Fertility and the World’s Religions

It should not be surprising that religions contribute to the desire for large families. The ancient religions were spawned in a world where the problem was depopulation. It is estimated that pre-historic persons, factoring in infant death, lived on the average about 18 years and in ancient Rome and Greece the average was in the low twenties. The Emperor Augustus penalized bachelors and rewarded families for their fertility. Widowers and divorcees (of both sexes) were expected to remarry within one month. Only those over fifty were allowed to remain unmarried. It was a society where, as historian Peter Brown says, death fell savagely on the young. Only four out of every hundred men—and fewer women—lived beyond their fiftieth birthday. As a species, we formed our fertility habits in worlds that were, in Saint John Chrysostom’s words, “grazed thin by death.”

Such judgments are deep-rooted. If, as Teilhard de Chardin said, nothing is intelligible outside its history, the fertility thrust, especially in stressful conditions, is the defining story of our species. Interestingly, the ancient religions born in these conditions, also contain the cure for excess fertility, for they all came to see that fertility, which is a supreme blessing, can also in certain circumstances become a curse. Still, for most of history the concern of religions was for more not for fewer children.

Religion Defined

Religion has to be taken seriously when any social problem is addressed. Two thirds of the world’s population affiliate with some religion and the other third could not but be affected by the
imaginative power of these symbol-systems. Religion is difficult to define, so we may not use the
term and expect a universally accepted understanding of its meaning. Often, in the social sciences,
the term is used descriptively and includes everything that humans label religion, however innocent
or guilty, bizarre, magical, or superstitious it may be. The advantage of this is that it allows a
consideration of all of the shadow forms of expressed religiosity as well as mainstream
manifestation. Many scholars of religion work out of a normative definition: *religion is a positive, life-enhancing response to the sacred.* By this definition, movements like the peace movement or
the green movement can be considered religions since they are responses to the values in life that are
so precious as to be called sacred.

The sacred may be interpreted theistically, as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, or non-
theistically as in Buddhism and the Chinese religions. No religion is a pure classic; all are burdened
with negative debris from their journeys through time. Good religious studies do not fudge the
downside--the sexism and the patriarchy, the authoritarianism, and, at times, the unnuanced pro-
natalism found in religions. The critical task is to ferret out the good amid the corruption.

The world’s religions are all philosophies of life. As Morton Smith says, in the ancient world
there was “no general term for *religion.*” Thus, as Smith notes, Judaism to the ancient world was a
philosophy. It presented itself as a source of wisdom, as seen in Deuteronomy: “You will display
your wisdom and understanding to other peoples. When they hear about these statutes, they will say,
‘what a wise and understanding people this great nation is!’” (Deut. 4:6) Similarly, other religions,
such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam were quests for enlightenment and betterment.
They contain ore from which rich theories of justice and human rights can be extracted. Often these
treasures have not been well applied to issues like sexuality, sexism, family planning, or ecological
care, but they all contain wisdom regarding the human right and obligation to bring moral planning to our biological power to reproduce. This would include the right to contraception and to abortion when necessary.

**Fertility as Blessing or Blight**

It took ten thousand generations to produce the first two and a half billion people simultaneously living on earth; it took only one generation to double that number. We also have right now the highest number of fertile persons in the history of the earth, a number equal to the total number of people on earth in 1960. That there are too many people in too little space with not enough to meet their needs not brilliant insight. Thirty five hundred years ago, Babylonian tablets, known as the Atrahasis epic, found in what is now Iraq, gave a history of humankind. The story it told was already old when it got carved on stone. It said that the Gods made humans to do work unworthy of the divinities, but huge problems developed when the humans over-reproduced. So the Gods sent plagues to diminish the population and made it a religious obligation for the remaining humans to limit their fertility. Joel Cohen says that this may be the earliest account of human overpopulation and the earliest interpretation of catastrophes as a response to overpopulation. Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle sensibly insisted that the number of people should not exceed the resources needed to provide them with moderate prosperity. Thomas Aquinas, the thirteen century Catholic saint, agreed with Aristotle that the number of children generated should not exceed the provisions of the community, and he even went so far as to say that this should be insured by law as needed. If more than a certain number of citizens were generated, said Thomas, the result would be poverty, which would breed thievery, sedition, and chaos.
All this was centuries before Thomas Malthus in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century proposed that human population is caught in a vicious cycle of population exceeding food supply, leading to famine and disease which would bring population back to a manageable level. Then the process would begin again. Many scholars feel that Malthus underestimated the capacity of the planet to produce food and that he was insufficiently informed on the complex dynamics of fertility increase and decline. There is enough, as Gandhi said, for our need, but not for our greed. The 2.9 million people in Chicago consume more than the more than 100 million people in Bangladesh. If, with an eye on consumption, you compare Germany with a poor African country, Germany consumes like the equivalent of one billion people. 75\% of the world’s pollution is caused by the “well salaried and well caloried.” Many earlier commentators on population did not see how the need for children could be changed by technology and by the move to cities. (You don’t need as many children in the city as you did on the farm. As recently as 1800, only 2.5 percent of humans lived in cities. By the 1980's that figure had risen to more than 50 percent.)

Still, numbers do count. Too many over-consuming people on a finite planet create massive problems. We also face the problem that as the poor move toward what we call “the middle class,” their patterns of consumption tend toward mimicking the consumptive patterns of the affluent.

\textbf{How Many Is Too Much?}

Professor Joel E. Cohen in his monumental book, \textit{How Many People Can the Earth Support?}, (W.W. Norton & Company, 1995) concluded that this is a questionable question. It’s a question that imports an army of other questions. But it is a question that started teasing the human mind in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century where the first estimates were made of the population that the earth’s “Land If fully
Peopled Would Sustain.” The estimate back then that the earth could support at most 13 billion is not far off from contemporary estimates. Most estimates today range from four to sixteen billion. If we were content to live at the level of Auschwitz or the Artic Innuit or the Kalahari bushmen, you would get certain numbers. If you face the reality that most people today have rising not lowering expectations, you get other numbers.

Most nations live beyond their means. Take the Netherlands, for example. It is estimated that the Dutch require the equivalent of fourteen times as much productive land as is contained within their own borders. To consume the way they consume takes the equivalent of 14 Hollands. Where does it get the other 13 Hollands? It imports from the rest of the world. In a significant misstatement, we refer to the gluttonous nations of the world as “developed” and the poor nations as “developing,” implying they can consume like us and some day will. But if we can return to reality, where is Zimbabwe going to find 13 Zimbabwe’s if it would try to match us in over-consumption.

Professor Cohen concludes sensibly that the Earth has reached, or will reach within half a century, the maximum number the Earth can support in modes of life that we would prefer. Family planning is necessary now lest population momentum carry us into chaos and it will be necessary when population stabilizes to keep families and overall population at sustainable levels. As biologist Harold Dorn notes with elemental logic: no species can multiply without limit and there are two biological checks to stop that--a high mortality and a low fertility. Only the human species can choose the latter. When it does not do so, the other check kicks in, which has already happened in parts of the world.

**Family Planning and Religion**
Anrudh Jain, a demographer at The Population Council notes that most of the world religions originated at a time when the global population was 50 to 450 million people in comparison to the six billion at the beginning of the second millennium. The problem for these religions is to adjust to the new demographic realities and to the new needs for family planning.

Family Planning means contraception. Since there is no perfect contraceptive, abortion as a backup is associated with family planning. Contraception is sometimes rejected on religious grounds, especially in theistic religions where it is seen as a lack of faith in God’s providence. This can be seen, for example, in some forms of Christianity, Islam, and African native religions. Christianity was seriously affected by an anti-contraceptive bias by Stoic philosophy, which championed an emotion-free rationality as the human ideal. Sex, being emotional, had to be justified by some reason and reproduction came to be that reason.

Abortion is more of a tortured issue in religions as elsewhere. Those religions that believe in reincarnation such as Buddhism and Hinduism would seem to have an insuperable problem with abortion since “the being about to be born” pre-existed and brings with it its own distinctive karmic history. Also in Buddhism one of the rules of the Eight-fold Path is: “I will not willingly take the life of a living thing.” This is found also in religions such as Jainism where some will not even swat a fly out of respect for life. How then could such religions justify abortion? Some in these religions do not. Others find ways to do so. William R. LaFleur, in his book Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan, (Princeton University Press, 1992) shows how many Buddhists see abortion as deferring birth to another time where the being can be born in better circumstances. Other Buddhists say there is some negative karma from an abortion but that it can be neutralized by positive karma from other good deeds. Still other Buddhists say that abortion is morally abhorrent and they will not
seek to justify it. This illustrates a pattern found in all the world religions. A conservative view banning abortion can usually be found co-existing alongside a more liberal view permitting abortion for serious reasons. This is comparable to the pluralism in world religions on issues like war, where some profess an absolute pacifism and others find in the same religion grounds for a just defensive war. Given the complexity and richness of religious moral traditions and the differing perceptions of people in changing conditions, such pluralism is inevitable and worthy of respect.

Not all religions are equally open to change. Hinduism, as some interpret it, has historically shown itself quite malleable in facing new situation. The revelations of the Vedas were not capped as final and binding for all time. The eternal demands of righteousness, dharma, can be seen as a river that is constantly renewed with new sources, changing course as needed while giving the appearance of changelessness. Adaptation is thus at home in the theories born of Hinduism. Even the Hindu and Jain concept of ahimsa, doing no harm, is sometimes interpreted to justify abortion because giving birth to a baby without the means to care for it can be more harmful, more of a violation of ahimsa, than an abortion. Abortion in such cases would be justified. The Hindu openness to family planning (including abortion) translates into policy as seen in the 1971 Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, permitting abortion in India for a variety of reasons. Hindu authorities have been supportive of this and have not opposed extending this right of choice to girls under the age of eighteen. As in other religions, there is no unanimity on the right to an abortion and there are specific prohibitions in the ancient dharma sastras of abortion even of an illegitimate child. This illustrates again the pluralism in religious ethics on reproductive ethics.

Judaism’s creation myth includes the divine mandate to be fruitful and multiply. However, as Jewish theologian Sharon Levy points out, the fact that there is a command given indicates that
reproduction is not genetically controlled in humans. The divine mandate addresses people as reasonable moral agents with moral obligations who must respond reasonably. Thus the command can be understood to dictate reasonable, human self-control in all moral matters such as reproduction. As Professor Laurie Zoloth says, we humans are not the ones who swarm over the earth like insects. She says that it is particularity, and not abundance that is stressed in Judaism.

Many rabbis historically justified the use of contraceptives. They said that the *mokh*, a soft cotton pad worn internally against the cervix, maybe worn during coitus or it might be used after intercourse as an absorbent. Various justifications for contraception are given, including the need for young girls to protect themselves from pregnancy since it might harm them physically.

The *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, Oxford University Press, 1993) notes that abortion as such is not mentioned in the bible. However it is clear that the fetus did not have the moral status of a born person. In fact, the lives of children under the age of one month were not accorded moral value, according to Leviticus 27:3-7. The Torah, in Exodus 21, speaks of two men fighting and one causing an accidental abortion. It is not treated as a capital crime as it would be if he had caused the death of the woman. Instead monetary damages are imposed as would be in a property loss. Many Jews hold that a fetus is not a fully fledged person until the birthing process itself begins. Thus various reasons could justify its termination.

In Islam both restrictive and permissive views are found on contraception and on abortion. There was support for contraception from the beginning of Islam. There are many documents from early Islam that indicate that contraception was practiced at the time of the Prophet, that some of his companions exercised it to prevent pregnancy, and the Prophet said nothing to imply that it was
Islam stresses that it is the quality of offspring, not the quantity that is the prime moral concern. Islamic authorities stress that human life should thrive and not merely survive and that having fewer children makes possible the thriving that all children deserve. Only the most compelling reasons could justify sterilization in Islam since it forestalls having a child when circumstances permit it at a later time.

Many Islamic authorities also justify abortion for serious reasons. Some Hanafite and Shafiite jurists have allowed abortion within the first 120 days of pregnancy for good reasons, while the Shiite Azidiva approve of such early abortions even if there is no serious reason for it. Some jurists in the Malikite and Dhahireya schools would prohibit all abortions. All Islamic jurists consider abortions after four months as justifiable only to save the woman’s life.

Islam illustrates again the divisions within world religions on family planning. Both the conservative and the liberal views have strong authorities supporting them. Thus civil societies that accept religious freedom should allow for both positions, i.e. permitting abortions to those who approve of them on religious grounds and protecting those who disapprove from having to have an abortion or participate in one if they are medical personnel.

The most influential Chinese religions are Taoism and Confucianism. Buddhism is also present in Chinese life. Taoism and Confucianism have been shaping Chinese culture since the Chou Dynasty (1066-256 BCE). Both traditions saw peace and harmony as the ultimate goal of life. This implies the absence of conflict between nature and human beings, between heaven and earth, and between the individual and society. This led both traditions into the issue of fertility management. The Chinese saw family planning as essential to the preservation of peace and harmony in society. This position co-existed alongside the belief that one of the worst of calamities
was not to have any posterity. As in other cultural and religious traditions we can see that fertility was perceived from experience to be both potential blessing or potential blight.

The temporary and sometimes harsh “one child” policy, without which it is estimated there would be some 250 million more Chinese, was broadly accepted by the Chinese. The drop in fertility rate from six children per woman in 1970 to near replacement level in 1990 was uniquely rapid and some scholars attribute half of this to government policies. Its harsher sanctions and abuses that sometimes accompanied this policy have merited harsh criticism. Still Westerners are surprised at the general cooperation with this policy, a cooperation with deep roots in the cultural commitment to the common good. Thus the Chinese were ready to reproduce in greater numbers when that was thought by national leaders to be good for China. In a similar vein of civic virtue, the Chinese were also generally ready to restrict births by contraception and abortion when that was asked for and seen as needed.

China has been involved in family planning for thousands of years, perhaps longer than any nation in recorded history. Many rules appeared in early China regarding marriage and reproduction, including stipulations on the right age for marriage and the spacing of children. This was seen as a matter of government concern since the government was the prime caretaker of the national family. Chinese culture has had positive attitudes toward sexuality, not seeing sex as dirty or obscene and thus it was not something that had to be justified by reproduction. Taoism stressed its health-promoting qualities more than its reproductive potential. The influential Confucian writer Han Fei (297-233 BCE) argued that the state would be happier and more prosperous if it maintained a modest population.

In Christianity, Protestantism has long been open to both contraception and abortion, and
most of the mainstream Protestant churches have made statements to that effect. Increasingly, fundamentalist Protestants have opposed abortion.

Roman Catholicism is often misrepresented as opposed to both contraception and abortion. Actually, the tradition contains strong views on both sides of the question. Although Pope Paul VI in his 1968 Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* declared all artificial contraception immoral, a number of Catholic bishops’ conferences offered quiet but noteworthy demurrals. They were supported by the vast majority of Catholic theologians and people, and the ban on contraception is adhered to by only a minority of Catholic people. Regarding abortion there is a long tradition espoused even by one canonized saint, Saint Antoninus, permitting abortion for serious reasons. The Catholic scholars Daniel A. Domrowski and Robert Deltete in their book *A Brief, Liberal Catholic Defense of Abortion* (University of Illinois Press, 2000) demonstrate the permissive view on contraception and abortion that co-existed alongside the non-permissive view with equal credentials. They also show the long Catholic tradition of not according personal moral status to the fetus until some three months into the pregnancy or even as late as quickening. For Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, principal shapers of the Catholic moral tradition, the early fetus had the moral status of a plant or vegetable, not that of a person. It could not, if miscarried or aborted be baptized or given Christian burial.

Religions are all characterized by their appreciation of life and the need to revere and enhance it. They all also came to recognize that family planning is essential to life. Laws that honor only the conservative religious view, are therefore violative of the religious integrity of the world’s major religions. The views for and against choice for abortion and family planning can find warranty in the complex tapestries of world religions.
Daniel C. Maguire, Marquette University

Further Reading


Jeremy Cohen, “Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It,”: The Ancient and Medieval