

Introduction to Christian Ethics

– Life and Death in Christian Ethics

HPRS4092

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Life and Death

In the previous section, we examined a few of the critical foundations of Christian approaches to sex, sexuality, and gender – examining how these approaches relate to all three of these areas, and how they interconnect within the Christian tradition. In addition, I hope we have seen that small difference of reasoning in one arena can have significant difference in other connected areas – this is because of the inter-connected and internally consistent nature of much Christian ethics.

In this section, I want us to turn our attention to questions of life and death in Christian ethics, examining two areas of consistent concern – abortion and euthanasia – in order to explore them in the same fashion.



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Life and Death in Christian Ethics



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Life and Death in Christian Ethics

As with the previous section, approaches to matters of life and death in Christian ethics differ significantly across time and across different forms of Christianity.

However, there are consistent principles that undergird and motivate much Christian reasoning around both the beginning of life and its end, and are applied to specific situations.

It is this application in contextual circumstances that best illuminates the principles guiding Christian ethics – in this case, beliefs around the meaning and purpose of human life, and its foundational qualities.



Sanctity of Life

One of the clearest of these guiding principles is the idea of the 'sanctity of life' – an idea that life, in and of itself, is a good valuable thing that should be preserved.

Christianity, as with most other religions, believes that life is a gift from God bestowed upon us by the act of a Creator.

As God has given us life, only God has the right to end life.

We see this principle emerge often in Christian approaches to ethical issues – abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, vaccines, etc – that touch on encouraging, preserving, or ending life.



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Sanctity of Life

This idea of the sanctity of life – that life is intrinsically valuable and should be preserved – emerges from a number of biblical commitments and is developed throughout both Old and New Testaments.

It emerges largely in two distinct, but related, ways – the idea of the *imago dei*, that humans are somehow created ‘in the image of God’ and as such carry some additional value in their lives due to their initial relationship to the divine, and the idea of an ongoing relationship between the individual and the divine, that God maintains a special connection to the individual throughout their life.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Gen 1:26-28



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Sanctity of Life

The implications of beliefs about the *imago dei* have a significant influence on the moral valuation of human life, aligning the value of human life with the value of God – to destroy a human life is not just the destruction of a person, but also, in some way an offence to the divine.

This also relates to a number of Christian beliefs about ongoing bodily ethics, like those examined in the previous section.

If our bodies carry the image of god, then our ongoing actions reflect not just on us as individuals, but also as carriers of the *imago dei*.

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

Gen 9:6

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

1 Cor 3:16-17



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Abortion



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Abortion

These valuations of life inform a great deal of contemporary and early Christian reasoning about abortion – the termination of a foetus before birth – as well as the balancing of complicated balancing of factors having an impact on it – things like term limits, access to different forms of abortion, and the moment of conception.

From this, the Christian tradition has generally been opposed to forms of abortion, with some exceptions, and has not supported abortion without some forms of restriction – e.g. only in the case of rape or incest, or only to preserve the life of the mother, or only before a certain point of gestation.

²² “If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. ²³ But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

Exodus 21:22-25



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Abortion

However, the scriptural picture is not entirely clear on the level of violation that abortion is, or what the appropriate moral valuation should be.

It does seem to draw a distinction between accidental acts which cause abortion as a side-effect, and deliberate causation.

It also supports the idea that life begins at conception, although what this means for abortion or the development of a 'soul' has been a point of contestation for the tradition.

¹³ *For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

¹⁴ *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.*

Psalms 139:13-14

⁵ *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew^[a] you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."*

Jeremiah 1:5

"You shall not kill by abortion the fruit of the womb"
Didache, early Christian text



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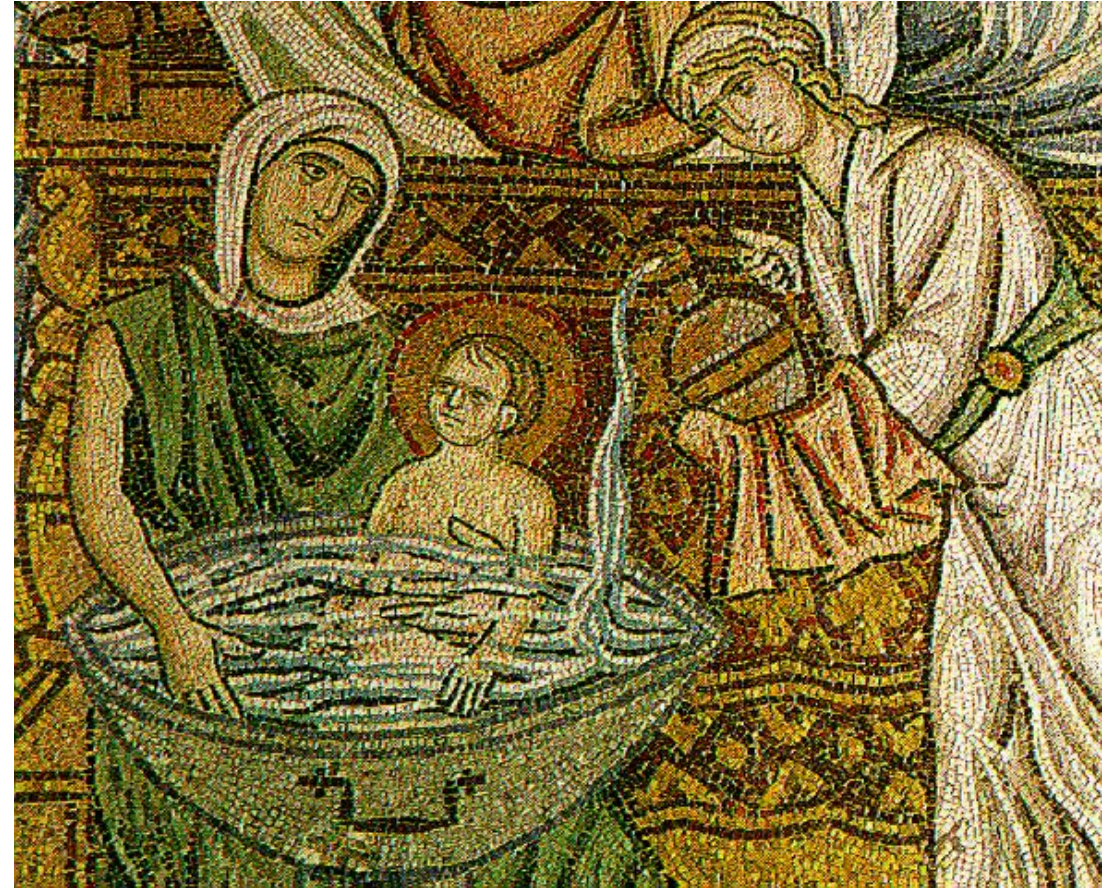
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Abortion

In the early centuries of Christianity, the notion of abortion was not particularly important – the Church largely idealised celibacy as the appropriate form of human sexuality, leaving little prominence for marriage and its accompanying ethical issues.

However, this prominence of chastity as the appropriate form of human sexuality posed numerous problems – it failed to reflect the majority of sexual relations in society and it posed issues for the continuance of the Church.

As we saw in the previous section, Augustine was responsible for revising this approach to matters of sexuality towards one that foregrounded marriage – primarily for its procreative purpose.



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Abortion

This led to the consideration of abortion as morally wrong not just because it involved the destruction of something carrying the *imago dei*, but also because it ran counter to the perceived natural end of sex – procreation and the raising of children in the Christian faith.

We do, however, also see the further development of moral valuation within the period of pregnancy, with Aquinas writing that the process of ‘ensoulment’ at 40 / 80 days raised the moral valuation of the foetus – while abortion prior to 40 days in the case of boys or 80 days in the case of girls was a sin, it was only after these periods that it carried the same moral weight as murder.

Sometimes, indeed, this lustful cruelty, or if you please, cruel lust, resorts to such extravagant methods as to use poisonous drugs to secure barrenness; or else, if unsuccessful in this, to destroy the conceived seed by some means previous to birth, preferring that its offspring should rather perish than receive vitality; or if it was advancing to life within the womb, should be slain before it was born.

Augustine, “De Nube et Concupiscentia” 1.17 (15)



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Abortion

Pope Pius IX, in 1896, further strengthened and delineated Catholic approaches to abortion, placing a blanket ban on all forms of abortion as immoral.

However, this blanket prohibition was balanced by a commitment in Catholic ethics to the doctrine of *double effect*, whereby if an abortion happened natural due to some other procedure vital to the mothers health then this was not a sin – only the deliberate abortion of a foetus carried that penalty.

An example of this would be operating to remedy an ectopic pregnancy, where the foetus grows outside of the lining of the womb and can be dangerous to the mother.

...however much we may pity the mother whose health and even life is gravely imperilled in the performance of the duty allotted to her by nature, nevertheless what could ever be a sufficient reason for excusing in any way the direct murder of the innocent? This is precisely what we are dealing with here.

Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XI on Christian Marriage



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Abortion

These themes are particularly prominent within the Catholic tradition of Christian ethics – where opposition to abortion has become a significant part not only of ethical reflection, but also, in some cases, of Catholic political identity.

These issues are, however, not confined solely to the Catholic tradition and often form the bedrock of similar ethical reflection across different Christian traditions and communities.

Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops — who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine — I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.

Evangelium Vitae, John Paul II, 1995



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Anglicanism

An example of this can be found in the Anglican tradition, which has generally taken a more liberal, though still oppositional, position to abortion in society.

For the Church of England, the key point is that sometimes abortion is necessary, and while this should be reduced as much as possible, it is impossible to eradicate completely.

While abortion is 'a great moral evil', in specific circumstances, such as a risk to the life of the mother, it can be sanctioned and must be provided in a safe manner.

In situations where the continuance of a pregnancy threatens the life of the mother, a termination of pregnancy may be justified and that there must be adequate and safe provision in our society for such situations.

Church of England General Synod 1983



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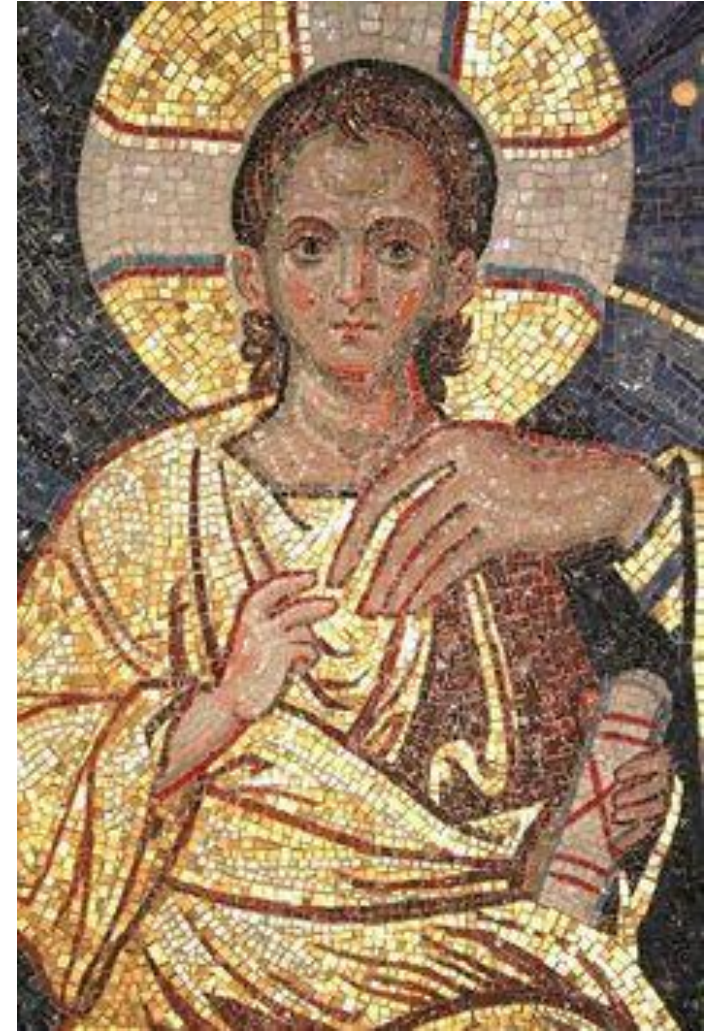
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Ethical valuation

These differences towards abortion between the differing Christian traditions emerge not from a desire to please general society, nor really from a differential account of moral valuation – both traditions hold the act of abortion as morally weighty and pertaining to key moral valuations.

Where the difference emerges in this case, as with so many different approaches in Christian ethics, is the differential weighting of **competing** ethical interests – the interests of the potential child in the case of the foetus, the interests of the mother, and the interests of the divine.

How these are balanced and valued is at the core of ethical reflection – it is why ethics is HARD.



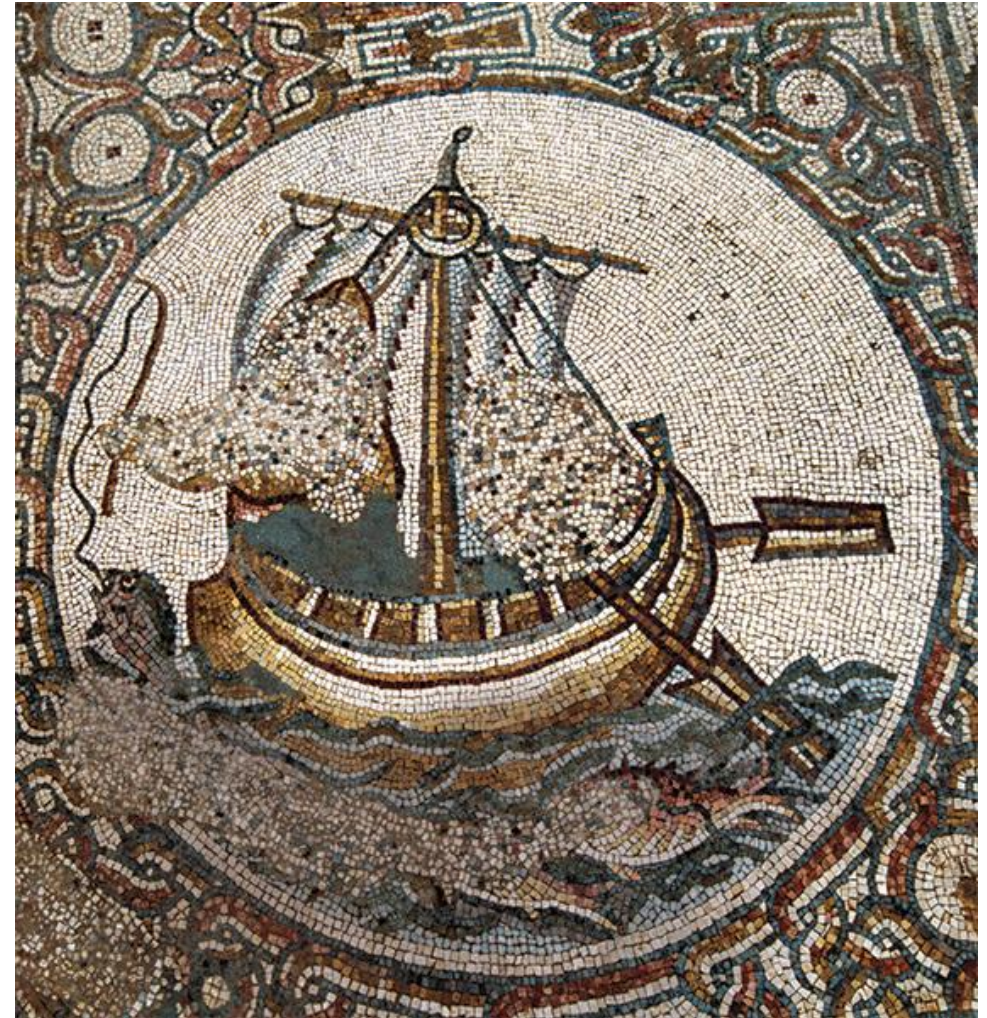
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Euthanasia

This differential valuation of principles in ethical reflection can also be seen in the various approaches to the matter of euthanasia that can also be seen in different Christian traditions and at different time periods within them.

Euthanasia is the practice of intentionally ending life, usually to relieve suffering or pain, and raises a number of similar ethical issues as abortion – the value of life, issues of consent and competency, the meaning and purpose of life, and the valuation of the human person.



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Euthanasia

There are therefore, unsurprisingly, mixed views on euthanasia within the Christian tradition, complicated by the changing circumstances of medical care since the time of scriptural writing.

In that context, euthanasia falls uneasily between being seen as murder, due to the prohibitions on killing, and being seen as somewhat immaterial, as only God has the power to truly destroy that which he has made.

Generally, the tradition here has been against euthanasia – preferring a reliance on the divine will of God and an understanding of suffering as promoting character.

You shall not murder.

Exodus 20:13

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

Genesis 9:6

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Romans 5:3-5



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Euthanasia

For the Catholic tradition, as with abortion, euthanasia is immoral in all cases – for similar reasons.

This follows on from the scriptural injunctions against murder, the taking of life, and of the strong emphasis on the innate sanctity of life, no matter the way it presents itself – whether in a foetal form or, for example, in old age. All life, no matter how minimal, is innately valuable.

In addition, as humans, we cannot know for certain the purpose of the suffering someone is undergoing or the will of God regarding them – euthanasia would be usurping God's prerogative to intervene.



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Euthanasia

Within the Anglican tradition, as with their position on abortion, there is a general opposition to euthanasia for the same reasons, but there is a greater moral valuation given to the context of the act – that in some cases euthanasia may be the lesser of two evils, between the suffering of the person and their death.

There are situations where euthanasia can be viewed as an act of love because the pain and suffering of an individual is so overwhelming. In these cases, the Anglican tradition can support passive euthanasia, the withdrawal of care, rather than active euthanasia, the deliberate killing of an individual.



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Reading

The compulsory reading for this section is:

Volpe MA, “Catholic Moral Anthropology” in Ayres L & Volpe MA (eds) ‘The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology’, (OUP, 2019).

Cloutier D, “Marriage and Sexuality” in Ayres L & Volpe MA (eds) ‘The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology’, (OUP, 2019).

Aquinas SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, 2A 2AE – On Suicide

Battin M, “Goodbye, Thomas: The Case for Physician-Assisted Dying” in Younger J & Arnold R (eds) ‘The Oxford Handbook of Ethics at the End of Life’, (OUP, 2016)

Byock I, “The Case Against Physician-Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia” in Younger J & Arnold R (eds) ‘The Oxford Handbook of Ethics at the End of Life’, (OUP, 2016)

