

Sophie's choice: Narratives of 'saving' in British public debates on abortion

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Abstract

In the UK, narratives about saved women and babies have been a significant feature in anti-abortion campaigns to oppose bufferzones, which seek to prevent anti-abortion activists from being directly outside abortion clinics. Anti-abortion activists argue that without their presence, the 'abortion industry' will fail to seek 'informed' consent and coerce women into abortions. These presumptions are based on positioning abortion, and service providers, as inherently 'evil', whilst saving is rooted in Christian beliefs aimed at ensuring that souls go to heaven.

This paper emerges from ethnographic research in Britain on anti-abortion activism and pro-choice counterdemonstrations. Highlighting the importance of saving in many of the anti-abortion campaigns, it will argue that as they have a different conceptualisations of harm to pro-choice activists, this leads to a lack of understanding of each other's saving narrative. Yet to some extent they both draw on a positioning of women as potentially vulnerable and at risk from the actions of others

1. Introduction

Birmingham, UK, was previously the location for the annual antiabortion *March for Life*. Organisers describe this event as unifying the different groups opposed to abortion, as well as sending a strong message to the public that abortion is wrong. At the 2016 event, one of the speakers was a woman called Sophie who, whilst holding her baby on stage, spoke about changing her mind about having an abortion. She stated that her change of heart came directly from seeing *March for Life* the previous year. In commentary after the event, it emerged that this testimony was highly significant to the anti-abortion activists attending; both Sophie and her baby had been saved. They accused abortion-rights counter-demonstrators of ignoring it because this was 'proof' of the importance and success of their work. In contrast, those who support abortion did not see a woman changing her mind and choosing to have a baby as significant at all. For them, it merely demonstrates that it is important that women are free to exercise their right to choose whether or not to continue with a pregnancy. This incident demonstrates not just the contrasting interpretations of the different sides, but the significance of 'saving' as both a religious and secular aim within UK antiabortion activism as a central part of their understanding of both themselves and their mission.

It is important to understand the cultural context of anti-abortion activism in the UK. The overwhelming majority of people accept or support access to abortion (Gray, 2017; Swales & Taylor, 2017). Abortion is state-funded for all those eligible within the National Health Service (NHS) (although, at the time of writing, people living in Northern Ireland usually need to

travel to the mainland to access this service) and this is rarely challenged politically. Moreover, around half of the population now state that they have no religion (Swales & Taylor, 2017), and overt displays of religiosity are usually only seen as culturally appropriate if restrained and unobtrusive (Davie, 2015). Consequently, those who are publicly active about abortion are a tiny minority, and are often seen as transgressive both in terms of abortion views and religious activism (Lowe & Page, 2019a, 2019b).

This paper will begin by outlining ideas of saving in Christianity and some of the history of attempts to save and/or reform 'fallen' women. The idea of the fallen woman is clearly linked to specific understandings of women's 'natural' role and this has an important impact on antiabortion activists' motivations, and why they believe that their activities outside clinics are vitally important to women and wider society. This will be followed by a methodological account, and the analysis of three data themes: 'saving the mothers' will examine how abortion is perceived as going against a mother's very nature, with anti-abortion activists positioning themselves as saving women from a mortal sin; 'religious rescues' will emphasise the religious motivations for the saving narrative endorsed; 'exercising choice' will examine the notion of choice within anti-abortion activism by drawing on pro-choice responses to anti-abortion activism. We will finish with some concluding remarks.

2. Saving souls as a gendered endeavour

Salvation is a fundamental Christian concept, generating various meanings (Bacon, Dossett, & Knowles, 2015). As Coleman III and Arrowood (2015: 13, emphasis in original) argue, 'salvation has been a theological concept that sought to free the soul from its inherent sinfulness', and to ensure one's relationship with God. Because of the perceived dire eternal consequences of not having salvation, saving souls has been fundamental to the Christian mission. Akin with salvation, the meanings of saving are various and have shifted over time. Within Christianity, the soul is immaterial, reflects the 'godliness' of the person, and is subject to judgement after death. In previous centuries, when belief in hell was pervasive, emphasis was placed on being saved from threat of eternal damnation; even babies were to be ritually baptised because they had been born sinful (Billings, 2004; Oestigaard, 2003). This notion of original sin arose from the story of Adam and Eve, the first couple created by God whose disobedience led to a world in which people are flawed unless they accept the faith. In many interpretations, Eve is deemed culpable for the sin of humanity, because she was tempted by the serpent, having repercussions for how all women are understood. More recently, as belief in hell has waned, the concept of saving becomes more centred upon the notion of being saved through Christ and a personal relationship with him, where one's humanity is ameliorated (Dowell & Williams, 1994). Infant baptism is therefore reconfigured as the child being welcomed into the community of Christ, rather than as a means of managing original sin (Oestigaard, 2003). The concept of saving has been gendered. For example, the feminist theologian Jantzen (1998) has emphasised how influential early church theologians such as Augustine and Tertullian were in cementing the link between women and sin, because of the way these authors connected sin with the sexual body.

Indeed, the body is considered an impediment to saving one's soul, as it is the body that is deemed at risk of sinfulness. Given that women were understood as being closer to the sexual body than men, especially due to links with Eve as the sexual temptress (Edwards, 2012), they are understood as being key receptors of the saving narrative, and a significant target for action. In this way, Jesus takes on the role of rescuing 'the damsel in distress' (Jantzen, 1998: 163). Jantzen is very critical of this theological interpretation, where the body is seen in negative and sinful terms, and instead argues that the body should be reclaimed for the sacred and considered divine. In the process she queries the ongoing emphasis on

souls over bodies. But these traditional theological interpretations have been influential and pervasive, and have positioned the saving narrative as a gendered endeavour, where women are specifically targeted. Jantzen's narrative also points to how 'saving' is hierarchical; the emphasis is that those with more power are envisaged as having the means to save those who are more vulnerable and weaker. In this scenario, men come to the rescue of women. Whilst these theological ideas form an important context for understanding the notion of saving, it is important to remember that individual adherents will always interpret religious doctrine in their everyday lives (McGuire, 2008). Thus in this paper, we are focusing on how saving is understood within anti-abortion activism as a specific religious practice.

This saving narrative also has resonance with contemporary secular narratives such as 'saving' children from social media or 'saving' the earth. Indeed, secular understandings of saving have equally taken a gendered meaning, particularly in relation to the perceived oppression of religious women. For example, Muslim women are often seen as being inherently oppressed through their religious identification:

Calls for secularizing and liberalizing Islam so that Muslims may be taught to live a more enlightened existence are issued from a variety of quarters these days, left and right alike. These calls strike a chord with secular feminists (from a variety of political perspectives) who have long been convinced that religion is a source of women's oppression (Mahmood, 2011:94)

Mahmood emphasises certain books that have been praised by feminists, even as they perpetuate this saving narrative. One example is the book by Nafisi called *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, where the take-home message is that 'only Western literature can be the salvation' (2011: 87). Certain feminist approaches have therefore not been immune from 'saving' endeavours (Bracke, 2012), with those doing the saving – those with greater power and resources – setting themselves up as knowing better, knowing more, than the person deemed in need of saving, with the assured belief that they have the expertise to liberate them, irrespective of whether that person wants that intervention or not.

3. Saving fallen women

In the UK, most anti-abortion activists are highly religious Christians (predominantly Catholic), and their religious understandings are central to how they interpret the issues, even when drawing upon secular arguments (Lowe & Page, 2019b, also see methods section). Consequently, understanding how their religious ideas about women and sexuality are intertwined with their position on abortion is important. Warner (1978) has argued that the strong association in Christianity between sex and sin has long had particular implications for women. The notion that sexual chastity was important for women in particular was underlined through the idea of the virgin birth, with Mary upheld as an (unattainable) ideal of a sexually-pure mother. This contrasts with the position of Eve who represents women as the 'temptresses' of men, leading them to their downfall through sexual knowledge. These dichotomous positions of good/evil, sacred/profane, mother/whore have had a significant impact on the ways in which women are perceived (Warner, 1978). As Page argues:

In this discourse, women are left with few safe spaces to occupy, for if sacrality is obtained through motherhood, this is negated by the "profaning" sexual process in order to achieve this, a process which, of course, did not apply to Mary (Page, 2011:5)

Within the Eve/Mary theological dichotomy, therefore, women cannot win; to mirror Mary's piety in motherhood, a sexual encounter is necessary. Therefore heterosexual marriage becomes the only divinely ordained space for sex to take place, with the strong emphasis on sex within marriage-only being a means for women to be more like Mary, leading both to a far heavier scrutiny of women's sexual behaviour, as well as a strong emphasis on procreation within marriage (Hall, 2000). Women who are pregnant and unmarried have therefore failed to live up to these expectations, and were a significant target for many of the campaigns of Victorian social reformers in the UK (Hall, 2000).

Hall (2000) argues that rather than an absolute division between 'good' and 'bad' women, there was recognition among Victorian reformers that women could be tricked or forced into being sexually compromised, and this initial 'fall' was not the same as those who were sexually unrestrained. Indeed as Hall (2000) points out, much of the Victorian emphasis on rescuing women from prostitution was based on the idea that they had ended up taking this path unwillingly, following an initial 'fall'. Within the broader sexual reform movement there was a particular emphasis on the need to protect young women from working class backgrounds from sexual activity. From legal bids to raise the age of consent to the exposé of innocent girls sold into child prostitution, the campaigners sought to both highlight and challenge the risks to the 'innocence' of young women (Hall, 2000).

Victorian homes for 'fallen women' also sometimes accommodated young women who were pregnant and unmarried, and by the early 20th Century many of these homes had changed into more general mother and baby homes. Some of these were more draconian than others. In Ireland, the Catholic Magdalene Laundries have been exposed as forcibly incarcerating women for long periods of time, often with significant abuse (Yeager & Culleton, 2016). In England, by the 1960s the homes were occupied by mothers for shorter periods, although they were still deemed shameful places (Clark, 2008). The notion that the women (and their families) could be 'saved' from shame by removing their children indicates the durability of the double standard of sexual morality that prevailed, in which it is women rather than men who are singled out for shaming for sexually transgressing. Moreover, as Garrett (2000) has shown, there was considerable concern in Ireland that the travel of Catholic women to England to give birth could lead to their children being adopted by Protestants. Keeping the women in Ireland was seen as important as it meant that they were saved *within* their faith. This notion, that a foetus is, or should be, predestined to belong to a religious (or national) group, remains an important element today, as births are central to the generational renewal of social groups (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

This historical account illustrates the ways in which gendered saving has long been an important narrative within Christian belief; those who 'save' others are often positioned as undertaking important religious work, with this also having a bearing on their own salvation status. Women's role as wives and mothers was understood as putting them in a unique position to instill 'virtues' in family life, and ensure that a new generation of Christians were saved. Whilst feminism has long challenged this limited understanding of women (for an early example see Gilman, 2003 first published 1900), studies have shown that for many opposed to abortion, traditional understandings of woman and motherhood are important (Haugeberg, 2017; Lowe & Page, 2019a). As we have demonstrated elsewhere,

anti-abortion participants draw on conservative religious teaching, to reaffirm gender complementarity and women's essential role as mothers. (...) The presumption that women would 'naturally' sacrifice their lives for a developing foetus is embedded in the activists' understandings of motherhood as sacred (Lowe & Page, 2019a:177)

Indeed, although the meanings given to abortion by the Roman Catholic Church have differed historically, in the contemporary period, official Church pronouncements condemn abortion (for example see Pope Francis, 2016). As this paper will show, by examining the contrasting understandings of saving, the disconnection between the antiabortion messages and the wider public becomes clearer. We argue that in order to have credibility within the anti-abortion movement, the underlying messages need to be broadly in-line with religious understandings of women and motherhood, but this means that they are often ineffective in persuading people who do not share the same narrow religious interpretations.

4. Methodology

This paper is based on an ethnographic project studying anti-abortion and pro-choice activism in public places in the UK from 2015 to 2019. Data collection has included a wide range of methods including observations at public events (marches, demonstrations, prayer vigils), analysis of leaflets and other materials handed out in public places, formal and informal interviews with activists from different organisations, and documentary analysis of public statements and other data. Decisions about which events to include have been made to reflect the different activities nationally, as well as being driven by significant events that have taken place during the course of fieldwork.

In the UK, there are several organisations involved in organising anti-abortion activities outside of clinics as well as local grassroots groups. The bigger organisations include Helpers of God's Precious Infants (HOGPI), Good Counsel Network (GCN), the Centre for Bioethical Reform UK (also known as Abort 67) on the mainland, and Precious Life (PL) based in Northern Ireland. The 40 Days for Life campaign, an American bi-annual prayer campaign which targets abortion clinics, also takes place. The majority of anti-abortion activists outside of clinics are Catholic, and it is common for the material objects (e.g. rosary beads, signs, leaflets) to reflect the religious beliefs of the anti-abortion activists. Fieldwork data revealed that the overwhelming majority of participants are highly religious, with many attending church every day and even nominally 'secular' anti-abortion organisations regularly rely on religious messages or infrastructure in their organisation (such as meeting at churches or raising money through church events). Despite religious motivations, and the Roman Catholic Church's stance against abortion, anti-abortion activism is generally led by lay people.

Pro-choice groups were only present in ten of the sites we visited. Most of the pro-choice activists organising against anti-abortion clinic activities were part of local grassroots organisations. They usually liaised closely with the specific abortion service provider in terms of when they were needed and what form their action should take. Some operated as clinic escorts, walking service users past anti-abortion activists; others would organise counter-demonstrations, such as having signs and banners, and some groups did both. At the beginning of the research, the links between the groups were sporadic, but over the course of the fieldwork, they became more pronounced. Following their success in getting the first bufferzone in Ealing, Sister Supporter developed training and resources to encourage other areas to use the same legislative framework.

Over the course of the project to date, observations have taken place outside 30 clinics across the UK (observations lasted between 1 and 2 h, and some clinics were visited on multiple occasions), at four annual *March for Life* events (organised by March for Life UK), and public meetings discussing abortion. The public meetings include both antiabortion and pro-choice activist meetings, debates in local and national government where consideration of the impact of anti-abortion activism outside clinics was discussed, and court hearings

related to the imposition of a bufferzone outside one clinic in Ealing, London, the first in the UK to be implemented. Formal interviews were audio-recorded (with permission) and were transcribed. Notes were taken in other cases. We have not included demographic data for the activists, as the small numbers outside abortion clinics makes them identifiable.

Both of the researchers support abortion, and Lowe had existing links with abortion rights groups and activists. This meant that entry and acceptance by those campaigning for abortion was straightforward. Despite this, it was of course important to be reflexive about our 'insider' status in the field. The fieldwork with those opposed to abortion was more complex. We were often questioned about our position on abortion, and sometimes about our faith position as well, and these questions were answered openly. We have strived to report the views of all the activists as they see themselves, being clear where our analysis of their actions leads us to different conclusions.

All the data (fieldwork notes, photographs, interview transcripts, documents) used in the paper were analysed thematically through a system of close reading, coding and comparison (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes discussed here are ones that emerged from the data, and the examples chosen are ones that we feel best illustrate the data set as a whole. NVIVO was used to manage the dataset.

5. Saving the mothers

As outlined above, for anti-abortion activists, motherhood is seen as women's 'natural' position, so abortion is an act which is against women's 'nature' as well as a mortal sin, which Singer describes as:

a serious breach of God's law, mortal sins are actions that imperil the violator's soul. To be deemed a mortal sin, an action must be intrinsically evil, the violator must know that what they are doing is immoral, and they must freely choose to commit the behavior. For the Catholic Church, seeking an abortion meets all of these conditions (Singer, 2018:18)

Hence, it is common for anti-abortion activists outside of clinics to understand themselves as saving women from a sin that threatens their very soul. This is more than just a tactical choice, but builds on their religiously-based understandings of women's role (Lowe & Page, 2019a). For the activists, pregnant women are mothers from conception, and a central activity is to ensure this is recognised by the women themselves (Lowe & Page, 2019a). All clinics offer counselling to women who are unsure of their decision, and approximately 10–15% of women who attend for an appointment decide against abortion.¹ Although this number does not seem to vary in relation to the presence or absence of anti-abortion groups outside, it appears common for antiabortion groups to claim success if they have had contact with a woman that decided against abortion, regardless of the interaction. Like Sophie, the 'saves' or 'turnarounds', as they are often called, provide antiabortion activists with the proof that they are needed, that their work is successful, and souls are saved. Therefore the notion of saving takes on a double meaning, as not only are babies 'saved' but women's souls are also rescued, and they no longer need to be absolved of sin. 'Saves' are fêted and counted; at one site they utilised a chalkboard outside the clinic to note the saves. Tales of saves often feature in accounts by activists. In the case of Sophie, there was a strong emphasis on her testimony in on-line anti-abortion summaries of the day, for example, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) commented that she was one of the 'most powerful speakers' at the event (SPUC, 2016).

¹ Data obtained during the study from abortion service providers.

Alongside the public testimonies of women describing how they were saved from abortion, which usually focuses heavily on their child, and joy in motherhood, are accounts of women who 'failed' to be saved, and deeply regret their abortions. Theologically, the notion of mortal sin is a tricky ground for activists to navigate, for it suggests that a woman's sin is so grievous that it becomes difficult to be forgiven. Indeed, recently, the Pope changed the rules on who could absolve the 'sin' of abortion within Catholicism to include all priests (Traina, 2018), although in the UK this was already the case. Importantly women who have had abortions are usually positioned as victims. This is either through directly describing pressure or coercion from partners, parents or friends that they failed to resist, or indirectly from an 'abortion culture', which is irreligious or otherwise harmful. This has the effect of playing down the culpability of women by positioning them as not knowing what they were 'really' doing. Whilst this is a tactical move designed not to alienate the people they are trying to help, it is also in line with their religious beliefs, as the possibility of divine forgiveness and/or being absolved of sin is a key theological emphasis. For example, one leaflet recounted one person's journey of being saved:

my heavenly Father started lovingly to reveal to me that I had actually aborted a child, my child (...) I must have said sorry to God, often with tears, hundreds of times (...) but God had never given up on me (...) and when He said I was forgiven, it was true (South-West city, 2018)

Despite possibility of divine forgiveness, the severity of the impact of one's actions is still emphasised. On a Christian radio show focusing on abortion, a woman who is now an anti-abortion activist, described how she was alienated from God when she had her two abortions, and it was only when she 'converted' (although she describes being raised as a Catholic) she was able to recover from them. In this testimony, she also attributes pro-choice activism as part of abortion grief. She describes a religious abortion 'recovery' event:

[I]n one of the sessions, we delve into all the different degrees of grief, and one of them is anger. And a lot of you if you have been outside with 40 Days for Life, and you have seen the pro-choice people, you have seen anger, a lot of them have had abortions and that is where they were (Radio Immaculata Pro Life Forum, 2018)

As Millar (2017) has argued, the notion of 'foetocentric grief', the idea that women perpetually mourn their unborn children, has become a strong narrative within anti-abortion activism.

The emphasis on the testimonies of 'saved' mothers became a major focus in the anti-abortion campaign to prevent the first bufferzone in London from being established. Time and time again during the bufferzone debate, the anti-abortion groups claimed that the voices of the women that were 'turnarounds' were being overlooked, and this culminated in the development of a new group - *Be Here For Me* (BHFM). At the time of writing, BHFM has a website, social media and official speakers, but the extent to which it is formally constituted as an organisation is unclear. BHFM appears to have a close relationship with GCN, as some of those associated with BHFM also appear in testimonies of women saved by GCN. This is unsurprising as the bufferzone campaign was sited at a clinic where employees of GCN (alongside unpaid activists) have been based for many years. A constant position of GCN and BHFM was that the voices of mothers were ignored in the bufferzone debate. These claims were made despite numerous accounts given to these voices in the media and during the formal bufferzone consultation and that the local Council met with women who stated that GCN had 'saved' them from abortion. Rather than understanding that the lack of change to public opinion was because their position was not supported, they appeared to credit it to not being properly heard.

Ideas about the naturalness of motherhood are central to their understanding of their activities in saving mothers (Lowe & Page, 2019a; Singer, 2018). As women's role is essentialized and seen as synonymous with motherhood, a rejection of motherhood is understood as a denial of the self. The activities outside clinics, particularly the work of people designated as 'pavement counsellors', is designed to *remind* women of their natural role. A handbook for 'pavement counsellors' given out in Birmingham (undated) states:

By carefully explaining the truth you are trying to arouse the protective, nurturing capacity of the mother (...) Ask if the woman has children. Talking about them could help re-awaken her maternal instinct

Moreover, for many of the activists, abortion does not alter the status of motherhood for women. Women are mothers from the moment they conceive, and abortion transforms women from being a pregnant mother into the 'mother of a dead baby' (informal interview with antiabortion activist). They believe that women will be 'haunted' by what they have done. This is manifested through women becoming hardened, cut off from their true selves, and, importantly, alienated spiritually from God. It is only by accepting what they have done as wrong, doing penance and seeking forgiveness that they will recover. Indeed, it was common for them to attribute women's support for abortion to a lack of (proper) recovery from abortion. This appears to be a way of rationalising why so many women support abortion rights when it is, according to them, against women's 'nature'.

The positioning of abortion as something which is completely alien to women means that they need to explain how and why women come to have abortions. They do this through assuming that there is always coercion involved either directly, through partners, friends or family, or indirectly through the 'abortion culture' more generally. Whilst many of the activists mention the term 'abortion culture', they found it difficult to explain exactly what this was. It seems to be a complex mix of individualism, consumerism, and a decline of religious values. Typically they described women as choosing abortion through 'fear'. This fear could be of specific people, concern about their material circumstances, or worries about the judgement of them. The anti-abortion activists understand themselves as providing 'love' as well as support, which should counteract the fear, saving women to assert their natural inclinations to proceed with the pregnancy.

More explicit than their understanding of 'abortion culture', was the critique of the 'abortion industry', which is positioned as financially motivated to stop women from having 'choice'. 'Choice' for anti-abortion activists is understood only in terms of rejecting abortion. From this position they are also able to claim that abortion service providers mislead women by not informing them of the 'real' risks as they seek to maximise their income:

The Council has ignored the fact that (*abortion clinic*) has financial incentives to remove anyone who might be offering alternatives to women seeking abortion from outside their clinics (Bufferzone Consultation Response, GCN spokesperson, fieldnotes,2018)

Remind the woman/couple that those in the abortion industry only make money from people who have abortions, not from women who keep their babies (Birmingham handbook undated)

Other risks emphasised pertain to health risks. Some are physical, such as erroneous claims about breast cancer; substantive emphasis is placed on mental health. This is in line with their beliefs around the spiritual harm caused to women. The trauma of abortion is believed to last until women accept that they have 'killed' their children and have sought God's forgiveness through appropriate acts of contrition. This return to religiosity ensures that

women are 'saved' within their faith. The understanding that women are mothers, and need to be reminded of this, is the means by which they can be saved.

6. Religious rescues

Anti-abortion activism outside of clinics can be understood within the longer history of saving 'fallen' women. However, the understanding of their actions goes beyond this. The activities of anti-abortionists are positioned as a sacred battle, and one where they are undertaking religious work. A frequent symbol used at clinic vigils is the Mexican image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which depicts a pregnant Madonna. In the South American context the image has traditionally been utilised as a symbol of Christian national identity, rather than anti-abortion activism (Hernández, 2014). In the UK context, activists focus on elements of the story of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico to promote their anti-abortion position. This goes beyond the symbolism attached to the pregnant Madonna. In addition, they recount how Our Lady of Guadalupe played an important role in the conversion of the Aztecs to Catholicism. Importantly, they emphasise how the Aztecs were involved in child sacrifice, and their conversion to Christianity is understood as being the catalyst for bringing this practice to an end. This is then linked symbolically to abortion; abortion is likened to child sacrifice, with an understanding that the Christian message can once again be fundamental to ending abortion. In this way, Our Lady of Guadalupe is utilised as someone who 'saved' Mexico from its sinfulness, and can also be appropriated in the message to save women from having an abortion.

For example, a 'pavement counsellor' at one abortion clinic said that the site itself, where Our Lady of Guadalupe manifested, was connected with the practice of child sacrifice, with her presence being instrumental in stopping such practices as 'putting babies into the fire and ripping their hearts out' (fieldnotes 2016). In this narrative, the Virgin is credited all at once with converting Mexicans to the true religion, stopping child sacrifice, and esteeming the life of the unborn. The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe therefore generates complex meanings and is purposefully utilised to tap into these forms of symbolism, albeit one that is probably lost on those attending the clinics who are unlikely to understand this deeper meaning.

References linking child sacrifice to abortion can also be found in other contexts. For example, the Centre for Bioethical Reform stated that:

From a Judeo-Christian perspective, abortion is Child Sacrifice (...) Satan has been a baby killer from the dawn of time (Press release: Abortion Controversy 2016)

This statement illustrates the extent to which opposition to abortion is rooted in a clash between the sacred and profane, with those who oppose abortion positioned as being involved in a religious battle against the 'evil' of abortion. This understanding of abortion as a religious evil occurs within internal communications for those involved in anti-abortion activism, but is typically absent within materials for a broader audience. For example at a public meeting which sought to recruit activists for a 40 Days campaign, one speaker stated that:

If praying outside of a clinic, [you] need to protect yourself against evil. Take holy water and sprinkle it on yourself at the beginning and the end (...) Take communion, go to Mass and use your rosary. It is spiritual warfare and this is your armour (March 2016)

By designating their actions as 'spiritual warfare', those active against abortion are positioned as 'holy warriors'. Moreover, by undertaking religious work, they can also be positioned as being on the righteous side, 'saving' themselves and seeking their own

salvation, being assured of God's approval for their actions. Moreover, for those who have previously had an abortion, being involved in anti-abortion work can be seen as a way to both do penance for their sins, as well as trying to save others from sinning in the same way. Belief in the divine also allows them to dismiss their lack of success in reducing abortions:

I still believe that if people are there praying and giving their actions as well to God, giving their time, you know they're giving that to God, then I believe that that does bear fruit, whether we know it or not (interview, Birmingham 2016)

Their understanding of anti-abortion activism as a religious mission, in which their activities are aligned with the sacred, and success is an act of faith, allows anti-abortion activists to dismiss any critique of their activities as at best misguided, and at worst, aligned with evil. Whilst they measure and count the 'saves' as proof of their achievements, their faith position also allows them to explain any failure as also being a divine outcome, and thus not to dissuade them from further activism. Whilst they may not have directly 'saved' a woman from abortion at that moment, their actions will bear fruit in a potentially unknowable way.

7. Exercising choice

The notion that anti-abortion activists are 'saving' women is firmly dismissed by pro-choice activists we encountered. They acknowledge a range of emotions about abortion (and motherhood more generally), but it is the ability to make a decision, rather than the outcome of the decision, which is significant for them. Anti-abortion activists have misinterpreted the slogan 'my body, my choice' to be focused solely on abortion. Yet for the pro-choice campaigners, the slogan has always included the option of motherhood, not least because the UK abortion rights movement has, since its inception in the 1930s, considered the ways in which social inequalities structure motherhood and abortion decisions (Brooke, 2001; Orr, 2017). The misreading of the support that pro-choice campaigns usually have for motherhood is illustrated when one anti-abortionist that we interviewed described how taken aback they were when the pro-choice activists were involved in organising a demonstration against welfare changes which capped child benefit in families with more than two children (fieldnotes, Belfast 2018).

Thus for the activists who support a pro-choice position, women who decide not to have an abortion are largely unremarkable. Rooted in a position of supporting bodily autonomy and women's agency, the decision to proceed with a pregnancy at any stage is seen as a legitimate choice, and maximising the capacity for women to make their own decisions is the central aim. Moreover, unlike the anti-abortion activists, the pro-choice campaigners saw abortion clinics as sites where women can discuss their options and come to an informed decision. Generally speaking, pro-choice activists trust the professionalism of healthcare practitioners in advocating women's individual decision making. This position is not confined to campaigners but is a common understanding. For example, the NHS (2019) website recommends abortion service providers (alongside other sources) as places for nondirective decision counselling, and explicitly warns against contacting anti-abortion crisis pregnancy centres which may not give impartial advice.²

Hence from the perspective of pro-choice campaigners, the activities of anti-abortion activists are problematic, not because they are against abortion, but because they actively seek to reduce women's choices by exerting unwanted pressure, and by distributing

² Whilst crisis pregnancy centres have been found to give misleading information (Education For Choice, 2014), their reach is limited, for most the NHS services would be their first reference point. During fieldwork, we heard no reports of women attending a crisis pregnancy centre by mistake.

erroneous information. Far from saving women, anti-abortion activists use intimidation and fear (Lowe & Hayes, 2019) and this reduces the potential for independent decision-making. Moreover, much anti-abortion activism, particularly when outside abortion clinics, is seen as inappropriate because they are unfairly targeting *individual women*. For example, as one pro-choice activist stated:

No person should feel harassed, shamed or judged when accessing legal healthcare. It is clear that they are not intending to offer support and advice, but wish to stop them accessing the clinic (London 2017)

The issue for pro-choice activists is that women who do not want to engage with anti-abortion groups are forced to do so in order to access abortion, and this is an invasion of their healthcare privacy. However, that some women who want to continue with a pregnancy receive support from anti-abortion groups is neither disputed nor condemned, providing it is not premised on the basis of misinformation. This point was recently reiterated in a court case which upheld a bufferzone where the judge acknowledged that some people might welcome the presence of anti-abortion activists, but this was not a sufficient reason to ignore many others who found the encounters intrusive and distressing (Dulgheriu & Orthova vs London Borough of Ealing, 2018). Hence, for most pro-choice activists in the UK, and potentially a considerable section of the wider public, anti-abortion groups should refrain from imposing their beliefs on *individual* women, and shift public activism away from clinics to political spaces (such as outside Parliament).³ Yet, as previously mentioned, the anti-abortion activists do not seem to understand this position. Instead they argue that pro-choice activists, and abortion service providers, seek to prevent the 'natural' choice of motherhood, which is supported through the 'saving work' of antiabortion groups.

Consequently, the current campaigns to introduce bufferzones around clinics could be understood as being premised on the notion that women need to be spared from the activities of the anti-abortion groups. Their introduction is called for because these can be distressing encounters for those who do not want to engage with anti-abortion groups or become the focus of a public spectacle. Moreover, when misinformation or intimidating tactics are used, this could lead to *uninformed* or *involuntary* decision-making which equates to a denial of choice.

Moreover, the positioning of anti-abortion activism outside clinics as harassment is also reflected in wider public opinion. For example, in the consultation about the introduction of the bufferzone in London, over 90% of local residents supported the proposal, including some local faith leaders. In the response to the consultation on behalf of a local church, one person wrote:

I feel quite strongly that we must offer support and protection to those who are visiting the clinic and are vulnerable. If that means that as churches we need to adapt our activities to enable that protection and to prevent others using 'prayer' improperly and unethically to apply pressure or coercion, then we must do so (Ealing Council, 2018:35)

In addition to the evidence of local support for bufferzones, this quotation also illustrates that there is no singular religious position on abortion, and a faith position can lead people to supporting unhindered access to abortion. This position further illustrates the extent to which being actively against abortion is unusual even among those who hold a faith position. It was

³ Whilst there are many attempts to restrict abortion, the lack of success means that many people do not consider it under threat in mainland UK.

common for some people to remark that they were against abortion, but in favour of bufferzones, and it appeared that this was also the position of a local Catholic priest in the same consultation (Ealing Council, 2018). Indeed, a common complaint of anti-abortion activists was that they had been unable to recruit support at their church and/or from their priest. Hence whilst it is clear that their religious beliefs are central to anti-abortion activists, their understanding of their actions as a benevolent saving activity is challenged, even by some who share their Christian beliefs.

8. Conclusion

For anti-abortion activists, their need to 'save' women is predicated on their understanding of women as mothers, which positions abortion as against women's nature. Abortion, for them, is both harmful and sinful, and stopping a woman from having an abortion is understood as both saving her soul and saving a life. Therefore, particular religious beliefs are being deployed, which emphasise both women's vulnerability in being coerced into an abortion as well as their potential for committing a mortal sin. The anti-abortion activists are motivated to prevent women from causing harm to themselves by having an abortion, harm which is understood to be generated at a physical, emotional and spiritual level. The campaign work undertaken by anti-abortion activists is very much part of their lived religion (McGuire, 2008). It forms part of their everyday lives regarding how they practice their religion, with such an approach often not being shared by others from the same religious tradition, even by those who take an anti-abortion stance. Whilst activism is meaningful for anti-abortion activists because it potentially saves the woman's soul and the life of her baby, the very activism itself has a role in securing the salvation of the activist too, heightening its importance further. The saving work being undertaken therefore exists at numerous levels – for the mother, the potential child and the activist too.

We suggest that an understanding of saving functions as both a means and an end within the UK anti-abortion movement. As a means, it shapes the specific gendered understanding of women and abortion, and positions anti-abortion activists as doing God's work. It also provides the ends, in that the success of their actions is measured in the counting and fetishisation of those saved. The strong emphasis on saving women from the 'harm' of abortion builds on the theological understanding of women being connected to sexual sinfulness, and a consequence of their failure to comply with the natural role of motherhood. This is an internally ordered understanding, which makes sense to those specifically participating in anti-abortion activism, but is often not comprehensible by those advocating a pro-choice position. Their actions to 'save' women can be situated in the longer history of religious rescues, including concerns about those not 'saved' in the faith. From this sacred position, those who support abortion are associated with the profane, which could include being 'hardened' to abortion through previous exposure or being motivated by profits. However, this latter aspect largely fails as a public message in the context of the UK where abortion is usually provided free within the NHS.

In contrast, pro-choice campaigners make no assumptions about motherhood (Orr, 2017). Women who consider abortion but decide not to proceed, whether or not they consult an abortion service provider, are understood as deploying agency and autonomy, and their decision is not seen as an outcome of anti-abortion activities. The pro-choice positioning of abortion and motherhood as equally legitimate choices for women is in direct contradiction to the essentialized assumptions of the anti-abortion activists. This position stems from a different understanding of women, their bodies and behaviour which emphasises individual decision-making but also challenges the structural conditions in which these decisions are made. The space outside abortion clinics is a flashpoint for these contested issues. It is

understood in multiple dichotomous ways; a battle between sacred and profane, a site of safety and danger, and a struggle between sacred and secular positions; but where women seeking abortion are positioned as potentially at risk and in need of saving.

Whilst religious understandings of saving are a powerful message in the context of strong Christian beliefs, we suggest they have limited public resonance. Moreover, positioning abortion as child sacrifice is likely to alienate the wider public. In contrast, the need to shield women from the anti-abortion activists appears to be a stronger argument, generating support from the general public as can be seen in the support for the introduction of a bufferzone in London. This is unsurprising in the context of widespread support for abortion (Park, Bryson, Ciery, Curtice, & Phillips, 2013) and concerns about the safety and privacy of women entering abortion clinics (Lowe & Hayes, 2019). At one level, both sides position women as potentially vulnerable and in need of protection from a specific form of harm. For the anti-abortion activists, the only way to prevent harm is to reject abortion. Meanwhile, for pro-choice activists, the harm is a restriction of potential choices. This latter position seems to better reflect the views of the wider public, and thus anti-abortion activists who position themselves as saving women seem unlikely to be convincing for those outside of the antiabortion movement.

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