

## Diverse Religious Perspectives on Abortion Politics in the U.S.

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## **Diverse Religious Perspectives on Abortion Politics in the U.S.**

### **Introduction and Rationale**

In the United States, the collapsing boundaries between church and state have undoubtedly infiltrated reproductive politics. Policies on abortion are rooted in religious doctrines. However, religious doctrines on abortion are often presented as a singular religious morality entrenched in conservative Christianity. Religious beliefs on abortion are more complicated than the discourse that associates *all* religious values with a conservative, anti-abortion perspective. Thus, other major religions and religious perspectives should be considered. For instructors wanting to discuss religion and abortion in the classroom, this section provides an overview of the differing stances on abortion in each of the five major world religions.

Judaism, for example, has a well-defined stance on abortion. The majority of foundational Jewish texts affirm that a “fetus does not attain the status of personhood until birth” (Mikva, 2019). For example, the Mishnah asserts that if a fetus poses a threat to a pregnant woman’s life, the woman’s life takes priority. Similarly, the Mishnah notes that an execution of a pregnant woman would not be delayed unless she was already in labor. The clarity on abortion in Jewish texts reflects an overwhelming support for abortion in the Jewish community, with the exception of some orthodox and conservative Jewish denominations (Jain, 2022; Mikva, 2019). 83% of American Jews believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases (Masci, 2018). Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, however, are not as clear on their stances on abortion.

The Christian Bible neither includes the word “abortion” nor provides an explicit reference to the deliberate termination of a pregnancy (Howard, 2022). The Bible’s lack of clarity around abortion has led to dramatic shifts in public opinion over time and Christian opposition to abortion has increased (Howard, 2022; Jain, 2022). Green (2022) notes:

Approximately three-quarters of white evangelical Protestants – 77% – say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, while 63% of white Protestants who are not evangelical say abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Interestingly, attitudes of Catholic laity are more narrowly

split – 55% favor legal abortion in all or most cases, while 43% say it should be illegal in all or most cases. (para. 12)

These statistics demonstrates there is not a singular Christian perspective, and it is specifically white conservative Christians who are predominately anti-abortion.

Scholars of Islam and Muslim clerics rely on interpretations of the Qur'an's for their take on abortion. Most Muslims (both Sunni and Shia) believe that ensoulment occurs at 120 days after conception. Yet, more stringent scholars assert that 40 days post-conception, “an angel endows the fetus with hearing, sight, skin, flesh and bones,” which would indicate the formation of a human being, and deem abortion as forbidden at this point (Mohammed, n.d.). Further, some Muslims also hold the belief that the fetus is a full person from the moment of conception, and as such, any abortion is forbidden. The range in Islamic perspectives reflects the uncertainty of the Qur'an's declaration of ensoulment. This is reflected in the 55% of Muslim-Americans who agree that abortion should be legal in all or most cases (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Finally, for Hindus and Buddhists, the idea of reincarnation or rebirth is an important factor shaping their views on abortion. Unlike Abrahamic religions, Hinduism and Buddhism do not see life as having a definite beginning or end. Therefore, the concept of abortion is not understood as a finite death. Pew Research Center surveys from 2007 and 2014 show that just under 70% of Hindu-Americans said abortion should be legal in all or most cases. The surveys from the same study showed in 2007 and 2014 just over 80% of American Buddhists stated abortion should be legal in all or most cases (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Conversely, some bio-ethic scholars studying religion *outside* of a U.S. perspective suggest that Hinduism and Buddhism are pro-life religions (Aramesh, 2019; Lecso, 1987). Some scholars of Hinduism see abortion as depriving a person from one cycle of rebirth, and the person responsible for the abortion will face consequences set by the laws of karma. Abortion itself is seen as a punishment or harm placed on the fetus by karma (Aramesh, 2019). Some scholars of Japanese Buddhism see abortion as the ultimate

moral dilemma. On one hand, Buddhists are to refrain from ending life or stopping a cycle of rebirth. On the other hand, Buddhist tradition entails showing compassion for pregnant women. Abortion is one possible outcome of a choice in which one of two Buddhist moral requirements must be broken (Perrett, 2000). For both Hinduism and Buddhism, different perspectives on reincarnation lead to different moral groundings.

In this Original Teaching Activity, I argue that there is a need for classes discussing abortion politics to examine the multiplicity of religion and religious values. In other words, instructors should not only discuss (white conservative) “Christian” values or morality, but also offer perspectives from the world's major religions. To do this, instructors should dedicate at least three or four 90-minute class periods to explore the diversity of moral perspectives and ambiguity of religious doctrines by examining the religious texts from each world religion. The first two classes provide contextual grounding, the next class is for the activity, and instructors may choose to use a fourth class to have additional discussion or might opt to assign an individual assessment. By looking at the breadth and depth of major world religions, each student, regardless of their own religious beliefs, is led to the conclusion that the U.S. does not always consider all religious perspectives and uphold the notion of religious freedom in regard to abortion politics.

### **Learning Objectives**

The learning objectives focus on students’ ability to think beyond a singular ethical and religious perspective. Students will:

1. Demonstrate the ability to decenter conservative, white Christian beliefs as the primary ethical and religious stance on abortion.
2. Explain how religious stances on abortion are diverse and varied.
3. Describe the inconsistencies of the civil concept of “religious freedom” in relation to abortion politics in the U.S..

### **Explanation**

I like to ease into the conversation on diverse religious perspectives. I start by discussing abortion through Christianity for two reasons. First, I teach at a private, Lutheran institution, and I know that most of my students are familiar with at least some of the tenants of Christianity from the college or through political discourse. Second, once students can conclude that there is no monolithic Christian perspective on abortion, they can easily apply the same principle to the other world religions. Therefore, as a precursor to this activity, my students read several chapters from Parker's (2017) book *Life's Work: A Moral Argument for Choice* or Peters' (2018) book *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice*. Both books argue that a pro-choice sentiment is, in fact, compatible with Christianity and offer depth to religious values.

Parker's book offers health literacy on abortion procedures as a practicing OBGYN and one of the few abortion providers in the south, as well as his perspective as a Black, Christian man growing up in the Black church. As Parker states, his experiences changed him from someone who, for religious reasons, refused to offer abortion services to someone who became an abortion provider *because* of their religious convictions. As he explains:

As I matured in my both my faith and profession, I found I was increasingly at odds with myself, an inner conflict that sat uncomfortably with me. I never questioned women's individual choices, but until I found clarity and certainty around the abortion issue—what I call the head-heart connection—I recused myself, as a practitioner, from the fight. (pp. 2-3).

This reading prepares students for a conversation on abortion because it welcomes evolving perspectives on complex and stigmatized subjects. The book also highlights the effects of anti-abortion rhetoric—including the murder of Dr. George Tiller—and debunks myths surrounding abortion. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that Parker was at the center of a #MeToo scandal. In March 2019, Parker was accused of sexual misconduct by another reproductive justice activist (Bullock, 2020; Jones, 2019). While I argue that Parker's book adds a unique perspective that speaks to issues of intersectionality, the complications of his credibility must be a part of the conversation. Some instructors may feel such a

conversation distracts from the exercise at hand, so I also include another source emphasizing the connections between Christianity and support for abortion.

Peters' book tells her account of accessing multiple abortions. Similar to Parker, Peters (2018) asserts that it is *because* of her religious beliefs that she is pro-choice. She states, "I did not choose to end my pregnancies despite my Christian identity and faith but rather because of it" (p. 2). For Peters, a true Christian perspective on abortion is to trust women to make their own ethical decisions. Peters also mirrors the personal, professional, and religious ethos of Parker. She not only understands the Christian ethics of reproductive justice as a Christian woman, but also as an ordained Presbyterian minister with a Ph.D. in Christian social ethics. Peters (2018) pivots from outdated (racist and misogynistic) Christian frameworks to demonstrate larger social forces, including (1) the impact of policies based on bodily control, (2) how misogyny and patriarchy are rooted in our social foundations, and (3) reimagining pregnancy and religious doctrines to achieve reproductive freedom.

After reading from Parker's or Peters' book, students will work in groups to research the breadth, complexity, and conflicting nature of moral arguments surrounding abortion in the major world religions. Discussing chapters from Parker's or Peters' book takes at least two 90-minute class periods. Students will then be able to conceptualize the diversity of abortion beliefs within Christianity. This activity, outlined below, takes up two more 90-minute class periods and consists of three parts. After the activity, students will understand the breadth and depth of abortion perspectives in the world's major religions.

First, I have students break into four groups and assign each group one of the five major world religions outside of Christianity: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Explaining the activity and assigning students to a group will take about five minutes. Second, students are tasked with answering the following discussion questions:

1. What do the religious texts for your assigned religion say about:
  - a. Sex?
  - b. Pregnancy?
  - c. When life begins?
  - d. Abortion?

Find direct quotes from these religious texts or interpretations of these religious texts to support your claims.

2. Is the word “abortion” in the religious text/s of your assigned religion? How does the text make a direct or indirect reference to abortion, pregnancy, and the beginning of life?
3. What are the complexities or contradictions across interpretations of the religious text/s for your assigned religion?
4. Do policies in the United States align with your assigned religion’s stances on abortion? Why or why not?

I allow students to find their own sources; however, if students are having trouble finding reliable research I direct them to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and the Guttmacher Institute websites. Although both websites are from pro-choice institutions, they present research with a wide range of interpretations, including orthodox and conservative to contemporary and progressive views on abortion. Answering the questions will take 45-60 minutes. Most of this time should be dedicated to the first question.

Finally, I ask each group to present the information it found on their assigned religion to the class. I invite students to challenge their misconceptions on religious groups outside of their own and be inclusive and thoughtful about their language choice. I ask each group to give a five-minute presentation to leave room for discussion/debriefing. It helps if your students have already practiced presenting as a group in front of the class and are aware of group presentation expectations.

### **Debriefing and Assessment**

After presentations, instructors should lead a discussion in the next class period, ask students to write a personal reflection, or assign a short essay connected to the activity. The discussion/writing prompts invite students to highlight the differences and similarities between religious stances on reproductive politics, as well as how each world religion does not have a singular stance on abortion. To do this, students should provide support for their answers by citing the texts from the in-class activity. Support for their claims might include which religious texts directly reference abortion and which do not.

Students might also provide comparisons on different theologies for when personhood or ensoulment occurs. Regardless of the evidence that students gather, students will conclude that there is still strong religious doctrine that shapes the ethicality and morality around abortion practices in public discourse and the ambiguity a religious text inherently brings to competing interpretations of the same religious readings.

Finally, it is important to lead students to the conclusion that there is a collective cognitive dissonance for how civil values of “separation of church and state” and “religious freedom,” as articulated in the First Amendment of the U. S. Constitution, relate to current anti-abortion policies in the U.S. Conversations about religion often get reduced to conservative Christianity, which minimizes the freedoms for folks who hold other religious beliefs on reproductive justice. I ask the class to reimagine what religious freedom, for everyone, would look like in the U.S. regarding abortion politics. This reimagining might lead your students to policy reform or the creation of a fictional reproductive justice utopia. In all, this activity is successful in students recognizing that true religious freedom means legal and accessible abortion healthcare and encourages critical democratic citizenship toward reproductive justice for all.

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