



MOST RELIGIONS BEGIN WITH SIMPLE IDEAS and understandable ideals. Then the scholars go to work, and the original enlivening spirit can be lost in jargon and gibberish. Look at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Magna Charta of his religious movement. Then look at some of the subsequent theological treatises on "circuminsession and the subsistent relations of the Trinity"; it is not a feat of clarity. (Jesus himself would have trouble understanding it.) Buddhism suffered the same fate. One scholar, after reporting on the basic doctrine of Buddhism, commented: "This very simple doctrine was developed in various rather pedantic forms, most important of which was the 'Chain of Dependent Origination' . . . commented on again and again by ancient and modern scholars, and probably not fully understood by anybody." That's a rare statement. Scholars are usually not that honest about the knavish obscurity to which their kind are all too prone.

Buddhism, like Christianity, had simple and refreshing beginnings. The Buddha lived 2,500 years ago in what today is Nepal. He discovered a way of life that was simple and balanced. He called it "the *Middle Way*." Somewhere between manic self-indulgence and grim mortification there lies the middle way of moderation. The Buddha sensed that we can easily get caught in the treadmill of greedy grabbing and of never knowing the elusive good news that "enough is enough." What we don't have can blind us to what we have.

Let's take a look at the basic catechism of Buddhism. We might see why Buddhism is a growing religion today, one that brings the cool waters of relief to our fevered and hyperactive modern lives. But Buddhism is not a major religion just because it has led many on the path of inner peace. It has also distinguished itself by its conviction that humans can undergo major transformation. Buddhism moved into a Tibet in which warriors were the ideal and changed society over time so that monks became the ideal. Three hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the Buddhist king Asoka put Buddhism into practice and changed a society focused on militarism and greed into a society of relative peacefulness. Buddhism has a track record, and that is one more reason to give it a listen. The Buddha's insights begin with what have been called the Four Noble Truths.

#### The Four Noble Truths

Suffering exists.

Much suffering in societies and in individual persons arises from excessive and unrealistic desires.

When attachment to such desires ceases, suffering abates.

This relief from suffering is cultivated by practicing the Eight-fold Path of the Middle Way.

The purpose of the *Eight-fold Path of the Middle Way* is to make us truly peaceful and happy. The eight ways of the path are Right View, Right Motives, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Contemplation. This list might sound too vague to be meaningful, but take a look at what it is saying. Each of the eight ways has a specific content.

*Right View* means recognizing that all things and all people are *interdependent and linked*. Most of us are ignorant of how interlocked we are with everyone and every-

thing else. Science confirms Buddhism here by saying that all life—including us, the birds, the bees, the flowers, and the viruses!—all evolved from a single cell. Otherwise the basic biological similarity could not be accounted for. The birds and animals and roses are our siblings. It's not poetry so much as fact to say that all that lives is family. You can see right away what this can do for ecological awareness—and for family planning. No species in the community of life should overreproduce and destroy the rest of life.

When Buddhism says that all being is interbeing—all that is, is related—it is not saying that all of life is of equal value. People are worth more than mosquitoes. Human life is a higher realization of life, but it is kin to the rest of it. We had a common origin. Also, we are part of the universe. The cells in our hands and face were once stardust, and will be so again when our sun runs out of energy and this earth dissolves. We can truly adapt the old Catholic mantra: "Stardust thou art and unto stardust thou shalt return." Ecologist John Seed reminds us that we are related to everything, including the rocks. We should look at our bodies and remember that "Every atom in this body existed before organic life emerged 4000 million years ago. Remember our childhood as minerals, lava, as rocks? We are the rocks dancing. Why do we look down on them with such a condescending air? It is they that are the immortal part of us." Recognizing all of that, says the Buddha, is the Right View. It's the realistic perspective from which we start.

*Right Motives* refers to being honest and thoughtful about your real intentions. Is your lifestyle honorable, or does it make you a predator? To quote Gandhi again, there is enough on this earth for our need but not for our greed. It's not love of life or love of children that makes

our species produce more children than the earth can support. Rarely do we, who gobble up more than our share, sit down and ponder our real motives. It's too scary. We might just discover the kind of people we are. Buddhism dares us to think about it, adding that we won't really be at peace with ourselves until we do.

*Right Speech* targets deceit and lying. It's deceitful to think that all is well because all looks well from our patio. Our minds are drenched in deceit by advertising and the modern media. I remember when my son Tom was five years old. He came running into the kitchen to tell me that a certain soap gets your clothes cleaner than all the other soaps. I asked him who told him that. "The man on television," he said, eyes wide open and full of unquestioning faith. I said: "He might not be telling the truth." "What!?" said Tom, as his mouth dropped open in total shock. His first loss of innocence! The television and all the media feed us deceit. More money is spent on advertising than on higher education in the United States, and truth is not the bottom line. Buddhism joins Christianity in saying "the truth will make you free."

*Right Action* says avoid killing, stealing, harmful sexual behavior, lying, and harmful intoxicants. (We might at this point wonder how Buddhists who are so against killing and are so strongly for peace—there has never been a Buddhist Holy War!—can still support abortion when necessary. We'll get to this shortly.)

*Right Livelihood* means earning your living in ways that do no harm to other living beings or to the environment. *Right Effort* goes after the big human weaknesses, the ones that most disrupt our inner peace and our society: *greed, gluttony, hatred, anger, and delusion*. *Right Mindfulness* and *Right Contemplation* urge us to stop, look, listen, and pause long enough to appreciate what we have.

As I mentioned earlier, my son Danny was profoundly retarded because of his disability, Hunter's Syndrome. When he was four or five, I took him to the beautiful lagoon by Lake Michigan, near our home. I used to drive past there every day on my way to the university, my mind filled with busy thoughts. I didn't really see the lagoon or its charming residents. Danny got out of the car and saw the array of mallard ducks with their stunningly-colored wings. He grabbed my leg and shouted: "Look, Daddy, look!" When Danny died a few years later, I put that moment into his eulogy. I saw it as Danny's valedictory to an unmindful and ungrateful world. "Look! For goodness sake, look!" Danny begs us. Pause long enough to be stunned at the budding of the rose, the setting of the sun, the smile of the infant, the wagging tail of the dog. This little boy with blighted mind but exquisite *mindfulness* saw more than "normal" people do. Danny was retarded, but he was not blasé. We are blasé—damnably so. The goodness of life escapes us. We attend more to what we want than to what we have. Buddhism wants us to cool the rat race and leave time for ecstasy. And Buddhism never gives up on the hope that we can be changed.

Ecologist Annie Dillard gives us a useful exercise in mindfulness. She bids us look at that stuff we call dirt, or better, topsoil. A square foot tray of topsoil one inch deep is a miracle of life and vitality. It contains "an average of 1,356 living creatures, . . . including 865 mites, 265 springtails, 22 millipedes, 19 adult beetles, plus various numbers of 12 other life forms." On top of that are two billion bacteria and millions of fungi, protozoans, and algae. We should kneel in the presence of topsoil. Our lives depend on it. It takes millennia to form. It is just one of the earth miracles of which we are not mindful. Slow down, says Buddhism, and look around.

So there it is, a little primer on Buddhism, a peek into the heart of this spirituality. Before getting into the nitty-gritty of Buddhist attitudes on contraception and abortion, we can see from the above an ethic friendly to family planning and to ecological concerns. Buddhism eschews excess—too much consuming, too much reproducing, too much unnecessary harm to our parent Earth and its privileged residents.

#### Buddhism and Contraception

Parichart Suwanbubbha, a professor at Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand, will be our principal guide to how Buddhism tackles the ethics of contraception and abortion. Suwanbubbha concedes that much of Buddhism is *pronatalist*, that is, in favor of reproduction. After all, in Buddhist thought, only human beings are able to attain *Nirvana*. Making lots of them would therefore seem to be, as Suwanbubbha says, “a good sign of a general improvement in the moral state of the universe.”

A lot of life experience informs the Buddhist tradition, however, and Buddhism is open to family planning and contraception. In Suwanbubbha's words, “it is possible to say that Buddhist teachings allow individuals, including women, to have the right to plan their family according to their own circumstances using any methods of safe contraception.” The *Middle Way* supports this, since there can be too many children. Also, “economic misery and quality of life of all members in a family” can justify contraception. The Buddha taught that poverty can become the cause of crimes, a view also held by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, as we saw in chapter 1. Inasmuch as this relates to “an excessive birth rate,” family planning should be allowed; and good government, in Buddhist thinking, should provide the services for those who want them. William

LaFleur says that for Buddhists in Asia “there is absolutely nothing wrong with preventing conception.” It is an obvious application of the Middle Way.

The result of this teaching in Thailand shows in the fertility rate. It stands just below the replacement level, at 1.9 births per woman. The contraceptive rate for married women of reproductive age is 72.2 percent. This shows that Buddhism does not discourage contraception for family planning. The abortion question, however, involves more agonizing. To that we turn next.

#### Buddhists and Abortion

Most Buddhists believe in reincarnation. This relates directly to Buddhist views of abortion. Buddhism believes that life begins at the time of conception when three conditions combine: (1) the father and mother have sexual intercourse; (2) it is the mother's fertile period; and (3) there is a “being to be born” (*gandhabba*) present, ready to reenter life in the form of a baby. This would seem to block any permission of abortion, since in this view, the fetus would seem to have rights equal to that of adults. “Right Action,” one of the rules of the Eight-fold Path, forbids killing. It says: “I will not willingly take the life of a living thing.” That includes animals as well as fetuses, and this is called the *First Precept of Buddhism*. An early Buddhist text said: “As far as the human being is concerned, even the abortion of an embryo which was just conceived is regarded as a crime.” So there goes any right to abortion. On top of that, as Suwanbubbha says, “the act of killing will certainly produce retribution” by way of the doctrine of *karma*. Part of the retribution could be seriously nasty—the shortening of your life, or a continuing tendency to disease if you were involved in performing the abortion.

So the immediate conclusion would seem to be that Buddhism absolutely forbids abortion. The operative word here is *seem*. As we saw in Hinduism, however, the prohibition against killing comes on like an absolute, but then it runs into life with all of its complexity, and exceptions and accommodations are made. Aquinas said that life is marked by *quasi infinitae diversitates*, an infinity of variations. Religions and their moral systems that endure notice this and adapt to it. Christianity adapts, for example. Christians have a commandment that tells them not to kill. Then they go on to interpret it to mean that murder is what is always wrong, but not every homicide is murder. Things like capital punishment and war have been justified by many Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Jesus was pretty clear in saying that his followers should sell all they have and give it to the poor, but few are the Christians who haven't found a way out of that demand. Christian scholars say it is a "counsel," not a "precept or a commandment." All this may seem like quibbling, but it may also be seen as coping successfully with the facts of a life in which ideals cannot always be realized.

These ancient systems of thought liked to proclaim the ideal—and not killing is plainly the ideal—and to proclaim it as an absolute law or commandment. Then they discover that absolutes do not play out well in real life. This is exactly what happened in Buddhism. After saying that no killing is the first precept of Buddhist life, they honor life by making the exceptions it requires. Phra Depvethae, a Thai Buddhist monk, says that all beings are not equal. Some have higher standing. For example, you could not kill a mother to save a fetus, because the mother is a more developed person and can contribute many important and valuable things to her family and society. As Parichart says, "if there is only one choice, the mother's

life should be saved, not the fetus." You could, in other words, abort the fetus to save the mother, but you could not endanger the mother to save the fetus.

#### Unlessment

As always happens in ethics, the *unlessment* door opens. Thou shalt not kill—*unless*. So, in Buddhism, you can kill a fetus if it is necessary to save a mother. Also, Suwanbubbha says, it is right for physicians to abort fetuses if their mothers have HIV infections. "This would be considered a good intention and a good means for a mercy killing of fetuses, even though these cases are illegal in Thailand." This would be acceptable to many Buddhists, "since the medical personnel do not perform such actions owing to greed, hate, or delusion." As she says, all Buddhists might not agree on this; as in all other religions, there are few things on which all agree. Yet this is a respectable Buddhist position.

And there is more. We saw that *karma* enters into abortion decisions. Abortion is a decision that results in the death of a fetus. That leaves those who perform it open to bad *karma*. But you can change your *karma*. Here is the way Buddhists explain it: "According to Buddhism, when one *karma* is still bearing its fruit, other *karma* with the same or lesser potency do not have the chance to ripen. Only when the *karma* currently bearing fruit is weak or exhausted can other *karma* have an opportunity to replace it." This means, Suwanbubbha says, that performing good deeds can build up so much good *karma* that it simply overwhelms the bad *karma* resulting from an abortion. The bad *karma* can become "lapsed *karma*." It is simply superseded, and you are, as it were, home free.

Furthermore, the Buddha made an exception for an offense performed by one who "has carefully cultured

body, habits, and thought: He has developed insight." Insight—enlightenment to Buddhists—means goodness and virtue. When such a good person performs an offense, less bad *karma* results. Good persons have enormous stores of good *karma*. An offense by them could be considered, Suwanbubbha says, "like throwing a grain of salt into the river Ganges. Due to the mass of water in the big river, the water would not become salty and undrinkable." When a morally bad person performs an offense, it "is like throwing a grain of salt into a little cup of water: The water would become salty and undrinkable because of a little quantity of water in the cup." She continues, "the bad action of a good person is insignificant compared to his or her accumulated good actions." A good woman who has an abortion, may, by this doctrine, "feel relief, hope, and encouragement." In effect, the abortion may become what Catholics would call a *venial sin*, a forgivable sin, unlike the seriousness of a *mortal sin*. But even mortal sins can be forgiven in Catholic teaching.

Intention is also central in Buddhist morality. The motive for an abortion affects its morality. An abortion performed for good motives, says Suwanbubbha, uncontaminated by greed, hatred, anger, or delusion, will not be considered as serious a moral issue. The bad *karma* that might result would be greatly limited by the compassionate intentions. An abortion done out of self-indulgence is more serious. Buddhists would not justify an abortion done for purposes of sex selection, since wanting only one gender would imply hatred of the other. That would poison the intention. Also, wisdom (*panna*) is an important moral criterion. So, says Suwanbubbha, "Buddhist criteria for the ethics of abortion are open to using wisdom" to see if the motive for the abortion is marked by compassion and not by any negative emotion.

Suwanbubbha argues with other Buddhist scholars that the right to abortion should be expanded in Buddhist countries such as Thailand. She asks: "Why don't we expand the definition of the threat to the mother's life in Thai law to cover more necessary reasons of the present situation, such as contraceptive failure and economic hardship in accordance with Buddhist norms based on 'wholesome intention' and 'wholesome consequences'?" She adds, "This would be a good way to help both suffering pregnant women, and at the same time it is not obviously contrasting to Buddhist teachings." A Buddhist woman can have an abortion and still be a good Buddhist. Suwanbubbha concludes that Buddhism allows "enough freedom to choose the way. Whatever one decides, one has to be brave enough to accept the consequences." As always, compassion has the last word in Buddhism.

When all of these considerations are applied to abortion, it does not mean that abortion is nothing or morally neutral. It would still be better if no abortions were needed, but Buddhism, like the other religions studied in this book, faces the fact that abortion may sometimes be the best decision and a truly moral choice.

#### Japanese Buddhism

William LaFleur, professor of Japanese studies, is the author of *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*. He shows in this remarkable study how a contemporary Japanese woman could accept Buddhism with its First Precept against killing, have an abortion, and still consider herself a Buddhist in good standing.

Japanese Buddhists have a long experience with family planning, including abortion. In fact, population growth stopped from 1721 to 1846. It had been climbing rapidly. Suddenly it stopped, and population leveled. There was no

government effort to stem growth. On the contrary, the government wanted increased growth; they thought it would strengthen Japan. Thomas Malthus had famously said that what stops population growth are the terrible three: war, famine, and epidemic. There is no evidence, however, that these factors were sufficiently present to explain the stabilization of Japan's population. LaFleur concludes that the "decisions about having fewer children than had once been the custom were being made within the 'bedrooms' of the Japanese citizenry." Their main method of limiting births? LaFleur and other scholars say "infanticide and abortion" were widely used.

Does this mean that Japanese Buddhists were cold-hearted and cruel, and should we invoke the old saw that Asians see life as "cheap"? If we do that, we should first remember what we saw in chapter 3 about the widespread use of infanticide and abandonment in medieval Christian Europe when people had little access to reliable contraception or safe surgical abortion. Also, there is no evidence that Japan was deficient in family values. When Francis Xavier (1506–52) visited Japan, he remarked: "Judging by the people we have so far met, I would say that the Japanese are the best race yet discovered and I do not think you will find their match among the pagan nations." As LaFleur says: "This is, to say the least, rather high praise for the moral tenor of a society that, exactly at that time, countenanced both abortion and infanticide."

Japan has always strongly valued children. François Caron, who lived in Japan in the early seventeenth century, made this observation: "Children are carefully and tenderly brought up; their parents strike them seldom or never, and though they cry whole nights together, they endeavor to still them with patience; judging that infants have no understanding, but that it grows with them as they grow

in years, and therefore they are to be encouraged with indulgences and examples."

LaFleur sees all of this as "evidence that there is no necessary correlation between the allowance of abortion and the quality—or even the overall tenor—of family life in a given society . . . Apparently it is possible for a society to practice abortion and still have what is generally called a 'strong' conception of the family." Additional proof may be found inversely in those modern right-wing resisters to abortion rights who, with all their talk of *family values*, display no great concern for born children, their schools, their families, or their welfare. There are lessons here. Do not equate the use of abortion with cruelty or resistance to it with gentleness. It's just not that simple.

#### Learning from Rituals

How did Japanese Buddhists decide abortion was compatible with their gentle religion? The answer is found not so much in texts, as we Westerners would want, as in rituals and symbols. Because the symbols and the rituals surrounding them are unfamiliar to us, we could easily scorn them. That would be a mistake. We should never belittle the ways in which people deal with pain. Even today, we can see that Japanese Buddhists do not take abortions lightly. They do not forget the aborted fetus, which they see, in LaFleur's words "not so much as being 'terminated' as being put on 'hold,' asked to bide its time in some other world." Remember the doctrine of reincarnation that is common in Buddhism. A being was going to be born. For reasons judged good by the would-be parents, that birthing was stopped, but the being who would be born is put back in waiting. The "life" that was rejected or that died through miscarriage or early infant death is called a *mizuko*, and parents pray for its well-being in the sacred

realms to which it has been "returned." Elaborate rituals are employed to remember these rejected "lives." Little child-size statues of Jizo, a sweet savior-figure associated closely with children, are found in abundance and are visited by parents who lost children or had abortions. In some images, Jizo wraps the *mizukos* under his protective cape and gives them comfort. In a time when infant mortality was high, as LaFleur says, "the idea that such children were being pulled back into a basically 'good' world of the gods and Buddhas to some extent palliated parental pain." There is nothing coldhearted about the care of the *mizuko*. And it is not dissimilar to my mother's belief that the many children she saw die in old Ireland were being taken to heaven by God as angels to pray for their surviving families.

In much of Buddhism, birth is seen as a gradual process, not a moment. Progress was celebrated, but it was not until age fifteen—or age twenty today—that the child was considered a full human. Prior to that, the child was slowly moving out of the sacred realm of the Buddhas. Returning them to that realm through abortion was not the same as killing an adult, especially since they had a chance to return in better circumstances or even to enter *Nirvana*. Many Christian leaders in the early centuries rejected any such gradualism and decided that the "image of God" was stamped on the earliest embryonic manifestations of life. Even male masturbation was called homicide. Potential life was simply stipulated to have full personal status. The yellow flower on the tomato plant was to be treated as a tomato. Common sense is offended by such thinking, and sensible debate on abortion is short-circuited.

A final thought on Buddhism: Buddhism, overall, has accepted sexuality as a good; it also appreciates the use of non-procreative sex for the sheer joy of it. Christianity

could learn from this. James Brundage, in his *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, refers to "the Christian horror of sex." Sex was even seen as the cause of the "original sin" that fouled the souls of newborns till baptism cleansed them. Such a view is an invitation to neurosis. It is not essential to Christian teaching, and it made a realistic discussion of abortion difficult. Reproduction came to be seen as the only justification for sex, since sex was seen as morally sordid. Sexual thoughts are still called "dirty" in much of the West. East and West have much to learn from one another. That conviction is the soul of this book.



EURO-AMERICAN PRIDE IS A PROBLEM when we look at the more ancient—and thus more experienced—cultures of the East. We white Euro-Americans really do believe we are the master race. The fact that we are a dwindling minority on the planet and Johnny-come-latelies to civilization is something we would be wise to remember. Long before we came on the scene and ages before our Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions were formed, the ancient Chinese were highly sophisticated philosophically and even scientifically. Some of the religious insights we explore in this chapter can be traced back over four thousand years. The Chinese made the first seismograph when Jesus was still alive, and they were systematically charting spots on the sun a generation before Jesus was born. There was smallpox inoculation in China as early as the eleventh century; the inoculation was not introduced into Europe until the eighteenth century.

The theories of these bright people are worth a hearing. All theory is a distillation of experience. Experience is the best teacher, as the saying goes, and the Chinese have had a lot of it. A visit to their wisdom is worth the effort.

Our first guide is Geling Shang, currently at the Harvard-Yenching Institute at Harvard University. Shang has studied the religions of China, particularly Taoism and Confucianism. He insists that you cannot understand the history or culture of China, even during its Communist period, without understanding its religions. For example, Shang refers to “the notorious effectiveness of China’s campaign

of family planning and its "one child" policy, initiated by the Communist government and supported by Marxist ideology. As to its effectiveness, historian Paul Kennedy reports on scholarly estimates that 240 million more Chinese would have been born over the two decades when this policy was being enforced. The drop in fertility rate from six children per woman before 1970 to near replacement level in 1990 was the fastest decline ever reported in any country, and some scholars attribute half of this decline to government policies. So there is reason to say it was effective. More puzzling, Shang says, at least for Western observers, is why there was so much acceptance of the policy by the Chinese people.

Westerners, he says, can understandably ask: "Why does this campaign not meet much resistance from the majority of Chinese people, though it is seen as manifestly coercive and even violent when measured by the Western standards of human rights?" Of course, most in the West believe that it was not supported by the people but simply forced on them by the Communist regime, but that is inaccurate. There was, indeed, resistance to some of its more drastic manifestations, but overall, there was acceptance of the policy. Comparative religion scholars Jordan and Li Chuang Paper say: "The policy could not have continued for this length of time and been moderately successful were the people not, to a large degree, supporting it." They add another corrective to much Western thinking: "China is not the highly centralized totalitarian state depicted in the Western press. Regional governments can and do ignore central directives, and the police, usually unarmed, can only enforce laws which are supported by the population, for to do otherwise can lead to being beaten by the populace."

The way the Chinese prefer to bring about change, the Papers say, is through education and moral persuasion.

Some of the compliance with this stern policy was motivated by simple practicality. People notice when there are too many people. As Luo Ping, sociologist and director of the Women's Studies Center at Wuhan University observes: "Family planning must be implemented in a country like China where the size of the population puts too much pressure on the economy and on society. . . . China is just like a small boat which can only carry 100 people but already has 110 in it."

Actually, the "one child" policy was intended as a temporary emergency measure and is now being phased out, according to the Population Institute. "It was only meant to influence one generation," said Li Cheng-Sheng, director of China's State Family Planning Commission. "If this generation had fewer children, it would slow population growth and solve the problem. But if we continue to carry it out, it would make for a bad family structure."

#### A Culture Shaped by Religion

Shang, however, says that none of the above is understandable without taking religion into account. Chinese culture, which has been defined and shaped by Chinese religion for over four thousand years, was a "spiritual resource which has enabled Chinese people to tolerate, accept, and even support the modern idea of family planning." The Chinese religions that Shang refers to are Taoism (usually pronounced *dowism*) and Confucianism, which are the principal religions in China (though not the only religions). (Buddhism is also present in China.) Taoism and Confucianism vary in many ways, but they also share some understandings of reality. They agree on this one central position: "Peace and harmony are the ultimate state of the whole universe and the ultimate goal of human life." All policies and all individual lives must be geared to peace and harmony. When this goal is met, "the whole

universe with its 'ten thousand beings' flourishes, prospers, and celebrates," says Shang.

To enter the world of Chinese religion, we must be introduced to some of its basic concepts, and we can add a few Chinese words to our vocabulary. Remember, words are windows into the soul. We are peering into the soul of an ancient and sophisticated culture in which people like us rose to the same sun and ended their individual days under the same moon. We are entering into the living room of their culture, and when we do such a thing, we should tread lightly, with eyes and ears wide open to see what they have made of it all. Here we will meet new terms such as *Tao*, *Mandate of Heaven*, *ch'i*, and *jen*.

#### Religion without God

When we in the Western world think of religion, we are influenced mainly by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions are theistic to the core, that is, they all believe in a personal God. It is hard for Westerners to think of religion in any other way. If, however, we want to be open to other cultures and their wisdom, we must try to see the different conclusions other good people came up with as they tried to make sense of the universe. As professor of Chinese studies Chun Fang Yu tells us: "Unlike most other religions, Chinese religion does not have a creator God. There is no God transcendent and separate from the world and there is no heaven outside of the universe to which human beings would want to go for refuge." That's a shocker to most people in our part of the world, but let's see where this kind of thinking led the Chinese. Unlike the Jewish scriptures that start their origins story with "In the beginning . . ." there is no beginning of the universe for the Chinese. It always was.

The universe, "Heaven and Earth," as they say, "is the origin of everything including human beings," Yu tells us.

There is a creating and sustaining force in the universe called the *Tao*, which means "the way." The *Tao*, which is like the Western "natural law" and the Hindu *Dharma*, points the way toward harmony. Conforming to the *Tao* is our moral duty. This is called the *Mandate of Heaven*. When we don't obey the *Mandate of Heaven*, which urges us toward self-restraint, humility, and unselfishness, confusion and destruction follow. Rulers have to follow the *Mandate of Heaven*, or they lose their right to rule.

This is not the heaven of Christians, a place where God and the blessed reside. In the Christian and Islamic view, as Daniel Overmyer puts it, "it is really God that is sacred, not the world itself." In the Chinese perspective, however, sacredness is a quality of the universe, and the *Mandate of Heaven* is a mandate of that sacred universe of which we are a part. Overmyer says, "this view of the world is similar to that of many other cultures, such as the Hopi or the Sioux in North America, but it is different from the traditional teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam." Another basic aspect of this worldview is the concept of *yin* and *yang*.

#### *Yin* and *Yang*

Reality, the ancient Chinese concluded, is full of polarities such as day and night, bitter and sweet, winter and summer, male and female. They called this natural harmony of opposites *yin* and *yang*. That is why everything, including meals (we notice this in Chinese cooking) should be in conformity with this bipolarity, balancing sour and sweet, peppery and bland. This reality of which we are born, with its *yin* and its *yang*, is a reality in which everything and everybody are made of the same material. They call this material *ch'i*. *Ch'i* is the basic reality of all that is, including the rocks, the lilies, and us! National boundaries would mean nothing, because reality is shared being. We

are all made of the same basic stuff. Damaging nature would make no sense. Nature and humans are all part of the same miracle.

This reality, this world, in which everything is made of the same stuff, deserves our fullest respect. And here is our final Chinese word; the word for that respect is *jen*, the greatest of the virtues according to Confucius. *Jen* implies a largeness of heart, sincerity, compassion, and a sense of our relationship to all that is in the universe. It is the essence of true humanity. To have it is to be a truly humane person. Not to have it is to court disaster.

All of this appears in an "inscription" that is seen as a Confucian creed. It goes like this:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. The great ruler (the emperor) is the eldest son of my parents (Heaven and Earth), and the great ministers are his stewards. Respect the ages—that is the way to treat them. Show deep love toward the orphaned and the weak—this is the way to treat them. The sage identifies his character with that of Heaven and Earth. Even those who are tired, infirm, crippled, or sick; those who have no brothers or children, wives or husbands, are all my brothers and sisters who are in distress and have no one to turn to. In life I honor and serve Heaven and Earth. In death I will be at peace.

In that list of virtues, Jews, Christians, and Muslims will hear the voices of Isaiah, Jesus, and the prophet Mohammed urging us to have compassion on the orphans, the widows, and the poor. Compassion is the DNA of all great religions. These things we must do, the Chinese say.

We must be people of *jen*, following the Tao. It is the Mandate of Heaven. Thwarting the mandate means trouble. If life is a mess, it's a mess of our making. One Chinese saying puts it this way: "Curses and blessing do not come through the door uninvited. Human beings invite their arrival. The reward of good and evil is like the shadow accompanying a body, and so it is apparent that heaven and earth are possessed of crime-recording spirits." (Again we see similarities to the doctrines of *dharma* and *karma* from Hinduism and Buddhism.) We can't hide from reckless or self-indulgent living. We have to plan and think about the results of our behavior on our mother, the Earth. The effects of our deeds follow us like a shadow follows the body. Heaven and Earth keep records; they record our crimes and punish us for them. This ancient teaching contains a lot of realism. If anything, it is more relevant today than it ever was, now that our capacity to destroy exceeds the earth's capacity to heal. A humanity filled with *jen* and reverence for the Mandate of Heaven would make this earth a garden. The alternative is to make it a garbage heap. And we will pay the price in disease and pain and hunger. Our shadows follow us.

Now let us return to Shang's guidance and see how this applies to family planning.

#### Family Planning in Chinese Religions

Shang tells us that the Chinese have been involved in family planning for thousands of years, perhaps longer than any people on record. Undergirding their interest "is the Chinese concept of universal harmony, a moral ideal and religious belief" shared by Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism. The Chinese and all their religious traditions have believed "that the human phenomena of reproduction, sexuality and family life could gravely affect

the balance, order and harmony of human society and the natural world." Shang says: "Chinese people have become accustomed to thinking, under the influence of these traditions, that the way we act and the things we have done even in everyday life might affect the state of our family, community, nation and the whole world." Their concern for family planning was never a private matter, as in much of the individualistic West. It was a matter of social obligation to have more or fewer children as demanded by the common good. In Shang's words: "In Chinese traditions there is very little room for individuals or private rights apart from the roles and duties one is to fulfill."

You could say their approach was based on family values, but it was a different concept of family values, unlike the one touted by modern United States conservatives. The family was the basic unit of society. As Shang says, "before any individual and before society, there is the family." Family in China became the archetype, the model of all social reality. Even society was seen as a family writ large. The nation has been called "a nation-family." There are important moral implications to this. If the whole nation, and by extension the whole human race, is a family, then we are concerned for the good of all. There are no outsiders. Indeed, this broader Chinese notion of family includes not only the living but also the dead, and even the future unborn. It is expansive, not inbred. Too often, the Western "family" is an occluded, egotistical island. Not so in China, and that adds richness to their culture.

Interestingly, this idea of family matches one of the central ideas in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Hebrew Bible saw the household or the family as the model for society. Creation in this perspective is God's household, and as Christian theologian Douglas Meeks says, the first and last question of economics from the biblical perspec-

tive is: "Will everyone in the household get what it takes to live?" You don't leave people out or ignore them in a family.

It is like the cartoon that showed a mother and father and three children seated at the kitchen table, with bills all over the table. The father announces gravely: "Because of inflationary pressures, I'm going to have to let two of you go!" It's a funny cartoon because that is not the way it happens in a family. In times of stress, we find new ways of sharing; we don't discard a couple of the children. Corporations in the East used to think of themselves as a family and did not fire people. If people could not keep up with the pace of one job, they would train them for something else. Unfortunately, a crueler Western approach is seeping into these corporations, and letting people go has become the norm.

A nation that thought of itself as a family would share generously and would always be thinking socially. We would not just think of our "own" family as the center of the universe. Chinese culture was imbued with a strong social conscience, and this was reinforced by its religions. It shows up in its approach to family planning, in the readiness of the Chinese to cooperate with the government when more people were needed and also when fewer people were the requirement.

#### Too Many, Too Few

Like all the ancient religions, Confucianism was born in a world in which life was short and perilous. Fertility was stressed. The Confucian writer Mencius said: "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the worst of them." Shang says: "Many Chinese, if not most, still believe in this today." Through history, Chinese leaders stressed the need to expand the population.

Confucius himself said: "A noble man would be ashamed of land waste due to a lack of people." Duke Yue ruled that if a twenty-year-old man or a seventeen-year-old woman were unmarried, the parents would be charged as criminals. Rewards were given for having a baby—two gallons of wine and a dog for a son and two gallons of wine and a baby pig for a daughter. A welfare system also supported the children. When you had two children, the government supplied additional food and nursing care if needed. If the parents were ill or died, "the government would look after their children," Shang tells us. The government was involved because fear of having too few people was an issue for "the nation-family."

Shang tells us that Taoism, however, was an interesting exception to this ancient stress on fertility. Their ideal society was "the small state with a little population" that could prevent people from battling for land, food, and other resources. This view shows up in later jurists, who argued that population should be controlled according to the needs of the state.

When the early Communist government in China urged people to reproduce, they did; when that government realized that overpopulation was the new threat, the people cooperated with the new need to limit births. The reasoning was the same: There will be no harmony and balance in the world if the number of people outstrips the land's resources. Remember, in their view, we, the water, the topsoil, and the rest of nature are made of the same stuff, and we must live in harmony. The universe is a community, and everybody and everything have to get along.

Other things in the Chinese religious culture helped the modern family planning effort. The ancient traditions always stressed the *quality* of offspring, not the *quantity*. People should not marry or reproduce too soon. The very

young might not be ready to parent healthy children. Some even held that men should be thirty years old and women twenty before marrying, since before that time they are not physically and mentally mature enough to produce healthy and well-developed children. As Shang says, "there is a right season for growing crops, and there is a right time for marriage." Sometimes premature marriage was forbidden by law, and "those who violated such laws would be fined or heavily taxed by the government." The Communist "one child" policy had a family planning history to build on.

The belief that sex is good is another helpful aspect of Chinese culture. One of the weaknesses in Christian history was the belief that sex is bad, and only reproduction validates it. Sex was a valued gift in China, aside from its capacity to make babies. Sex was utterly natural, the primary example of *yin* and *yang*. One of the purposes of sex was reproduction, but pleasure and health are on an equal plane. Sex is good for you, and the Chinese religions celebrated what Shang calls "the joy of sexual interplay." The Taoists, in fact, unlike the Confucians, put more emphasis on the joy and healthfulness of sex than they did on reproduction. A good sex life—marked by both pleasure and restraint—was the secret of longevity. The Taoists developed, as we shall see, "the art of the bed chamber" to maximize the pleasure and delights of a good sex life for both men and women. They knew that there is a lot more to sex than making babies. How right they were—in real life, sex is rarely used for the purpose of making a baby.

#### But What about Abortion?

Abortion is always a thorny issue, an unfortunate necessity at best. How did the Chinese handle it? One thing is certain, says Shang: "The Chinese have employed abortion

for various purposes since ancient times." There was "no explicit code" to prohibit it. At the same time, it was viewed as "unfavorable" and "was carried out by midwives rather than official physicians." It was seen as a private matter, needed to handle a private crisis. In spite of its "unfavorable" rating, Shang tells us, "Chinese attitudes toward abortion were mostly tolerant and compassionate. People did not think it was wrong unless it was done unnecessarily."

An important ethics text was called the "Table of Merits and Errors." The Table tried to quantify the wrongness of various activities—again, something like the Catholic division into mortal and venial (forgivable) sins. So abortion was considered a 300-point error, which was 200 points less than setting fire to someone's house. It was the same kind of error as inducing someone to gamble, but it was not even close to the murder of a person, which was a 1,000-point crime!

Abortion was clearly part of the "one child" policy of the Chinese government. How did that fit in with Chinese religion and culture? Shang says that "the Chinese religions have always prioritized social values over the concerns of the individual. Where conflict arose between society and individuals, the latter were expected to sacrifice their needs to serve the common good. If abortion profits the family or society, then it is reasonable to do it. Even an adult is supposed to be ready to sacrifice his life for the family and society, so why not a fetus?"—Of course there was appropriate criticism in and outside of China of the "poor medical conditions of abortions that take place in China, or the forceful aggressiveness of some local officers in enforcing the policy." Still, Shang says, abortion "has never been a religious issue for Chinese."

It was viewed, sensibly, as a sometime necessity. Those who are dogmatically opposed to all abortions must realize that most people and most cultures do not agree with them.

As in Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, infanticide and abandonment were practiced by the ancient Chinese, usually as a result of poverty and famine. Female babies were the prime victims of these practices. There was moral resistance to this. The Table of Merits and Errors counted infanticide as a 1,000-point error, the same as for the murder of an adult.

In conclusion, then, the religions of China have long considered family planning a necessity. It is based on the need for universal harmony rather than on Communist ideology or other Western influences. Contraception, even abortion when needed, are accepted in this ancient moral tradition.



POPE PIUS XII, IN HIS WEEKLY AUDIENCE WITH TOURISTS, often opened with the line: "He who travels far, learns much." In this book, we are traveling far to see what other people have thought of the life we all live. Every religion develops stories to explain reality and shape a view of the world that makes sense. None of these religions is fully successful. In modern public relations terms, each religion puts a spin on reality. If we only know the religion that dominates in our culture and its spin on reality, we are limited, locked in a cocoon. Our sense of reality is impaired, because we have only seen one version of it. We have already toured some of the religions that were spawned in the Near East and the Orient. From there, they spread around the world, learning from experience and changing and adapting as all religions do. Our particular focus is on how they dealt with sex, gender relations, and reproduction.

In this chapter, our principal guide is Hsiung Ping-chen of the Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan. Throughout her career, Hsiung has studied the rich history of her people. She joined our project to share some of the special attitudes the Chinese had regarding sex, and particularly how they dealt with men. The Chinese realized early on that when it comes to sex, men are a bit of a problem.

Hsiung is not unkind to men. She says that male sexuality has been caricatured in nasty ways in both modern and ancient times. Males are presented as reckless studs "driven by endless carnal desires, always ready to indulge

and hardly capable of constraint." They are widely seen as uninterested "in limiting the number of children or disciplining their sexual drives."

The long history of China shows that it is not that simple. Of course, the Chinese knew that men were not low on sexual energy and were not bashful about pursuing their sexual goals. Their cultures and their religions addressed that fact of life. The Chinese did not allow sex or family planning to be classified as *women's work*. They acknowledged that in their history—as in most societies—males were largely in charge. Religious and political authority was in their grasp. Therefore, when it comes to something as important for "universal harmony" as sexuality and reproduction, we had better deal with the guys.

The Chinese knew that sex is powerful. It can purr like a kitten, but it has the strength of a tiger. We can either control it, or it can chaotically control us. Still, as Hsiung says, sexuality in the Chinese religious traditions of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism did not have "the overall shadowing of a puritanical association of human sex with guilt, sin, or shame." Sex was good and delightful, and it was to be appreciated and regulated. Special efforts were made to remind males of this.

#### The Magnificent Pleasure of High Sex

Hsiung uses the suggestive term "high sex" to show the first lesson from Chinese culture. Sex is not an inconsequential pleasure of the grab-it-when-you-can variety. Proper sex is high art, an exercise in sensitivity and delicacy. It has many purposes. For years, Christians taught that the primary purpose for sex is reproduction, and all other purposes are secondary. The Chinese disagree. Reproduction is one purpose of heterosexual sex, but not the usual or the primary. Sex had four equally important purposes:

*spiritual elevation, the promotion of health, successful reproduction, and personal pleasure.* Proper sex in the right time, place, and circumstance promoted longevity and spiritual depth. Obviously, in this worldview, thoughts of such sex are not *dirty*, nor are joyful jokes about such sex *dirty jokes*.

Taoism was particularly keen on enhancing the joys and pleasures of sex. Taoists wrote extensively on "the art of the bed chamber." High sex is not just tumbled into; it was the product of care and a healthy life style. It is said that President John F. Kennedy got the United States into exercise in a big way for the first time. The Chinese were far ahead on this. For a healthy sexual life, we should feed ourselves well, sleep well, and exercise. Sex is one of the most natural of the world's forces, and we should view it with respect. Modern science has confirmed what these people knew millennia ago: Poor nutrition and lack of exercise can decrease sexual potential—including male potency. Men should realize their responsibility for the success of sex. Men were instructed in the skills of pleasing a woman. Good sex requires *jen*, respect, and concern for the other. Men should bring a kind of "nurturing kindness" into their lovemaking and become connoisseurs of "achieving the magnificent pleasure for both women and men." For sex to be good, Hsiung tells us, "the emotional and physical gratification of both the male and the female parties is essential, as the deficiency in either compromises the desired effects."

Part of the high art of lovemaking involves giving attention to the right moment—what was called "the heavenly moment." The best time for a man to make love to a woman is when she shows "a desire to engage that is almost unsuppressible." Don't assume your partner is ready when you are. Love is patient and sweetly opportunistic. Some

things are detrimental to good sex: exhaustion, anger, too much to drink, overeating, and not enough exercise. Poorly done sex could also have adverse effects on reproduction. Bad effects, Hsiung tells us, were seen as related to "whether one was to beget any offspring, whether a boy might be hoped for, and whether the child one received would live to maturity, and turn out to be smart and capable." Some of the details for preparing and doing sex well were referred to as *Tao*, the term for spiritual and moral rectitude from which Taoism takes its name. Again, this stresses the spiritual significance of sex done well. Rather than being dirty, sexual pleasure has a kind of sacramental value.

The Chinese, however, did conclude that in sex, as in the rest of life, it was possible to have too much of a good thing. Taoists strongly believed in what Hsiung calls "a 'zero sum' nature of the reserve of male essence (semen)." There was, in this view, only so much that a man had to offer, and if he had too much sex, the quality of it for reproduction and pleasure could decrease. To some degree, this had in it a bit of the old French adage that pleasure delayed is pleasure increased. They were also concerned with producing healthy offspring who would be loyal. Men feared, in Hsiung's words, "that their overused male organ could fail them in the task of successful coital performance and in successful reproduction. . . . Anxieties over the premature depletion of the male essence and an inadequate supply of 'kidney water' (the source of male sexuality) was a constant factor in Chinese giddy gossips and popular medical advertisements." Overindulgence would lead to too much extraction of the limited supply of male sperm. There was even a lot of discussion about the advisability of coitus interruptus. Underlying all this, Hsiung says, may have been

the insight that "self-restraint in sex is probably a useful and necessary habit." Whatever the intentions behind the idea that male sperm was limited, it would certainly have had the effect of taming male sexual impetuosity. It also taught that quality was more important than quantity in sex. Better infrequent high sex than frequent low and careless sex.

#### Sleeping Alone

Praising celibacy rose out of the idea that you could overdo sex. "Songs of Sleeping Alone" were widespread, especially as people aged, and especially for men. It appealed because celibacy conserved your overall energy and gave you a healthier old age. Hsiung tells of a particularly "bouncy man name Pao Hui," who lived in the twelfth century. Minister Chia Ss'u-tao observed the elderly Pao "getting up and down the stairs, bowing and kneeling at this and that altar with little difficulty." He wanted to know Pao's secret to having such a long healthy life. Pao replied that his "technique of maintenance and nourishment had to do with a kind of special 'pill' he took from an unspeakable source." Chia wanted the recipe. At this point, Pao smiled and disclosed his secret prescription: "What your humble servant has been taking for fifty years is the pill of sleeping alone."

As in any tradition, consensus is hard to come by, especially in something as intimate and personal as sex. As we would imagine, there were vigorous oldsters who wanted not just to run up stairs nimbly but also to enjoy their vigor in bed. The much admired eighteenth-century poet Yuan Mei confessed that "for the better half of my life I never slept by myself unless lying down in illness." Others said that resisting sex all the time would take more energy than it would give you. They asked: "What benefit was left

after every ounce of energy and bit of spirit one had were spent suppressing the desire for sexual union?"

#### Chinese "Viagra"

Since sex was a positive good and a path to health and spiritual growth, the Chinese were concerned about sexual health and the ability to have sex. The problem of male impotence received much attention. The pharmaceutical texts of Yueh attended to it in great detail. To enhance male potency and for "fruitful sex," Yueh prescribed more than sixty remedies, all of them graced with what Hsiung calls "enticing names." These included complex concoctions, food recipes, pills, cakes, powders, drinks, and so on. Many of the recipes for these medicines were converted into rhymed verses for easy memory and transmission so they could be broadly available.

The medical concern for men was not just limited to their sexual potency. The Chinese developed a whole branch of medicine concerned with men's health. It paralleled our gynecology, which focuses exclusively on women. Hsiung suggests we might call it andronology, and she points out that there is no parallel to this in other systems of medicine. One purpose of andronology was to improve the quality of offspring and to treat infertility. It also included contraceptive ways of lessening the chance of pregnancy. And these medical texts also urged "thriftiness in coital intercourse and seminal emission" to improve "the male essence" and make sex and reproduction more successful.

#### Conclusions on Sex and Family Planning

The Chinese approach to these subjects was religiously conditioned by the Taoist deep appreciation of nature, the Confucian reverence for moderation and loyalty to family,

and the Buddhist advocacy of compassion and the interconnectedness of all things. Good sex, "high sex," demands more than the release of an urge. It involves "morality, aesthetics, and heavenly blessing." There was no contradiction in their view in saying that good sex involves pleasure and duty, celebration and moderation. In light of all this, Hsiung finds some of our Western ideas strange. She even calls them "ignorance fed by self-congratulatory arrogance."

What is she talking about? She is amazed that we tend to think we discovered sexual fun and pleasure in our so-called "sex revolution," and that this was only possible because of the invention of "the pill." The Chinese were into unabashed sexual fun from time immemorial. Also, she finds our Western debate between pro-life and pro-choice "mystifying and misleading." All human choices, she says, are made with life in view, and life is a series of choices. Confucianism and Taoism, she says, "have no inherent opposition to contraception or abortion." These are realities to be faced and are necessary at times to preserve the greater harmony of the world.

Reading Chinese scholars on sex and family planning reminds me of a moment in the past. I was at a conference with a number of Chinese and other scholars. One of these Chinese scholars was a witty woman who spotted me peeking into the lounge during a break to check on a football game. Knowing she could tweak me without breach of friendship, she said: "Ah, yes. That is a sport that would attract you adolescent Americans. When you mature you will delight in more delicate, less violent expressions of physical prowess, like ping-pong and gymnastics."

As we meet these older, experience-rich cultures, our Western attitudes toward sex and fertility are being tweaked and critiqued.

Jews, like Native Americans, see population problems in a special way. Their up-close problem is depopulation, not overpopulation. As Jewish theologian Laurie Zoloth says: "Falling fertility rates among Jews and increasing intermarriage can be graphed to show a point a generation or two in the imagined future in which there will be no Jews at all." Jews have been through more than one holocaust and have repeated experiences of exile. That they have continued to exist at all as a discernible religious culture is amazing. Before the Nazi Holocaust, there were about 18 million Jews in the world; afterwards, the number was only 11 million. Elliott Dorff, an ethicist from the Conservative Jewish Movement, says:

We as a people are in deep demographic trouble. We lost one-third of our numbers during the Holocaust. . . . The current Jewish reproductive rate among American Jews is between 1.6 and 1.7 [2.1 is considered replacement level]. That statistic means we are killing ourselves off as a people. . . . This social imperative has made propagation arguably the most important mitzvah [duty] of our time. . . . To refuse to try to have them, or to plan to have only one or two is to refuse to accept one of God's great-gifts. It is also to renege on the duty we all have to create the next generation and to educate them in Torah.

In the United States, as of 1990, Jews who were once 3.7 percent of the population were only 2.4 percent. Of that number, 52 percent were intermarried to non-Jews, and only 25 percent of these were raising their children as

Jews. You can understand why family planning for Jews can mean planning to have more children, not fewer. And talk of abortion does not raise enthusiasm, even though most Jews are pro-choice. Immanuel Jakobowitz, the former Chief Rabbi of Britain, remarking on abortion in Israel, noted that "abortion deprived the Jewish state of over a million native-born citizens." Canadian Jewish scholar Sharon Joseph Levy says: "It has been estimated that a people this ancient, living continuously in its own homeland, without ever being exiled, would number one billion people."

If Judaism were only interested in the survival of Jewish people, we might well conclude that Judaism would not be of much help to us in addressing the overall world population problem. And yet Judaism never thought of numbers as its contribution to the world. Deuteronomy 7:7 makes this clear: "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples."

In fact, Judaism is an essential partner in the interreligious discussion of any moral issue. Judaism is the spiritual parent of Christianity and Islam and a major shaper of Western culture. As the historian of religions Morton Smith says, early Israel became "the seedbed of the subsequent religious history of the Western world." There can be no sophisticated study of Western culture that does not explore the massive influence of Judaism on us all. For Jews, the survival of Jews is not a motive standing by itself. It's what Jews have to offer that is important. Notice in the quote given above from Elliott Dorff that the last word is "Torah." The reason to have children was to teach them Torah and not to let the vision die. Torah can refer narrowly to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, but it is used more generically to encapsulate the full richness of historical Jewish teaching.

Judaism did not begin as a religion in our modern sense of the word; their language didn't even have a word for religion. Judaism began as a workshop for a new humanity. They looked at the decaying societies around them and decided to rethink life from top to bottom. Early Israel constituted a "creative break from the past." The remarkable people who gathered together to form Israel three thousand years ago presented the world with a new philosophy of life. This is their not-at-all-modest self-portrait in Deuteronomy: "You will display your wisdom and understanding to other peoples. When they hear [this] they will say, 'What a wise and understanding people this great nation is!'" (4:6 NEB). These folks were not timid about their mission. They dared to think of themselves as "a light to the nations . . . to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). They believed they had a message, a Torah, that could save the world from its self-destructive ways.

All of this is beautifully recognized by the gifted writer Thomas Cahill, who is not a Jew himself. His book is titled *The Gift of the Jews* and is provocatively subtitled: *How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*. His opening lines are these: "The Jews started it all—and by 'it' I mean so many of the things we care about, the underlying values that make all of us, Jew and gentile, believer and atheist, tick. Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes, hear with different ears, even feel with different feelings." So what was this vision, this Torah, and how can it help us in dealing with the human need for contraception and for abortion as a backup when necessary?

#### In the Image of God

Laurie Zoloth, who is professor of Jewish studies at San Francisco State University, will be our principal guide in this chapter. Zoloth is a prolific scholar, an observant

Orthodox Jew, and—relevant to the Jewish demographic problem—the mother of five children. If we run out of Jews, it won't be Zoloth's fault. As our scholars worked on this family planning project, Zoloth took us through the fascinating history of how Jews have dealt with fertility questions. Before taking that short tour with her, let us look at some of the central teachings of Torah and see the relevance of each of them to our issues.

It's hard to sum up any major religion in a brief catechism, but let's try to hit some of the main points of Jewish moral and religious wisdom, looking at two things: (1) their casting humanity as "in the image of God"; (2) their rich and radical theory of justice. Each of these has an impact on the Jewish ethics of family planning.

*Image of God* is such a familiar term for many people that it might seem piously boring. In its origins, it started a revolution that continues into our day. *Image of God* was used by monarchs to shore up their authority in the world of the ancient Israelites. The king or pharaoh was the image of God, giving him divine rights. The Israelites stole the term and gave it a whole different meaning. They democratized it. They said: "If you want to see the image of God, look at the baby in my arms. That is the image of God. Look at my father sitting by the fire, hobbled by age. He is the image of God. Run to the reflecting pond and look at your face there. You are looking at the image of God." This undermined the idea of royalty. It set the stage for democratic theory in the West and things like the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution.

Genesis connects this with reproduction: "So God created humans in his own image; in the image of God he created them: male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it'" (1:27-28). Interest-

ingly, in Genesis, God also wanted the fish and the birds to multiply. With them, however, as Sharon Levy says, "the need to procreate is inbred. With people, procreation is a blessing and a directive: 'God said to them. . . .' Human beings are not simply animals doing what comes naturally. We have a divine directive, and we can exercise self-control." The directives of God are not inscribed on our genes but directed to our power of reasoning and providing. Being the image of God makes us, again in Thomas Aquinas's terms, "participants in divine providence." We are to manage this fruitfulness and not reproduce without reason.

As Zoloth says, "we are not the ones who swarm over the earth" like insects. When you give birth to a human child, as Maimonides said, it is "as if a whole world is created." Childmaking is worldmaking—such is the value Judaism puts on every human life. In this supreme valuing of each individual, "it is particularity, and not abundance that is stressed."

Those who would use the Genesis "increase and multiply" text to justify the rejection of family planning do violence to a text that actually gives profound theological justification for family planning. The command to "increase and multiply" was given to beings gifted with reason, and so the increase and multiplication was to be reasonable. Also, in the Jewish view, quality counts more than quantity. We don't just make human beings, we are obligated to make *humane* human beings who can bring the message of Torah to the world. Which bring us to the Torah's teaching on justice.

The Hebrew word most used to convey the idea of justice, *Tzedakah* (pronounced *say-dah-kah*), has more meaning than our word justice can contain. In its Aramaic root, it means mercy to the poor and the destitute. Hebrew justice

means the usual duties of paying debts and fulfilling contracts, but its program is much broader. When Job defended his virtue, he spoke in *Tzedakah* terms, claiming he had been "eyes to the blind, feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy"; he saved the orphan, the widow, and "the poor man when he called for help." He took up the cause of persons whom he did not even know (Job 29:12-20 NEB). In our terms, his justice was proactive, not just reactive. Saying that he had merely paid his bills would be no defense at all in this generous Hebraic notion of justice. This is the central message of Torah, and when you have children, you accept the vocation to make them doers and messengers of *Tzedakah*. What is key, says Zoloth, is not fecundity or numbers of persons, but the enactment of justice. The common good is not created by women's ability to make many children but in her ability to create a household of justice. In such a household, her hands go out to her children, but she will also "stretch her hands out to the poor and her palms to the destitute."

Justice and justice-teaching are intrinsic to parenting in Judaism. Justice requires that families look out not only for themselves, but also that they make sure "ever larger families do not overwhelm a community's ability to care for the poor." Family planning is planning births so they can spread justice on the earth.

This Jewish linking of parenting and justice gives yet another theological basis for family planning. It also forbids a neo-Malthusian shrinking of the problems of the world down to numbers: "Too many people, that's all." Supporting birth control is not enough. Sharon Levy asks the tougher questions, questions filled with the spirit of *Tzedakah*: "Would we support birth control efforts but not forge ahead with bringing justice to those in need? Would we be willing to modify our lifestyles for their sake

and the sake of the world itself?" Condoms are not enough to fix this world. But, speaking of condoms, how do contraception and abortion when necessary as a back-up fit into Jewish ethics?

#### Contraception and Abortion

Realistic flexibility is the hallmark of any religion that appears and stays around for a long time. In Judaism, there is what Zoloth describes as "room for vigorous debate with contradictory opinions heard and honored." Since there was no "central authority," specific issues were always open for debate. Religions are concerned with life and how it is lived, and we humans are complex and always changing. For that reason, a religion is not just a collection of written scrolls. Each enduring religion represents, as Judaism does in Zoloth's term, "thousands of years of discourse." Judaism never saw religion as a remote backdrop. Again, Zoloth says: "It is the totality of life the Jewish belief is after—the inescapable call of the stranger, the constancy of the demand for justice in every interaction, and the importance of the minute details of daily life." Certainly, reproductive life was not going to be left out.

Like all the ancient religions, Judaism was pro-birth. It couldn't be stated more starkly than in the Tannaim in the Tosefa: "One who does not procreate both denies God and commits murder" (8:7). But right away, flexibility appears. After that blunt statement, the text goes on to excuse a man who is so taken up with the study of Torah that he has not taken the time to have children. Rather than condemn him as a murderer, he is seen as "an example of diligence and dedication to the study of Torah." In other words, the Genesis mandate to "be fruitful and multiply" involves more than making babies. There are other

ways of being fruitful; there are other forms of "increase" and other goods to be multiplied. "Having students is akin to childbearing," Zoloth tells us. For humans, there are many forms of fertility. Justice, *Tzedakah*, is the prime Jewish virtue, and being just may require limiting births. Limiting births may be necessary to do justice to the children we already have and to do justice to our community.

One old example of birth limitation concerns women who are nursing. The nursing mother had to use birth control to avoid pregnancy. The health of the nursing child who, the Rabbis thought, might be compromised by another pregnancy or even by full intercourse, was primary. Thus the *mokh*, a soft cotton pad worn internally against the cervix, was prescribed. Nursing was thought to be a two or even three-year period, and the ban against getting pregnant in this time was severe. The Talmud, a body of teaching dating back some fifteen hundred years, says that a divorcée or widow who is nursing or is pregnant (and will be nursing soon) cannot marry until her child is two years old. If she marries before that time, she must divorce and not remarry until the full twenty-four months pass.

The *mokh* was also permitted as a birth control method for other reasons, such as the well-being of the woman. Contraception is not forbidden in Judaism, even though fertility is seen as a precious divine gift.

And what of abortion? In the book of Exodus, there is a revealing case of accidental abortion. "When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine." (21:22 NRSV). This is the earliest clue that a fetus was not seen as having equal standing with a born person. The penalty here is a monetary fine. If the woman had died, it

could be capital punishment, "a life for a life." The fetus was not yet a fully-fledged life—in our terms, not yet a person. Today, some call this "delayed ensoulment," as opposed to ensoulment, or personing, at conception. Fetal tissue is human but not yet personal.

This idea has continued in Judaism. In the ancient writings of Judaism, Zoloth tells us that "abortion is permitted as a health procedure since a fetus is not seen as being an ensouled person. Not only are the first forty days of conception considered 'like water' but also even in the last trimester, the fetus has a lesser moral status." The fetus is not deemed a *nefesh*, a person, until the head emerges in the birthing process (Rashi commenting on Sanhedrin 72b). Because of this teaching, there can be a variety of reasons justifying abortion. Avoiding disgrace is one justifying cause. An early modern response to abortion puts it this way: It states the ideal, which is not to destroy a fetus, but then it quickly adds, "Clearly it is not forbidden when it is done because of a [great] need." It addresses the predicament of a married woman who is pregnant from another man. "If there is no reason, it is forbidden to destroy the fetus. But in the case before us of a married woman who went astray, I have pronounced my lenient opinion that it is permitted to abort, and perhaps it even almost has the reward of a *mitzvah*" (Jacob Emden, *Responsa She'elat Ya'avetz*, No. 43).

Calling the abortion a *mitzvah* is significant. A *mitzvah* is a sacred duty. It is even customary to recite a blessing before doing a *mitzvah*: "Blessed are thou Lord God, King of the Universe who has sanctified us through your commandments. . . ." It is not a slight thing, then, to say that an abortion in these circumstances is a meritorious action, a sacred choice, not just something tolerated as a lesser evil.

Reasons of health are also grounds for abortion. The case was raised of a pregnant woman who had an ear infection; the doctors said that if she remained pregnant she could lose her hearing. The response was that deafness "will ruin the rest of her life, make her miserable all her days, and make her undesirable in the eyes of her husband. Therefore . . . she should be permitted to abort her fetus through highly qualified doctors who will guarantee ahead of time that her life will be preserved, as much as this is possible" (Ben Zion Uziel, Mishpetei Uziel, *Hoshen Mishpat* 3:46).

The rabbis also took on the case of craniotomy, very late-term abortion when the birthing process has already begun. The Talmud says: "If a woman suffers hard labor in travail, the child must be cut up in her womb and brought out piecemeal, for her life takes precedence over its life: if its greater part [head] has already come forth, it must not be touched, for the [claim of one] life cannot supersede [that of another] life" (*Mishneh* 6).

The views on all of these cases were broadly held by the community. We know this because of this principle of Jewish jurisprudence: "We do not make a ruling unless the majority of the community can abide by it" (*Baba Kama* 79b).

#### The Sanctity of Life

The Jewish religion, which has parental status for Christianity and Islam—all three are known as "the Abrahamic religions"—laid the cornerstone of respect for individual and social life in the Western world. Its idea that every single person is a child of God, made in the image of God, undergirds the ethical and legal conception of "the sanctity of life." It is highly significant, therefore, that it forthrightly addressed the issues of contraception and abortion

when necessary. And it comes down firmly on allowing these moral freedoms.

Therefore, we see again that the right to choose an abortion has deep religious roots. Laws that deny women this right are unjust and violate religious freedoms. Such restrictive laws unduly privilege religious persons who espouse the most conservative views while disenfranchising those who hold equally religiously-grounded pro-choice views. Governments that criminalize all abortions have taken sides in a religious debate. Since there are good religious authorities on both sides of the debate, government has no right to intrude.