

# Unit 7: MEDICAL ETHICS

**Checklist - tick these off if and when we cover them:**

## OVERALL

*This Topic is concerned with religious responses to ethical questions raised by medical issues.  
Attitudes towards abortion and fertility treatment  
Attitudes towards euthanasia and suicide  
Issues of the use of animals in medical research*

## SPECIFICS

*Different Christian attitudes towards abortion;  
Christian responses to issues raised by fertility treatment;  
Christian attitudes towards euthanasia and suicide;  
Christian beliefs about the use of animals in medical research.*



JUST TICK THEM  
OFF IF YOU THINK  
YOU KNOW THEM

*These notes are based on the hard work that Mr Antonio D'Onofrio put in over his time at Sion School. Many thanks to Mr Starkey who typed up these notes and donated his efforts to the common good of our GCSE students. These notes are not being endorsed in any way - please use them if you want to. The main help is through the booklet which costs £10 and can be found on the GCSE page. (JR 21/9/7)*



## UNIT SEVEN: CHRISTIANITY AND MEDICAL ETHICS

### INTRODUCTION

- ★ *Medical Ethics deal with questions of right and wrong actions ie what it is justifiable and unjustifiable to do in terms of human health care. Christianity has teachings about these questions, which often concern matters of life and death, such as:*
  - *Should people be kept alive if severely disabled or in a great pain with an incurable disease – or should drugs be administered to kill them? (Euthanasia/Assisted Suicide)*
  - *Should unwanted or extremely handicapped fetuses be allowed to be born or destroyed? (Abortion)*
  - *Does everyone have a right to have a child – even if this requires complex and costly medical help? (Fertility Treatment)*
  - *Is it right to manipulate the genetic characteristics of children before they are born, or even conceived? (Genetic Engineering)*
  - *Can it ever be justified for a person to take their own life? (Suicide)*

*Christian teaching has to attempt to address all of these questions, none of which is simple or easy, because Christianity is founded on a central belief in the sanctity of human life as a gift of God.*

### DEFINITION OF TYPES OF EUTHANASIA

- ★ *This word comes from 2 Greek words “eu” (good) and “thanatos” (death).*
- ★ *Euthanasia is an action or actions aimed at bringing death more quickly than might have occurred naturally. It is most often carried out by administering lethal drugs, and in these circumstances is termed Active Euthanasia.*
- ★ *At Active Euthanasia is illegal under UK law, though not for instance in Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and certain US states.*
- ★ *Voluntary Euthanasia is the administering of lethal drugs to a patient by another person with the patient’s consent. It does not involve a patient administering fatal drugs to him/herself, since that would fall within the definition of suicide.*
- ★ *Involuntary Euthanasia occurs if lethal drugs are administered to a patient without that patient’s clear consent. Some proponents of euthanasia argue that the decision to act without the patient’s*

*consent is justified where a person is in great pain but unable to communicate their wish to die, for instance because of brain damage, etc.*

- ★ *Passive Euthanasia is defined as the withdrawal of a treatment which, if continued, would prolong the life of suffering patient but not offer a cure. It can take place via the consent to withdrawal of treatment by a patient who is conscious and competent to decide. It can also take place via a decision by physicians and/or next of kin where a patient is unable to express a competent view, for instance through being in a persistent vegetative state (PVS) or mental incapacity.*

### CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TO EUTHANASIA

- ★ *All Christians believe all human life to be sacred, since every human being was created by and is known to God, who plans their life and its span:*
  - *“your eyes saw my unformed body,  
All the days ordained for me  
were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.”  
(Psalm 139: 16)*
- ★ *Many Christians believe that God gave the gift of life, and that euthanasia is wrong, because it presumes to take away God’s gift. They say such an action betrays a complete lack of faith in God, whom Christians should trust to know when to end a person’s life, without humans usurping and pre-empting his power.*
- ★ *Many Christians do, however, make a distinction between killing someone, which is active euthanasia as described above, and letting a person die without trying to prolong their life with extra treatment – passive euthanasia. For them, active euthanasia is always wrong, even when a doctor or relative may be acting out of the best motives to avoid further suffering, for instance, whereas passive euthanasia is acceptable, rather than struggling to keep a person alive in pain with an incurable condition. This is often summed up in the lines of the Victorian poet Arthur Hugh Clough, who wrote:*
  - *“Thou shalt not kill, but needst not strive officiously to keep alive.”*
- ★ *A significant number of people, including some Christians, think at least passive*

*euthanasia should be available as a kinder option than prolonging needless suffering.*

- ★ *Many Christians, and some non-believers, think on the other hand that active euthanasia is a form of murder, even if a patient has consented to it or insisted on it. They base this view on the belief that God gave life to all human beings, and only has the right to decide when those lives will end.*
- ★ *The RC Church teaches a principle known as “double effect”. Under this principle, the death of a patient may justifiably occur as a kind of side-effect of another procedure whose purpose is not to cause death. For instance, high doses of morphine may be justifiably administered with the intention of relieving severe pain, and may have the unintended secondary/double effect of hastening death.*
- ★ *Many Christians believe nowadays that a dignified death can be achieved without recourse to euthanasia if a terminally sick person goes into a hospice. Hospices do not commit euthanasia but give palliative care to the dying to make them as comfortable as possible. They help patients and their relatives to come to terms with death, and often help with such things as financial advice and other concerns to ease the passing as much as possible.*
- ★ *Pope John Paul II is quoted as a recent example of a truly Christian death, accepting of suffering and waiting patiently until the moment that God calls one into the next life.*

## **SUICIDE**

- ★ *Suicide (from the Latin sui “of himself” and caedere “to kill”) occurs when a person deliberately ends his or her own life. It is also sometimes termed “self murder”.*
- ★ *Suicide was in the past considered a crime in many countries, and the punishment for failed suicides was often a lengthy prison sentence.*
- ★ *Today, most legal systems recognize that wishing to kill oneself is not so much a crime, but a desire arising from serious mental illness, such as severe depression.*

## **CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TO SUICIDE**

- ★ *Christian teaching also used to condemn suicide very stridently, and suicides would be refused both a Christian burial service*

*and interment in the “hallowed ground” of a Christian churchyard.*

- ★ *This view has been replaced now by a much more compassionate one, by which most Christians recognize that mental illness, not sin, has in all likelihood caused the person to want to end their life.*
- ★ *Most Christians would now agree that those with suicidal tendencies and thoughts need medical/mental treatment, not condemnation. Some Christians become active in social work in organizations such as The Samaritans which tries to help the lonely and suicidally inclined.*

## **DEFINITION OF ABORTION**

- ★ *The term abortion is usually used when a foetus is deliberately destroyed by removal from the womb before it is mature enough to survive independently. This is also termed procured (=brought about) abortion, since someone has made the choice and taken deliberate actions to end the baby’s life.*
- ★ *A foetus can also be ejected “naturally” from the womb before it can survive without an intentional outside intervention, but this is called a miscarriage rather than an abortion.*
- ★ *There are many reasons why a pregnant person might wish not to carry a pregnancy through to “term”, ie its natural conclusion in the birth of a child. She might be very young and unmarried. She might have become pregnant following rape, ie sexual intercourse to which she genuinely did not consent. She might be very poor, either because her partner has no job or has deserted her.*
- ★ *Also, it may have been discovered through medical tests that the foetus has grave health problems which will not cease at birth, for instance Downs Syndrome or other severe mental or physical impairment. Alternatively, the health of the mother may be such that she remain pregnant or give birth safely without gravely endangering her own life.*
- ★ *In all the above cases, a mother’s decision whether to have an abortion or not is very often an extremely difficult, even agonizing, decision to make.*
- ★ *Under current UK Law, a pregnant woman has to convince 2 doctors that her mental and/or physical health would suffer*

significantly if the pregnancy was not terminated. The medical decision in the UK to abort a foetus is currently permissible only up to 24 weeks into the gestation. This is because it has been shown that foetuses born naturally, albeit prematurely, at 28 weeks nowadays have a good chance of survival ie 8 weeks earlier than a full-term pregnancy.

### **DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TO ABORTION**

- ★ There is a wide spectrum of Christian attitudes towards abortion, and the teaching of the various Christian denominations on the subject has evolved over the centuries.
- ★ In the era of the Early Church (up to 200 CE), abortion was common, as was the killing of new-born babies (infanticide) if they were unwanted or their parents could not afford to rear them.
- ★ This approach to abortion gradually came to depend on the question of “ensoulment” ie exactly when a human soul entered a growing foetus. After much debate in the Early Church, it was concluded that male foetuses received a soul 40 days after conception, and female foetuses 80 days. It was therefore permissible to abort male foetuses up to 40 days after conception and females 80 days. Abortion was accordingly allowed in the very early stage of pregnancy, but infanticide came to be viewed as murder.
- ★ Some Christians believe, no matter what the circumstances of the pregnancy (rape, danger to the mother’s health, family economic circumstances) and no matter exactly when an abortion is carried out, that abortion is morally gravely wrong and tantamount to murder. They base this approach on the belief that the foetus is fully a human being and a sacred creation of God right from the moment of conception. The Roman Catholic Church is alone, however, in presenting this as its official teaching, regardless of the circumstances of any given case.
- ★ Christian teaching against abortion will often be justified by reference to Scripture, to demonstrate a belief that God forms each human life, and has His own particular concern and plan for that life:
  - “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you

were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” (Jer 1: 5)

- ★ In the light of this kind of biblical quotation, abortion might be seen as deliberate defiance or destruction of God’s plan.
- ★ Other, less absolutist/traditionalist, Christians would take the view that abortion, while never a good thing, may in some circumstances be justifiable. They might argue this in cases where it avoids what they would consider a worse evil, such as the birth of a child whose parents are desperately poor, or one who is in constant pain, or one whose birth will kill its mother.
- ★ Such Christians might justify their position by referring to what is sometimes called the Bible’s Golden Rule, set out in Matthew:
  - “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt 7: 12)

They would argue that this is an application of the Christian principle of unconditional love (agape in Greek), by which a Christian tries to imagine how they would feel if personally faced with, say, a situation where an abortion might be considered. They would not condemn the woman wishing the abortion and might conclude in some circumstances that it would be the lesser of two evils compared to bearing the child.

### **FERTILITY TREATMENT (FT)**

- ★ Infertility may arise as a result of a wide range of reproductive problems either in males or females, most commonly:
  - the male partner may produce insufficient healthy sperm or none at all
  - the female partner may not ovulate normally or her eggs cannot be reached by the father’s sperm
- ★ The expression FT covers a wide variety of treatments and procedures offered to couples who are proving unable to produce a child by sexual intercourse. Such treatments/procedures are offered by the medical profession because infertility can become a source of great sorrow and anxiety in couples who deeply long for children.
- ★ In-Vitro (literally “in glass” meaning a test-tube) Fertilisation (IVF) is one of the most common FTs. In it, an egg from the mother (or a different “donor female” if she can produce no eggs) can be fertilized in the laboratory with sperm taken from the

partner (or a different "donor male", if he can produce no sperm). Once fertilized the embryo can be placed into the female's womb to gestate.

### **CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TO FT**

- ★ There is no teaching in the Bible specifically referring to FT, since the medical technology and ethical issues surrounding that technology were unknown when the Bible was written.
- ★ In the many centuries before FT's development, people were very often unhappy at being childless but were helpless to do anything about it. Childlessness was assumed to be a decision of God's, as in the case of Hannah, one of the wives of Elkanah in the OT, "because the Lord had kept her from having children." (1 Sam 1: 5). In the same Book of Samuel, the Lord answers Hannah's prayer and allows her to have a child with Elkanah, a child whose life she promises to dedicate to the Lord.
- ★ In the modern day, FT – like abortion – is a subject on which not all Christians agree.
- ★ Childlessness causes as much sorrow now to couples as in the past, however, and so many Christians take the view that medical treatment (FT) is perfectly justifiable if it may help. They think FT can both help the couple in their anxiety and grief, and may bring the new life of into a loving environment, as God wishes. They believe that this is consistent with Jesus' own many loving acts of healing during His public life.
- ★ Other Christians are less sure that FT is always justified and wise. Some might say that childlessness is God's way of saying He has other plans for a given couple, and that FT is contradicting God's will for them.
- ★ Also, it is common IVF medical practice that more than one egg will be fertilized to ensure that a least one IVF embryo survives, and this worries many Christians.
- ★ Catholic teaching in particular condemns the FT practice by which the multiple embryos which are not used in the fertilization process are either destroyed immediately or used for genetic experimentation and destroyed in that manner. This is because the Catholic Church teaches that each of these embryos

is fully human and a child of God from the moment of conception and has human rights as such. Other Christians, and some non-Christians, are also concerned that destruction or experimentation on these embryos may be immoral, or even murder.

- ★ Use of "donor" eggs from another female, if the female partner cannot produce her, or sperm from another male if the male cannot produce sperm, is also wrong or at least questionable in the eyes of some Christians. They worry that this introduces a third person into the married relationship and thus contradicts the vow of married faithfulness, under which the couple promised to be faithful to and procreate with each other alone.

### **ANIMAL RESEARCH**

- ★ For many years, animals have been used in all kinds of research and experimental activities: to look into the effects of drugs, cosmetics, cleaning products, weapons etc. By using these things on animals, researchers aim to discover what effects they will have on human beings.
- ★ Medical research companies continue to insist that they cannot develop new drugs to combat human disease without some animal experimentation, pointing to the important drugs and procedures which have been created in this way. The discovery of vitamins, understanding of how embryos develop, and the development of anaesthetics and treatment of diabetes are all instances of very important knowledge which came from such experiments. Tests on animals helped produced the polio vaccine, better treatments for asthma and ways to help premature babies survive.
- ★ Use of animals in this way therefore continues today, particularly at the moment in the fields of cancer and Alzheimer's disease. The wider population is, however, much more aware of such activities than in the past, and a significant "Animal Rights" movement has grown up which opposes all such experimentation on the grounds that we have no right to cause pain, injury, illness and death in this way, any more than to a fellow human-being. Such opponents of animal testing say we should find some other way of testing drugs and medical procedures that does not

involve exploiting animals cruelly in this way.

- ★ Some people simply convey this view by avoiding all products whose development has involved testing on animals. A minority of activist Animal Rights campaigners even feel themselves justified, however, in threatening scientists and their families and in committing violence to stop such experiments.
- ★ Strict government guidelines in many countries now dictate the way animals, both in experimentation and when being farmed for human consumption, are to be treated. Companies are obliged under the law in many countries to share research data with companies working in the same field to minimize the number of animals used in experiments.

### **CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT USE OF ANIMALS IN MEDICAL RESEARCH**

- ★ Christians believe that human beings are God's most important creation, and that animals and the world's resources were made for humans to benefit from, as indicated at the start of the OT:
  - God blessed [Adam and Eve] and said to them: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Gen 1: 28)
- ★ Christians do not believe animals to have a soul, or certainly not one like humans capable of having a special relationship with God and seeking to know Him. They are therefore willing to kill animals for food, and to keep them on farms and in zoos for their own use and interest/amusement.
- ★ More recently, however, with the higher profile of Animal Rights, Christians have come to believe that animals deserve greater respect and consideration than in centuries past. Mistreating them has come to be seen by many Christians as an insult to God, since Man was given the duty of responsible stewardship over Creation, not the right to abuse anything in it.
- ★ Most Christians believe, however, that Animal Testing for serious and important reasons to benefit humanity can be justified. The position of one of the main

Christian Churches, the CofE, has been summarized as follows:

- "The Church of England recognises the need for animal to be used in certain research to improve medical understanding, veterinary or behavioural knowledge, and to test for the safety of chemicals, and understands that such testing is a requirement of law. It also, however, affirms that responsible stewardship of the natural world requires all animals to receive care and sympathetic treatment, both during their lives and in the manner of their dying."  
(What the Churches Say, CEM Publications)
- ★ The RC Church similarly says that animal experiments are permissible as long as they are aimed at important improvements in human health or to save human lives. RC teaching also accepts the eating of animals for food and the use of their skins for clothing. RC teaching stresses that people should not be more concerned about animal welfare than they are, for instance, about starving and suffering human beings in the world. Equally RC teaching would condemn giving animals a life of luxury while fellow human beings are in poverty.
- ★ The majority Christian view is that the use of animals in serious and important medical research (as opposed, say, to research into new cosmetics and beauty products) is justified, provided the animals are treated with compassion by avoiding all unnecessary suffering.