

## 9. The Wisdom of Islam

“CARICATURE ASSASSINATION” (a phrase coined by Protestant theologian Robert MacAfee Brown) is step one in ecumenical dialogue. It’s not that we know nothing of other religions. We have impressions of them, but they are like photos taken from too far away. They are more caricatures than pictures, and sometimes when the truth arrives about these religions, we resist it. We’ve become too comfortable with the caricature. Often the caricature that we have about other religions is created by news stories on television and in the papers, stories focused on fringe groups and fanatics. Such stories and such people hide from us the gentle core of wisdom that is the true soul of all great religions.

I do not think that any religion suffers more from “bad press” and caricature than Islam. When my son, Tom, and his wife recently embraced the faith of Islam, some friends asked in revealing jest: “Are they building a bomb factory in their cellar?” The joke is on our common ignorance, not on the ancient faith of Islam. When the federal building was blown up in Oklahoma City in 1995, suspicion fell first on “Muslim fundamentalists,” and persons with Arab features were looked for as the culprits. When the truth came out, there was Timothy McVeigh—sounding more like an Irish Catholic than an Arab Muslim.

Interestingly, the word Islam means peace and is related to the Hebrew *shalom*. The Qur’an (often written Koran), which Muslims believe to have been divinely revealed to Muhammad in the seventh century C.E., states the basis of

Islam in a single sentence: "We believe in God, and that which has been sent down on us, and sent down on Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the Tribes, and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and the Prophets of their Lord; we make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we surrender" (3:85). In other words, Muslims see themselves as relatives of Jews and Christians. Muhammad was trying to get back to the original purity of the religious and moral movement begun by Abraham. The moral goal of this faith is to see all peoples transformed into one family, one people—in the Arabic, one *umma*, filled with justice, peace and compassion. Muslims see themselves as God's *vicegerents* (deputies) on earth, put here to do the work that will bring peace and prosperity to all God's children.

Now having said that, mention the plight of women in the Muslim world. Or say the words Taliban, "Muslim fundamentalists," Salmon Rushdie, or "the Islamic Republic of Iran," and the words in the preceding paragraph seem unrelated and unreal. The most obvious truth in religious dialogue is this: Great faiths and the adherents of those great faiths do not always match. Christians are not Christian enough, Hindus are not Hindu enough, and Muslims are not Muslim enough. We are all unworthy heirs to the religious and moral traditions we inherited. We all love to profess great ideals, but living them is a burden we craftily eschew. Nations are the same as religions. In the United States, we boast of "equal justice for all," but who is naive enough to say that the same justice can be expected by the black and the white, by the well-heeled and the poor, by the well educated and the illiterate, by immigrants and citizens?

The Islamic scholars with whom I work are one and all devout Muslims. They are also all reformers, "liberation

theologians," feminists, and lovers of justice and peace. One of them, Farid Esack, is the Minister for Gender Equality in the government of South Africa. Another, Asghar Ali Engineer, works in his Islamic Studies center in the slums of Bombay, defending the rights of women and the poor. Nawal Ammar, natively of Egypt, writes of the true Islam that would end poverty and empower women. The principal guide for this chapter, who worked on the family planning project, is Riffat Hassan. Hassan, currently a professor at the University of Louisville, is a native of Pakistan. She is an activist as well as a scholar and works in Pakistan and India. She has been particularly active in fighting the "honor killings" of women that are tolerated in much of the Muslim world.

Hassan is a feminist, and I love her definition of feminism. It is "a passionate quest for truth and justice on behalf of women." Notice these words: Feminism is not just an outlook or a set of ideas. It is not a view from the sidelines. It is a passionate, activist pursuit of justice and truth to end the victimization of women.

Hassan and these other scholars do not try to cover up the current state of Islam. There are problems, and Hassan is blunt in stating them. For example, regarding women in Islamic countries, she says: "Women are regarded in virtually all Muslim societies as being less than fully human. The way Islam has been practiced in most Muslim societies for centuries has left millions of Muslim women with battered bodies, minds, and souls. These women have been kept in physical, mental, and emotional bondage. The rate of literacy of Muslim women, especially those who live in rural areas where most of the population lives, is among the lowest in the world." These words spoken by a devout Muslim woman are not hedged or calculated to excuse the weaknesses of Muslim societies. Muslim faith

requires an honest admission of sinfulness, and I assure my readers that the reformers in Islam—and they are many and everywhere in the Islamic world—are nothing if not honest. They rail against the injustices done in the name of Islam, and they are deeply pained at the distortion of their faith by some of their fellow Muslims that has gone too long unchallenged and unchanged.

#### Reformation: Back to the Core

Early Christians came up with the axiom *ecclesia semper reformanda*, “the church is always in need of reform.” The ideals that gave birth to the great religions are like delicate flowers trying to take root but always getting crushed under foot. Rescuing those flowers is the reformer’s mission. What are the flowers of Islam? What are the core moral values in Islamic ethics?

According to Muslim theologian Asghar Ali Engineer, the first answer to that question is obvious. Asghar Ali Engineer tells us, “the most fundamental values in Islam, as expounded by the Qur’an, are justice, benevolence, and compassion.” The Qur’anic terminology for these values is *‘adl*, *ihsan*, and *rahmah*. Any legislation, custom, or ruling by Islamic teachers that offends these values is invalid and un-Islamic. The insight here is that no family, no human institution, or no society will flourish unless it has these values as its cornerstone. But notice, justice does not stand alone; it is bonded to benevolence and compassion. Justice that is not ensouled by compassion becomes cold and rigid. Showing its continuity with Jewish and Christian morality, Islam insists that true justice, in Asghar Ali Engineer’s words, shows “deep concern for the weaker sections of society. Verse 28:5 of the Qur’an expresses this concern and says: ‘And We desire to bestow a favour upon those who were deemed weak in the land, and to make

them leaders, and to make them the heirs.’ The Qur’an desires to bestow the mantle of leadership of this earth upon those who are weak.” One obvious conclusion of this, says Asghar Ali Engineer, is that “women certainly belong in this category in a patriarchal society.” If one accepts the Qur’an, women are to be made “leaders and heirs.”

This Islamic elevation of the weak to leadership roles should remind Christians of Jesus’ words in Luke’s Gospel: “Blessed are you poor for yours is the kingdom of God” (4:20 NEB). It should also recall Mary’s *Magnificat*: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:52-53 NRSV). At root, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are morally kin. Only the mess of history divides them.

This central stress on justice in Islam doesn’t languish in generality. It gets down to the nuts and bolts of what justice means in real life. Hassan tells us:

The Qur’an puts great emphasis on the preservation of what we today refer to as ‘fundamental human rights’ such as (a) the right to be respected for one’s humanity [16]; (b) the right to be treated with justice and equity [17]; (c) the right to be free of abusive authority whether religious, intellectual, political or economic, and the right to be free of sexism and slavery, classism or caste-system [18]; (d) the right to privacy and protection from slander and ridicule [19]; (e) the right to learn and acquire knowledge [20]; (f) the right to private property and the right to work and earn a decent living [21]; (g) the right to move freely and to have a secure home [22,23]; (h) the right to one’s aesthetic sensibilities, the right to enjoy and express the beauties of God’s creation [24]; (i) the right not just to survive but to thrive and prosper [25].

And more. The Qur'an is the original "liberation theology." (It is easy to see why Islam has attracted so many African Americans. They find that, more than Christians, Muslims reject the color-caste poison of racism. And so Lou Alcindor became Abdul Jabbar, Cassius Clay became Mohammed Ali, and Malcolm X came back from Mecca with gentler views of race.)

You can understand the impatience of progressive Islamic scholars when they see how the grandeur of the Qur'anic vision has been squandered and corrupted in so many Muslim societies. And you can see why progressive Islamic scholars are not so much avant-garde as conservative and traditional. They're trying to get Islam back to its glorious origins just as the prophets of Israel did and, indeed, as all the reformers in all the religions are doing.

#### *Zakat and Hay'a*

Before turning to family planning and Islam's position on contraception with abortion as a backup when necessary, let us add to our Arabic vocabulary two words that give us a better view into the soul of Islam. *Zakat* literally means "sweetening." It also has connotations of "purifying." When applied to wealth, as Islamic scholar Isma'il R. Al-Faruqi says, "it means making that wealth 'sweet', i.e. just, legitimate, innocent, good and worthy. Obviously what *zakat* adds to wealth is not utilitarian, but moral." Islam has no objection to the accumulation of wealth, but it insists that all wealth must be shared to be moral, to be "purified." The purpose of sharing is the utter elimination of poverty in the *ummah*, in the community. Hassan tells us that "according to the Qur'an, one should give away (as *zakat*) 'whatever is beyond' our needs. However, Sunni Muslims mostly accept the percentage of two-and-a-half percent, determined by classical jurists as the amount of

annual *zakat*." This was the way the Prophet Muhammad created a welfare society in which the needs of all were met. It made "wealth sharing" a pillar of faith.

Thus good Muslims will be generous in charitable giving, but beyond their private charity, *zakat* requires that they give 2.5 percent of *their total wealth*—not their annual income!—for distribution to the poor. Add up the value of your home, your investments, and all superfluous belongings (including your jewelry), and give 2.5 percent of that a year as *zakat*. Like the Hebrew-Jewish tradition, Islam regards all wealth and even our lives as belonging to God, and God forbids the coexistence of poverty and wealth. Every person created by God is so good and so precious that they deserve not just adequacy, but a comfortable and even a prosperous life.

This sets the tone for the Islamic view of family planning. Individual rights are set in a context of social conscience and social obligation. The stress on a generous adequacy for all means that quality of offspring is more important than quantity. If the population exceeds natural resources, there can be no comfortable or prosperous life.

Islamic teaching mandates respect for all people. "Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you be he male or female. Ye are members of one another, and behave with *hay'a* toward them" (Ali Imran: 195). *Hay'a*, Ammar tells us, is a word so rich that it cannot be translated by a single word. In her view, it reflects an attitude of gentle reverence and respect for all of God's creation. It seems to connote a sense of wonder and gratitude in the face of the unearned gift of existence. Ammar translates it as "dignified reserve" and shows how it dictates an ecological ethic and a sense of limit. It is a word that can be extended and applied to family planning. We should respect the right of all children to have a comfortable and

a prosperous life, to develop all of their talents and aesthetic potential. *Hay'a* demands that we do not produce more children than we can provide for generously.

Note well, however, that Islam is not saying that poverty comes only from overpopulation. *Zakat* shows that the main evil is the lack of distribution of wealth rather than the presence of too many people. Overconsumption and gluttony are targeted more than overreproduction. It is the unsharing rich more than the overreproducing poor that Islam hits with prophetic critique, though it recognizes the human right to and need for family planning. Overreproduction is bad; not sharing is worse.

#### Contraception and Abortion in Islam

Islam's views on family planning are important for our planet, since one out of every six people on this earth is a Muslim. We can say from the outset that there is pluralism in the Muslim world (as there is everywhere). There are conservatives, liberals, and those who claim to be centrists. No major religion is a grid into which all the faithful neatly fit. In approaching Islam, it is necessary to see what the teaching authority structure is. Clearly, the Qur'an is the prime authority, considered divine revelation. But the authority of the Qur'an is not magical. Al-Faruqi makes the interesting point that Muslims do not claim any miracles for Muhammad to shore up the authority of the Qur'an. "The Qur'anic revelation is a presentation to one's mind, to reason." There is no papal figure or ruling synod in Islam that can impose its views. "In Islam, religious truth is a matter of argument and conviction, a cause in which everybody is entitled to contend and everybody is entitled to convince and be convinced." Certain institutions, like the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, have a lot of teaching prestige, and the opinions and pro-

nouncements of certain authoritative persons have a lot of weight, but their weight is not so heavy as to crush personal conscience.

Also, as Hassan points out, the Qur'an is not "an encyclopedia which may be consulted to obtain specific information about how God views each problem, issue or situation." It is not a blueprint for moral life covering all the questions from the seventh to the twenty-first century and beyond. For this reason, there are other sources of truth in Islam. The *Hadith* are sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. These do not all agree, and the authenticity of many is doubted and debated. The *Sunnah* are the practical traditions rising out of the life of Muhammad. There is also the huge body of legal literature known as *Shari'ah*, which again is contradictory at times. Some of its regressive and antiwoman prescriptions are preferred by right-wing zealots. However, the Qur'an is the Supreme Court, and its central values, outlined above, hold sway over any later interpretation. The prime value there, as we saw, is justice animated with mercy and respect for all persons. Whatever contradicts that is not true to Islam.

There is another principle in Islamic teaching that is central to Muslim ethics. It is called *ijithad*. This is the heart of any true religious ethic. It means that you analyze the unique data of a current moral problem, and argue from Qur'anic principles, using analogy and logic to come to the best and most reasonable solution. As the jurist and philosopher Azizah Y. al-Hibri says, this gave Islamic ethics great flexibility. "It is an essential part of Qur'anic philosophy, because Islam was revealed for all people and for all times." It allows Islamic ethics to respond realistically to new problems for which there is no spelled-out answer in the Qur'an. It established Islam's respect for our faculty of reason.

In Islam, as in all the religions, fertility is highly prized, and children are a gift of God to bring "joy to our eyes" (Surah 25: Al-Furqan: 74). Conservatives argue that family planning is a lack of trust in the sustaining God. They cite texts such as this: "There is no creeping being on earth but that upon God is its sustenance" (Surah 11: Hud: 6). The Qur'an also says that if we place our trust in God, that is enough. I quoted my mother's Irish faith earlier, saying that God will not send a child without sending the means to feed it.

This naive and passive trust that no matter what we do or don't do, God will make up the difference, does not bear scrutiny and does not face up to the perennial fact of starving children. It is dismissed by Islam's best theologians. Theologian Fazlur Rahman says that using the Qur'anic references to God's power and promise to sustain all creation to argue "for an unlimited population out of proportion to the economic resources is infantile. The Qur'an certainly does not mean to say that God provides every living creature with sustenance whether that creature is capable of procuring sustenance for itself or not." We are not passive sheep waiting to be fed, in the Islamic view. We are God's vicegerents on earth, gifted with reason and talent. God has shared responsibility for providence with us and has given us the power to be prudent, to see problems and do something sensible about them.

(It is always interesting to see similarities among the different religions. These Islamic views on providence square beautifully with Thomas Aquinas's description of humans as "participants in divine providence." Also, in Catholic theology, relying on God's sustaining power to do what we have been equipped by God to do for ourselves is called the sin of "tempting God.")

Contraception has a long history in Islam. Early Islam actually developed contraceptive medicine and instructed

Europe on it. Avicenna, the Muslim physician, discusses in his book *The Law* twenty different substances used for birth control. Such Islamic books of medicine were used for centuries in Europe. When Europe was in its Dark Ages, Islamic culture, with its stress on education, kept the light of learning burning to the benefit of all peoples.

The most common form of birth control when Islam began was called *azl*, withdrawal (coitus interruptus). There are five major schools of law in Islam, and all five permit the practice of *azl*; four of the five insist that the consent of the wife is necessary. And here is where *ijtihad* comes in, reasoning analogically from something already permitted. The Arab Republic of Egypt published a booklet called "Islam's Attitude toward Family Planning." They state in its introduction that broad consultation with the most authoritative sources in Islam went into the research on this book. After noting that *azl* is permitted, they argue that any method that has the same purpose as *azl* and does not induce permanent sterility is acceptable for Muslims. They then go on to list methods such as the cervical cap, the condom, contraceptive pills, injections to produce temporary sterility, and the "loop device" placed in the uterus to prevent implantation of the fertilized egg.

There are many reasons in Islam that justify contraception: reasons of health, economics, the preservation of the woman's appearance, and improving the quality of offspring. This last reason is important in Islam, because the Islamic approach to contraception has a social conscience. It is concerned with the common good. Producing sickly, weak, or underdeveloped or uneducated children is not good for the *umma*, the society. The Egyptian study says that "the strength of a nation is measured not by numbers or quantities, but rather by quality." The study stresses the importance "of being rational and moderate and of living within the possible means and available resources." The



*hadith* literature also says it is better to have few who are virtuous than many who are not. Once again, human life deserves to thrive, not just to eke out a living.

What then about sterilization? In blessing the use of contraceptives, we saw the precondition that none of them cause permanent sterility. There is a wisdom in this. It is senseless to permanently sterilize if temporary sterility would meet the needs of the situation. Having stated the Islamic opposition to permanent sterilization, the Egyptian study immediately moves to exceptions and says that if the husband or wife suffer from a contagious or hereditary disease, permanent sterility is needed and moral. The study then invokes the principle of the lesser evil. This means that you may have objections to sterilization, but at times it will do less harm and is to be preferred. Interestingly, Catholic theologians today are using that same "lesser evil" argument to justify the use of condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS. Even the Vatican is showing some flexibility on this.

And then we come to abortion. There are those in Islam who oppose all abortions. A favored text to support this is: "Do not kill your children for fear of poverty for it is We who shall provide sustenance for you as well as for them" (Surah 6: At-Talaqa: 2-3). Hassan notes on this text that the reference is to killing already born children—usually girls. The text was condemning this custom. Also, she notes the Arabic word for killing in this text "means not only slaying with a weapon, blow or poison, but also humiliating or degrading or depriving children of proper upbringing and education." So once again, as in other religions, a text is being freighted with meaning that it cannot sustain. The text doesn't explicitly address abortion and therefore doesn't close the argument on it.

So the *no choice* view is not the prevailing view in Islam. There is broad acceptance in the major Islamic

schools of law on the permissibility of abortion in the first four months of pregnancy. Most of the schools that permit abortion insist that there must be a serious reason for it, such as a threat to the mother's life or the probability of giving birth to a deformed or defective child. However, as the Egyptian study says: "Jurists of the Shiite Zaidiva believe in the total permissibility of abortion before life is breathed into the fetus, no matter whether there is a justifiable excuse or not." That would be a pure form of what some call "abortion on demand."

What about abortion after four months? Once again, it is a case of a rule against it but then the allowance of exceptions. The Egyptian study puts it this way: Abortion after four months is permissible "if there is an inevitable necessity such as fear of a difficult delivery and a trustworthy physician finds that the continuation of pregnancy would harm the mother." They justify such late abortion again by the use of the principle of "the lesser evil" or lesser harm. They even justify what is basically infanticide "when delivery becomes difficult and the preservation of the mother's life requires the cutting off of the fetus before it is taken out from the mother's uterus." Where medical care is good, such crises may usually be avoidable. But medicine is not good in all of the Islamic world, and Islamic ethics is realistic.

Because conservative voices have been louder in much of the world, religion is seen as the enemy of family planning. Properly understood, it is not. The Islamic Egyptian study reaches the opposite conclusion: "The best way to regulate the family is to understand religion well and to make this understanding prevail among all members of the nation." That is precisely the argument of this book. The importance of religion in national family planning efforts is illustrated by the successes in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Iran. In all three nations, the religious leaders supported the

family planning effort. In other Islamic countries, family planning programs have fared badly despite large international investments. So, once again, the argument of this book is that religion is an essential motivational force for successful family planning. If the false impression that all religions are opposed to family planning is allowed to go unchallenged, efforts in this area will fail. It's that simple.

## 10. Protestants and Family Values

NO ONE WOULD DENY that the United States is a huge force on planet Earth. For better or for worse, we export a lot of culture (and subculture). Therefore, it is wise to know the forces that shape that complex thing called the "American mind." Open that mind, and you will see a lot of the phenomenon called Protestantism. Most Americans identify themselves as Protestant—56 percent. Catholics come in at 28 percent and Jews at only 2 percent. Beyond that, there are growing sprinklings of Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and others. Only 10 percent claim no religious affiliation at all. So as Italy, Spain, Ireland, and the Latin American countries can be legitimately called Catholic nations, the United States is Protestant.

So where are these Protestants when it comes to family planning? Their numbers alone suggest that they are going to be a major influence on reproductive ethics, public policy, and law.

Our guide here is Beverly Harrison, until recently professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, now ensconced in the hills of North Carolina. Harrison tells us that "Protestant Christianity" includes a veritable "polyphony of Christian movements." Just as there are multiple Catholicisms and Hinduisms, there are many diverse Protestantisms. The term *Protestant* is used most generically to signify those Christian churches that do not accept the Roman Catholic authority system and are not affiliated with the Eastern Orthodox traditions.



To really get a fix on Protestantism, Harrison says, go back to the sixteenth century when the Protestant Reformation was launched. That century was marked by a number of movements against papal authority, movements that called themselves reforms. These movements gradually coalesced into discernible groupings. The earliest were led by Luther and took definite form in the German-speaking regions of Central Europe and Scandinavia. Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin led the Swiss reforms. These predominantly Swiss churches came to be known as the "Reformed churches." A more radical European stream stressing personal faith rose out of farming and peasant communities, and its followers became known as Anabaptists. As the European empires moved over the world, they carried some of all these movements with them. Episcopalians in the United States generated a division led by John Wesley that became known as Methodism. Anabaptist movements emphasizing the priesthood of all believers and the local autonomy of congregations sprouted into the various Baptist congregations. And the diversification continues.

Amid all this diversity, Harrison says, the main uniting theme of Protestantism was based on "shifting the locus of theological teaching authority from hierarchical control of doctrinal interpretation to something like shared discernment in reinterpreting doctrine and morals." The protest of Protestantism was against mind control in faith and morals. There was no one *magisterium* before which all should bow. Protestantism tumbled to the fact that there are a lot of good people who see things differently. In Harrison's words, there are "complex alternative ways of being religious and Christian." Flexibility, and a certain openness to pluralism in religion and in ethics, was the fruit of this.

### The Fundamentalist Temptation

The desire for simple, absolute truth is a constantly-beckoning security blanket, and not all Protestants could resist the allure. We see this today in those called right-wing fundamentalists. The term fundamentalist is tossed about promiscuously, but Harrison sees the nub of it in an "insistence on a religious monopoly of knowledge grounded in fear of alternative knowledges, particularly 'scientific' modes of knowledge generated in modernity, which the 'God-knowledge' people cannot control." Fear, then, is at the very pulse of fundamentalism. There is a lot of Protestant fundamentalism in the United States and increasingly in Latin America—to the point where it has the pope and others very worried about the loss of these Latin American "Catholic countries."

*Cherchez la femme* ("look for the woman") finds an application here. Part of fundamentalism is a reaction to the emergence of free women and the loss of male monopoly. In Harrison's view, "fundamentalism always involves the reinscribing of male supremacy within religion."

How does all this shake out on our family planning issues?

### Contraception and Abortion

Protestantism was not born out of thin air but out of history. As a protest, it rejected much of that history but not all. It absorbed from that history the sporadic condemnations of abortion which rose on the crest of a strong historical antisexual asceticism that afflicted Christianity. This antisexual asceticism was somewhat understandable in light of the perceived moral laxity of the Roman Empire. It was a Christian reaction to the excesses of Roman culture, but these rigid and fear-ridden views on sex became part of Christian orthodoxy. This negativity to

sex affected attitudes on abortion. Harrison says, "careful readings of the early Christian history of debate about abortion make clear that one primary reason for the occasional condemnations of abortion in theological sources, including early versions of Canon Law, was that women who had abortions were assumed invariably to be adulteresses."

As we saw in chapter 3 on Catholicism, there was not much theorizing about the ethics of abortion. It was more in the nature of an inherited taboo, handed down like an heirloom. It can be seen as an un-thought-out reflex that saw abortion as part of the sordid sexual agenda. The Reformation inherited this taboo legacy. Those early Protestant leaders who discussed abortion were against it—Calvin, for example, scathingly so. But, Harrison says, "explicit moral reasoning on why it was evil was lacking."

#### Exit Celibacy

Early Protestantism was a huge shift from the controlled church to a family-centered Christianity. Luther shut down monasteries and nunneries when he could, married a former nun, and ended the practice of clerical celibacy, a practice that was often more observed in the breach anyway. Zwingli and others joined in. Calvin declared that marriage is the preferred form of Christian faithfulness. One obvious result: Clergy living in a family setting, unlike monks in a monastery, had firsthand experience of the dilemmas of reproduction. They were in a position to learn that fertility could be either a blessing or a curse. (A pope who listened to his wife and children might be the wiser for it.) By a natural kind of development, then, Protestantism from the start was not resistant to family planning, even while it still held onto conservative reli-

gious views. Protestant birth rates showed that they were managing their fertility. Aside from its fundamentalist streams, Protestantism has been a sane and positive influence in family planning.

Move to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and once again, Harrison says, you find both silence and sympathy on the birth control front. Reproductive health was being handled in "the women's health care culture," and women generally and midwives particularly saw the need for family planning. Men had not yet seized control of medicine.

In the nineteenth century, two things happened. An unhealthy, sexist kind of *sexual identity* that defined women in a limiting way began to be socially constructed, and it took hold, especially in fundamentalist segments of Protestantism. Secondly, male doctors were on the scene now, discouraging the midwives (who were their competition) and condemning abortion, something done by these midwives. Interestingly, the doctors did not have much success with Protestant leaders, who were reluctant to march in the anti-choice crusade.

By the end of the nineteenth century, feminism was rising and spreading to Protestant women and a few good men. The ordination of women changed the face of the clerical world and its male-centered mind-set. In all of this, we can see that religions don't just shape cultures; they are shaped by cultures. They respond like barometers to the climate around them. This is why religions are in constant need of reformation. A lot of what they absorb is toxic. Harrison tells us: "Some Protestant theologians embraced dubious 'scientific' teaching on eugenics because it held out [the] promise of 'race-lifting,' leaving out concern for the common good or the well-being of women. . . . Racist motives have sometimes shaped Protestant enthusiasm for

population management and for birth control and abortion." This has not, however, been the main thrust of Protestantism.

#### The Christian Right and the Abortion Wars

The Christian right's new interest in abortion has been stimulated by an obvious agenda to resist any gender role shifts and advocacy for women's rights. Harrison points out that the new right-wing Christian demonology contains many devils: "feminists and women who have abortions or seek to keep abortion legal and also 'queers'—gays, lesbians, and other 'sexual nonconformists.'" The Protestant Christian right borrows freely from Roman Catholic conservatives in what Harrison calls "the new social construction of the fetus as 'person.'" They have been enormously successful. Again, Harrison: "Truly one of the most remarkable efforts in information control in human history has moved U.S. public discourse into an atmosphere in which any moral analysis of fetal life is suspect. Our public debate images the well-being of early gestating fetuses powerfully as 'the innocent unborn.' The well-being of a pregnant woman, willingly or unwillingly pregnant, is hardly mentioned."

The odd couple of current abortion politics is the Catholic hierarchy and right-wing Protestants. Together they have created an atmosphere that spawns fanaticism and even terrorism. In 1973, the Catholic bishops, for the first time in modern U.S. history, called for civil disobedience to resist laws legalizing abortion. In 1975, they pushed for a *single-issue* politics, urging Catholics to oppose any political candidate who supported the legalization of abortion. This was music to right-wing Protestant ears; they were also reeling from the *Roe v. Wade* decision on abortion. The healthier Catholic and Protes-

tant traditions of social justice and concern for the poor and for peace were swallowed up in what I call *pelvic politics*.

There is ample reason to say that this newborn love of fetuses is but a cover for the patriarchal fear of the free woman who is appearing in our day. Can we really believe that patriarchal Catholics, patriarchal Protestants, and patriarchal Muslims, after centuries of warring with one another, are suddenly and stunningly bonded by fetus-love? (As we've seen, not all adherents of these religions can be branded as patriarchal.) Are not such improbable alliances always suspect? (One thinks of the text in Luke: "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies" [23:12 NRSV].) A question is a terrible thing to waste, and any analysis of the current anti-choice religious movements that ducks these questions about anti-choice fervor and fear of free women is purblind.

What lurks beneath family value rhetoric on the right—among Protestants and Catholics—is a kind of sweet love ethic that loses sight of social justice and the needs of the common good. This makes the right the darling of the harsher modes of capitalism. The suppression of social conscience and concern for the poor that is masked by family value piety, really intends, in Harrison's view, "to make Christianity the 'handmaiden' of 'the Market God' who brooks no rivals." Once again, she is on target.

#### The Bottom Line

Protestantism, the dominant religious affiliation in the United States and in many countries, is firmly in favor of family planning. However noisy the conservative minority may be, statements from the denominations are clear. Unfortunately, they haven't been loud, and a lot of people

and politicians have never heard them. Let's hear a representative few.

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice in Washington, D.C. (<http://www.rcrc.org>) has done us the favor of gathering official position statements from U.S. religious bodies. What these statements prove is that the right to choose an abortion is a religiously-grounded right. If laws remove this right, they are taking sides in a religious debate where they have no right to meddle. And they are denying one side of the debate their civil liberties and religiously-grounded human rights.

The General Board of the American Baptist Churches pointed out in 1988 that there are legitimate differences among their members. Some oppose all abortion. "Many others advocate for and support family planning legislation, including legalized abortion as being in the best interest of women in particular and society in general." Both are good Baptists. No law should side with one religious position against the other, though both sides are free to advocate and debate in the public forum. Laws that take sides in the religious debate are guilty of partiality. They violate the human right to religious freedom.

In 1970 and again in 1989, the American Friends Service Committee stated their support for "a woman's right to follow her own conscience concerning child-bearing, abortion and sterilization. . . . That choice must be made free of coercion, including the coercion of poverty, racial discrimination, and the availability of service to those who cannot pay." No one can doubt the Quaker commitment to the sanctity of life, but they see the sanctity of life as requiring the right to choose an abortion when life's complexities make that the most pro-life choice.

In 1975 and again in 1989, the Disciples of Christ General Assembly resolved to "respect differences in religious

beliefs concerning abortion and oppose, in accord with the principle of religious liberty, any attempt to legislate a specific religious opinion or belief concerning abortion upon all Americans."

Legislators and judges, take heed. There is a strong consensus that the right to choose an abortion is religiously orthodox. Those religious people who think all abortions are wrong should not have abortions. Those religious people who believe on the basis of their religious tradition that they do have the right to choose should not have their religious freedom curtailed. It is a fascistic impulse to impose one moral view when there is no consensus and when good authorities disagree for good reasons.

In 1988, the Episcopal Church General Convention defended "the legal right of every woman to have a medically-safe abortion." The Episcopal Women's Caucus insisted in 1978 that "the particular belief of one religious body should not be forced on those who believe otherwise." They also called for public funding of abortions for the poor. The Convocation Gathering of the Lutheran Women's Caucus in 1990 praised the "Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, a coalition of religious groups whose members hold diverse views about abortion and value the religious freedom that allows this diversity." The Northern Province of the Moravian Church in America in 1974 noted that "the Bible does not speak directly to the matter of abortion and the Moravian Church has refrained from being dogmatic when a biblical position was not clear."

The Presbyterian Church (USA), in five of its General Assembly meetings, approved of abortion until the fetus is viable. The Assembly approved "a public policy of elective abortion, regulated by the health code, not the criminal code. . . . Abortion should be a woman's right because, theologically speaking, making a decision about abortion

is, above all, her responsibility." The statement "affirms the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision of the Supreme Court which decriminalized abortion during the first two trimesters of pregnancy."

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) in 1974 and again in 1980 affirmed "the right of the woman to make her own decision regarding the continuation or termination of problem pregnancies." The Unitarian Universalist Association, in their General Assembly, stated in their 1963 meeting and in seven subsequent meetings "the personal right to choose in regard to contraception and abortion." They grounded this right in the prerogatives of "individual conscience" and they linked it to the "inalienable rights due to every person."

The United Church of Christ, in its General Synod 16, 1987, urged that "alternatives to abortion always be fully and carefully considered," but they then insisted that "abortion is a social justice issue . . . [requiring access to] safe, legal abortions." The United Methodist Church General Conference rejected in 1988 "the simplistic answers to the problem of abortion which, on the one hand, regard all abortions as murders, or, on the other hand, regard all abortions as procedures without moral significance. . . . We believe that a continuance of a pregnancy which endangers the life or health of the mother, or poses other serious problems concerning the life, health, or mental capability of the child to be, is not a moral necessity." In such cases, "mature Christian judgment may indicate the advisability of abortion." They explicitly support, as do many of these churches, the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision on abortion.

#### Respectable Debate

*In a pluralistic, democratic society, issues supported by mainstream humanitarian and religious authorities, based on reasons that appeal to many people of good will and*

*sound judgment, should not be banned by law.* This can be called the principle of respectable debate.

The respectable debate criteria are not met if zoologically-untrained people want to keep serpents in their churches to test their faith, as some sectarians do, and so this practice can be forbidden. The respectable debate criteria are not met if people decide for religious reasons to keep their children illiterate or deprive them of essential medicine. The right to contraception and to abortion when needed enjoys massive mainstream religious and humanitarian support, based on good reasons that appeal to many good and sensible people. In a truly democratic society, this right is inalienable.

#### The Common Good

Law requires an underlying consensus. The American experience with Prohibition illustrates this clearly. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas both thought prostitution was immoral, but both of them thought it should be legal. They judged that, given the realities of their society, there would be *mala inundantia*, a flood of evil results, if this practice were outlawed. Lawmakers, like God, must tolerate things for the common good that they themselves think evil. Taking advice from these saints (who are part of the Christian and not just the Catholic legacy), lawmakers today who disapprove of all abortions can still, in good conscience, support the legalization and decriminalization of abortion. There is solid mainstream religious and humanitarian support for the right to choose an abortion. An attempt to outlaw this religious freedom of choice would not be successful. It would be Prohibition II. From the Protestant perspective, it would be an un-Protestant thing to do. It would reestablish the tyranny of conscience against which Protestant reformers, to their glory, protested.

## II. Lessons from Native Religions

COLUMBUS DID NOT DISCOVER AMERICA. When the Europeans arrived—Native Americans call it “the European invasion”—there were more than a million people who had already lived in America for fifteen to twenty thousand years. And they didn’t think the land needed to be rediscovered.

These people varied enormously. It is estimated that there may have been some two thousand different Native American cultures in North America when the Europeans arrived. According to many scholars, these people of Mongoloid stock seem to have entered the new world by crossing the Bering Strait during the last glacial period. For the most part, they had been living in harmony with their environment, doing some agriculture, fishing, and hunting. Harmony, social and environmental, was not what the Europeans brought with them. Genocide and the crushing of native cultures awaited the native residents of North America.

Historian David E. Stannard argues that “the destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world.” A nation that likes to think of itself as “kind and gentle” has this to live with. Native American population expert Russell Thornton estimates that at the nadir of American Indian population decline in the United States, only about 7 percent of the aboriginal population remained.

North American natives might therefore seem to be the least likely people to approach for religious wisdom on family planning. As with the Jews, depopulation has been

their problem. As the Lakota holy man Lame Deer put it:

The population explosion doesn't worry us much. All these long years, when the only good Indian was a dead Indian, the bodies at Wounded Knee, the Sand Creek Massacre, the Washita, all this killing of women and children, the measles and small pox wiping out whole tribes—the way I see it, the Indians have already done all the population control one could ask of them a hundred times over. Our problem is survival. Overpopulation—that's your worry.

There are other reasons why Native Americans might seem unlikely resources for our topic in this book. Native women suffered from what Native writer and activist Andrea Smith calls "sexual colonization." European and American men regularly targeted them for sexual violence and death, using sexual assault as a way of subordinating the indigenous women and their communities. Men who interfered with the raping Spanish soldiers were killed. One of the consequences of this sexual reign of terror was syphilis, and it was devastating.

This abuse of Native women did not stop after the early invasion. It was discovered in the 1970s that the branch of the U.S. government responsible for Native health services, the Indian Health Service, was performing sterilizations on Native women without their consent. Connie Uri, the Choctaw/Cherokee doctor who discovered this, estimates that more than a quarter of all Native women had been forcibly sterilized in this way. Charon Astoyer, of the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, says that the use today of the contraceptives Depo-Provera and Norplant in American Indian communities can be seen as part of the unending assault. How, we might wonder, can such a brutalized people help us in matters of reproductive health and planning?

Our special guide who will help us address this question is Mary Churchill, part of whose lineage is Cherokee.

Churchill is a professor of Native American Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Churchill acknowledges all of the above, including Lame Deer's main point about overpopulation not being the Native's problem. However, she takes exception to his sweeping away of the problem. She says: "Global overpopulation is necessarily a Native concern." Lame Deer spoke of "all this killing of women and children," but as Churchill says, that killing "continues today, only in more subtle ways." The battering the earth is taking, sometimes magnified by the sheer mass of people, is global in its impact. There is no hide-away. If you flee for respite to the sweetest and loneliest little spot in the north woods, where the only sound is that of chirping birds and cackling crickets, the poisons still get to you and to the trees and the animals.

I was in the Black Forest in Germany some years ago, and I had a feeling of distance from the world and its problems. Then I ran into a sign hung by a hiker: *Der Wald stirbt*, the forest is dying. And it was. I could see it: trees poisoned by the rains that nourished them and the winds that whistled through the leaves.

### Stories to Live By

Why do we go to a decimated people to talk about family planning? Because the lack of family planning is not an isolated problem. It is linked to a whole set of human behaviors and traits—greed, overconsumption, colonialism, racism, and militarism. The human problem is a sickness of the spirit; overpopulation is only one part of a broader malady. And it is here that Native Americans have a lot to say. As the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy puts it: "Spiritual consciousness is the highest form of politics." They are saying: as your spirituality, so your behavior. Spirituality refers to what we hold sacred. In that sense, even materialism is a twisted kind of spirituality. What it



holds sacred is selfish accumulation. The Iroquois Confederacy is using the term in its positive sense, referring to civilizing values like gratitude, reverence for life, compassion, justice, and so forth. Our spirituality is measured by how much we love these values, and our love for these values (or lack of it) determines our politics.

Every culture has a set of values and its own sense of what is sacred, that is, what matters most. Buddhist philosopher David Loy makes the point that a new spirituality or religion is now spreading across the planet, seeping into culture after culture. This new religion is doing what the old religions always did: setting value priorities, saying what and who counts, providing a worldview. This new religion is setting the story line for our global community. The name of this religion, Loy says, is market capitalism. Capitalistic entrepreneurship is not intrinsically evil, but the current global capitalism carries a creed with it that is devastating to both the earth and humankind. Economics is the theology of this new religion, says Loy, "and its god, the Market, has become a vicious circle of ever-increasing production and consumption by pretending to offer a secular salvation. . . . The Market is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe into a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist on seeing it as 'secular.'"

Religion never goes away. If one form of religion weakens, another takes its place. We need a true, humanizing religion or spirituality—the two words are almost synonymous. Humanity needs a new politics, a new way of doing business in the world. And here is where the rich cultures of Native America come to the fore. Says Churchill: "The experiences and perspectives of American Indians have the potential to reframe the population question entirely. Only after creating a new frame of reference, a

new paradigm, can we consider in an ethical way the Native American religious resources that could justify the right to family planning, contraception, and abortion."

### Malthus and Storytelling

Native Americans put enormous stress on the story, and the storyteller is something like a civil servant in their cultures. Says Churchill: "In much the same way as Westerners believe that money sets events into motion, American Indians believe that stories do not merely mirror reality; they create it." Churchill applies this to population. Malthus, she says, was "a storyteller *par excellence*." Over two hundred years ago, he told a story of overpopulation, and the world has never been the same since. This is but one proof of the power of a story to grip human imagination and control us. The Malthusian error that Churchill cites is the belief that "overpopulation is the major cause of hunger, poverty, environmental destruction, and resource depletion and many other social, political, and economic ills. There is a growing number of scholars who contend that we are in the grip of that story." Environmentalist Betsy Hartmann supports the power of Malthus the storyteller: "So pervasive are Malthusian assumptions that many of us have internalized them without even realizing it." The heart of that seductive story is to blame the numbers, especially the number of poor people, while overlooking all the other iniquities messing up the world.

Asoka Bandarage agrees, saying that

it can be argued that Malthusianism has shaped modern consciousness, determining the moral spirit of our age. . . . Population management by itself does not lead to the alleviation of poverty, environmental destruction, political unrest or other social problems. On the contrary, population management without

poverty alleviation, environmental restoration, and demilitarization results in the exacerbation of the existing problems and the victimization of poor women.

Powerful stories are the vehicle of a spiritual outlook and worldview. The Natives are right; we are in the grip of stories we have never examined, stories that control our politics, stories that are suffocating us.

#### Ingredients for a New Story

The prime story of the Native Americans is the story of the Land. "Land," says Churchill, "is the foundation of Native religious traditions. By 'land' the Natives do not just mean terrain. Land includes the beings who live on or near the Earth, the plants, animals, birds, and aquatic life; the formations of the Earth such as mountains, rocks, rivers, and lakes, and meteorological phenomena, including the winds, clouds, rain, and lightning. The entire cosmos, visible and invisible, is encompassed in the idea of Land. But Land is not an object; it consists of sentient beings, who are connected in a web of consciousness and reciprocal relationship. It is a holy thing."

Now that is a mouthful. Let's see what Churchill is really saying here, because it is central to Native American spirituality and religion. Land "is a holy thing," she tells us. As professor of world religions Harold Coward says, in the religions of the East and in the aboriginal, native religions, "the divine is usually seen as present in, rather than separate from, nature." Westerners who grew up within the matrix of Judaism, Christianity, and Islamic thinking should pause and ponder this, because it is a different view of reality. In those Western religions, as religious scholar Daniel Overmyer says: "There is just one God who exists outside the world. . . . It is really God that is sacred, not the world itself."

The experience of sacredness in the Asian and Native religions is not focused "out there"—in heaven, maybe—but right here. The world, the land, "is a holy thing." Sacredness is here and now, in this interconnected, interlocking world in which humans are only one of the treasures of the "land." Native scholar Vine Deloria points out that it is a misunderstanding of the aboriginal religions to say that because Mother Earth is considered sacred, she must be a Goddess. That might distance her too much from the rocks and stones and dirt that are the tabernacle of the sacred. It misses the direct "experience of personal energy within the physical universe" that the Natives experience. Some Natives say that non-Natives cannot really be experts on Native religion; they import too much separation between the terrestrial and the divine.

Another thing that is not separated in what I call the Native *sacrology* is the dignity of humans and the dignity of everything else in the cosmos. The implications of such a view are huge. Everything from air to water to plants, animals, and rocks is made of some combination of the same reality. Coward says: "There is no radical break between humans and the non-human realms of nature. . . . Exploitation of one part of nature (plants, animals, trees, etc.) by another part of nature (humans) is unacceptable." Abuse of the land, whether by overpopulation or by overconsumption, is a violation of life.

When the Natives faced the necessity of having to kill in order to eat or be protected against the elements, they did so with a paradoxical mixture of both mourning and gratitude. They did not simply claim predator's rights. When a Kwagiutl hunter killed a bear, he would apologize and offer thanks. Before killing the bear, he would say: "Greetings, friend that we have met, only to destroy you, my friend. Apparently the creator created you so that I could hunt you

to feed myself and my wife, my friend." Now the bear still dies in this scenario, but the mentality of the hunter does not make him a profligate hunter. Native Americans were stunned by the Europeans, who slaughtered whole herds without scruple or regret. They saw it as appalling arrogance, and indeed, as sacrilege. This certainly contrasts with the Western view of birds and animals as "game."

Before cutting down the hemlock tree that he needed, the tree was acknowledged, thanked, and addressed as "my friend." When a fisherman caught a salmon, he would acknowledge the salmon's sacrifice, as would his wife before cooking it. Daisy Sewid-Smith, an aboriginal writer living in Canada, says: "These practices may seem foolish to modern people, but these daily acknowledgments seem to remind the Kwagiutl that they were not the only important species on this planet."

A Wintu Native shows that this religious reverence extends even to rocks. The White man splits them and does not hear them cry. "How can the spirit of the earth like the White man? Everywhere the White man has come, the earth is sore." These rituals and ideals enforced restraints, and the Natives confessed that only humans need laws and restraints to keep them from destroying their environment. Other animals are less dangerous for Mother Earth.

Churchill and other Native American scholars are not arguing that the Natives were always ecologically sinless. They eschew romanticism of the "noble savage" sort. No people, no societies are sinless or immaculately conceived. Still, Native wisdom has remedies for Western cultural maladies.

#### What Is the Link between Feminism and Gratitude?

What strikes me in the Native religions is their elevation of gratitude to the top of the virtues. Their liturgies and

rituals almost invariably begin with gratitude. They are thankful for the wind and the water, the plants and the trees, the fish and the animals, and for one another. Many Christian liturgies begin with repentance and confession of sin. The Natives start with exuberant thanks. Faith, hope, and charity top the Christian list of virtues. Gratitude is more basic, the Natives say. What do we have that we have not received? To be is to be a recipient. Ingratitude is almost a form of psychosis, a detachment from reality, and it is dangerous. If you don't appreciate what you've got on this generous host of an earth, or even in a personal relationship, you may lay it waste. As a species, we won't perish from a lack of information, said Abraham Heschel, but from a lack of appreciation. Gratitude is a cure for blindness. (Here the natives are close to the Buddhists with their stress on mindfulness, discussed in chapter 5.)

The absence of gratitude leads to narcissism. We lose a sense of linkage to everything else. Grateful persons can more easily see how their well-being is linked to everything else. We are tempted to think of ourselves as separate atoms. We miss that we are part of a web. Gratitude flows into a sense of interconnectedness. And this thrust in gratitude even makes scientific sense. Scientists feel that all life on earth began from a single cell. So all that lives is family, in spite of our wildly different forms. And even the first single cell that started it all was a new configuration of what started as stardust whirling in space. In fact, we are all reconfigured stardust. To recall once again the adapted Catholic mantra, "stardust thou art and unto stardust thou shalt return." The chair on which we sit, the clothes we wear, and the book we are reading can all be traced back to the primeval blast on our parent sun that rushed out into space, cooled, and became our earth. When the sun completes its mission and collapses into its

"red star" phase, it and all of us will evaporate back into stardust, to be seen perhaps some time by another civilization as luminous clouds loose in space. There will be no clue left as to what we were. Native and Eastern religions are more aware of our relationship to the rest of the cosmos. That we are at all is a miracle, one that we share with the whole world. Being is a shared glory.

By now you should be wondering: How is all this going to lead to feminism? It will. But first another look at our ungrateful narcissism and how it shrinks us.

Western Euro-American cultures are marked by what Harold Coward calls an *I-self* outlook. We are, as the scholars say, individualistic. The individual is supreme. This isn't all bad. It has encouraged the defense of individual rights such as the rights to privacy and to freedom, but it has its limits. It's weak on the common good, on human solidarity, and on respect for the rest of nature. It could also contribute to a libertarian approach to reproduction: "I can have as many children as I want with no regard for the good of the community or the environment."

*I-self* cultures have large fault lines. Native religions in North America and elsewhere are more marked by a *we-self* outlook. They relate more to the common good and are more bonded to the other citizens of earth—the animals and the plants. Everything, including pregnancy, has a community dimension. Jacob Olupona, a scholar who studies Native African religions, was struck when he heard that during her first pregnancy, Princess Diana felt that all of England was carrying the child with her. This, says Olupona, is the experience of every woman in an African village. This sense of pregnancy as a communal event can cut two ways: It could encourage more births when the community needs that, and fewer when that is required.

So, now to the feminist connection. Gratitude has many children. One of them is humility and a lack of self-

centeredness. When we see how much we owe to how many, it deflates a pretentious ego. Another offspring of gratitude is the sense of connection with the community that nourishes us. Here, community means people and the rest of nature. When the Native peoples give thanks, they thank all that is life-giving. This leads to a powerful respect for women as the unique bearers of life. Only women can bear children and nurse them into life. This appreciation could have been short-circuited, respecting women only as baby-makers. This would not be feminism. But the Natives recognize that the life-giving talents of women go beyond reproduction. As the Iroquois tradition has it: "Women are respected because they nurture the spirit of the people and remind them of their responsibilities, their kinship with all life." Women become the Clan mothers, a position of enormous responsibility. With the Mohawks, the men become chiefs, but they answer to the women, who can remove them if they fail in their duties.

As Daisy Sewid-Smith says, before the European invasion, "women had equal ranking with the men. There was no need for a feminist stand." Feminism addresses a problem that many of the Native peoples did not have. In the Native nations, there was a division of labor. Men hunted and were the warriors, but women managed the village and the agriculture. Debra Lynn White Plume writes about the Lakota people: Before the invasion, "adult men and women existed as equal human beings. . . . Men and women each held definite roles in society that were considered of equal importance to the Nation." Different roles did not mean inequality. A Papago woman explained with confident humor to anthropologist Ruth Underhill, "Don't you see that without us there would be no men? Why should we envy men? We made men."

Churchill tells us that "as a result of this equality, domestic violence rarely occurred in Indian families. Instead, men

and women participated in all spheres of society including the family." In the Cherokee and the Iroquois cultures, the home belonged to the women, and the children belonged to the mother's clan. Churchill says: "The most important male in a child's life in this case was the clan uncle (the mother's brother), not the child's father. This arrangement not only secured women's authority in the home but it enabled failed marriages to dissolve without significant harm to the children."

It is not surprising, therefore, that Native communities tended to have appropriate population size. When women are empowered, that is the usual result. This is a lesson the world is slowly learning.

#### Application to Family Planning

Prior to the assault on Native culture, there were many customs that wisely addressed the need for the empowerment of women, especially but not exclusively in the area of family planning. In 1998, an event happened that was a moment of major recovery. Eleven Dakota girls "lived alone" for the first time in over a century. Guided by their female elders, these "child-beloveds" participated in a ceremony that had been prohibited by the U.S. government for five generations: the *Ishna Ti Awica Dowan*, or "singing for those who live alone." It was in the 1880s that this coming-of-age puberty ceremony became a crime under the Indian Offenses policy. Only with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978 could this ceremony be publicly and legally practiced.

Now, as Churchill tells us, "Dakota girls once again became women in the traditional way." The traditional way stressed strength, self-respect, and the authority and responsibilities of women in Dakota culture. These rites, taught by older women, gave young girls a sense of their

natural right to manage their sexual and reproductive lives. They also stressed an important theme in most Native cultures, the pursuit of harmony with all of nature.

In other ways also, adolescent girls were helped toward sexual and reproductive maturity. Churchill says: "Through stories elders warn girls about the dangers of men." These stories continued the instruction on the need for women to manage their sexuality. Mothers were especially vigilant. In Lakota culture, according to Lame Deer: "If you were a tipi-creeper you'd find out that mothers had a habit of tying a hair rope around their daughter's waists, passing it through their legs. This was a 'No Trespassing' sign. If a boy was found fooling around with that rope, the women would burn his tipi down or kill his horse."

Native cultures showed a keen awareness of the need to restrain sexual impulse and reproduction. Virginity was given status, and periods of celibacy were built into daily life as ceremonial requirements. Girls were to retreat to the menstrual hut for some three or four days to be alone. Says Churchill: "It was a ceremonial occasion which enabled a woman to get in touch with her own special power."

Sleeping separately was a form of birth control in the past. One Dakota woman reported: "Mother and father never slept together, men and women slept on different sides of lodges. Maybe we have to do that again." As a woman of the Ojibwe people said: "It is a disgrace to have children like steps and stairs. If a man had sense, he didn't bother his wife while a child was young." In a way that resembles Chinese traditions, some nations taught that sexual energy is a limited quotient. A man of strong character would restrain himself to preserve his sexual energy and also to be able to concentrate on the child he has before siring another.

These customs emitted many signals of responsibility regarding sex and family planning. In Native cultures, family planning made sense. Churchill sums this up: In spite of the great diversity in the many Native North American cultures and religions, they unite on "the privileging of the common good, the belief in the sacrality of Mother Earth, and the interrelatedness of all life." Native Americans know from their own experience that too much reproduction can violate these beliefs. Coward says that all the world's major religions "have encouraged population growth in irresponsible ways" except for Buddhism, the Chinese religions (Taoism and Confucianism), and the aboriginal, Native religions.

Native religions saw that you can't respect Mother Earth without family planning. The North American natives also learned the need for family planning from their own mistakes—a major route to wisdom for us all. There are many cases, for example, in the Southwest when overpopulation imposed excessive burdens on the communities and the fragile desert environments. The Native oral traditions teach lessons about this in their stories. The Cherokee story on the origin of disease, for example, says that animals introduced afflictions into the world because humans were overpopulating the earth and treating animals carelessly. In the Navajo account of creation, Coyote warns the people: "If we all live, and continue to increase as we have done, the earth will soon be too small to hold us, and there will be no room for the cornfields."

Churchill says that "Native traditional knowledge of practices of birth control also indicate concern with population size. These sources suggest that prior to European contact, Native people generally strived to live in harmony with their environment, balancing their population size

with the resources available in their regions." As much as they valued sexuality, they saw the need for limits. Sexual abstinence was prescribed for men and women who were seeking spiritual growth. Warriors, hunters, and others in some societies had to practice abstinence; and the times for abstinence varied from four days to four weeks, four months, or even four years.

Contraception and abortion have been practiced in Native communities, and women have authority here. Churchill says, "men did not interfere with women's matters, especially concerning sexuality. Women therefore traditionally make their own decision about family planning, contraception and abortion, all of which have been practiced in American Indian societies, to a greater or lesser degree." A contemporary group called the Native Women for Reproductive Rights Coalition explains the common attitude of Native women: "Within traditional societies and languages, there is no word that equals abortion. The word itself is harsh and impersonal. When speaking to traditional elders knowledgeable about reproductive health matters, repeatedly they would refer to a woman knowing which herbs and methods to use 'to make her period come.' This was seen as a woman taking care of herself and doing what was necessary."

Lakota women maintain their traditional authority over their bodies. "Anything that has to do with our bodies . . . is really our business as women, and as Lakota women, it is part of our culture to make our own decision about abortion. . . . It is our privilege as Lakota women to make decisions about our bodies." A 1991 Women of Color Reproductive Health Poll showed that many Native women hold this philosophy. They found that 80 percent of Native American women believe every woman should decide for herself whether or not to have an abortion.



### "Savage Rites and Heathenish Customs"

In the 1880s, the Courts of Indian Offenses tribunal set out to eliminate the "savage" customs of the Natives. The best that can be said of these courts is that they did recognize that they were dealing with a different culture, one that was more ecologically sophisticated and highly advanced in giving equal rights to women and men—and therefore a serious threat to the invading culture. The lesson from Native cultures is that family planning, including abortion as a backup when necessary, need not be controversial. The "abortion wars" of Western cultures today occur in a context in which nature is not our mother but is the raw material for our greed, and in which women are suppressed and therefore feared. Our Western cultures are also riven with tensions between fear of sex on one hand and pornographic obsession on the other. We do not enjoy a peaceful possession of our sexuality. In such an unhealthy climate, sane discussions of family planning are hard to come by, and the battle lines are drawn.

## Conclusion

OUR WORLD'S PROBLEMS ARE ENORMOUS and interlocking. Our greed, in the observation of Christian ethics professor Larry Rasmussen, has turned life into an emergency. The solution to the mess we're in cannot be merely technical. After studying the perils of too much growth, scientist Jorgen Randers concluded: "Probably only religion has the moral force to bring about [the necessary] change."

In 1990, thirty-four renowned scientists led by Carl Sagan and Hans Bethe wrote an appeal to the religions of the world. Their position was that "efforts to safeguard and cherish" this battered earth "need to be infused with a vision of the sacred." Religion has been part of the problem. It has to be part of the solution. The Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman said that people will die for a dogma (a religious conviction) who will not stir for a conclusion. Nothing so stirs the human will as the tincture of the sacred. The problems presented by greedy overconsumption, the human incapacity to share, and overpopulation require a reshaping of the human spirit, a kind of moral heart transplant. All the religions we studied are into this kind of heart transplantation. They have had successes in the past and have helped in our tortuous limping toward civilization, but they never faced a challenge like this.

In this book, we have seen the wisdom of multiple religions and cultures on the broad issues underlying family planning. As with the travelers in *The Canterbury Tales*, each has a story to tell and wisdom to share. If our ears are



open, conversations with these cultures can be medicinal. Each of these religious traditions show strong respect for the gift of children, and each of them sees fertility as a blessing. Each of them also sees it as a potential curse.

Family planning is not a radical idea. It is simply the service we owe this earth, an earth that is, in novelist Alan Paton's words, "lovely beyond any singing of it." No one could say that our "abortion wars" are normal or represent humanity at its best. Maybe some of the peace of these other cultures who faced the same questions can quietly seep into our souls. This may seem an unlikely dream, but to adapt the words of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, tread softly if you would tread upon that dream.

## Suggested Reading

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