

Religion Belief and Abortion



CHRISTIANITY

Abortion is the deliberate medical intervention to end the life of an unborn child. Christians have always been opposed to abortion from the earliest times. A document called the Didache (literally meaning teaching) – The Doctrine of the Apostles was compiled in the very first century within the lifetime of people who lived with Jesus. The Didache says: *"You shall not kill the foetus by abortion, or destroy the infant already born."*

Christian attitudes to abortion are strongly shaped by the belief that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. In the very first chapter of the first book of the Bible we hear of this fundamental act of God: *"Then God said, 'and now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small.' So God created human beings, making them to be like Himself. He created them, male and female."* **Genesis 1: 26&27**

Christian belief that human beings are made in the image of God is strengthened by the Christian belief in Incarnation: namely that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

FURTHER WORK:

The Bible does not explicitly mention abortion, but take a look at these Bible references. Jeremiah 1:4-5; Psalm 139: 13-16; Job 10: 8-12; Luke 1: 39-45. Write down the references. Then write down why you think these references would lead Christians to oppose abortion.

WHEN DOES LIFE BEGIN?

Science now tells us clearly that life begins at conception when the mother's egg is fertilised by the father's sperm.

In addition though, Christians believe that all human beings have an immortal soul. When does the soul enter the human body? From the earliest times some Christian thinkers stated that the soul entered the human at the moment of conception (Tertullian in the first century, Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century). Others such as St Augustine ultimately admitted that they could not decide. Some Church Fathers were influenced by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle and placed "ensoulment" at 40 days after conception, dividing the "unformed" from the "formed" embryo. This view gained strength in the Middle Ages under the influence of the great Christian theologian, St Thomas Aquinas partly because science at the time could tell us so little about the development of the young embryo after conception. Eventually after the introduction of microscopy and the discovery that conception involved the fusing of egg and sperm in the 19th century the distinction between "formed" and "unformed" embryonic life and arguments that the soul only entered the developing human at some stage after conception was largely abandoned.

The key point however, is that from the earliest times the Fathers of the Church condemned abortion as 'child murder' – a term used by Sts Athenagoras, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and many others. Throughout history, the Christian church demanded protection for the foetus, whatever the differing views on when the soul entered the body. In fact in his first canonical letter, St Basil the Great swept away such arguments saying: "... any hair-splitting distinction as to whether the foetus was formed or unformed is inadmissible..." while St Tertullian explained: "One who will be a man is already one..."

FURTHER WORK:

For a fuller discussion on these issues visit:

<http://www.linacre.org/atheol.html>

for a recent document endorsed by Christian theologians from the Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox and Reformed churches.

CHURCH TEACHING

We have seen above that the Church has taught since the time of the Apostles that abortion is a grave sin. Let's take a look at the current teaching of the Christian churches.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH:

The teaching of the Catholic Church on abortion is unchanged through the centuries. Human life must be protected from conception. Destruction of human life is a grave sin and Catholics directly involved in abortion cut themselves off from the Church i.e. they are excommunicated. The Church's stance is clear:

*For God, the Lord of life, has conferred on men the surpassing ministry of safeguarding life in a manner which is worthy of man. Therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* 51, 7 December 1965*

*Any discrimination based on the various stages of life is no more justified than any other discrimination . . . In reality, respect for human life is called for from the time that the process of generation begins. From the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother, it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, 1974*

*I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* 62, 25 March 1995.*

FURTHER WORK:

Look up abortion in the index of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Catholic school libraries should have a copy) or type abortion into the search engine of the Vatican website www.vatican.va and look at one or two of the many articles there. Then produce a written piece which explains the Church's teaching.

CHURCH TEACHING

CHURCH OF ENGLAND:

The Church of England's position shares the general opposition of the Catholic church to abortion. In 1980 one of its governing committee's said *"In the light of our conviction that the foetus has the right to live and develop as a member of the human family, we see abortion, the termination of that life by the act of man, as a great moral evil."* However, the Church of England does not oppose abortion in certain narrowly defined circumstances e.g. where the mother's life is endangered. It also recognises that their church members may come to different decisions about abortion in the cases of, for example, rape and serious handicap to the child.

ORTHODOX:

Although the Orthodox church split from Rome a thousand years ago it holds the same total opposition to abortion as the Catholic Church.

OTHER CHURCHES:

Most evangelical denominations (e.g. Assemblies of God, Elim Pentecostalists) take a position of total opposition to abortion in line with Christian tradition. Some longer-established denominations such as Methodism allow for certain limited exceptions where abortion may be permitted as the lesser evil but the Methodist church is clear in its 1976 statement that abortion is still "always an evil".

SUMMARY: It is clear that all Christian Denominations regard abortion as wrong. Christians though are called to put their faith into action. They are commanded to love their neighbour and they believe too in the forgiveness of sins. It is not surprising therefore that Christians are heavily involved in organisations such as Right to Life, the ProLife Alliance, LIFE and CARE that educate people about the realities of abortion, provide alternatives to abortion and help women who have had abortions.

FURTHER WORK:

Scenario: A teenage girl is a friend of yours. She comes up to a small group of you in the playground and tells you she is pregnant and thinking about an abortion. You and the others in the group are against abortion, but also concerned to help your friend.

Working in small class groups take this scenario and write, prepare and perform a short 5 minute drama to the rest of class that might cover the playground discussion that follows.

The websites of the organisations mentioned above might be useful for background information about the facts about abortion and how your friend might get help.

www.righttolife.org.uk

www.prolife.org.uk

www.care.org.uk

www.lifeuk.org

OTHER WORLD FAITHS

JUDAISM: Personhood in Judaism begins at birth, but Jews recognise the unborn child as human life and Jews have duties in respect of unborn children. Jewish teaching on abortion is summed up well by the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks *“Abortion is forbidden in Jewish law. Indeed, with very few exceptions, Jewish authorities will not permit abortion even when we know that the foetus suffers a genetic condition such as Tay Sachs disease. There is no concept in Judaism of a life not worth living. Even a brief restricted life beset by handicap is a gift not to be refused. However, because the foetus is not a person, our duties to it may be overridden by our duty to an actual person, namely the mother. Abortion is therefore permitted to save her life, and in some cases to protect her health”*. **Lecture to Royal College of Physicians, 2001**

ISLAM: Just as there is no explicit mention of abortion in the Bible, there is likewise no specific mention of abortion in the Muslim Holy Book, the Qur’an. However, like the bible there are several references to the sanctity of human life e.g. "Whosoever has spared the life of a soul, it is as though he has spared the life of all people. Whosoever has killed a soul, it is as though he has murdered all of mankind." Surat 5:32. At Chapter 60, verse 12 Muslim women are defined in part by the fact that they “will not kill their children”. Muslims believe in the sanctity of human life.

Generally Islam forbids abortion. However, unlike some other faiths, Islam has no central authority. The debates that Christian theologians had in the past about “quickening” (i.e. when the mother could feel the unborn child’s movements) and the presence of the soul in the unborn influenced early Islamic theologians and some therefore permitted abortion in certain circumstances up to either the 40th or even 120th day of pregnancy. This still influences Islamic thinking today. Abortion is permitted in some circumstances in some Muslim countries, but it is completely outlawed at all stages in many more.

HINDUISM

Hinduism holds the belief that the human soul (*atman*) is divine and passes from one life to the next at conception. Thus there is no time when the human embryo is not en-souled and thus sacred. Abortion also goes against the Hindu teaching of *ahimsa* (non-violence). *Ahimsa* prevents Hindus from taking life in any form. Hindu scriptures and tradition have from the earliest of times condemned the practice of abortion, except when the life of the mother is in danger. Hinduism teaches that the fetus is a living, conscious person needing and deserving protection. Hindu scriptures refer to abortion as *garha-batta* (womb killing) and *bhroona hathya* (killing the undeveloped soul).

BUDDHISM

The first of the five Buddhist precepts is “I will not harm any living creature”. In addition there is the Buddhist belief about rebirth. Buddhists believe that at conception three things come together - the sperm, the egg, and the karmic force that is the effect of a previous life. Therefore it is no surprise that Buddhism forbids abortion. The Buddha’s rules for his monks were clear about this. Buddhism lacks a central authority and some current-day Buddhists do become involved in abortion. However, they still believe that abortion is wrong. This is reflected in the practice adopted by Buddhist women in Japan who have had an abortion. They honour or make an offering to the deity Jizo, the god of lost travellers and children. It is believed that Jizo will steward the unborn child until it is reborn in another incarnation.

FURTHER WORK:

Produce an extended piece of writing which compares and contrasts Christian beliefs about abortion with the beliefs of one other world religion.

