

Signposts in Reproductive Rights: Religious Intersections

Facilitated by

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Discussion Questions

1. Do sacred religious texts address abortion?
2. Is abortion incompatible with religious teachings about the sanctity of life?
3. If abortion is not addressed in sacred texts, why has religion become a pillar for the anti-abortion movement?
4. Which Christian denominations are anti-abortion? Which are pro-choice?
5. How do non-Abrahamic religions like Buddhism and Hinduism address abortion?
6. What role does the First Amendment to the United States Constitution play in the discussion of Reproductive Rights?

Religious Affiliations in America: Pro-life & Pro-choice

- An online poll found that “atheists are the most likely to identify as pro-choice, at 91%,” followed by 83% of Agnostics, 77% of Jewish people, and 76% of Buddhists. 63% of people who say their religion is “nothing in particular” also take a pro-choice stance, followed by 56% of Muslims.¹
 - Roman Catholics are nearly evenly split, with 46% identifying as pro-choice and 47% as pro-life. Among Americans whose religion is Eastern or Greek Orthodox, 44% say they are pro-choice while slightly more (49%) are pro-life.
 - Protestants (38%) and Mormons (25%) are among the least likely to say they are pro-choice. Majorities of Protestants (57%) and Mormons (69%) are pro-life.

Pew Research Center Chart²

Major religious groups' positions on abortion

Opposes abortion rights, with few or no exceptions	Supports abortion rights, with some limits	Supports abortion rights, with few or no limits	No clear position
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• African Methodist Episcopal Church• Assemblies of God• Roman Catholic Church• Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints• Hinduism• Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod• Southern Baptist Convention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Episcopal Church• Evangelical Lutheran Church in America• United Methodist Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conservative Judaism• Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)• Reform Judaism• Unitarian Universalist• United Church of Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Islam• Buddhism• National Baptist Convention• Orthodox Judaism



RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON ABORTION

Christianity

- As the Pew Research Center chart on the previous page demonstrates, there are many perspectives among various religions, but especially within the denominations of Christianity. However, it is also important to acknowledge that a person affiliated with a particular church does not necessarily agree with or follow that church's formal stance on the issue of abortion.

The Bible and Abortion

- Melanie Howard, an associate professor of Biblical & Theological studies, explained:
 - “In the response to the Supreme Court’s decision, Christians on both sides of the partisan divide have appealed to any number of texts to assert that their particular brand of politics is biblically backed. However, if they claim the Bible specifically condemns or approves of abortion, they are skewing the textual evidence to fit their position.

Of course, Christians can develop their own faith-based arguments about modern political issues, whether or not the Bible speaks directly to them. But it is important to recognize that although the Bible was written at a time when abortion was practiced, it never directly addresses the issue.”³

Buddhism

- According to lay Buddhist teacher Sallie Jiko Tisdale, “The conclusion of orthodox Buddhist scholars has long been that a human being appears at the moment of conception.”⁴ However, Tisdale observed that there is more flexibility in Modern American and Mahayana Buddhist traditions. She stated that abortion can ultimately “increase happiness even as it decreases future suffering, and allow a person to be healthier, stronger, more whole. Abortion is health care, and people’s suffering will only be compounded as long as it is anything short of safe and legal.”

Hinduism

- Author Dheepa Sundaram explained, “While U.S. Hindu communities express strong support for abortion rights at 68%, mirroring the numbers Pew Research catalogs for all Asian Americans, classical Hindu texts such as the Vedas and Shastras forbid abortion except when the life of the pregnant person is threatened or there are fetal abnormalities.”⁵

Islam

- According to Al-Matary & Ali, “Islam is considerably liberal concerning abortion, which is dependent on (i) the threat of harm to mothers, (ii) the status of the pregnancy before or after ensoulment (on the 120th day of gestation), and (iii) the presence of foetal anomalies that are incompatible with life. Considerable variation in religious edicts exists, but most Islamic scholars agree that the termination of a pregnancy for foetal anomalies is allowed before ensoulment, after which abortion becomes totally forbidden, even in the presence of foetal abnormalities; the exception being a risk to the mother’s life or confirmed intrauterine death.”⁶

Judaism

- The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), explained that, according to Jewish law, life does not begin at conception:



- “Sources in the Talmud note that the fetus is “mere water” before 40 days of gestation. Following this period, the fetus is considered a physical part of the pregnant individual’s body, not yet having life of its own or independent rights. The fetus is not viewed as separate from the parent’s body until birth begins and the first breath of oxygen into the lungs allows the soul to enter the body.”⁷
- According to the NCJW, “Jewish sources explicitly state that abortion is not only permitted but is required should the pregnancy endanger the life or health of the pregnant individual. Furthermore, ‘health’ is commonly interpreted to encompass psychological health as well as physical health.”

Pro-Choice Religious Organizations + Resources

- **The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC)** is a broad-based, national, interfaith movement that brings the moral force of religion to protect and advance reproductive health, choice, rights and justice through education, prophetic witness, pastoral presence and advocacy. The RCRC “provides spiritual support and medical and legal advice to pregnant people before, during, and after an abortion, [and] has created webinars to educate people on the relationship between religion and reproductive health.”⁸
- **Catholics For Choice** is a nonprofit pro-choice organization that “fights for the rights of all individuals to have access to the full scope of reproductive healthcare, including abortion. Barriers to abortion access have the greatest impact on the poor, the vulnerable, and people of color. We are part of the majority of the faithful in the Catholic church who know that abortion access is a social justice value—and a matter to be decided by one’s individual conscience.”⁹
- The All-Options organization has a **Faith Aloud** call line for “spiritual concerns or questions about abortion or pregnancy decision-making,” and offers nonjudgmental support from trained clergy and religious counselors.¹⁰
- **The Spiritual Alliances of Communities for Reproductive Dignity (SACReD)** is an “an alliance of organizers, religious leaders, academics, and congregations working together to advance the cause of reproductive justice through congregational designation and community building programs.”¹¹

Notes

1. Jamie Ballard, “Which religious groups’ members are most likely to identify as pro-choice?” *YouGovAmerica*, May 13, 2022. <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/05/13/which-religious-groups-members-abortion-poll>
2. David Masci, “Where major religious groups stand on abortion,” *Pew Research Center*, June 21, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/21/where-major-religious-groups-stand-on-abortion/>



3. Melanie A. Howard, “What the Bible actually says about abortion may surprise you,” *The Conversation*, July 20, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/what-the-bible-actually-says-about-abortion-may-surprise-you-186983>
4. Sallie Jiko Tisdale, “Is There a Buddhist View on Abortion?,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, October 8, 2021. <https://tricycle.org/article/buddhism-abortion/>
5. Dheepa Sundaram, “Hindu’s classical texts strictly forbid abortion. Here’s why many Hindus don’t,” *Religion News*, May 20, 2022. <https://religionnews.com/2022/05/20/hindus-classical-texts-strictly-forbid-abortion-heres-why-many-hindus-dont/>
6. Abdulrahman Al-Matary and Jaffar Ali, “Controversies and considerations regarding the termination of pregnancy for Foetal Anomalies in Islam,” *British Medical Journal: Medical Ethics*, 15:10, 2014. <https://bmcmedethics.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1472-6939-15-10>
7. National Council of Jewish Women, “Judaism and Abortion,” *NCJW*, <https://www.ncjw.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Judaism-and-Abortion-FINAL.pdf>
8. Julia Ries, “Meet the Religious Groups Fighting to Save Abortion Access,” *Healthline*, May 25, 2022. <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/meet-the-religious-groups-fighting-to-save-abortion-access>
9. Catholics for Choice, “Abortion.” <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/issues/abortion/>
10. All-Options, “Faith Aloud.” <https://www.all-options.org/find-support/faith-aloud/>
11. See the SACReD website for more information: <https://www.sacreddignity.org/>