

Taking the measure of the culture wars

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Many conservatives think advocating for unborn life is a continuation of the civil rights movement. Many liberals believe they're carrying on the legacy of the civil rights movement in the struggle for LGBT equality. Of course, conservatives tended to oppose or sit out the actual civil rights movement. Some admit that their fervor for the right-to-life movement is a way of making up time, of compensating for their earlier error.

These two issues have been the hot-button issues of the culture wars for several decades now. It seems to me that we are now getting a sense of how those wars are playing out. Gays and lesbians are gaining acceptance in society. Abortion, on the other hand, continues to be a contentious issue, and the numbers of people on each side of the debate don't change much over time.

But maybe that's the way it should be: advancement on the one issue, stalemate on the other. As King said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Sexual orientation and gender identity have less to do with personal morality and more to do with social justice. To the degree LGBT people are gaining equal rights, they are getting their due, however slowly.

Abortion, on the other hand, remains a complex and controversial issue. It illustrates a key part of human existence: competing claims. There is the claim, unspoken, of the unborn life; and there is the claim of the mother, host to the fetus. And there are other, societal claims as well. I personally think Stanley Hauerwas said it right years ago: it's not a matter of whether every abortion is right or wrong, but of what kind of people we become if we don't welcome our children.

I, for one, hope that the struggle over abortion doesn't end anytime too soon. Of course it would be better if we could have a civil discussion about how to make abortion rare, while also safe and legal, along with how we can support mothers—especially poor and marginalized mothers—making tough decisions and bringing their offspring into a sometimes inhospitable world. Yet I'd maintain that the right-to-life movement has legitimacy, much as the LGBT rights movement does. We might say that each has a different, appropriate calling.

Meanwhile, we have been experiencing rude reminders that the civil rights movement itself isn't over. If anything, we've lost some ground. A new commitment to the struggle to overcome racism is desperately needed. People of principle on both the right and the left should join in that struggle, regardless of whether they agree on abortion or LGBT rights.