

Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.

**THE ISSUE OF ABORTION WITHIN CHRISTIANITY IN CONTEMPORARY
BRITAIN**

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GLOSSARY

Abortion – The process of terminating a pregnancy so that it does not result in pregnancy

Contraception- The deliberate prevention of conception

Ectopic pregnancy- where the foetus develops in the fallopian tube and must be operated on

Embryo- An unborn baby in the earlier stages of pregnancy

Foetus- An unborn baby in the later stages of pregnancy

Miscarriage- loss of foetus or embryo in the first 23 weeks of pregnancy

CASE STUDY

According to the BBC, Savita Halappanavar was denied an abortion after she was told she was undergoing a miscarriage. The lack of abortion was fatal and she died several days later from infection¹. As Ireland is traditionally Roman Catholic, the views revolving around abortion reflect that of the Church. However, not all Christian denominations regard abortion with the same rules, Protestantism for example, although not encouraging abortion, can accept it in some situations. This guide will also look at the foetus' rights as well as woman's rights concerning abortion and considering the case of Savita Halappanavar in both. Her case

¹ BBC News Europe, "Woman dies after abortion request is 'refused' at Galway hospital," November 14, 2012, accessed January 13, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20321741>.

will also be referenced to when looking at the legality of abortion and medical issues. As this issue is controversial in contemporary Britain, this guide will be beneficial to all audiences.

The Catholic interpretation of abortion

The Catholic faith has very strong views on the subject of abortion often viewing it as ‘murder’² due to the sanctity of life from conception³ it is therefore, completely rejected in Catholicism. Even in the case where a mother’s life is threatened it is not allowed. The woman is reminded of her ‘duty allocated to her by nature’ in which ‘the direct murder of the innocent’ could never be sanctioned⁴. This is why in the previous case of Savita Halappanavar, an abortion was not permitted. However, there is some speculation as to whether this view has a place in contemporary Britain. As the legality behind abortion has changed over time, Beattie believes that ‘the Church needs to stop preaching the gospel in its old fashioned way and make it more accessible to modern day issues’⁵. The reason for this view is that Christianity extracts its beliefs from the divine authority in the Bible but as the Bible does not speak directly about abortion, it is the opinion of the individual Christian denominations as to the rules revolving around abortion. Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Richardson state that the omission of abortion is due to the fact that ‘the mere possibility of harming, attacking or actually denying a life in these circumstances is completely foreign to

² Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1966), 62.

³ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Realigning Catholic Priorities: Bioethics and the common good,” *America Vol.191*, September 14, 2004, accessed January 13,2014, <http://www.americamagazine.org/issue/495/article/realigning-catholic-priorities>

⁴ Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Richardson, *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), 280.

⁵ Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 15.

the religious and cultural way of thinking of the people of God⁶ whereas in modern day, abortion is seen as a 'right' for women.

Although the direct abortion of a foetus is deemed as wrong, the Catholic Church allows the death of foetus if it is a by-product of another surgical procedure. For example, if a woman were to have an ectopic pregnancy in which the by-product of the surgery is the abortion of the foetus⁷. Therefore, as long as the termination of the foetus is not done on purpose, the Catholic Church's views are less restrictive.

Other Christian denominations

Catholicism is not the only Christian denomination, there are numerous with different interpretations of abortion due to the fact that abortion is not specifically mentioned in the Bible. Although many of the denominations discourage abortion, the Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian churches accept it⁸. Jones also adds that the Methodist Conference's views have differed. In 1961, abortion was denied as 'destruction of human life', in 1966 abortion was legitimate in specific cases and 'in 1976 it implied that a foetus could hardly be termed a 'person', but said that there was never a time when it 'totally lacks human significance'⁹. As well as this, Beattie adds that 'Catholic theology is radically different from Protestant theology in its treatment of gender and sacramentality'¹⁰ showing that there is a difference between Catholicism and Protestantism which is reinforced by Jones again who explains that where Catholics are strict in some rules 'Protestants appear to have been rigid over quite different matters (e.g. gambling) and tolerant over others (e.g. abortion)¹¹. Therefore, in

⁶ Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*, 281.

⁷ Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch, *The Puzzle of Ethics* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1999)1, 24.

⁸ Religion facts, "Comparison of Christian Denominations' ethical views," May 5, 2013, accessed January 13, 2014, http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/charts/denominations_ethics.htm.

⁹ Richard G. Jones, *Groundwork of Christian Ethics* (London: Epworth Press, 1984), 180-181.

¹⁰ Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 15.

¹¹ Jones, *Groundwork of Christian Ethics*, 184.

reference to the case of Mrs Halappanavar, if her miscarriage occurred in a less restrictive religious country, her abortion might have been accepted, resulting in her life. It was only due to the fact that the laws in Ireland were so restrictive that her abortion was denied.

The foetus' rights

Reasons for the controversy of this particular topic in Britain today vary. According to Peter and Grosch, there are two issues when looking at abortion. The first consists of whether a foetus is considered a person or a potential person and the second is whether the foetus has any rights and if it does, how these are measured in comparison to the mother's rights¹². For example, in Ireland, there are strict Catholic laws in place therefore meaning that abortion is not permitted. In the case of Savita Halappanavar who was denied an abortion, both her and her baby died, despite her not being Catholic. The foetus was considered to be a person, by Roman Catholic laws and this therefore meant that the mother had equal rights to the foetus. 'The Roman Catholic position is adamant in seeing the fertilized egg and the foetus as 'persons' and legitimately refers to them as innocent'¹³ which means that abortion cannot happen. However, the controversy lies in the fact that opinions regarding the foetus' differ from faith to faith, denomination to denomination. According to Vardy and Grosch, Michael Tooley concludes that 'if a being lacks conscious of self and has no self-conscious feelings about its own future existence it is not a person at all'¹⁴ showing that a foetus should not have the same rights as the mother. However, the reason for the denominational difference is due to the fact that there is no apparent precursor of this [abortion] in the Bible, no discussion

¹² Vardy and Grosch, *The Puzzle of Ethics*, 145.

¹³ Jones, *Groundwork of Christian Ethics*, 199.

¹⁴ Vardy and Grosch, *The Puzzle of Ethics*, 147.

about the significance of the foetus or embryo.¹⁵ Therefore, all religious opinions of abortion are interpretations of the sacred text.

The woman's right

As mentioned previously, a key issue of abortion is due to whether the foetus can be considered a person and if so, what rights does this foetus have? Similarly, another key issue is whether abortion can be considered to be a woman's right. Legally, laws have changed and Buckley and Anderson state that these reforms in the 1960s and 1970s were not directly linked to abortion but more so due to political and legal changes. They continue however, with the belief that 'it was the woman's life which was most influenced by an unwanted pregnancy and therefore she should be the one to have the final say'¹⁶. This is also the case when looking at Peter Singer who argues that 'women who must earn have an acute need to control their fertility'¹⁷ he continues to say this control, through contraception and abortion, is necessary in order to avoid issues such as poverty and overpopulated families which he mentions previously. However, previously, the Catholic faith in reference to abortion was explained. Beattie adds that Catholicism rejects the idea of female sexuality due to the celibate nature of the Catholic faith. Beattie also expresses that the faith should 'challenge war and violence with the same unyielding absolutism with which she challenges abortion and contraception.'¹⁸ In the case of Savita Halappanavar, Buckley and Anderson as well as Jones suggest that the pregnancy should have been terminated as was the woman's right. However, Beattie explains that Catholicism rejects abortion due to the celibacy of the faith and the idea that pregnancy should always happen within the sanctity of marriage in which there is no need for abortion. In this case study however, the abortion was necessary due to an

¹⁵ Jones, *Groundwork to Christian Ethics*, 47.

¹⁶ Joyce Outshoorn, edited by Mary Buckley and Malcolm Anderson, *Women, Equality and Europe* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), 206- 207.

¹⁷ Peter Singer, *A companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 304.

¹⁸ Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 4.

unwanted pregnancy, more so because of a medical emergency and so the laws of abortion in Ireland are currently under review.

The legality of abortion

As Britain has become a secular society, it has become necessary that the laws reflect this. According to Mary Buckley and Malcolm Anderson, who have an intense knowledge of the subject, the laws revolving around abortion have undergone a number of changes throughout history. In the 1920s, there was an abortion movement but these were only achieved in the Scandinavian countries. The 60s and 70s introduced a reformation law on abortion which did not take off in Belgium, Ireland and Greece¹⁹. According to the Abortion Act of 1967, the abortion of a foetus is legal as long as it does not exceed the twenty fourth week. Previous to the Abortion Act of 1967, strict laws had forced women to undergo risky abortions often leading to serious health risks²⁰ and some in contemporary Britain, an abortion is legal if it is to 'prevent grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman'²¹. Jones terms this form of abortion 'therapeutic abortion' which he states would be difficult to avoid considering is permitted by law²². However, Cahill reminds us that God's command is to act lovingly²³ and so in the case of Savita Halappanavar Cahill would suggest that the abortion was the most lovingly thing to do, as although the foetus was going to die, the fatality of the mother was not necessary. The Abortion Act of 1967 would have allowed a safe termination due to the fact the foetus was only 19 weeks. The lack of abortion in this case, caused risks to the father's mental health as he is left devastated by the deaths of both his unborn baby and his wife.

¹⁹ Outshoorn, *Women, Equality and Europe*, 204.

²⁰ Outshoorn, *Women, Equality and Europe*, 205.

²¹ "Abortion Act of 1967," *The National Archives*, January 3, 2007, accessed January 13, 2014, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1967/87/section/1>.

²² Jones, *Groundwork of Christian Ethics*, 196.

²³ Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, 62.

Medical Issues

According to the NHS, ‘depending on how many weeks you have been pregnant, the pregnancy is ended either by taking medication or by having a surgical procedure’²⁴ and Jones explains that the 1967 Abortion Act allows abortion when the mother’s life is threatened, either physically or mentally and when the risk to the mother and family is greater if the termination is not undergone²⁵. Therefore, according to Jones theory, Mrs Halappanavar’s abortion should have been allowed to take place due to the fact that her life was at risk. Buckley and Anderson explain abortion ‘a ‘back-up’ method to the more accepted forms of birth control’ however Singer brings up the argument that although advancements in contraception have lowered issues including poverty, death rates and severe strains on families, no contraception is completely effective²⁶ and therefore, abortion is necessary in order to keep these issues minimal. Joseph Fletcher also adds to this argument stating that ‘*In most situations* birth control by prevention, for example, is better than abortion’²⁷.

As mentioned in the ‘legality of abortion’ section, the laws regarding abortion have changed dramatically in the last hundred years. Regarding the medical issues behind this, Buckley and Anderson state that the introduction of the new laws was in order to make the process safer however, although debates made abortion safer, they also undermined the ethical dominance of the churches²⁸. Buckley and Anderson would perhaps suggest therefore that the Catholic Church in Ireland avoids ethical dominance by enforcing religious laws and therefore, in the case of Savita Halappanavar, it is not the case that her life was at risk, more so the fact that religiously, abortion is deemed wrong.

²⁴ “Abortion”

²⁵ Jones, *Groundwork of Christian Ethics*, 200.

²⁶ Singer, *A Companion to Ethics*, 303-304.

²⁷ Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, 122.

²⁸ Outshoorn, *Women, Equality and Europe*, 205-206.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Abortion Act of 1967.” *The National Archives*. January 3, 2007. Accessed January 13, 2014, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1967/87/section/1>.

The National Archives provide information regarding British law. This website provides the necessary information regarding the laws revolving around abortion. This website was not useful for development of discussion in the Guide as it does not offer any Christian views however, the information gained was vital when researching the legality of abortion.

Beattie, Tina. *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Tina Beattie, the British theologian and catholic feminist, focuses on the theories of theologians in regards to the Catholic faith. Her focus on abortion is somewhat limited as her book is dedicated to the discussion of different theorists’ opinion. This permits theories in which situations can be applied to, but does not specifically refer to abortion in great detail. This book contains valuable research regarding Catholic views but lacked the intense knowledge regarding Catholic views and abortion.

BBC News Europe. “Woman dies after abortion request is ‘refused’ at Galway hospital.” November 14, 2012. Accessed January 13, 2014. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20321741>.

The BBC, ‘British Broadcasting Corporation’, reports news amongst other things. This website was invaluable for the Guide, providing a case study extremely useful in the study of Christianity and the views of abortion. As the woman reported was in Ireland during her miscarriage, where the laws are strict, this provided the Catholic viewpoint regarding abortion. As well as this, the website refers to the health risks regarding her miscarriage, prompting the discussion about health risks. The information provided in this website was vital for the Guide.

Cahill, Lisa Sowle. “Realigning Catholic Priorities: Bioethics and the common good.” *America*, September 14, 2004. Accessed January 13, 2014. <http://www.americamagazine.org/issue/495/article/realigning-catholic-priorities>.

Lisa Sowle Cahill, a professor of theology at Boston College, provides knowledge regarding Catholic ethical opinion especially regarding gender relations in her article. She somewhat focuses on the rights and wrong of abortion and therefore, contributes effective information regarding the Guide. Although the ethics discussed was valuable, other resources proved to be more useful.

Clark, Elizabeth A, and Richardson, Herbert. *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought*. New York: Harper Collins, 1977.

Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson's book does not strictly focus on abortion however, the chapter devoted Twentieth Century Issues reviews abortion within Christianity as well as looking at previous Pope's opinions on the topic. This offers constructive research, useful when looking at views of Catholic views on abortion.

Fletcher, Joseph. *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1966.

Fletcher's literature regarding abortion was minimal. The focus on Catholic views was important in the Guide however, the information regarding other denominations was limited. This resource provided more theories that abortion could be applied to rather than specific information regarding abortion in Christianity which did not prove to be as useful as other literature.

Jones, Richard G. *Groundwork of Christian Ethics*. London: Epworth Press, 1984.

Jones' book offered detailed information regarding Christian ethical theology and was advantaged in the focus of many Christian denominations. This book also discussed different Pope's opinions regarding abortion throughout history, giving a rounded review of the subject. This book also provides legal research of the 'Abortion Act' proving this literature to be extremely useful for the topic of the Guide.

Joyce Outshoorn, edited by Buckley, Mary and Anderson, Malcolm. *Women, Equality and Europe*. London: Macmillan Press, 1988.

Mary Buckley is a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh and Malcolm Anderson is a Professor of Politics at the same institution. This book addresses issues regarding equality by exploring different essays on different issues of equality. Although this book does not specifically research abortion, the information provided gives good background research. There are limitations when looking at Christian views of abortion as this book mainly focuses on the facts rather than religious opinions.

NHS Choices. "Abortion." *NHS Choices*. June 12, 2012. Accessed January 13, 2014. <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Abortion/Pages/Introduction.aspx>.

The NHS, National Health Service, is a website useful for explaining medical issues. This was useful when looking at medical processes of abortion as well as the issues regarding miscarriage. This website was limited due the focus on abortion and did not provide information regarding Christianity.

Religion facts. "Comparison of Christian Denominations' ethical views." May 5, 2013. Accessed January 13, 2014. http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/charts/denominations_ethics.htm.

This website provided brief information regarding different denominations and their views of ethical issues. It was limited in its research of abortion in specific denominations however it provided the information that was necessary.

Vardy, Peter and Grosch, Paul. *The Puzzle of Ethics*. London: Fount Paperbacks, 1999.

The puzzle of Ethics provided specific information regarding the Guide's topic. It offered information regarding the Pope and Catholic moral theology as well as detailed information regarding the rights of the foetus along with comparison of other scholars work. This book provided extremely useful information and was only limited in its focus of Catholicism rather than Christianity as a whole which would have been more beneficial to the Guide.