

## Issues, Etc.

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# The Sanctification of Human Life

from *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*  
by Dr. Alvin Schmidt

"I have come that they may have life." Jesus Christ in John 10:10

When in Rome, do as the Romans do." So goes an old saying. But when the early Christians arrived in Rome from Jerusalem and parts of Asia Minor, they did not do as the pagan Romans did. They defied the entire system of Rome's morality. The low view of human life among the Romans was one of their pagan depravities: "The individual was regarded as of value only if he was a part of the political fabric and able to contribute to its uses, as though it were the end of his being to aggrandize the State."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the pagan gods taught the people no morals, as St. Augustine, a former pagan himself, knew from personal experience (The City of God 2.4). This too did not enhance the value of human life.

The low value of life among the Romans was a shocking affront to the early Christians, who came to Rome with an exalted view of human life. Like their Jewish ancestors, they saw human beings as the crown of God's creation; they believed that man was made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Although that image was tarnished by man's fall into sin, they nevertheless believed the words of the psalmist to be true: "You made him [man} a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:5). They also knew that God so honored human life that he himself assumed it by becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son (John 1:14). Thus, unlike the Romans, Christians did not hold human life to be cheap and expendable. It was to be honored and protected at all costs, regardless of its form or quality. By doing so, they countered many depravities that depreciated human life.

## COUNTERING THE DEPRAVITY OF INFANTICIDE

One way that Christianity underscored the sanctity of human life was its consistent and active opposition to the widespread pagan practice of infanticide - killing newborn infants, usually soon after birth. Frederic Farrar has noted that "infanticide was infamously universal" among the Greeks and Romans during the early years of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Infants were killed for various reasons. Those born deformed or physically frail were especially prone to being willfully killed, often by drowning. Some were killed more brutally. For instance, Plutarch (ca. A.D. 46 - 120) mentions the Carthaginians, who, he says, "offered up their own children, and those who had no children would buy little ones from poor people and cut their throats as if they were so many lambs or young birds; meanwhile the mother stood by without a tear or moan"

(Moralia 2.171D). Cicero (106 - 43 B.C.) justified infanticide, at least for the deformed, by citing the ancient Twelve Tables of Roman law when he says that "deformed infants shall be killed" (De Legibus 3.8). Even Seneca (4 B.C.? - A.D. 65), whose moral philosophy was on a higher plane than that of his culture, said, "We drown children who at birth are weakly and abnormal" (De Ira 1.15). So common was infanticide that Polybius (205? - 118 B.C.) blamed the population decline of ancient Greece on it (Histories 6). Large families were rare in Greco-Roman society in part because of infanticide.<sup>3</sup> Infant girls were especially vulnerable. For instance, in ancient Greece it was rare for even a wealthy family to raise more than one daughter. An inscription at Delphi reveals that one second-century sample of six hundred families had only one percent who raised two daughters.<sup>4</sup>

Historical research shows that infanticide was common not only in the Greco-Roman culture but in many other cultures of the world as well. Susan Scrimshaw notes that it was common in India, China, Japan, and the Brazilian jungles as well as among the Eskimos.<sup>5</sup> Writing in the 1890s, James Dennis shows in his *Social Evils of the Non-Christian World* that infanticide was also practiced in many parts of pagan Africa. He further states that infanticide was also "well known among the Indians of North and South America,"<sup>6</sup> that is, before the European settlers, who reflected Christian values, outlawed it.

As with abortion (discussed below), the early Christians called the Greco-Roman practice of infanticide murder. To them infants were creatures of God, redeemed by Christ. Moreover, they knew of Christ's high regard for little children, for he once said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them" (Matthew 19:14). He spoke these words in response to his disciples, who thought he should not be bothered with people bringing small children to him. Having been reared as Jews, who saw children as a blessing, the disciples oddly enough reflected an opinion of children that was inconsistent with their Jewish heritage. One wonders whether the prevailing Greco-Roman culture's low view of children had to some degree influenced the disciples' remarks.

Early Christian literature repeatedly condemned infanticide. The *Didache* (written between ca. 85 and 110) enjoins Christians, "[T]hou shalt not. . . commit infanticide."<sup>7</sup> One finds infanticide also condemned in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 130) as it comments on the *Didache*'s opposition to this immoral practice.<sup>8</sup> Callistus of Rome (d. ca. 222), a onetime slave who later became bishop of Rome, was equally appalled at this common method of disposing of unwanted infants.

The Christian opposition to infanticide was not only prompted by their seeking to honor one of God's commandments, "You shall not kill [murder]," but also by their remembering St. Paul's words, written to them in Rome shortly before Nero had him executed: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this 'world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2). There was no way that they would conform to the ungodly practice of infanticide; to do so would have violated their belief in sanctity of human life.

"Infanticide," said the highly regarded historian W. E. H. Lecky, "was one of the deepest stains of the ancient civilizations."<sup>9</sup> It was this moral practice that the early Christians

continually opposed wherever they encountered it. And it was this depravity that they sought to eliminate. Before the Edict of Milan in 313, Christian opposition to infanticide obviously was not able to influence the pagan emperors to outlaw it. But only a half century after Christianity attained legal status, Valentinian, a Christian emperor who was sufficiently influenced by Bishop Basil of Caesarea in Cappadocia, formally outlawed infanticide in 374 (Codex Theodosius 9.41.1). He was the first Roman emperor to do so.

Total elimination of infanticide never became a reality, however, largely because not everyone converted to Christianity and because some who joined the church were only nominal Christians who still retained some pagan values and did not take seriously the church's stand on infanticide. Thus, evidence shows that many unwanted infants in many parts of Europe in the Middle Ages and after continued to have their lives snuffed out by their parents. But throughout the centuries the Christian church never wavered in its condemnation of infanticide. And as geographical states developed on the continent of Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, the Christian influence that prompted Valentinian to outlaw the killing of infants became the norm throughout the West, and anti-infanticide laws (with the exception of today's partial-birth abortion) remain in effect in much of the world today. It is one of Christianity's great legacies.

## COUNTERING THE DEPRAVITY OF ABANDONING INFANTS

When the Christians arrived in Rome and its vicinity, they encountered another culturally depraved practice that showed its low regard for human life. If unwanted infants in the Greco-Roman world were not directly killed, they were frequently abandoned - tossed away, so to speak. In the city of Rome, for instance, undesirable infants were abandoned at the base of the Columna Lactaria,<sup>10</sup> so named because this was the place the state provided for wet nurses to feed some of the abandoned children. Child abandonment had even become a part of Roman mythology. The city of Rome, according to mythology, was reputedly founded by Romulus and Remus, two infant boys who had been tossed into the Tiber River in the eighth century B.C. They both survived and were reportedly reared by wolves. This mythological account is one of many that reveal the Roman practice of abandoning undesired children, or *exposti*, as they were called.

Sometimes, according to Suetonius (A.D. ca. 69 - ca. 140), the biographer of Roman caesars, infants were also abandoned in a symbolic ritual of grief, for instance, when people in A.D. 41 grieved the assassination of Emperor Caligula.<sup>11</sup> This supports the observation that "the 'exposure' of children was a part of the standard litany of Roman depravities."<sup>12</sup>

The Greeks too practiced child abandonment. Like the Romans, they had their cultural myths that related tales of child exposure. For instance, the well-known Greek play *Oedipus Rex* revolves around Oedipus, who, abandoned as a three-day-old infant by his father King Laius of Thebes, was found by a shepherd of King Polybus of Corinth and his wife Merope, who reared the boy. Similarly, Ion, the founder of Ionia, was abandoned as an infant by his mother, as were other noteworthy Greek characters, such as Poseidon, Aesculapius, and Hephaistos, according to ancient literature. Greek mythology also depicts Paris, who started the Trojan War, as an abandoned child. And Euripides, Greek poet of the fifth century B.C.,

mentions infants being thrown into rivers and manure piles, exposed on roadsides, and given for prey to birds and beasts. <sup>13</sup> In Sparta when a child was born, it was taken before the elders of the tribe, and they decided whether the child would be kept or abandoned. <sup>14</sup>

In neither Greek nor Roman literature can one find any feelings of guilt related to abandoning children. One could argue that there might have been at least a scintilla of subconscious guilt, however, for many of the Greco-Roman stage plays and mythologies revolve around famous characters and heroes who were abandoned as children. These plays may unwittingly have soothed guilty consciences in that they permitted the audience to infer that their abandoned children really did not die but instead became cultural heroes.

As with infanticide, Christians opposed and condemned the culturally imbedded custom of child abandonment. Clement of Alexandria, a highly influential church father in Egypt in the latter part of the second century, condemned the Romans for saving and protecting young birds and other creatures while lacking moral compunctions about abandoning their own children. <sup>15</sup> Similarly, the African church father Tertullian (ca. 200) strongly denounced this practice. <sup>16</sup> Lactantius, the church father who tutored one of the sons of Constantine the Great, opposed child abandonment, saying, "It is as wicked to expose as it is to kill" (Divine Institutes 1.6). A sixth-century canon of the church called parents who abandoned children "murderers" (Patri Graeco-Latina 88:1933).

Christians, however, did more than just condemn child abandonment. They frequently took such human castaways into their homes and adopted them. Callistus of Rome gave refuge to abandoned children by placing them in Christian homes. Benignus of Dijon (late second century), who like his spiritual mentor Polycarp was martyred, provided protection and nourishment for abandoned children, some of whom were deformed as a result of failed abortions. Afra of Augsburg (late third century) was a prostitute in her pagan life, but after her conversion to Christianity she "developed a ministry to abandoned children of prisoners, thieves, smugglers, pirates, runaway slaves, and brigands." <sup>17</sup> Christian writings are replete with examples of Christians adopting throw-away children.

In spite of the many severe persecutions that Christians endured for three centuries, they did not relent in promoting the sanctity of human life. They saw child abandonment as a form of murder, and their tenacious efforts eventually produced results. When Emperor Valentinian outlawed infanticide in 374, he also criminalized child abandonment (Code of Justinian 8.52.2). Following him, Honorius and Theodosius II (both emperors in the fifth century) ruled that a foundling child had to be announced to people in the church, and if no one claimed it, the finder could keep it. <sup>18</sup> By the eleventh century, King Haroldsson (St. Olaf) of Norway fined parents who exposed a child; his successor, King Magnus, tightened the exposure law by charging such parents with murder. <sup>19</sup>

Although laws were enacted outlawing child abandonment in much of Europe, where Christianity was prominent, the practice did not come to a complete end. As with infanticide, many people did not internalize the moral and ethical teachings of Christianity. As Jesus said in one of his parables, some seed falls on good ground, some on stones, and some among thorns (Matthew 13:3 - 9). The "thorns" in the early church were those who never really

converted to Christianity. Some joined the church, especially after the persecutions ended, because it was socially or materially advantageous. They had not really disavowed the pagan customs. Hence, one account in the sixteenth century reveals a priest lamenting that "the latrines resound with the cries of children who had been plunged into them." <sup>20</sup>

The Christian opposition to child abandonment, which resulted in laws outlawing this practice throughout Europe, along with outlawing infanticide, had the wholesome effect of morally and legally ascribing to newborn infants the sanctity of life. That sanctity is in part atrophying today as many people support abortion on demand and even favor partial-birth abortion (the modern way of practicing infanticide).

Yet some of Christianity's high accent on human life is still operative even among the advocates of partial-birth abortions, because they believe that abandoning an unwanted child in a back alley or in a garbage can is a heinously criminal act. But apparently the belief in the sanctity of human life of newborn children is changing, as indicated by the recent rise in the abandonment of newborn infants in parts of the Western world. The city of Hamburg, Germany, recently established "Project Findelbaby" for foundling babies by providing a "baby flap" (resembling a large mailbox slot) at some buildings where unwanted infants may be dropped off without legal jeopardy. <sup>21</sup> The problem is not confined to Germany. In the United States, billboards along highways in Texas have recently posted the plea: "Don't Abandon Your Baby." <sup>22</sup> And in the spring of 2000, seventy-two state legislatures in the United States were seriously thinking about imitating the Hamburg practice.

However unfortunate the present-day baby-flap boxes might be, they ironically reflect Christianity's influence with regard to saving the life of abandoned infants. Rescuing infants in this manner is in part a revival of what the Christian church did in the Middle Ages. In the ninth century the Council of Rouen (France) asked women who had "secretly borne children to place them at the door of the church and provided for them if they were not reclaimed." <sup>23</sup>

## Countering the Depravity of Abortion

The low view of human life among the Greco-Romans also showed itself in widespread abortion practices. Ignoring this factor, historians and anthropologists tend to cite poverty or food shortage as the primary reason for their prevalence. However, historical data indicate that poverty was not the primary cause for the high abortion rates among the Romans in the century preceding and during the early Christian era. At this time in history the Roman honor and respect for marriage had virtually become extinct (see chapter 4). Roman "marriage, deprived of all moral character," as one historian has noted, "was no longer a sacred bond, and alliance of souls." <sup>24</sup> Juvenal apparently was not exaggerating when he said that a chaste wife was almost nonexistent (Satire 6.161). And Seneca, the Roman moralist, called unchastity "the greatest evil of our time" (De Consolatione ad Helviam 15.3). In light of this pronounced deterioration of marriage, countless Roman women engaged in adulterous sex, and when they became pregnant, they destroyed the evidence of their sexual indiscretions, thus adding to Rome's widespread abortions.

There was still another Roman motive - a rather unusual one - for aborting pregnancies, namely, the desire to be childless. Seneca said, "Childlessness bestows more influence than it takes away, and the loneliness that used to be a detriment to old age, now leads to so much power that some old men pretend to hate their sons and disown their children, and by their act make themselves childless" (De Consolatione ad Marciam 19.2). Why? Unmarried or childless persons were assiduously courted and given undue attention by fortune hunters who hoped to cash in on their "friends" wills. Historian Will Durant says that "a large number of Romans relished this esurient courtesy" <sup>25</sup> So pronounced was this phenomenon that the Roman poet Horace (65 - 8 B.C.) showed his contempt by satirically telling would-be fortune hunters how to be successful in their pursuit of childless couples (Satires 2.5). Thus, a ghoulish desire for other people's fortunes added to the prolificacy of Rome's abortions.

Long before the birth of Christ, faithful Jews, contrary to the pagan societies around them, held to the sanctity of human life, including life in the womb. Flavius Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, said that the biblical law (the Pentateuch) "forbids women from either to cause abortion or to make away with the fetus." He further stated that a woman who aborts her child "destroys a soul and diminishes the race." <sup>26</sup> First-century Christians, being predominantly former Jews, similarly valued human life in the womb.

The popular Greco-Roman view, however, was remarkably different. Human life (as noted above) was cheap and expendable, particularly the life of the unborn. Long before the birth of Christ, some of the philosophers - such as Plato, Aristotle, Celsus, and others well into the fourth century after Christ - had no compunctions about taking the life of an unborn child. Plato argued that it was the prerogative of the city-state to have a woman submit to an abortion so that the state would not become too populous (Republic 5.461). Similarly, Aristotle, once a student of Plato, contended that there was a "limit fixed to the procreation of offspring," and when that limit was not heeded, "abortion must be practiced" (Politics 7.14).

The opinions of Plato and Aristotle and others like them prevailed among the people in ancient Greece. To be sure, there were some opposing views. For example, as early as the fifth century B.C. the Pythagoreans frowned upon free and easy abortions, as did the Greek physician Galen (137 - 200) and the gynecologist Soranus of Ephesus (ca. 98 - 138). Similarly, the Hippocratic Oath of the fifth century B.C. said, "I will not give to a woman a pessary to produce abortion." <sup>27</sup> These opposing positions, however, carried little or no weight among the general populace or its political leaders, no matter who uttered them.

The Romans essentially followed the Greeks. Abortion was common and widespread among them too. There was some opposition, but it also meant little or nothing because the Roman populace had an extremely low view of human life. Moreover, the few who saw abortion as wrong usually did so on pragmatic grounds rather than for moral reasons. Thus, the verbally eloquent Cicero (106 - 43 B.C.) argued that abortion was wrong because it threatened to destroy the family's name and its right of inheritance; it was an offense against the father (pater) and it deprived the Republic of a future citizen. <sup>28</sup> Another opposing voice was that of the Roman philosopher-statesman Seneca, a onetime teacher of Emperor Nero. The well-known Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C. - A.D. 17) said in his Amores that women who had abortions were worthy of death. <sup>29</sup> And the Roman writer Juvenal (ca. A.D. 60 - 140) said the

abortionist was "paid to murder mankind within the womb" (Satires 7).

While a few poets and philosophers opposed abortion, the Roman populace received adequate support from its morally decadent culture and from its morally depraved emperors, who had no qualms about taking human life - young or old, prenatal or postnatal. Emperor Tiberius, who ruled from A.D. 14 to 37, and under whose reign Christ was crucified, loved to see tortured humans thrown into the sea. Emperor Caligula (A.D. 37 - 41), the crazed tyrant who succeeded Tiberius, arbitrarily killed all who once served in his palace. He enjoyed seeing human beings dragged through the streets with their bowels hanging out, and he forced parents to witness the executions of their sons. Claudius, the successor of Caligula, treasured seeing the blood and gore of men brutally disemboweled in the Colosseum. Nero (A.D. 54 - 68), who severely persecuted and executed hundreds of Christians and who had St. Paul and St. Peter executed, forced Seneca, his former teacher, to commit suicide. Emperor Vitellius, a successor to Nero, who ruled only for one year, said that the smell of dead enemy soldiers was sweet, and the death of fellow citizens sweeter yet. Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81 - 96) killed four vestal virgins, executed senators who opposed his policies, and killed his niece's husband.<sup>30</sup> And as shown in chapter 1, he severely persecuted Christians during his rule of terror. Bloody acts of other emperors could also be cited. Given this culture of killing, abortion was by no means an anomaly in the eyes of the populace.

Some have argued that the Bible nowhere specifically prohibits abortion. However, there are at least two biblical references that cast considerable doubt on this argument. Writing to the Christians in Galatia about A.D. 55, St. Paul issued a catalogue of sins (Galatians 5:20). One of the sins mentioned is pharmakeia, the making and administering of potions. This word has commonly been translated as "sorcery" (NRSV) or "witchcraft" (NIV) because potions were often made in a context of sorcery. However, it is quite likely that when Paul used the word pharmakeia in Galatians, he meant the practice of abortion, because administering medicinal potions was a common way of inducing abortions among the Greco-Romans. There is additional evidence in the New Testament in support of this argument. In Revelation 21:8, where the Apostle John condemns "sexual immorality," these two words are immediately followed by the plural word pharmakois, evidently because sexual immorality often resulted in unwanted pregnancies being aborted.

That pharmakeia (pharmakon), as used by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians and St. John in the book of Revelation, apparently refers to the practice of abortion has added support in extrabiblical literature, both pagan and Christian. Plutarch (A.D. 46 - 120), a pagan, uses pharmakeia to note that it was especially used for contraception and abortion purposes (Romulus 22 of his Parallel Lives). An early Christian document, the Didache, says that abortion is forbidden, and in so arguing, it uses the words ou pharmakeuseis (you shall not use potions). These words are immediately followed by "ou pharmakeuseis teknon en phthora" (you shall not kill a child by abortion).<sup>31</sup> Thus, this passage seems to link potions (drugs) with the killing of an unborn child. Clement of Alexandria (155 - 215), an early influential church father, identifies pharmakeia as an abortifacient. In criticizing women who conceal their sexual sin, he links abortion (phthora) with the taking of potions (pharmakois).<sup>32</sup> About the same time (around 190), Minucius Felix, a Christian lawyer, declared, "There are women who, by medicinal draughts, extinguish in the womb and commit infanticide upon

the offspring yet unborn." <sup>33</sup> About two hundred years later (in 375), Bishop Ambrose wrote that potions were used by well-to-do women to snuff out the fruit of their womb. <sup>34</sup> Similarly, St. Jerome in about 384 lamented that many women practiced abortion by using "drugs." <sup>35</sup> And in the latter part of the fifth century, Caesarius of Arles, in one of his sermons, said, "No woman should take any drug to procure an abortion." <sup>36</sup> In another sermon he again condemns abortion, and here too he links it with the taking of a pharmaceutical mixture (potiones in Latin). <sup>37</sup> Basil of Caesarea, a bishop in the latter half of the fourth century, asserted, "Women. . .who administer drugs to cause abortion, as well as those who take poisons to destroy unborn children are murderesses." <sup>38</sup>

Whether abortion was performed by using some type of potion or by some other means, prominent Christian leaders unequivocally condemned it. For instance, Athenagoras, a Christian philosopher and layman writing in about A.D. 177 to Emperor Marcus Aurelius, defended his fellow Christians against the preposterous charge of cannibalism that stemmed from Christians believing they received the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. He forcefully responded, "What reason would we [Christians] have to commit murder when we say that women who induce abortions are murderesses?" <sup>39</sup> Tertullian (d. ca. 220), the Latin church father in northern Africa, stated the Christian position in opposition to abortion by saying, "We may not destroy even the foetus in the womb." And he continued, "Nor does it matter whether you take away the life that is born or destroy one that is coming to birth" (Apology 9).

By the beginning of the early fourth century, Christian opposition to abortion was no longer voiced only by individual theologians but also by the church collectively. For instance, the church in the West not only condemned abortion in the Synod of Elvira, Spain (ca. 305 or 306), but it also excommunicated women who had abortions and did not accept repentance for their acts until their final hour of life. <sup>40</sup> In the East, the Council of Ancyra (now modern Turkey) took its stand against abortion in 314. The Canons of St. Basil, formulated by Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) and accepted by the Eastern church in the mid-fourth century, opposed abortion and the guild of abortionists (the *sagae*). This guild provided abortifacients and surgical devices for abortion. Its members also sold aborted bodies to the manufacturers of beauty creams. <sup>41</sup> Basil mobilized Christians to help minister to women who were facing unwanted pregnancies. At times he helped stage public protests against abortion. His efforts reportedly inspired Emperor Valentinian to outlaw abortion, along with infanticide and child abandonment, in 374.

Antiabortion laws did not put an end to all abortions, however. Pagans, of course, continued practicing it, as did some "so-called Christians," as Origen called them. So the church passed more canons (rules) proscribing it. Thus, in 524 the Council of Lerida (Spain) condemned abortions, as had the Synod of Elvira two hundred years earlier. In the twelfth century Ivo Chartes and Gratian noted that from the fourth century to their day, over four thousand canons had been issued affirming the sanctity of life. <sup>42</sup> Nor did the pro-life affirmations end with the twelfth century. After the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Protestants joined the Catholics in condemning abortion. Martin Luther, for example, asserted that "those who pay no attention to pregnant women and do not spare the tender fetus are murderers and

parricides." <sup>43</sup> John Calvin said, "The unborn child.. though enclosed in the womb of its mother, is already a human being... and should not be robbed of the life which it has not yet begun to enjoy. " <sup>44</sup>

Christian opposition to abortion, which resulted in antiabortion laws, continued uninterrupted well into the twentieth century. In 1945 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor whom Hitler executed a month before the end of World War II, reflected the view of the Christian church's long-standing opposition to abortion. Said he: "Destruction of the embryo in the mother's womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon this nascent life." <sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer's statement was rather typical of Christian theologians and formal church positions up to the 1960s.

As is well known, abortion on demand has become widely accepted today in Western societies, and as indicated above, liberal theology and secularism have greatly contributed to its acceptance. Even most mainline Protestant churches, most of them influenced by liberal theology, have come to accept abortion on demand and have thereby largely rejected Christianity's long-standing adherence to the sanctity of human life, at least in regard to abortion. Only a few of the larger denominations, such as the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Southern Baptist Convention, and Wesleyan Methodists, continue to walk the path of their Christian ancestors, reaching back to the pristine church. And of course the Roman Catholic Church continues to be firmly opposed to abortion. But even within these denominations, in contrast to the early church, there is really no Christian admonition or discipline regarding abortion when some of their members - for instance, legislators - promote pro-abortion laws.

The early church's opposition to abortion, along with its condemnation of infanticide and child abandonment, was a major factor in institutionalizing the sanctity of human life in the Western world. As historian W. E. H. Lecky has observed, "the value and sanctity of infant life. . .broadly distinguish[ed] Christian from Pagan societies." <sup>46</sup> The sanctity of life, with the exception of abortion, is still largely present today. Thus, the words of another historian are fitting: "The intrinsic worth of each individual man and woman as a child of God and an immortal soul was introduced by Christianity." <sup>47</sup>

As already indicated, until about the mid-twentieth century Christianity's opposition to abortion was accepted virtually by everyone, even by those who had little or no identification with the church. For instance, in the latter part of the nineteenth century even the feminist leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Gage strongly opposed abortion. Anthony said, "I deplore the horrible crime of child murder [abortion]. . .No matter what motive, love of ease, or a desire to save from suffering the unborn innocent, the woman is awfully guilty who commits the deed;... but oh! thrice guilty is he who for selfish gratification.. .drove her to the desperation which impelled her to the crime." <sup>48</sup> Today, however, most feminists favor and support the pro-abortion stance. The sanctity of human life, so zealously proclaimed and defended by the early Christians and their followers for nearly two millennia, has in the last several decades been significantly undermined by pro-abortion advocates, commonly outside the context of the church but sometimes also within

sectors of the organized church itself.

## COUNTERING THE DEPRAVITY OF GLADIATORIAL SHOWS

According to Ausonius, the Roman writer, gladiatorial games were begun in Rome in 264 B.C. by Marcius and Decius Brutus, who introduced them at their father's obsequies. Thus, by the time Christians arrived in Rome, the Romans had watched hundreds of thousands of gladiators mauled, mangled, and gored to death for at least three hundred years. These games, as one historian has noted, "illustrate completely the pitiless spirit and carelessness of human life lurking behind the pomp, glitter, and cultural pretensions of the great imperial age." <sup>49</sup> Like infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion, the games underscore Rome's low regard for human life.

Gladiators were usually slaves, condemned criminals, or prisoners of war, all of whom were considered expendable. <sup>50</sup> Each gladiator was seen as "crude, loathsome, doomed, lost. . . a man utterly debased by fortune, a slave, a man altogether without worth and dignity, almost without humanity." <sup>51</sup> Sometimes freemen (nonslaves) became gladiators to earn money or because they enjoyed the applause of the spectators. Only on rare occasions were women gladiators. The gladiators were physically trained in advance of the contests so that they would be able to put forth a strenuous fight, thus pleasing the crowds that always included senators, emperors, praetorians, vestal virgins, pagan priests, and other prominent Romans.

Gladiatorial contests occurred irregularly and only by an emperor's decree. They were usually announced unexpectedly, thus intensifying the public's interest. <sup>52</sup> These barbaric spectacles often lasted for months, especially during the second century. <sup>53</sup> Sometimes a hundred or more gladiators fought on a given day. Before the games began, carriages drove the gladiators, dressed in purple chlamyses embroidered with gold, in a parade to the Colosseum in Rome or to an amphitheater in other cities. Upon entering the arena, each gladiator turned to the emperor and saluted with his right hand extended, saying, "Hail, Emperor, those who are about to die salute thee." <sup>54</sup>

Each contest required men to fight men, commonly with the aim of killing the opponents with a sword (gladius). It was the crowd that largely decided the fate of a weakened, gasping gladiator. A turned-thumb signal, usually given by women spectators, instructed the victor to go for the final blow. Often it was also the women who praised gladiators "with the largest wounds or fell with the greatest calm." <sup>55</sup> The barbaric cruelty, the agonizing screams of the victims, and the flow of human blood stirred no conscience in the crowds of the gladiatorial events. To the contrary "the inability or unwillingness of the gladiator to go eagerly to his slaughter filled the audience with disgust and wrath and deprived the gladiator of his glory." <sup>56</sup> The Roman writer Seneca in the first century gives us a glimpse of the depraved enjoyment people had in seeing the gladiators brutally annihilated. He cites the spectators shouting, "Kill him! Lash him! Brand him! Why does he meet the sword in so cowardly a way? Why does he strike so feebly? Why doesn't he die game? Whip him to meet his wounds!" (Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales 7.5). To see a gladiator stab and slice his opponent to death was top-

ranked amusement.

Occasionally, gladiators fought wild beasts that often gored them to death. Whether fighting beasts or men, thousands upon thousands of gladiators were slaughtered during the seven centuries of this cruel institution. For instance, Emperor Trajan (98 - 117) celebrated his conquest of Dacia by holding gladiatorial shows lasting four months in which ten thousand gladiators participated, and ten thousand wild and domestic beasts were killed.<sup>57</sup> Of the ten thousand gladiators, at least half of them died on the sands of the amphitheater's floor, and many more expired later as a result of the wounds they had incurred. When Emperor Titus inaugurated the Colosseum in Rome in A.D. 80, five thousand wild animals were killed in one day, along with the numerous gladiators whose blood saturated the sand of the amphitheater.<sup>58</sup>

As indicated above, these "games" were not confined to the city of Rome. They were also held in other locations of the empire. Theodor Mommsen, a historian of ancient Rome, notes that these contests were also very popular in Asia Minor, Syria, and Greece.<sup>59</sup>

Christians were appalled by the gladiatorial games because they reflected the nadir of human morality: gambling with human lives. They saw these shows, like the moral depravities of infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion, as flagrant violations of God's commandment: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). Thus, they condemned and boycotted these bloody contests, and their opposition did not go unnoticed. Minucius Felix cites a Roman pagan who strongly criticized the Christians for their anti-gladiatorial posture: "You do not go to our shows; you take no part in our processions. . . you shrink in horror from our sacred [gladiatorial] games."<sup>60</sup>

The church's leaders enjoined their members not to attend any of these Roman events. The church father Tertullian (d. ca. 220), in his book *de Spectaculis* (Concerning Shows), devotes an entire chapter to admonishing Christians not to attend gladiatorial contests. In another of his writings, he condemns the gladiatorial shows for shedding human blood and reveals that at these events "the entrails of the very bears, loaded with as yet undigested human viscera, are in great request."<sup>61</sup>

Today the mere thought of the barbaric nature of the gladiatorial games and the fact that for hundreds of years people saw them as highly desired entertainment makes the average human recoil in horror. Such a reaction is powerful proof of Christianity's great humanitarian influence on the world at large. Most people now recoil at the inhuman features of the gladiatorial shows because they have absorbed Christianity's view of the sacredness of human life and rejected the pagan philosophy of Stoicism that was so prevalent among the Romans. Stoicism had no compassion for the weak and the oppressed. This view of human beings sheds considerable light on why abortion, infanticide, child abandonment, and delight in seeing helpless gladiators mangled to death were such an integral part of Roman culture.

Christianity's high view of human life and its concern for the weak and oppressed, together with its continual growth and influence, in time moved Christian emperors to ban the gladiatorial contests. Jerome Carcopino says that "the butcheries of the arena were stopped

at the command of Christian emperors." <sup>62</sup> Similarly, W. E. H. Lecky states, "There is scarcely any single reform so important in the moral history of mankind as the suppression of the gladiatorial shows, a feat that must be almost exclusively ascribed to the Christian church." <sup>63</sup> In short, it was Christianity's high value of human life, together with its belief that God had sent his Son, Jesus Christ, so that people might have life more abundantly both here and hereafter, that slowly under-mined the gladiatorial contests. Under the reign of the Christian emperor Theodosius I (378 - 395), gladiatorial contests were terminated in the East, and his son Honorius ended them in 404 in the West.

Some might think that the Roman enjoyment of the gladiatorial contests was no worse than what millions of Americans enjoy on television. Without defending the American penchant for violent programs, there is nevertheless a significant difference between the Roman gladiatorial contests and violent television scenes. The violence on television is contrived - it does not maim or kill people - whereas the Roman gladiatorial events were real; they brutalized human beings and took the lives of the contestants as well. Even modern boxing matches, whose violence is real, do not permit a knocked-down boxer to be further pursued by his opponent to the kill, as was required in the gladiatorial contests. When the downed boxer is seriously hurt, the referee terminates the match. On the other hand, as one observer has rightly noted, "To become a gladiator was to embrace, with vengeance, cosmic cruelty."

<sup>64</sup> Disgusting as violent television programs are, they are substantially different from the violence of the gladiatorial events.

Allowing individuals to be deliberately killed for people's enjoyment has not again been permitted in Western societies since the Christian emperors outlawed the gladiator contests. It seems appropriate to note that the frequent concern over violence on television that is often expressed by many Americans and other Westerners is a clear reflection of Christianity's accent on the sanctity of human life.

## THE MORAL LAWS OF CONSTANTINE AND CONSTANTIUS

Along with the many changes that brought sanctity to human life during the first four centuries of Christianity, other humanitarian laws were instituted by the state. For instance, Constantine the Great (306 - 337), who issued the Edict of Milan in 313 that formally let the Christians live in peace, in 315 outlawed the branding of the faces of criminals condemned to serve in the mines or as gladiators. Seeing the human face as "the image of celestial beauty," he outlawed the branding of slaves. He also ordered speedy trials because he saw it as wrong to treat a person as guilty before being convicted. And given his high regard for the Christian cross, he out-lawed crucifixion, the most cruel form of human execution. <sup>65</sup>

Other reforms followed. Constantine's son, Constantias (337 - 361), ordered the segregation of jailed male and female prisoners. <sup>66</sup> To most people today the segregation of male and female prisoners seems rather obvious. But it should be remembered that the pagan Romans had little or no regard for the welfare of women (see chapter 4), especially for women who were no longer under the manus (controlling hand) of their husbands. And since it was quite acceptable to have sexual relations with such women, the Romans had no moral qualms

about housing men and women in the same prison quarters.

The salutary and humane acts by Constantine and Constantius are clear indications that the Christian values regarding the sanctity of human life had powerful influence on both of them. Constantine has often been criticized for having sided with the Christians out of mere political expedience. The acts just cited suggest that his critics have overstated their case.

## COUNTERING THE DEPRAVITY OF HUMAN SACRIFICES

When paganism rules, it is not uncommon to see human beings sacrificed to pagan gods. Child sacrifices were common rituals of the Canaanite Baal worshipers in Palestine during the ninth century B.C. It was this practice that caused the prophet Elijah, with God's approval, to condemn and destroy 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:6 - 40). Near Mount Carmel on the site of the ancient city of Meggido, archaeologists have discovered the remains of infants who, under the corrupt rule of the Israelite King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in the ninth century B.C., had been sacrificed in a temple of Ashtoreth, the goddess of Baal.

<sup>67</sup> In the eighth century B.C. the corrupt King Ahaz of ancient Israel turned his back on God and sacrificed (by burning) his own son to the Canaanite god Molech (2 Kings 16:3). Not too long after Ahaz, another spiritually fallen king of Israel, King Manasseh, sacrificed his son (also by burning) in the Valley of Hinnon (2 Kings 21:6). And during the latter part of the seventh century B.C., the prophet Jeremiah condemned numerous Israelites for sacrificing "their sons and daughters in the fire" (Jeremiah 7:3 1).

Sacrificing human beings for religious reasons was not confined to the pagan Canaanites and the spiritually fallen Hebrew kings. For example, the Irish, before St. Patrick had brought the Christian gospel to them, "sacrificed prisoners of war to war gods and newborns to the harvest gods." <sup>68</sup> Sacrificing humans was also a common practice among the pagan Prussians and Lithuanians even until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The British author Edward Ryan noted in 1802 that these people "would have done so to this day were it not for Christianity." <sup>69</sup>

Another place where widespread human sacrifices occurred was in what is now Mexico. Here the Aztec Indians, a warlike people, frequently fought in order to acquire prisoners whom they used for human sacrifices. Their prisoners were commonly led up the stairs through thick clouds of incense to the top of the Great Pyramid. Here the victims were laid on a sacrificial block, their chests were cut open, and each prisoner's heart was torn out while he was still alive. According to Richard Townsend, "Streams of blood [from the many sacrificed prisoners] poured down the stairway and sides of the monument [pyramid], forming huge pools on the white stucco pavement." The heads of the victims were commonly "strung up on the skull rack as public trophies, while the captor-warriors were presented with a severed arm or thigh." With great rejoicing, the severed body parts were taken home, where they were made into stew for special Aztec meals. The eating of human flesh was a ceremonial form of cannibalism. <sup>70</sup>

Very similar to the human sacrifices of the Aztecs were those of the Mayans. Howard La Fay

describes their brutality: "A priest ripped open the victim's breast with an obsidian knife and tore out the still-beating heart." The priests also drew blood from the victim's genitals. La Fay continues, "Priests and pious individuals cut holes in their [prisoners'] tongues and drew rope festooned with thorns through the wound to collect blood offerings." <sup>71</sup>

Given the Christian precedence of having condemned abortion, infanticide, and gladiatorial contests of the Romans, it is not surprising that the European explorers in Mexico condemned the human sacrifices of the Aztec and Maya Indians. Referring to the gruesome religiously based human sacrifices of the Aztec and the Maya Indians, Hernando Cortes, the leader of the Conquistadors, said that it was "the most terrible and frightful thing [he and his men] have ever witnessed." <sup>72</sup> Bernal Diaz del Castillo, one of Cortes's surviving soldiers, wrote that as part of the sacrifices the Indians ate the flesh of the captured soldiers "with a sauce of peppers and tomatoes. They sacrificed all our men in this way, eating their legs and arms, offering their hearts and blood to their idols." <sup>73</sup> Cortes and his men had, of course, encountered unbridled paganism, and they engaged in war to eliminate its bloodcurdling abominations.

Castillo's shocking descriptions show that the Conquistadors - often correctly seen as ruthless, and who undoubtedly killed more of the enemy than was necessary (a phenomenon common in war, even though morally wrong) - nevertheless, still retained enough Christian values to be appalled by what they saw in the pagan sacrifices of the Aztec and Maya Indians. Cortes, says Castillo, had as his mission "putting a stop to human sacrifices, injustices, and idolatrous worship." <sup>74</sup> Only a consistent cultural relativist or zealous multiculturalist would find fault with Cortes's men conquering the Mayans and Aztecs and thereby abolishing their inhumane rituals. It was another step in spreading Christianity's doctrine that human life is sacred, this time bringing it to the New World.

## COUNTERING THE DEPRAVITY OF SUICIDE

Before and during the time of Christ, the low view of human life among the Romans, largely influenced by the pagan philosophy of Stoicism, was not confined to the widespread practice of abortion, infanticide, child abandonment, and gladiatorial shows. It also affected how Romans viewed their own lives. Death was not an evil, so they "regarded the power of self-destruction as an inestimable privilege." <sup>75</sup> To take one's own life was an act of self-glory. Hence, it is not surprising to find that suicide was widely practiced on all levels of society. Famous Roman philosophers and writers - most of them of Stoic persuasion - not only spoke well of suicide, but many committed suicide themselves. The younger Cato, Seneca, Petronius, and some of the emperors are but a few examples.

"Open your veins" was a familiar pagan refrain among the Romans. It was the command that Nero gave to his victims, one of whom was his former teacher Seneca. Later, the Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81 - 96) gave similar orders to those whom he considered a threat to his rule. Seneca said, "Nothing but the will need postpone death." And he added, "If you do not lack the courage, you will not lack the cleverness to die" (Epistle of Seneca 70.21,24). The Younger Pliny relates the story of Arria plunging a dagger into her breast and then giving it to

her husband. Given her husband Paetus's terminal illness and her young son's recent death, she no longer cared to live. Pliny describes Arria's suicide, quoting her admiringly: "It does not hurt, Paetus." He called Arria's words "immortal, almost divine" (Letters and Panegyricus 3.16). Yet there was a certain ambivalence in Seneca regarding death, for in another context he said that when one approaches death, "one turns to flight, trembles, and laments" (Epistle of Seneca 77.11). This statement by Seneca shows that even he, the great advocate of suicide, was not without doubts regarding self-destruction.

Whether it was human life as a fetus, an infant, or an adult, the early Christians saw God as the creator of all human life, and thus it was God's exclusive prerogative to end an individual's life. Given their adherence to the Old Testament Scriptures, their views were consistent with the words of Job, who in the greatest depths of woe, having lost all of his many possessions, including his children, and been stricken with a horrible illness, did not, like the Stoics, think that he had the right to end his life. Instead, he said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21).

Critics of Christianity have sometimes called the nonresistant submission on the part of the persecuted Christian martyrs a form of suicide. While there were a few Christians who went out of their way to be martyred - for instance, Ignatius (d. A.D. 107), who willingly agreed to walk a thousand miles to his martyrdom - the vast majority of Christians who died in the persecutions were by no means suicidal.

A few of the early Christians, under the stress of persecution, did commit suicide. They apparently did not understand the Christian position on the sanctity of human life and God's role in giving and taking it. Eusebius cites one such case. A Christian mother and her two daughters who knew that their persecutors were about to molest them sexually and then execute them requested permission to go to the river to wash. As they approached the river, they threw themselves into the water and drowned.<sup>76</sup> There were other instances, but none of these cases received the approval of any corporate Christian community. Moreover, the lack of resistance to one's persecutors that was so apparent with many martyred Christians (as with Ignatius in 107) made their deaths no more suicidal than did Christ's lack of resistance make his crucifixion a suicidal act.

The Christian church as a body issued no formal statements regarding the sinfulness of suicide until the early fourth century. This occurred at the Synod of Elvira (ca. 305 or 306) when it condemned the acts of some Christians who apparently went out of their way to be martyred. The church's silence regarding suicide before this time is not difficult to understand when one remembers that for three centuries it had to fight for its life during the years of persecution. All of its energies were needed to survive.

Clement of Alexandria (d. 213), Lactantius (d. ca. 330), and Gregory of Nazianus (d. 374) were some early Christian opponents of suicide, along with Eusebius (d. 339), the church historian, who saw suicide so incompatible with Christianity's sanctity of human life that, when he referred to Emperor Maximian's taking his own life, he did not use the word "suicide" but instead called it a "shameful death" (Ecclesiastical History 1:303).

The strongest opposition, however, came from St. Augustine in the early fifth century. He

wrote in opposition to the Donatists, members of a heretical schismatic group within the church from northern Africa. Many of their members committed suicide en masse, primarily because they believed that there was no forgiveness of sin after baptism. Thus, right after baptism many of them took their lives. Augustine argued that suicide violated the commandment "You shall not murder." He further said that if suicide were an acceptable option, Christ would not have told his disciples to flee in times of persecution. He also contended that not a single case of suicide occurred among the patriarchs and prophets in the Old Testament or among the New Testament apostles. <sup>77</sup>

Although, as noted above, the church corporately condemned suicide at the Synod of Efrira, it did not address the matter again until the Council of Arles in 452 declared that suicide was the result of demonic forces. The Council of Orleans in 533 asserted that oblations (offerings) were not allowed for those who committed suicide. <sup>78</sup> A generation later, in 563, the Synod of Braga banned the singing of psalms at the funeral of a suicide and said that the body of a suicide could not be brought into the church building as part of the burial ceremony. <sup>79</sup> The Synod of Auxerre in 585 reiterated this position. In 693 the Synod of Toledo barred individuals who had attempted suicide from receiving the Lord's Supper for two months, during which time they were expected to repent of their sin. <sup>80</sup> The Council of Troyes in 878, and the Council of Nimes in 1184, denied suicides burial in church cemeteries. In 1441 the Synod of Sweden restated the decision of Nimes and added that the burial of a suicide would pollute the cemetery. This practice continued in many Roman Catholic and Protestant churches even into the twentieth century. If one visits rural cemeteries in Canada and the United States today, one can still find, outside the cemetery's fence line, the graves of individuals who committed suicide.

Following the condemnation of suicide by church councils, Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century said that taking one's life was morally wrong because it was a sin against nature: Everyone naturally loves himself; suicide also injured the community of which man is an integral part; it was a sin against God's gift of life; and, finally, it was an act of which one could not repent. <sup>81</sup>

Christian opposition to suicide over the centuries influenced and prompted Western nations to outlaw it. The recent desire for physician-assisted suicides in the United States - for example, Oregon's Death with Dignity Act (assisted-suicide law), first passed in 1994 and reapproved by voters in 1997 - is not only a rejection of Christianity's historic opposition to suicide but also a repudiation of its doctrine that human life is sacred and only to be terminated by God, who gave it in the first place.

## BURYING, NOT CREMATING, THE DEAD

To the early Christians the sanctity of life and the human body did not come to an end when a person died. Believing Christ's promise that he would raise them and all the dead on Judgment Day, they buried their deceased rather than cremate them as the Romans commonly did. The Christians strongly opposed cremation. Similar to their Hebrew ancestors, they saw it as a pagan custom, and given the sanctity they assigned to the human body

(alive or dead), they also rejected it for its violence and cruelty, according to Tertullian (ca. 160 - ca. 220). With specific reference to cremation, he faulted the Romans, saying, "What pity is that which mocks its victims with cruelty?" (On the Resurrection of the Flesh 1). But Christians most prominently opposed cremation because they saw it as contrary to their firm faith in the resurrection of the body, a faith that their Roman persecutors (as noted in chapter 1) sometimes mocked by defiantly burning the bodies of executed martyrs. When the latter happened, surviving Christians "tried to gather the fragments of their brethren who had been martyred in the flames."<sup>82</sup> They wanted their deceased to "sleep in peace," an expression found on many epitaphs in the Christian catacombs (subterranean cemeteries) near Rome. As one historian of the catacombs has said, they believed that "the body was only consigned to the earth for a while, as a sacred deposit which could be reclaimed at some future time when the sea and the earth shall give up their dead."<sup>83</sup>

So strong was the Christians' belief that the dead were "asleep," waiting to be resurrected, that they called every burial place a koimeterion, a word borrowed from the Greek that meant a dormitory where people slumbered.<sup>84</sup> Koimeterion became "cemetery" in the English language. Thus, every time people use the word cemetery they are using a term that harks back to the early Christians and their belief that the dead are merely slumbering until the day of their resurrection.

One Roman history scholar writes that while cremation was still the general practice, for example, among the Romans in the city of Ostia, burial was introduced in various parts of the empire during Emperor Hadrian's reign (A.D. 117 - 138).<sup>85</sup> Whether this change was prompted by Christianity's opposition to cremation cannot be determined with certainty; some think it came too early in the life of the church to be thus caused. However, as A. D. Nock has shown, cremation became increasingly rare by the third century, and by the fourth it had "almost disappeared."<sup>86</sup> While it may be arguable whether Christianity influenced many of the Romans to bury their dead in the second century under Hadrian's reign, it does seem plausible that when cremation virtually disappeared in the fourth century, it apparently was largely the result of Christian influence. We need only recall that the aura of Christian values was so pervasive already in the early fourth century that Constantine the Great not only issued the Edict of Milan to legalize Christianity, but he and other Christian emperors were moved to implement numerous other laws and customs (noted earlier) that supported Christian beliefs and practices.

The practice of burying people continued, and in the eighth century Charlemagne the Great, who was strongly supportive of Christian doctrine, made cremation a capital crime. Burial had become the only acceptable way of disposing of the dead throughout the Holy Roman Empire. Not until the nineteenth century was cremation brought back into Western countries, and then only by freethinkers, many of whom, similar to the Romans, denied the biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the human body.

So consistent and influential did the Christian practice of burying their dead become over the centuries that today even American Indians have come to believe that inhumation is the only proper way to dispose of their dead, as has been shown by their insistence on burying recently repatriated human skeletons from museums, for instance. However, when the

Europeans arrived on American soil in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most American Indians did not bury their dead. The Indians in the Northern Plains, in the Mackenzie subarctic region, and in many other locations did not inhumate their dead, but placed them on elevated scaffolds. In parts of the Yukon, California, and the Great Basin area, some tribes cremated the dead. The Choctaws skeletonized their deceased and then stored the bones in bone houses; some of the Pueblo buried their dead in refuse mounds. In still other parts of North America, Indians left their dead to be eaten by dogs or wolves. And the Teton Dakotas wrapped their dead in cloth and then placed them in forked trees. <sup>87</sup>

Today, contrary to centuries of Christian opposition, more and more Christian denominations, even some conservative ones, are permitting their members to cremate the deceased bodies of their loved ones. However, before 1930 in the United States, cremation was considered "bizarre." <sup>88</sup> In 1996 about 22 percent of the dead in the United States were cremated, and it is estimated that by 2010 the number will climb to 40 percent. <sup>89</sup> With the growing practice of cremation, many no longer see it as bizarre, but a new kind of bizarreness is now often present, especially with regard to how many survivors dispose of the ashes. Some have shot the ashes into space. Sometimes they are cast on the ocean, as in the case of John Kennedy Jr. in 1999. Frequently they are sprinkled on flower gardens. One firm in California mixes the ashes with gun powder and packs them in fireworks; an Iowa firm will, upon request, put the ashes into shotgun shells. <sup>90</sup>

What accounts for the recent increase in cremation practices? Among many Christians it probably reflects ignorance about how strongly the early Christians felt in rejecting the custom. Among non-Christians it likely indicates a denial of the resurrection. And, as noted above, it also reflects a permissive church posture. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church, which once strongly condemned it, in 1963 made an about-face regarding cremation by not only accepting it but also producing an order of worship for the practice. In 1969 the Church of England also accepted it. Many other church bodies, with the exception of the Eastern Orthodox Church, are imitating the Catholics and the Church of England. This change, similar to churches tolerating or accepting abortion on demand, indicates that some of the once-powerful influences that the church exerted in society for two millennia are slowly eroding.

Nowhere is there any evidence that the early Christians and their descendants believed that an omnipotent God could not, or would not, resurrect cremated individuals. That was never a question. They had other reasons for spurning cremation. Along with their belief in the resurrection of the body, they wanted to be faithful to the long-standing biblical practice of placing the dead person back into the earth from which God created him. In doing so, they, like their Jewish forbears, were mindful of the words of Moses that when man's life is over, he would "return to the ground" (Genesis 3:19). This is corroborated by the church historian Eusebius. Quoting the Christians, who saw many of their fellow believers martyred and burned by the pagans in Lyons in 177, he has them saying, "but in our circle great grief obtained because we could not bury the bodies in the earth" (Ecclesiastical History 1:437). Centuries later, Johann Heermann (1558 - 1647), the hymn writer, captured this Christian sentiment in his hymn "O God, Thou Faithful God." In one stanza he wrote:

And let my body have

A quiet resting-place  
Within a Christian grave  
And let it sleep in peace.

The early Christians were mindful of Christ's promise: "For a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:28 - 29). They heard him say "graves," not "urns." But even with the rise in cremation practices, the majority of the deceased in Western societies are still being buried, yet another sign of Christianity's pervasive, two-thousand-year influence.

## CONCLUSION

People who today see murder and mass atrocities as immoral may not realize that their beliefs in this regard are largely the result of their having internalized the Christian ethic that holds human life to be sacred. There is no indication that the wanton taking of human life was morally revolting to the ancient Romans. One finds no evidence in Roman literature that indicates that incidents such as the ethnic cleansing atrocities in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s or the Columbine High School massacre in Colorado in 1999, for example, would have been morally abhorrent to the ancient leaders of Rome or to its populace. One need only remember how both the Roman populace and its emperors enjoyed seeing gladiators massacred in the arenas. These events and other massive atrocities evoked no sympathy or moral outrage. It was part of the stoic culture of pagan Rome.

The low view of life and its accompanying lack of moral outrage is also seen in the behavior of many Roman emperors. The Roman view that life was cheap, including that of the emperors, easily fostered paranoia in many emperors, leading them to kill large numbers of people whom they perceived as possible enemies or traitors, within or without the imperial court. Suetonius, the biographer of emperors, says that under Tiberias (A.D. 14 - 37) "not a day passed without an execution."<sup>91</sup> Caligula (A.D. 37 - 41) enjoyed killing individuals, and sometimes he would shut down granaries so that people would starve to death. And from 27 B.C. to A.D. 324, only thirteen (26 percent) of the fifty emperors who reigned during that period died a natural death; the other thirty-seven were either assassinated or committed suicide. Given the low value of life, it mattered little whose life was extinguished. Whether it was executing Christian martyrs, encouraging or committing suicide, assassinating emperors, or slaughtering gladiators, the Roman conscience was not stirred. Thus, the moral revulsion in regard to the taking of innocent life of humans, on a large or small scale, came about largely as the result of Christianity's doctrine human life is sacred.

Significant as the influence of Christianity has been in giving sanctity to human life, recent trends indicate that its salutary value is diminishing. For instance, it is well known that since 1976, each year in the United States alone one-third of pregnancies have been aborted, amounting to more than one million per year.<sup>92</sup> The Alan Guttmacher Institute reports that 13,000 partial-birth abortions are occurring annually in the United States.<sup>93</sup> In 1991, sixty-five babies were abandoned in the United States, a figure that grew to 105 in 1998. Thirteen

infants were abandoned in Houston, Texas, alone during a ten-month period in 1999. <sup>94</sup>

Christianity's high view of human life is also diminishing as some people seriously begin to argue that human life is not more valuable than the life of animals. Media executive Ted Turner was heard to remark in a speech that Christianity was to blame for having taught that humans are of higher value than animals. <sup>95</sup> A related argument appeared in an editorial of *Wild Earth* magazine. The writer suggested that every problem on earth, whether social or environmental, is caused by humans, and he concluded, "No matter what you're doing to improve life on Earth, I think you'll find that phasing out the human race will increase your chances for success." <sup>96</sup>

If the decline with respect to the sanctity of human life continues and becomes even more common, the following story may no longer have much significance. During World War II on a remote island in the Pacific, an American soldier met a native who could read, and the native was carrying a Bible. Upon seeing the Bible, the soldier said, "We educated people no longer put much faith in that book." The native, from a tribe of former cannibals, replied, "Well, it's good that we do, or you would be eaten by my people today." <sup>97</sup> This is only one illustration of how Christ's magnanimous influence has taught people that human life is sacred. It is one of Christianity's outstanding legacies.

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