

Religion, contraception and abortion

December 2004

This factsheet aims to reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the leading religious groups in the United Kingdom to contraception and abortion.

The 2001 Census¹ showed that just over three-quarters of the UK population reported following a religion, and, although there is a wide range of religious groups in the UK, the seven most commonly followed faiths are represented in this factsheet.

Religion and culture

Although the two are inextricably linked, the distinction between culture and religion needs to be recognised. Religion is a powerful influence on sexual attitudes and behaviour in many individuals and it often forms a society's orientation towards human sexuality. When a particular religion is practised by many people in a society, it helps create culture, which then influences even those that don't accept the religion².

Personal interpretations of any faith may vary from the liberal to strictly traditional, depending on the individual. Influences such as ethnicity, age, sex and social class as well as culture can all have an effect on how someone views a religious faith. Religious doctrines can be viewed as a means to a spiritual goal, rather than merely a restriction on what is and is not acceptable³.

Throughout history religion has provided society with a great deal of information about sexuality. Many of these societies subsequently used this information to create laws regulating sex. However, it is important that these laws are seen in their historical context. Whilst a basic understanding of religious and cultural beliefs is useful, generalisations should be avoided.

Most of the following sections have been either written by or based on advice from the relevant religious groups. Where advice could not be obtained other sources have been used.

Church of England

Contraception

Contraception is acceptable to most in the Church of England, as long as mutually acceptable to both partners. It is generally agreed that parents have a responsibility to decide the number and spacing of their children, decisions based on the needs of existing children, prospects for maternal and child health and the particular social context.

However, Anglican tradition allows for a wide range of views, all of which are held sincerely and reached after much thought and prayer.

Source: General Synod of the Church of England, Board for Social Responsibility. "What is the Church's View"?

Abortion

The Church of England combines strong opposition to abortion with the recognition that there can be - strictly limited - conditions under which it may be morally preferable to any available alternative.

Source: General Synod Resolution.

Text approved by The Church of England Archbishops' Council.

Catholicism

Contraception

Responsible parenthood will often involve planning when to have children, God willing, but the Catholic Church believes that this should not be by artificial means since the Church believes such actions undermine the full meaning of human sexuality. The last twenty years have seen great improvements in Natural Family Planning, which is now regarded as being highly effective for those who are instructed by trained teachers and who are strongly motivated. The values of

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this holistic and human approach to family planning deserve to be considered seriously.

Source: Cherishing Life # 125-126.

<http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/cherishinglife/contents.htm>

Abortion

The Catholic Church regards abortion as the termination of a human life. The law of the Church establishes that a person who actually procures an abortion, fully aware of what they are doing, incurs the penalty of excommunication that can only be rescinded through the Sacrament of reconciliation. Having acknowledged the unborn child, the Church recognises the difficult circumstances that expectant mothers sometimes find themselves in and also the responsibilities of others. The Church wishes to protect the lives of unborn children and also to support expectant mothers so they do not feel forced to make such a harmful choice. The Church welcomes women who feel remorse over an abortion and who come seeking forgiveness, reconciliation and absolution.

Source: Cherishing Life # 173-176.

<http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/cherishinglife/contents.htm>

Cherishing Life is a teaching document recently published by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales

Text approved by Department of Christian Responsibility and Citizenship, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales.

Islam

Contraception

Whilst pre-marital sex is prohibited, a sexual relationship is seen as part of married life, both for the purposes of having children and to ensure that the sexual needs of the couple are satisfied within a legitimate relationship. Contraception has been judged permissible in certain circumstances:

- to space child-bearing, thus promoting the health of all children in the family. For example, to protect the health of an existing child who may not yet be weaned

- where there is fear for the physical and mental well-being of the mother
- for personal reasons dictated by conscience.

Coitus interruptus, the withdrawal method, was practiced by early Muslims with the tacit approval of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Some Muslim jurists have inferred from this that other non-permanent methods such as condoms, cap, IUD and oral contraceptives are also permissible.

Vasectomy is strictly forbidden. Although female sterilisation may be permissible, this is only when there is a medical opinion that the woman's life would be endangered or her mental health seriously affected by a pregnancy, which could not be prevented by other legitimate means.

Abortion

Abortion is never permitted as a means of birth control. Allah tells us in the Qur'an:

'Kill not your children for fear of want. We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily the killing of them is a great sin'.

Source: Qur'an 17:31 YA

Text approved by the IQRA Trust

Sikhism

Contraception

Sikhs believe in monogamy and great importance is attached to high moral character, modesty and sexual morality. One of the five Ks (Religious Symbol) of Sikhs is Kachhahra, which is a special pair of shorts worn as an undergarment by all initiated Sikhs, both men and women. This highlights the importance attached to sexual morality in Sikhism. Traditionally in Sikhism, like many other religions, the family size used to be large. However, attitudes today are beginning to change. Birth control through the use of contraception is an acceptable practice within Sikhism and family size is usually small. As there is no actual religious prohibition, acceptance of family planning has grown in line with social and cultural changes.

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Abortion

Abortion is accepted only in extreme circumstances such as rape or to save the mother's life.

Text approved by the Sikh Education Council.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a way of life as well as a religion. In Hinduism, four possible approaches to life are acceptable:

- Karma - the pursuit of pleasure
- Artha - the pursuit of power and material wealth
- Dharma - the pursuit of the moral life
- Moksha - the pursuit of liberation through the negation of the self.

The Hindu religion has evolved over thousands of years and is extremely diverse with a varied mythology and a complex approach to practice. However, many positive approaches to sexuality can be found in Hinduism.

Contraception

All methods of contraception are permitted.

Arguments for family planning can be found in many moral teachings and epic stories such as the Mahabharat which 'offers great praise for the Pandavas, who served as one of the Hindu prototypes of the ideal family. The Pandavas have small families and are exemplary in meeting the exacting demands of *dharma*'⁴.

Many Hindus believe that it is their duty to produce a son, since only sons can perform the funeral rites that enable a man's soul to go to heaven. Sons are therefore needed to say prayers to ensure survival in the next world. A son is known as '*putra*' – he who saves from hell. Contraception is therefore not generally practiced until the birth of a son or sons.

Abortion

Abortion tends to be disapproved of as Hindus believe that both physical and spiritual life enter the human embryo at the moment of

conception. To Hindus all life is sacred. However, in keeping with the diversity within the Hindu faith there are varying views on the subject of abortion and there is evidence that abortion is an accepted part of modern life for many Hindus. India is a country where over 80 per cent of the population are Hindus⁵ and Hindu religious bodies hold strong views on most moral issues. Despite this, abortion was legalised in India in 1971 in cases of rape, incest and for the mental health of the woman if she would be adversely affected by the birth of an unwanted child.

Judaism

Family and community are at the core of Jewish religious practice. The basic source of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the Old Testament of the Bible, which gives a fundamentally positive view of sexuality.

Contraception

The sources in Jewish law state categorically that a man may not use any form of contraception. However, as any mention of females and contraception was omitted from the sources, most if not all use this omission to interpret that females may use contraception. For those that believe no physical impediment may be used, even for females, oral contraception may constitute an exception as the pill does not interfere in any way with the natural act of intercourse and the male seed is not directly destroyed.

Contraception can be used by a woman whose physical or psychological health is at risk by becoming pregnant.

Abortion

As a rule abortion is prohibited unless the life of the mother is at risk or if continuing the pregnancy causes a severe threat to her health. Although termination is not ideal there are exceptional circumstances, such as rape, where abortion is not forbidden. In these situations the rabbi would provide guidance as to the best course of action.

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Buddhism

Buddhists are the arbiters of their own destiny. Cultural and other influences apart, they are free to act according to their own insights and understanding. They are, however, taught to act responsibly and to take complete responsibility for the effects of these actions. In acting thus they would be guided by certain personal undertakings. Foremost amongst these would be the undertaking to avoid intentional harm to any living (breathing) thing, cultivating as integral to this, genuine attitudes of loving kindness (metta) and compassion (karuna) with regard to them.

Source: *The Buddhist Society*

Contraception

Most Buddhists believe that conception occurs when the egg is fertilised so contraception that prevents fertilisation is not ordinarily a problem. Emergency contraception is likely to be unacceptable. However, as Buddhism is open to personal interpretation, attitudes to this and other questions of birth control will vary.

Abortion

Most Buddhists believe in re-incarnation and this has a direct bearing on their views on abortion. Buddhists believe that consciousness enters the womb and human life begins at the moment of conception. This suggests that the fetus has rights equal to that of an adult, therefore terminating a pregnancy could be seen as killing a sentient being. Although it is a point of ethical debate, many Buddhists do not believe all beings are equal and if continuing the pregnancy posed a severe health risk to the woman, the fetus would not be seen as equal to the woman.

References

- 1 Religion in Britain <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>.
- 2 Hyde, Janet Shibley. *Understanding human sexuality*. McGraw-Hill, 5th ed, 1994.

- 3 Blake, Simon and Katrak, Zarine. *Faith, values and sex & relationships education*. National Children's Bureau, 2002.
- 4 Maguire, Daniel C. *Sacred Choices. The right to contraception and abortion in ten world religions*. Augsburg Fortress, 2001, p53.
- 5 Census of India 1991, Table C-9, Part VB(ii) – Religion, <http://www.censusindia.net>.

Further reading

Hallgarten, Lisa. *Abortion rights, responsibilities and reason*. Education for Choice, 2004.

Halstead, J Mark and Reiss, Michael J. *Values in sex education: from principles to practice*. Routledge Farmer, 2003.

Health Education Authority, *Sex education, values and morality*. HEA, 1994.

Useful websites

BBC religion homepage
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/>

Catholics for a Free Choice
<http://www.catholicsforchoice.org>

Education for Choice <http://www.efc.org.uk>

National Children's Bureau <http://www.ncb.org.uk>

Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
<http://www.rcrc.org/>

sexual health direct is supported by the Department of Health.