

AlbertMohler.com

# Is Abortion a Theological Issue? Garry Wills Says No

Monday, November 5, 2007



Garry Wills is at it again — this time in the pages of *The Los Angeles Times*. A liberal Roman Catholic, Wills is a prolific historian who also writes works on contemporary religion. His new book, *Head and Heart: American Christianities* presents his pluralistic model of American Christianity and his effort to counter the influence of conservative Christians in the public square.

In his November 4, 2007 opinion column in *The Los Angeles Times*, Wills argues that abortion should be seen as a purely secular and scientific issue. Abortion “is not a theological matter at all,” he insists — making a brazen argument that is likely to shock parties on both sides of this issue.

“There is no theological basis for defending or condemning abortion,” he claims. Further, “The subject of abortion is not scriptural. For those who make it so central to religion, this seems an odd omission. Abortion is not treated in the Ten Commandments — or anywhere in Jewish Scripture. It is not treated in the Sermon on the Mount — or anywhere in the New Testament. It is not treated in the early creeds. It is not treated in the early ecumenical councils.”

This is intellectual sophistry on display. Abortion is not “treated in the early ecumenical councils” because abortion was not an issue in those debates. Neither was homosexuality . . . or any number of other issues. How exactly does Wills interpret “Thou shall not murder?” If abortion is not included here, what else is left out? Abortion is a theological issue because it deals with the questions of human life, personhood, the image of God, and the sanctity of the gift of life. There is no way that it can be anything less than theological at its core, which is why so many Christians take the issue with such seriousness.

Wills wants to secularize the abortion debate and leave it to science. So, when does he believe that a fetus becomes a person? He suggests that this is marked by the development of a “functioning brain” at about the end of the sixth month of gestation. He celebrates that this also marks where he considers the fetus viable.

But Wills also makes this argument:

*The question is not whether the fetus is human life but whether it is a human person, and when it becomes one. Is it when it is capable of thought, of speech, of recognizing itself as a person, or of assuming the responsibilities of a person? Is it when it has a functioning brain?*

Does Garry Wills believe that a fetus at six months is capable of “recognizing itself as a person, or of assuming the responsibilities of a person?” This sounds like the logic of philosopher Peter Singer, who argues that an individual is not to be considered fully human until he or she develops such understandings of self as a person and is able to communicate, establish relationships, and envision the future. Needless to say, these capacities are not present at birth — which is why Singer would not consider infanticide murder.

Would Wills go this far? Probably not. But his argument that the issue must be settled on purely secular terms leaves the door wide open.

Wills is certainly right that abortion is not specifically mentioned in the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, or the early Christian creeds. He fails to mention, however, that it is specifically mentioned in the *Didache* — a compendium of early Christian teaching that claims an origin tied to the twelve disciples. The *Didache* states that a Christian “shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is born.”

Consider these two paragraphs from Wills’ article. The first is his opening salvo:

*What makes opposition to abortion the issue it is for each of the GOP presidential candidates is the fact that it is the ultimate “wedge issue” — it is nonnegotiable. The right-to-life people hold that it is as strong a point of religion as any can be. It is religious because the Sixth Commandment (or the Fifth by Catholic count) says, “Thou shalt not kill.” For evangelical Christians, in general, abortion is murder. That is why what others think, what polls say, what looks practical does not matter for them. One must oppose murder; however much rancor or controversy may ensue.*

Then, a later paragraph:

*If we are to decide the matter of abortion by natural law, that means we must turn to reason and science, the realm of Enlightened religion. But that is just what evangelicals want to avoid. Who are the relevant experts here? They are philosophers, neurobiologists, embryologists. Evangelicals want to exclude them because most give answers they do not want to hear. The experts have only secular expertise, not religious conviction. They, admittedly, do not give one answer — they differ among themselves, they are tentative, they qualify. They do not have the certitude that the religious right accepts as the sign of truth.*

Wills is a Roman Catholic, and Catholicism has a much longer tradition of dealing explicitly with abortion than does Evangelicalism (to our shame). Nevertheless, he aims his sights on evangelicals, accusing evangelicals of opposing abortion “however much rancor or controversy may ensue.”

But later, in pressing his own preferred agenda, he admits that his designated secular experts — the scientists and philosophers — “do not give one answer” and “differ among themselves.” Is he seriously arguing that if evangelicals went away, the abortion controversy would disappear?

There is more to Wills’ [article](#) (and book) on this subject, and it is clear that this Catholic author and intellectual has huge problems with his own church. But his suggestion that abortion is a merely secular issue will get nowhere. Theology is inevitably involved whenever human life and human dignity are defined or debated. A world in which these issues are considered merely secular is the stuff of nightmares.

