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## THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON CONTRACEPTION AND FERTILITY

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### INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Issues regarding religion and contraception have a long history. There are evidences from ancient Jewish sources, early Islamic medical texts, and Hindu sacred scriptures, which show that herbal contraceptive, could induce temporary sterility. It needs be said, however, that there is no uniform position regarding contraception among the major religious traditions in the present time. What we have is a plurality of views. However, although the views on contraception are varied, the use of contraception outside marriage is generally condemned and no religion advocates a childless marriage.<sup>1</sup>

In Genesis 1:28 we see that the Hebrew Bible promotes prolific childbirth as evident from the command "be fruitful and multiply". The only possible reference to birth control in the Hebrew Bible is found in Genesis 38:9-10 where we are told that Onan practiced *coitus interruptus* (withdrawal). Onan "spilled his seed on the ground". His intention was recorded as "evil in the sight of the Lord" and Onan received a death penalty for this. On the basis of this passage, Jewish Talmudic literature prohibits the use of any form of contraceptive device by men. This is considered as wasting the "male seed". However, female contraceptive may be permitted on health grounds especially when the health of the mother or the potential child is in danger. This has remained the orthodox position on contraception and only abstinence is permissible as a birth control method. However, there are conservative and reform views, which note that sexual pleasure within marriage is permissible and sanctioned by the rabbinical literature. Besides

the health reasons accepted by the orthodox practice, these authorized social, economic and environmental reasons for the use of birth control but leave the choice to individuals. These conservative and reform views were formally declared at the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1930 and the Rabbinical Assembly of America in 1935.

The 1930s marked the departure from the unanimous prohibition of the use of contraceptives by all Christian denominations. The Lambeth Conference of the Church of England, which was held in 1930, was the first to advocate the use of artificial contraception where abstinence was deemed impracticable. The Federal Council of Churches held in 1931 followed this. Thereafter, most major Protestant traditions followed suit. The trend was such that by 1961, the National Council of Churches had to declare a liberal policy on contraceptive use, subject to mutual consent between couples.

In the Roman Catholic Church, however, Pope Pius XI declared a total prohibition of all forms of artificial birth control in 1930. This prohibition, which was maintained by Pope Paul VI in 1968, has remained the policy of the Roman Catholic Church till today. The only birth control methods approved by the Roman Catholic Church are abstinence and the rhythm method or natural family planning method sometimes called the use of safe period. This position on contraception derives from the natural law theory of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, which hold that procreation is the end purpose of sexuality and to interfere with this end purpose would be a violation of the natural law and this is a sin. Some Anglicans, Evangelical and Christian fundamentalist denominations also hold this view.

Contrary to the Roman Catholic position, the Orthodox Church does not prohibit the use of artificial contraceptives. Only abortion, infanticide and permanent sterilization are condemned. Outside these, individual couples are allowed to make their own decisions regarding contraceptive use. The Eastern Orthodox Church does not see any moral difference between natural and artificial birth control methods. It contends that many Church Fathers as well as the Pauline epistles do not actually limit sexual intercourse to procreation. The position of the Orthodox Church is that, indeed sexual intercourse within marriage constitutes an expression of love.

In Islam, attitudes to contraception vary widely. There are those who are critics of birth control, on the one hand, and there are those who are advocates of it, on the other. The argument of the critics is premised on the Islamic injunction, which says: "You should not kill your children for fear of want."<sup>2</sup> They argue that this indicates a ban on all forms of family planning. However, the advocates of family planning argue that this passage only refers to infanticide and that the Quran does not actually prohibit birth control. Evidence shows that the Hadith and Sunna literature permits *coitus interruptus* ('azl) and there are indications that prophet Mohammed himself practiced it.<sup>3</sup> Advocates of contraception argue that artificial

birth control is not morally different from *coitus interruptus* and as such should be accepted. Most Muslim traditions permit the use of family planning on health grounds or for the well being of the family. This affords considerable variations and flexibility in the interpretation and is reflected in the differences in family planning policies by distinct Muslim groups and countries. Be that as it may, there is a unanimous prohibition of sterilization and abortion and emphasis is placed on procreation within the family as a religious duty.

In the Hindu religion, prolific procreation within marriage is encouraged and there is no prohibition against birth control. Although abortion is generally condemned and temporary abstinence is advocated in the Shastras, opinions vary among Hindu scholars on the use of contraceptives. India was the first nation whose government established a population strategy based on birth control measures.<sup>4</sup> However, while Gandhi advocated birth control based on abstinence and not through artificial means, Radhakrishnan and Tagore promoted the use of artificial methods.

### **Religious Beliefs and Sexuality**

The discussion here is with particular reference to Christianity and Islam, which are the predominant religions in Nigeria. These two religions are the main source of religious value systems, which affect sexual attitude and behaviour in Nigeria. In Christianity, for example, men and women are expected to hold in high esteem the religious value of sexual purity. Premarital sexual relations (referred to as fornication) and extramarital sexual relations (adultery) are generally condemned by Christianity. A girl is expected to be a virgin at the time of marriage. In Islam, girls are given out in marriage before the age of puberty. This is to ensure that the girl remains a virgin at marriage.

Although Christianity and Islam frown at adultery or extramarital relations, Nigerian culture, as many African cultures, allows or even encourages men to contract polygynous marriages and a man engaged in extramarital relations does not receive general condemnation as a woman who does. He might even be privately hailed for his behaviour. On the other hand, not only would such an act by a married woman receive wide condemnation but would in fact be ruthlessly and severely punished. This practice is similar to the biblical story of the woman caught in the very act of adultery.<sup>5</sup> While the scribes and Pharisees brought her to Jesus to be stoned, there was no reference to the man with whom she committed the act. In Christianity and Islam, whereas it is much easier for a man could ask for and be granted a divorce if his wife is confirmed to have committed adultery, the case is different for a woman whose husband is confirmed to have committed a similar act.

Christianity seems to encourage women to be subservient to their

husbands. Reproductive and sexual decision-making is the prerogative of men. Local interpretations of both Christian and Islamic faith forbid women from making marriage proposals and sexual advances to their husbands. Sexual advances are made by men and not women.<sup>6</sup>

### **Religion and Fertility**

Adherents of the Roman Catholic faith normally have higher fertility compared to adherents of the Protestant faith.<sup>7</sup> This is a consequence of the teachings of the Catholic Church, which forbid members to use artificial means of contraception. The Roman Catholic Church is undoubtedly the clearest, at least in the level of official doctrine, in forbidding most forms of contraception and any recourse to abortion.<sup>8</sup> The Protestants have gradually moved toward more relaxed views on contraception although sterilization and abortion are still strongly opposed by many.<sup>9</sup> A similar trend has also been observed in Judaism, with only the orthodox group still opposed to sterilization and abortion.<sup>10</sup>

Countries with large Muslim populations have been generally slower to experience fertility decline, and they feature prominently among the societies, which continue to have high fertility rates.<sup>11</sup> Islamic teachings on contraception have been marked by controversy. There is no universally supported view on contraception and fertility in Islamic religion. However, recent scholarship shows that Islam is generally supportive of family limitation, although many Islamic leaders have shown opposition to abortion and to some forms of contraception, particularly sterilization.<sup>12</sup> Even though there seems to be a general approval for fertility control among Muslims, it is puzzling to note that many Muslim respondents in social surveys give religious reasons for non-usage of contraception.<sup>13</sup>

The reasons which may account for the high fertility levels among Muslims may include universal and early marriage, fairly easy divorce and early remarriage, absence of sexual asceticism and little or no education for women. Education is known to be positively related to contraception and negatively related to fertility.

Asian religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism have not developed codes of conduct that serve as religious laws for members. No doubt, they do have a rich tradition and ethical analysis but such ethical reflections are seen as advice to adherents of these religions and members are considered responsible for their own conduct.<sup>14</sup> Buddhist teaching relegates matters pertaining to procreation and family life to secondary interest and leaves fertility regulation largely to individual knowledge and choice. Although leading thinkers in Hindu and Buddhist traditions have expressed concern about practices in the area of reproduction, particularly with regards to abortion, this has not led to any rule forbidding abortion.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from direct religious teachings on contraception, there are religions which

speak directly on issues of fertility even though they may not have specific rules on practices of fertility control. An example is Mormon teaching as found in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Although the Church has no specific rules regarding contraception, its philosophy is clearly pronatalist. This Mormon theology believes that the plan of salvation can only be accomplished when all "worthy spirits" yet unborn come to experience this life on earth. It is believed that it is the duty of Mormons to bring this to pass. Having large families is considered as faithfulness to this teaching. Thus, even though there are no rules prohibiting contraception in this church, this teaching favours high fertility. As such, the fertility of Mormons typically exceeds that of other religious groups in the same society.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in parts of the developing world where Muslim populations are in a minority, the tendency is to lay emphasis on the importance of the family and large families. The consequence is that this may favour high fertility and lead people to believe that the practice of fertility control is contrary to their religious beliefs.

In Asia and in Africa, there are traditional religious beliefs related to the duties owed to one's ancestors. The living are considered as having an obligation to their ancestors, which must be fulfilled as a religious duty. In many traditional religions, bearing a large number of children is fulfilling one's duty to ancestors.<sup>17</sup> It serves as a sign that one is specifically favoured. Infertility and sterility are considered a misfortune and are viewed as punishment inflicted by the ancestors or gods on evildoers. The blame for childlessness is often on the woman. Her unfruitfulness is usually associated with some fault of her own, on account of which it is believed that ancestral spirits will not insert a soul in her womb, or be willing to be incarnated in her. Because of this, women might derive particular status from giving birth to a large number of children.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has shown the influence of religion on contraception and fertility. Aside from religious rules on issues of contraception and abortion, many religions have articulated guidelines, which have the potential to either increase or limit fertility rates. These can be seen in such examples as the rules governing entry into sexual unions, the rules or constraints on age of entry into unions, the number of spouses one is permitted to have, divorce and remarriage and entry into subsequent unions after divorce or widowhood. There are issues, which involve prohibitions of sexual relations outside officially recognized unions and frequency of intercourse within marriage. Many African religions promote prolonged postpartum abstinence. All these have implications for the level of fertility in a population.

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