

## **RELIGION, POWER AND REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM: A Checkered History of Conflict**

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Thank you for inviting me to be here this evening and receive this award. It is a great honor, and it is a privilege to be here. It is also a privilege to do the work we do to help women and their families. It is my definition of practicing medicine.

It is ironic from my point of view that you are bestowing this honor on an apostate Methodist who gave up on Christianity nearly 60 years ago after reading Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy, Why I Am Not A Christian*, and *Unpopular Essays*, Erich Fromm's *Escape From Freedom*, R.H. Tawney's *Religion and The Rise Of Capitalism*, Charles Guignebert's *Jesus with Greek footnotes that I learned to read*, *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, *A Guide for the Perplexed* by Maimonides, *In Praise of Folly* by Erasmus, the works of Baruch Spinoza, Plato's *Απολογία* concerning the persecution of Socrates, Aristophanes' satire of sophistry in *The Clouds*, Lessa and Vogt's *Reader in Comparative Religion, Man and His Gods* by Homer Smith, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis, the works of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, and several times through The King James Version of *The Bible*.

I read some of these on my lunch time while sitting under my water truck on a construction job and while camped out in the mountains during another construction job. I had the heart of a believer and the mind of a skeptic. The skeptic won. I enjoyed the Unitarians at Dick Henry's church on 14<sup>th</sup> & Lafayette, and the ritual was comfortable, but I found it disconcerting to go from "Our Father, Who Art In Heaven" to "To Whom It May Concern." I had sung enthusiastically and joyfully in *The Messiah* every Christmas in excellent choirs from junior high through medical school, and I loved the

music. I still do. But skiing and hiking in the mountains – my real cathedral – got to be more important than going to any church. I was baptized when I was very young, but it obviously didn't have much effect.

In my work as a physician helping women by performing abortions, I have been confronted with the conflict among religions about this issue and, further, the checkered history of religion in matters of truth and power. While religious traditions may offer important insights into our relationship with the cosmos and our ethical relationships with fellow humans, I could not help noticing that religion has been sometimes on the side of truth and freedom, but at other times, it has been on the side of brutal power and repression. Socrates was prosecuted for doubting the gods of theocratic Athens and thereby corrupting the youth. The message was: "Believe this or die." Two thousand years later, the medieval Catholic church carried out the Inquisition, whose victims included Galileo and Giordano Bruno, whose crimes were independent thought. Martin Luther, although cruelly anti-semitic, challenged the dogmatism and authoritarianism of the Catholic Church. Hitler described Christianity as the foundation of German values, which embraced anti-semitism for many, but not all, German Christians. Christianity was used to defend apartheid in South Africa and slavery in the United States, torture in the Inquisition, and the slaughter of Native Americans by both the *Conquistadores* and our own fellow citizens.

Then we have the awakening of the Christian community in the struggle for civil rights in the 1960's in this country. The moral leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King and his associates is an historic beacon for all time.

In the 1960's, tens of thousands of women throughout the country were given critical help in finding safe abortions by the Clergy Counseling Service. Those religious leaders held that having an abortion was a moral choice, and they gave women the support they needed to effect that choice.

Now, we have the radical religious right in the United States, which has joined with the radical political right in its effort to fight and destroy the reproductive rights of women and to make women servants of the fascist state. In 1986, TV evangelist and Republican candidate for President, Pat Robertson, said in Denver during a National Right To Life meeting that we must oppose abortion so that “we will have enough soldiers to fight the wars and people to pay the taxes.” Joseph Scheidler, a defrocked Catholic monk, went around the country urging violence against abortion clinics and doctors, and he came to my office several times in 1985 and 1986. One of his followers threw a stone through the front window of my office a few days after I had seen the flame scars on the Jewish Community Center and synagogue left from the 1938 *Kristallnacht* in East Berlin.

In March, 1988, five shots were fired through the front windows of my waiting room, narrowly missing a member of my staff. I had just walked through the room. It was one of several attempts on my life. Randall Terry, surrounded by his followers, stood in the street in front of my office in 1991 and prayed for my execution. In March, 1993, Dr. David Gunn was assassinated in Pensacola, Florida by Michael Griffin, who was defended by Joe Scarborough, for whom this was a springboard to political stardom in the Republican Party, a seat in Congress, and a lucrative morning TV show. Later in 1993, Rev. David Trosch, a Catholic priest in Alabama, declared that killing doctors who perform abortions is “justifiable homicide.” A few days after his announcement, Randall Terry went on National Christian Radio Network, and, naming me and quoting scripture, invited his listeners to assassinate me. The next day, Shelly Shannon tried to assassinate Dr. George Tiller in Wichita. Reverend Trosch formed the “American Coalition of Life [sic] Activists” and advocated the assassination of abortion doctors. Paul Hill, a member of the group, then assassinated Dr. John Britton along with Dr. Britton’s bodyguard, also in Pensacola. The “American Coalition of Life Activists” had a national press conference on January 22, 1995 and announced the hit list of the first 13 abortion doctors they wanted eliminated. I was on the list, and so was Dr. Tiller. Dr. Barnett Slepian was assassinated

in 1998, and Dr. George Tiller, a close friend of mine, was assassinated in his Lutheran Church in 2009.

The Mafia has the decency to keep its hit lists private.

The last time I was privileged to visit this temple was in June, 2009, a few days after Dr. Tiller's assassination, when I was invited by Rabbi Stephen Foster and Betty Serotta to speak here about my friend. During that month, an anti-abortion fanatic threatened the lives of my family. I received a letter from Shelly Shannon from her cell in Kansas state prison telling me that I'm next.

Quoting now from something about this subject that I wrote earlier:

*"The murder of Dr. David Gunn [the first of the abortion doctors to be assassinated] was not the isolated act of a deranged loner. It was the inevitable consequence of 20 years of violent and inflammatory rhetoric from the radical Christian right that paints abortion as a "Holocaust" and doctors who perform abortions as "baby killers," "murderers," "Nazi doctors," and other hateful epithets.*

*Dr. Gunn's assassination culminated 20 years of violent terrorist acts that included stalking and harassment of patients and staff members and the bombing of clinics. The idea that a six-week embryo is equal to or more important than the life of a cantankerous adult doctor is no longer a sick private delusion. **It is a collective psychosis masquerading as religion that has become a political force threatening democratic society.**"*

I wrote those words in an editorial published in The Denver Post in 1993.

Guess who's running the country now?

It is difficult for me to be neutral and objective about Christianity's contribution to this frightening fanaticism. There is much more to this story.

As personified by Pat Robertson and others such as Jesse Helms and Jerry Falwell, the Republican party has been taken over by Christian anti-abortion fanatics. The policy

of the Republican Party is that women are for pleasure and having babies, and they should have as many as possible. The philosophy is clearly that individuals are here to serve the state and not the other way around. Individual freedom is subject to cancellation because it does not serve the needs of the State.

That is the current Republican philosophy, and it is a fascist philosophy. The underpinnings are both Protestant Evangelical and Catholic theology, and its advocates are in complete control of all three branches of the federal government of the United States at this time. Fanatic opposition to abortion has helped to elect Republicans across the country. It was critical to the success of Robert Dole, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Newt Gingrich, George W. Bush, and Donald J. Trump, who had the overwhelming political support of Christian evangelicals. For forty years, for the Republicans, abortion has been the hammer and tongs to power.

What is the response of religious leadership in this crisis of not only reproductive freedom but democracy itself? Where is the high ground of moral leadership for Christians who support the rights of women to be healthy and to be free from the tyranny of their own biology? The Jewish community has been outspoken in support of reproductive rights in harmony with rabbinic law, which values the life of the woman over the life or potential life of the fetus. Since I am an admirer of Talmudic teachings but am not a Talmudic scholar, I refer you to Rabbi Foster and others who are experts on this. But I sympathize with pro-choice Christians whose faith is being given a bad name by the totalitarians who oppose us.

Whose morality? Whose “family values?” Whose virtues? It is not only a religious question. It is a matter of power. Who has the power to make the decision to transmit life to a new generation: the individual, or the State? You and I know that no government has the capacity, nor should it have the right, to make that decision for any woman, and that any woman is more competent to make that decision than any government. You and I know that safe abortion is a fundamental component of health care for women in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century, and that affirming that during the past 50 years has been one of the great public health successes of all time. But those who lust for power and who are willing to walk on the bodies of women to get it are determined to eliminate that great step forward for humanity.

This, then, at this moment, is completely about power: Who has it, and who doesn't? Which way are the guns pointed? That's a matter we decide at the polls in a democracy. But we are now faced with an ignorant, cruel, corrupt, autocratic, racist, misogynist, authoritarian criminal regime in Washington, D.C. that hates individual freedom, the rule of law, civil rights, voting rights, any part of the natural world not being exploited for profit, democracy, the free press, facts, and thought itself. We have an existential threat to democracy in America. Unless we secure it by our voices and votes, and with the help of this religious community, women will not have reproductive freedom, and if women are not free, none of us are free.

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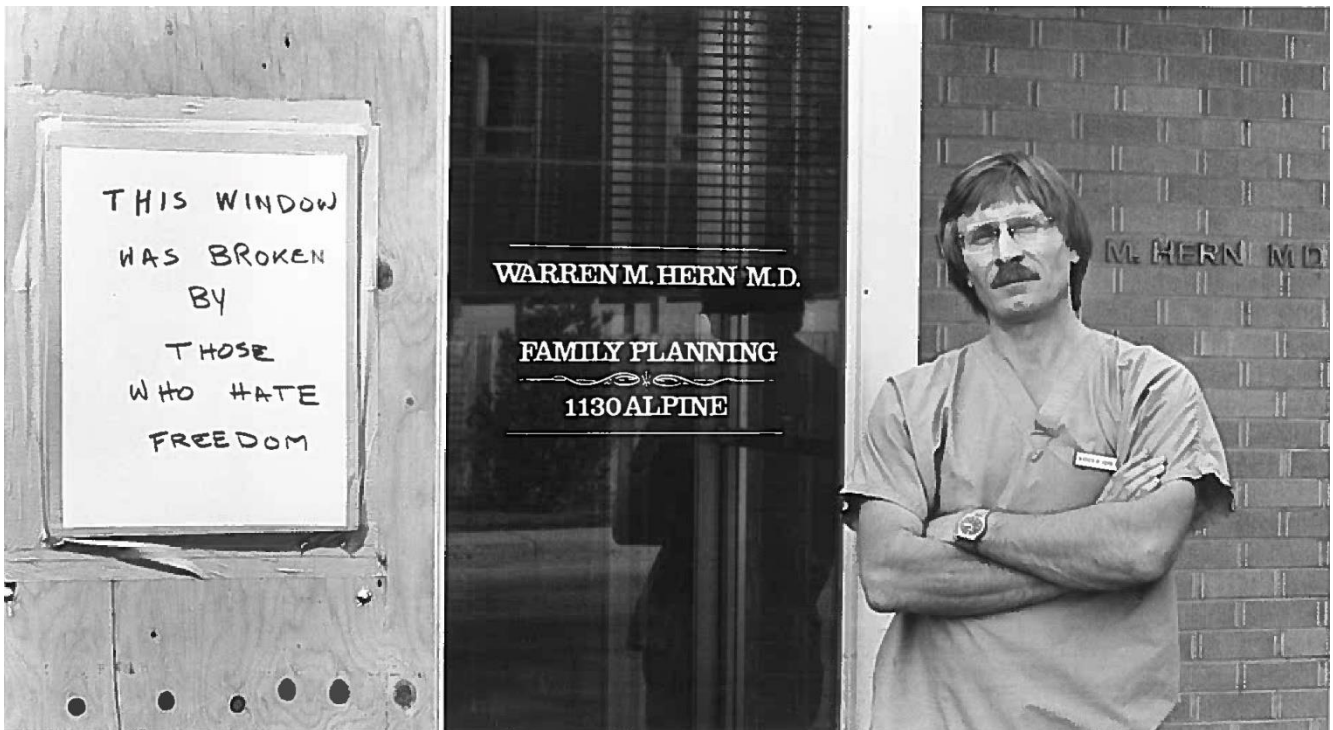


Photo for the Camera by Brian Lincoln

Dr. Warren Hern stands next to a window broken Friday at the Boulder Abortion Clinic.

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