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RELIGION - ETHICAL ISSUES

By Harry Jivenmukta

Life is seen as being sacred by all religions. The argument about whether a woman should have the right to choose when to have a baby or whether to keep a foetus in her womb or whether to have an abortion is a very emotive one. It all depends on when a person thinks a life is a life; at which point is a foetus developed enough to be called a baby?

In strict religious terms, a life is a life. As soon as a woman conceives, even before she knows herself that she is pregnant, the life is already sacred. Strictly religious people would argue that there is nothing more to be said, and any tinkering with issues is just people looking for excuses.

Many people believe that it is more complicated than this forthright view, and even some very religious people can think of occasions when abortion or birth control is acceptable.

The obvious argument about birth control is that there are already 6 Billion people on this planet with an extra billion being added every ten years! Some people argue that God gave us a brain with which to think. We are not robots; God designed us to think for ourselves and make decisions. We have to limit the number of people being born otherwise the whole planet is at risk. As attractive as it might be that we shouldn't tamper with God's gift of children, the fact is that we are already in danger. For many people birth control is not a matter of choice but a matter urgent compulsion.

All religions are opposed to abortion as well, although some religious people think that in some cases abortion should be allowed:

- z If the mother's life is at risk by keeping the baby,
- z If the mother is pregnant as a result of being raped,
- z If the baby is likely to die in the womb.

The one area in which all religions seem to agree about abortion is that women who become pregnant just because they are leading a loose and irresponsible life should not be allowed to have an abortion. Life and death should not be considered so cheap. Others believe that girls and women should be educated about the risks of sex and pregnancy.

Questions

1. When does a foetus become a living person?
2. Is abortion simply a matter of choice for the pregnant woman, or should other people have a say?
3. Is the attitude of religions regarding birth control out of date?

The matter of organ transplants divides the Judaism-Christian-Islam group of religions from the Buddhist-Hindu-Sikh ones. The first group believes that the body will be resurrected on the day of judgement so some people in this category feel that to be without certain organs (due to donation after death) means that they will be resurrected without those organs on the day of judgement. So if the eyes are donated when the person dies to save someone else's sight, the person whose eyes are taken will be blind on the day of judgement.

Some people believe that whatever God has given each person is right and we should not tamper with that. For instance if God has given a certain person the inability to see, then God has his reasons for that and by helping the person, the rest of us are 'playing God'. Most people do not have such an extreme view and argue that since God has given us free will, and the ability to think for ourselves, we should do our utmost to help each other.

The second group of religions believe that the body is just a form of transport in this life. On death the spirit or soul leaves the body and the body is of no further use. Taking organs at the point of death causes no difficulties for these religions. It is rather like having a car; when the car gets old and is of no further use, the driver just gets another one, (rebirth), and the old one can be used for spare parts.

In all religions there are people who will happily donate their organs when they die to help others; the actual rights and wrongs of the matter are a personal choice. Many of the people who believe the body is of no use after death can be as particular about not donating organs as people in the resurrection religions.

Questions

1. Is the body of any use after death?
2. What are the advantages of organ donation?
3. Why do some people who believe that the body is of no use after death still question whether they should donate their organs or not?

Euthanasia means to allow someone to end their life because they are in too much pain or they feel that they are of no further use alive. The issue of euthanasia arises with people whose quality of life is such that they feel it would be better to die. These include:

- z people with terminal illnesses like cancer,
- z very old people,
- z severely disabled people.

The important point to remember about euthanasia is that it is the person him or herself who decides whether to die or not, and not other people who decide for the person. Euthanasia is illegal in the UK and most other nations, although there have been a few landmark cases where doctors have allowed patients to die by not prescribing medicines or helped patients to die by giving them extra medication. The ethical and legal problems associated with euthanasia include:

- z How can we be certain that the person has decided to die and that it was not influenced by greedy relatives?
- z Is human life so cheap that people should be allowed to do die when they want?
- z If it were allowed, what does euthanasia tell us about the health of our society and the level of care we offer to our weaker members?

All religions say that life is sacred and by implication oppose euthanasia. Life is seen as such a valuable gift from God that it would be an insult to God if we let people give up that gift so easily. Religions also say that we should help each other, and by letting people die like this, it is a reflection on all of us that we are not caring enough.

People who support euthanasia argue that it should be an individual right to live or die if circumstances become such that life is too painful, but critics argue that the criteria for deciding who should live or die could change. For instance, people might start arguing that fetuses which have disabilities should always be aborted, or that all disabled people should be considered for euthanasia. Where would it end?

Questions

1. What is euthanasia?
2. Should anyone be allowed to choose when they die? Why?
3. Is life too precious to make it into something which can be measured for its relative worth or value?

Buddhism: Buddha said 'eat whatever falls into your bowl'. Buddha also said that people should not harm any living thing and should be vegetarians.

Once a monk was out begging for food. People knew that Buddhist disciples did not eat meat so always put vegetables into their bowls. A bird flying overhead, dropped some meat it was carrying and it fell into the disciple's bowl. The disciple was confused. The Buddha had told him to eat whatever fell into his bowl but also not to eat meat. He went to ask Buddha. After hearing the story, Buddha thought for a moment and said 'eat whatever falls into your bowl'.

In some countries Buddhists are vegetarians, but people who want to eat meat find a way. Buddhists are allowed to eat meat that is killed accidentally, (a goat falling from a steep hillside etc.) It is amazing how many animals seem to die accidentally in Buddhist countries! Another devilish ploy is to agree once with the cook, (wife usually), that every Wednesday cook chicken or whatever meat is desired. Never repeat the request again. Be surprised every Wednesday when meat 'falls into your bowl'.

Christianity: meat eating is allowed but some Christians are vegetarians.

Hinduism: Hindus are vegetarians, but a few people do eat meat. Some animals, especially the cow, are seen as holy.

Islam: Muslims can eat any meat except pork which is seen to be dirty. Meat should always be Halal; killed in a particular way whilst verses of the Qur'an are spoken.

Judaism: Jews can also eat any meat except pork. They have their own particular way of killing and preparing the meat called Kosher.

Sikhism: Sikhs should be vegetarians and all baptised Sikhs are. Ordinary Sikhs eat meat. There is no particular method of slaughter, although some Sikhs will not eat Halal meat. This is more to do with social and political reasons than religious.

Questions

1. Why do Buddhists sometimes eat meat?
2. What are the religious arguments for vegetarianism?
3. Should eating meat have anything to do with religion?

Some religions think that all living things have a right to life and should not be killed at all. These include Hinduism and Buddhism. Others see the Earth as a 'bounteous garden' which can be manipulated by people. Christians and Muslims believe that God put animals, plants and sea life on the Earth for the benefit of people, and they have no problem with eating meat.

The main ethical problem around meat eating is more to do with how the animals are raised and kept. All life is sacred so although some people may eat meat, the animal should still have a good quality of life whilst it is alive. The modern methods of intensive meat farming are often seen as being cruel. Animals are treated like objects and raised only for profit without much concern for their welfare.

The farmers may argue that in order to satisfy the huge demand for meat it is impossible to raise animals in any other way. With this in mind, many people are becoming vegetarians because their conscience is not clear about meat eating.

A major debate among vegetarians is whether people should eat eggs. The eggs are produced in the same intensive process, and even free range egg hens are often kept in crowded conditions.

The egg debate includes whether the egg contains life or not. Modern egg production includes certain drugs in the chicken feed which means that the egg can never produce chickens. Nevertheless, many Hindus and Sikhs will not eat eggs because they either cannot be certain that the egg contains no life, or they object that the egg has no life only because of tampering by humans, which is wrong. Supporters of the modern egg argue that it is a useful container full of vital protein that vegetarians need.

A few religious people argue that whatever we eat, we are killing. Almost all religious texts refer to 'God is one'. This is often interpreted as meaning 'there is only one God'. It also means that God is in everything and everything is part of the One universal experience. In that sense a stone is as important as a plant or a human life. God does not prefer any part of His/Her/Its creation more than any other. If we eat vegetables, they too are being killed. If we eat meat, animals too are being killed. Who will say which life is more sacred than another?

Questions

1. Should animals have the same rights as humans? Explain?
2. Are modern factory farmed eggs vegetarian or not?
3. Why are some religious people vegetarians?

Some religions support the death penalty, notably Islam and Judaism. The main reason for this is that both these religions have written legal codes which were devised a long time ago. Whilst the opinion of people generally has moved on, the strict adherents to these religions still support their original legal texts.

The old testament is thousands of years old and refers for instance, to stoning adulterers to death. This is way out of line with the modern position of simply getting divorced. The only **Jewish** nation, Israel, employs a modern legal system in line with most other developed nations.

In **Islam**, the Qur'an was written about 1400 years ago. It includes very comprehensive lists of punishments for certain crimes. Shariah law is commonly used in most Muslim countries.

Hinduism and **Buddhism** do not believe in the death penalty although in fact many people have died in Hindu and Buddhist nations. In Thailand, for example, drug trafficking carries the death penalty, and in India, the death penalty remains.

Christianity teaches restraint and love even for enemies. Most Christian nations have had or still have the death penalty for certain crimes.

In **Sikhism**, life is seen as very sacred but Sikhs are allowed to take a life to overcome evil and help the weak.

There is a distinct difference between what some religious texts say and the way nations behave. All religions believe in the sanctity of life but some see it as inevitable that a few people are too evil to be allowed to live. The practical application of the law, however, is sometimes more severe than this. There are many people on Death Row in the USA, who are to die but would cause no threat to the nation if they were simply imprisoned for life. It has also been shown that it would be cheaper to keep them in prison than kill them because the legal expenses of final appeals before death run into millions of dollars.

Questions

1. Why do some religions support the death penalty?
2. Can it ever be right to take a human life?
3. How can religions talk of loving your neighbour, and at the same time allow the death penalty to exist?

All major religions support marriage and see it as an institution which upholds the moral code of the community. The age old problem has been how to maintain marriage as the most important institution and prevent other types of relations especially amongst the young. Most people end up being married but there is sometimes a period (mostly 13-18 year olds) when people want to experiment with relationships.

The objection that religion has is mainly to do with the results of teenage sex:

- z teenage pregnancy,
- z abortion,
- z straining the limits of what is acceptable.

Religions generally do not support abortion. Life is sacred and should be respected as the highest gift from God. By accidentally becoming pregnant, young people, their parents, and the legal system are put under a great amount of strain and questions of moral and ethical behaviour are raised.

There has been a great shift of attitudes to teenage relationships in civil law but religious texts are often seen as being 'written in stone'.

All religions put a great deal of emphasis on restraint and this is seen as a religious quality. Young people find it very hard not to experiment although they might understand and agree in principle with the idea of restraint.

Questions

1. Should people get married before having sex?
2. Why are religious people so concerned about young people and their relationships?

Sexuality is about the relationships which people have. Some people are '**traditional**' in their beliefs, that the natural and only acceptable relationship is between one male and one female. Other people believe that there is nothing wrong if a man loves another man, or a woman loves another woman. This is called **homosexuality**.

Sexuality is a very complicated subject. For some people any talk of sexuality is embarrassing or distasteful, whilst for others it causes no difficulty at all. Some people want to discuss sexuality because they want other people to change their minds about traditional hostilities to homosexuality.

Gay rights campaigners believe that the same laws should apply to gay people as to everyone else. On the surface it does not seem that there are many issues here but there are considerations if a gay couple wanted to marry, or adopt a child.

One of the biggest problems which gay people have is the attitude of other people. Often gay people are victimised for being different, are attacked verbally or physically. Our society seems to find it very unacceptable that some people are different to the average whether this is because of the sexuality of the person, their colour, or nationality. Gay rights campaigners see their efforts both in terms of changing some laws and in educating people that they are different, but are not a threat to anyone.

All religions see homosexuality as wrong. Their position is that God made man and woman for the purpose of forming a family where children would be born. The family is the bedrock of most religious teaching where the children can be given a good moral upbringing and taught right from wrong.

Some religious people even refuse to talk about homosexuality and see it as dirty, and full of sin. The homosexual person is seen as doing many other things which are wrong besides their sexual preferences. A few people even welcomed the illness Aids and said that God had sent this illness to punish these people.

A few religions do not seem to concern themselves too much with homosexuality. Zen and certain types of Buddhism see this behaviour as 'mistaken'. Their positions are that people do all sorts of things which are mistakes, not sin, and that someday, or some lifetime, the person will realise that the important matters in life are to realise God or Nirvana. Everything else is just illusion or empty pleasure.

Questions

1. Why do most religions dislike homosexuality?
2. Can a homosexual person be religious? Explain.
3. Is heterosexuality normal, and homosexuality abnormal? Can they both be seen as equally valid?

In some early religions drugs were used by priests to induce trances. In some tribal religions and Shamanism even today, drugs are used for this purpose. Drugs alter the mind and sometimes cause out of mind experiences which the priests claimed were experiences of the 'other world' or God.

The use of drugs in tribal religions is different from ordinary drug use in the West and is attached to a period of training. The type of drug used is very particular and the circumstances of its use is very limited. Drugs are used only rarely and the teachings behind it are passed down in secrecy from master to disciple so that no-one else can use it incorrectly and be damaged by it.

All the major world religions today are very clearly against the use of drugs. Most religions are also opposed to alcohol, Christianity being one exception. In Christianity, wine is used in some services, in very small quantities, and represents the blood of Christ.

Drugs are seen as bad because they cloud the mind and cause physical illnesses. It is true that drugs can make 'out of body' experiences easier, but these are not real experiences. The hallucinations which result from taking certain drugs are simply the person's own dreams or fears which are amplified by the drug to seem bigger and more real. That is why the person sometimes has very good and sometimes very bad experiences. It all depends on what is occupying the person's mind at that time.

Some people use drugs to enhance meditation, and this was particularly the case in the 1970s. All religions oppose this use. In the very short term it can help meditation but it means the person will never proceed from the most basic level. Meditation is about harnessing the energy of the body and transforming it into spiritual energy. The use of any outside influence is detrimental to this process.

In some religions and cultures drug use or trafficking is punishable by death. Thailand is a Buddhist country which uses the death penalty for anyone found using drugs in more than the finest amounts.

Questions

1. Why do religions oppose the use of drugs?
2. Find out what Shamanism is.
3. Why are the punishments for drug trafficking so severe, even in Buddhist countries?

Most religions do not want ethical issues to be raised. Religious people tend to be traditional in their beliefs and like the way things are. Whenever moral or ethical issues are raised it seems that the limits are lowered.

The problem with religion and ethics is that most religions refer back to their holy books for reference. These are usually very old:

- z Hindu: at least 5000 years old, some say up to 18000 years old,
- z Jewish: 3000 years old,
- z Buddhist: 2500 years old,
- z Christian: 2000 years old,
- z Islam: 1400 years old,
- z Sikhism: 350 years old.

The problems arise when the modern world looks at the old edicts and laws and sees them completely or greatly out of line with modern thinking. An example is adultery. Many religions see adultery as one of the greatest sins, punishable in some cases by death. The modern world sees adultery as a common but at most an irritating problem which can be resolved through the civil courts.

Religious practices also fall into this difficulty. In Sikhism, the newest of the major religions, Sikhs are asked to rise and meditate before dawn. In Summer in the UK this means 3am. This is totally impractical for most people.

The conflict which arises between traditional religion and the modern day are almost always won by the modern day enthusiasts. Consequently, religions seem out of date, old fashioned, and undesirable. All traditional religions are on the decline, except perhaps Islam. But even its popularity is often an imposed one. Nations which are Islamic sometimes do not offer any other choice to their people.

Questions

1. Are all old religions out of date?
2. What useful advice can religions give us about everyday issues?
3. Why do modern attitudes almost always win when ethical matters are discussed

