

# Abortion and Euthanasia

## Some Christians Support Passive Euthanasia

- 1) Some Christians suggest that the use of 'extraordinary treatment' (e.g. life-support machines which are keeping someone alive artificially) is not always the best approach — they suggest the easing of suffering through passive euthanasia is a way of demonstrating Christian compassion.
- 2) However, many only agree with euthanasia if the dying person chooses it for themselves.
- 3) Anglican denominations are against active euthanasia. However, they agree that terrible distress should not be suffered at all costs, and that death may be considered a blessing rather than continuing life-extending treatment. They argue that a person's quality of life must also be considered.

## Judaism Allows Abortion in Some Cases

- 1) As a general rule, Judaism is opposed to abortion that is carried out for non-medical reasons. Human life is part of the universe that God created, and he "created mankind in his own image" (Genesis 1:27 NIV). An unborn child is part of that creation.
- 2) Some Jews might argue that it is up to God to decide when life starts and ends (see below).
- 3) However, Judaism does not teach that the life of an unborn child is more valuable than that of the mother — the foetus isn't seen as a human until birth. Many Jews accept that, in certain cases, abortion should be allowed. Most rabbis allow abortion if pregnancy becomes physically or mentally dangerous for the woman concerned, or if the child is likely to be severely disabled and unable to lead a full life. But it cannot be carried out simply for convenience.

"For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my  
mother's womb." Psalms 139:13 NIV

"...anyone who saves  
a life is as if he saved  
an entire world."  
Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

## Judaism Teaches That Only God Can Decide When People Die

- 1) Jewish teaching is generally opposed to the practice of euthanasia. There are some rabbis who have come out in support of it, but most Jews see life as a sacred gift from God. They believe people do not have the right to decide when a life should end.
- 2) Many see euthanasia as going against pikuach nefesh (see p.28) — Jews should do all they can to save human life, not bring about its end.
- 3) The relief of pain and suffering is a key part of Jewish teaching. So although euthanasia is seen as wrong if it involves actively doing something to cause someone's death, it may be possible to withhold treatment, if this treatment would cause further distress. Reform Jews would agree with this idea, but ultra-orthodox Jews are strongly against stopping treatment.
- 4) The words of Rabbi Moses Isserles are sometimes used to argue that it may be reasonable to switch off a life-support machine that's keeping someone alive: "If there is anything which causes a hindrance to the departure of the soul... then it is permissible to remove it."
- 5) The Jewish sacred text, the Nevi'im, contains an example of euthanasia. Abimelek is hit by a stone:  

"...a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull. Hurriedly he called to his armour-bearer, 'Draw your sword and kill me, so that they can't say, "A woman killed him."' So his servant ran him through, and he died." Judges 9:53-54 NIV

To avoid being killed by a woman, which would have been seen as embarrassing, he gets a man to kill him instead. This could be seen as supporting the right to die in a dignified way, but the text doesn't condone or condemn the action, and most don't see it as giving support for euthanasia.

## It's tricky, emotional stuff...

Make sure you've got all the viewpoints straight by having a go at this exam-style question:  
Outline three beliefs about euthanasia. [3]





# Abortion and Euthanasia

General, Christianity,  
Catholic Christianity

Arguments about abortion and euthanasia revolve around who can decide when life begins and ends.

## Abortion and Euthanasia are *Controversial Issues*

Abortion is when a foetus is removed prematurely from the womb before it can survive. It's legal in England, Scotland and Wales and can take place until the 24th week of pregnancy. Abortions can take place after this time if there's a danger to the health of the mother or foetus.

Euthanasia is killing someone to relieve suffering, often from an incurable illness. Active euthanasia is when a patient requests help to die, often using drugs — it is illegal in the UK, but legal in some countries, e.g. Belgium. In passive euthanasia, medical treatment that might extend someone's life is withdrawn — they might refuse further treatment, or a life-support machine might be turned off if there is no hope of recovery. This is legal in the UK.

- 1) Christianity, Islam and Judaism teach that all life is created by God. As God's creation, all life belongs to God and is therefore holy. This is the 'sanctity of life' argument.
- 2) Based on this, many religious people believe that people don't have the right to interfere with when life ends, or to prevent the beginning of a new life. Many support hospices — a hospice is a place where terminally ill people can be well cared for.
- 3) Other people take into consideration a person's quality of life (how able they are to live a normal life).

## Many Christians see Abortion as *Undesirable*

- 1) Abortion is a very complicated and emotional issue, but generally speaking, Christianity teaches that abortion is undesirable as God "created mankind in his own image" (Genesis 1:27 NIV).
- 2) However, the Roman Catholic Church goes so far as to say that abortion is murder, as it teaches that human life starts as soon as the egg is fertilised at conception.  

"...all direct abortion... [is] to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children." Humanae Vitae, section 14
- 3) Many argue abortion is wrong because God cares a lot about children. Jesus said "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Luke 18:16 NIV).
- 4) Not all Churches see it in such black and white terms. The Church of England believes that abortion is permissible in certain circumstances, such as when the pregnancy puts the mother's life at risk. The Society of Friends (the Quakers) argues that the life of the unborn child cannot be valued above that of the woman. Many Christians argue that allowing a woman to choose is a way of showing Christian compassion — whether they agree with the choice made or not.
- 5) The Bible doesn't actually mention abortion, but it connects life with breath, e.g. in the creation of Adam — so it could be argued that the foetus is only alive when it breathes independently. Other Christian writings (e.g. the Didache, a 2nd century manual of Christian teaching) are quite specifically against it.

## Some Christians are Strongly *Against Euthanasia*

- 1) Roman Catholics are the most strongly opposed to euthanasia. They believe that anything that intentionally causes death is wrong. So even those who are unlikely to recover consciousness should be kept alive.  

"...an act or omission which... causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator." Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2277
- 2) Some Christians view euthanasia as going against the commandment "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13 NIV). Some might argue that only God should decide when a person's life ends, as he gave them life in the first place.
- 3) Many Christians believe suffering is part of life. Job was made to suffer by Satan, but refused to end his life: "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10 NIV).
- 4) Euthanasia could be seen to ruin the natural course of death, when a soul starts to make its way to God.
- 5) Many Christians feel they must care for sick people, and euthanasia goes against this. Local churches often have links with hospices — Christians would argue hospices allow a person to feel valued as they reach the end of their life.





# Abortion and Euthanasia

Islam &  
General

## Islam Allows Abortion Before Ensoulment in some Circumstances

Muslims believe that people's lives are sacred (see p.51). The Qur'an teaches that "whoever kills a soul... it is as if he had slain mankind entirely" (Qur'an 5:32). This means that abortion is generally seen as wrong.

- 1) The passage on the right sums up Islamic teaching on abortion. But there are circumstances in which it is permissible. "And do not kill your children... We provide for them and for you. Indeed, their killing is ever a great sin." Qur'an 17:31
- 2) When the mother's life is in danger, abortion is lawful. The potential life in the womb is not as important as the actual life of the mother.
- 3) When a foetus gets its soul, this is called ensoulment. Islam teaches that this happens after 120 days, when "the soul is breathed into his body" (Sahih al-Bukhari 55:549).
- 4) This means that within the first 120 days, abortion can be allowed if the mother's life is at risk, or if the baby would be born with a serious defect, though not all Muslims agree with this. After 120 days, abortion is only allowed to save the life of the mother.
- 5) Some Muslim women argue that they should be free to choose what happens to their bodies. Those that disagree claim that Qur'an 81:8-9 says unborn children will want to know why they were killed.

## Muslims are Usually Against Euthanasia

- 1) Euthanasia is seen as wrong by most Muslims: "do not kill yourselves [or one another]" (Qur'an 4:29).
- 2) Muslims believe that their lives are Allah's and he has a plan for every living person — he has decided how long each person will live on this Earth, and they do not have the right to interfere with that plan.
- 3) Islam teaches that life on Earth is a test. Allah knows why people suffer, and they do not have good reason to end their own lives, no matter how bad that suffering is. Instead, those who are suffering should turn to Allah, pray and wait — Allah is merciful, and all will be revealed on the Day of Judgement. "O you who have believed, seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient." Qur'an 2:153
- 4) As a result, Muslims support hospices, but often they try to look after the ill person at home — this allows them to be surrounded and taken care of by their family, friends and neighbours. "...when disaster strikes them, [they] say, 'Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return.' Those are the ones upon whom are blessings from their Lord and mercy." Qur'an 2:156-157
- 5) However, when a patient has a terminal illness with no hope of improvement, Islam allows doctors to stop 'unnecessary' treatment.

## There are Many Non-Religious Views on Abortion and Euthanasia

- 1) Many atheists support abortion as it gives women control over what happens to their bodies. Humanists prioritise quality of life over sustaining life, and look at the impact on the woman first.
- 2) There is some debate surrounding the time limit on abortions. Since some babies born prematurely at 24 weeks or less are surviving, some feel that the timeframe for abortions should be shortened. Others feel that there shouldn't be a time limit on abortions at all.
- 3) There is more of a divide in opinions when it comes to euthanasia. Some support it when a person will die from an illness or where they are suffering from an incurable illness. They feel that ending someone's suffering through euthanasia is the kindest thing to do.
- 4) However, some people fear that legalising euthanasia would potentially lead to people feeling pressured into it. Some also feel that doctors should work to protect lives, not the opposite.
- 5) Some people might apply situation ethics — looking for the most loving option in each situation, rather than applying the same rules in every instance. This might lead them to support abortion or euthanasia where it seems to be the kindest option.

## Abortion and euthanasia are complicated topics...

...so go back over the pages if you need to. Then try out this question when you're ready:  
Explain two religious teachings on abortion. [4]

