

## The Ethics of Abortion

***Summary:** For American Christians, abortion is a highly-charged political and religious issue. Religious groups that support abortion rights, like the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights, have long faced opponents of abortion, notably Catholics and evangelicals. Despite the polemics, some Americans on both sides have made efforts at open conversation.*

For many decades, Americans have been deeply polarized over the issue of abortion. While the debate on abortion involves secularists as well as people of every religious tradition, the issue has become particularly acute among Christians because of strong views on both sides. Generally, the debate has been cast in terms of “pro-life” views and “pro-choice” views, but it is a much more complex issue for Christians.

The legality of abortion was confirmed in 1973 when the United States Supreme Court struck down a Texas statute that prohibited abortion procedures, no matter how medically urgent they might be. This decision, commonly referred to as *Roe v. Wade* [410 U.S. 113 (1973)], is the most important legal milestone in the debate. In its decision, the Court acknowledged that it cannot rule as to when life begins, since even those in medicine, theology, and philosophy have no consensus on this matter. Christian pro-life advocates insist that all human life is sacred and that human life begins at the moment of conception. From the point of view of pro-life Christians, aborting a fetus is equivalent to killing an unborn baby. As Pope John Paul II explained, “The legalization of the termination of pregnancy is none other than the authorization given to an adult, with the approval of an established law, to take the lives of children yet unborn and thus incapable of defending themselves.” The most vocal opposition to abortion has come from the Roman Catholic Church and from evangelical Christians working through activist groups such as Operation Rescue. Many hold that there should be no abortion at all, while some others might carve out exceptions in the case of rape, incest, or grave danger to the life of the mother.

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights (formerly the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights) brings together Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Unitarian Universalists, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists who want to make clear that pro-life voices are not the only religious voices in the abortion debate. Describing their position as people of faith, the RCRR seeks to “support individuals in making their own

moral decisions and stand with them as they struggle with the very real complexities of life.” The Coalition acknowledges that, “while people of all religions anguish over abortion, most feel this is a moral decision, one a woman must make for herself in keeping with her faith, beliefs, conscience, and her own personal situation.” Another voice in the debate is Catholics for Choice, an organization of Catholics who are both pro-choice and faithful Christians involved in the life of their parishes and communities. Catholics for Choice, founded in 1973, lobbies for women’s reproductive rights in Congress and legislatures. A 2020 Pew survey found that 56% of Catholic voters think abortion should be legal in most cases, despite the official position of the Church hierarchy.

At the extreme, some pro-life activists have engaged in a series of violent attacks on abortion clinics and doctors. In 2009, a man associated with an organization called Army of God shot and killed Dr. George Tiller, one of only a few doctors in the United States to perform abortions into the third trimester of pregnancy. The assassination occurred inside Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kansas where Tiller was a member. Tiller had been shot before, in 1993, and his abortion clinic had been bombed in 1986. Another physician, Barnett Slepian, was killed in Buffalo in 1998, preceded by two other doctors in northern Florida and abortion clinic workers in Boston between 1993 and 1995. Despite these incidents, the vast majority of people and organizations within the pro-life movement do not condone the use of violence. Many are vocal, however, about the violence associated with abortion procedures, especially in the case of partial birth abortion.

The question of whose “voice” counts in the decision to have an abortion is also highly charged. Pro-life activists often portray the pro-choice movement as viewing pregnancy too individualistically and treating abortion too lightly. They associate the movement with a so-called “sexual revolution” that considers abortion a necessary method of birth control. According to this view, pro-choice advocates do not to grant any recognition or moral status to fetal life at all, effectively leaving the life of the fetus completely out of the process of ethical decision-making. The pro-choice side, however, stands for the ultimate autonomy of the woman in making bodily and reproductive decisions. Pro-choice proponents often see pro-life advocates as concerned only with the life of the unborn, callous towards the lives and bodies of women. They argue that pro-life advocates give virtual sovereignty to the fetus, ruling out abortion regardless of the circumstances of the pregnancy or the well-being of the mother.

Abortion is one of many difficult ethical issues today involving human judgment on the line between life and death, sitting alongside questions concerning stem cell research, organ transplants, birth control, assisted suicide, and capital punishment. Some have woven all of these issues together in what Chicago's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin has framed as "a consistent ethic of life." A 2005 statement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, for example, approaches the issue of capital punishment in a way reminiscent of the abortion debate: "Ending the death penalty would be one important step away from a culture of death and toward building a culture of life."

There have been some efforts to find "common ground" between pro-life and pro-choice advocates. In a 1996 *Christian Century* article titled "Pro-life, Pro-Choice: Can We Talk?," Frederica Mathewes-Green documented the Common Ground Network that began in Missouri in the late 1980s when Andrew Pudzer, a pro-life lawyer, and B.J. Isaacson-Jones, the head of one of the largest abortion clinics in St. Louis, began engaging in conversations. The two "enemies" met privately for several months before appearing together to discuss the issues on a local television show. While they had diametrically opposed views on abortion, they found that there was indeed much "common ground" between them. They agreed, for example, that both sides should seek more aid for women below the poverty line and for their children, both born and unborn.

Those involved in these dialogues say the discovery of overlapping areas of common commitment is important. Mathewes-Green described one such discovery at a dialogue in Washington D.C. "In one small group, an aggressive pro-choice lawyer was talking passionately about the protection of abused children. She spoke about children's helplessness before their adult attackers. 'They're so small and vulnerable, and they have no one to defend them.' A pro-lifer in the group said softly, 'You know, that's the reason a lot of people give for being pro-life.'" At the same time, those who participate in these efforts are often criticized for talking with the "enemy." Mathewes-Green wrote about one pro-life leader who characterized the discussions as "seeking common ground with proponents of murder."

Through the process of face-to-face dialogue, each side is challenged in its stereotypes about what the other truly believes. Efforts to find common ground continue, as evidenced in the October 2012 broadcast of "Pro-Life, Pro-Choice, Pro-Dialogue," a Civil Conversation Project event at the University of Minnesota hosted by Krista Tippett and the American Public Media program *On Being*. Dr. David

Gushee, a Christian ethicist, and Frances Kissling, former president of Catholics for Choice, demonstrated the kind of nuanced conversation not often heard in this deeply polarized public discussion.