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Review of "Beyond the Abortion Wars". By Charles Camosy

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“...[T]his is a book that will completely satisfy no constituency....Whatever your view, it will be challenged here. And if you’re willing, you’re highly likely to learn something as a result.”

So writes Melinda Henneberger, senior writer for BloombergPolitics.com and a former reporter for The Washington Post, in her foreword to Charles Camosy’s Beyond the Abortion Wars. She is correct on all three points. Yet Camosy’s attempt to bring clarity to the question of abortion politics in the U.S. and to move the public conversation beyond demagoguing polarization toward a constructive solution might find his most receptive audience among those who work in Catholic health care. For, as a moral theologian on faculty at Fordham University, Camosy engages the question of abortion through two lenses that are germane to this audience: moral theology and public policy.

Camosy’s argument unfolds in six chapters. Chapter 1, “Shifting Abortion Politics,” is the strongest. Here, he provides an illuminating historical overview of abortion’s changing politics, starting with early feminists’ staunch opposition and continuing through shifting platforms within both the Republican and Democrat parties from the 1970s through the early 1990s. He demonstrates, through recent polling data, that Americans as a whole are not nearly as polarized about abortion as public rhetoric would suggest and are, in fact, largely “pro-choice” in some situations and “pro-life” in others. Few Americans, it appears, want to see abortion banned entirely, but most would favor greater restrictions. His overview of these statistics as well as the plethora of legislative initiatives currently in process at the state and federal levels provides a thick description of the abortion question’s landscape.

With this context mapped out, Camosy turns to moral analysis. In Chapter 2, he reviews the standard arguments on the moral status of the fetus, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. His own conclusion is that the fetus is a person, deserving equal protection under the law. Yet this strong position does not simply determine the legislative question. Rather, it provides the starting point for a more nuanced consideration of those limited situations where both U.S. law and the Catholic tradition have considered it licit to end the life of a person.

Camosy moves through these situations in Chapter 3. He carefully outlines and engages the two key ways of conceptualizing abortion — as an act that either “aims at the death of” or “ceases to aid” the fetus. With regard to the first, he seeks to balance and preserve two important moral principles: that it is always wrong to aim at the death of an innocent person and that a woman has a right to defend herself when pregnancy threatens her life. He advances the conversation in important ways, reframing cases in which the mother’s life is threatened under the category of material harm. He also seeks to glean what insight he can from claims made by some that in abortion, a woman is simply ceasing to provide physiological aid to her fetus.

A next question is: Ought these moral positions to be translated into law? Camosy turns to the issue in Chapter 4, “The Challenge of Public Policy.” He draws particularly on the work of the Catholic theologian and legal scholar, M. Cathleen Kaveny. His analyses, which cannot be briefly summarized, will be of interest and use to those engaged in the work of advocacy and policy development.

In Camosy’s view, the question regarding public policy also brings the moral status of women to the forefront. In Chapter 5, “Abortion and Women,”...
he makes a compelling case that, in
general, “our broader abortion prac-
tices and policies actually serve the
interests of men … have had disastrous
consequences for women,” and overall
have made women in the U.S. less free.
He draws on arguments from pro-life
feminists in making this case, but in
doing so, he sets up the fundamental
premise for a constructive proposal,
namely, that any legitimate endeavor
to limit abortion and advance wom-
men’s freedom will entail changing our
social structures to respect women, to
provide them true equality under the
law and economics, and to implement
social and cultural supports that truly
value all lives.

In his final chapter, Camosy makes
a bold move for an academic theolo-
gian: He proposes a public policy ini-
tiative. In Chapter 6, “A Way Forward,”
he sketches the outlines for a legislative
proposition he entitles the Mother and
Prenatal Child Protection Act, which
combines a deep commitment to the
lives of the unborn with a proposal for
social and economic supports for wom-
en and children. The four planks of the
act include: (1) equal protection of the
law for the prenatal child; (2) equal
protection of the law for women dur-
ing pregnancy; (3) economic support of
mothers and their children during and
after pregnancy; and (4) legal support
for “ceasing to aid a fetus” for a propor-
tionately serious reason. Specific ini-
tiatives under each heading are listed.

This is a brave and helpful book, and
one that is quite easy to read. Camosy
seeks to push toward a practical solu-
tion that reflects the positions of the
American public and truly seeks to ad-
\vance the common good. He provides
clear and helpful counterarguments to
positions on both sides of the debate
while also grounding his work in the
complex, conflicted and often subtly
coercive realities in which many wom-
en find themselves.

As Henneberger noted, this book
will completely satisfy no constitu-
ency. Although I think Camosy makes
a helpful contribution to the Catholic
conversation in his analyses of “aiming
at death” and “ceasing to aid” in Chap-
ter 3, some no doubt will take issue with
his argument; but he lays the ground-
work for further conversation among
Catholic moral theologians around
important technical moral questions.
Equally, pro-choice feminists will likely
find their arguments underrepresented
in Chapter 5.

Nonetheless, this is one of the few
books — and perhaps the only one —
that attempts to move beyond shrill po-
larization and craft a careful, thought-
ful, balanced and reasonable solution
to a devastating moral and social issue,
one that often places Catholic health
care in the crosshairs. I anticipate that
many who work in the Catholic health
care ministry will align with Camosy’s
positions and therefore will appreciate
the clarity his analysis brings to what is
usually just a muddle.

In closing, while I laud his attention
to the question of public policy, I wish
to end with an oblique comment that he
makes that points in an equally, if not
more, pressing direction. He rightly
calls out the Catholic Church for the
abyss between its teaching, its politi-
cal rhetoric and machination, and its
actual witness, noting that:

... it is an utter scandal that lo-
cal Catholic communities don’t
do more to support local preg-
nant women in difficult situa-
tions. We should be lining up
to adopt babies of various races
and health conditions; we should
be using our free time to pro-
vide free child-care for needy
women in our local communi-
ties and churches; every parish
and church should offer shelter
and assistance to pregnant wom-
en in difficult situations and of-
fer programs of counseling and
healing for women who have had
abortions.

What a difference the Catholic
Church could make with regard to the
issue of abortion if it would only live
the Gospel via these practical, mate-
rial manifestations of the Catholic so-
cial tradition. Camosy’s words could be
equally directed to our Catholic health
systems, which occupy such a powerful
position amid so many economically
troubled communities.

This is a timely book, given the po-
tential reconfiguration of the U. S. Su-
preme Court and the continued legisla-
tive efforts around abortion in the Unit-
ed States. But it is also timely given the
reconfiguration of health care delivery
from a tertiary care model to popula-
tion health — going forward, informed
by Camosy’s analyses, how might Cath-
olic health systems provide a real wit-
ness and make a real difference with re-
gard to maternal and child health and
help move Catholic health care beyond
the abortion wars?

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