

would be almost no need for abortion. And we could certainly agree that this world is not utopia. It is our hope that we all could endorse the moral freedom of women who must sometimes make this serious decision in an imperfect world.

This book shows that the right to an abortion is solidly grounded in the world's great religions. Governments that restrict that right are abusing the religious freedom of many—in some cases, most—of their citizens.

The world religions can be our guides. For all their imperfections, each of them is a classic in the art of cherishing. Each of them faces the fact that life is *the* good and the precondition of all other goods. But the life that is so good also bears the mark of the tragic. Sometimes the ending of incipient life is the best that life offers. Historically, women have been the principal cherishers and caretakers of life. We can trust them with these decisions. This book shows that the world's religions urge us to do so.

## I. More People, Less Earth

WHEN I WAS BORN, only a little more than two billion people lived on Earth. Suddenly there are six billion, with another four or five on the way in the next fifty years. The experts say the population boom will then level off, but no one knows what that number will be. It is worrisome that we have on earth at this time the largest class of fertile persons in the history of the world. Half of the human family are under twenty-five. Depending on what these do, our numbers will peak at mid-century somewhere between nine and eleven billion. Put another way, there are more fertile young folks on planet Earth right now than there were people in 1950, and we have no guarantee about what they will do. World population now is like a triangle, with the reproductive young at the wide bottom and the infertile oldsters at the narrow top. Until this becomes more of a rectangle, with a balance between the young and the old, there will be growth.

There is some good news. Overall population growth has been dropping for years. In fact, some thirty-five nations have stopped growing, and some of these actually have declining populations. Even some poor states in India like Kerala and Goa have stabilized their populations. But world population still grows, because mortality is also declining. Sanitation, food, and medicine are all getting better, and more people are surviving. We're lucky to have been born at this point in history—at least those of us who live in the affluent parts of the world. Prehistoric people only lived for an average of eighteen years, factoring in

infant death. In ancient Greece, that figure was twenty, and in ancient Rome, twenty-two. It grew to thirty-seven in medieval Europe and some other parts of the world and was at forty-seven in North America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Extensive child mortality was normal until recently. My father was born in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century. He was one of thirteen children. Only he and four of his siblings survived into adulthood. When I asked him what happened to the others, he would reply: "One wee girl died of the fever, another wee boy died of the cramps," and so forth. Our family moved to the United States, but my mother would still surprise new parents by saying: "That's a lovely child. I hope God spares her." She was saying she hoped the baby would not die, since, in my mother's experience, a lot of babies—sometimes half of them—did. The old Irish developed a religious mythology to help them live with the terrible pain. When my own son, Danny, was diagnosed with Hunter's Syndrome, causing his death at ten years of age, my mother sought to console me by saying that it was a poor family that did not have at least one angel in heaven praying for them. According to this sad theology, God took away your infants so they could pray in heaven for the rest of the family.

In reality, it wasn't a sadistic God that was the problem. Nutrition and sanitation were poor and medicine almost absent. That's the state of a lot of the world today. You need to make many babies, because most will die. That is family planning of a desperate sort! In Sudan today, many feel they need to have twelve or more children to see three or four survive. Often more than three or four survive. Women are viewed primarily as potential mothers, and so early teenage marriages are often the norm. There is a clear link between illiteracy among girls and women and

high birth rates. Also, in many poor countries, children may be the only social security people have, and they can be a financial asset on the farm. In 1984, the World Bank reported that 80 to 90 percent of the people they surveyed in Indonesia, South Korea, Thailand, and Turkey expected to rely on their children for support in their old age. An old Chinese saying was that with each mouth comes two hands. These are some of the reasons why 90 percent of the increase we expect as we go from six to ten billion or more will be in the poorest parts of the world.

Dismissing population problems by saying that overall world population will level off sometime around the middle of this century is small comfort for poor nations like Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Nigeria, whose numbers will probably triple in the next fifty years, with economic and political effects that can hardly be imagined. Half the children in Ethiopia today are undernourished; and if Pakistan triples its numbers as expected, it will have about a tennis court of Pakistani grain land per person—not enough to feed its people even a meager diet. In size, Bangladesh is equivalent to the state of Iowa. But it has forty times the number of people, and its numbers are expected to almost double—to about 210 million—by the middle of this century. Those who would sing songs of comfort about the end of the population problem should first imagine 210 million people in Iowa.

And there is another problem. Even when the poor want to control their fertility, they often cannot find the means to do so. According to John Bongaarts of the Population Council, one-third of the population growth in the next century will be due to the lack of family planning that poor people want but cannot afford. It's not that the poor want to have more babies than they can feed. It's just that foreign aid and national governments do not give them the

contraceptive help they need, often due to conservative religious influences on the government. Many people believe that contraception is forbidden by their religion, but this book will show that the world's religions are open to family planning, including contraception and also abortion as a backup when necessary. This information has been too little known. Many people, even within the various religions, have heard only conservative views on family planning. It is well known that there are *no choice* teachings on contraception and abortion in all the religions, but there are also *pro-choice* positions in these same religions that give people their moral freedom to make choices in these matters. These liberating views have been hidden away—this book seeks to reveal them.

#### What Is So Controversial about Family Planning?

Words, like people, have relatives. When you marry one, you may get all those relatives in the bargain—both the good and the bad.

The term *family planning* has a clan of relatives, and not a peaceable clan. To some people, family planning is the cornerstone of feminism, lifting women from their patriarchally-defined role as mere domestic managers, even “brood mares,” defined by their parenting potential in ways that men are not. For others, it is a euphemism for abortion, which they see as always an immoral choice. Others believe population problems are caused by poor people, by what one writer a century ago bluntly called “the untrammelled copulation of the poor.”

But there are others who see family planning as the sensible wedding of two good ideas: *family* and that alternative to chaos that we call *planning*. That is the way this book sees it.

The human animal is, by definition, the planning animal. So why does family planning generate so much heat?

Because of its relatives. Family planning relates to sensitive issues such as sexuality, the decision to have children or not to have children, the overall health of this fragile Earth, and the delicate problems of sharing between men and women, rich and poor. That is a heavy bunch of relatives. On top of that, governments get in on family planning. They always have. Governments are concerned with whatever affects the common good, and overpopulation—or underpopulation—affects the common good. In ancient times, the governmental worry was not about too many people but about too few. This led to legislation under the Roman Emperor Augustus that penalized bachelors and rewarded families for their fertility. Widowers and divorcees were expected to remarry within a month! Only those who were over fifty were allowed to remain unmarried. Remember that Augustus presided over a society with an average life expectancy of less than twenty-five years. It was a society where, as historian Peter Brown says, “death fell savagely on the young.” Only four out of every hundred men—and fewer women—lived beyond their fiftieth birthday. As a species, we formed our reproductive habits in worlds that were, in Saint John Chrysostom's words, “grazed thin by death.” Such instincts are deep-rooted. If, as Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin wisely said, nothing is intelligible outside its history, this thrust toward reproduction is the defining story of our breed.

The major religions were spawned in a world where our species lived on the scary brink of depopulation. It is not surprising that these religions would be part of the chorus pushing for fertility. That's what the human race needed. As University of Pennsylvania professor William LaFleur says, the ancient religions “turned reproductivity into a mode of being godly. The multiplication of one's kind became both an index of divine favor and a way of receiving such favor.” However, we will see that these same religions

developed teachings that would permit, even require, a limit to births.

If you stay with this book and read it to the end, you will know more about your own religion (if any), and also about the other religions of the world. You will learn that these religions are storehouses of good sense and wisdom in areas of sexuality and family planning—more than you suspected. And your respect for them will actually grow.

### Too Much of a Good Thing

Many of us living in Western countries look down our streets and don't see too many people. We could easily conclude that this worry about overpopulation is bogus. It's not. Too many people in too little space with not enough to meet their needs is a problem. And this is not a new or brilliant insight. Thirty-five hundred years ago, a stone tablet in Babylon gave a short history of humankind. It said that the Gods made humans to do the scut work that was unworthy of the divinities, but that huge problems developed when the humans overreproduced. So the Gods sent plagues to diminish the population and made it a religious obligation for the remaining humans to limit their fertility. This myth represents the earliest record of worries about too many people.

Clive Ponting, in his classic *A Green History of the World*, reports that "All gathering and hunting groups, both contemporary and historical, seem to have tried to control their numbers so as not to overtax the resources of their ecosystem." Protracted nursing was of some help. Other means used were often grim: They included infanticide, especially of twins, the handicapped, and a proportion of female offspring. *Homo sapiens* (a term we humans claim), as far back as we can see, saw that numbers of people and available resources could be in conflict.

Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle sensibly insisted that a nation should not have more people than it can reasonably provide for. Too many people and too few resources spell trouble. Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century Catholic saint, agreed with Aristotle that the number of children generated should not exceed the provisions of the community, and he even went so far as to say that this should be ensured by law as needed! If more than a certain number of citizens were generated, said Thomas, the result would be poverty, which would breed thievery, sedition, and chaos. All this was centuries before Thomas Malthus, in the eighteenth century, famously and pessimistically proposed that the human population is caught in a vicious cycle: The population exceeds the food supply, leading to famine and disease, bringing population back to a manageable level. Then the process begins again. But Malthus missed a lot of things. He did not see how the need for children could be changed by technology and by the move to cities. You don't need as many children in the city as you did on the farm. As recently as 1800, only 2.5 percent of humans lived in cities. By the 1980s, that figure had risen to more than 50 percent. Malthus underestimated the capacity of the planet to produce food; he was uninformed about the multiple influences on fertility increase and decline, and he also failed to see overconsumption by the rich, not the numbers of the poor, as a more crucial problem. There is enough, as Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi said, for our need but not for our greed. The 2.9 million people in Chicago consume more than the 100 million-plus people in Bangladesh. Seventy-five percent of the world's pollution is caused by the "well-salaried and well-caloried."

More important than the number of people is the fact that a few gobble up most of the earth's resources while others starve. Buddhism and other religions have diagnosed

the human problem as primarily one of *greed*. The powerful arrange things so that wealth goes from the bottom to the top, and they are efficient at this. The United Nations reported in 1992 that the richest fifth of the human race gets 82.7 percent of the world's income, leaving 17.3 percent for the rest of the world. The poorest fifth receive 1.4 percent. The shift from bottom to top is accelerating. Under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, the poverty rate in Britain increased from one in ten to one in four, with one child in three officially poor. Under President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, the top 10 percent of American families increased their average family income by 16 percent, the top 5 percent by 23 percent, and the top one percent by 50 percent. The bottom 80 percent all lost. The bottom 10 percent lost 15 percent of their already meager incomes.

This shift of wealth from the weak to the powerful is both color-coded and gender-coded. In 1984 in the United States, more than 75 percent of all the poor were either women or children, including almost one black child in two, one in three Hispanic children, and one in four children under age six. The problem is worldwide. Noeleen Heyzer, director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, says that throughout the world "poverty has a female face. Most of the world's poor are women and most of the world's women are poor. . . . Girls constitute the majority of the 130 million children who have no access to primary schooling." The World Health Organization reports that 19,000 people, mostly infants and children, die each day from hunger and malnutrition. Hunger-related illnesses swell this number greatly.

There is nothing accidental about any of this. A few years ago I was visiting congressional offices with a citizens group. Before we entered the office building, we noticed

rows of limousines parked and double-parked outside—the chariots of the professional lobbyists. With feigned innocence, I commented: "Isn't that wonderful? All those people are in the congressional offices lobbying for the poor!" The problem is not too many poor people; the problem is too many rich people making people poor. No discussion of overpopulation should run away from this fact. With all these greedy arrangements in place, it is sheer iniquity to blame the poverty of the poor on their fertility.

Still, the point not to be missed is that numbers do count. Too many people on a finite planet can be a problem, especially too many greedy, economically comfortable people. But also too many poor people. *Too many rich people* are high-speed wreckers. *Too many poor people* wreck more slowly, but both are wreckers.

So it's not hard to see why governments, religions, and people with common sense are concerned about population. It's also not hard to see why it is a hot topic, since it touches on so many delicate issues.

### Payback Time

Through most of history, the rich could buy themselves a free ride. When the industrial revolution blighted many cities with smoke, dust, and ash, leaving the inhabitants coughing and choking on foul air, those with cash could retreat to country homes and resorts and find clean air and water. That has changed. For the first time in history, the problems of the poor can hurt the well-off. There is no more hiding. Those of us who are comfortably ensconced in the garden spots of the world can easily miss that too many people on the earth—even the desperately poor ones we don't see—make problems for everyone else on earth. We are more connected than we suspected. Religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and

aboriginal Native religions have long taught how utterly interdependent everything is on earth. Now we can see how right they were.

There are around a billion hungry and malnourished people in the world. This causes problems that don't stay overseas. "Too many" *over there* leads to big problems *here*. They can hurt us in two significant ways: (1) through poison and disease, and (2) through job loss in the rich world.

#### Sick and Getting Sicker

Desperate poor people can destroy an environment. More farmland is needed; forests are destroyed. How does this affect us? In lots of ways. As forests are destroyed, microbes need new hosts and move to humans. Microbes and viruses that used to find a life for themselves in the forests have accepted deforesting humans as their new hosts. It's not the tigers coming out of the forest that we now fear. It's the microbes. And those microbes travel. As Nobel Laureate Joshua Lederberg says: "The bacteria and viruses know nothing of national sovereignties. . . . The microbe that felled one child in a distant continent yesterday can reach yours today and seed a global pandemic tomorrow." We talk of the global economy. Global poisoning is also a new fact of life. The poisons of poverty mix with the poisons of the gluttonous rich and are blowing in the wind and falling in the rain and coming home to us in the strawberries and the beef. The words of the ancient Jeremiah take on a fresh contemporaneity. He warned that it is hard to escape the effects of moral malignancy: "Do you think that you can be exempt? No, you cannot be exempt" (Jeremiah 25:29 NEB).

Overpopulation and poverty conspire with the overconsumption of the comfortable to kill our life support sys-

tems. We have lost a fifth of our topsoil and a fifth of tropical rainforests since 1950. Topsoil is that miraculous thin layer of earth that supports all plant life. It is literally more precious than gold. We can live without gold. We cannot live without topsoil. The rainforests are natural treasures that provide oxygen, absorb excess carbon, and supply medicine. (Seventy-five percent of our pharmaceuticals come from plants.) We all get hurt when the planetary womb in which we live gets hurt. Professor of ecology David Orr records some of the results of global poisoning: male sperm counts worldwide have fallen by 50 percent since 1938. Human breast milk often contains more toxins than are permissible in milk sold by dairies—signaling that we have so dirtied the world that some toxins have to be permitted by the dairies. At death, some human bodies contain enough toxins and heavy metals to be classified as hazardous waste. Newborns arrive wounded in their immune systems by the toxins that invaded the womb. One report from India is that "over 80 percent of all hospital patients are the victims of environmental pollution." Human consumption is stressing the oceanic fisheries to their limits, and water tables are falling as more of us need to share this limited resource. If present trends continue, we will not. It's that serious.

#### Jobs and Refugees


As populations rise in small countries, wages go down, and industries move out of affluent countries to take advantage of cheap labor. Industries also find that poor countries do not enforce environmental laws, so they pollute with abandon, but that pollution blows back at us. Acid rains fall on the rich and poor alike—another way that poverty over there affects the rest of us over here. Desperate people also become refugees, fleeing from their

own homes due to poverty or environmental degradation. The wealthy nations now worry about poor people sneaking in or being smuggled across their borders in a desperate search for work. Short-sighted people just want to build walls or tighten immigration laws. But that's like trying to stop the flow of water by jamming the faucet rather than turning off the spigot. The spigot is *desperate need back home*. Ask the Roman Empire. If you have it and they don't, they will come, and walls or dangerous seas will not stop them. The only cure is helping them find what they need at home: jobs, health care, education for their children, human rights—the things we all want and need. And we all would rather find them at home, not in a land that speaks a foreign language and doesn't welcome us.


"The poverty of the poor is their ruin," said the Jewish scriptures (Proverbs 10:15 NRSV). Increasingly, the poverty of the poor is also our ruin. And remember, 90 percent of the population growth in the next fifty years will be in the poor countries. Moral concern for the unnecessary tragedy of world poverty should break our hearts and move us. According to historian Clive Ponting, some 40 million people die every year from hunger and the diseases spawned or affected by poverty—the equivalent of 300 jumbo jet crashes daily—with half of the passengers being children. When you stop to think of it, war is actually an inefficient and picayune killer, no competitor at all for hunger. What war or holocaust ever did anything so huge! But if moral concern for these people does not move us, self-interest should. The effects of their poverty will come home to us. We cannot be exempt.

Population growth is one of the significant coconspirators in this wasting of people and the environment. The environment is our womb. We and the rest of nature form

one fragile and precious community, perhaps the only one like it in all the folds of the universe. The life miracle happened here and possibly nowhere else. One thing all the religions of the world agree on is that we should pause daily and be grateful for this privilege. We don't do that. We're not a grateful people. Our lack of gratitude might well be called our original sin, the root of our undoing.



## 2. Why Do People Make Too Many Babies?



BEWARE SIMPLE ANSWERS TO THIS QUESTION! Simple answers make for simple solutions. Among the simplest—and most wrong—is to say that all we need is more condoms. This ignores the reasons why people—even those with access to contraception—go on making babies anyhow. Family planning that shrinks to just throwing condoms at the problem is a form of self-deception. It ignores the reasons, good and bad, why people feel they need more children. Let's look at just some of these reasons.

According to demographer John Bongaarts's figures, we might add 5.7 billion people in the poor countries between now and the year 2100. By his estimate, 2.8 billion will be the result of "population momentum," the amount of growth if the fertile young simply replace themselves. Those who wanted to use family planning but did not have the means to do it will produce 1.9 billion people. (Many abortions are due to the lack of contraception. That is why it is irrational to deny people contraceptives and then criticize them when they have abortions because they cannot feed more children. They would prefer to have used contraception!) The final 1 billion will come from the cultural desire for big families, a desire that is based on all kinds of things—including religion.

Normally, the desire for children is healthy. It is healthy when you can have children that you can properly care for and when you are bringing them into an environment that is not already overstressed. But there are many kinds of unhealthy and sad reasons for wanting a baby. Sometimes,



the desire for children is due to the despair that poverty breeds. In desperate circumstances, studies show, young women find that the only love relationship they can count on is the mother-child relationship. This can prompt them to have babies they are really not prepared to parent. Another cause of excessive fertility is the custom of early marriage forced on girls in their early teens or younger. In Africa, there is a persistent belief that the dead survive as spirits only as long as the descendants remember them. Having many descendants is a kind of postmortem insurance and a stimulus to fertility.

The literacy of women is crucial for sensible family planning. Overall, the literacy rate for women in India is 39 percent, and the fertility rate is almost four children per woman. However, in India's remarkable state of Kerala, the literacy rate for women is 86.3 percent, and the fertility rate is 1.8.

Small wonder that in 1994 the United Nations Population and Development Conference in India saw that the economic and educational empowerment of women is the key to fertility limitation. As Anrudh Jain, a demographer from the Population Council, reports: "The link between education, particularly girls' education, and fertility decline has been established and appreciated for many years." The same can be said regarding poverty. As political economist Asoka Bandarage says: "Fertility declines require alleviation of poverty and improvements in the living conditions of the poor, especially women." Education and the abolition of poverty are essential for family planning. Jain says: "These factors contribute as significantly as contraceptive availability to fertility decline."

So, in a word, family planning requires more than providing contraception with safe abortion as a backup option when necessary. In a true sense, the best contracep-

tive is hope. When there are hopeful prospects of education and economic sufficiency, people will manage their fertility in sensible ways.

### How Many Is Too Many?

Economist Kenneth Boulding chided his own guild, saying that anyone who believes we can have infinite growth on a finite planet is either a madman or an economist! But really, how big can the human family safely get? Joel E. Cohen, in his monumental book *How Many People Can the Earth Support?* concluded that this is a question that started teasing the human mind in the seventeenth century, when the first estimates were made of the population that the earth's "Land if fully Peopled would sustain." The estimate back then was that the earth could support 13 billion at most, and this is not far off from contemporary estimates. Most estimates today range from four to sixteen billion. It all depends on what people are willing to settle for. If you were content to live at the level of Auschwitz inmates, the Arctic Inuit people, or the Kalahari desert bushmen, you would get large numbers. If you face the reality that most people today have rising, not lowering, expectations, you get smaller numbers.

The world is not infinite. If the Chinese ate fish at the same rate the Japanese do, it would take all the fish in the world to satisfy them. There are limits. Some estimate that only 3 billion people can eat a diet like that enjoyed in the United States, Western Europe, or Japan. One particularly pessimistic study done at Cornell University estimated that the earth can only support a population of 1 to 2 billion people at a level of consumption roughly equivalent to the current per capita standard for Europe.

Most nations live beyond their means. As a typical example, take the Netherlands. It is estimated that the

Dutch require fourteen times as much productive land as is contained within their own borders. To consume the way they consume takes the equivalent of fourteen Hollands. Where does it get the other thirteen Hollands? It imports from the rest of the world. In one of the great lies of modern parlance, we refer to the gluttonous nations of the world as *developed* and the poor nations as *developing*, implying that they can consume like us, and someday will. But if we can try to return to reality, where in the world is Zimbabwe going to find thirteen Zimbabwes? For all of us to live high on the hog, it would take several more planets just like earth, and we don't have them.

So how many people can the world support? Cohen reaches this sensible conclusion: "The Earth has reached, or will reach within half a century, the maximum number the Earth can support in modes of life that we and our children and their children will choose to want." Family planning is necessary now lest population momentum carry us into chaos, and it will be necessary when the population stabilizes to keep families and overall population at sustainable levels. Family planning is as essential to human life as is reason. As the scientist Harold Dorn says with elemental logic: "No species has ever been able to multiply without limit. There are two biological checks upon a rapid increase in numbers—a high mortality and a low fertility. Unlike other biological organisms [humans] can choose which of these checks shall be applied, but one of them must be." If we overreproduce, nature will kill us off with famine, disease, and environmental destruction. The alternative to that is justice-based family planning.

#### What Is Religion?

Animals below the human level are neither religious nor ethical. Some can be trained to gentleness or turned into

rogues by bad experiences; but in general they work on instinct and genetic instruction. They are programmed to do the things that help them survive. What we humans would call moral duties that help us survive are inscribed in detail on the genes of the animals and insects. It is both our glory and our tragedy that our human genes are not adequately programmed to meet all our survival needs. Instinct and genetic inscription don't do the job for us. With our species, the need is met by ethics and by that powerful cultural motivator that we call religion.

Ethics and religion. It's either them or chaos.

*Ethics is simply the systematic effort to study what is good for people and for this generous host of an earth.* And before saying what religion is, we can say that whatever it is, we know that it is powerful and a major shaper of culture. Americans are naive about religion. We think that we removed it from public life by passing the First Amendment and separating church and state. The First Amendment was a good idea. Its whole purpose was to guarantee that reason would not be replaced with alleged divine inspiration. After all, divine inspiration was cited to defend the Inquisition, "witch" killings, the Crusades, pogroms, the subjugation of women, and slavery. The framers of the First Amendment said that you don't hand over government to churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. That's fine, but it's silly to imagine that the First Amendment took that permanent social force that we call religion and threw it out of society.

As the noted historian Garry Wills said, most of the revolutionary movements that transformed, shaped, and reshaped the American nation—"abolitionism, women's suffrage, the union movement, the civil rights movement . . . grew out of religious circles." It's easy to forget it, but if the early Hebrews had not decided that we are all made

"in the image of God"—a term that used to be reserved for kings and Pharaohs—Western ideas of democracy would probably not have evolved, and we might not have a Bill of Rights. As scripture scholar Elaine Pagels says, the Bible "forged the basis for what would become, centuries later, the western ideas of freedom and of the infinite value of each human life." Ideas and symbols born in religion have the power to turn society upside down.

Now to define religion: *Religion is the response to the sacred.* So what is the sacred? The sacred is the superlative of precious. It is the word we use for that which is utterly and mysteriously precious in our experience. Since there is no one who finds nothing sacred, religion is all over the place. In the sacred, our experience of value goes beyond all rational explanation. When we talk about the sanctity of life, we are talking about this mysterious preciousness. Let me illustrate this with an example of experiencing the sanctity of life that we can identify with.

Jean-Paul Sartre, the most famous philosopher of the twentieth century, wrote of how he was walking in a park in Paris, late in his life. He met some former students who had their three-month-old baby with them. Sartre took the smiling baby in his arms and was overwhelmed with its literally priceless charm. He said he realized in that mystical moment that if you took all the works of his life and put them on one side of a balancing scale, then put this baby on the other side, his work would weigh as nothing compared to the *sacred* preciousness he held in his arms. This was a religious experience. Now, Sartre was an atheist. He would not explain the sanctity of the baby's value by talking about God, and yet he was responding to the sacred. It was a religious moment.

And that tells us something about religion. Not all the religions we will meet in this book conclude to the exis-

tence of a god or gods. Some, like Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, are profound responses to the sacredness of life on this privileged planet. They are filled with reverence and awe, generosity and compassion. They are religious. But they are not theistic. As Chun Fang Yu says, speaking for the Chinese religions: "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 is obviously different from other religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which are confident that there is a God underlying all our experiences of the sacred. Christianity and Islam are confident that we can be united with God after death. Hinduism has multiple gods and goddesses. When it comes to god-talk, there is no unanimity. There never was. How, then, do we all get all these world religions together to address problems that affect all humans?

Answer: We recognize that all religions have a common origin. It is an experience of awe, wonder, reverence, and appreciation of the gift of life in this blessed corner of the universe. Each of the world's religions started there. They then took off on their historic journeys, developing symbols to explain the mysterious preciousness we find here. Their symbols and their rituals of appreciation vary, as do their interpretations of how it all got going. Some are more open to what science says of our origins, some less so, but all genuine religions are expressions of reverent gratitude. Agnostic or atheistic humanism can also be seen as religious, since many who so describe themselves have a rich and generous response to the sacredness of life. Like Sartre, they are deeply sensitive to the sanctity of life.

With all this wild diversity of symbols and differing interpretations, can such a motley group get together on issues such as human rights, ecology, and even family

planning? Yes, they can, not by focusing on the differences generated by their march through the centuries but by returning to the primal awe that birthed them all. At the point of reverence for life, we are all at one.

The project that produced this book is proof that religions that are so different in some ways can sit down and talk about common problems. This book was sponsored by a group of international religious scholars known as the Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics. With help from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Ford Foundation, we brought together outstanding religious scholars from ten of the world's religions. Reproductive ethics is complex and multifaceted, and so we brought to the task a group of scholars rich in variety and talent. From Taiwan's Academia Sinica, we have Hsiung Ping-chen, a professor of Chinese cultural history with special interests in sexuality and reproductive patterns. Parichart Suwanbubbha comes to us from Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand, to represent the teachings of Buddhism. Riffat Hassan, a native of Pakistan, is a major reforming theologian in Islam. Sandhya Jain lives in New Delhi and studies Hinduism, Jainism, and Indian culture. Jacob Olupona, a native of Nigeria, is an expert on native African religions. Laurie Zoloth heads the Program in Jewish Studies at San Francisco State University. Christine Gudorf is a Catholic theologian teaching at Florida International University. Mary Churchill comes out of the American Cherokee tradition and works on the various native American religions. Beverly Wildung Harrison, recently retired from Union Theological Seminary in New York, wrote the first book by a Protestant on the moral right to choose an abortion, and we drew her from retirement to join our effort. Geling Shang, a native of China, now at Harvard, is an expert on Taoism and

Confucianism. Arvind Sharma, an expert on Hinduism, but also on the comparative study of world religions, completed our group of world religionists. When all is said and done, we have more than ten religions represented here, since there are multiple Native religions; and our experts on Hinduism are also experts on Jainism. Ten, however, is the round number under which we set sail.

To keep the religious scholars informed on the multiple aspects of demography, science, and policy relating to our topic, we were joined by Dr. Anrudh Jain, Senior Director of Policy at the Population Council. Funmi Togonu-Bickesteth came to us from Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile Ife, Nigeria, where she is a professor of social psychology. Dr. José Barzelatto, an endocrinologist natively of Chile, has been an international leader in population and fertility issues for years. At our first meeting, we were assisted by Dr. Oyin Sodipe from the Department of Primary Health Care in Abeokuta, Nigeria.

All of their papers will form the chapters of a book to be published by a university press, but this book now in your hands will introduce you to their work and conclusions and to the work of others in those religions.

#### Religions Are Changing—They Always Have

Nothing survives that cannot adapt to change, including the world's religions. They have been adapting, correcting themselves, and coming up with new ideas all through the centuries. If they hadn't changed, they would not be taken seriously today. They would be fossils fit only for a mausoleum. For examples of changes we are glad Christians made in their religion, we can look at the Crusades. During the time of the Crusades, Christians thought the greatest thing they could do was to kill non-Christians, especially Jews and Muslims, and religious orders were founded to

do just that. When this was going on in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, in his esteemed book *Summa Theologiae*, said that just as capital punishment of counterfeiters was moral, so too was the execution of "heretics." If we still believed Aquinas, Catholics would be killing their Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim neighbors. Fortunately we got away from that, and modern popes have apologized for some of those terrible wrongs. Does this mean we are perfect now, and no more changes have to be made? Not at all. Some of the coming changes can already be seen.

Let me use Roman Catholicism as one example of ongoing change. In the past, it taught that contraceptive sex could never be justified. We see this changing in many Catholic theologians like Christine Gudorf, whom we will be meeting in this book. Gudorf says that not only is contraception *not* wrong, but that sex should normally be contraceptive and the decision to use sex to have a baby is one that has to be justified. It can be justified if you can give that baby all that it deserves and if you are bringing the child into an environment that is not already overburdened.

Catholic theologians did not talk this way in the past. And it is not just theologians who are changing. In 1994, the Italian bishops issued a report by a panel of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences that stated: "There is a need to contain births in order to avoid creating the insoluble problems that could arise if we were to renounce our responsibilities to future generations." They added that lower death rates and better medical care "have made it unthinkable to sustain indefinitely a birth rate that notably exceeds the level of two children per couple—in other words, the requirement to guarantee the future of humanity." The report recognizes the "unavoidable need to contain births globally." This is a change. Catholic bishops were not putting out reports like this a generation ago.

There are other welcome changes in the Catholic world. The official Vatican publication *Osservatore Romano* published an article in April 2000 by Monsignor Jacques Suaudeau of the Pontifical Council for the Family. In a surprising statement, the monsignor said: "The prophylactic (condom) is one of the ways to 'contain' the sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS, that is, to limit its transmission." Regarding sex workers in Thailand, the monsignor said, "the use of condoms had particularly good results for these people with regard to the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases." He spoke of the use of the condom as justifiable for these purposes—a change in the Vatican's position.

Realistic recognition of the need to plan births is growing similarly in other religions. In 1988, the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar in Egypt proclaimed it as official Muslim teaching that Islam accepts birth control, and there is also acceptance of abortion in certain circumstances in Islamic teaching. We shall see more of other such changes in other religions. Often, alongside the *no choice* position is a *pro-choice* position that is too little known, even by adherents to the religion. That is the key message of this book.

No religion is a total success story. All of them carry the negative debris they accumulated in their march through time. But the religions we meet here are all at root life-enhancing responses to the sacred. In its distinctive way, each is a classic in the art of cherishing. The study of religion is a mining effort that seeks to bring to light the renewable moral energies lost in the mess we can make of all good things. Good religious studies do not fudge the downside—the sexism and the patriarchy and the authoritarianism abundantly found in religions. Amid all the corruption that accrued to these religions in their long histories, we are searching out the good that survived. And on issues of family planning, the good is there.

It is important to remember that religions are all philosophies of life. Just because you are not actively involved in any particular religion does not exclude you from enjoying these treasure troves of wisdom about life and its possibilities. As Morton Smith says, there was "no general term for *religion*" in the ancient world. Thus, for example, Judaism presented itself to the world as a philosophy, a source of wisdom. Look at Judaism's self-portrait in Deuteronomy: "You will display your wisdom and understanding to other peoples. When they hear about these statutes, they will say, 'what a wise and understanding people this great nation is!'" (Deuteronomy 4:6 NEB). So, too, the other religions were quests for enlightenment and betterment. They contain ore that can be mined and refined into rich theories of justice and human rights. Often these treasures have not been applied helpfully and healthily to issues like sexuality, family planning, intergender justice, or ecological care; but that is precisely our mission in these pages. Our particular focus is the human right and obligation to bring moral planning to the human biological power to reproduce. We are not bunny rabbits or bacteria. We are people, the *animal rationale*, the reasoning animal, and we have to reproduce in a reasonable way so that life on this uniquely privileged planet can survive and thrive.

#### But What about Abortion?

Both conservatives and liberals can agree: *There are too many abortions*. In a utopia, there might be almost no need for abortion. However, all you have to do is open your eyes to see that it is not a perfect world. It is a world in which rape, sexual harassment, and abusive sexism are common. Sex education is often absent or distorted. Contraception is unavailable for hundreds of millions of

women. Grinding poverty produces social chaos, often leading to unwanted and often dangerous pregnancies. To get really serious about cutting back on abortions, all of these things would have to be addressed. We're not there yet.

The religions studied in this book defend what should be the obvious human right to contraception, but they also support the moral and human right to an abortion when necessary. The religious scholars you will meet in these pages are at one with the position stated by Asoka Bandarage: "Abortion should not be used as a contraceptive method, but safe and legal abortions should be available to women who choose to have them. Abortion is, almost always, a painful decision for women. Instead of punishing women for that difficult moral and emotional decision, society should develop compassion and support systems for women in making their own choices." When the difficult decision for an abortion is made, it should be made by the person most intimately involved: the woman. It should not be made by some remote government agency or religious leader. Women have a good track record when it comes to serving and preserving life. They should be trusted with these decisions. We find solid support for this sensible position in the major and indigenous religions of the world.

The need for legal and safe abortion is a deadly serious issue. It is estimated that two hundred thousand women die every year from illegal, unsafe abortions; and the number could be higher, since many nations do not report maternal mortality statistics to the World Health Organization. We work out of the belief that the best way to lower the number of abortions is to promote education and economic well-being, and to make contraceptives available. This is the most effective way to cut back on

abortions. This is the truly *pro-life* agenda. Criminalizing abortion is not pro-life; it is anti-woman.

Certain human acts are what I call positive goods. There is no downside to them. Giving food to a hungry person is an example. Some goods can be called negative goods. They are good in conflict situations. They are the best you can do in some cases. Abortion fits into this category. It's something you would like to avoid if possible. You would never say to a young woman, for example: "I wish you a good life, filled with friendship, joy, and professional accomplishment—and to round out your life, I hope you have an abortion or two." No. But you could wish for that young woman the freedom to choose an abortion if she is ever faced with an unwanted pregnancy. The freedom to have the choice of an abortion when needed is a positive good.

In this imperfect world filled with imperfect people, women may become pregnant when they are not emotionally, financially, or physically able to bring that pregnancy to term. Pregnancy, after all, can be seen as a twenty-year condition. Human life is so complex that it takes a lot of rearing and a lot of time to bring a person to maturity. Not every woman who becomes pregnant has the resources to meet that long challenge.

So, one might say: "Why did she become pregnant when she is not ready for it?" Such a question deserves an answer. There are many causes of unwanted pregnancies. Let me list a few: (1) *Ignorance*. The lack of sex education is a fountain of sexual myth about when and how you can get pregnant. (2) *Unavailability of contraceptives*. Sexual passion is a most powerful force that doesn't await the arrival of contraceptives. (Interestingly, the Chinese have started leaving free condoms in hotel and motel drawers.) (3) *Premature sexual experience*. In a culture where sex is

constantly being hyped to impressionable young people, unplanned pregnancies will result. (4) What I call the *hostile inseminator syndrome*. The devil here is sexism. Sexism is the belief that women are inferior, and how do you make love to an inferior? Carelessly, would seem to be the answer. Male disinterest in contraceptives is a form of violence. (5) The *surprised virgin syndrome* is another source of mischief. By this I refer to the inability to admit that the relationship is nearing the point where it could get sexual, and that moral choices are called for. Counselors are often told that "it just happened," but that is not honest, since the onset of sexual ardor is, to say the least, noticeable. (6) *Poverty* brings unwanted pregnancies, since poverty breeds chaos and despair and is not conducive to realistic planning in sexual or other areas of life. (7) *Social pressure, especially in the form of peer pressure*, presses young people to begin their sex lives prematurely. The scarlet letter today is V, not A. Virginity becomes taboo. Too often, the adolescent male sexual impulses make having sex the gateway to social acceptability. This sort of pressure can be seen as a kind of socialized rape. (8) *Alcohol and drug use in dating contexts* removes caution and dilutes good sense. (9) *The diminished influence of religion* with the sexual restraints it included also make for unintended pregnancies. Many religions were too negative toward our sexuality and sexual pleasure and didn't see sex as the sweet good it is, but they also provided cultural brakes that prevented premature or imprudent use of this natural gift.

More could be said, but these answers suffice to show that the question "Why did she become pregnant when she is not ready for it?" is arrogant, judgmental, and naive. As in all matters of gender justice, sexuality, and family planning, both simple answers and simple questions are suspect.

### 3. The Roman Catholic Freeing of Conscience

WE WILL START WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC *positions* (note the plural) on contraception and abortion, not because it is the oldest religious tradition—it is not—but because of its international influence. For one thing, the Catholic Church is the only world religion with a seat in the United Nations. From that seat, the Vatican has been active in promoting the most restrictive Catholic view on family planning, although more liberating Catholic views exist. From its unduly privileged perch in the United Nations, the Vatican, along with the “Catholic” nations—now newly allied with conservative Muslim nations—managed to block reference to contraception and family planning at the 1992 United Nations conference in Rio de Janeiro. This alliance also delayed proceedings at the 1994 United Nations conference in Cairo and impeded any reasonable discussion of abortion. With more than a bit of irony, the then Prime Minister Brundtland of Norway said of the Rio conference: “States that do not have any population problem—in one particular case, even no births at all [Vatican City]—are doing their best, their utmost, to prevent the world from making sensible decisions regarding family planning.”

The sudden rapport between the Vatican and conservative Muslim states is interesting. For fourteen centuries, the relationship was stormy to the point of war and persecution. During that time, abortions were known to be happening, and yet this produced no ecumenical coziness. Is the issue really fetuses, or is it that these two patriarchal



bastions are bonded in the face of a new threat—the emergence of free, self-determining women? Questions like these and all of the above summon us to visit Roman Catholicism first in our examination of the world religions.

The separation of power and ideas is one of the tragedies of human life. The Catholic tradition is filled with more good sense and flexibility than one would gather from its leaders. Religious leaders are often not equipped to give voice to the best in the tradition they represent. In Catholicism, popes and bishops are usually not theologians, and often they do not express the real treasures of wisdom that Catholicism has to offer the world. Lay people are changing this as they enter the field of Catholic theology and bring their real-life experience as workers, parents, and professionals. Catholic theology is no longer a clergy club, and that is gain.

One of these lay theologians is Christine Gudorf, who will be our principal guide in this chapter. Gudorf is an internationally known scholar teaching at the International University in Miami. She is also a wife and a parent. In recent centuries, Catholic theology was done almost exclusively by men. That has changed, and in the last half of the twentieth century, women began to enrich the tradition with their scholarship and experience as women.

Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit scholar, said that nothing is intelligible outside its history. The point is well-taken. If we lost our personal history through amnesia, we would not even know who we are. Gudorf believes, along with many scholars, that nothing clears the mind of caricatures like a bracing walk through history.

### The Catholic Story

Gudorf points out that Christianity was born in a world in which contraception and abortion were both known and

practiced. The Egyptians, Jews, Greeks, and Romans used a variety of contraception methods, including *coitus interruptus*, pessaries, potions, and condoms; abortion appears to have been a widespread phenomenon. Knowledge of all of this was available to Christians, and although church leaders tried to suppress it, they were never fully successful.

Surprisingly, even before the coming of Christianity, abortion and contraception were not the primary means of limiting fertility in Europe. As it was elsewhere in the world, infanticide was the main method. Christianity reacted against infanticide, but evidence exists that it continued to be practiced. Late medieval and early modern records show a high incidence of “accidental” infant deaths caused by “rolling over” or smothering of infants, or deaths reported as “stillborn.” As Gudorf says, “the level of layings over could hardly have been fully accidental.”

During the Middle Ages, however, infanticide was much less common than abandonment. Infants for whom parents could not provide were most often left at crossroads, on the doorsteps of individuals, or in marketplaces in the hope that the child would be adopted by passersby. (More often it condemned the children to a life of slavery or an early death.) To ease this crisis, the church in the Middle Ages provided for *oblation*. This meant that children could be offered to the church to be raised in religious monasteries. Many of them eventually became celibate nuns and monks, thus leading to further containment of fertility.

Another Catholic response to excess fertility was the foundling hospital. The foundling hospitals were equipped with a kind of *lazy Susan* wheel (*ruota*) on which the child could be placed anonymously; then the wheel turned, putting the child inside. The good intentions in this were not matched with resources; the vast majority of these

infants, sometimes 90 percent of them, were dead within months. Because of the reliance on infanticide and abandonment, it is not surprising that abortion and contraception were not much discussed. As Gudorf says, "the primary pastoral battles in the first millennium were around infanticide, the banning of which undoubtedly raised the incidence of abandonment." The high mortality of children due to nutritional, hygienic, and medical debits was also a common and cruel form of population control.

#### Catholic Teaching on Contraception and Abortion

Catholic teaching on contraception and abortion has been anything but consistent. What most people—including most Catholics—think of as "the Catholic position" on these issues actually dates from the 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii* of Pope Pius XI. Prior to that, church teaching was a mixed bag. The pope decided to tidy up the tradition and change it by saying that contraception and sterilization were sins against nature and abortion was a sin against life. As Gudorf says, "both contraception and abortion were generally forbidden" in previous teaching, but both were often thought to be associated with sorcery and witchcraft. In the Decretals of 1230, Pope Gregory IX treated both contraception and abortion as homicide. Some of the Christian Penitentials of the early Middle Ages prescribed seven years of fasting on bread and water for a layman who committed homicide—one year for performing an abortion, but seven years for sterilization. Sterilization was considered more serious than abortion because the issue was not framed as pro-life. Rather, the driving bias was antisexual. Traditional Christian attitudes toward sexuality were so negative that only reproduction could justify sexual activity. Abortion frustrated fertility once; sterilization could frustrate it forever and

therefore was more serious. Also, since the role of the ovum was not learned until the nineteenth century, sperm were thought to be little *homunculi*, miniature people, and for this reason male masturbation was sometimes called homicide. Christian historical sexual ethics is clearly a bit of a hodgepodge. To really understand it, and to arrive at an informed judgment of Catholic moral options, it is necessary to be instructed by a little more history.

#### Catholic and Pro-choice

Although it is virtually unknown in much public international discourse, the Roman Catholic position on abortion is pluralistic. It has a strong pro-choice tradition and a conservative anti-choice tradition. Neither is official, and neither is more Catholic than the other. The hierarchical attempt to portray the Catholic position as univocal, an unchanging negative wafting through twenty centuries of untroubled consensus, is untrue. By unearthing this authentic openness in the core of the tradition to choice on abortion and contraception, the status of the anti-choice position is revealed as only one among many Catholic views.

The Bible does not condemn abortion. The closest it gets is in Exodus 21:22, which speaks of accidental abortion. This imposes a financial penalty on a man who caused a woman to miscarry "in the course of a brawl" (NEB). The issue here is the father's right to progeny; he could fine you for the misdeed, but he could not claim "an eye for an eye" as if a person had been killed. Thus, as conservative theologian John Connery, S.J., said, "the fetus did not have the same status as the mother in Hebrew Law."

Following Scripture's silence on abortion, early church history treats it only incidentally and sporadically. Indeed, there is no systematic study of the question until

the fifteenth century. One early church writer, Tertullian, discusses what we would today call a late-term emergency abortion. Doctors had to dismember a fetus in order to remove it, and he refers to this emergency measure as a *crudelitas necessaria*, a necessary cruelty. Obviously this amounted to moral approbation of what some today inaccurately call a "partial-birth abortion."

The theory of delayed animation or *delayed ensoulment* developed early on and became the dominant tradition in Christianity. Borrowed from the Greeks, it taught that the spiritual human soul did not arrive in the fetus until as late as three months into the pregnancy. Prior to that time, the life did not have the moral status of a person. Theologians opined that the *conceptum* was enlivened first by a vegetative soul, then an animal soul, and only by a human spiritual soul after it was formed sufficiently. Though sexist efforts were made to say the male soul arrived sooner—maybe a month and a half into the pregnancy—the rule of thumb for when a fetus reached the status of *baby* was three months (or even later). As Gudorf writes, the common pastoral view was "that ensoulment occurred at quickening, when the fetus could first be felt moving in the mother's womb, usually early in the fifth month. Before ensoulment, the fetus was not understood as a human person. This was the reason the Catholic church did not baptize miscarriages or stillbirths."

Reflecting the pious belief in a resurrection of all the dead at the end of the world, Augustine pondered whether early fetuses who miscarried would also rise. He said they would not. He added that neither would all the sperm of history rise again. (For this we can all be grateful.) The conclusion reached by Latin American Catholic theologians in a recent study is this: "It appears that the texts condemning abortion in the early church refer to the abor-

tion of a fully formed fetus." The early fetus did not have the status of *person*, nor would killing it fit the category of murder.

This idea of delayed ensoulment survived throughout the tradition. Saint Thomas Aquinas, the most esteemed of medieval theologians, held this view. Thus the most traditional and stubbornly held position in Catholic Christianity is that early abortions are not murder. Since the vast number of abortions done today in the United States, for example, are early abortions, they are not murder according to this Catholic tradition. Also, according to this Catholic tradition of delayed ensoulment, all pregnancy terminations resulting from the use of RU 486 would not qualify as the killing of a human person.

In the fifteenth century, Antoninus, the saintly archbishop of Florence, did extensive work on abortion. He approved of early abortions to save the life of the woman, a class with many members in the context of fifteenth century medicine. This became common teaching. He was not criticized by the Vatican for this. Indeed, he was later canonized as a saint and thus a model for all Catholics. Many Catholics do not know that there exists a pro-choice Catholic saint who was also an archbishop and a Dominican.

In the sixteenth century, the influential Antoninus de Corduba said that medicine that was also abortifacient could be taken even later in a pregnancy if the mother's health required it. The mother, he insisted, had a *jus prius*, a prior right. Some of the maladies he discussed do not seem to have been matters of life and death for the women, and yet he allowed that abortifacient medicine was morally permissible, even in these cases. Jesuit theologian Thomas Sanchez, who died in the early seventeenth century, said that all of his contemporary Catholic theologians approved of early abortion to save the life of the

woman. None of these theologians or bishops were censured for their views. Note again that one of them, Antoninus, was canonized as a saint. Their limited pro-choice position was considered thoroughly orthodox and can be so considered today. In the nineteenth century, the Vatican was invited to enter a debate on a very late-term abortion, requiring dismemberment of a formed fetus in order to save the woman's life. On September 2, 1869, the Vatican refused to decide the case. It referred the questioner to the teaching of theologians on the issue. It was, in other words, the business of the theologians to discuss it freely and arrive at a conclusion. It was not for the Vatican to decide. This appropriate modesty and disinclination to intervene is an older and wiser Catholic model.

What this brief tour of history shows is that a *pro-choice* position coexists alongside a *no choice* position in Catholic history, and neither position can claim to be more Catholic or more authentic than the other. Catholics are free to make their own conscientious decisions in light of this history. Not even the popes claim that the position forbidding all abortion and contraception is infallible. Teachings on abortion are not only *not* infallible, they are, as Gudorf says, "undeveloped." Abortion was not the "birth limitation of choice because it was, until well into the twentieth century, so extremely dangerous to the mother." As our short history tour illustrates, there was no coherent Catholic teaching on the subject, and there still is not. Some Catholic scholars today say all direct abortions are wrong. Some say there are exceptions for cases such as danger to the mother, conception through rape, detected genetic deformity, or other reasons. Gudorf's sensible conclusion: "The best evidence is that the Catholic position is not set in stone and is rather in development."

### Sex, Women, and the *Sensus Fidelium*

Debates about sexuality and reproduction are always influenced by certain cultural assumptions. These usually involve attitudes toward women and sex. A culture that looks on women, like Pandora and Eve, as sources of evil is going to have trouble justifying having sex with them; it may conclude that only reproduction can justify sexual collusion with women. That is exactly what happened in Christianity. Augustine said that if it were not for reproduction there would be no use for women at all. In his words, "in any other task a man would be better helped by another man." Early attitudes toward women were poisonous. The Mosaic law assumed male ownership of women. Early church writers said women lacked reason and only possessed the image of God through their connection to men. Luther saw women as being like nails in a wall, prohibited by their nature from moving outside their domestic situation. And Aquinas said that females are produced from male embryos damaged through some accident in the womb. As Gudorf says in her refreshingly sensible book *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, the church has rejected all of that nonsense but "continues to teach most of the sexual moral code which was founded upon such thinking."

Small wonder that we are rethinking sexual and reproductive ethics. As Gudorf says: "The Roman Catholic Church (and Christianity in general) has in the last century drastically rethought the meaning of marriage, the dignity and worth of women, the relationship between the body and the soul, and the role of bodily pleasure in Christian life, all of which together have revolutionary implications for church teaching on sexuality and reproduction. In effect, the foundations of the old bans have been razed and their replacements will not support the walls of the traditional ban."

Gudorf and other Catholic theologians do not stand alone in the church on this dramatic and important change in Catholic teaching. In 1954, Pope Pius XII laid the groundwork for a change in Catholic teaching when he permitted the rhythm method. Though he quibbled about what means could be used, he did bless contraceptive intent and contraceptive results. He even said there could be multiple reasons to avoid having any children at all in a marriage. In 1968, when Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the view that all mechanical or chemical contraception was sinful, the Catholic bishops of fourteen different countries respectfully disagreed and told the faithful that they were not sinners if they could not accept this papal teaching.

Most of the laity, of course, had already made up their minds. Birth rates in so-called Catholic nations in Europe and in Latin America are close to or below replacement levels. And as Gudorf wryly puts it, "it is difficult to believe that fertility was cut in half through voluntary abstinence from sex." Such dissent by Catholic laity from hierarchical teaching is actually well-provided for in Church teaching. The *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful, is one of the sources of truth in Catholic theology. This means that the consciences and experiences of good people are guideposts to truth that even the hierarchy must consult.

In its best historical realizations, Catholicism is not as hidebound and authoritarian as many bishops, popes, and fearful conservatives would make it seem. There exists dissent from hierarchical teaching that is "in and for the church," as Catholic theologian Charles Curran says. Through much of Catholic history, the hierarchy taught that all interest-taking on loans was a sin of usury—even the smallest amount. The laity saw that this was an error and decided that too much interest was sinful and a reasonable amount was not. A century or two later, the hier-

archy agreed—especially after the Vatican opened a bank and learned some of the facts of financial life. The laity are again, along with the theologians, leading the church on the moral freedom to practice contraception and to use abortion when necessary as a backup. Perhaps if the hierarchy were married with families, they could follow the wisdom of the laity in this at a faster pace. It would be a shame if it took a century or two for them to respect the conscience of the laity, graced and grounded as that conscience is in the lived experience of marriage and children.

Gudorf is hopeful in this regard. She believes that within a generation or two, Catholic hierarchical teaching "will change to encourage contraception in marriage and to allow early abortion under some circumstances." She continues: "This change will occur because as the Catholic Church confronts the reality of a biosphere gasping for survival around its teeming human inhabitants, it will discern the will of God and the presence of the Spirit in the choices of those who choose to share responsibility for the lives and health and prosperity of future generations without reproducing themselves, even if that choice involves artificial contraception and early abortion."

## 4. The Religions of India

EVERY CULTURE FISHES FOR ITS IDEAS and ideals in certain ponds, ignoring the fishing opportunities in other waters. Europe and the Americas have drawn sustenance from the Greek, Roman, and Jewish worlds particularly, and have profited by this. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the three religions that trace back to Abraham (and hence are called the Abrahamic three); these have been influential shapers of Euro-American culture. Much of this influence was positive. Meanwhile, in the rest of the world, human beings through the ages have gotten up every morning and tried, with successes largely unknown to us, to figure out what life means. In India, China, Africa, and beyond, human genius has blossomed in poetic and religious forms that are rich in the understanding of life and its possibilities and delights. These flowerings of culture beckon to us. In the words of the Buddha, they say to us, "Come and see!"

In this chapter, we go to India *to see*. We will see that Hinduism is the main religion, embraced in some way by 80 percent of the Indian people. There is no tidy little creed that sums up Hinduism, and it can be said that Hinduism is more a confederation of religions than a single denomination. Yet in the rich variety of forms that Hinduism assumes, there are commonalities and motifs that are relatively constant.

### Meeting Hinduism

I believe the best way to meet a religion is in a person, not in a book or creed. In Hinduism, that person is Mohandas K.

Gandhi, the most famous Hindu of our times. Gandhi is more than a Hindu hero; he is the moral giant of the twentieth century, an unparalleled example of the power of spiritual and moral conviction. He was a slight figure less than 100 pounds, and his possessions when he died were worth less than five dollars. And yet he led the liberation of India from foreign control and taught the world the power of a nonviolent struggle for justice. His sense of justice was fearless. He assaulted the cruelest prejudice in India by naming the Untouchables the *harijan*, the children of God, thus beginning the slow undermining of caste in India.

Gandhi illustrates one of the great beauties of Hinduism: its intellectual tolerance and openness. He studied not just the Vedas of Hinduism but the Bible of Jews and Christians and the Qur'an of Islam, and he actually taught other religions something about themselves. Many of the Christian peace movement's modern leaders found the Christian peace ideal through Gandhi, not through their own religious communities. This was certainly true in the case of Martin Luther King Jr. Gandhi was the moral and political leader not just of Indian liberation but also of the United States civil rights revolution. One Christian writer even said that "the most Christlike man in history was not a Christian at all." He was a Hindu named Gandhi.

Hinduism is open to wisdom from any source. Gandhi said: "I believe in having equal regard for all faiths and creeds." He did not believe there was one true and perfect faith. In the words of the Christian apostle Paul, we all know "in part." In Gandhi's words, "all faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error. Reverence for other faiths need not blind us to their faults." Thus the Laws of Manu are sacred to Hindus, but they say some atrocious things about women. "By a girl,

by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife." Gandhi said these teachings were simply in error.

The same can be said of the Christian scriptures; the epistle to the Ephesians tells women to be subject to their husbands as if the men were divine. That is as wrong as the Laws of Manu were when they made the same sexist point. As theologian Diana Eck sees it, "religions are not revealed full-blown from heaven. They are human responses to the glimpses of God's revelation, human creations, bearing the imprint of inevitable human imperfection." Some Buddhists go even further and say that every belief system is an illness waiting to be cured. That is a bit too sweeping; these rich traditions contain much positive content. But no matter what religion you study, you will find much that is wrong and harmful. If that were all there was to find, these religions would be useless and discardable. But within these classics are renewable moral energies that have transformed societies in the past and can do so again. To make matters worse, the faithful of the world's religions are not very faithful to the ideals of their religions. As Gandhi said, "much of what passes for Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount." And the best insights of Hinduism are often mocked by the daily lives of Indians. We are all hypocrites to some degree, professing one thing and doing another.

Having said that, let us agree that any religion that can produce a Gandhi deserves a hearing in all serious moral

debates. Our question: What can Hinduism teach us on matters of family planning?

### *Dharma*

Our principal guide in this chapter will be Sandhya Jain. Jain lives in India. She is a student of India's religions, particularly Hinduism and Jainism, and an internationally respected journalist and commentator on Indian politics and culture.

Before getting to the issues of contraception and abortion, Jain directs us to the major teachings of the Hindu religion for the background against which all moral judgments are made. To meet Hinduism, start with *dharma*. Derived from the Sanskrit word *dhr*, it means "that which supports right living" and "that which is conducive to the highest good." *Dharma* is the law of life—the moral or the natural law, we might call it. Sometimes Hindus call their religion *eternal dharma*; that's how central it is. We might be tempted to think that *dharma* is a blueprint that gives detailed, unchanging instructions for the entire moral life. That would be a mistake. Built into the notion of *dharma* is the need to adapt to changing circumstances. Life is always the same, and it is also always different. Morality (*dharma*) has to be consistent but also adaptive. Obligations change as situations change. (Already you can see how this will apply to family planning. When more people were dying than being born, it was good to have more children. When we are overcrowded, *dharma* says, "take note!")

Jain says: "Like a river, *dharma* maintains a continuous flow through the ages, constantly renewing and replenishing its waters (contents) and continually altering its course, while giving the appearance of changelessness." This insistence on the need to adapt to new circumstances,

Jain says, has given "Hinduism its incredible capacity to vary its metaphysical and ethical principles in consonance with the social and historical realities of the day, without losing its essential character or sense of identity." It is true that Hinduism has encouraged big families and has a bias for boy babies. However, Jain says, "this ancient religion is as malleable as it is eternal. This religion can be utterly transformed and turned on its head in the name of religion itself."

Hinduism believes change is non-threatening; resistance to necessary change is a mark of ignorance and futility. Religious reformers can get somewhere in India. Jain says that "by and large, progressive ideas and movements in India have not encountered religious opposition." On the contrary, the successful efforts to eliminate *sati*, the self-immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband, were led by religious leaders. The same is true for the promotion of the right of widows to remarry and for resistance to Untouchability (in which Gandhi led the way). The ideal of a small family is growing. Religious reformers are challenging the religiously grounded bias in favor of male offspring. It was taught that the eldest son enjoys a special status because he can offer the rites that advantage his departed father in the afterlife. As religious reformers teach that girls can do the same, this is changing. As we shall see, religious leaders have also rallied in favor of family planning.

### *Karma*

*Karma* is a strong feature of Hinduism and the religions, like Buddhism and Jainism, that were influenced by Hinduism. *Karma* is basically a belief that what you sow, you will reap. And it is not just individualistic. What society sows, society reaps. If India has hundreds of millions of



poor people, it is not an act of God. It is the harvest of deeds done and duties neglected. Every thought and every deed has an unavoidable impact. *Karma* is the fate that you yourself have—or a whole society has—chiseled out. It is the powerful belief that we get what we have coming to us, the good and the bad. This fights the human tendency to blame blind fate or chance for social disasters.

We are geniuses at dodging blame. The Black Plague was blamed on divine retribution instead of the horrendous unhygienic conditions in which most people lived. Global warming is blamed on the inevitable cycles of nature rather than our double-basting the planet in carbon dioxide. The gobbling up of 80 percent of income by the top 20 percent of people is just a given; greed has nothing to do with it. Nonsense, says the doctrine of *karma*. A lot of sowing has gone on. We are just looking at the harvest.

*Karma* doctrine is a piercing call to candor. It also involves faith that real possibilities of goodness exist in this little corner of the universe. Hinduism has an inner optimism about our reality. As Hindu scholar Anantanand Rambachan says, it is Hindu belief that “the divine exists equally and identically in all beings and things.” As the Bhagavad Gita puts it: “He who sees the Supreme Lord, existing alike in all beings, not perishing when they perish, truly sees.” In other words, this is a belief that deep down, in all things, there is a divine spark. Reality is basically good and promising. This is a hopeful posture. It matches the Genesis story of the Hebrews that portrayed God as looking on creation and pronouncing it “very good.” This puts the obligation on us not to mess it up. If poverty is killing 40 million people a year, don’t blame God. Don’t blame this “very good” earth. The enemy is us.

*Karma* strips away rationalization and shouts a big loud accusation at the human race. It is a blunt demand

for accountability. Looking at the wreck we are making of the earth, *karma* says “it ain’t necessarily so!” *Karma* doctrine is practical. It could be directed now against the prevalent Indian practice of female abortion and female infanticide. This has lowered the ratio of men to women. In 1991, there were 927 women for 1,000 men. In 1901, the ratio had been 972 women to 1,000 men. India is sowing here, and it takes no genius to see what it will reap.

*Karma* is strongly tied to the belief in reincarnation in Indian religions and in Buddhism. The *karma* that one has accumulated determines how and in what form one will be reborn or whether one will escape the cycle of rebirth and enter a state of bliss. Aside from this belief, however, *karma* teaching stresses the impact of our behavior on this planet.

### *Ahimsa*

Especially through the influence of Gandhi, *ahimsa* has featured prominently in Hindu morality. The word connotes nonviolence and compassion toward all beings. Gandhi took instruction on *ahimsa* from Jainism. Jainism is another of India’s ancient religions. Though small in its number of adherents, Jainism has had a major influence on Indian culture and on India’s majority religion, Hinduism. That it has had such an influence on Hinduism signals how open Hinduism is to other religious views, especially since Jainism rejects the idea of a God who creates and denies the authority of the Vedas, which have scriptural standing for Hindus. (Jains also reject the idea of caste.) Where Jainism shines is in its simplicity of life and avoidance of selfish indulgence. Jains insist on five major moral commitments, and this pentagon of virtues has also been absorbed by Hinduism. The first is *ahimsa*: non-injury, nonviolence, compassion; the second is *satya*:

speaking truth and respecting the power of truth; the third is *asteya*: not taking anything not given. The fourth also curbs the human desire to own: *aparigraha*, the restriction of the desire to possess and dominate. The last is *brahmacarya*: sexual restraint.

The Jain stress on *ahimsa*, on not doing injury or violence, leads some Jains to reject abortion. In support of abortion, other Jains point out that in some situations, abortion may be the only way to avoid greater injury.

#### Hinduism on Abortion

At first blush, it would seem that Hinduism is the last place to go if you want to take a pro-choice view on abortion. In the prestigious *Dharma Sastras* and in other major writings, Hindus are told never to practice abortion even in the case of an illegitimate child. Abortion is presented as a heinous crime and is classified as one of the *mahapatakas* (atrocious acts), subjected to severe penances and punishments. Other sources list abortion as the basest of sins, pointing out the bad *karma* it produces that could have negative consequences in this life and the next. Jain notes that this "apparently implacable aversion to abortions derives from the Hindu theory of conception as the result of a divine act, and hence as holy and worthy of reverence."

Conception is not just the material union of sperm and ovum. It also involves the life principle or spirit, the *atman*. The term *atman* is seen as the link with God. "God abides in the *atman*, and the *atman* abides in God." Thus, as Jain says, "in the Hindu view both physical and spiritual life enters the human embryo at the moment of conception itself and there is never a pure state of matter alone." For those who believe in reincarnation, the seriousness is even greater, since the *karma* of a past life will be reentering in this birth. The embryo is not just tissue.

It's a being endowed with spirit, dignity, and a previous history.

The deck would therefore seem to be firmly stacked against the moral permissibility of any abortion in the Hindu world. But abortion has been legal in India since 1971 with the passing of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act! This law permits abortion in cases of rape, incest, and even for the mental health of the woman if she would be adversely affected by the birth of an unwanted child. "With such broad-ranging provisions," says Jain, "it can easily be seen that in India, abortion is available practically on demand." Moreover, the Indian government is planning to extend the Termination of Pregnancy Act to provide abortion rights to minor girls below 18 years of age, whether married or unmarried, without the consent of their guardians. And, remarkably, says Jain, "Hindu religious bodies have not expressed any opposition to this move." And Hindu religious bodies are not bashful about speaking out on any moral issue.

How then can we explain this stunning inconsistency? Is this another case of East is East, West is West, and never the twain shall meet? Is there something in the "inscrutable East" that others could never understand?

Not really.

#### Better Insights Replacing Old Taboos

Religions developed when illiteracy was the norm, and their teachers often taught the way parents teach toddlers. They used absolutes, not nuanced rules. You don't say to a toddler: "It would be ideal if you never crossed the street. However, there may be circumstances in which there is no danger, and you may have good reasons to cross by yourself on your own authority." No, we say: "Don't you dare ever go out into that street." This tendency to use absolute

commands endures in most religions. They continue to treat adults like unlettered and unthinking children. That Hindu teachers are not complaining about these changes in abortion laws, allowing people to make their own decisions, puts them a step ahead of the Vatican. Hindu teachers are showing respect for the mature consciences of their people. The Vatican is still enmeshed in the parental control syndrome: "Don't you dare!"

So East and West are not that far apart when it comes to morality and change. We can even find an example in Catholic Italy of this kind of adaptability. In the 1950s, I was a Catholic seminarian studying in Rome. When Lent arrived my first year there, I found in the official rules of the church that fasting and abstinence from meat were required every day in Lent. Yet what to my wondering Irish Catholic eyes should appear but the obvious fact that no one—priest or layperson—was fasting or abstaining. I even went to the extent of calling the Vicariate, the church headquarters in Rome. The impatient voice of some monsignor, who clearly wished he had not answered this call, received my question: "Do we have to fast and abstain during Lent?"

With a suppressed moan, he replied, "No." Then he added as an afterthought, "Maybe on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday."

Having heard that "maybe," I pressed him: "But do we *really* have to fast on those two days?"

"No," he replied, and quickly bid me good day.

What was going on here? Italy had just gone through a terrible war during which finding food, not fasting and abstaining, was the issue. On top of that, Catholicism had been rediscovering the biblical stress on social justice and care for the poor as much more important than dietary restrictions. Even the bishops of the church eventually

changed the fasting laws and caught up with the laity. The same thing that Christine Gudorf has predicted for birth control took place. Better insights replaced old taboos.

There is another reason why Hinduism can allow for the choice of abortion. Religious traditions are never seamless garments, though the faithful like to think of them that way. They are patchwork quilts, and not all the patches match. Alongside the prohibitions against abortion, ample evidence exists in the ancient medical texts of India that contraception and abortion were going on. As Jain says: "These all attest to the fact that there has always been a human need to control or mitigate the consequences of sexuality, and that this fact was recognized, with sympathy, by at least a section of the religious-medical teachers at various times." In fact, the strong condemnations of abortion mentioned above indicate that those inveighing against them had something to inveigh against. Abortion was approved by some and practiced by many—otherwise it would not have won a place in the medical treatises. This is one of the same reasonable arguments used by Christian scholars to show that women had leadership roles in the early church. All the virulent condemnations of women's participation would have been unnecessary if the women had not been asserting themselves.

#### In Praise of Small Families

Alongside the Vedas' lauding of the family with "ten sons," the ideal of the small family persists in the complex tapestry of Hinduism. Epic stories do much Hindu moral teaching. The famous epic *Mahabharat* offers great praise for the Pandavas, who served as one of the Hindu prototypes of the ideal family. The Pandavas have small families and are exemplary in meeting the exacting demands of *dharma*. Their enemies the Kauravas have large families but are not

treated as righteous. Small families are praised. Of Rama's wife Sita and her three sisters, it was written: "Two beautiful sons had Sita . . . Two sons did all the mothers give birth to, all beautiful, graceful, and full of virtue." Jain comments: "In almost all cultures, the Holy Family tends to be a small family." The "big hint" in the Hindu tradition, she says, is that this not only promotes material well-being but spiritual growth as well.

Arguments for family planning can be drawn from the main moral teachings of Hinduism and Jainism. *Dharma* emphasizes a need to act "for the sake of the good of the world." In other words, *dharma* includes a social conscience and a concern for how our individual choices affect the common good. It includes a sense of the interrelatedness of all forms of life. Producing more children than you or the environment can support is not "for the sake of the good of the world" but is a harmful form of greed. It violates the "five vows": (1) *ahimsa*, which encourages nonviolence and avoiding harm (greed can harm children, ecology, and society); (2) *satya*, which is truthfulness (pregnancy is a promise you should be able to fulfill truthfully); (3) *brahmacarya*, which encourages bringing reasonable restraints to the use of sexuality (this is violated); and (4) *asteya* and (5) *aparigraha*, which forbid stealing and greedy possessiveness and encourage frugality. Overpopulating beyond your means or society's capacity is claiming more than you have a right to. It is profligacy, not frugality. There is no kindness or compassion in it. It violates *ahimsa* and all the other moral commitments.

#### Lessons From Kerala

Kerala is one of the poorest states in India, but it can teach the world. Its great lesson on family planning is that family planning is next to useless if it only provides contra-

ceptives with abortion as a backup. Kerala is a success story in fertility management, and the story it tells is that *the solution calls for more than condoms*. Simply, it calls for social justice. But let's spell out the details of Kerala's formula of success.

Kerala's population density is three times India's average, but its recent fertility decline is unparalleled in any comparable state. Statistics sometimes tell the truth. Look at these: The total fertility rate in India is 3.56; in Kerala, 1.8. The replacement fertility rate is thought to be 2.1 per woman. Infant mortality in Kerala is well below the average in the rest of India. Literacy for women in India is 39 percent; in Kerala, 86.3 percent and climbing. The percentage of people living below the poverty line in India is 40; in Kerala, 27. Female age at first marriage is 18.7 in India but 22 in Kerala, and fully 22 percent of women in Kerala never marry. These marriage statistics certainly relate to the economic opportunities available to educated women.

Add to the above the availability of universal primary education in Kerala, minimum wage and child labor laws, improving medical facilities, and the likelihood that children will survive into adulthood. Under such circumstances, as anthropologist Joan Mencher has said, even poor agricultural laborers become "amenable to family planning." But notice: If people are not "amenable to family planning," families are not planned. And people become amenable when they live in a society marked by hope and justice. This is the message Kerala sends, not only to the rest of India, but to the world.