

Reverend Serene Jones

[00:00:00] **Katie:** Hello, and welcome to a new episode of the Femtastic Podcast. This is Katie Breen, the host of the Femtastic Podcast. I am really excited for the conversation that we are having on the podcast today. So our guest is Reverend Serene Jones, who is a pro-choice Reverend religious scholar and the former chair of Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies at Yale.

[00:00:32] **Katie:** And Reverend Serene is an expert on how abortion and reproductive rights became a political rallying cry for the conservative religious right. Unknown to many people, decades ago- and not that long ago, even in the seventies and early eighties- the church was essentially silent on the issue of abortion.

[00:00:52] **Katie:** In fact, the Southern Baptist church even issued statements that specifically said that the government should not be involved in [00:01:00] abortion, but over time sensing an opportunity to gain followers and political power, the church launched an all out crusade against abortion and Reverend Serene Jones is going to tell us how that came to be and how it's also really tied to racism and a desire by the conservative right to resist integration in society and maintain a racial order that they were comfortable with.

[00:01:31] **Katie:** Another thing that we're going to talk about today is how there's really nothing in the Bible that condemns abortion. Reverend Jones goes into a couple passages in the Bible that people tend to bring up or really just one passage that people tend to bring up that they liberally translate to mean that it is against abortion.

[00:01:53] **Katie:** So we go into that. She brings up some other verses that would seem to respect the authority and [00:02:00] the choice of the pregnant person over the life of the fetus. So we'll talk about that. And overall, and, and as Serene says, the Bible consistently says that people should have the autonomy and freedom to make decisions that are best for them, and really supports flourishing.

[00:02:23] **Katie:** In doing so supports the right to choose. So I'm very excited to talk about this topic on the show. I think that I love the way that Reverend Jones says that basically are the thoughts that we have on abortion or not. We

have, but the thoughts that the religious right has on abortion are totally made up.

[00:02:45] **Katie:** They made them up in the last 40 years basically. And if they made them up, they can change him. And I hope that this episode provides insight into the radical political [00:03:00] shift towards anti-abortion that the conservative right has made over the last 40 years. But I also hope it provides comfort to people, especially people who have really been negatively impacted by.

[00:03:10] **Katie:** Religious so-called religious negativity towards abortion to see that, you know, the way that the anti-abortion right is interpreting the Bible and it is interpreting. Christianity is just one way to interpret it and is a relatively new way to interpret it and was used for political convenience.

[00:03:31] **Katie:** It wasn't an interpretation that has been proliferated as a way to gain votes and to polarize. So. It's okay. If you have nuanced thoughts on this, even if your church says differently. So this is a really interesting episode and I hope you enjoy it. As always, before we get started a couple of quick asks, number one, please subscribe to [00:04:00] fantastic podcast.

[00:04:00] **Katie:** If you don't already number two, please leave a rating and review of the podcast, especially on apple podcasts so that more people can find it. And number three, please follow fantastic on social media on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. And that's all with that being said, I'm really happy to introduce Reverend serene Jones and have you hear her unique perspective on how the fight against abortion has evolved and has been manufactured

[00:04:32] **Katie:** Hi Serene, hello, thank you for joining

[00:04:38] **Serene Jones:** Katie. It's great to be talking with you today.

[00:04:41] **Katie:** Yeah, I'm, I'm very excited for this conversation. So let's start off by having you introduce yourself. Who are you, what do you do?

[00:04:50] **Serene Jones:** So I am Reverend I'm ordained in the Christian Church disciples of Christ and the United church of Christ.

[00:04:57] **Serene Jones:** And I'm the president of a seminary in [00:05:00] New York city called union theological seminary, which is a very broad seminary that has all different kinds of Christians, but also people from other

religious traditions and also a big number of students to are spiritual, but not religious, which in in, particularly in younger generations is a lot of people in the United States.

[00:05:21] **Serene Jones:** So I run a seminary. That's a little microcosm in many ways of, of religion and spirituality in our country. And I'm also a theologian. So. About God and our lives and meaning and the big questions. Yeah.

[00:05:38] **Katie:** Cool. Well, you know, the way that I was sort of introduced to your work is through the context of abortion and the idea of, you know, the religious rights, sort of their evolution, for lack of a better word on their stance on [00:06:00] abortion and you know, thoughts on it and, and sort of use of it as a political tactic.

[00:06:06] **Katie:** So I had heard a little bit about this, but was super excited to hear more from you on like, what is this story regarding, you know, the Christian conservative stance on abortion and sort of like how it came to be, what it is today.

[00:06:23] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. And it's such a fascinating question because when it comes to an issue like abortion, people tend to think that there is a single right position that has always been there and everybody knows what that is, and that's how we should make laws.

[00:06:39] **Serene Jones:** And that's how everybody should behave. And when it comes to the topic of abortion, like so many issues, but this one in particular the conservative evangelical focus on abortion is very real. You know, in, in 1967 you have a major conservative, evangelical magazine coming out with [00:07:00] a huge article actually condemning Roman Catholics for their position on abortion saying that it's much too restrictive and doesn't, you know, make room for the rights and the life of the mother.

[00:07:14] **Serene Jones:** Even in the Southern Baptist convention, which today, when we. Angelical conservative Southern Baptist is the largest body we think of even until the late seventies, early eighties, they were passing resolutions that their general conventions that were concerned about the rights and the health of the mother.

[00:07:33] **Serene Jones:** And we're so far from the kind of strident anti-abortion under any condition positions that we see nowadays coming out of the Southern Baptist convention. And it shows us that That what we have today

has a reasons behind it. It was created by conservative voices in America, not all of them, Christian, oftentimes you know, as a political [00:08:00] strategy,

[00:08:00] **Serene Jones:** That is trying to get certain segments of the United States to move in conservative and really restrictive political positions with respect to women's freedom and women's agency.

[00:08:13] **Serene Jones:** So recent thing. Yeah.

[00:08:15] **Katie:** So what changed if like in the early eighties, they were still talking about the rights of the mother and. Yeah. Thinking that abortion restrictions were too restrictive. Like what was the evolution that landed us where we are today?

[00:08:32] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. Well, several things began to change. One, you it'd be really began in the late fifties, early sixties, but it was reaching a crescendo in the late seventies.

[00:08:42] **Serene Jones:** And that is the influx of women into the work. And what happened when women were entering the workplace in massive numbers? There was this fear that if women were staying at home, taking care of the kids and this mythological [00:09:00] notion of the nuclear family, then somehow, eventually men would be pushed out of the workforce.

[00:09:04] **Serene Jones:** So, you know, one way to make sure women stay home is we have to have women who keep having babies. Like this is what they're meant to do. And everything's being thrown into chaos because now women are starting to see themselves as part of the workplace. And not necessarily only mothers and home, home care givers.

[00:09:25] **Serene Jones:** At the same time we're seeing in the seventies the serious beginning of desegregation and a real fear on the part of flight evangelical communities that the, the sort of grounding racist rules that had guided America were going to be destroyed and they needed to find a wedge issue that they could rally conservative white Christians around.

[00:09:54] **Serene Jones:** And this seemed to be an issue

[00:09:57] **Katie:** that if they deployed it right, could do that.

[00:09:59] **Serene Jones:** [00:10:00] And it had the advantage of saying, oh, all we're advocating for is this thing that they made up called this like poor, innocent feeding. Which was, it was something that was made up. It was not you know, before we had the medical technology to see, you know, how how fetuses grow before we had all this language around abortion there wasn't the ideas we have now that for instance, at the moment of heartbeats, a life begins and somehow a fetus becomes a person.

[00:10:33] **Serene Jones:** So it really was used as a political wedge issue around race.

[00:10:36] **Katie:** Say more about that cause like, what do you mean? What, what does it mean to be like a wedge issue around race? Like what were they trying to accomplish? Or like, who were they? Who were they trying to sway? Like, I don't really understand.

[00:10:52] **Serene Jones:** So they needed an issue that would say, this is what. Good God fearing white Christians are going to get behind. [00:11:00] Okay. And if you're not behind this, then you're a sinner. You're an outcast. You are, you know, not only you know a political opponent, you actually become evil. I mean, imagine an issue that could be stronger as a wedge issue than an issue that declares people who disagree with you, murderers.

[00:11:21] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. I mean the rhetorical force of that. Now, why did that have to do with race? Well, it was very clear when you look at even now the breakdown racially in this country that that in communities of color, there had been long histories of multiple ways of managing unwanted pregnancy. It was really the white community that was predominantly relying upon Roe V Wade medical services.

[00:11:48] **Serene Jones:** And so it was considered, this is where you can see white and communities of color America divide. And so let's just push it and let's open that up. And let's put everybody [00:12:00] on the other side of it. Not only is wrong, but as killers. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:12:05] **Katie:** So the idea like, okay, things politically and socially are moving towards racial integration and we can what, and we, and we don't want that and we don't want that.

[00:12:25] **Katie:** And so we can stop that by creating like a voting block. White people. Yes.

[00:12:34] **Serene Jones:** Okay. It is that simple. Yes. A voting block of white people that will move lockstep around a, a set of political positions. And you know, abortion was probably the most emotionally volatile and the way it was deployed that had to do with, you know, anti anti desegregation, anti busing, anti taxation anti-immigration you take [00:13:00] a whole collection of conservative political issues, and then you put a little bow around it called abortion and, and all of it gets infused with the emotions of abortion.

[00:13:11] **Katie:** Right. Because it can be, it can start to become like a single issue, like create single issue voters where they're like, oh, well, this person might vote for this other candidate because. You know, this other candidate is more progressive on racial issues, but if they believe that voting for that person would mean they are murderers, then we can get them to vote for this white Christian by making it like a single issue

[00:13:38] **Serene Jones:** election.

[00:13:39] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean, and it also had just, as I said earlier, a lot to do with the, the rising independence of women. So, you know, if you can one of the subtext of the seventies, as you were beginning to see abortion come to the fore is that, oh, there are, there are all these women out there that are.[00:14:00]

[00:14:00] **Serene Jones:** Sexually uncontrollable and just use abortion as birth control. And one way we can start controlling them is to punish them for having sex and punish them for owning their own bodies. And this is a way to do it. So it was also sort of the wanton woman let's get her under control.

[00:14:20] **Katie:** Yeah. So I have so many questions.

[00:14:24] **Katie:** I know like like you, you said about previously there, wasn't this idea of like, once there's a quote unquote heartbeat, it's not really heartbeat, as we all know, then that is when life begins. And I know I've, I've read some books about that where basically it's essentially. At least through the turn of the century, it was the focus, at least for some people, not for all people of all religions was around quickening, which [00:15:00] was like in the third

trimester probably once, like you could actually feel like kicking and movement was what they call quickening.

[00:15:06] **Katie:** And that was more of like their barometer for maybe when life began. But I also know. And you know, I know you're familiar obviously with so many religions that it's also very especially lately a very Christian idea that life could begin before birth. Like I believe that many people of the Jewish faith think that, you know, life doesn't begin to live first breath.

[00:15:31] **Katie:** So can you talk a little bit more about like those differing opinions and how they. Changed over time

[00:15:40] **Serene Jones:** or whatever. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, you know, part of the the Christian success of arguments around abortion is that in very traditional Christianity, there is a view that goes way back to the third, fourth century.

[00:15:59] **Serene Jones:** And really you can [00:16:00] find it articulated best in the figure. Agustine that the purpose that God made human beings and the purpose of sex was to make babies all the purpose only purpose of sex was reproduction. And if sex was for any other purpose in reproduction, it was bad and it was tainted and it made you uncertain.

[00:16:24] **Serene Jones:** And then that was when the whole story about sexuality and reproduction began to just go way off track for Christians. And it just continued to tumble in the wrong direction still today. And once you make sort of reproducing this quintessential value of human sexual relations then it becomes a hotbed of restraint and control and rules.

[00:16:50] **Serene Jones:** That's where you're going to set up your rules about what it means to be a good Christian. So it was just rich with possibilities for making it a place where we would talk about how [00:17:00] women's bodies are controlled around reproduction. You don't find that in in most of the world's other religions you, you find for the most part, hardly anything.

[00:17:10] **Serene Jones:** Which was true when it came to abortion, when it came to reproduction. Even though Augustan said, you know, we're made you know, the purpose of sex is reproduction. He didn't come in and say anything about abortion. I mean, it wasn't a topic. And one of the reasons why it wasn't something that people were worried about is that in the course of a woman's

lifetime it was common that she could expect to have multiple miscarriages, multiple stillbirths.

[00:17:37] **Serene Jones:** She could lose, you know, a child in the first six weeks of life. You know, the most uncommon thing was to give birth to a healthy child that made it past the age of five and continue to live. So the, the whole focus was not on, you know On abortion, preventing abortion. It was really on the reality that having children is, is, [00:18:00] is is a dangerous thing.

[00:18:01] **Serene Jones:** And in the midst of all of that, you know, the vast majority of women until really the mid 20th century died of childbirth. So there was just a whole other set of, of social concerns around giving birth that had nothing to do with, you know, whether or not you were going to willingly and through a decision decide not to have a pregnancy.

[00:18:20] **Katie:** So yeah, so the, the Bible doesn't actually say anything about abortion.

[00:18:26] **Serene Jones:** You know, it there's there's a couple of passages that get pulled out. One of them is Psalm 139, which the Psalmist says. You know, speaking in the voice of God, I have known you since you were formed in your mother's womb which is as I read it a very beautiful way of saying that that God's presence to reality, all aspects of life is totally comprehensive.

[00:18:56] **Serene Jones:** You know, there's no place that, that, that God's love is [00:19:00] not present. You take that metaphor out of context and it starts sounding like, you know, God has a special God there, the special eye that God's keeping on, you know the moment that conception happens of, of forming the person apart from that, there really is nothing.

[00:19:18] **Serene Jones:** In fact, there's other passages where. One passage in the old Testament in, well, several in Exodus where it's clearly they're interesting. One passage describes what happens if someone happens to harm a woman who's pregnant, and if they harm a woman who's pregnant and she loses the pregnancy, there's a minor penalty.

[00:19:46] **Serene Jones:** But if you harm a woman who's pregnant and she dies,

[00:19:51] **Katie:** the death penalty is what you get.

[00:19:53] **Serene Jones:** So there's clear distinction being made between the value of a life of a woman and the pregnancy. [00:20:00] Right. You know, Jesus said, absolutely nothing about abortion. He just said nothing about homosexuality or being trans, although throughout the Bible on almost every page.

[00:20:13] **Serene Jones:** People are saying a lot about poverty and how we need to

[00:20:16] **Katie:** take care of. Ain't a lot about how people shouldn't be rich.

[00:20:20] **Serene Jones:** So why aren't we yelling about

[00:20:22] **Katie:** that? I know. And I feel like I have heard the the Psalm that you mentioned about how, you know, like I've known you since you're in your mother's womb.

[00:20:34] **Katie:** Definitely feel it feel like people are reading a lot into what that could be to interpret it to be against abortion, because hypothetically let's say, you know, God said that and also is not against abortion. It's not incompatible like that, you know?

[00:20:59] **Katie:** I knew you, since [00:21:00] you were in the womb, even if you never make it out of the womb, he still knew you. So it just like, feels like it's like really retching it out to mean a lot of different things that it doesn't actually say. And it also doesn't take into consideration, like, because it doesn't address at all, like the, the health of the mother or what the mother would want and it's not incompatible.

[00:21:28] **Katie:** Like it just doesn't, it's it, the argument doesn't seem incompatible with me to thinking that abortion is okay. Like it could be both and

[00:21:37] **Serene Jones:** yeah. And you have to wonder too. Why Jews and Christians read this passage for thousands of years and never came up with it being against. like, hello, that never occurred to them.

[00:21:50] **Serene Jones:** That that's what this passage was about. Yeah. It was about the love of

[00:21:53] **Katie:** God. It wasn't like, that's what I was going to say. It's, it's very general and like a very nice [00:22:00] general statement that didn't come with, like a list of caveats. And like, here's what I mean by this. Especially when we talk like the, the, the Bible talking so much about, you know, and, and ever loving all loving God, like that is that statement is compatible with that.

[00:22:16] **Katie:** It's not necessarily incompatible with abortion. Right?

[00:22:19] **Serene Jones:** Absolutely. Absolutely. No. That's true else.

[00:22:24] **Katie:** Aiding. Yes. Okay. So when did sort of the wedge issue thing take off and was it like a conscious decision that they were like, okay. Abortion is the issue that we're going to use? Yeah. How did they come to that decision?

[00:22:45] **Katie:** And then what did they do once they were like, abortion is what we're

[00:22:47] **Serene Jones:** using? Well, so I wasn't in the back rooms where these decisions were made. You know, I wasn't quite old enough place, but it was a very conscious decision because you see it rolled out, you [00:23:00] know in a very conscious way. And you'd see it tied to all these other conservative positions almost immediately that have to do with segregation, voting rights and all sorts of economic issues.

[00:23:11] **Serene Jones:** And it, it was, it was consciously used, you know, asking the question, well, what is an issue that we can get people to feel really emotionally strong about and feel like they have the moral high ground on and really get them motivated to vote as a block one. We'll do it. Now the irony of all of this.

[00:23:34] **Serene Jones:** Is it's a well-known statistic that that young women in very devout Roman Catholic and extremely conservative evangelical communities have more abortions than young women in progressive religious communities or young women who come from progressive families. And so you know, what's so painful [00:24:00] about all of this for the evangelical conservatives who are supporting it so strongly is it's it's, you know, the mothers who are going to have to deal with their daughters in terms of the impact of this decision.

[00:24:13] **Serene Jones:** And no one seems to stop and think about that. Like who's going to get fined in Texas. It's going to be proportionately, more

conservative Christians than any other group. The law is fairly inactive. If, which of course we know how race and class works, and most likely it will be fairly enacted, but you know, a large part of that is that we know that education around sexuality, around birth control around women having control of their bodies and having the right to make decisions about when they have sex, all of those mitigate against unwanted pregnancies and they have a very effective way of mitigating against it.

[00:24:55] **Serene Jones:** So it's in communities that don't do those things that unwanted [00:25:00] pregnancies are most prolific and those are the communities that are going to be the most effective. Yeah. So what kind of, I always find myself wondering, what is it about this, that your own mothers and daughters who. Our anti-abortion don't get now we do know that, and this is a nod thing about religion is that people can believe one thing and act in completely different ways.

[00:25:27] **Serene Jones:** Right? So you take your daughter to get an abortion and you can come out of that abortion clinic and still be anti-abortion.

[00:25:34] **Katie:** Yeah. Well, I definitely, I feel like you hear stories of from clinics, people who work in clinics and people coming in and saying like, I think abortion is wrong, but like, I am a special circumstance where like, it's, it's like less wrong if I do it, but it's, it's more wrong if other people do it and blah, blah, blah.

[00:25:54] **Katie:** But like every circumstances is a special

[00:25:57] **Serene Jones:** circumstance. Yeah. [00:26:00] Yeah. So the, so the position that people take on abortion, doesn't actually mirror the actions they take. And that's where, you know, you think if Roe V Wade is reversed, It's going to hit like a ton of bricks on people for whom there's this breakdown between their view of abortion and what they actually do.

[00:26:20] **Serene Jones:** And suddenly they're going to discover they can't continue the practices that they've had because this politicized issue has now become in fact, the source of oppression to you and the voices. Yeah.

[00:26:37] **Katie:** So when, so I guess like initially when they were creating this wedge issue, was it only to get like the evangelical block on board with, with

voting conservatively or like when did it sort of seep into the mainstream conservatism and not just among evangelicals?

[00:26:59] **Serene Jones:** [00:27:00] So one of the interesting statistics is that. It's still the case that the majority of in polling, at least in how this translates into votes, you don't know, but in pulling the majority of Catholics and evangelicals and progressive the basically across the board, the majority of all Americans support abortion seven and 10.

[00:27:25] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. So that's the odd thing about the whole issue, which makes you suspicious about what's really going on here? Because it it's, it's never became, become a broad issue with respect to how people actually act. But it, it has it has crept into a broader public, although I would say now, even more than that eighties and nineties, it's Evan, gelical Christian leaders who are [00:28:00] driving the language around it.

[00:28:01] **Serene Jones:** So even though it's not representative they've even taken a stronger stance with respect to the leadership of it, it used to be sort of a, a wedge issue that you could get churches to buy into. And now it's the churches getting, trying to get other people to buy into, but they are the leaders of the movement.

[00:28:21] **Serene Jones:** I mean, the closest sort of parallel I find it's not a complete parallel, but it's like w you know, most recently the S the group of conservative pastors, conservative leaders Christians who are evangelical, conservative, got together and made the decision that trans rights, they just decided this, but trans rights was a great

[00:28:45] **Katie:** wedge, right?

[00:28:46] **Serene Jones:** Hmm, because people felt uncomfortable about bath worms. So they decided to make that the issue that they would go out all out on. Yeah. It wasn't just an issue that kind of emerged at a grassroots

[00:28:59] **Katie:** [00:29:00] level. It wasn't something

[00:29:01] **Serene Jones:** even 20 years ago, people even thought about much less cared about. Yeah. So that's the sort of most contemporary parallel we have to kind of reaching into the grab bag of things that you think can divide people.

[00:29:17] **Serene Jones:** Cause it can make them uncomfortable and people that you're going to use. And we can't deny that underneath all of this too, is just a general discomfort with quote women's liberation and anything we can do to control women's bodies and control women is going to be perceived as positive

[00:29:36] **Katie:** bag. Isn't in like a good way to put it too, because I think like, you know, You hear anecdotes of people saying like, well, P especially for evangelicals and S and having single issue voters who really are like, well, I would vote for Hillary, but she's a baby killer. So I'm [00:30:00] going to vote for the other person instead because blah, blah, blah.

[00:30:02] **Katie:** So you have those people who are really motivated by it. And then I think that you have a lot of people who like you, well, like you said, in terms of like their actual behavior probably don't really care or think about abortion much on a day-to-day basis, but we're such a polarized, like politically polarized country that it's like, oh, well, this issue, this stance on abortion is going to be lumped into what it means to be conservative.

[00:30:29] **Katie:** And if I identify as a conservative, then I guess that, like, this is what I either, this is what I believe. And like, that's my line and I'm sticking to it. And I'm not thinking about it much or. I don't really care. Like it's going to be part of the grab bag. I care about fiscal conservatism and this abortion thing, I guess, is part of being conservative.

[00:30:49] **Katie:** So like I'm going to vote conservative anyway and it'll just get, like, be brought in. So I think it's just, it's just odd the way that this all ends up playing out [00:31:00] electorally.

[00:31:01] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. And you, and I think you do have like more in con in the conservative Christian community, even if, you know, a woman is divorced working full time and has two children and needs to make a decision about a pregnancy.

[00:31:22] **Serene Jones:** Even that person who's already. Fallen outside of all of the, you know, standards of perfect womanhood. I mean, she's divorced, she's working full time. Somehow the way our, our, our, our brains work in relation to the vision we have of ourselves, she still wants to believe that if she votes this way, she is that person that is this idealized womanhood.

[00:31:50] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. That's really interesting. And it's, and it's a denial of her own self. But that's how strong those gendered stories about perfect [00:32:00] womanhood are. And

[00:32:01] **Katie:** there's nothing perfect. Perfect Christianity,

[00:32:05] **Serene Jones:** perfect Christianity and perfect woman did in the perfect Christian woman. You know, shouldn't be getting herself in a situation where she needs to get an abortion.

[00:32:12] **Katie:** Yeah. Like I did this, but like, it shouldn't be. Right. Yeah, it happens. Yeah. The other thing that popped into my mind, and I'm curious, you have any, if you have an insight into this is like, there are, of course in a lot of countries outside of the us that are very Christian. So countries in Latin America or Poland Ireland, places like that, where this also has become a political issue and also sort of religious issue.

[00:32:46] **Katie:** I'm curious, like, did that happen around the same time it happened in the U S or did it come after or

[00:32:54] **Serene Jones:** it like, where did,

[00:32:55] **Katie:** because we're not like we, we are unique in a lot of ways in terms of our [00:33:00] politics and how they intersect with abortion, but in some ways we're really not. So I'm curious if you have any insight into that.

[00:33:06] **Serene Jones:** Well, it's, it's different country by country. I mean, Ireland is a good example of a country that used to have some of the most strict abortion laws that you could find. And in recent years, those have been lifted. And that's just not true for Ireland anymore. In, in south America. You mainly see it going hand in hand with the rise of conservative, evangelical Christianity in the form of Pentecostalism, which just sort of a whole heartedly adopts the the political language of conservative Christianity in the United States.

[00:33:43] **Serene Jones:** I think it also, and I don't know how to say this in a way that's not going to sound extremely inflammatory, but I do think that In a place like the United States, but also in places [00:34:00] where people are concerned about the declining birth rates of quite baby white babies or the dominant cultures, babies you see a rise in the anti-abortion language because there's this concern that that, you know, as, as our political landscapes change in

terms of their racial demographics, you know, we're just going to the white people are concerned.

[00:34:29] **Serene Jones:** We're just going to be outnumbered communities of color. And so all the more reason for for raising up abortion as an issue, you also find though, and this is true in the history of United States at the same time abortion was coming up as an issue.

[00:34:44] **Katie:** You had places like Alabama and Georgia. In Texas

[00:34:46] **Serene Jones:** Louisiana, where there were also increasing the forced sterilization of women of color.

[00:34:51] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. So you got to ask, okay. So what's this really about, is this about like, not, you know, abortion or is it really about [00:35:00] white womanhood and protecting white bait? What quote white babies and increasing population.

[00:35:07] **Katie:** Yeah. I mean, I think that is a, there's like a very clear eugenic history that like, they basically, like, they, they spelled it out for us.

[00:35:17] **Katie:** It's not like we're reaching to say that that's what they were trying to do. Like they've said that that's what they're trying to do. So yeah, I think that's a very good point. So with, you know, like Pentecostalism and

[00:35:30] **Katie:** in like Latin America, for example, in your you're saying how they sort of have adopted the political language that the. American conservatives use related to abortion. So is, did the American like shift around abortion, give rise to their politics in these other countries? Like, did we imperialize this?

[00:35:57] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. So it's part of the whole colonial [00:36:00] and it was not indigenous to these countries to have these strong policies around abortion. Yeah. They're just like the United States, you know, 70 years ago. It just wasn't an issue. Yeah. So it, it rises up with the rise of of the whole colonial project and the projection of a particular political view.

[00:36:24] **Serene Jones:** And I mean, I have to say too that the history of fascism all around the world has been historically. Always connected to increased surveillance and control of the reproductive agency of women, the

agency, period of women decisions about their own bodies and their own sexuality.

[00:36:47] **Serene Jones:** And we have the rise of fascism around the globe right now.

[00:36:51] **Katie:** Yeah. Yeah. That's really interesting. When did the Catholic church start talking about abortion as, as [00:37:00] something that they're against? Yeah.

[00:37:01] **Serene Jones:** So that's been predominantly in the 20th century, you see some of that in the 19th century. You always you've had for a long time, as you mentioned earlier in Roman Catholicism, the idea that that fetus was not a A baby

[00:37:19] **Katie:** until like a fully

[00:37:20] **Serene Jones:** formed baby there until it quit until they could kick and you could feel it move.

[00:37:26] **Serene Jones:** Which is, you know, somewhere, usually in the third trimester which you know, there are so few abortions that happen at a third trimester level that it just wasn't an issue with that kind of policy, but it was with the rise of the new technologies that that you began to see this shift in the Roman Catholic view.

[00:37:49] **Serene Jones:** Of course I have to say in Roman Catholicism it's there is much more room in general for discussions about the life of the mother, because usually their [00:38:00] position on abortion is tied to a broader position on. On the supporting of life. So I usually have a stronger antipoverty policies. They have room for the life of the mother.

[00:38:15] **Serene Jones:** They have you know, very developed adoption in hospital systems. So that's not to say that their position is right I'm opposed to it at every turn, but it was more consistently tied to some sort of social position where the concern was to, to support human flourishing in all of its dimensions.

[00:38:39] **Serene Jones:** And it's one piece of that. It wasn't sort of an isolated political topic.

[00:38:47] **Katie:** Yeah. It goes back to what you were saying earlier. You know, sort of picking and choosing topics. Cause the Bible talks exhaustively about poverty and [00:39:00] the American conservative movement really does not care about alleviating poverty or really helping anyone. You know, you, you, this is like a very common reframe, but like pro-life would mean so much more than just abortion that the American conservative right.

[00:39:18] **Katie:** Seems quite opposed to, so it is, it's very odd that they would like cherry pick this one issue.

[00:39:25] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. And you know, even the thinking of conservative Christianity as not caring about poverty is a relatively new thing. Like in the, in the 19th century early 20th century Southern Baptist. We're extremely concerned about poverty in all of their policies, many Southern Baptist in the state where I grew up in Oklahoma voted

[00:39:48] **Katie:** socialist.

[00:39:49] **Katie:** Right. Which would make sense. That would be like inline, like Jesus was socialist.

[00:39:55] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. Yeah. So the, so it's so bizarre that at the same time [00:40:00] they focus on abortion, they let go of this long history of anti-poverty policies, total flip, you know, let's bury the good stuff and bring out a nightmare.

[00:40:13] **Katie:** The disconnect is very confusing to me.

[00:40:15] **Katie:** And just like the way that religion and politics get intertwined or separated like this. Yeah. Like the. Today's conservative, right. Christian conservative. Right. He was like horrified by the ideal of socialism, the idea of socialism, but like, that is what Jesus is talking about, basically. So it's like at what point, I mean, I think a lot of it probably has to do with the cold war and blah, blah, blah, but like, they're just, it just like diverges in such interesting and counterintuitive

[00:40:49] **Serene Jones:** ways.

[00:40:51] **Serene Jones:** Yes. Well, I think that, and again this would be a whole, this would be millions, well, not millions, hundreds of books to play this thesis out. But [00:41:00] I do think that post-World war two with the sort of a

commitment to re-invest realizing and promoting capitalism in the United States, that the, the industrial leaders saw that the biggest threat to the expansion of capitalism.

[00:41:20] **Serene Jones:** Was this network called the liberal church because it was a national network, it was strong and it took very strong policy positions on issues like poverty and like war. And so a concerted effort beginning in the mid fifties was made to break that hold and to create a very conservative religious right, and to destroy the legitimate voice of what were considered progressive Christians, meaning to make them seem like they're not Christians because they realized until this, this connection was broken, they would [00:42:00] not be able to move forward with the, with the advance of capitalism at the rate that they wanted it to move forward.

[00:42:08] **Katie:** That makes a lot of sense. Yeah. And then like where you were, it reminded me also, you were saying about fascism earlier, like during world war II, the Pope and Mussolini were like best friends and basically the Pope sort of like what Mussolini was doing. Definitely went against like the teachings of the church, but by partnering with the Pope, the Pope basically like basically like greenlit what Mussolini was doing.

[00:42:36] **Katie:** So the, the intersection of religion and politics gets quite messy.

[00:42:42] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. Yeah. And, and it's, you know, as someone who studies the history of religion, generally in Christianity specifically, I mean, you can go back and you can see some of the. Horrible things that have been done in human history have been done in the name of religion.

[00:42:57] **Serene Jones:** And then some of the very best things [00:43:00] that have happened in human history have been done in the name of religion. So you can't just be sh you know, con comforted to think, well, if it's religious, then people are thinking in morally positive good ways. It's a terrible weapon. And it's being mobilized now against women's bodies and I'm horrified by what's happening and we all should be.

[00:43:27] **Serene Jones:** Yes.

[00:43:28] **Katie:** So I'm curious what you think like,

[00:43:36] **Katie:** so elution could or could, or should be like one thing I think about a lot is. I'm obviously very pro-abortion pro-abortion. And however, I understand that if you were someone who morally, truly believed that life began at conception, then I understood. I do understand why you would be opposed [00:44:00] to abortion.

[00:44:00] **Katie:** If that is the basis of your belief system, about the topic. I just don't agree that that is the basis. You know, I don't, I don't agree that that is when life begins. So I don't know. I guess like how, how do we move forward with productive conversations about abortion? When so many people fundamentally believe religiously that life begins at conception.

[00:44:26] **Katie:** So it's murder. Like how do we move forward and have productive conversations when the fundamental belief is so different?

[00:44:35] **Serene Jones:** Well, it's an interesting question too, too, as you begin to have those conversations, It to figure out how many people do actually believe that life begins at conception. I mean, you don't have angelical churches don't have funerals for miscarriages, right?

[00:44:56] **Serene Jones:** I mean, you know, so [00:45:00] is this just a kind of catchword or is it a, is it a, a deeply held thought through belief? And then I think that we have to be able to hear each other. And if someone truly thinks that I need to be able to understand and accept that that if I choose to have an abortion, I'm do, I'm doing something morally important in their mind.

[00:45:26] **Serene Jones:** And that doesn't mean that it should determine what I do. But I need to be able to respect that that's their view. And you know, there's a difference between learning how to listen to one another and respect our differences. Then there is believing that your view should be able to completely dictate and determine my view.

[00:45:49] **Serene Jones:** And we haven't created enough space for people to have those conversations. I think, you know, the, the view is that somehow women [00:46:00] who choose to terminate a pregnancy are just like, they do it so easily and they do it all the time and it's no big deal. And if women really started listening to each other and talking more about the kinds of decisions they make, it would seem that these decisions are always hard.

[00:46:19] **Serene Jones:** Because it's, it's, it's a difficult moment. And it's fraught in so many ways, and there's no way it's not an emotional moment that

that requires, you know, to be sort of aware of, of something significant that you have to make a decision about. And if we could, if we could hear each other, I think that we would be making a lot of progress and being able to say, all right, you hold this position.

[00:46:53] **Serene Jones:** You, you, you under no conditions, are you going to be able to get an abortion? [00:47:00] So what can I do to support you in this decision? So that you can have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby and make decisions about what you want to do with the baby that are right for your life. How can I support you?

[00:47:16] **Serene Jones:** Rather than just, you know, think you're, you're crazy and I disagree with you and therefore I'm going to have nothing to do with you at all. It's like, you need to, right now, things are so polarized. It's really easy to demonize the other side and to just make them seem like they're crazy and they don't know what they're doing and they're ideologues.

[00:47:41] **Serene Jones:** And so I think right now it's time for a lot of listening. And that's hard. Listening is hard, especially when it concerns my body. You know, you talk about your body, but you don't have the right to talk about my body. You know, well,

[00:47:57] **Katie:** like I, I don't believe [00:48:00] that the decision to have like the actual decision having an abortion is necessarily difficult for everyone.

[00:48:06] **Katie:** But I do believe that if we all. We're listening. Then you could understand why someone would make that decision. Like, and that I feel like we're obviously isn't a conversation we're having. Another thing I wanted to ask that I feel like I struggle with and other people do too, is the idea that like your personal belief, even though I disagree with that belief, like should dictate what I can do.

[00:48:45] **Katie:** And like, where is that? Is there like an element or like something we should know about these particular like versions of Christianity that like, would explain why that is sort of the taxes that they're taking.

[00:48:59] **Serene Jones:** I mean, I do [00:49:00] think that there are forms of Christianity that are built around notions of, of they're very rigorous when it comes to quote moral behavior and the sanctions against being immoral or being a sinner are so harsh that in those communities you have no choice, but to be unequivocal in your position and to, you know, even the language of a war

you're soldiers for Christ, you know, we're in a, a battle for salvation, for saving souls, you know, all of that kind of language immediately takes any of these issues and turns them in to the equivalent of a battle where lives and deaths are, you know, taken if they have to be.

[00:49:50] **Serene Jones:** I mean, it's, it's a very aggressive and. Very right and wrong world in which there's no room for just being a human [00:50:00] being who has to find their messy way through things.

[00:50:04] **Katie:** Yeah, that's really, I mean, that makes sense that like, if you're viewing this as sort of like a battle for salvation, the salvation of humanity than you would, like, it wouldn't matter what someone else wants to do.

[00:50:16] **Katie:** You're like, I'm going to stop you from sinning. Is that something that is reflected in the Bible? Sort of like the suggestion that, that is like, what it, what Christian should be doing?

[00:50:30] **Serene Jones:** I mean, there's parts of the Bible that are, that are very, you know, adamant and aggressive and, and and hostile to women.

[00:50:38] **Serene Jones:** And I mean, it's a patriarchal book and so there's parts of it that are just wrong, I think. Yeah. But the overarching message that I come away with in my Christianity is. The overarching messages that God loves all that is. And including the earth, including all creatures, [00:51:00] clean all human beings and wants us to flourish and wants us to have our agency, our freedom, to enjoy our bodies, to be happy, to find a light and you know, to be fully human.

[00:51:13] **Serene Jones:** And and that that's, that's what it means to to have faith is to, is to believe in that love. And so, you know, trying to control women's bodies and, and punishing them for making decisions about pregnancies is completely antithetical to that.

[00:51:37] **Serene Jones:** Well, that

[00:51:38] **Katie:** feels like a good place to wrap up. I, I agree that it is antithetical to that.

[00:51:45] **Serene Jones:** And just say, just to be clear, I don't think that for all women, the decision to have an abortion needs to be a morally difficult one. I

think that there's many times where it's just so clear and you [00:52:00] make the decision.

[00:52:00] **Serene Jones:** But I do think it's one of those moments that always requires you have to make a decision. You can't do nothing, so you have to think about it. So, you know, in that sense, it's like not one of those things you can just slide past. Right. So everyone has to kind of think about it and nobody, nobody does it without but because it's impossible to do without thought.

[00:52:22] **Katie:** Yeah. Yeah, no, absolutely. Yeah, I agree.

[00:52:29] **Serene Jones:** Oh, you're so these are great questions. I then this conversation, and I think at the end of the day, it's just like, look, we made this stuff up, the religious right. Made this stuff up and they're using it as a weapon against women. And they're using it as a weapon against their own women, you know?

[00:52:48] **Serene Jones:** I mean, all of the women that this impacts and because it was made up so recently it can be undone very

[00:52:54] **Katie:** quickly, right? Like it's sort of a fad. Yes, yes. [00:53:00] Which I hope that like, especially for people who I've really been impacted by the negative association and then the stigma and the, the moral valence of, you know, Christianity.

[00:53:19] **Katie:** Beliefs of this lately. I hope we can bring comfort to people who have, you know, really struggled with the morality of it and thought like, oh, well I've had an abortion, so I'm a bad person. I'm going to hell or people who are like, oh, well I'm a Christian. So I know I should believe this, but I, I feel a little bit differently on this topic.

[00:53:40] **Katie:** Like I think it's comforting to know that we've made this up.

[00:53:45] **Serene Jones:** Yeah. Yeah. We made it up. We can undo it and we can set women free to make a wide variety of decisions. Yeah,

[00:53:57] **Katie:** yeah. Yeah. There's definitely nuance here. [00:54:00] There's space to their space to feel differently. And if it's important to you to be like a moral person, their space for

[00:54:08] **Serene Jones:** both.

[00:54:09] **Serene Jones:** Yeah, absolutely. There is. But when you start putting in place laws that constrain your moral agency, there's not spaces. Yeah.

[00:54:19] **Katie:** Well, and I think, you know, like, like you said, I, I think that like the message of the overarching message of the Bible is this, this message of universal love and the desire for flourishing ends, like morally, like I think, I think abortion is a moral issue.

[00:54:43] **Katie:** You know, I think that there are people who are like, you know, oh, abortion is a moral and it can't be like a moral good. I think abortion is a moral good because if what God would want is for us to flourish, then people choosing abortion are doing so, so that they can better [00:55:00] achieve flourishing. And it can

[00:55:02] **Serene Jones:** be a positive, moral decision to have an abortion.

[00:55:04] **Serene Jones:** Yes,

[00:55:05] **Katie:** absolutely. Yeah. So I appreciate, I, especially, I really appreciate too, like you know, when there are, are people like religious folks, like yourself who are like talking about that and, and saying like, yes, this is compatible with my Christianity. Because yeah, it's, it's certainly compatible with my view of morality.

[00:55:30] **Katie:** That, of course I should, we should want to help the person make the decision. That's going to be best for them going to be best for, you know, the two thirds of them that have children already. Yeah. Yeah. So I wanna, I hope that like eventually societally, or even one person at a time we can divide like divorce from the idea that abortion is a moral.

[00:55:55] **Katie:** And instead of think of it in a moral.

[00:55:58] **Serene Jones:** Yeah, I think that, that is [00:56:00] my hope. That is my hope. And I hope that it, then that it doesn't have to get terrible before it gets better. It's already terrible, but it could get really bad. Very, very fast. And that's

[00:56:15] **Katie:** yeah, I think it is going to be terrible. Yeah. Before it gets better, but we will see it'll be, you know, I'm very curious to see like what you

said earlier about like, if, if Roe falls like what it will suddenly mean for people who are in conservative evangelical communities and it, yeah.

[00:56:40] **Katie:** It, it, it will be an interesting,

[00:56:44] **Serene Jones:** it will be if it falls and then women have to live under the conditions of not having Roe V Wade, even those who, you know, voted. Against abortion. They have to live in the hell of the kind of healthcare system that they're [00:57:00] left with, which puts their own lives at risk. So

[00:57:06] **Katie:** especially in the states where, I mean, like in the states where we're, where row would like automatically go away, they have the worst healthcare outcomes and the worst pregnancy and birth outcomes. So

[00:57:22] **Serene Jones:** yes.

[00:57:24] **Katie:** And they, and they won't expand Medicaid, which is very ungenerous. Like to me.

[00:57:29] **Serene Jones:** Yes, no, no. I think in Mississippi yeah.

[00:57:34] **Katie:** Yeah. Well, thank you so much for this conversation. I've. Like, I don't know if I consciously realized it, but I've always wanted to talk to someone with your expertise about this. And I do think this, the people more people should know about how this is like a relatively recent stance.

[00:57:54] **Serene Jones:** Yes. And no one should say, will Jesus said you can't have an abortion.

[00:57:59] **Serene Jones:** Jesus never [00:58:00] said that. It's not there.

[00:58:03] **Katie:** Don't put words in the man's mouth. You probably said something about that. So Jesus

[00:58:09] **Serene Jones:** says feed the poor care for the hungry, you know, take care of the orphans and the widows, but didn't say anything about abortion, not seeing abortion on that list.

[00:58:22] **Katie:** Well, thank you so much, Shereen. This was a fabulous conversation.

[00:58:27] **Serene Jones:** Thank you so much. And take care and keep having these conversations. Oh, I will.

[00:58:36] **Serene Jones:** Okay. Bye. Bye bye. Thank

[00:58:39] **Katie:** you for listening to another episode of the fantastic podcast, I will be linking any relevant articles and additional information on things that serene mentioned in the show notes of this episode, which you can find on your podcast player, or if you are listening to this not through a podcast player, you can go to a fantastic podcast.com and on the [00:59:00] episode page, you will find those links.

[00:59:01] **Katie:** That's all for now. Thank you for listening and you'll hear from fantastic again

[00:59:06] **Serene Jones:** soon.