

# DOING REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE RELIGIOUSLY

## Faith and Secularism in the Struggle Against Reproductive Oppression

By Rev. Darcy Baxter

“The distinction between the religious and secular collapses, leaving a more complex set of relationships.”<sup>1</sup>

For many years, I felt awkward. Awkward because I was actively part of two communities that usually conceive of themselves as distinct and separate: reproductive rights and health communities and liberal religious communities. Awkward because I saw the “secular” fight for reproductive rights as a group of people advocating for what they believed to be most right based on their particular values and ethical traditions. I wondered - how was that different from an explicitly faith-based group?<sup>2</sup> Awkward because my liberal religious people often articulated

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their support of reproductive rights based on the constitutional separation of church and state.<sup>3</sup> Yet it was the particular beliefs of our religious ancestors (Anglo/White New England Puritan Protestants) that formed the basis for United States secularism and national legal system—how convenient!<sup>4</sup>

You see, I was raised in that “collapse” of religious and secular distinctions:<sup>5</sup> as an adolescent, I got comprehensive, body-affirming, feminist sexuality education in church.<sup>6</sup> I really learned what prayer meant while working on an abortion hotline, and my religious community was essential in helping me identify, cope with, heal from, and resist White supremacy.<sup>7</sup> It was only in reproductive justice spaces that my curiosity and persistent challenge to these common-sense distinctions of religious versus secular felt welcomed, where I felt my whole

self embraced - my whole self as a person of faith (and now a minister) who is religiously dedicated to people having the right to have children, the right not to have children, and the right to parent their children in safe and healthy environments. You can read about that comprehensive, body-affirming, feminist sexuality education elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Here I will share what I know about prayer, secularism and religion, and White supremacy. I will share about finding a sense of home in doing reproductive justice religiously.

I first learned to truly pray while working on an abortion hotline. I was in my early 20s and working on the National Abortion Federation's hotline, where we took calls from people all across the country seeking help regarding unplanned, unwanted, or complicated pregnancies. Many called seeking financial assistance to access abortion services. Because funding assistance was so scarce, we hotliners would have to tell folks calling that unfortunately there was very limited money available. We asked, “Do you have anything to sell or pawn? A TV? Jewelry? Do you have people you can ask for money, even small amounts like ten or twenty dollars? You will need to come up with as much money as you possibly can.” I identified as a privileged, college educated, queer, White/WASP young woman. Working on that hotline required me to intimately encounter both the vast differences and vast similarities between my life experiences and those of many of my callers.

Entering in and out of all kinds of people's stories and experiences was emotionally exhausting. Confronting the many ways many people lacked adequate support and resources brought up intense feelings of powerlessness.<sup>9</sup> I asked myself, “How do I keep doing this work and not be overcome with



despair and cynicism?” And so I wrote something. It was a poem-like thing, something I began to say after each of my calls. It did not contain references to anything supernatural or theistic. It did say something about believing in the strength and resiliency of the callers and keeping faith to carry on. My supervisor eventually posted that “poem” in each of the cubicles and shared with other counselors that I had developed the practice of reciting this poem to myself after each call.<sup>10</sup> In other words, I had developed a prayer practice.

The reproductive rights and health movements understandably often expresses hostility towards “religion.” In the name of religion (in particular, its conservative Christian incarnations), profound violence has been and continues to be committed on the people and institutions working to create access to abortion care. But in the face of this conservative Christian opposition and violence, many forget how liberal religious people and institutions, compelled by their spiritual convictions, were deeply involved in the mid-twentieth century in aiding women to access safe abortion services.<sup>11</sup>

Like many liberal, middle class White women, initially I only associated reproductive freedom with abortion and contraception. The particular experiences of some women were over-generalized into universal stories of all women. Too many stories and perspectives were forgotten or dismissed.<sup>12</sup> Stories of black and brown people. Stories of

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non-secular people. “Just like whiteness and maleness, secularism claims to speak for the whole world” by erasing/forgetting the particular places and people from where it came.<sup>13</sup> Working on the hotline, more and more stories worked their way into my consciousness. Maintaining a dehumanizing denial of particularities, differences, and power dynamics that White supremacy required was simply no longer feasible.

As a person of faith and now a minister who

unapologetically draws on non-secular resources and ways of being-knowing-living, I tend to feel far more welcomed into reproductive justice spaces than reproductive rights and health spaces. In 2012 and 2013, I partnered with Forward Together and ACCESS Women's Health Justice (both reproductive justice organizations) to put on spiritual public events<sup>14</sup> for those actively involved in the reproductive health, rights, and justice movements. I used my particular religious-liturgical tools to create space for participants to listen, receive, and digest different people's stories, while minimizing the common anxiety to tidy up and unify all these different, divergent narratives. While reproductive rights and health groups may (hesitantly) invite me to show up in my clerical collar, reproductive justice groups have actively partnered with me as a person of faith and religious leader, interested in my particular knowledges and wisdoms, not just the symbolic moral power my clerical collar may (or may not) hold.

How do faith and religion fit with the movements for reproductive health, rights, and justice? Though often times forgotten and denied, in truth, they have never been separate. Reproductive justice as a theoretical framework and movement was born from women committed to embracing complexities and the wisdoms of intersectionality. Thus, in reproductive justice spaces, people can less anxiously remember and encounter all parts of our stories, including the religious-spiritual pieces of themselves and our justice movements.<sup>15</sup> We face enormous challenges in making real the right to have children, not to have children, and to parent their children in safe and healthy environments for all people. We cannot afford to deny ourselves resources and tools that live outside the boundaries of secularism (boundaries that are increasingly harder to define.) The blessing of reproductive justice is that it never denied these resources in the first place.



## NOTES

1. Ann Snitow. "Introduction: Moral Crusades Then and Now: Religious and Secular," *Social Research* 76(4) (2009): 1257-60.

2. "Among the discomfiting implications for the Left of this hidden hegemony of secularized Protestantism is that the Christian Right is not necessarily wrong when it asserts its marginalized status in American Public Life. To admit this is not, however, to accede to the self-representation of Christian conservatives that Christians are the most oppressed of 'minorities...' Rather in the United States currently, we have a three-part relation among Christian secularism, mainline Protestantism, and conservative Protestantism." Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, "World Secularisms at the Millenium - Introduction," *Social Text* 18(3) (Fall 2000).

3. For further reading on the origins of church and state separation, see John M. Barry, "God, Government and Roger Williams' Big Idea," *Smithsonian Magazine* (January 2012), last accessed 12/2015 at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/god-government-and-roger-williams-big-idea-6291280/?no-ist>.

4. Emory Elliot, "The Legacy of Puritanism," The National Humanities Center, last accessed 12/2015 at <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/eighteen/ekeyinfo/legacy.htm>. For more in-depth reading on Puritan and Protestant influence, see: *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* by Jill Lepore; *Seeds of Racism in the Soul of America* by Paul Griffin; *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-belief* by George Marsden; *Head and Heart: American Christianities* by Garry Wills.

5. For more information, see Charles Taylor, "The Religious-Secular Divide: The U.S. Case," John Tishman Auditorium, the Center for Public Scholarship at the New School, New York, New York (March 5, 2009), last accessed 12/2015 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd6ad7jCCFA>.

6. "[W]ith a four-decade tradition of honest, comprehensive, health-promoting talk about sexuality — and eleven years of offering specialized curricula for all ages called Our Whole Lives (OWL) — Unitarian Universalist congregations are recognized as leaders in sexuality education." Sarah Gill Millspaugh, "Forty years of UU sexuality education," *UU World* (January 2012), last accessed 12/2015 at <http://www.uuworld.org/arti->

[cles/40-years-sexuality-education](http://www.uuworld.org/arti-cles/40-years-sexuality-education).

7. For further reading on anti-racism work in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, see "Curricula & Trainings on Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, and Multiculturalism," last accessed 12/2015 at <https://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/curricula>.

8. For more on church-based sexuality and health education, see Rachel Martin, "Church Tries Its Hand at Sex Education," *NPR* (March 2007), last accessed 12/2015 at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7867316>.

9. I have wondered if I was more easily prone to feelings of powerlessness and despair because of being raised encased in the comforts of a lot of White/WASP, middle class privilege, akin to arguments made by Robin D'Angelo in her work "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3(3) (2011): 54-70. For further reading on White anti-racist work, see Courtney E. Martin, "Transforming White Fragility Into Courageous Imperfection," *On Being* (June 2015), last accessed 12/2015 at <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/transforming-white-fragility-into-courageous-imperfection/7701>.

10. A couple of years later, while going through the process of becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister, a denominational official spoke with a fellow hotline counselor who I had listed as a reference. She shared with me that she had a lively debate with the official about whether that "poem" was a prayer and if not, how was using that poem different than saying a prayer? I believe they left that debate in the state of polite draw.

11. Tom Davis, *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances*, Rutgers University Press (2005). See also Tara Culp-Ressler, "God Loves Women Who Have Abortions': The Religious Abortion Advocates That History Forgot," *ThinkProgress* (December 2014), last accessed 12/2015 at <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2014/12/16/3601000/clergy-consultation-service/>.

12. To read more of these stories, see Loretta Ross, "The Color of Choice: White Supremacy and Reproductive Justice," *The Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*, South End Press (2006), last accessed 12/2015 at <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/The-Color-of-Choice---Public-Version-with-footnotes-1.pdf>.

13. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Thinking Otherwise," *Social Science Research Council Blog: The Immanent*



Frame - Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere (2010), last accessed 12/2015 at <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/12/03/thinking-otherwise/>.

14. For more information, see <https://sites.google.com/site/honoringlegaciesofjustice/home>, last accessed 12/2015.

15. For more in-depth history, see Daniel McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition*, Beacon Press (2011), as well as his speech on the subject: “Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition,” Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts (March 5, 2012), last accessed 12/2015 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l25syxTcOQI>.

