

those rights they have already won. To retain them, and at the same time bear children, will cost in terms of time, money and personal commitment. But who stands to pay most, to lose most, if that were to be the case? Women with rights are a threat to the system, but they are less of a threat if they are compelled to behave like men and at least keep the system intact.

To sum up, the questions are these: does seeking abortion on demand perpetuate the very system which requires it in the first place? In campaigning for free abortion, are we not rather encouraging those who wish to alienate women from their bodies and each other, than helping women to lead fuller and more satisfying lives? Should we be seeing our capacities for child-bearing and nurturing in much more positive terms than we have heretofore? As feminists, we should see the need of addressing these issues. As Christians, it is our duty to address them.

## II — Prolifers for Survival\*

Susan Dowell

Abortion was a hot election issue in the US of 1984. The pro-family rhetoric of the Born-again Right<sup>1</sup> predictably incurred the correspondingly doctrinaire derision of the women's movement and the Left. The National Organisation for Women (NOW) banned from its platform women who in any way opposed abortion. Both sides agree, it seems, that abortion is a primary and integral component of women's liberation and a crucial test of "reliability" for or against.

All the more vital, then, is the search for ethical consistency and clarity which *is* being maintained in some wings of the peace and women's movements. This was given some force by the visit to Britain last autumn of the US Catholic pacifist Juli Loesch, who founded, in 1979, an organisation called Prolifers for Survival. She came to promote a parallel network here. This exploratory visit, (sponsored by Pax Christi, some members of London SPUC and Women for Life) provoked signs of increasing polarisation in UK. One reaction in *Peace News*—which in 1983 published a reflective consideration of the links between private and public violence—"was to curl into a ball and puke".

Juli Loesch described her own conversion on this issue with an almost revivalist persuasiveness. The warm-up of her testimony was a head-on mocking of the traditional ideological line-ups. Hands up all those on the left in this audience: ban-the bomb, pro-feminist, pro

“choice” (drugs and promiscuity). And on my right: those for strong “defence”, NATO, respectability, capital punishment (the Empire and Mrs Whitehouse). The laughter, only slightly uneasy, was rich with recognition. Loesch’s underlying assumption is that the pro-life movement is a sign of a gospel peace movement among conservatives and that, for pacifists, abortion, so personally maiming as it is, sharpens our apprehension of the pervasive violence of our culture expressed in the war machine. Wishful thinking or therapeutic lie? It was nevertheless helpful for me, angry as I often am at the self-righteousness and myopia of the anti-abortionists yet needing increasingly to find ways of exploring and expressing this dimension of pacifism. Juli Loesch’s own opposition to abortion was born in the peace activism of her Vietnam-dominated “sexually active” youth. She detected both in that war and in the clamour for abortion accompanying the “sexual revolution” an underlying colonialist impulse to control: control or destroy. Her own rejection of abortion, though, remained a private discipline. But as her peace work moved into anti-nuclear education, discovering the work of anti-nuclear scientists like Helen Caldicott and Rosalie Bertell, the abortion question burst out of the personal morality in which it had been (and remains, for many) enclosed.

Juli Loesch asserts that even if abortion had never been “invented” before, it would be now, by the scientific/military complexes deploying nuclear energy and weapons. Nuclear arms have been in production for 41 years, nuclear energy for 31, so we have barely begun to realise the effects of these materials. Future generations are, of course, at risk from the massive doses of radioactivity that would be released in a war, and today’s unborn children are those most severely imperilled by the “permissible” low levels of contamination to which we are all presently exposed in varying degrees. Small levels of plutonium, undetectable and probably harmless to prospective and expectant mothers and fathers, tend to attack and reside in the reproductive organs. These genotoxic diseases spread alarmingly easily: most people in the northern hemisphere, according to Helen Caldicott<sup>2</sup>, already carry a small plutonium load in their reproductive organs. “As plutonium contamination of populated areas worsens that load will increase—with potentially devastating consequences for future offspring”. Furthermore, the *admittedly* dangerous levels—and these are grossly conservative estimations—which do occur through accident or miscalculations in safety procedures, are defended on the grounds that foetal damage is detectable and can be averted by therapeutic abortion. Of course, the female population must be fully enlightened on this issue! There is simply no way even the richest government could bear the costs of compensation for parents or the massive programmes of long-term

care that would have to be set up if abortion were resisted as a preventative safety measure.

Juli Loesch told how, in a seminar seven years ago, she was forced to face the contradictions of her anti-nuke, pro-choice feminism by a woman who asked: if it's wrong for babies to be damaged and killed accidentally, what about those who are torn apart and poisoned deliberately?

I think it is crucial to consider these connections and to demand moral consistency from left *and* right, but I think it is unhelpful to collapse all the categories of this issue into one another. "Women's choice" may well be becoming increasingly meaningless in terms of global, ecological crisis, but for countless women what choice there is agonising. It is a choice that must by its very nature be confronted, urgently, in a constricted, lonely space. It is not enough to set "good" bountiful "nature" against "bad" technology and human intervention. Nature too can be cruel and wasteful and we do, on every level of our lives, exercise controls. What these are and how they are exercised needs imaginative and painstaking thought.

There is plenty of hard economic and sociological evidence that all manifestations of the combined forces of militarism and monetarism make abortion increasingly inevitable for the poor (of whom it has been said that this is the one right they never asked for but got). I am proud that Christian liberationists were among the first to denounce the cynical opportunism of the US "moral" stance, taken recently at the World Population Conference in Mexico City, of cutting aid to the third-world countries which include abortion provisions in their population programmes. At the same time, Christians must recognise that parallel, equally justifiable, charges can be levelled against the Church for seeking quick n'easy, cut price cleanliness. Not, like Reagan, at the expense, of the poor, but at the expense of that ultimate "other", woman. Many of my Catholic, feminist, "pro-life" friends deeply resent the priority and wholeheartedness given to this issue. Why? Because it is a woman's sin and the Church has always felt more comfortable denouncing these: part of its dualistic equation of women with carnality and ungodliness? The Pope's recent pronouncements naming even the rhythm method of contraception as sinful<sup>3</sup> can only serve to fuel this suspicion as well as the total scorn of his opponents who see the Church's pro-life stance as an age-old, illconcealed, punitive denigration of (female) sexuality.

However, many Christian feminists, along with the pacifists, have learned to walk the thin line of valuing the Church's teachings on the sanctity of life while rigorously defining and denouncing the accompanying misogamy and inconsistencies. A demanding discipline that can be said, now, to have begun to pay off. The US

Bishops' Pastoral Letter is a triumph of consistency and *radical* obedience to tradition. Roger Ruston's prediction of the "irreversible effect" the letter would have on the Church's thinking on war was well founded, as I experienced during a five-month stay in the US this year. Both supporters and critics of the letter realise that it cannot be tidied away. I was in Los Alamos (Bomb City), where the Catholic members of that prosperous, English-speaking scientific community were fighting a troubled, isolated rearguard action. As well they might, for the letter is indeed a *pastoral* letter calling Church people to re-examine personal as well as national involvement in the nuclear arms race. Elsewhere in the state of New Mexico—and the next county to Los Alamos was reputedly the third poorest in all the States—many clergy, religious and laity were inspired and empowered. Nearly every issue of *The National Catholic Reporter*, my lifeline to the radical heart of American Catholicism, carried news of programmes of study and action initiated to find ways of linking the nuclear threat to other justice issues, to weave what Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago has called the 'seamless garment' of reverence for life.<sup>5</sup>

The substantial resources of feminist/liberation theology are on hand to point up the hypocrisy and bankruptcy of the strictly private morality of the US ecclesiastical and political Right, which reached their nadir this election year. Ruston identified the beginning of an enduring and conflictual process of change as we come to realise the "limits set by the gospel to Christian obedience to the State". It is easier to envision this in the pluralist US, where, for example, many nuclear installations depend on large workforces of Catholic Hispanic peoples (who actually listen to their Bishops!), whose 'reliability' must now be in question in any escalation of world tension.

Juli Loesch proposes the Prolifers for Survival model for building bridges between the pro-life and peace-movements here, to help each side get a more realistic grip on its own issue rather than competing for top holocaust honours. (Prolifers for Survival has 25 chapters in US cities and is about 60% Christian, mainly Catholic, and 40% unaffiliated). She was asking pro-lifers here to yield up their respectable "reliability", and I think she had much to teach us from the US experience.

My main and underlying unease with her presentation was that it was deficient in any full-blooded feminist analysis. True, these perspectives were not, I surmised, shared by most of her audience, but she seemed to short-change the very women who are given such pride of place in her utopian vision of abortion ending by consensus and changed consciousness. Such a consensus, Loesch has written, would be spear-headed by feminists, by women who had have abortions and have come to identify abortion as part of women's social, economic and sexual exploitation. Those women exist, I hear and meet them,

but many, I believe, could not, like me, have heard Juli Loesch without a sense of betrayal. Bridge-building is vital but the bridge will be insubstantial if particular strands of church, and feminine awareness are adopted without realistic reference to their spiritual and political contexts. Bernadin's "seamless garment" has angered many doves and liberals: those who welcome the Church's anti-war initiatives but are contemptuous of the whole package, which they see not as creative weaving but as a smoke-screen to put over the old *Humanae Vitae* line.

Paranoia can only be forestalled by precision. I was uncomfortable with Loesch's response to questions about contraception. Shunning, on ecological grounds, all unnatural methods of birth control is not a position she can expect to "go public" on without charges of gross elitism. Few women enjoy a level of choice and control over their lives that would make this a realistic possibility. The issues of abortion and contraception must be absolutely distinct. The ways they are now linked are disastrous on every front—from "liberally" touting abortion as a "back up" contraceptive measure to the US New Right's policy of repealing abortion laws and tying this in with legislation that would limit the availability of contraception and sex education. The question, surely, is how can safe ecological techniques be developed which, above all, encourage joint male/female responsibility for human fertility.

Until we in the Church think with a more precise and imaginative involvement on these things, we will be colluding with those feminist critics who say that this is and must remain a woman-only issue. (Bishops Hands off Women's Bodies!). Abortion is not a woman's issue any more than war is a man's issue, but to say that demands that we relinquish another uneasy collusive myth of bourgeois Christianity and bourgeois feminism: that women are somehow closer to "nature" and must forever embody its ways and laws—while those in power define and defy those laws at will.

I do wholeheartedly believe that discovering areas of a common mind and concern is exciting and empowering. Personally, I could not stay in a Church that had not at least begun to condemn nuclear weapons, any more than I could continue to be part of a feminist movement that revered female sexual autonomy as an ultimate end and triumph. So let us, by all means, value and nurture this dialogue. But let us also understand that we meet in what is, today, a narrow place, a minefield of paradox and contradiction. Only when we fully recognise that this is where we are can we be truly prophetic.

I am not, I hope, knocking Juli Loesch or this movement for not being pukka "right-on" feminist. But feminists, and many other women, will inevitably and rightly be wary of even the most enlightened "pro-life" initiatives that shirk a comprehensive analysis

and real repentance of women's oppression in Church and society: an oppression that traditionally employs women's role in childbearing both as its arena and its justification.

I feel it is entirely justifiable to give more weight to the tender feelings on the feminist side of this debate. Christian perspectives and the voice of the male-dominated Church have held sway—for better or worse—over our culture's values. Whether it can continue to do so depends on its own capacity to grasp a comprehensive analysis of the systems of oppression and evil that dehumanize us all.<sup>6</sup> That analysis, says Ruether, is being made in the women's movement, and "any attempt to dismiss feminism as excessive or marginal is based finally on the assumption that male domination itself is the constitutive framework of what is called 'the human condition'". If we are to seek a new covenant with the earth and all its peoples yet to be born our vision of one another and our mutual trust in one another must take root now.

- \* A UK branch of this organisation was launched in January. For information contact Veronica Whitty, 26 Parkfield Road, London N.W.10, tel. 01-459 3870.
- 1 Rosemary Radford Ruether's essays on Church and Family (*New Blackfriars* January—May 1984) show that the 'bible-based' bourgeois model so beloved of the Right in the US is unmatched by historical, economic or social reality.
- 2 *Nuclear Madness*, Autumn Press, Mass. USA 1978.
- 3 Allocution at the General Audience of 8.8.1984.
- 4 *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, CTS/SPCK £1.50. Discussed in detail by Roger Ruston, 'NO to the Nuclear Warriors: The US Bishops' Pastoral', *New Blackfriars* December 1983.
- 5 In his 1984 Gannon lecture at Fordham University, New York, to symbolize the consistent ethic which he argued that one should bring to all questions concerning life (war, capital punishment, abortion).
- 6 *Are Women Today's Prophets?* Address given for the Catholic women's network, Westminster Cathedral Conference Centre, London, August 23 1984.