

MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

FERTILITY TREATMENT • EMBRYO RESEARCH
ABORTION • EUTHANASIA



Science Photo Library



Science Photo Library





GOD, THE GIVER OF LIFE

In the Nicene Creed, Christians each Sunday at church profess their belief in *“the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life”*.

This universal belief among Christians in the life-giving power of God is clearly grounded in Sacred Scriptures. In the book of Genesis, the creation account indicates God’s life-giving, firstly for plant and animal life, but then in a special way for human beings.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” **Genesis 1:26-28**

It is that human beings are made in the image of God that makes human life sacred. God Himself underlines this in his instruction against murder to Noah: *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.”* **Genesis 9:6**

That humanity reflects God’s image was made manifest in a dramatic and unique way at the Incarnation, when God became man as Jesus Christ. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* **John 3:16**

For Christians, the saving event of Christ’s incarnation as man and his subsequent death and resurrection reveals to humanity not only the boundless love of God, but also the incomparable value of every human person.

St John refers to eternal life as our ultimate destination, but this earthly life too is a key part of God’s plan for us. It is not to be interfered with by man. Pope John Paul II put it like this:

“Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase. Life in time, in fact, is the fundamental condition, the initial stage and an integral part of the entire unified process of human existence At the same time, it is precisely this supernatural calling which highlights the relative character of each individual’s earthly life. After all, life on earth is not an “ultimate” but a “penultimate” reality; even so, it remains a sacred reality entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters.” **Evangelium Vitae, 2**

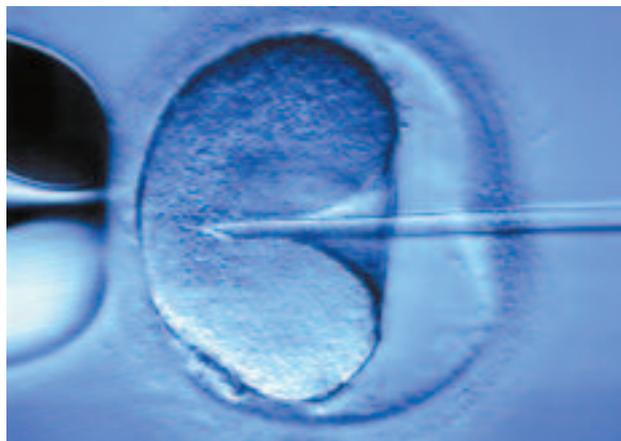
FERTILITY TREATMENT

Infertility is being unable to conceive a child by natural means. In the past, like today, there were couples who were unable to have children, while others had very large families. There was nothing you could do about these things. Whether you had children was considered to be in the hands of God.

In the 20th century, scientists started to develop methods to control fertility. A medical procedure to interfere with the reproductive system – sterilisation - could render a man or a woman permanently infertile. Alternatively contraception became widely available and widely used to prevent fertility temporarily. Ironically though, some forms of contraception (e.g. the intra-uterine device) along with increased sexually transmitted disease have led to a rise in permanent sterility.

Just as scientists have developed ways to prevent pregnancy, they have also developed ways to assist pregnancy. Some common techniques are:

- Fertility drugs can sometimes stimulate the ovaries of a woman to produce eggs and help her to conceive. These drugs sometimes lead to the overstimulation of the ovaries and the production of more than one egg leading to multiple births (twins, triplets etc) with increased risks to the mother and infants.
- Artificial insemination (AI) is a means of helping couples to have children if they are unable to conceive through sexual intercourse. Artificial insemination refers to a range of techniques in which the man's sperm is put into the woman's genital tract artificially. This can be the sperm of the woman's husband or partner (often known as AIH – artificial insemination by husband), or if there is a problem with the husband/partner's sperm then sperm from a donor can be used (often termed AID – artificial insemination by donor).
- *In vitro* fertilisation (IVF) – sometimes termed test tube babies, the first successful birth from this technique took place in 1978. Now around 1% of all births in the UK are IVF births. In this technique, fertilisation takes place *in vitro* (literally meaning in glass) outside the parents' bodies in a Petri dish. The technique still has a low success rate (22% of treatment cycles in 2003/4) and so often more than one egg is fertilised with two or three embryos being placed in the mother's womb to increase the chances of a successful birth. This, though also leads to the birth of many twins and some triplets with increased health risks for mother and offspring.



Science Photo Library

- Surrogacy – sometimes one woman will offer her womb to host the developing pregnancy for another woman or couple in exchange for a payment. This host mother may sometimes contribute the egg for fertilisation if the other woman is completely infertile.

RELIGIOUS TEACHING

CATHOLIC CHURCH – The church has sought to apply its constant moral principles to these emerging technologies. The church teaches that sex has two functions: to express love between two people, and to produce children. It must perform *both* of these functions – they cannot be separated. This is why the church is opposed to contraception. It also explains why the church is opposed to IVF, artificial insemination and other infertility treatments. These treatments separate the two functions of sex and make the new human being an instrument of science offending human dignity.

The church has moral objections too that IVF usually involves the destruction of a large number of young human embryos and is closely linked to embryo experimentation (see next panel).

continued over

CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND OTHER CHURCHES – Many other Christian churches do not hold to the view that the two functions of sex cannot be separated. Therefore they are not opposed, under certain circumstances to contraception or IVF and other infertility treatments. As this is a developing scientific field many denominations have not fully clarified their positions but IVF within marriage is generally accepted if there is no destruction of “spare” embryos. Most churches have concerns or objections to surrogacy and use of donors for eggs or sperm.

OTHER WORLD FAITHS – Islamic scholars have issued fatwas (religious edicts) in recent years that permit IVF and other techniques but only where the sperm and eggs come from a married infertile couple. IVF clinics are common in Muslim countries. Surrogacy and use of donor eggs or sperm are specifically ruled out as sinful by Sunni scholars but are being allowed in Shi’ite Iran. Jewish teaching allows IVF for married couples and artificial insemination by husband.

FURTHER READING:

http://www.catholicchurch.org.uk/ccb/catholic_church/publications

Find the reference to Cherishing Life and download this document from the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales that provides a good explanation of Catholic teaching.

<http://www.ethicsforschools.org/genetics/confert.htm>

A useful article from an evangelical Christian perspective. The whole website is a useful resource.

QUESTIONS:

(you may wish to use these in class debate, discussion or as starting points for essays or other written work)

- 1 Christians believe that children are a gift from God, a privilege, not something that is ours by right. Is infertility a medical problem to be overcome, or are children a gift we can demand?
- 2 “Babies should only be conceived naturally.” Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to religious arguments in your answer.
- 3 What do you think are some of the possible implications for children who know they were conceived by artificial methods?

EMBRYO RESEARCH

In the 1980’s, partly due to the low success rate of the new technology of in-vitro fertilisation, “spare embryos” were produced in-vitro and frozen. This allowed infertile women to have further attempts at transferring embryos into her uterus to establish an ongoing pregnancy without having to take more fertility drugs and undergo surgery.

However, as some women were successful in having a child through IVF on the first embryo transfer, and also because other women changed their minds about further treatment many of these frozen embryos were “in limbo”. Some scientists suggested that experimenting on these embryos, or even embryos especially created for the purpose could help to find cures for genetic diseases. Others were strongly opposed because they viewed experimentation on a young human life without any benefit to that young human life itself as objectively immoral.

Though now legal the following areas remain deeply controversial:



EMBRYO RESEARCH – is permitted on embryos up to 14 days after fertilisation for research into fertility, contraception, congenital diseases, prenatal diagnosis, and into general embryology research with a view to addressing serious diseases. The embryos concerned are destroyed, while others remain frozen in storage. There has been no independent review of the success of the embryo research that has taken place and certainly no dramatic scientific breakthroughs.

STEM CELL RESEARCH – Most adult cells in the body have a particular purpose which cannot be changed. Stem cells are different. They are still at an early stage of development, and retain the potential to turn into many different types of cell. Scientists believe it should be possible to harness this ability to turn stem cells into a super "repair kit" for the body, curing injuries and diseases that have previously defeated modern medicine.

There are two types of stem cells – those from embryos and so-called "adult" stem cells which can be found in any child or adult human being. Adult stem cells have an established history of success e.g. the bone marrow transplant, which is used to treat leukaemia and other types of cancer, as well as various blood disorders. Adult stem cells also do not suffer from the problem of rejection as they are taken from the patient's own body, and then re-introduced. In contrast, embryonic stem cell research is very recent. Stem cells were only grown outside the embryo for the first time in the UK in 2003. The process of removing the stem cells from the embryo leads to the death of the embryo and so raises moral issues. So far no tissue grown in the lab has been implanted into a patient. Embryonic stem cells will also be rejected by the patient in the same way as organ transplants. One way of overcoming the rejection issue, but which raises yet further ethical issues is so-called therapeutic cloning.

CLONING – A clone is a genetically identical copy of a cell, gene or organism. Cloning used to be science fiction, but tadpoles were cloned as early as 1952 and in 1997 Dolly the sheep was the first mammal cloned.

THERAPEUTIC CLONING is so termed to distinguish it from reproductive cloning (allowing a cloned embryo to develop and be born) which is illegal. However, the basic cloning technique is the same in the two: the nucleus containing the genetic material is removed from an unfertilised egg and replaced with the genetic material of an adult cell. The egg is then stimulated chemically or electrically to begin division as if it had been fertilised. While development then continues in reproductive cloning, in therapeutic cloning development is stopped when stem cells are harvested from the embryo after five days, killing the embryo in the process. While the process is clearly not therapeutic to the embryo, hence the ethical concerns, it does not pose the same tissue rejection problems as using stem cells extracted from a human embryo.



RELIGIOUS TEACHING

CATHOLIC CHURCH – The church points to the scientific fact that human life begins at fertilisation. This leads it to state that: *"Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being."* **Catechism of the Catholic Church 2274**

As embryo research as currently practiced is not to the benefit of the individual embryo and leads to the destruction of the young human embryonic lives, the church opposes embryo research. Similarly, because the extraction of stem cells from embryos leads to the death of the embryo, the Church is opposed to embryonic stem cell research. This moral objection does not apply to adult stem cell research in Catholic teaching.

The church opposes all cloning. It opposes reproductive cloning for several reasons: the separation of the functions of sexual intercourse (as with IVF); the subordination of the human clone to the purposes of other human beings; and the large loss of young human life due to cloning's low success rate. So-called therapeutic cloning is opposed because of the destruction of the cloned human embryos when stem cells are harvested. *"Therapeutic cloning would be far worse than full pregnancy cloning as it would set up a system in which human embryos were cloned only to be destroyed so that their cells could be 'harvested'."* **Cherishing Life 2004 - Statement from Catholic Bishops of England and Wales**

continued over

CHURCH OF ENGLAND – In 2003 the General Synod of the Church of England debated embryo research and resolved to affirm the sanctity of the human embryo and therefore the need to treat it with profound respect. However it also recognised that there are different but principled and sincerely held views among Christians on the morality of embryo research. Some leading Anglican church leaders use arguments relating to the concept of “ensoulment” (see further reading) to justify embryo research. The Church of England’s Board of Social Responsibility did not oppose embryonic stem cell research in a submission to the Government in 2001. It however stated “research using embryos must be deemed absolutely necessary and, ideally, the research should only take place after all other avenues have been fully explored”. The Church of England opposes reproductive cloning. It has not taken a position to date on so-called therapeutic cloning although church leaders have spoken out in opposition to it.

CHURCH OF SCOTLAND – The Church of Scotland revised its official position on embryo experiments in 2006. Previously, the Church had held that “the human embryo must be regarded as an actual person, and regarded as a person at all stages of development from the moment of conception. However, the more recent position states that while views on the moral status of the embryo diverge the majority view is that ‘the moral status of the human embryo is not established until some time into its biological development after conception. The Church of Scotland also approved of cloning in some circumstances. This move put this church at odds with the weight of religious opinion on Britain. Before the latest law change in 2001 that permitted so-called therapeutic cloning eleven prominent religious leaders from the Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical, Baptist, Orthodox, Jewish and Muslim faiths wrote to Peers in the House of Lords opposing the move.

ORTHODOX AND EVANGELICAL CHURCHES – The Orthodox churches are opposed to embryo experimentation, embryonic stem cell research and cloning, agreeing with the Catholic church on these issues. This view is shared by many evangelical Christians.

OTHER WORLD FAITHS:

Jews believe that though the human embryo is human life it is not yet a human “person” – personhood is acquired at birth. Therefore they believe that while embryos should be afforded some respect, some research is permissible. They support embryo research but only as long as the embryos have not been created specifically for the purpose of research, so-called “spare” embryos from IVF treatment. They would also support embryonic stem cell research, but only using “spare” embryos and only because they believe that adult stem cell research alone will not prove sufficient. Jews support moves to halt any human cloning.

Muslim teaching has some similarities to Jewish teaching, but while Jewish teaching views an early embryo as a human life but not a person, Islam does not view the early human embryo as a living human. So while the Qu’ran includes phrases such as: “*Whosoever has killed a soul, it is as though he has murdered all of mankind.*” **Surat 5:32**, it also contains passages that indicate a gradual progression of physical development: semen, blood, flesh, and then the soul. Islamic scholars though dispute and argue about the time after conception when “ensoulment” takes place. Thus there is no clear Islamic teaching on these subjects, though most Moslem opinion mirrors the Jewish position of supporting research including stem cell research on “spare” embryos, but only with parental consent. The Islamic Organisation for Medical Sciences has stated: “Ordinary human cloning, in which the nucleus of a living somatic cell from an individual is placed into the cytoplasm of an egg devoid of its nucleus, is not to be permitted.” This accords with the view of the vast majority of Muslims currently, although some of them hold that the issue should be re-examined if human cloning moves closer to becoming reality.

FURTHER READING:

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

A theological article from the Linacre Centre supported by Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox theologians about the moral status of the human embryo through Christian tradition. Helpful in understanding the historical thinking behind “ensoulment”.

http://www.catholicchurch.org.uk/ccb/catholic_church/legislation_and_public_policy/human_fertilisation_and_embryology_bill_2007 A useful web reference site produced by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales during the changes to embryology legislation in 2007/08.

<http://www.ethicsforschools.org/abortion/deadly3.htm>

An informative article from a Christian doctor.

QUESTIONS:

(you may wish to use these in class debate, discussion or as starting points for essays or other written work)

- 1 “Researching on human embryos to find a cure for serious genetic diseases is morally acceptable” Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to religious arguments in your answer.
- 2 What reasons would you give for the almost universal opposition to human reproductive cloning among religious believers and non-believers alike?
- 3 “A 5-day human embryo is not a human person”. Do you agree? Refer to the arguments used by more than one world faith in your answer.

ABORTION

Abortion is the deliberate medical intervention to end the life of an unborn child. Abortion is carried out by medical staff in hospitals and clinics. Abortion using powerful drugs, where the woman expels a small dead unborn child at home, is becoming increasingly common. Unborn children can be aborted up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. However, if the unborn child is disabled in any way, however minor, then its life can be ended right up to birth.

Abortion is very common in Britain. There are nearly 600 abortions carried out every day in Britain. The womb is the most dangerous place to live – 1 in 5 unborn babies are never born – their life ended in the womb by abortion.



RELIGIOUS TEACHING

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

continued over

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.

THE 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.

EVANGELICAL CHURCHES – Most evangelical denominations (e.g. Assemblies of God, Elim Pentecostals) 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”.

ORTHODOX CHURCH – The Orthodox church holds the same total opposition to abortion as the Catholic church.

OTHER WORLD FAITHS

JUDAISM:

We’ve already seen that personhood in Judaism begins at birth, but Jews recognise the unborn child as human life with duties towards them. 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 Qur’an. However, like the Bible there are several references to the value in which human life must be held 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”. Generally therefore Islam forbids abortion. However, 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 “ensoulment” of 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. 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”. Buddhists also believe in rebirth. Buddhists believe that at conception three things come together – the sperm, the egg, and the karmic force from a previous life. Therefore it is no surprise that Buddhism forbids abortion. The Buddha’s rules for his monks were clear about this. Some current-day Buddhists do become involved in abortion. However, they still believe that abortion is wrong. This is reflected in the practice of 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. They believe that Jizo will steward the unborn child until it is reborn in another incarnation.

FURTHER READING:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-effect> An excellent summary of the doctrine of double-effect. Catholic church teaching does not permit abortion as the “lesser of two evils” as some other traditions do. However, the doctrine of double effect would, for example, permit emergency treatment of a woman with an ectopic pregnancy to save her life even though the unborn child would die as a result.

<http://www.dayforlife.org> A website that includes examples of the practical help Catholic Christians are providing to women facing difficult pregnancies.

<http://righttolife.org.uk> A pro-life group, supported by many Christians, that works to change the law on abortion and other related issues.

QUESTIONS: (you may wish to use these in class debate, discussion or as starting points for essays or other written work)

1 “A woman should have the right to choose abortion.” Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to religious arguments in your answer.

2 Christians are called to live out their faith. How might a strong belief that abortion is wrong be acted out in the society in which we live?

EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia comes from two Greek words meaning “good death”. In contemporary debate it refers to the deliberate killing of a person supposedly for the benefit of that person. It is sometimes termed “mercy killing”. In most cases euthanasia is carried out because the person who dies asks for it (voluntary euthanasia), but there are cases of euthanasia where a person can't make such a request (involuntary euthanasia). A person who undergoes euthanasia is usually terminally ill, but not always so.



RELIGIOUS TEACHING

CATHOLIC CHURCH – The Catholic church is firmly opposed to euthanasia. Pope John Paul II in 1994 said: “I confirm that euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person” **Evangelium Vitae 65.**

continued over

The church understands euthanasia to be action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering. What is crucial is the intention of the action or omission. Therefore the church does not accept, applying the doctrine of double effect (see Further reading, Abortion section), that the death of a patient may sometimes be hastened by the attempts of medical staff to control pain. The doctor may foresee that death is likely from the high dosage of pain-relieving drugs administered to a patient, however so long as the intention of the doctor concerned is to control pain and not to hasten death then euthanasia has not taken place. The doctrine of double effect applies.

The church also distinguishes euthanasia from the decision to forego medical procedures which are either extraordinary or disproportionate to any expected results, or which impose an excessive burden on the patient and family. In such circumstances, when death is close and inevitable, then treatment can, in conscience be refused. To forego extraordinary or disproportionate means expresses acceptance of the human condition in the face of death.

However, the church also makes clear that there is a moral obligation to care for oneself, and to allow oneself to be carried for. Therefore, basic human needs for e.g. food, water and pain relief must continue. The church is opposed to the increasingly common practice in Britain of withdrawing artificially administered food and water from patients in a so-called persistent vegetative state.

CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND ORTHODOX CHURCHES – Both the Orthodox and Anglican churches hold the same total opposition to euthanasia as the Catholic church. In 2004, as a response to attempts in the House of Lords to weaken current British law in this area, the Catholic and Anglican bishops jointly opposed the bill saying: "We believe very strongly that respect for human life at all its stages is the foundation of a civilised society, and that the long term consequences of any change in the law to allow euthanasia in limited circumstances would be immensely grave. This is a view shared not just within our Churches, but very widely among those of all faiths and none who share a moral outlook founded on respect for human life and the protection of vulnerable people."

EVANGELICAL CHURCHES – Euthanasia is also opposed by most evangelical Christians and the Methodist Church.

OTHER WORLD FAITHS

Euthanasia is opposed by all the major world faiths. This opposition was underlined by the open letter against euthanasia signed by British religious leaders of the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh faiths in 2005 when Parliament was considering proposals to weaken the law against euthanasia.

JEWISH:

Jewish law is clear and definite. Under no circumstances may a doctor directly kill, or indirectly provide the means for suicide. Any form of active euthanasia is strictly prohibited and condemned as plain murder. The fact that the patient is in unremitting pain and pleads for assistance in ending his life does not change the law. Jewish law maintains that one has no absolute ownership of one's body. We are given a body for a fixed time. We are obliged to guard it for safe-keeping and to make rational decisions about its care. We have no rights to tamper with life except for the purpose of preventing its destruction or loss.

ISLAM:

"Do not kill (or destroy) yourselves, for verily Allah has been to you most Merciful" (Qur'an 4:29). Euthanasia has no place in Islam. For Muslims, death is a time allotted by God and God is the owner of Life. Euthanasia and Suicide are perceived by Muslims as morally equivalent. The hardships and sufferings of this life are a test of a person's faith. A Muslim needs therefore to have an optimistic approach to life and not run away from the difficulties of life. No one has the right to decide when they will die: *"Nor can a soul die except by Allah's leave, that is a decree with a fixed term"* (Qur'an 3:145). In Islamic communities the lives of the old are just as sacred as the young.

HINDUISM:

Hinduism also views the practice of euthanasia negatively. To kill is considered to be negative karma and to go against the principle of ahimsa (non-violence). Again, each moment of a being's life is an opportunity to improve karma and move closer to liberation. Furthermore, Hinduism has the concept that while one is living at the grihastha or householder stage of life, it is one's religious duty (dharma) to care for one's elders: euthanasia therefore may deprive the Hindu of the opportunity to fulfil their religious duty.

BUDDHISM:

We've already learned that the first of the five Buddhist precepts is "I will not harm any living creature". In addition there is the Buddhist belief about rebirth. Death therefore does not terminate life, or more precisely the life process. Hence it cannot terminate pain and unhappiness. Therefore a sufferer's desire to terminate pain in this life through suicide or requesting euthanasia has to be unequivocally opposed to the religion's central tenets.

FURTHER READING:

<http://www.ethicsforschools.org/euthanasia/euth2.htm>

Explains that the distinction between passive and active euthanasia disappears under scrutiny. It is the intention of the person involved that is crucial from the Christian perspective.

http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/ccb/catholic_church/catholic_bishops_conference_of_england_and_wales/departments/christian_responsibility_and_citizenship/topics/euthanasia

Further information on the Catholic position on euthanasia from the Catholic bishops of England and Wales.

http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/news_item.2004-10-19.9713099720

The text of the submission on euthanasia to Parliamentarians in 2004 from the British Anglican and Catholic church leaders which provides a good summary of the Christian arguments against euthanasia.

QUESTIONS:

(you may wish to use these in class debate, discussion or as starting points for essays or other written work)

1 "Only God has the right to take away life." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to religious arguments in your answer.

2 Describe briefly the work of the hospice movement. Why do you think that Christians take a prominent role in the hospice movement?



THE LEGAL POSITION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM ON EMBRYO RESEARCH, CLONING, ABORTION AND EUTHANASIA



EMBRYO RESEARCH AND CLONING

The Human Embryology and Fertilisation Act 1990 legalised research on human embryos (both spare and especially created) up to 14 days after fertilisation. No research is permitted beyond 14 days. The range of research purposes was extended in 2001 and research can take place related to infertility; congenital diseases; miscarriage; contraception; detection of abnormalities; and general embryological research. After 14 days the embryos must be destroyed. All research is licensed by a government quango, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. All human cloning was originally prohibited by the 1990 Act, but this was amended in 2001 to distinguish reproductive and so-called therapeutic cloning. Reproductive cloning remains a criminal offence. So-called therapeutic cloning and embryonic stem cell research are now permitted under the licensing scheme described above. The law relates to the whole of the UK.

ABORTION

Before 1967, abortion was generally outlawed by legislation from the 1860's and 1920's. However, decisions made by judges (case law) had permitted abortion to take place without prosecutions in a very limited number of circumstances.

In 1967 the Abortion Act was passed in England, Wales and Scotland. The Abortion Act does not cover Northern Ireland, where abortion remains illegal. The Abortion Act decriminalises abortion (i.e. ensures that a doctor performing an abortion is not prosecuted) provided that a number of conditions are fulfilled.

- The abortion must be carried out on one or more of the grounds stipulated in the Act namely: risks to the physical or mental health of the mother; risks to the physical or mental health of the existing children; risk that the child would be born with physical or mental abnormalities so as to be seriously handicapped; and risk to the life of the mother.
- The consent to abortion had to be provided by two doctors.
- The pregnancy must not have progressed beyond 28 weeks.

Doctors who have a conscientious objection to abortion are protected by the Act, although in practice they are subject to pressures and their careers may suffer.

Many parliamentarians when voting for the Act envisaged the grounds for abortion above being narrowly applied. In practice, the grounds have been interpreted widely and most observers would agree that the law has led to abortion on demand, even though the Abortion Act does not create a "right" for a woman to have an abortion.

The Abortion Act was amended in 1990 by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. This reduced the time limit from 28 to 24 weeks for most of the grounds for abortion except for the ground relating to handicap. For this ground, abortion is now available up to birth.

EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia remains a criminal offence in the UK. However, the law in this area has been weakened in recent years. In 1993 judges in the Tony Bland case permitted doctors to escape prosecution after they have withdrawn food and fluid from incapacitated patients in a so-called persistent vegetative state. As this act is an intentional one to bring about the death of a patient who is not dying, most people would regard it as euthanasia. Now, because of the Bland ruling, doctors will, on occasion, apply to the courts for permission to withdraw food and fluid.

The Mental Capacity Act 2005 which is in force from October 2007 gives legal force to advance decisions and lasting powers of attorney. These may be used to extend the practice of withdrawal of food and fluid from any incapacitated person without the involvement of a court and without fear of prosecution. The Act also aims to uphold the right of patient autonomy i.e. to refuse any treatment and to respect the conscience of medical staff.

Only as the Act becomes established will the consequences of this legislation become clear.

