

Abortion as a Moral Act

by Diana Alstad & Joel Kramer

For almost thirty years, abortion rights have been increasingly curtailed with the pro-choice movement on the moral defensive. There are basically four types of justifications for abortion: legal and social rights, health, family planning, and morality. The American pro-choice movement has focused on rights. But how can choice compete with life as an ultimate value? How can legal rights compete with morality, which is more basic? Rights exist only if society grants them, and thus can be eroded whenever the climate of moral opinion changes. Health and family planning justifications for abortion have also lost ground to the moral rhetoric and resulting political clout of the fundamentalists. All three depend on a favorable moral climate. The polemic depicting abortion as immoral can only be challenged by powerfully presenting why abortion is a moral, positive act. For abortion to be considered moral, it cannot be viewed in isolation separate from other aspects of society. The immense and negative repercussions on society of removing choice must be made clear.

The reason abortion is moral is very simple, although its implications are complex: forcing any woman to have a child she doesn't want is harmful to the woman and all of society. It means creating another unwanted, potentially uncared-for child, while limiting the woman's potential, including the potential of her present and future motherhood. Unwanted, inadequately cared-for children are one of the greatest sources of violence on the planet. Such children as they grow older are typically angry and prone to violence--potential time-bombs that can capriciously explode, destroying whatever is around them. To choose not to have a child when there's little foundation for her or his well-being is a moral and protective act. We must move abortion from a single issue and show how it is interwoven with many core issues: violence, poverty, quality of life, the stresses on and breakdown of the family, as well as conscious reproduction, and democracy. Tragically, as long as the focus is on the dubious "rights" of zygotes, embryos, and fetuses rather than on what's good for women, good for parenting and thus for children, and good for society, all will suffer. The immorality of forced motherhood for the broad social context must be made very clear.

The abortion conflict is a prime example of "morality wars" over basic values--a planetary phenomenon. This global battle for power and people's minds between fundamentalists and modern people stems from two deeply opposing worldviews. The old order is built upon woman's choiceless submission to her biological destiny and traditional sex role. Freeing women shakes up the old order as it changes roles, values, and thus the structures of power. Abortion is such a volatile issue in part because it erodes the very underpinnings of the old moral order.

Religious tolerance has meant respecting all religions, with an implicit taboo against criticizing them. Now this is handicapping us unfairly. A more appropriate definition that is not inherently disadvantageous to the more tolerant side is: everyone is free to believe what they want, and people are also free to criticize others' beliefs, especially if they can be shown to be harmful. Everyone has an opinion about the morality of abortion. Above all, it can and must be shown that it is morally wrong to force another's morality on any woman in this most personal and life-determining of all arenas.

Framing the issue as "pro-life vs. pro-choice" is wrong. The real dichotomy is between freedom and authoritarianism. Reframing the polarity as "pro-choice vs. pro-force" strips the lofty facade off the "pro-life" identity. This shifts the focus to the decision-making process, revealing the anti-abortion position as essentially authoritarian. The real moral issue is: who has the right to force a woman to have a child she doesn't want, and what are the implications of this for society? Wherever the forces of authoritarianism win on this issue, the world will suffer. Woman's recent ability to control her reproductive destiny is bringing about an unprecedented leap in social evolution. Choice extends the possibility of conscious reproduction, which in turn is essential to meet the momentous challenges humanity is facing.

“**Teen Abortion**” by Diana Alstad & “**Abortion as a Moral Act**” by Diana Alstad & Joel Kramer are posted at www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com & at www.rit.org

“**Abortion & the Morality Wars: Taking the Moral Offensive**” by Diana Alstad & Joel Kramer is at <http://www.rit.org> in Editorials (Web site of Resources for Independent Thinking)

Abortion & the Morality Wars: Taking the Moral Offensive

A position paper/speech co-authored by veteran feminist Diana Alstad and Joel Kramer exposes why being on the moral defensive is harming pro-choice and how we can and must reverse this by redefining the moral high ground, challenging the right's moral monopoly and showing why the religious right is wrong. It shows why forcing a woman to have a child she doesn't want is immoral, whereas abortion is usually a moral act that is good for individuals and society. This 10-page paper has had significant impact on many heads of pro-choice and family planning organizations, enthusiasm from feminists, and also aroused some controversy.

“I can't remember reading so cogent and truthful an analysis—ever. It's superb.” Elizabeth Conant, former editor of **Pro-Choice Network Newsletter**, plus enthused responses from Gloria Steinem, Ira Glasser, Geraldine Ferraro, Kate Millett, Sally Epstein, Lawrence Lader, Alix Shulman, Anita Perez Ferguson, Ellen Levine, Gene Boyer, Virginia Whitehill and many more.