

# We are

# REPAGANIZING

An abridged version of an essay by Louise Perry

There's a very short and very brutal poem by the Scottish poet Hollie McNish, written in 2019 and titled "Conversation with an archaeologist":

*he said they'd found a brothel,  
on the dig he did last night,  
I asked him how they know,  
he sighed:  
a pit of babies' bones,  
a pit of newborn babies'  
bones was how to spot a  
brothel.*

"It's true, you know," said the writer and lawyer Helen Dale when we had lunch in London last year and I mentioned this poem, which I chose as one of the epigraphs to my book *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*. Helen was a classicist before she was a lawyer, and as a younger woman she had taken part in archaeological excavations of ancient Roman sites. "First you find the erotic statuary," she went on, "and then you dig a bit more and you find the male infant skeletons." Male, of course, because the males were of no use to the keepers of Roman brothels, whereas the female infants born to prostituted women were raised into prostitution themselves.

I realize that this is not a nice thing to think about. Personally, I find that if I let my mind rest for more than a moment on these tiny extinguished lives, and on the cruelty of the society that regarded their suffering as an acceptable consequence of the need to satiate male lust, I experience a painful, squeezing, swooping sensation in my chest that I've discovered only since I

became a mother myself—an involuntary physical response that I felt for the first time during my third trimester when I read an article on abortion that included a graphic description of what the procedure actually involves. I recalled that moment as I spoke to Helen, and it occurred to me that I had no idea what modern abortion clinics do with fetal remains.

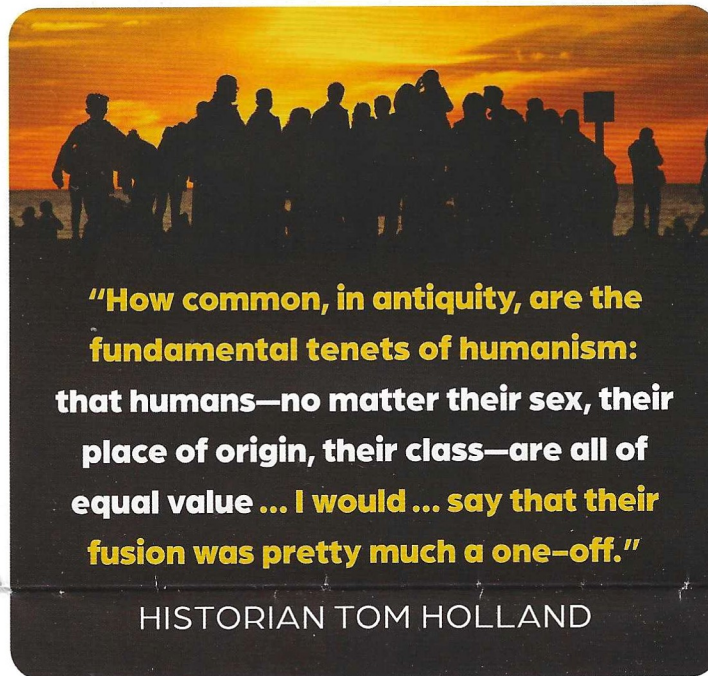
exceptions, as we will see). But this distinction has not been made by all peoples at all times. The anthropologist David F. Lancy describes the "far more common pattern":

*Among the ancient Greeks and Romans sickly, unattractive, or unwanted infants were "exposed" or otherwise eliminated; the Chinese and Hindus of India have, since time immemorial, destroyed daughters at birth, to open the way for a new pregnancy and a more desirable male offspring; the Japanese likened infanticide to thinning the rice plants in their paddies; among foragers such as the Inuit or the Jivaro, unwanted babies were left to nature to claim.*

Modern technologies such as ultrasound allow us to identify undesirable characteristics (for instance, female sex or Down syndrome) earlier than our ancestors could, but the most common reasons given by women seeking abortions today—poverty, fetal disability, and simple unwantedness—were the same reasons given by mothers and fathers who killed

their newborn infants in other times and places. Historical and anthropological accuracy therefore demands that we plot the acts of abortion and infanticide on a chronological continuum, since they have typically been performed for the same reasons and have been permitted in accordance with the same moral calculus.

It was the arrival of Christianity that disrupted the Romans' favored methods of keeping reproduction in check, with laws against infanticide, and then



**"How common, in antiquity, are the fundamental tenets of humanism: that humans—no matter their sex, their place of origin, their class—are all of equal value ... I would ... say that their fusion was pretty much a one-off."**

HISTORIAN TOM HOLLAND

The answer, I've since discovered, is that the remains are usually burned, along with other "clinical waste." There will be no infant skeletons for archaeologists of the future to find.

To mention abortion and infanticide in the same breath is a provocation. A majority of voters in Britain and America [ed: and Australia] regard abortion as permissible in some circumstances, whereas very few are willing to say the same of infanticide (with some notable



abortion, imposed by Christian emperors from the late fourth century. Christians have always been unusually vehement in their disapproval of the killing of infants, whether born or unborn, and their legal regime prevailed until the mid-twentieth century when we experienced a religious shift that will probably be understood by future historians as a Second Reformation. Christians are no longer in charge, and their prohibition of abortion—unlike their prohibition of infanticide, at least so far—is regarded by most pro-choice secularists as archaic, illogical, and misogynist.

I don't consider abortion morally trivial. Abortion is not just "healthcare"; it is not at all like getting a tooth or a tonsil removed. I am repulsed by the grandstanding of pro-choice activists who insist that all abortions are good abortions, and who have rejected the Clinton-era slogan "safe, legal, and rare" on the grounds that it promotes "stigma." The slogan resonated because it roughly expressed the view of the modal American voter: that abortion is sometimes a necessity, but always sad.

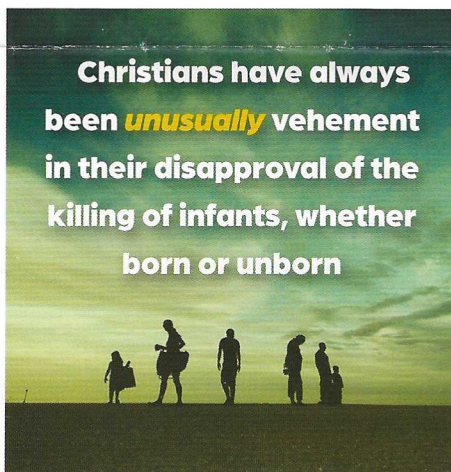
Uneasy agnosticism on both abortion and infanticide has probably been the norm in Christian societies, even during periods when the church was far more powerful than it is today. Laura Gowing, for instance, writes of the reluctance of witnesses and neighbours to condemn women suspected of infanticide in seventeenth-century England: instead, they would present the accused as "confused and anxious, heartbroken and manipulated by her fear of naming the father." Although a 1624 statute demanded that women found guilty of infanticide be hanged, courts were unlikely to hand down such a sentence. This reluctance persists still, as Helen Dale writes:

*An echo of humanity's infanticidal past is still found in jury rooms throughout the common law world: the reason we do not refer to infant-killing as "murder" is because in 1922, it was reclassified and re-named with passage of the Infanticide Act. This was done because juries refused to convict—even before 1920, when they were all male and the Crown case was overwhelming—and had been refusing to convict for some time. The only crime*

*for which fewer convictions were recorded was abortion. In Scotland, there hadn't been a successful abortion prosecution for 50 years. To this day, infanticide convictions are astonishingly rare.*

"Juries," as Helen put it to me, "are pagan." Increasingly, we all are.

In 1939 T. S. Eliot gave a series of lectures at the University of Cambridge in which he described a fork in the road. Western Civilization might continue along the Christian path, he predicted, or it might adopt "modern paganism." Eliot, a Christian convert, hoped for the former, but he feared that we were already hell-bent on the latter.



Eliot's binary is the basis of a 2018 book by the legal historian Steven Smith titled *Pagans and Christians in the City*. One might reasonably ask why our choices should be limited to these two options, to be pagans or to be Christians. If we fully abandon Christianity, so say the secular reformers, shouldn't that clear the way for some newer and better guiding philosophy?

No, says Smith, because paganism never really went away, which makes its return all the easier. Forget the account of history offered in, for instance, Gustave Doré's painting *The Triumph of Christianity Over Paganism*, in which Christ and his sword-wielding angels descend from the sky and scatter the old gods. Even after the Christian emperors began to persecute pagans in earnest, Smith argues,

*Paganism lingered on both in the countryside and in enclaves like Athens for decades, even centuries. . . . paganism endured as a powerful, evocative, shaping force in the historical memory and*

*imagination of the West. It persisted both in a positive form—in wistful memories of (and attempts to recapture) the beauty and freedom that had ostensibly been lost with the suppression of paganism—and in the more negative form of a lingering anger or resentment toward the force that had supposedly defeated and suppressed it—namely, Christianity.*

Smith and Eliot do not define paganism narrowly as an interest in entrails or in praying to Jupiter. Rather, they understand it as a fundamentally different outlook on the world, and on the sacred.

Christianity flourished when it [ed: i.e. so-called 'Christendom'...] permitted followers to incorporate religious practices that were found, not only in Greek and Roman religion, but in many other religions—practices that seem, in fact, to be instinctive in human beings, particularly the veneration of nature and of ancestors.

We should understand Christianity's impact on [socially-accepted] morality in much the same way—not as a process of replacement, but rather as a process of blending. The supremely strange thing about Christianity in anthropological terms is that it takes a topsy-turvy attitude toward weakness and strength. To put it crudely, most cultures look at the powerful and the wealthy and assume that they must be doing something right to have attained such might. The poor are poor because of some failing of their own, whether in this life or the last. The smallness and feebleness of women and children is a sign that they must be commanded by men. The suffering of slaves is not an argument against slavery, but an argument against allowing oneself to be enslaved.

Most cultures—perfectly logically—glorify warriors and kings, not those at the bottom of the heap. But Christianity takes a perverse attitude toward status and puts that perversity at the heart of the theology. "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" is a baffling and alarming claim to anyone from a society untouched by the strangeness of the Jesus movement.

The early Christian author Lactantius summarized the pagan objection to this topsy-turviness:



*Why did [Christ] render Himself so humble and weak, that it was possible for Him both to be despised by men and to be visited with punishment? Why did He suffer violence from those who are weak and mortal? Why did He not repel by strength, or avoid by His divine knowledge the hands of men? Why did He not at least in His very death reveal His majesty?*

In his book *Dominion*, a remarkable account of Christianity's enduring impact on the West, Tom Holland tracks the development of this confusing preoccupation with weakness and humility. He notes that though early Christians might make the sign of the cross, or illustrate the Gospels with stylized crosses, they would not, for many centuries, regard the crucifixion as an appropriate subject for vivid artistic representation. The manner of their savior's death was, to the Roman mind, so obscene and so humiliating as to be beneath mention. It was not until the fifth century that Christ began to be depicted in the moment of His death, and then never in a show of agony: These Christs were imagined with calm expressions, and as sculpted as a bodybuilder—or, more pertinently, a Roman god.

It took a millennium, argues Holland, for a new understanding of the Christian God to take hold of medieval Europe, “one in which the emphasis was laid not upon his triumph, but upon his suffering humanity.” New crucifixion scenes showed the reality of Christ's suffering—the suffering of a condemned criminal, not of a king. Christians would spend the next millennium as victors over both the Old and New Worlds, frequently acting as violent persecutors. But built into the fabric of the religion was a love for the weak that could not help but (slowly, falteringly) work against the strong. Christians were not unique in owning slaves, for instance, but they were unique in eventually banning slavery, something that no other civilization had ever done before. And modern secular feminists familiar only with the caricature of Puritanism presented in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* wholly

underestimate the emancipatory effect that Christianity had on women.

What Kyle Harper has described as the “first sexual revolution” emerged in a slave society in which Roman men enjoyed unrestricted sexual access to the bodies of their social inferiors, including children, and murdered infants were understood as an acceptable consequence of the need for frequent male sexual release. The violation of slaves and other low-born people was simply, as Harper puts it, “beyond the field of vision for ancient thinkers.” All legal systems, including the Roman one, have some concept of rape as forbidden sexual violation. But rape is normally a crime that can be committed against only some categories of women—typically, only those whose male kin are inclined to object to the offense, and able to punish the perpetrator. The poor and the friendless have no such recourse, and they are thus defined as unrape-able.

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The moral innovation of Christianity was to reconceptualize rape as a moral wrong done to the woman herself, regardless of her birth. Paul's prohibition of (to use the Greek term) *porneia*—that is, illicit sexual activity, including prostitution—upended an ethical system in which male access to the female body was unquestioned and unquestionable. Whereas the Romans regarded male chastity as profoundly unhealthy, Christians prized it and insisted on it. Early converts were disproportionately female because the Christian valorization of weakness offered obvious benefits to the weaker sex, who could—for the first

time—demand sexual continence of men.

When we accept the Christian emphasis on weakness as a crucial prior, many other moral conclusions follow. Slavery becomes unacceptable, as does the rape of low-status women. To point out the vulnerability of women, children, the poor, the enslaved, and the disabled is to argue in favour of their protection, not their persecution. Dress it up in secular language if you like, talk of “human rights” or of “humanism,” but this system of morality is far from universal. Holland asks,

*How common, in antiquity, are the fundamental tenets of humanism: that humans—no matter their sex, their place of origin, their class—are all of equal value; and that those who walk in darkness must be brought into light? Not common at all, I would say. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that their fusion was pretty much a one-off.*

Though women are a vulnerable group by virtue of their being smaller and weaker than men, there is another group of human beings who are weaker still. A group with no ability to defend themselves against violence, or to proclaim their rights. The very smallest and weakest among us, in fact. Whether we like it or not, we cannot place the protection of the vulnerable at the heart of our ethical system without reaching the conclusion that the unborn child ought not to be killed.

This presents a problem for feminism, because a prohibition on abortion places on women burdens that it does not place on men. And given the widespread practice of both abortion and infanticide, even in Christian cultures, it's apparent that people struggle to abide by a moral principle that causes huge practical problems.

The legal status of abortion is at the centre of the contemporary culture war because it represents the bleeding edge of dechristianization. When pro-life and pro-choice advocates fight about the nitty-gritty of abortion policy, what they are really fighting about is whether our society ought to remain Christian. Most people who describe themselves as pro-choice have not really thought about



what truly abandoning Christianity would mean—that is, truly abandoning Christians’ historically bizarre insistence that “God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.” But there are a few heralds of repaganization who are willing to be confidently and frighteningly consistent.

These are not evil people. They are not even unpleasant. In an extraordinary 2003 essay, the late Harriet McBryde Johnson, a legal scholar and activist who was disabled due to a neuromuscular disease, described her personal relationship with Peter Singer, perhaps our most influential modern philosopher, and a genial agent of repaganization—including on the question of infanticide.

“He insists he doesn’t want to kill me,” Johnson begins:

*He simply thinks it would have been better, all things considered, to have given my parents the option of killing the baby I once was and to let other parents kill similar babies as they come along and thereby avoid the suffering that comes with lives like mine and satisfy the reasonable preferences of parents for a different kind of child.*

Singer is one of the few philosophers writing today who is willing to follow the logic of arguments made in defense of abortion all the way to the end of the long, dusty road, concluding ultimately that there is no important moral distinction between abortion and infanticide, and that the killing of some newborn babies ought to be permitted in law.

“Newborn human babies have no sense of their own existence over time,” he explains. “So killing a newborn baby is never equivalent to killing a person, that is, a being who wants to go on living.” Singer can make such claims because he rejects the notion that there is something special (dare we say, sacred) about human beings, whatever their age or cognitive abilities. He argues that one ought to assess a being’s rights based on his or her individual capacities, not on his or her membership of the human species. Within this argument is, writes McBryde Johnson, a “terrible purity.”

McBryde Johnson makes clear that Singer is not a villain. He is a kind and thoughtful person, and, on a personal

level, she likes him. But Singer’s ideas can easily be put to villainy. He admits that the baby’s “sense of their own existence over time” does not appear suddenly but rather waxes into being. This fact presents a practical problem in the setting of a legal distinction between permissible and non-permissible child-killing. It’s a problem, of course, that all abortion legislation must face. If you do not set the limit at conception, then you must find some other point during gestation. Why not, asks Singer, push it a little further?

McBryde Johnson raises the specter of Auschwitz in her concluding paragraphs, and it is not difficult to draw parallels between a philosophy that denies the sacredness of human life and the philosophy of the Nazis. (“There is nothing particular about man. He is but a part of this world”—the words of Heinrich Himmler.) But we do not need to speak of Hitler, the secular stand-in for Satan himself, to warn against the risks of dechristianization. A world that embraced infanticide would not necessarily look anything like Nazi Germany. It would probably look like ancient Rome.

Or, indeed, twenty-first-century Canada. When it was first introduced in 2016, the Canadian Medical Assistance in Dying program (MAID) offered medically assisted suicide only to those patients whose deaths were foreseeable. But now MAID will be made available to the disabled and those suffering mental illness. Disturbing reports out of Canada suggest that the poor and the disabled are already under pressure to make use of this “service,” and depressed teenagers are eager to see it extended to so-called “mature minors,” as some euthanasia lobbyists propose.

Journalists have uncovered numerous examples of acutely distressed people applying for MAID because they have been denied health or welfare support from the state. Jennyfer Hatch, thirty-seven, was euthanized in October 2022, having given up hope of resolving the chronic pain caused by Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. She told friends that she was “falling through the cracks,” unable to access the state support she needed in order to go on living. Her desperate choice to die was glorified in a glossy

TV commercial titled “All Is Beauty,” produced by the Canadian fashion retailer Simons. “Last breaths are sacred,” says Hatch in the commercial, released on the day after her death. Modern progressives still care about the sacred, it seems—just not the Christian sacred.

As Canada slips down its slippery slope, the legalization of infanticide is being discussed quite calmly within its government. In October, Louis Roy of the Quebec College of Physicians told the Special Joint Committee on Medical Assistance in Dying that parents should be able to arrange the deaths of babies up to one year old who are deemed to have “very grave and severe syndromes.”

If infanticide is again legalized—first in Canada and then, inevitably, across the dechristianized world—we will know for sure that Christianity has retreated to the catacombs. And the date will come to be seen, I suspect, as a bright historical line: the moment at which we arrived at T. S. Eliot’s fork in the road and chose the older, darker path.

What if we understand the Christian era as a clearing in a forest? The forest is paganism: dark, wild, vigorous, and menacing. For two thousand years, Christians pushed the forest back, with burning and hacking, but also with pruning and cultivating, creating a garden in the clearing with a view upward to heaven.

But watch as roots outstretch themselves and new shoots spring up from the ground. The patch of sky recedes. “Paganism has not needed to be reinvented,” writes Steven Smith: It never went away. “In a certain sense, the Western world has arguably always remained more pagan than Christian. In some ways Christianity has been more of a veneer than a substantial reality.”

With no one left to tend the garden, the forest is reclaiming its ground.

**Louise Perry is the author of *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*.**

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