

**ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE**  
**R.I.P.**

*Robert P. George\**

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Elizabeth Fox-Genovese was a scholar as notable for her bravery as for her brilliance. After what she described as her “long apprenticeship” in the world of secular liberal intellectuals, it was careful reflection on the central moral questions of our time that led her first to doubt and then to abandon both liberalism and secularism. Needless to say, this did not endear her to her former allies.

At the heart of her doubts about secular liberalism (and what she described as “radical, upscale feminism”) was its embrace of abortion and its (continuing) dalliance with euthanasia. At first, she went along with abortion, albeit reluctantly, believing that women’s rights to develop their talents and control their destinies required its legal permission availability. But Betsey (as she was known by her friends) was not one who could avert her eyes from inconvenient facts. The central fact about abortion is that it is the deliberate killing of a developing child in the womb. For Betsey, euphemisms such as “products of conception,” “termination of pregnancy,” “privacy,” and “choice” ultimately could not hide that fact. She came to see that to countenance abortion is not to respect women’s “privacy” or liberty; it is to suppose that some people have the right to decide whether others will live or die. In a statement that she knew would enflame many on the left and even cost her valued friendships, she declared that “no amount of past oppression can justify women’s oppression of the most vulnerable among us.”

Betsey knew that public pro-life advocacy would be regarded by many in the intellectual establishment as intolerable apostasy—especially from one of the founding mothers of “women’s studies.” She could have been forgiven for keeping mum on the issue and carrying on with her professional work on the history of the American south. But keeping mum about fundamental matters of right and wrong was not in

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her character. And though she valued her standing in the intellectual world, she cared for truth and justice more. And so she spoke out ever more passionately in defense of the unborn.

And the more she thought and wrote about abortion and other life issues, the more persuaded she became that the entire secular liberal project was misguided. Secular liberals were not deviating from their principles in endorsing killing whether by abortion or euthanasia in the name of individual “choice”; they were following them to their logical conclusions. But this revealed a profound contradiction at the heart of secular liberal ideology, for the right of some individuals to kill others undermines any ground of principle on which an idea of individual rights or dignity could be founded.

Even in her “long apprenticeship,” she was never among those who disdained religious believers or held them in contempt. As an historian and social critic, she admired the cultural and moral achievements of Judaism and Christianity. As her doubts about secularism grew, she began to consider seriously whether religious claims might actually be true. Reason led her to the door of faith, and prayer enabled her to walk through it. As she herself described her conversion from secularism to Catholicism, it had a large intellectual component; yet it was, in the end, less her choice than God’s grace.

Betsey continued her scholarly labors, especially in collaboration with her husband Eugene Genovese, our nation’s most distinguished historian of American slavery. Not long ago, Cambridge University Press published their masterwork, *The Mind of the Master Class*. Soon after Betsey’s own religious conversion, Gene (who had long been an avowed Marxist, but who had gradually moved in the direction of cultural and political conservatism) returned to the Catholic faith of his boyhood under the influence of his beloved wife.

As if she had not already antagonized the intellectual establishment enough, Betsey soon began speaking out in defense of marriage and sexual morality. Her root-and-branch rejection of the ideology of the sexual revolution—an ideology that now enjoys the status of infallible dogma among many secular liberal intellectuals—was based on a profound appreciation of the centrality of marriage to the fulfillment of men and women as sexually complementary spouses; to the well-being of children for whom the love of mother and father for each other and for them is literally indispensable; and to society as a whole which depends on the marriage-based family for the rearing of responsible and upright citizens. If her pro-life advocacy angered many liberal intellectuals, her outspoken defense of marriage and traditional norms of sexual morality made them apoplectic.

Betsey's marriage to Gene was one of the great love stories of our time. They were two very different personalities, perfectly united. He was the head of the family; she was in charge of everything. Their affection for each other created a kind of force field into which friends were drawn in love for both of them. Although unable to have children of their own, they lavished parental care and concern on their students and younger colleagues, who in turn worshiped them.

Betsey leaves us many fine works of historical scholarship and social criticism—works admired by honest scholars across the political spectrum. Even more importantly, her life provides an unsurpassed example of intellectual integrity and moral courage. Her fervent witness to the sanctity of human life and the dignity of marriage and the family will continue to inspire. May the living God who drew her to Himself comfort her bereaved husband and grant her a full share in His divine life.