

Applied Ethics (Christianity)

8. Religion and medical ethics

Introduction to medical ethics

- Medical ethics is about applying moral values to medical situations.
- They often have to deal with matters of life and death e.g. abortion and euthanasia.
- Questions may also arise as to the rights and individual has to receive fertility treatment.
- Also need to consider the rights of animals.

The sanctity of life

- Many Christians argue that human life is sacred as it has been created by God.
- Christians believe that humans have been created special.
- "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27
- Christians argue that life belongs to God and therefore only God has the right to give and take life away.

The beginnings of human life

When does life begin? Biological markers include:

- Birth
- fetal viability
- when it can be established that the fetus is capable of cognition
- when the fetus is first capable of feeling pain
- the time of fetal movement, or "quickening" (15 – 20 weeks)
- neuromaturation, when the central nervous system of foetus is neurobiologically "mature"
- when the heart begins to beat (6 weeks)
- segmentation, after twinning is no longer possible
- implantation, the start of pregnancy
- fertilization, the fusing of the gametes to form a zygote

Other than birth and fertilization, it is very difficult to determine any of these stages. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that life begins at the moment of conception.

Abortion

- Abortion is the deliberate termination of a pregnancy by the removal and destruction of the foetus.
- Abortion was legalised in the UK in 1967.
- 200,000 abortions are performed each year.
- Two doctors need to give consent for an abortion to be legal in the UK.
- In the UK abortion is legal providing "...that the pregnancy has not exceeded its twenty-fourth week and that the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated, of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman or any existing children of her family."

Own point of view and different points of views

- In order to get full marks on the last 12 mark question it is necessary to give another point of view, your own point of view as well as references to Christianity in your answer.
- Many of these topics studied in this unit are highly controversial. People have very strong views on things like abortion, euthanasia and vivisection. You still need to give both sides of the argument irrespective of your own opinion. When you do state your own point of view make sure it is backed up with valid reasons.
- Islam and Judaism hold similar views to Christianity, emphasising the sovereignty of God and the sanctity of life.
- Many Christians are 'Pro-life' stressing the rights of the unborn child. While many feminists are 'Pro-choice' emphasizing the rights of a woman to do with her body what she wants.
- A basic precept in Buddhism is that of non-harm. For this reason many Buddhists are vegetarians.

Christian views on abortion

- The Bible does not specifically mention abortion.
- Many Christians believe that babies have a soul from the moment of conception.
- Some biblical quotes:

"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."

Jeremiah 1:5

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb."

Psalm 139:13

- The Roman Catholic Church teaches that abortion is a great moral evil. Abortion is not permitted under any circumstance. It teaches that abortion is the same as murder.
- The Church of England teaches that abortion is only acceptable in exceptional circumstances e.g. to save the mother's life.

Fertility treatment

- Fertility treatment is the medical assistance given to people who want babies but cannot have them.
- Fertility problems affect one in seven couples in the UK.
- Common treatment includes:

- **In vitro fertilisation (IVF)** – literally fertilisation in glass (test tube baby). Embryos are then placed inside the woman. More than one egg is fertilised resulting in spare embryos. Many Christians are concerned about these spare embryos.
- **Sperm or egg donor** – sometimes one partner can't produce health sperm or eggs. Sperm or eggs may be used from someone else. Some Christians think this goes against the idea of marriage being exclusive.

Embryo research

- Scientists claim that by studying and using cells taken from human embryos better ways of preventing or curing various illnesses might be found e.g. the use of stem cells in the cure of motor neurone disease or Parkinson's disease.
- Christian believe in the sanctity of life. Some embryo research as an abuse of the gift of life given by God.
- The Roman Catholic Church opposes all embryo research on the same grounds as it opposes abortion.
- The Church of England support it up to 14 days.

Cloning

- Cloning is done by fusing the nucleus of one cell with the unfertilised egg of a donor.
- Theoretically possible to clone a human.
- Some see this as 'playing God'.

Euthanasia

- Euthanasia literally means 'good death' – sometimes it is referred to as mercy killing.
- Questions often arise in the morality of it with cases of terminally ill patients.
- Euthanasia is illegal in the UK but not elsewhere e.g. Switzerland.
- Euthanasia can be:
 - **Voluntary** – the patient decides when to end their life (**assisted suicide**)
 - **Involuntary** – where a doctor decides when someone's life should end.
 - **Passive** – when the patient requests that treatment should be stopped (legal in the UK).

Suicide

- Suicide is when someone takes their own life.
- Laws against suicide (and attempted suicide) prevailed in English law until 1961.
- It perceived suicide as an immoral, criminal offence against God and also against the King.
- In the past those who committed suicide were denied a Christian burial.
- Today most Christian churches still think suicide morally wrong but try to be understanding in the reasons why someone would want to take their life and their state of mind at the time.
- The **Samaritans** was set up in 1953 by Rev. Chad Varah to provide a 24 hour telephone helpline for those with suicidal thoughts.
- Today the Samaritans continue to befriend people using volunteers via phone, email, letter and face to face.

Animal Rights

- Christians believe that humans are made in the image of God.
- They believe that humans have been given control over animals:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

Genesis 1:26

- Most Christians do not believe that animals have souls.
- Most Christians are not vegetarians and see nothing wrong with eating meat.

Animal Experimentation

- Experimentation on live animals is called **vivisection**.
- Christians might not believe that animals have souls in the same way that humans have souls, this does not mean that they believe it is right to be cruel to animals.
- They believe that God has placed them as stewards of creation.
- Christians recognise that humans may benefit from animal experiments.
- Some people argue that it is important that scientists are allowed to carry out such experiments.
- Animal experiments have led to:
 - Dialysis machines to treat kidney patients
 - Development of drugs to prevent the rejection of organ transplants.
 - The creation of vaccines for tuberculosis
- Some people argue that humans and animals are so genetically different that any results from experiment would not be any use for humans.
- Some animal rights activists have targeted scientists' homes and families to try and stop them from experimenting on animals.