CHRISTIANITY AND REPRODUCTION: A BRIEF DISCUSSION

Giuseppe Benagiano, Sabina Carrara, Valentina Filippi

Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Urology, Sapienza, University of Rome, Rome, Italy

Abstract

All three major monotheistic religions hold that sexual activity is ethically permissible only within the sanction of marriage. Within Christianity differences exist as to the meanings of sexuality and whether human interventions made possible by technologic progress are ethically acceptable. Specifically, on the issue of whether it can be permitted to separate sexuality from reproduction, the Roman Catholic Church remains totally opposed to modern contraceptive technology; Orthodox Churches instead, have of late moved towards permitting the use of certain modern methods of contraception within marriage. Protestant Churches initially held a critical attitude, although later they generally accepted and approved birth spacing through contraception; the first to do so being the Anglican Communion. With regard to assisted reproduction technology (ART), the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches believe that they expose mankind to the temptation to go beyond the limits of a reasonable dominion over nature and therefore disapprove of them. On the contrary, today most Protestant denominations accept ART, arguing that a couple should have a right to achieve the legitimate goal of having a child even if this means resorting to a partly external act. Finally, with regard to treating infertility, the position of the Roman Catholic Church that, from an ethical standpoint, childless women should not be helped through IVF has come under strong criticism because, in a number of countries, childlessness is a real curse, usually much more serious in the developing world. Protestant denominations seem to agree with the internationally sanctioned right for couples to see that, whenever possible, their infertility should be treated. In this connection, in practical terms, the Catholic Church has often acted to promote legislation that, without banning IVF, limits its interventions to couples aiming at obtaining a child who is the offspring of both the members of the couple seeking a child.
Introduction

Throughout the course of human history, sexuality has been loaded with multiple meanings, ranging from love, lust, pleasure, reproduction, the need for protection and support and a desire to maintain and fortify the bond between man and woman [01].

In particular, all three major monotheistic religions hold that sexual activity is ethically permissible only within the sanction of marriage, an institution they not only strenuously defend, but support in every possible way.

In the Christian world, although marriage is viewed positively by all denominations, differences exist as to the meanings of sexuality and about human interventions made possible by progress in reproductive biology and medicine.

In analyzing the meaning of sexuality within the Christian world, the most visible point is an apparent contradiction between early Christian teaching on sexuality and God’s command reported in the holy Bible [02]: «Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it; be master of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on earth». Why, confronted with such an explicit command early Christian theologians and fathers of the Church, instead of encouraging procreation praised total abstinence? The reality is that Christ himself preached, in no uncertain terms, the superiority of celibacy to marriage and sexual activity. This position was then violently opposed by the Protestant reform [03], but has remained – to this day – a cornerstone of Catholic teaching.

Given this long held negative position toward non-conceptive sexuality, how did the Catholic and Orthodox Churches react to the new technologies separating sexuality and reproduction and making reproduction possible without a sexual act?

Here we wish to briefly outline some of the differences existing within the Christian world on these main issues concerning reproductive ethics.

Contraception

While all major monotheistic religions see sexuality as focused on reproduction differences exist on whether it should be permitted to separate sexuality from reproduction. Those in favor, argue that humans have tried to practice contraception ever since they began to leave written records [04] and that therefore this is a natural desire that must be considered positively. Those opposed point out that God bound together sexuality and reproduction and therefore man cannot separate these two aspects [05].
Notwithstanding the still ongoing ethical debate, it is a fact that when, in the nineteen fifties, practical methods of controlling fertility became available a true social revolution took place [06] This major social development, labeled “contraceptive revolution” did not go unchallenged because the very idea that natural human evolution moved sexuality away from a situation where non-procreative sexual activity was considered almost a “side effect” with even negative connotations, has been resisted by all those who advocated maintaining traditional values.

In particular, the Roman Catholic Church remains totally opposed to modern contraceptive technology, in accordance with a long tradition [01]. A similar attitude was initially taken by the Orthodox Churches, although, more recently, a new view has prevailed among Orthodox theologians and thinkers; they argue in favor of permitting the use of certain modern methods of contraception within marriage for the purpose of spacing children, enhancing the expression of marital love, and protecting health [07]. Also Protestant Churches initially held a critical attitude, although later they generally accepted and approved birth spacing through contraception. The first Protestant denomination to formally accept contraception was the Anglican Church in 1930, when – at the Lambeth Conference – they explicitly admitted the morality, within marriage, of the form of birth control that we would today call “family planning through artificial means” [08]. At the time, such an enormous breach with tradition provoked an immediate reaction by Pope Pius XI [09] through an encyclical letter restating traditional teaching, namely condemning birth control (artificial contraception), while at the same time admitting birth regulation (natural family-planning).

Assisted Reproduction

Another area of disagreement within Christianity is Assisted Reproduction Technology (ART), the biggest revolution yet in human reproduction. It should be obvious even to secular thinkers that ART must have an ethical dimension, since it acts by ‘creating’ a new human life. Naturally, the new technology can be viewed positively because it can help an endless number of infertile couples to have their own babies. In addition, discussing the ethics of the most widely employed ART, In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) can help a great deal those involved in it making them conscious of all arguments against the procedures [10]. Therefore, those in the scientific community who believe that criticisms and arguments against ART are damaging and not in the best interest of society should consider a simple fact: in the final analysis it is the ethical discussion that will help shaping guidelines and laws regulating these practices [11].
A number of ethical objections to IVF have been repeatedly made by the Catholic Magisterium [12]:

1. God wants human life to begin through the ‘conjugal act’ and not in an artificial way.
2. Artificial interventions at the beginning of human life are dangerous and may lead to abuse.
3. Limits can and should be imposed upon an individual’s own conscience and therefore to her/his freedom to achieve even a legitimate goal, such as having a child within marriage.
4. The massive loss of early, pre-implantation embryos that characterizes IVF, represents nothing less that a tragic loss of ‘nascent’ human persons.
5. IVF has made possible a series of abuses ranging from abandoned embryos to surrogate motherhood, to pregnancy after 50 years of age, to eugenics.
6. There can be deleterious effects for offspring born after some of the newest techniques.
7. ART does not eliminate causes of infertility, nor does it solve the plight of most childless women.

These points have been already discussed elsewhere [12] and here they will be only briefly mentioned. Summing-up the situation, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches believe that “These techniques can enable man to take in hand his own destiny, but they also expose him to the temptation to go beyond the limits of a reasonable dominion over nature” [13]. The issue of man taking his own destiny in his hands is an important one, since from the moment it appeared on Earth, Homo Sapiens set himself in the position of interfering with and modifying natural evolution, attempting to heal himself, resorting to agriculture to improve his food supply, domesticating animals to obtain extra help in his daily work and making all kind of discoveries aimed at altering the “natural course” of events. Medical progress that all Churches praise is indeed aimed at modifying the natural course of diseases and at intervening in all sorts of biological situations; therefore, it has been argued that there should be no reason why the Creator would place one and only one limit to human ingenuity.

There is another point worth discussing here: the “massive loss” of embryo caused by IVF. Here the situation is complex, given the position of the Catholic Church that human life must be granted full protection from its inception [14]. At the same time, embryology tells us that in the human species there is a natural major loss of embryos during the first stages of development [15]. Although this phenomenon cannot contradict the Church’s position which is based on metaphysical considerations [16], it can help solve – from a non-religious point of view – the ethical issue of embryo loss in IVF and help ethicists, philosophers and policy makers in their evaluation of when the life of a new human individual begins and in determining the nature of protection to be accorded to it at the various stages of development.
It is well-known that the rate of spontaneous abortions, although increasing with age, overall does not exceed 15%. However, abortion rates refer only to “clinical pregnancy” (i.e. the interruption of a gestation that has been already detected) and evidence is now available that early embryonic loss among fertile women is much more common than generally believed. Indeed, human fecundity rarely exceeds 35% and may be decreasing due to deterioration in semen quality; in addition, there are embryological studies showing that 50% of randomly recovered pre-implantation embryos had severe anomalies that would have prevented their further growth. Furthermore, studying early sensitive markers of pregnancy, such as serum human Chorionic Gonadotropin (hCG) also indicates substantial embryo wastage, in the order of 50%, during the first two weeks after fertilization [15]. Finally, in “spontaneous ovulation”/natural IVF cycles, results also show major losses, with an overall pregnancy rate of 7.2% per cycle and 15.8% per transfer [16].

As expected, opposite conclusions have been drawn from these findings. On the one hand, secular scientists have argued that the fertilized ovum cannot be considered a person because it lacks individuality (in the earliest stages all its cells have the potential to evolve into a human being); that if a fertilized ovum is already a human person, then all gross, non-viable, early abnormalities are human persons and “personifying” early human embryos, means accepting that countless human beings never had even the slightest chance to express their potential [17]. On the other hand, theists have concluded that such a massive loss of early human embryos does not imply that human embryos are not human beings or persons. They reason that what makes a group of contiguous cells an embryo depends on what it is, not what it may, or may not, eventually become [18].

Within the Christian world two positions exist: as already mentioned, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches teach an absolute respect for human life from its inception and the requirement that a new human life must begin only through natural means [07, 19].

The Protestant world, on the other hand, contends that a couple should have a right to achieve the legitimate goal of having a child even if this means resorting to a partly external act. Seeking the help of professionals who act as “stewards of a pregnancy” should therefore be perfectly ethical, since even if on the specific occasion that begins gestation external help is sought, the act of conception would remain “within the zone of their intimate married life” [20]. In other words, even if conception occurs outside the woman’s body, this happens because the spouses ask for help in fulfilling the scope of their conjugal act.
The Ethics of Treating Infertility

It is well known that in a number of countries childlessness is a real curse and that infertile women can be divorced simply on the ground that they cannot provide an heir to their families. For this reason, the position of Roman Catholic Church that, from its ethical standpoint these childless women should not be helped through IVF, has come under strong criticism, especially because, tragically, this curse is much more serious in the developing world, where women often enjoy less rights than in the West.

It has been argued that in addition to the personal grief and the moral suffering it causes, the inability to have children, especially in poor communities in the developing world, can produce broader problems, particularly for women; it creates a social stigma, economic hardship, social isolation and even violence. In some societies, motherhood is the only way for women to improve their status within the family and the community. On a practical level, many families in developing countries depend on children for economic survival. For these reasons, the debate on whether “infertility is a disease” and therefore should be cured, becomes irrelevant for two reasons: first infertility is always the consequence of an abnormal, often pathologic situation; second, for sure it is a social and public health issue as well as an individual problem [21].

Recently a report appeared in the journal Nature [22] describing the story of a woman named Betty Chishava from Harare, Zimbabwe, who was thrown out of her family home because she failed to conceive and refused to sleep with her brother-in-law to increase her chances of getting pregnant. She did not have access to treatment and in her culture she could not negotiate her status in her family and society outside motherhood. In commenting this episode, Effy Vayema [23] pointed out that this is unfortunately not a rare story; rather it is the reality for many infertile women in developing countries. In addition, infertility is not usually considered a developing world problem and for good reasons the provision of infertility services and especially assisted reproduction are not on the resource allocation agenda.

In 1994 the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, to which the Holy See participated signing the final document, although lodging a number of ethical objections, affirmed the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children [24]. Indeed, helping couples to have children has represented the other side of the coin for fertility by choice, especially because the social burden of infertility falls disproportionately on women and they go to great length in their quest for a baby [25].
In discussing the right to access to infertility care, there is a sentence in the Cairo definition of reproductive health that can only be interpreted as establishing a right for couples to see that, whenever possible, their infertility should be treated. The sentence states: “Reproductive health therefore implies that people … have the ability to reproduce …” [24]. Establishing such a right is therefore not a small endeavor, since it has been calculated that already twenty years ago, sixty to eighty million people experienced infertility around the world, most of them living in developing countries where their right to treatment remains a dream [26].

With regard to the Catholic Church, although holding the position that ART is a technique that overall cannot be accepted on ethical grounds, in practical terms it has often acted to promote legislation that without banning IVF, limits its interventions to those aiming at obtaining a child who is the offspring of both the members of the couple seeking a child.

One final ethical point: over the last decades people from Western countries have cultivated the belief that overpopulation, not infertility is the major problem of developing countries, creating a practical, but important barrier to even consider infertility treatment in resource-poor countries. Pennings [27] has argued that what this approach fails to take into consideration is the fact that we are dealing with the personal suffering of individuals, not with global solutions and we cannot avoid helping them. At the same time, it must be stressed that infertility treatment can only be considered when two conditions are fulfilled; first a minimal level of political stability and a minimal basic structure of health care provisions. Second, the fact that we should not discuss only high technological interventions like IVF, but include other interventions of a lower technical nature.

Nonetheless, it is important to notice that the issue of a “right to treatment of infertility” was raised, among the first by an Indian scientist [28], indicating that this issue is considered important also in the developing world.

Conclusions

This brief overview was aimed at summarizing the position of Christian Churches on reproduction and sexuality with special emphasis on ART, an area that has created great ethical controversy. Within the Catholic Church, although restricted by specific pronouncements by the Magisterium, the debate on ethical aspects of human reproduction continues because, being a member of the Catholic faith means, above all, believing in God Unum et Trinum; it also means believing in Jesus Christ and in his teaching as reported in the 4 canonical Gospels. Last, but not least, it means following the instructions and
recommendations of the Catholic Magisterium. This however does not mean accepting any decision or ruling by the Magisterium without discernment, as much as abiding by a civil law dose not mean “agreeing” with that law. If this were not the case, then the Church would have never accepted the Copernican system and formally apologise, albeit 350 years later, for having done a great wrong to Galilei. Nor would it have accepted the principles of evolution, granted with certain inevitable limitations, fully rehabilitating Fr. Theilard de Chardin who first among churchmen/scientists exposed this new path. And, more recently would not have beatified the Catholic philosopher Antonio Rosmini who – in his lifetime – was silenced by the Holy Office for writing “against the Church”.

REFERENCES


