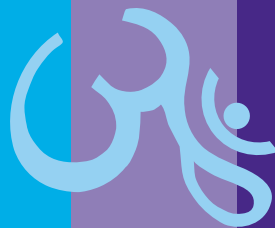
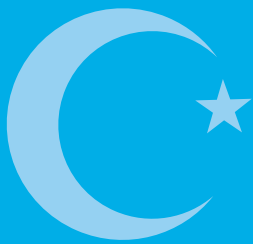
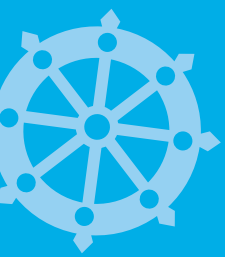


# Abortion & Religion

Over a third of all pregnancies, across the world, are unplanned.<sup>1</sup> The discovery of an unplanned pregnancy affects all women differently. Each woman's circumstances are unique and there are sometimes reasons why she may not feel able to continue with a pregnancy.

Although some religions oppose abortion under all circumstances, many religions recognise the different factors that influence a woman's decision on how to proceed with a pregnancy and teach that there are *some* instances in which abortion is acceptable. Most religions agree that abortion is a last resort; they teach that the decision to have an abortion is a serious one and must not be taken lightly.

This leaflet looks at some of the key moral questions that influence religious thought on abortion as well as looking at the teachings of some of the major world religions.



# What are the Key Questions for People of Different Faiths?

## ● When does life begin?

Not all religions define a particular moment when life begins but some, like Buddhism, Sikhism and Catholicism, teach that life begins at fertilisation – the moment that sperm meets egg. The Roman Catholic Church says that the fertilised egg is a sacred life, with as many rights as a baby, child or adult, and forbids abortion. Amongst Buddhists and Sikhs there is a variety of opinions on the morality of abortion.

Medical science tells us that a proportion of fertilised eggs do not become implanted in the woman's womb and that a large proportion of those that do (up to 25%) are lost naturally to miscarriage. This loss of 'life' is often not acknowledged in any formalised religious ritual – such as a funeral – and in many cases the woman might not even know that she was pregnant or that she has miscarried.

## ● Who has the greater right to life: the fetus or the woman?

The Roman Catholic Church says that abortion – 'the deliberate ending of a pregnancy' – is never acceptable, even to save the life of the woman. However, life-saving treatment can be carried out on a woman even if it will result in the death of the fetus. So, in this particular situation, the woman does have a greater right to life than the fetus.<sup>2</sup>

Most religions would choose to save the life of the woman even at the cost of the fetus. Even religions that are firmly opposed to abortion like the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, Hinduism and Orthodox Judaism say that abortion is acceptable to save a woman's life.

Some religions go further than this and teach that the woman has the right to decide on the fate of the fetus even if continuing with the pregnancy does not directly threaten her life. It is argued by some Christians that God has given human beings free will and that we must respect the integrity of woman's conscience. To remove her choice is to deny that integrity and, in effect, her humanity.

## ● Is abortion murder?

Most religions teach about the sanctity or sacredness of human life, but do not categorise abortion as murder.

Judaism, for example, only recognises the rights of a baby after the majority of the baby has left the woman's body, so although it teaches that abortion is morally wrong, it is not considered equivalent to murder.

Despite the general prohibition on killing – for example Judaism and Christianity teach 'Thou Shalt Not Kill', (*Exodus and Deuteronomy*) whilst Muslims believe '...whosoever kills a human being ... it shall be as if he had killed all mankind.' (*Quran 5:32*) – most religions recognise that not all killing is murder. Killing in battle, in self-defence, as legal punishment or retribution is sanctioned by many religions.

## ● Does the fetus have a soul?

Islam teaches that ensoulment (the moment that the soul enters the body of the fetus) takes place at 120 days and abortions after this time are considered to be more of a sin than early abortions.

The Roman Catholic Church used to teach that ensoulment takes place at 'quickening' when the woman starts to feel movement in her stomach (about 16 weeks). However in 1869 the church changed its teaching and it now teaches that the soul is present from the moment of fertilisation.

Hindus believe that the fetus has a soul, although opinion is divided over what happens to the soul of an aborted fetus. Some believe that the soul, like all souls of the dead, will be reincarnated in another body.

Quakers believe that there is 'that of God in everyone' but do not give guidance on whether this applies to the fetus.

## ● When does a fetus become a person?

This question is important because we do not give human rights (such as the right to life) to all living things (plants, animals etc) but only to people.

The earliest embryo contains the entire DNA code (genome) of the person that could develop from it, and some argue that its potential to become a person is enough to give it the rights of a fully developed person.

Others argue that a person is more than just the sum of its biological parts, and believe that a living person has characteristics that a fetus doesn't. These may include the ability to think and reason or the capacity to build relationships and to communicate.

Some believe that it is the ability of the fetus to exist independently of the woman that defines it as a person. They consider the fetus to have the right to life at the point where it is 'viable', meaning it can survive outside of the woman's womb. (British law recognises viability as an important indicator of personhood and gives greater rights to the fetus after this point in its development).

Most religions agree that gestation (the fetus growing in the womb) is a process of becoming a person and consequently teach that later abortions are morally worse than early abortions.

## ● Where do world religions stand on abortion?

Some religions, notably the monotheistic faiths, rely on one or two key texts and have clear doctrine on moral issues. Others, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, consist of collections of writings which are more open to interpretation. Some religions like Islam have maintained a relatively consistent teaching on abortion while others, like Roman Catholicism, have changed their ideas on abortion over time. The chart opposite aims to give a broad overview of the teaching of different religions on abortion.<sup>3</sup>

<b>Prohibited</b>	The <b>Roman Catholic Church</b> teaches that abortion is always wrong. A Catholic who had an abortion could, in theory, be 'excommunicated' from the church.	The <b>Jehovah's Witnesses</b> believe that abortion is always wrong.	The <b>Evangelical Christian</b> movement includes many who are totally opposed to all abortion.
<b>Very restricted</b>	The <b>Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches</b> teach that abortion can only be justified to save a woman's life.	<b>Orthodox Judaism</b> believes that abortion can only be justified to save the woman's life or to protect her from the risk of serious and permanent injury.	<b>Hinduism</b> is opposed to abortion, but some Hindu texts approve of abortion to save a woman's life.
<b>Limited</b>	The <b>Church of England</b> considers that abortion is sometimes a 'necessary evil'. Later abortions are worse than early abortions.	<b>Islam</b> teaches that abortion is a sin which increases as the pregnancy progresses, but does allow for its use to save the life or protect the health of the woman and in other limited circumstances.	<b>Liberal/Reform Judaism</b> leaves the decision to the woman and her partner, but is clear that abortion should not be used for 'trivial reasons'.
<b>No written law</b>	<b>Buddhism</b> Some say that abortions break the first rule of Buddhism, which is to 'do no harm'. Others believe in compassion for the individual woman in this situation.	<b>Sikhism</b> Decisions on contraception are left entirely up to the married couple to decide and some also believe that abortion too is possible if both partners agree. Others say that it is forbidden.	<b>Quakers</b> There is no official teaching on abortion. However, there is a great emphasis on personal conscience and the individual's capacity to make good decisions.
<b>Individual decision</b>	<b>Humanists</b> believe that the quality rather than quantity of life is important and that there is nothing wrong in principle with abortion. Rational thought should direct our actions, so women should have the opportunity to weigh up the pros and cons of abortion and make their own decisions.	The <b>Methodist Church</b> spoke out to highlight the dangers of illegal abortions before the law was changed in 1967. It teaches that you should have reverence for life and also have compassion for women who are not able to continue with a pregnancy.	

## Religion, The Law and Practice

There is not always a connection between a country's main religion and its abortion laws.

- Most Latin American countries prohibit or severely restrict abortion which is in keeping with Roman Catholic teaching.
- India, which has a majority Hindu population, has very liberal abortion laws that do not reflect mainstream Hindu teaching on abortion.
- Egypt and Iran completely prohibit abortion despite the exception that Islam makes to preserve women's life or health.

The official teaching of a religion is not always reflected in the way its members actually live their lives. Many people feel that they must make decisions based on their own conscience and circumstances, even when they do not fit in with the official

teachings of their religion or their own faith. Abortion is a good example of this as it takes place in every culture and every country in the world often in opposition to the community's culture, religion or law. Statistics show that people of all religions have abortions and that the number of abortions that take place do not relate to the law or religion of the country.

Four million abortions a year take place in Latin America and 6,000 Irish women travel to Britain each year for abortions because it is prohibited in those countries by law and religion. 26% of the world's population live in countries where abortion is prohibited, but many of those countries have a high abortion rate. An estimated 70,000 women die each year through illegal abortions, demonstrating that prohibiting abortion does not prevent it from happening, but makes it unsafe by removing access to doctors and sanitary medical facilities.<sup>4</sup>

# Glossary of Terms

<b>Doctrine</b>	Strict teaching or rules.
<b>Excommunicate</b>	To exclude a person from membership or participation in the church for breaking a religious code or law.
<b>Fertilisation</b>	When the sperm enters the egg.
<b>Free Will</b>	The idea that human beings are free to choose their actions – good or bad – and are not forced to act by fate or pre-programmed to behave a certain way.
<b>Gestation</b>	The process of the development of the fetus which takes place throughout a woman's pregnancy from implantation of the fertilised egg in the womb to birth.
<b>Humanity</b>	Distinguishes people from animals. It is normally used in a positive sense to mean human beings' ability to be thoughtful, rational and to care about the feelings of others.
<b>Integrity</b>	Honesty. Being true to your beliefs.
<b>Monotheistic Religions</b>	Religions that teach there is a single God, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Religions that believe in more than one God (like Hinduism) are polytheistic.
<b>Personhood</b>	Being more than just a body, but having thoughts and feelings.
<b>Prohibited</b>	Not allowed – banned.
<b>Quickening</b>	An old-fashioned word for the time when the woman can feel the fetus begin to move within her womb. This normally takes place at around 16 weeks.
<b>Reincarnation</b>	The belief that when a person dies, their soul or spirit is born again in another body or another form.
<b>Retribution</b>	A severe punishment or revenge. An example of this would be the Old Testament's 'an eye for an eye' in which the punishment directly reflects the crime.
<b>Sanctity</b>	The sanctity of human life refers to the idea that human life is sacred or holy – that it is owed special protection and respect.
<b>Viability</b>	The point at which a fetus might be able, with medical support, to exist outside of the woman's womb.

## Footnotes

- 1 According to the Safe Motherhood Initiative, 75 million of the 200 million pregnancies that take place around the world each year are unplanned. See [www.safemotherhood.org](http://www.safemotherhood.org) for more information.
- 2 For example, a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy (in which the fertilised egg is implanted in the fallopian tube instead of the womb) can be ended, by removing the whole fallopian tube, but not the fertilised egg on its own because according to Catholic law it must be the 'damaged' organ not the fetus that is being intentionally removed. (*Abortion*, Catholic Truth Society [www.cts-online.org.uk](http://www.cts-online.org.uk))
- 3 For more detailed information and quotes from different religions and visit our website at [www.efc.org.uk](http://www.efc.org.uk).
- 4 World Health Organisation.

# Useful Links

## Catholicism

[www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

## Hinduism Today

[www.hinduismtoday.co.za](http://www.hinduismtoday.co.za)

## Anglican Church

[www.cofe.anglican.org](http://www.cofe.anglican.org)

## Judaism

[www.scjfaq.org](http://www.scjfaq.org)

## Islam

[www.islam.org](http://www.islam.org)

## Sikhism

[www.sikhs.org.uk](http://www.sikhs.org.uk)

Most of the political groups that oppose abortion do have a religious basis for their views, but there are also many religious people who support a woman's right to choose abortion and actively campaign to challenge negative attitudes towards abortion and women who have abortions. For more information on their arguments visit the websites below:

## Catholics for Choice

[www.cath4choice.org](http://www.cath4choice.org)

## Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

[www.rcrc.org](http://www.rcrc.org)

These organisations provide general information on abortion:

## Education for Choice

[www.efc.org.uk](http://www.efc.org.uk)

## British Pregnancy Advisory Service

[www.bpas.org](http://www.bpas.org)

## Marie Stopes

[www.mariestopes.org.uk](http://www.mariestopes.org.uk)

## Brook

[www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

For information on abortion worldwide:

## The Alan Guttmacher Institute

[www.agi-usa.org](http://www.agi-usa.org).

## Centre for Reproductive Law and Policy

[www.crlp.org](http://www.crlp.org).

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