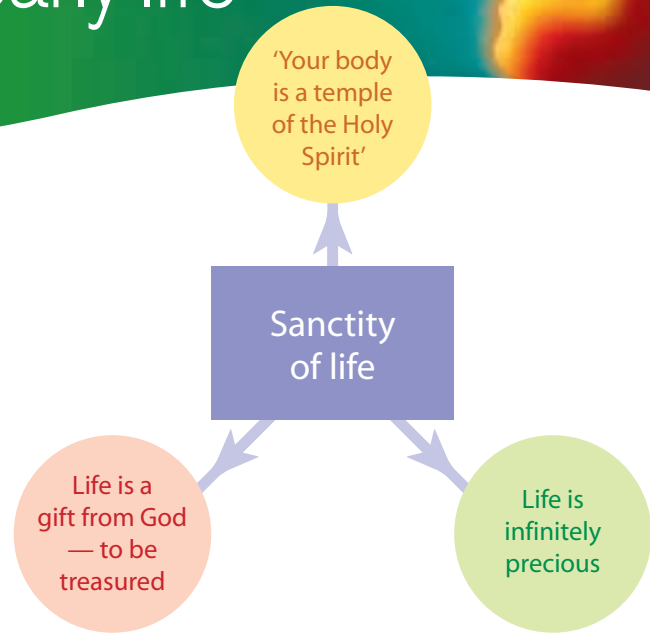


## Topic 4

# Religion and early life

### The miracle of life

Whatever their religious beliefs and regardless of whether they want to have children themselves, many people feel awe and wonder at the mystery of life. They refer to it as a miracle. Many would also say that children are a blessing and couples suffer terribly if they find they are infertile. **Abortion** is not a trivial matter.



Many people see children as a blessing

## When does life begin?

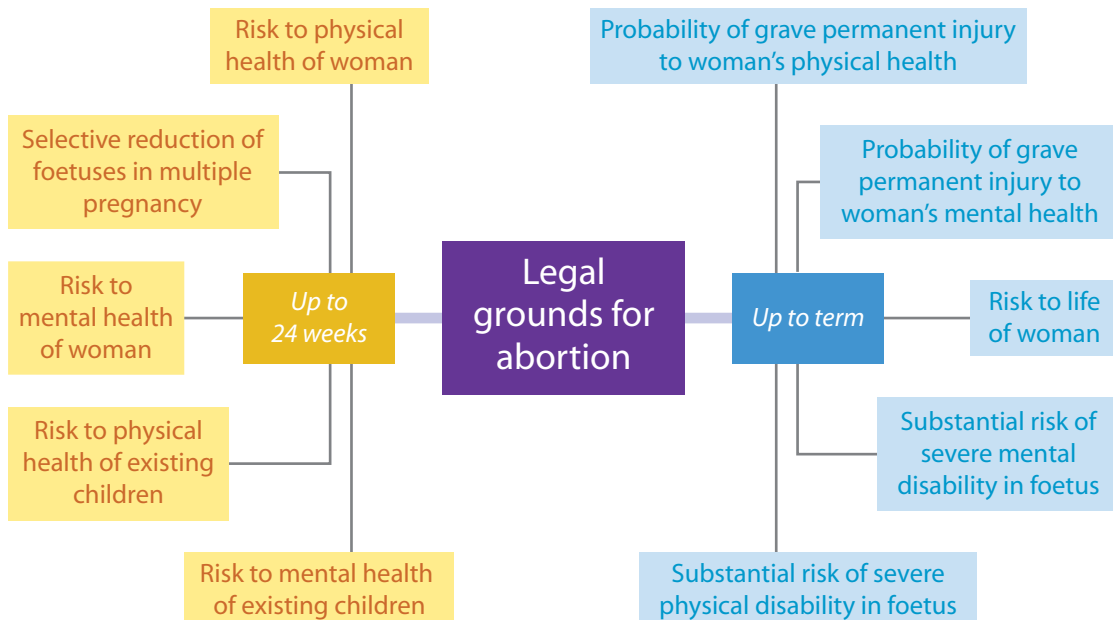
Biological life begins with the fertilisation of the egg by the sperm, but what is meant here is at what stage is it meaningful life, i.e. life with rights? There are different views on this:

- At conception
  - the **pro-life** view
  - from the moment of fertilisation, a new person with potential, a human being complete with a soul, has come into existence
- At birth
  - the **pro-choice** view
  - independent life only starts at birth; until that point the foetus is totally dependent on the mother
- **Viability**
  - the view taken by the law
  - the foetus has rights from the point at which, if born, it could have a reasonable chance of survival (currently taken to be 24 weeks)
- A gradual process
  - the view of many religious believers
  - the embryo has the right to respect from conception, but full rights are acquired as the foetus develops (e.g. development of the nervous system, brain activity)

## Abortion

Abortion is the deliberate termination of pregnancy. It is permitted under UK law, provided certain conditions are met. The cut-off point for most abortions is 24 weeks.

### UK law





## Secular arguments for and against abortion

For	Against
No child should be unwanted	No child need be unwanted — there are alternatives to abortion
The <b>embryo/foetus</b> is just a clump of cells — it is at best a potential life	Life begins at <b>conception</b> , when something totally and uniquely new comes into being
A young girl is not ready for the responsibilities of motherhood	A young girl is not mature enough to deal with any long-lasting guilt feelings after abortion
It is cruel to make a raped woman go through with pregnancy	It is wrong to punish a child for the father's action
Aborting a disabled foetus is in the best interests of everyone	It is wrong for those without disability to make quality of life judgements about people with disability
The right to <b>autonomy</b> — the mother has the right to choose for herself	The right to autonomy should be limited as in this case the mother is making choices for someone else (i.e. the foetus)
The woman knows what is best for herself and the foetus	The woman's emotional state may cloud her judgement

## Pro-choice

Maternal rights come first

She is more fully alive than a foetus

She should decide what happens in and to her body

## Pro-life

Foetal rights come first

The foetus is fully alive as a human being with potential

The foetus is vulnerable and needs protection

A 5-month old foetus in the womb

## Alternatives to abortion

- the mother keeping the baby
- **fostering** until the mother can care for the baby herself
- **adoption**

## Key words

abortion	embryo	pro-life
adoption	foetus	secular
autonomy	fostering	viability
conception	pro-choice	

### Pro-life

- ⊕ The baby's right to life is respected
- ⊕ The mother will not suffer the guilt feelings that are common after abortion
- ⊕ As well as support from the state, many church organisations will give her all the financial and emotional support she and her baby need
- ⊕ Infertile couples are given great joy and the child has a loving home

### Pro-life

- ⊖ The mother and baby might struggle throughout life without access to support
- ⊖ The child might spend his/her whole childhood in foster care because the mother is not ready for the responsibility but does not want the child to be adopted and he/she may feel unwanted by the mother
- ⊖ There may be emotional problems later for all concerned when an adopted child wants to find his/her mother

## Religious beliefs for and against abortion



### Buddhism

- Traditionalists think abortion is wrong as life begins at conception, so it breaks First Precept
- Mother and abortionist acquire bad kamma
- But in some situations, in best interests of foetus (e.g. severe disability)
- Dalai Lama stated that situations should be taken into account
- Metta, karuna and right intention should underlie decisions
- Above all, a personal decision



### Christianity

#### Roman Catholic Church

- Abortion is a grave sin tantamount to murder, incurring **excommunication** (not allowed to receive Holy Communion)
- Human being with potential — the embryo has full rights from the start
- Embryo absolutely defenceless — merits special protection
- Infinitely precious to God; sanctity of life
- All life has potential and is of equal value — not for humans to pass judgement on quality of life for foetus with disability
- Wrong to punish child for father's sin in case of rape — birth of child is good coming out of evil
- Unwanted child can be adopted — brings joy to infertile couples and chance of life and love for child
- Practical and emotional support given by Roman Catholic community and charities can enable young mothers to cope

#### NB Some Protestants hold these views

#### Anglican Church

- Abortion is a great moral evil — concern about number of abortions taking place
- Life is sacred and the foetus deserves respect and protection
- But in certain circumstances, abortion may be lesser of two evils, e.g. to save mother's life; in cases of extreme distress such as rape
- Late abortions (i.e. after 24 weeks) for disability — only where child would die soon after birth
- Abortions up to 24 weeks for disability if in child's best interests
- Importance of compassion and love for all concerned
- A matter for personal decision, in accordance with conscience
- Tries to balance sanctity of life with quality of life

### Methodist Church

- Similar to Anglican view — undesirable, but sometimes lesser of two evils
- Justified in some cases — risk to life/health of mother and existing family, extreme poverty, rape, severe disability

### Hinduism

- Permissible only where mother's life at risk
- Dharma at householder stage to rear children
- Goes against principle of ahimsa (doing no harm); atman present from conception
- Stops foetus moving closer to **moksha** (release from samsara)
- But female foeticide (killing of foetus) is an issue in India because of dowries
- Some accept abortion in cases of rape, disability, other risks to maternal health

### Islam

- Permissible at any stage if risk to mother's life; loss of mother affects society more than loss of foetus
- Otherwise haram (forbidden) for most Muslims
- Strong opposition to excuse of poverty; Qur'an teaches that Allah will provide for the poor, so abortion shows lack of trust
- Dispute over time of ensoulment: official view places it at 120 days and until then mother's rights take priority
- Some place it at 40 days or at conception
- 1990 meeting of World Islamic League: permissible before 120 days for severe disability
- Minority accept it in cases of rape or incest
- Stress on sanctity of life and compassion

### Judaism

- Importance of sanctity of life
- Foetus not a person until born; no human rights until head born — up to that moment, abortion permissible to save woman's life, but from then on foetus has equal rights with mother
- Exodus 21:22 often seen as showing difference in moral status between mother and foetus
- Abortion to save maternal life a duty, though rabbi should be consulted; often extended to include suicidal mother
- Tiny minority accept it for disability out of concern for maternal mental health



## Sikhism

- Human life begins at conception, so abortion an insult to the Creator
- Stress on sanctity of life
- Infanticide banned for Khalsa Sikhs in the **Reht Maryada** (Sikh code of conduct) and most extend this to include abortion
- Most accept it if a risk to mother's life
- A minority accept it in cases of rape
- Grounds of disability not accepted
- Female foeticide strongly condemned

### Key words

#### Christianity

excommunication

#### Hinduism

moksha

#### Sikhism

Reht Maryada



## Test yourself



### Case study

## Joanna Jepson

- Born in 1976
- An Anglican priest
- Had many years of operations to correct a jaw defect, for which she had suffered bullying at school
- Has a brother who has Down's Syndrome
- In 2001 she took the West Mercia police to court for not investigating the late abortion of a foetus with a cleft palate — she regarded this as unlawful killing
- Her complaint was dismissed
- Sometimes a cleft palate can be an indication of far more serious problems with the foetus, but in this case, Joanna Jepson claimed that this was not so



Joanna Jepson

- 1 What is meant by the term abortion?
- 2 Which particular part of the abortion law did the case brought by Joanna Jepson relate to?
- 3 Give two reasons why her views on abortion might be affected by her personal experiences.

- 4 What is meant by pro-life and pro-choice?
- 5 Explain two answers that are given to the question of when meaningful life begins.

### **Examination question**

**Explain the difference between sanctity and quality of life.** (3 marks)

**Explain why some religious believers might support abortion in some cases.** (4 marks)

**'Any action to prevent the birth of an unwanted child is the most loving thing to do.'**

**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.** (6 marks)

#### **Exam tip**

In answering 6-mark evaluation questions, ensure that you include religious arguments in your answer. A purely secular (non-religious) answer will not receive more than 3 marks. To gain full marks, there needs to be clear reference to religious arguments.

