that takes an even more narrow focus than Mistry is Aarcia S. Roberts, “Gendered Womb-Healing: Malevolent Magic and Spiritual Medicine in the Early Medieval

⁴³ Mistry. “The Sexual Shame of the Chaste,” p. 208.

⁴⁴ Mistry utilizes several works by Lisa Bitel. The one I am referencing later in this paper is, *Land of Women*, by Lisa Bitel.

⁴⁵ Mistry. “The Sexual Shame of the Chaste,” p. 208.

⁴⁶ Take for example the biblical story and account of the Virgin Mary.

Lives of St. Brigit”.⁴⁷ Similar to, Callan, this article, looks at miraculous abortions, with a special focus on the hagiography of St. Brigit. What is interesting is that this article claims that abortion miracles are a central focus of mainly Irish Hagiographers. According to Roberts, scholars have previously argued that the existence of abortion miracles in Irish hagiography has been for one of two reasons. The first, is that abortion miracles are placed in defiance to early Christian morality, as evidenced in the modern notion of the Church always being anti-abortion. The second is that abortion miracles demonstrate the value of chastity in early Medieval Christianity.

Clearly, there is a wealth of secondary work on abortion miracles in the early middle ages. It is evident that the womb-healings and miraculous abortions that occurred by saints upon nuns and religious women placed the religious women’s chastity and virginity above any consideration for the potential life of the fetus. This all leads me to recognize that the image of the church and maintaining women’s chastity and virginity was the main goal in the recognition of utilizing abortion. This is also evident in the lighter punishment for committing or having an abortion compared to other sexual/reproductive sins. I have to believe that the harsher the punishment, the more devious the sin in the eyes of those writing the penitentials and hagiographies.

St. Hildegard and St. Paul

Up to this point we have discussed English and Irish penitentials and Irish hagiographies. I want to turn our attention to Germany and the writings of a woman. While this might appear to diverge from my focus on men’s writing, rhetoric, and male gaze upon women it is still connected. St. Hildegard was a woman that was able to write and documented much of her own work, music, and medical documents. Even though St. Hildegard broke some gendered norms

⁴⁷ Gendered Womb-Healing.

she still resided and worked within the realm of a male dominated Church hierarchy. In this way I have to imagine that a man was still necessary to oversee her writings if they were to be distributed to others outside of St. Hildegard's parish.

St. Hildegard was a German nun, born around 1098 AD, and along with everything else she accomplished in her life she prescribed medicinal abortions.⁴⁸ In St. Hildegard's, *Physica et Curae*, she describes 437 medicinal uses for 175 different plants. Included in the medicinal uses are emmenagogues (menstrual stimulators) and abortifacients. St. Hildegard discusses the botanical asarum and explains that "A pregnant woman will eat it, either on account she languishes or she aborts an infant which is a danger to her body, or if she has not had a menstrual period for a time period so that it hurts."⁴⁹ This is just one example from the *Physica* but depicts a very prominent religious woman recognizing the necessity of abortion and not condemning it as a major sin. While Hildegard covers the high middle ages, with her work, she allows us to follow a thread. St. Hildegard allows us to recognize that abortion back then was simply viewed as healthcare. Church doctrine in its relation to abortion from the Early Medieval Age to the High Medieval Age, with the penitentials and *vitas*, to the *Physica*, allows us to see how the Church dealt with and viewed abortion from one time period to the next.

All of the primary sources I have used have allowed me to discuss why our modern interpretation of medieval Church doctrine and rhetoric is imagined and inaccurate. While I say this, I am also sympathetic to attempting to understand why many in our modern era believe that the church is and always has been anti-abortion. I briefly want to look at The Epistle of St. Paul

⁴⁸ *Abortion Remedies from a Medieval Catholic Nun(!) - JSTOR DAILY*. <https://daily.jstor.org/abortion-remedies-medieval-catholic-nun/>.

⁴⁹ *Abortion Remedies from a Medieval Catholic Nun*.

to the Romans. Paul discusses the wrath of God as people gave in to their lusts and traded natural sexual acts for unnatural ones. As women and men committed these unnatural acts, such as men having sex with other men, God commanded his wrath and cursed those people. The idea of the Church being anti-abortion, however, is furthered when Paul states, in the Bible,

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety.⁵⁰

This section from the Bible, while it does not state a woman cannot have an abortion does portray a very dark life for women because of Eve's original sin. A woman must bear children in order to rid herself of this original sin. Therefore, if an abortion is committed then that furthers the notion of women carrying Eve's original sin.⁵¹ This roundabout argument surrounding why the Church could have been anti-abortion makes some sense, however the primary sources I analyzed above clearly contradict this theory, in practice. The language and rhetoric of control and fear is very prevalent throughout Church doctrine. Even with this being the case the medieval Church clearly recognizes that fornication that leads to an unwed pregnancy is more shameful than having an abortion and reinstating the virginal status to the woman.

⁵⁰ 1 Timothy 2:11-14.

⁵¹ Further reading about the Apostle Paul's writings and how they conflict with modern ideals of reproduction, and even feminism can be seen here, Bickerstaff, Marianne, and Amy-Jill Levine. *A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles*. Edited by Marianne Blicherstaff and Amy-Jill Levine. London;: T&T Clark, 2003.

CHAPTER TWO

ROE V. WADE¹

The 1960's and 1970's in the United States of America encapsulated a time of dramatic change, activism, and violence. The landmark Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, was not immune to the tumultuous atmosphere of the era. This chapter will look at not just *Roe v. Wade* but will also take a step back and look at the voices and rhetoric that decided and influenced the decision. The *Roe v. Wade* decision and the abortion debate are much more complex than they might seem on the surface. The conversation surrounding abortion shifted from a discussion about the legitimate and moral grounds for obtaining an abortion to questioning whether or not the government has a right to control abortion.² Much like the oversight of women's reproduction in the medieval era, *Roe v. Wade* is also a prime example of male rhetoric surrounding decisions that predominantly affect women, and their bodies.

The lack of inclusion of women and woman's rights groups in the Supreme Court decision depicts the ways in which the Supreme Court Justices ultimately gave the majority of power to medical professionals. This will be discussed in greater detail later but overall, what one sees is

¹ Before I begin this chapter, I want to recognize that I utilize the term safe (and legal) abortion often because I recognize that if abortion is not made legal, women will still obtain "illegal" abortions and in many cases the abortion providers in these instances might not be qualified, or they might harm, and even kill the woman seeking an abortion with little repercussion because the woman was seeking an illegal procedure. So, banning abortion does not mean abortions will end; it simply means abortion will become more unsafe and, in many cases, fatal.

² Greenhouse, Linda., and Reva B. Siegel. *Before Roe V. Wade: Voices That Shaped the Abortion Debate before the Supreme Court's Ruling*. New York: Kaplan Pub., 2010. p. 119.

that the Justices are still claiming that women do not have the agency or capacity to make an informed decision about their own pregnancy. Instead, women are still relegated to the decisions of, predominately, white male doctors. *Roe v. Wade* while a step in the right direction, guaranteed that a doctor and his patient were allowed a certain level of privacy and could not be prosecuted for having or performing an abortion. It also took away a states right to deny someone a legal abortion.³ What I want to look at in this chapter is not doctors versus women's decisions and women's rights but instead what this all has to do with the male gaze, the media, and medieval rhetoric and ideology.

The fact that neither women nor fetuses figured very prominently in *Roe v. Wade* makes it plausible to assume that feminist voices and right-to-life voices were simply missing, both from the arguments presented to the Supreme Court, and from the public conversation.⁴ Even though feminist and pro-life activists were passionately speaking about abortion and were present in the public debates, they were left out of the final decision as it appeared to mainly have concerned the thoughts and arguments of the medical community. The medical community, at this time, was comprised of mainly white males (in terms of doctors). In 1960, men made up 94% of doctors and in 1970, 92%.⁵ *Roe v. Wade*, in this sense gave more power to medical doctors, or white men, and allowed them to make decisions surrounding their female patients and whether or not it was in the best interest of their female patients to have an abortion. The lack of women's agency did not stop with them having to gain their physicians approval. Indeed, "Many doctors

³ What this access looks like, and who has access is worthy of research but is not touched upon in this thesis.

⁴ Williams, Daniel K. *Defenders of the Unborn: the Pro-Life Movement before Roe V. Wade*. Oxford University Press, 2016. p. viii.

⁵ Detweiler, Susan E. *Women Physician Pioneers of the 1960s: Their Lives and Profession over a Half Century*. S.1.: University of California, 2021.

had routinely asked hospital abortion committees for permission to perform abortions on women who had been exposed to rubella. To them, it seemed like good, compassionate medicine.”⁶ This idea in and of itself is extremely troubling and problematic, not just because rubella was a major factor in allowing a woman an abortion, but because there is this notion that a woman cannot make the decision for herself. Here we see that a woman who wants or needs to end her pregnancy safely is having this decision made by a committee of strangers. Not only is an abortion a potentially traumatic event, but it is also a very personal one. The fact that the doctor is the one now asking permission from a group of people (most likely all male) that do not know the woman, is not only inappropriate but would simply add to the stress and trauma of the patient. The idea that so many men are involved in a decision that most closely and intimately affects a woman is something that this chapter will look at in more detail.

The Supreme Court decision is also not immune to ignoring women’s agency. Not only were the Supreme Court justices who decided *Roe v. Wade* all white males, with the exception of Thurgood Marshall (an African American man and the first African American to serve on the Supreme Court),⁷ but women in this country have been under the gaze and decision-making process of men for centuries. This is further evidenced as the Supreme Court justices utilized an ancient historical precedent as they decided the outcome of the case, “Employing a standard textbook, the justices noted that the practice of abortion went back to ancient times and was

⁶ Blumenthal, Karen. *Jane Against the World: Roe V. Wade and the Fight for Reproductive Rights*. First edition. New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2020. p. 95.

⁷ Supreme Court Justices during the *Roe v. Wade* decision; Warren Burger (Chief Justice), Harry Blackmun (majority opinion), William Douglas, William Brennan Jr., Potter Stewart, Byron White, Thurgood Marshall, Lewis Powell Jr., William Rehnquist

available to women unless a father's right to offspring was being violated.”⁸ Not only is this an ancient ideology but it also sets a precedent for a man (i.e., the father) to claim some level of right over the pregnant woman's body.⁹ The court also discusses the Hippocratic Oath and its relation to a doctor's responsibility to do the least harm to their patients, harm which could be viewed as something completely different, depending on who you are speaking with. A doctor could decide that even though the pregnant woman is requesting an abortion it would be less harm to have the woman carry the fetus to term versus allowing her to obtain a safe and legal abortion. In this sense, is the pregnant woman's agency and choice really something that a doctor should have a lot of leeway to override?¹⁰ Here we see several grey areas, which will be discussed later on, that the court is allowing, and we see, even in the highest court in the nation, ties to ancient ideology are being borrowed and in many ways in a very simplified form.

History of *Roe* (and *Doe*)

Roe v. Wade was not the only case related to abortion that the Supreme Court was deciding in 1973. Alongside *Roe v. Wade*, from Texas, was *Doe v. Bolton*, from Georgia. Both were argued together, decided together, and ultimately issued on the same day. The Supreme Court even states that the two decisions, “are to be read together.”¹¹ Even with this bold of a

⁸ Riddle, John M. *Eve's Herbs: a History of Contraception and Abortion in the West*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997. p. 2.

⁹ I am not advocating that a father has zero rights to a child, but I am concerned about the term father in this sense. Is a father someone who had consensual relations with the woman? If so, then in this case, there is a potentially different moral and legal argument surrounding abortion. If the “father” is a man who raped (or committed incest) then this precedent could be extremely dangerous and traumatic for the pregnant woman.

¹⁰ I also want to interject a caveat that I understand the moral duty of the Hippocratic Oath and the line for allowing a person agency can change based on factors such as mental illness, etc. However, the questions I pose are still valid and I believe were not looked at in enough detail as the justices made their decision and utilized language that left these grey areas.

¹¹ Forsythe, Clarke D. *Abuse of Discretion: the Inside Story of Roe V. Wade*. First American edition. New York: Encounter Books, 2013.

statement, the media and politicians have largely ignored the *Doe* decision when talking about abortion and its legality. This research is not meant to dissect the differences in the two decisions nor dive into why *Doe* is relatively undiscussed. I do however want to point out one major difference in the language of the two. *Roe* implied that states could essentially ban abortion after *fetal viability* unless the mother's health was in danger from carrying the fetus to term. In 1973, and for the sake of abortion law, fetal viability in this sense was defined to mean that the fetus could survive on its own, outside of the womb. Most studies claim this begins after 28 weeks from conception. In *Doe* there was an addition that added a health exception post-fetal viability. The Justices classified this health exception as any health-related factor such as, emotional, physical, familial, psychological, and even the woman's age as being relevant to the well-being of the patient. This leaves a lot of room for medical professionals and their patients to obtain a legal abortion, and also proved to be a critical factor in the abortion debate and decision,

Health, in abortion law, means emotional well-being without limits. Any potential emotional reservation a woman has about being pregnant can be deemed, at the discretion of the abortion provider, as a threat to her 'health,' and thus a reason to ignore any abortion prohibition after fetal viability.¹²

Doe arguably, is one of the most liberal decisions the Supreme court has ever made. While *Doe* allowed a lot of leeway to obtaining abortion, it still took agency away from women, much like *Roe*, by stating that the decision was at the discretion of the abortion provider. This is still problematic due to the high percentage of male doctors at the time. While the *Doe* decision was extremely liberal it still placed the power in the hands of male doctors, who were predominantly white. That being said, the focus of this research is not about *Doe*. It is about *Roe* for the sake of brevity, and also because *Roe* has had such a major impact on the abortion debate and especially

¹² Abuse of Discretion, 9.

the media. For that reason, I now want to turn to *Roe v. Wade*. What does the language of *Roe* mean for the millions of people living in the United States that this decision affected?

Roe

Roe v. Wade was considered the most controversial decision made by a modern court.¹³

This is for several reasons. The controversial nature of abortion and *Roe v. Wade* lies in how our society discussed the case and ultimately how the justices, lawyers, medical professionals, and activists all spoke about women. Language and rhetoric matter, especially in the judicial system, because the way things are worded can set dangerous precedents. Words can, however, also allow freedoms to be granted. “The outcome in *Roe* surprised even abortion activists. Lawrence Lader, one of the key abortion-rights leaders of the 1960s, wrote that the abortion decisions were ‘far broader in scope than anyone expected, and even more conclusive than any of us dared to hope.’”¹⁴ What is also interesting about the *Roe* decision is that what the media reported was actually very different from what the justices wrote. This is interesting in the sense that when one thinks about who the target audience of the media is versus the target audience and politics surrounding the Supreme Court, those two groups could be drastically different.

Media aside, for a moment, I want to recognize what the language of the Supreme Court, in relation to *Roe* and abortion actually means, in practice. While the entire *Roe v. Wade* decision is too long to cite in its entirety here I do want to place the first full paragraph below because it depicts the verdict and what this case is truly about,

¹³ The courts recognize this themselves as they state, “We forthwith acknowledge our awareness of the sensitive and emotional nature of the abortion controversy, of the vigorous opposing views, even among physicians, and of the deep and seemingly absolute convictions that the subject inspires. One’s philosophy, one’s experiences, one’s exposure to the raw edges of human existence, one’s religious training, one’s attitudes toward life and family and their values, and the moral standards one establishes and seeks to observe, are all likely to influence and to color one’s thinking and conclusions about abortion. *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), p. 708.

¹⁴ Abuse of Discretion, 4.

Action was brought for a declaratory and injunctive relief respecting Texas criminal abortion laws which were claimed to be unconstitutional. A three-judge United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas, 314 F. Supp. 1217, entered judgement declaring laws unconstitutional and an appeal was taken. The Supreme Court, Mr. Justice Blackmun, held that the Texas criminal abortion statutes prohibiting abortions at any stage of pregnancy except to save the life of the mother are unconstitutional; that prior to approximately the end of the first trimester the abortion decision and its effectuation must be left to the medical judgement of the pregnant woman's attending physician, subsequent to approximately the end of the first trimester the state may regulate abortion procedure in ways reasonably related to maternal health, and at the stage subsequent to viability the state may regulate and even proscribe abortion except where necessary in appropriate medical judgement for preservation of life or health of the mother.¹⁵

In many ways the Justices did something unique but in other ways there were several pieces missing if this was to stake a claim to a major leap for “womankind.” Let’s take a look at the medical aspect of this Court case. Without a doubt “The Justices also abruptly changed American medicine.”¹⁶ Not only did the Justices immediately change medicine but they also allowed abortion to be the only medical procedure that became a constitutional right. This gave protection not only to women seeking abortions but specifically medical professionals. Abortion became not only a national debate and issue, but now the politics of abortion were on a national scale. In this sense medicine was more politicized than ever in terms of women and reproduction. Most critically, however, as noted, *Roe v. Wade* still placed the decision-making process in the hands of doctors. As mentioned before over 90% of medical doctors at this time were male. In this sense, the decision making was still left up to men – a decision that would most closely affect women experiencing a dangerous or unwanted pregnancy. In sum, the decision of *Roe v. Wade*, gave doctors the power to decide if a woman should receive an abortion for health reasons instead of leaving the final decision up to the woman.

¹⁵ *Roe v. Wade*, 705.

¹⁶ *Abuse of Discretion*, 10.

The Rhetoric of *Roe*

As I dive into the language of *Roe v. Wade*, I am really looking at the way the Justices, specifically Justice Blackmun,¹⁷ used rhetoric, and history, as tools to discuss those most closely affected by abortion, women. As Justice Blackmun lays out the task placed before the Supreme Court he states,

Our task, of course, is to resolve the issue by constitutional measurement, free of emotion and of predilection. We seek earnestly to do this, and, because we do, we have inquired into, and in this opinion place some emphasis upon, medical and medical-legal history and what that history reveals about man's attitudes towards the abortion procedure over the centuries.¹⁸

I find it interesting that the Justices are calling on centuries of history to help inform their decision in the present. Seeing as the highest court in the nation is using history as a precedent, we can deduce how important it is to depict the past accurately if we are using it to inform our present. This is evidenced by the courts as they go on to discuss ancient attitudes, The Hippocratic Oath, and common law/quickenings. The Ancient Attitudes section, of *Roe v. Wade*, claims that "These [ancient attitudes] are not capable of precise determination."¹⁹ Even so, the Justices attempt to condense some of the most important aspects of the history of abortion,

We are told that at the time of the Persian Empire abortifacients were known and that criminal abortions were severely punished. We are also told, however, that abortion was practiced in Greek times as well as in the Roman Era, and that 'it was resorted to without scruple.' The Ephesian, Soranos, often described as the greatest of the ancient gynecologists, appears to have been generally opposed to Rome's prevailing free-abortion practices. He found it necessary to think first of the life of the mother, and he resorted to abortion when, upon this standard, he felt the procedure advisable. Greek and Roman law afforded little protection to the unborn. If abortion was prosecuted in some

¹⁷ Justice Blackmun wrote the majority opinion, while Justices Rehnquist and White dissented.

¹⁸ *Roe v. Wade*, 709.

¹⁹ *Roe v. Wade*, 715.

places, it seems to have been based on a concept of a violation of the father's right to his offspring. Ancient religion did not bar abortion.²⁰

By drawing on an ancient past and claiming specifically that ancient religion did not ban abortion, the Justices are in dialogue with those who claim abortion is wrong based on religious tradition. Not only do the Justices touch upon a religious argument but they also look at ancient medical ethics with the Hippocratic Oath,

The Oath varies somewhat according to the particular translation, but in any translation the content is clear: 'I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked nor suggest any such counsel; and in like manner I will not give to a woman a pessary to produce abortion,' or 'I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect, Similarly, I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy.'²¹

Following this translation there is discussion of the importance of the Hippocratic Oath, "[The Hippocratic Oath] represents the apex of the development of strict ethical concepts in medicine, and its influence endures to this day."²² The Justices go on to discuss a theory as to why Hippocrates (author of the Hippocratic Oath) did not try to stop abortion in Rome since he believed abortion was wrong. The Justices claim that even the Hippocratic Oath was contested during its time and therefore just because something is contested and creates division does not mean that the state will consider it illegal. Ultimately, the Oath represented a small fraction of Greece and Rome at the time and was not accepted by all ancient physicians.²³ While our modern time is very familiar with the Hippocratic Oath, as it has become the standard for medical practitioners, it was not always this way.

²⁰ Roe v. Wade, 715.

²¹ Roe v. Wade, 716.

²² Roe v. Wade, 716.

²³ Roe v. Wade, 716.

The last historical section I want to dissect, discusses the common law related to abortion before quickening,

It is undisputed that at common law, abortion performed *before* ‘quickening’ – the first recognizable movement of the fetus *in utero*, appearing usually from the 16th to 18th week of pregnancy – was not an indictable offense. The absence of a common-law crime for pre-quickening abortion appears to have developed from a confluence of earlier philosophical, theological, and civil and canon law concepts of when life begins.

This Justices go on to discuss how this argument relied on when the fetus became “formed” or recognizably human. This also includes the religious argument of when the soul enters the fetus.

The Justices in this opinion clearly spend a great deal of time discussing the history of how people viewed abortion, based on surviving written documentation surrounding abortion. Due to the length and in-depth nature of these discussions the reader can see that the Justices placed great significance on the past. This significance points to why it is so important to understand not only the context of rhetoric from the past but overall, why it matters that we correctly understand, to the best of our ability, the history of abortion. Since the Justices are utilizing these ancient and medieval histories to inform their decision, they should, understand the history in the context of the societies at the time. One thing the Justices do well, is recognize the disputed nature of abortion throughout our history, this is especially evidenced in the quickening section, “Whether abortion of a *quick* fetus was a felony at common law, or even a lesser crime, is still disputed.”²⁴ The opinion written by Justice Blackmun that has been briefly dissected above is clear evidence of the importance of history to their decision. It also depicts a history and world that has always been divided on how to deal to with abortion.

²⁴ Roe v. Wade, 717.

The language of the *Roe v. Wade* decision allows for a much wider lens as the Justices discuss how women, in the early 19th century in the United States, “enjoyed a substantially broader right to terminate a pregnancy than she does in most States today.”²⁵ The decision then goes on to discuss how the anti-abortion mood of the American Medical Association played a significant part in the enactment of criminal abortion legislation in the late 19th century.²⁶ The Justices, jumping forward to 1970, depict a change in the medical field with an example from the American Public Health Association who claim that abortion should be allowed if certain standards are adopted – including a trained physician, psychiatric consultation, and the fact that abortions should be performed in a hospital, etc. After dedicating significant space to the thoughts of the medical and even legal field, the opinion goes on to explain why the 19th century saw the enactment of criminal abortion law. Ultimately, the justices decide that the overall reason is that there was a major focus on State’s interests and privacy.

Privacy is then discussed at length as the Justices claim, “The Constitution does not explicitly mention any right of privacy. In a line of decisions, however...the Court has recognized that a right of personal privacy, or a guarantee of certain areas or zones of privacy, does exist under the Constitution.”²⁷ The Justices spend several pages discussing privacy and precedents that allow them to make a decision based upon previous legal cases that dealt with privacy. This argument results in the decision that,

This right of privacy, whether it be founded in the Fourteenth Amendment’s concept of personal liberty and restrictions upon state action, as we feel it is, or, as the District Court determined, in the Ninth Amendment’s reservation of rights to the people, is broad

²⁵ *Roe v. Wade*, 720.

²⁶ *Roe v. Wade*, 721.

²⁷ *Roe v. Wade*, 726.

enough to encompass a woman's decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy...In other cases, as in this one, the additional difficulties and continuing stigma of unwed motherhood may be involved. All these are factors the woman and her responsible physician necessarily will consider in consultation.²⁸

Here we see the Court claiming that a woman does have a right to privacy and that a responsible physician should be consulted if a woman desires an abortion. Ultimately the Justices decide that abortion is protected, not necessarily under a woman's right to make decisions about her own body, but under her right to privacy, "We, therefore, conclude that the right of personal privacy includes the abortion decision, but that this right is not unqualified and must be considered against important state interests in regulation."²⁹ This statement leads me to the recognition that the portrayal of the *Roe v. Wade* decision by media outlets as a win for women often times leaves out the discussion of privacy as a major factor in the decision.

This closer examination of the reasoning and arguments of the Justices in making their ruling leads me to conclude that the Justices themselves were aware of the extent to which beliefs that the Church's ideology was always anti-abortion were incorrect as well as, secular society has always been divided on the issue of abortion. Those who claim the pro-life stance is grounded in religious tradition or an anti-abortion Church are clearly misinformed. The Church's ideologies have clearly changed over time and the Supreme Court justices also recognize this in their own decision making. Another interesting facet of *Roe v. Wade* is the way the Supreme Court Justices wrote about the decision versus how the media portrayed it are drastically different. I now turn to this issue.

²⁸ *Roe v. Wade*, 727.

²⁹ *Roe v. Wade*, 727.

Roe and the Media

The sensational nature of the media is one aspect of our society that has not changed much since *Roe v. Wade*. The media portrayal of *Roe v. Wade* and the actual language used in the final decision diverge from one another. Many media outlets discuss *Roe v. Wade* as a turning point in the fight for rights for all women. One newspaper article published in 1980 (about seven years after the *Roe v. Wade* decision) states in a letter to the editor, and in response to Quaker Steven R. Valentine,

Mr. Valentine would enslave me to my womb, and to chance (whether as contraceptive failure or as rape). *Roe v. Wade* has not only just freed me by guaranteeing me, not the wisdom to make the right choice at all times, but the right to choose for myself. I will never go back.³⁰

Bold words written by Deborah Reich in response to a man who claimed previously that the only women who need abortions are those who are promiscuous or sexually “free” and that *Roe v. Wade*, “encourages people to choose abortion for foolish reasons and that to be pro-choice is to be antifamily.”³¹ Valentine goes on to discuss that distinguishing the fetus from a human person is akin to racism, and that President Reagan is the “Lincoln of our time.”³² What this shows is that the debate surrounding abortion in the mainstream deviated drastically from the language of the actual decision. The media also depicts a lot of women’s and men’s stories (both pro-choice and pro-life). The voices of activists resonate strongly throughout the media, compared to the actual decision which leaves these voices out. Some of this can be due to the sensational nature

³⁰ *A Woman’s Right*: [Letter]. *The New York Times*. New-York, [N.Y.:HJ Raymond & Co, 1980.

³¹ *A Woman’s Right*.

³² President Reagan, at this time, opposed *Roe v. Wade*; *New York Times*, 1980.

of the media but other reasons are that the everyday person is probably not as familiar with the language in the actual case.

The aftermath of *Roe v. Wade* being seen as such a huge victory for the pro-choice movement allows discussions surrounding it to be geared towards a win for women and women's rights. While I am not disagreeing with this fact, I am leery to say that it was all decided on the basis that a woman has agency and a right to choose what to do with her own body. As I have argued in the previous section, the decision had little to do with this. In this way I believe the popular debates and media discussions are lacking in facts. Instead, *Roe v. Wade* was a major win and advancement for doctors and medical professionals. *Roe v. Wade* granted doctors the right to do what they believed (not necessarily what their patient believed) was in the best interest of their patient. Doctors often prescribe, or do not, medications and give advice that might be in conflict with what the woman knows and believes would be best for her.³³ One major example relating to reproduction is birth control. Historically, doctors would not prescribe birth control to women unless they were married, and even then, the woman often had to prove her husband did not want any(more) children.³⁴ There was also a case, in the 1960's (granted pre-*Roe*), regarding a woman who was very ill after having her second child. She was worried that if she got pregnant again, the pregnancy would kill her. She knew that her body literally could not handle another pregnancy. Yet, she was in her 20's, and her doctor decided she was of childbearing age, and married, and could therefore not be allowed to go on birth control. Her

³³ We must also remember that *Roe v. Wade* did not guarantee access to an abortion clinic or a doctor that could/would perform an abortion.

³⁴ Planned Parenthood. "Birth Control Became Legal 50 Years Ago – and Here Are Our 5 Favorite Things About It." Planned Parenthood Action Fund. Accessed January 28, 2023.; *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479.

greatest fear came true, and she became pregnant again, she begged her doctor for an abortion. The doctor did agree and took her case before the hospital board to perform the abortion. The hospital board denied her the abortion and she was forced to carry the fetus to term, regardless of her own needs. She ultimately miscarried and survived, but this is just one instance of a decision being made by a doctor against the wishes of his patient in a medical field that has historically denied women the right to decide what is best for them.³⁵ Granted this was pre-Roe, but still it shows the struggles and added trauma women have gone through, and still do, just to make everyday decisions about their health and wellbeing.³⁶

The Aftermath of *Roe v. Wade* and Modern Political Debates

In exploring the issue of the aftermath of *Roe*, I again turn to the media and recognize not only the sensational nature of newspapers, tabloids, and tv news networks, I also recognize the disconnect from historical fact, and witness inaccurate accounts of history and in some cases complete historical myth. We are also struck with the fact that rhetoric and language is so powerful. Much of the discussion going on in politics regarding the abortion question revolves around the reason why a woman would want an abortion. Cases of rape and incest stand most prominently, but the interesting thing is that those who are most vocal about denying a woman an abortion are white men in politics. Jim Buchy, a representative from Ohio, and strong proponent of the Heartbeat Abortion Ban (HB 125)³⁷ appeared in a documentary titled, *The*

³⁵ Kaplan, Laura. *The Story of Jane: the Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

³⁶ *The Story of Jane*.

³⁷ “HB 125 more popularly known as “The Heartbeat Bill,” is a bill to modify Ohio law to require doctors to search for a fetal heartbeat and to ban abortion after a fetal heartbeat is detectable, unless there is a medical emergency that would put the woman at risk of death or ‘substantial and irreversible impairment of a major bodily function.’” “HB 125 – the Heartbeat Bill (2011-2012).” ACLU of Ohio, August 6, 2012. <https://www.acluohio.org/en/legislation/hb-125-heartbeat-bill-2011-2012>

Abortion War. In this documentary Buchy is asked why he believes a woman would seek to have an abortion. After some thought he stammers out an answer, “Well, there’s probably a lot of – I’m not a woman so I’m thinking, if I’m a woman, why would I want to get - some of it has to do with economics. A lot has to do with economics. I don’t know, I have never – it’s a question I have never thought about.”³⁸ One would think that Buchy, being such a strong proponent of banning abortion after the fetus’s heart starts to beat (many women do not even know they are pregnant before this time) would be an expert on women, reproduction, and abortion. Instead, Buchy, a wealthy white man from Ohio, has never even tried to put himself in the shoes of those who would most closely be affected by the ban he intends to pass. Buchy also claimed that the ban would help reduce unwanted pregnancies because most abortions are performed on women who are not raped.³⁹ Where he pulls this logic from I will probably never know, but the fact that he is allowed to speak on such a loud stage and to such a large audience is not only concerning but dangerous. Should his ban be implemented, women will be losing major rights and agency to control what happens to their own body, be it rape, incest, economics, or for any number of reasons for needing/wanting an abortion.

Much like Buchy, the United States witnessed another example of a white man in a leadership role, completely out of touch with abortion and women’s rights. Todd Akin, former Representative and at the time of his statement a Senate hopeful, unapologetically claimed that the rape and incest debate surrounding abortion is not valid because a woman’s body cannot become pregnant from incest or from being raped. Both Buchy and Akin are extremists of the

³⁸ Harris, Lydia. “Old Ideas for a New Debate: Medieval and Modern Attitudes to Abortion.” *Medieval Feminist Forum*, n.d. doi:10.17077/1536-8742.2091. p. 131.

³⁹ *Old Ideas for a New Debate*, 132.

most dangerous form. They are ill advised, misinformed and spew inaccuracies that put people in danger. What I want to focus on is the fact that both of these men's ideologies have been labeled by news outlets as "medieval" concepts.⁴⁰ Donald Trump's plan to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and close women's health clinics was also labeled as "going back into medieval mire."⁴¹ Much of this is in direct contrast to the ideologies I depicted from actual medieval times in the first chapter. I say this because here we see the media finding a scapegoat for harmful rhetoric. We see politicians making dangerous claims and attempting to enforce harmful and unpopular policies and yet we claim that they say them as an ode to the past. This clearly demonstrates not only a dangerous pattern of media outlets misconstruing the past, but ironically also depicts an America, where much like the medieval era, white men are still making the decisions for women, and it has dire consequences as we will see in the next chapter.

⁴⁰ Several issues of the New York Times and the Guardian.

⁴¹ Old Ideas for a New Debate, 133.

CHAPTER THREE

CHRISTIAN FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

Christian Far-Right Extremism (CFRE) has been present in the United States for a long time.¹ Even so, 2017 saw a rise in this ideology as it moved to the forefront of not only the media but boldly infiltrated almost every aspect of daily life in this country. The Trump era, as I call it, saw an emergence in CFRE that many within this country thought we left behind in a mere distant past. There was a blatant resurgence of racism, sexism, homophobia, queerphobia, transphobia, anti-immigrant rhetoric, anti-Chinese sentiment, and so on. While all of this instigated violence and is very important to acknowledge because people lost their lives, it is not the focus of this research. This nation has been the home to white supremacy and many human rights violations, from its conception, reproductive rights for women are included in these violations. This country bears the scars and the continued beatings of a nation that has not been able to look at the past and learn from it. The checkered past of this nation leads me to the main point of this chapter: How is CFRE tied into abortion, especially in terms of the pro-life movement and how has medieval ideology been inaccurately (or imagined) seized upon by this group to justify its actions. To address this, I will look at the post-Roe era and violence against abortion clinics and providers by two CFRE organizations, the Army of God, and Operation Rescue. This section also looks at a more modern example as this nation, again, saw an increase in anti-abortion rhetoric with the resurgence of CFRE in 2016/2017 to the present.

¹ Pitcavage, Mark. "Surveying the Landscape of the American Far Right." Accessed March 1, 2023. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Surveying%20The%20Landscape%20of%20the%20American%20Far%20Right_0.pdf.

In addition, I want to recognize again the power of rhetoric. The slogan, “Make America Great Again,” clearly ignited something in a group of people that has led to not only violence and death, but also to a new debate about religious extremism and morality. Certain aspects of CFRE ideologies and actions have led to the overturning of certain rights for individuals as well as created a divisive atmosphere in this country. Before jumping into the main focus of this chapter, I want to put this all into context by looking at the re-emergence of CFRE, and why this group so visible now, ultimately ending with how this group, historically, is tied into the anti-abortion, the pro-life movement, and medieval rhetoric.

The “Re” Emergence of the Christian Far-Right

As stated earlier, CFRE has been present in the United States prior to the Trump era. I do, however, recognize that if we look at the past five to seven years we can see a rise in the frequency and severity of not only extreme ideologies and conspiracies but also in violent acts being committed by predominantly white men, that we have not seen on a scale like this since the 1980’s and before. On August 3rd, 2019, El Paso, Texas witnessed a white supremacist kill twenty-two people in a mass shooting. Not even a full day later in Ohio another mass shooting left ten people dead. These occurrences only led to emboldening CFRE as posts on social media declared, “it’s happening!” and “the fire rises!”² Moving back even further to 2017, the world witnessed scores of white men marching across the University of Virginia, wielding tiki torches and chanting things like, “Jews will not replace us,” and “white lives matter,” a scary homage, and reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. Shortly after this racist and antisemitic rally, the governor of Virginia had to declare a state of emergency as the Unite the Right rally created a situation of pure chaos and destruction. A twenty-two-year-old drove his car into a group of counter-

² Hate in the Homeland, 1.; Referencing the “fire” is a biblical reference to the second coming of Christ.

protestors injuring many and killing one. Not to mention Dylan Roof, who murdered nine African American churchgoers in a South Carolina church. All of this combined shows not only how CFRE was cemented into the mainstream narrative but more importantly demonstrated that, “white-supremacist and far-right movements [are] unquestionably on the rise in the United States.”³ An increase in not only confederate imagery in social media, and beyond, but also in fascist and Nazi symbolism emerged as well. The white men who committed these atrocities all had confederate or Nazi symbolism and ideology somehow tied to them. We must take this seriously because in 2017, “right-wing extremists killed at least fifty people in the United States, outnumbering all other terrorist – and extremist-related deaths.”⁴ With the emergence and election of Donald Trump as leader of a very powerful country in 2016, and his assumption of office in 2017, the correlation is clear. Trump’s rhetoric led to, or at least contributed to, the massive resurgence in white nationalism and hate groups/movements in 2017. While there are several issues surrounding hate groups in the United States, I want to focus on extremism and rise of these ideologies as they relate to abortion. This means that we will go back to before Donald Trump’s political rise and look at the post-Roe era and CFRE violence against abortion clinics and practitioners.

Christian Far-Right Extremism and Abortion

Up to this point we have pinpointed a moment in time when this country saw a rise in CFRE. I have also discussed the extremism, in CFRE ideology. Now I want to turn to the Christian or, religious aspect, in CFRE. As mentioned before, the United States has seen domestic terrorists bomb abortion clinics, LGBT-venues, murder minorities, and even agitate to

³ Hate in the Homeland, 1.

⁴ Hate in the Homeland, 2.

overthrow the federal government when their candidate (Donald Trump) lost the presidential election. Most, if not all, of the individuals who committed these acts of violence utilized, “a warped version of Christianity to justify their violence.”⁵ In a twisted way, these CFRE have commandeered a religion to justify their beliefs in white supremacy. This notion of violence being the best route to accomplish their goal is also evidenced in the way CFRE groups and organizations talk about abortion.

The Army of God is a group that first appeared in 1984. By utilizing the term “Army” there is an insinuation that there is a war to be fought, that violence is the proper route and that they are fighting it on behalf of God. These beliefs alleviate some of the responsibility, allowing a rationale and excuse for these violent individuals. They can simply say God ordained the violence and it is His will. Take for example, Reverend Michael Bray. Bray bombed an abortion clinic in the 1980’s and left a sign reading “AOG” (Army of God) at the site of his attack. Supreme Court Justice Blackmun received a very threatening letter in 1980, signed “AOG” in connection to the *Roe v. Wade* decision. The AOG is simply one example of a group that has utilized Christianity to justify their violent white supremacist actions. Especially in relation to abortion, one edition of a pamphlet written and distributed by the AOG states, “[W]e, the remnant of God-fearing men and women of the United States of Amerika, do officially declare war on the entire child killing industry.”⁶ On paper, this might seem harmless, but in practice these words serve a very specific and dangerous purpose. They claim a war declaration, which insinuates violence. They justify it by claiming that the abortion industry is killing babies. This

⁵ Jones, Sarah E. “Homegrown HATE: On the Fringes of the Far Right Sit Groups That Use Faith to Justify Violent Extremism.” *Church & State* 69, no. 5 (2016): p. 4.

⁶ On the Fringes, 4.; This is something that we still see occurring at Planned Parenthoods today.

organization goes on to discuss how to construct bombs and place them in abortion clinics to do the most damage. Militants are also encouraged to “maim” doctors who provide abortion services by cutting their fingers off. While AOG’s status is unclear today, it existed not so long ago that we can act like it is not still affecting ideologies today. The other harmful aspect of this organization lies in a warped belief that Christian tradition is violent. This group seemingly borrows from the ideology of the Crusades, where Christians thought the only way to honor God and protect their religious freedoms was to go to war against non-Christians.⁷

While many mainstream narratives attribute a lot of these harmful ideologies solely to the Trump era, what I have found is that Trump gravitated towards many of these ideologies in order to build a political base. Seeing as AOG was around before Trump’s rise, one can recognize the rhetoric that Trump borrowed from the misinformed AOG. AOG was not alone in its militant mission to eradicate abortion, abortion clinics, and abortion providers. Operation Rescue was also a leading militant Christian group that was anti-abortion. Known for its extreme tactics, Operation Rescue became famous for blocking abortion clinic doors and occupying clinics for extended periods of time.⁸ Posting addresses of abortion providing doctors, so their militants could “maim” them led to the death of Dr. George Tiller. While Operation Rescue tried to distance itself from this murder, they still were the catalyst for his murder. Not only did they post his home address, but they encouraged this ideology – do the work of God and end abortion by any means necessary. In an interesting turn of events, the 1994 murder of abortion provider John Britton and his bodyguard James Barrett was supported by Operation Rescue president, Troy

⁷ Buc, Philippe. *Holy War, Martyrdom, and Terror: Christianity, Violence, and the West, cca.70 C.E. to the Iraq War*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

⁸ On the Fringes, 4.

Newman. Newman claims, “There are many examples where taking a life in defense of innocent human beings is legally justified and permissible under the law.”⁹ Newman has published several books and in some even compares abortion providers to Adolf Hitler and compares abortion to sacrificing to demons.¹⁰ These two examples of extreme rhetoric, shed light on the reasoning behind why so many of these acts are violent. Those who subscribe to CFRE ideals are just that, extremists that believe the only way to honor God and do his will is to utilize a tradition of violence.

Violence, and rhetoric that inspires violence, are clearly not new to humanity. How we utilize rhetoric and incite violence, however, has taken on new tactics over the centuries. I have depicted several examples of the media and individuals utilizing a medieval past and arcane ideologies to justify the actions against present day politicians and leaders related to abortion. Not only is the use of these ideologies inaccurate, and they create an imagined past, as this research has shown, but medieval ideals related to abortion, specifically, were more lenient than CFRE extremists believe.

Up to this point I have pointed out the ways that CFRE have utilized violence in the name of God to perform His “will.” What I want to do next is trace this ideology back to a misunderstanding, and assumption about the medieval past. Several CFRE not only utilize the names of medieval leaders on social media, but many ascribe to inaccurate versions of medieval era religions, that guide (or misguide) their beliefs about abortion. Scholar Miki Vohryzek-Bolden discusses the rise in white domestic terrorism (or right-wing terrorists) in the United

⁹ “Who is Troy Newman? What is Operation Rescue?” Troy Newman and Operation Rescue, Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://feminist.org/anti-abortion-violence/troy-newman-operation-rescue.html>.

¹⁰ Newman, Troy, and Cheryl Sullenger. *Their Blood Cries Out*. Wichita, KS: Restoration Press, 2003.

States. Vohryzek-Bolden discusses how many of these extremist groups have begun to ascribe to ancient and medieval religions,¹¹ “Many of the key philosophers and advocates in these movements believe they are obligated – and sometimes biblically mandated – to turn one’s beliefs into action.”¹² Post-Roe, there was a surge in CFRE, in relation to anti-abortion activism. Scholars claim that this “second” generation of anti-abortion activists was born out of frustration from the setbacks of/during *Roe v. Wade*. This second generation, began utilizing violent forms of protesting abortion.¹³

One major example of this extremism and its ties to ancient religion is a 1992 campaign, “One of the most visible direct action anti-abortion endeavors was the ‘John the Baptist’ campaign in 1992 of the Dallas Pro-Life Action Network (PLAN). The campaign was designed to persuade doctors to stop performing abortions.”¹⁴ The John the Baptist campaign was designed to threaten abortion providers with violence should they continue performing abortions. Much like the discussion in chapter one surrounding the epistle of Paul, there is also reason to connect John the Baptist to abortion. “He [John the Baptist] will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”¹⁵ This was a prophecy, from the Bible made about John the Baptist and it can be seen that this could have some connection to a belief that Christians and the Church should

¹¹ Vohryzek-Bolden, Miki. “Right-Wing Terrorists and the Threats they Pose for Americans in the 21st Century.” *Humboldt journal of social relations* 27, no. 2 (2003): 53-98.

¹² Right-Wing Terrorists, 72.

¹³ Right-Wing Terrorists, 74.

¹⁴ Right-Wing Terrorists, 75.

¹⁵ Malachi 4:5-6

always be anti-abortion because it is the belief that if John's God ordained task is to reconcile parents and their children¹⁶ then abortion would only serve to do the opposite, and would bring destruction and anger God. Clearly this is a major assumption and there are no definitive ties to John the Baptist and abortion ideologies one way or the other.

Utilizing John the Baptist however is on strategy of these CFRE organizations. While there are several strategies and goals of anti-abortion extremists, Vohryzek-Bolden found after researching these groups that, "The goal of anti-abortion terrorist groups and individuals are to repeal *Roe v. Wade*; to outlaw abortion and sometimes birth control; and to control and subordinate women so they fit into the traditional Judeo-Christian assumptions about a woman's place."¹⁷ This evidence suggests that a major goal of CFRE is anti-abortion activism, and this activism is often times rooted in ancient and medieval ideologies of imagining religious doctrine, relating to women's agency. Other examples are evidenced in the belief of a strict adherence to Christian domination. Otherwise known as "Dominion Theology," this belief, "encourages Christians to take control of the institutions or pillars of society so as to shape it according to a particular Christian vision."¹⁸ This vision views things like the liberal views on sexuality and abortion as bringing sin into the country. This form of CFRE therefore is designed to ensure, "a rigid adherence to Christian domination of social mores, legal norms, and so on."¹⁹ This "rigid

¹⁶ Spielman, Michael. "What Does John the Baptist Have to Teach Us About Abortion?" *Abort73.com/Abortion Unfiltered*. Accessed March 1, 2023. https://abort73.com/blog/what_does_john_the_baptist_have_to_teach_us_about_abortion/.

¹⁷ *Right-Wing Terrorists*, 76.

¹⁸ Hedges, Paul, and Luca Farrow. "Christian Far-Right Extremism: Theology and Typology." *Think Tank and Graduate School*. Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/Christian-far-right-extremism-theology-and-typology/#.ZAe0CC-B0UQ>.

¹⁹ *Christian Far-Right Extremism: Theology and Typology*.

adherence” is grounded in the belief that God and then Christ require a very specific life to be lived and therefore converting others to this life is doing God’s work. These teachings, it is believed by CFRE, include an anti-abortion stance and therefore this belief lies in the “tradition” of Christianity to always be anti-abortion. This specific anti-abortion tradition, as evidenced in chapter one, is simply not true and those who ascribe to it are imagining this past. The Church has not always believed that abortion is the worst of sins.

CONCLUSION

CHRISTIAN FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM, ROE V. WADE, AND MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

The history of abortion and contraception is long and complex, shaped by political, social, cultural, and religious factors. In the medieval period, the Catholic Church held significant power over people's lives, including their reproductive choices. The Church's position on abortion and contraception was not as clear as we may think. Women attempted to control their fertility through various means. In some cases, this included abortion, as evidenced in St. Hildegard's *Causae et Curae*. According to Riddle, women were able to utilize a variety of methods to prevent pregnancy, this included things like superstitions, herbal remedies, and even amulets. Riddle's research suggests that women had a complex understanding of fertility and pregnancy, and they actively sought ways to control their bodies.¹

Rhetoric as a means for control is evidenced throughout the Medieval Ages and beyond. During the medieval period, rhetoric played a significant role in shaping public opinion on issues such as abortion and contraception. As Lydia Harris argues in her article, "Old Ideas for a New Debate: Medieval and Modern Attitudes to Abortion," the rhetoric surrounding abortion was often focused on the sinfulness of the act and the need for punishment rather than on the needs and experiences of women.² The Church's teachings on abortion were often communicated through sermons, which emphasized the moral and ethical implications of the act. This rhetoric

¹ Eve's Herbs.

² Old Ideas.

had a lasting impact on the way abortion was perceived, and it continued to shape public opinion for centuries. This leads me to clarify that I am not claiming the Church was ever pro-abortion, instead I am saying that under certain circumstances, the Medieval Church did condone it.

The criminalization of abortion is also a more recent development. In his book, "The Criminalization of Abortion in the West: Its Origins in Medieval Law," Wolfgang P. Müller argues that abortion was not always a crime, and it was only in the late 19th century that laws began to be passed criminalizing the act. Müller traces the history of abortion laws from medieval times to the present day, demonstrating how they were shaped by religious, moral, and political factors. The landmark Supreme Court case, *Roe v. Wade*, had a profound impact on the abortion debate in the United States. In "Before Roe V. Wade: Voices That Shaped the Abortion Debate before the Supreme Court's Ruling," Linda Greenhouse and Reva B. Siegel provide a detailed account of the legal and political battles that led up to the decision. They argue that the case was not just about abortion but also about the right to privacy, and it reflected broader social and cultural changes that were taking place in American society. The fight for reproductive rights is ongoing, as Karen Blumenthal's book, "Jane Against the World: Roe V. Wade and the Fight for Reproductive Rights," demonstrates. Blumenthal's book tells the story of the Jane Collective, a group of women who provided safe and illegal abortions in the 1960s and 1970s before *Roe v. Wade* was decided. The book highlights the bravery and determination of these women and the ongoing battle for reproductive rights. Overall, the history of abortion and contraception is complicated and controversial. It has been shaped by religious, moral, political, and social factors, and it continues to be a contentious issue today. Understanding the historical context of this debate is essential for making informed decisions about reproductive rights and women's health.

Regarding rhetoric and reproductive rights, Mary Ziegler writes in *Beyond Abortion: Roe v. Wade and the Battle for Privacy* that, "In the years before Roe, conservatives and liberals debated the morality of abortion and the scope of the right to privacy."³ This debate involved the use of various rhetorical strategies, including appeals to individual rights and social welfare. Ziegler notes that, "[C]onservatives framed the issue in terms of the rights of the unborn child and the moral responsibility of individuals to protect innocent life," while "liberals talked about the need to protect women's health, freedom, and dignity."⁴ In terms of medieval abortion, Riddle writes that "Medieval scholars debated the moral and legal implications of abortion at length, and in great detail."⁵ However, there was no consensus on the issue. Riddle notes that "[W]hile some theologians and canonists held that abortion was always wrong, others allowed for exceptions in cases where the life of the mother was in danger or where the fetus was not yet animated."⁶ Much like medieval women, modern day women played a significant role in the debate over abortion and reproductive rights. Blumenthal notes that "Women had always found ways to end unwanted pregnancies, despite the risks."⁷ However, before the landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision in 1973, access to safe and legal abortion was limited, and women who sought abortions faced significant legal and social barriers. Blumenthal writes that "women who sought abortions faced a world of closed doors, false promises, and dangerous

³ Mary Ziegler, *Beyond Abortion: Roe v. Wade and the Battle for Privacy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018. p. 25.

⁴ *Beyond Abortion*, 25.

⁵ *Eve's Herbs*, 308.

⁶ *Eve's Herbs*, 308.

⁷ *Jane Against the World*, 12.

practitioners.”⁸ The church also played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward abortion and reproductive rights, as Müller notes, “[T]he Catholic Church played a leading role in the gradual tightening of legal restrictions on abortion in the late Middle Ages.”⁹ However, Müller also notes that some within the church disagreed with this stance. He writes that, “[T]here was a vigorous internal debate within the church over the morality of abortion, and some theologians and canonists argued that the fetus did not receive a soul until a later stage of development.”¹⁰ The historical evidence reveals a complex and multifaceted debate over abortion and reproductive rights, involving various stakeholders and rhetorical strategies. While there was no consensus on the issue, attitudes were shaped by a range of social, religious, and political factors.

Women, in the Early and High Medieval eras, and in the present day, have an important part in the debate over abortion and reproductive rights. From 476 AD to 2023, this thesis has travelled back in time and gone on a rather turbulent journey. This research has not only looked at abortion but also took a literal journey into the realm of rhetoric. Rhetoric clearly has a strong connection to inciting violence and creating an imagined past that has led to dangerous assumptions. The medieval past, while not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, was much more lenient in terms of conceptualizing abortion as a sin compared to how modern ideology and the media portray the medieval eras. Not only has this research shown how the modern-day media and individuals have misconstrued a medieval past but it has also shown how more recent events related to abortion have also been incorrectly understood.

⁸ Jane Against the World, 12.

⁹ Muller, Wolfgang P. *The Criminalization of Abortion in the West Its Origins in Medieval Law*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012. p. 4.

¹⁰ *The Criminalization of Abortion in the West*, 4.

Dobbs v. Jackson

I want to end by recognizing that for brevity's sake, I did not touch on the recent Dobbs decision. *Dobbs v. Jackson* was brought before the Supreme Court, in 2021, as a way for conservative politicians to essentially overturn *Roe v. Wade*. In a controversial decision, the court ruled that the Constitution of the United States does not confer a right to protect abortion, which gives states the power to regulate any aspect of abortion not protected by federal law. In this sense *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned and what this means for the future of abortion is still to be seen, as this decision was decided on June 24th, 2022, not even a year ago. Most likely, a new law will need to be brought before the Supreme Court, or a federal law will need to be enacted that would counter Dobbs, if this is to be overrode/overturned. This shows that the future of women's reproductive rights and abortion are constantly being negotiated. I believe that a better understanding of the past would allow us to better understand a more benign present and future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A Woman's Right*: [Letter]. *The New York Times*. New-York, [N.Y.:HJ Raymond & Co., 1980.
- Abortion Remedies from a Medieval Catholic Nun(!) - JSTOR DAILY*.
<https://daily.jstor.org/abortion-remedies-medieval-catholic-nun/>.
- “Abortion and Catholic Thought. the Little-Known History.” *Conscience* (Washington, D.C.). U.S. National Library of Medicine. Accessed December 19, 2022.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12178868/>.
- Betancourt, Roland. “Abortion and Contraception in the Middle Ages.” *Scientific American*, December 11, 2020. <https://scientificamerican.com/article/abortion-and-contraception-in-the-middle-ages/>.
- Bingen, Hildegard af, and Priscilla Throop. *Hildegard Von Bingen's Physica: The Complete English Translation of her Classic Work on Health and Healing*. Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1998.
- Bitel, Lisa, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).
- Bitel, Lisa, “Spirituales Medici.” In *Isle of the Saints, 173–*. Cornell University Press, 2019.
- Blumenthal, Karen. *Jane Against the World: Roe V. Wade and the Fight for Reproductive Rights*. First edition., Roaring Brook Press, 2020.
- Bolton, Brenda., and Susan Mosher. Stuard. *Women in Medieval Society*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812207675>.
- Boonstra, Heather D. “Abortion in the Lives of Women Struggling Financially: Why Insurance Coverage Matters.” *Guttmacher Institute*, August 30, 2022.
<https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2016/07/abortion-lives-women-struggling-financially-why-insurance-coverage-matters>.
- Callan, Maeve B. "Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maidens Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginitly, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 21 no. 2, 2012, p. 282-296. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/sex.2012.0031.

- Cha, Ariana Eunjung. "Tough Questions – and Answers – on ‘Late-Term’ Abortions, the Law and the Women Who Get Them." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, January 24, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/uspolicy/2019/02/06/tough-questions-answers-late-term-abortions-law-women-who-get-them/>; Simmons-Duffin, Selena. "At 18 Weeks Pregnant, She Faced an Immense Decision with Just Days to Make It." NPR. NPR, October 27, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/10/27/1131410832/abortion-law-exception-fetal-anomaly>.
- Connolly, Sean, and J.-M. Picard. "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit' Content and Value." *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987): 5–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25508920>
- "Early Penitentials the Canons of Theodore." Internet Archive. Accessed January 25, 2023. <https://archive.org/details/EarlyPenitentialsTheCanonsOfTheodore>.
- Elsakkers, M.J. (2010). *Reading between the lines: Old Germanic and Early Christian Views on Abortion*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].
- Emmons, James BT. "Translation of the Vita Aidi/The Life of St. Aed Mac Bricc – Researchgate." Accessed January 6, 2023.; Markus, Gilbert. "The Life of St Cainnech of Aghaboe." Accessed January 7, 2023.
- Forsythe, Clarke D. *Abuse of Discretion: the Inside Story of Roe V. Wade*. First American edition., Encounter Books, 2013.
- Riddle, John. "Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 73 no. 2, 1999. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/bhm.1999.0076.
- Greenhouse, Linda., and Reva B. Siegel. *Before Roe V. Wade: Voices That Shaped the Abortion Debate before the Supreme Court's Ruling*. Kaplan Pub., 2010.
- Griswold v. Connecticut, 381 U.S. 479.
- "HB 125 – the Heartbeat Bill (2011-2012)." ACLU of Ohio, August 6, 2012. <https://www.acluohio.org/en/legislation/hb-125-heartbeat-bill-2011-2012>
- "Hagiography." Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc. Accessed March 5, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hagiography>.
- Harris, Lydia. (2017). 'Old Ideas for a New Debate: Medieval and Modern Attitudes to Abortion.' *Medieval Feminist Forum* 53(1): 131-149.

- Hedges, Paul, and Luca Farrow. "Christian Far-Right Extremism: Theology and Typology." Think Tank and Graduate School. Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/Christian-far-right-extremism-theology-and-typology/#.ZAe0CC-B0UQ>.
- Hillstrom, Laurie Collier. *Roe V. Wade*. Omnigraphics, 2008.
- Jones, Sarah E. "Homegrown HATE: On the Fringes of the Far Right Sit Groups That Use Faith to Justify Violent Extremism." *Church & State* 69, no. 5 (2016).
- Kaplan, Laura. *The Story of Jane: the Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Kapparis, Konstantinos A. *Abortion in the Ancient World*. Bristol Classical Press, 2012.
- Lanouar, Ben Hafsa. "Lobbying for the Unborn: The American Catholic Church and the Abortion Issue." *Memoire(s), identite(s), marginalite(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain*. Cahiers du MIMMOC. Universite de Poitiers, August 26, 2015. <https://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/2320>.
- Larson, Jennifer. "Medical Specialties with the Most & Least Women Physicians: Staff Care." *Medical Specialties with the Most & Least Women Physicians | Staff Care*. Accessed February 25, 2023. <https://www.staffcare.com/locum-tenens-blog/news/women-in-medicine-specialty-choices/>
- Malachi 4:5-6
- McCann, Christine. "Fertility Control and Society in Medieval Europe." *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 40, 2009, p. 45-62. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/cjm.2009.0004.
- Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*. New Edition ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. muse.jhu.edu/book/101717.
- Mistry, Zubin. *Abortion in the Early Middle Ages, c. 500-900*. York Medieval Press, 2015.
- Mistry, Zubin. "Medicine for Sin: Reading Abortion in Early Medieval Penitentials." *Abortion in the Early Middle Ages, c.500-900*, NED-New edition, Boydell & Brewer, 2015, pp. 126–64. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt13wzsp5.10>. Accessed 17 Sep. 2022.
- Mistry, Zubin. "The Sexual Shame of the Chaste; 'Abortion Miracles' in Early Medieval Saints' lives." *Gender & History* 25, no. 3 (2013).
- Müller, Wolfgang P. *The Criminalization of Abortion in the West: Its Origins in Medieval Law*. Cornell University Press, 2017.

Newman, Troy, and Cheryl Sullenger. *Their Blood Cries Out*. Wichita, KS: Restoration Press, 2003.

Paramore, Lynn. “Can Capitalism Work for Women of Color?” Institute for New Economic Thinking. Accessed March 1, 2023.
<https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/can-capitalism-work-for-women-of-color>.

Piercey, Robert. Review of *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* by Ronald Beiner. *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 72 no. 3, 2019, p. 588-590. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/rvm.2019.0045.

Pitcavage, Mark. “Surveying the Landscape of the American Far Right.” Accessed March 1, 2023.
https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Surveying%20The%20Landscape%20of%20the%20American%20Far%20Right_0.pdf.

Planned Parenthood. “Birth Control Became Legal 50 Years Ago – and Here Are Our 5 Favorite Things About It.” Planned Parenthood Action Fund. Accessed January 28, 2023

President, Julia Cusick Vice, Julia Cusick, Vice President, Madeline Shepherd Director, Madeline Shepherd, Director, Emma Lofgren Associate Director, et al. “Limiting Abortion Access Contributes to Poor Maternal Health Outcomes.” Center for American Progress, December 3, 2021. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/limiting-abortion-access-contributes-poor-maternal-health-outcomes/>.

Rampton, Martha. *Trafficking with Demons: Magic, Ritual, and Gender from Late Antiquity to 1000*. Cornell University Press, 2022

Riddle, John M., and J. Worth Estes. “Oral Contraceptives in Ancient and Medieval Times.” *American Scientist*, vol. 80, no. 3, 1992, pp. 226–33. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29774642>. Accessed 17 Sep. 2022.

Riddle, John M. *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*. Harvard University Press, 1994.

Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

Roberts, Arica S. “Gendered Womb-Healing: Malevolent Magic and Spiritual Medicine in the Early Medieval Lives of St Brigit.”, vol. 31, 2020, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, pp. 193–208, doi: 10.1484/J.PERIT.5.124475.

Smith, Patrick. “Death of a Dentist in Ireland Denied an Abortion Has Worried Doctors Who Say History May Repeat in U.S.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group. Accessed

- January 28, 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/woman-died-ireland-abortion-ban-warning-americans-roe-v-wade-rcna35431>.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. 1st ed. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1985.
- Spielman, Michael. "What Does John the Baptist Have to Teach Us About Abortion?" *Abort73.com/Abortion Unfiltered*. Accessed March 1, 2023. https://abort73.com/blog/what_does_john_the_baptist_have_to_teach_us_about_abortion/.
- Sweet, Victoria. "Hildegard of Bingen and the Greening of Medieval Medicine." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 73, no. 3 (1999): 381-403. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44445287>.
- The Homilies On The Epistle Of St. Paul To The Romans. N.p.: Jazzybee Verlag, (n.d.).
- Timothy 2:11-14.
- Trump, Donald. "Presidential Candidacy" (Speech, Trump Tower, New York, NY, June 16th, 2015).
- Van Rhijn, Carine, and Marjolijn Saan. "Correcting Sinners, Correcting Texts: a Context for the Paenitentiale Pseudo-Theodori." *Early medieval Europe* 14, no. 1 (2006): 23–40.
- Vohryzek-Bolden, Miki. "Right-Wing Terrorists and the Threats they Pose for Americans in the 21st Century." *Humboldt journal of social relations* 27, no. 2 (2003): 53-98.
- Walle, Etienne van de. "Flowers and Fruits: Two Thousand Years of Menstrual Regulation." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 2 (1997): 183-203. <https://doi.org/10.2307/206401>.
- "Who is Troy Newman? What is Operation Rescue?" Troy Newman and Operation Rescue, Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://feminist.org/anti-abortion-violence/troy-newman-operation-rescue.html>.
- Williams, Daniel K. *Defenders of the Unborn: the Pro-Life Movement before Roe V. Wade*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Zahm, J. A. *Woman in Science: With an Introductory Chapter on Woman's Long Struggle for Things of the Mind*. Czechia: Good Press, 2019.
- Ziegler, Mary. *Beyond Abortion: Roe V. Wade and the Battle for Privacy*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

VITA

Madison Givens is a recent graduate of Loyola University Chicago. Givens has degrees from Santa Clara University in History, Political Science, and Classical Studies. Graduating with her undergraduate degrees in 2018, Givens decided to pursue graduate school. Graduating from Loyola University Chicago with Masters degrees in History and Women Studies and Gender Studies, Givens will go on to pursue a PhD in History within the next year. Givens research and writing has won her several awards throughout her academic career. Her most recent accomplishment was the publishing, in 2022, of her historical research on women in 1960's social movements in the United States.