

Sex, Sin, and Abortion Rights By Steven Jonas

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Over the last several years the Roman Catholic Church has found itself confronted with a wide variety of scandal --- some of them have been described even by Catholics as horrors --- that involve sex and what Catholics describe as sins of one sort or another.

First came the discoveries in Ireland of the Catholic orphanages/homes-for-unwed mothers, and at some of them, of the widespread practice of forcibly taking babies away from their mothers in the homes and putting them up for adoption. This practice was denounced by the Pope himself. But of course, it occurred in the past. Occurring in the past too was the apparent practice of killing babies and dumping them in unmarked graves (one was a septic tank) along with fetuses aborted in the homes.

The current scandal revolves around the report of a grand jury in Pennsylvania of widespread sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, over a period of many years. The scandal here concerns the sexual assaults themselves, discovered on a scale not previously known of, and the cover-ups. The general public has been becoming aware of the latter on a broadening scale since the original reporting by The Boston Globe some years ago, which was made into a movie ("Spotlight"). Currently also are the charges being made against the Pope himself of a cover-up of the activities of a Cardinal covering up reports of priestly sexual abuse. There are also charges of the broad toleration of homosexuality within the Church, which may well be wide-spread. Interestingly enough, the latter charges are being used against a Pope intent on reforming the Church on a grand scale in how it deals with economic, political and social issues around the world, by a powerful reactionary wing with the Church hierarchy.

Interestingly enough too, all of these scandals involve sex --- one of basic humans drives, both for procreation and for pleasure --- and sin, a concept that has driven Catholic theology since it was codified by St. Augustine in the 4th and 5th centuries. "Sin" is, of course, a concept unique to a certain set of religious beliefs, but not to others, and is totally alien to those of us who are humanists/reasonists/atheists. As is well known, there is a list of sins which, if committed by Catholics without confession and absolution, will lead upon death to eternal damnation in Hell.

In the list of sins are such matters as pre-marital sex, giving birth out-of-wedlock, using contraceptives (other than "Vatican Roulette"), and homosexuality. I must say that I don't know whether or not the commission of a crime such as sexual assault or a crime such as knowing of a sexual assault and not reporting it to law enforcement (the latter being the crime in Pennsylvania on which the former fabled Penn State football coach Joe Paterno --- a Catholic himself --- got hung up) are considered sins of the order of magnitude of the sex-related ones listed above.

Before we get to the issue of the relationship between these matters and abortion rights, there are a few other observations to be made. One is that it is highly unlikely that the widespread sexual abuse within the Church exposed by that Pennsylvania grand jury is unique to that state. It couldn't be something to do either with Pennsylvania's water or the fact of the widespread fracking in that state which is doing such harm to its water supply. After all, as the leader of the Russian Revolution Vladimir Ilyich Lenin is said to have once said, "sex is not like a drink of water." If it happened in Pennsylvania it has happened (and may still be happening) in many other states.

As to the matter of homosexuality, it is a practice among members of the human species which goes back to the Old Testament (and beyond, to be sure) where it was well-described by the homophobes of the time. There is no reason to think that it wouldn't be practiced by certain members of the clergy, and who knows, since the Catholic Priesthood is an all-male profession, perhaps it attracts male homosexuals. (The same could be said about the Sisterhood too, but no

reports of sexual abuse or homosexuality have emerged on that side of the Catholic street [yet at least].) Whether or not that is the case, it is highly unlikely that it is just a recent development within the Church. (But that is a matter for another day.)

And then we come to abortion. According to Catholic doctrine, life begins at the moment of conception, so that abortion at any stage of pregnancy is murder, obviously a sin. (One can note that this is relatively modern Catholic doctrine, was established by Pope Pius IX in 1869. He reversed the long-time Church position, established from the time of St. Augustine and reinforced by St. Thomas Aquinas, that abortion was OK up to the time of "quickenning" (16-20 weeks). Also, it was Pius IX who established the Doctrine of Papal Infallibility. So, for Catholics (and for certain other right-wing Christians), abortion is a sin. For those who do not accept the doctrine/concept of "sin," it is irrelevant. Or should be.

Unfortunately for the rest of us, the Catholic Church does not want to let it rest there. As is well-known, in the United States, before *Roe v. Wade*, it was Catholic doctrine (agreed to by many right-wing Protestant denominations as well) that abortion should be a crime. Ever since *Roe v. Wade* changed that reality, the Roman Catholic Church and their right-wing Protestant allies, aligned more-and-more with the Republican Party, have been fighting to restore the status quo ante bellum. That is, they want to criminalize abortion, according to their concepts of "when life begins" and sin, and are becoming evermore intense about it. The irony is that this is happening just at a time when the Church itself is becoming flooded with revelations of its own sinfulness, in its own terms.

Now, there are many people who seek abortions, who are homosexual, who are certainly religious, who believe in God in one form or another. But what the right-wing Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike, want to do is criminalize religious belief on these matters that is not in accord with theirs. This is religious authoritarianism, that is using the power of the State and the criminal law, to enforce one particular religious belief upon the population as a whole, many of whom do not agree with it, through the force of that law. This would take us back to the era of European Religious Wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. This is the most important point, and this is the point to which the protectors of abortion rights, and LGBTQ rights as well, must move, politically, if these rights are to be protected in the long run, politically. Appeals to "fairness" and "justice" alone are simply not going to work, in the long run. Everyone's religious, and non-religious, beliefs are at stake here, and that will have to become the issue, if those rights are to be preserved.

And then we come full circle back to the Roman Catholic Church and sin. It is beginning to drown in it, in everybody's terms, in matters of sexual abuse, of the non-reporting and covering-up of crimes, and the former forcible separation of single mothers from their children and the apparent murder of infants and non-burial of fetuses. As far as homosexuality is concerned, in the Western World only the Christian Right regards it as sinful or abnormal in any way. But within Catholicism, while it is considered sinful, and worthy of eternal damnation in the Afterlife, it is apparently widely practiced among Catholic clergy. And surely, this is not solely a modern phenomenon within the Church. If homosexuality is a sin, the question must be asked, over the millennia how many souls of how many Catholic clergy have ended up in Hell. And of course these are the clergy, straight and gay alike, who constantly preaching to Catholics, from pre-school on up, the doctrine of sin and the absolute necessity, for "good" Catholics, of resisting and avoiding it. Quite a contradiction, eh wot?

Whether a more modern concept of "sin" will save the Church is a matter for Catholic theologians and policy-makers. But that is not a major concern for non-Catholics. The major concern for us is that for too long have the abortion rights and LGBTQ rights movements been on the defensive. Especially with what has been revealed about the inner workings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, it is time to go onto the offensive, folks, and soon.