Review: Beyond the Abortion Wars

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

There is no issue on which attitudes are more set in stone than abortion. People who are pro-choice tend to find it unthinkable that anyone would tell a woman what she can and can't do with her body. People who are pro-life consider it unconscionable that anyone would think abortion should be legally available. Powerful, well-funded interest groups enforce the twin orthodoxies of each side, and few and far between is the politician capable of a profile in thoughtfulness, let alone a profile in courage.

In actual fact, as Fordham theology professor Charles Camosy demonstrates in his new book, Beyond the Abortion Wars: A Way Forward for a New Generation, only half of the above paragraph is true. Americans are deeply conflicted about abortion and a significant proportion, almost 70 percent, identify themselves as both 'pro-choice' and 'pro-life.' Opinion surveys also indicate that many Americans do not think abortion should be available for any and all reasons and even many pro-lifers think that it should be available in exceptional circumstances, such as to save the life of the mother. This ambivalence is especially pronounced among younger voters. The second half of the first paragraph, about the entrenched interest groups and the profiles in cowardice from the political class, that half remains true.
Here, we see the value of this book. Camosy consistently, determinedly, and even with an occasional touch of delectatio morosa, challenges each and all on this issue about which we all think we know what we believe. In any field of controversy, there is a ?must read? book. A person who, having watched ?Wolf Hall,? and is interested in understanding the intersection of religion and politics in Tudor England must read Diarmaid MacCulloch?s biography of Cramner. Anyone who opines about the State of Israel must read Walter Laqueur?s ?History of Zionism? of they are not really serious. On the issue of abortion, Camosy?s book instantly becomes the must read text if one wishes to seriously engage the issue, or to be taken seriously.

There are two schools of thought about how morality should be framed in public discourse. One thinks that bright lines should be drawn, and surely protecting innocent unborn life would be one of the areas in which a bright line would seem warranted. But, as Camosy, and common sense, dictate, that strategy has not worked. When people are ambivalent, shouting louder does not tend to incline them even to examine their own thoughts more deeply, let alone shift their political calculations one way or another. It is time for those of use who are genuinely horrified by the number of abortions in this country to try the alternate path, to invite reflection and analysis, to encourage people to probe, non-judgmentally, their own thoughts and wonder, preferably out loud, how our current legal system might better reflect that ambivalence. In Camosy those who hope to pursue this alternate approach have found their scout and their guide.

Camosy?s work is not sui generis. He is deeply rooted in the Catholic intellectual tradition of moral analysis. And, he applies that tradition to the tough issues, examining the moral status of the unborn child. In this book, as in previous public discussions, he examines the claims of Peter Singer, the Princeton University professor who thinks infanticide is little different from abortion and endorses both, but Camosy uses Singer?s argument to expose some of the myths in the pro-choice position that an unborn child is not really worthy of moral consideration, still less a locus of rights. He notes that our legal system and cultural norms regularly accord all the rights of personhood to many people who are not ?independent,? such as a person in a coma. He argues against the idea that there is one defining characteristic oh human kind, such as rationality, that should be the mark or trait defining the presence of personhood. He looks at the argument from potentiality, noting the different ways the word potential can be used, largely embracing the conviction that an unborn child should share the rights of other members of the Homo Sapiens species: Many other members have various disabilities that hinder their full, human potential, and all of us have our limits, why would the fact that a human person is at a certain, albeit early, stage of development sufficient to deny that person the rights we accord other persons? Camosy also confronts typical pro-life arguments with some difficult questions, asking how we can draw the line at fertilization, as if it were a discrete point in time when fertilization is a process? He admits there is such a thing as ?gray area,? an admission neither side is usually willing to admit. All sides get challenged in this text, which may or may not advance the discussion but I am sure it made Camosy plenty of enemies!

Of course, in all societies, there are times and circumstances in which a person is denied rights the rest of us enjoy. A politician has a decreased right to privacy and the degree of the decrease is in direct proportion to the increase in power he or she seeks. Criminals are incarcerated both as punishment for past crimes and to protect society from further criminality. A person has a right to defend themselves from bodily harm even to the point of inflicting bodily, and in certain circumstances lethal, harm on another. This last becomes a focus for Camosy as he details those circumstances, such as when a woman has been raped, when an indirect abortion is permissible. Similarly, Camosy follows official Church teaching that a doctor can remove a cancerous uterus, even though this will result in the death of the unborn child, because the aim of the procedure is not the death of the child but the removal of the cancer. Camosy notes that there is a difference between declining to aid an unborn child and intending its killing, even though the circumstances in which that difference is meaningful will be few. Some see such careful
moral distinctions as so much analysis of angels on the head of a pin. I see what distinguishes us from barbarism.

The strongest part of this book is when Camosy reiterates an argument first put forward by Sidney Callahan. Pro-choice groups like to say that a woman’s ability to flourish requires her to exercise autonomy over her body. Further, this claim has taken on iconic status for many women, even if they never intend to have an abortion. Such are the demands of the modern workplace, that the ability to regulate pregnancy is, at present, a necessary requirement for workforce participation and while men do not have to worry about getting pregnant, women do, and so they should have full autonomy over all choices related to pregnancy. But, Camosy, following Callahan, rightly asks: Must women become like men in order to flourish in the workplace? Why not make the workplace, with its rules and regulations both formal and informal, reflect the fact that half the workforce can get pregnant and find ways to accommodate them? How did it become a badge of feminist honor that female autonomy requires women to oppose their own unborn child’s right to life? Only men would devise such a solution to the challenges women face in the workplace. Oh, wait a minute. That’s right. Roe v. Wade was decided by all men. Camosy rightly notes ? and this is an argument I cannot commend enough to pro-life advocates ? that many women feeling anything but autonomous in their decision to procure an abortion. They are pressured by the men who got them pregnant, pressured by an economy that sees pregnancy as an unwanted variable in a person’s career trek, pressured by poverty and the high costs of caring for a child, pressured by moral busybodies who frown on unwed motherhood without lifting a finger to help unwed mothers, the list goes on. The ?choice? championed by the pro-choice groups turns out to be a pretty thin experience of choice.

The weakest part of the book is Camosy’s first chapter in which he makes the case that public opinion is ripe for a change in abortion policy in the U.S., certainly not for an outright ban on all abortions, but for a policy that is more akin to policies in Europe where there are far more restrictions on abortion, especially late term abortion. Camosy is hopeful that public ambivalence about abortion will find a way to create a vital center that demands such change, staring down the extremists on both sides of the issue. I confess I just don’t see it. I would love nothing better than to discover a generally progressive woman who was willing to challenge the current pro-choice orthodoxy, or a generally conservative woman who was willing to question the current pro-life orthodoxy. But, I do not see how such a person could win a nomination for office in either party. There were once many pro-life Democrats. There are not so many anymore.

Camosy’s book evidences one of the rarest combinations in non-fiction literature. It is carefully reasoned and highly provocative. He aims to unsettle us and anyone who reads this book with a mind opened at least a little bit will be unsettled. But, the people who care most about this issue are resistance to being unsettled. Camosy should be named an adviser to the USCCB’s pro-life committee on the basis of his thoughtful work and his sheer hopefulness that our society can take fruitful steps to at least lower the abortion rate, but he won’t be so named. I fear the people who care the most about this issue, on both sides, will simply keep banging their heads up against their respective walls. It is a shame. It is our nation’s shame. Camosy thoughtfully argues that it need not be this way, and I commend him for his hopefulness. I also pray to God he is right and I am wrong.