

CONTRACEPTION AND BIRTH CONTROL: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PERSPECTIVES ACROSS DIFFERENT RELIGIONS

Anusha Shakya

Ph.D. (Buddhist Studies)

University of Delhi

E-mail: anushashakya@gmail.com

Abstract—Humans have tried to control fertility for centuries. Primitive, preliterate civilizations practiced infanticide and abortion. When primitive women understood the advantages of conception control, they tried, when possible to use contraception. In the 4th century BC, Plato and Aristotle advocated a one-child family.

Religion can be a powerful influence on sexual attitudes and behavior for many individuals. It can often form a society's viewpoint towards human sexuality. When a particular religion is practiced by many people in a society, it contributes to that society's culture and influences those who don't practice religion. For many people, religion plays a significant role in influencing the decision about birth control and the use of contraceptives. The knowledge of contraception has been accounted for since early times.

Issues regarding birth control and contraception have a long history. Religious views on birth control vary widely, and even those religions that seem to be the most opposed to birth control have traditions that allow the use of contraceptives.

In this paper, I am going to explore the hypothesis "Effect of religion on the decision to use contraception in India". Also, this paper is an attempt to critically analyze the different religious theories about the use of contraceptives.

Keywords: Religion, Contraception, Birth control, Sexuality, Humans.

Introduction

Religious adherents vary widely in their views on birth control. This can be true even between different branches of one faith. Some religious believers find that their opinions of the use of birth control differ from the belief espoused by the leaders of their faith, and many grapple with the ethical dilemma of what is conceived as "correct action" according to their faith versus Personal circumstances, reason, and choice. Religious texts can be viewed as a means to a spiritual goal, rather than merely a restriction on what is and is not acceptable. Personal interpretation of religious texts and

aspects of faith can vary. Religious leaders within the same faith may also interpret the same text differently.

The objective of this research paper is to elucidate the religious and cultural influence that may affect the acceptance and use of various methods of contraception, including emergency contraception.

The general meaning of contraception

According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, Contraception is the deliberate use of artificial methods or other technique to prevent pregnancy as a consequence of sexual intercourse. The major forms of artificial contraception are barrier methods, of which the commonest is the condom or sheath; the contraception pill, which contains synthetic sex hormones which prevent the fertilized ovum from implanting in the uterus and male or female sterilization.

Different Religious Perspectives

The knowledge of contraception has been accounted for since early times. Early Islamic medical texts, ancient Jewish sources, and sacred Hindu scriptures all mention that herbal contraceptives could induce temporary sterility. Religious views on birth control vary widely, and even those religions that seem to be the most opposed to birth control have traditions that allow the use of contraceptives. Religion in India is characterized by a diversity of religious beliefs and practices. India is a secular state with no state religion. The Indian subcontinent is the birthplace of four of the world's major religions; namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, and Christianity. Throughout India's history, religion has been an important part of the country's culture.

Hinduism-

Hinduism is not in against of contraception; however, they prefer procreation after marriage. Most Hindus accept that there is a duty to have a family during a particular stage of

life. Ancient Indian texts referred this stage as a "**GRIHASTHA ASHRAMA**". There is no ban on birth control and the use of contraception in Hinduism. Some Hindu scriptures include advice on what a couple should do to promote conception- thus providing contraceptive advice to those who want it. However, most Hindus accept that there is a duty to have a family during the householder stage of life, and are unlikely to use contraception to avoid having children altogether.

According to traditional Hindu texts, it is normal in ancient times to have large families. Yet, Hindu scriptures that applaud small families also exist which emphasizes the development of a positive social conscience. So, family planning is seen as an ethical good in Ancient Indian society. The Upanishads describes birth control methods, and some Hindu scriptures contain advice on what a couple should do to promote conception with the help of natural remedies. Hindu scholars have different views about contraception. Gandhiji advocated abstinence as a form of birth control, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, an Indian Philosopher, and Rabindra Nath Tagore, the most prolific writer in modern Indian Literature, encouraged the use of artificial contraceptive methods. Arguments in favor of birth control are drawn from the moral teachings of Hinduism.

Islam-

A widespread variation in contraception approaches can also be found in the Islamic faith. Because contraception is not expressly banned in the Qur'an, many Muslim scholars commend of family planning. Yet, some also believe that birth control is prohibited as the Qur'an contains the command to "procreate and abound in number." These scholars argue that only God can decide the number of children that a couple will have.

Early Sunni Muslim literature discusses various contraceptive methods and reveals that the practice of *azl* (withdrawal) is morally adequate since it was experienced by the prophet Muhammed. Sunni doctrine in favor of contraception suggests that any contraceptive that does not produce sterility is morally the same as *azl* and is therefore accepted.

Despite these varying views, Islam emphasizes that procreation within the family is a religious duty, so there is an undisputed rejection of sterilization and abortion. Most Islamic traditions will permit the use of birth control where maternal health is an issue or where the well-being of the family may be compromised. The Islamic faith prioritizes human life, so being able to space out births allows a mother ample time to care for each child. In Shia Islamic countries, contraception is not only taught to married couples but is encouraged to youngsters as well. Birth control is supported for economic reasons; it helps protect the mother's life and provide for her children. For Muslim women, family planning is key to their empowerment. The Islamic faith allows a lot of latitude in interpretation, which is reflected by the various

differences in family planning policies by distinct Muslim groups and countries. In India, about 33% population is of Muslims.

Buddhism-

In Buddhism, there is no established doctrine about contraception. Traditional Buddhist teaching favors fertility over birth control, so some are reluctant to tamper with the natural development of life. A Buddhist may accept all contraceptive methods but with different degrees of hesitation. The worst of all is abortion or 'killing a human to be.' According to the Canada- Tibet committee interview with the Dalai Lama, he said- "In India, some people were reluctant to accept birth control because of traditions. So, I thought, from the Buddhist point of view, there is the possibility of flexibility on this problem thought it might be good to speak out and eventually create more open space for leaders in other religious traditions to discuss the issue".

The Dalai Lama wants his religion to be open-minded. He realizes that in some places it is overpopulated, so using contraceptives is one way to go. The Dalai Lama thinks all cultures should think more about contraceptives to decrease overpopulation and realize it's not terminating a fetus, the method prevent conception.

In the Buddhist culture, there is a debate going on about whether or not if contraception is acceptable. For years contraception was acceptable. For years, contraception was acceptable if it did not affect conception. Buddhist would rather have fertility over contraception. Some of the people are uneasy of contraception because of the way their tradition as. To grow up into a person who has a life that is full and is thankful, their parents need to take good care of them. That is one of the major practices. If a family feels they can't take care of a child then it is acceptable to family planning and use methods to prevent conception.

Using methods like birth control, condoms, spermicides and another method that prevented conception is what the Buddhist culture believes in birth control and condoms are the most common methods to use, but Buddhists favor using condoms than birth control pills. Using the emergency contraception pill is something that is not used. It is taken after conception happens and this killing, in the eyes of Buddhists, abortion is completely out of the question because to them that is also killing a human being. To kill a human being would be against their culture because Buddhists believe in Ahimsa (non-violence).

Sikhism

Many Sikhs use contraception; yet, to some, birth control is associated with lust and seen as disruptive to the natural cycle of procreation. There is also no religious mandate on abortion. Some don't support it because they believe the fetus has a soul. But this decision is considered a personal choice.

Conclusion

Religious and cultural factors have the potential to influence the acceptance and use of contraction by couples from different religious backgrounds in very distinct ways. Within religions, different sects may interpret religious teachings on this subject in varying ways, and individual women and their partners may choose to ignore religious teachings. Cultural factors are equally important in couples' decision about family size and contraception. Family planning is embraced by religion across the spectrum as a moral good, a responsible choice, and as a basic human right. The world's religion recognizes that family planning helps build strong families, protect the health of women and children, reduce child and spousal abuse, and prevent unintended pregnancy.

Because India has such a high level of population, much of the discussion of birth control has focused on the environmental issue of overpopulation rather than more personal ethics and birth control is not a major ethical issue.

References

- [1] Amirtha Srikanthan and Robert L. Reid, Religious and Cultural Influences on Contraception, *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada*, 30, 2, (129), (2008).
- [2] Jennifer S. Hirsch, Catholics Using Contraceptives: Religion, Family Planning, and Interpretive Agency in Rural Mexico, *Studies in Family Planning*, 39, 2, (93-104), (2008).
- [3] Lauren Rogers-Sirin, Ceyda Yanar, Dilara Yüksekbaş, Merve İpek Senturk, and Selcuk Sirin, Religiosity, Cultural Values, and Attitudes Toward Seeking Psychological Services in Turkey, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 48, 10, (1587), (2017).
- [4] Maguire C. Daniel, *Ethics: A Complete Method for Moral Choice*, Fortress Press, 2009.
- [5] Saswata Ghosh and Aparajita Chattopadhyay, Religion, Contraceptive Method Mix, and Son Preference Among Bengali-speaking Community of Indian Subcontinent, *Population Research, and Policy Review*, 36, 6, (929), (2017).
- [6] Srikanthan, A; Reid, RL (February 2008). "Religious and cultural influences on contraception" (PDF). *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada*. 30 (2): 129–37.
- [7] Tim B. Heaton, Does Religion Influence Fertility in Developing Countries, *Population Research and Policy Review*, 30, 3, (449), (2011).
- [8] http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/contraception/against_1.shtml
- [9] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00324720127691>
- [10] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-5906.00156>
- [11] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1701216316327360>
- [12] <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195160017.001.0001/acprof-9780195160017-chapter-6>
- [13] <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6f91/189625a175e84f3639f8aa5fbfbdeba9cb85.pdf>
- [14] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/hinduethics/contraception.shtml>