



AN OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON ABORTION AS A MORAL DECISION

As religious leaders, we are committed to supporting people's efforts to achieve spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being, including their reproductive and sexual health. We assist women and families confronted with unintended pregnancies or pregnancies that can no longer be carried to term. We are committed to social justice, mindful of the 46 million women worldwide who have an abortion each year, almost half in dangerous and illegal situations. We seek to create a world where abortion is safe, legal, accessible, and rare.

Millions of people ground their moral commitment to the right to choose in their religious beliefs. While there are strong public health and human rights arguments for supporting the right of women to safe and legal abortion, here we invite you to consider the religious foundations for affirming abortion as a morally justifiable decision.



AFFIRMING WOMEN'S MORAL AGENCY

Abortion is always a serious moral decision. It can uphold and protect the life, health, and future of the woman, her partner, and the family.

We affirm women as moral agents who have the capacity, right and responsibility to make the decision as to whether or not abortion is justified in their specific circumstances. That decision is best made when it includes a well-informed conscience, serious reflection, insights from her faith and values, and consultation with a caring partner, family members, and spiritual counselor. Men have a moral obligation to acknowledge and support women's decision-making.



RESPECT FOR LIFE

Our religious traditions affirm that life is sacred. Our faiths celebrate the divinely bestowed blessings of generating life and assuring that life can be sustained and nurtured.

Religious traditions have different beliefs on the value of fetal life, often according greater value as fetal development progresses. Science, medicine, law, and philosophy contribute to this understanding. However, we uphold the teaching of many religious traditions: the health and life of the woman must take precedence over the life of the fetus.

The sanctity of human life is best upheld when we assure that it is not created carelessly. It is precisely because life and parenthood are so precious that no woman should be coerced to carry a pregnancy to term. We support responsible procreation, the widespread availability of contraception, prenatal care and intentional parenting.



SCRIPTURE

Scripture neither condemns nor prohibits abortion. It does, however, call us to act compassionately and justly when facing difficult moral decisions. Scriptural commitment to the most marginalized means that pregnancy, childbearing, and abortion should be safe for all women. Scriptural commitment to truth-telling means women must have accurate information as they make their decisions.



MORAL IMPERATIVE FOR ACCESS

The ability to choose an abortion should not be compromised by economic, educational, class or marital status, age, race, geographic location or inadequate information. Current measures that limit women's access to abortion services — by denying public funds for low-income women; coercing parental consent and notification as contrasted with providing resources for parental and adolescent counseling; denying international family planning assistance to agencies in developing countries that offer women information about pregnancy options; and banning medical procedures — are punitive and do nothing to promote moral decision-making. When there is a conflict between the conscience of the provider and the woman, the institution delivering the services has an obligation to assure that the woman's conscience and decision will be respected and that she has access to reproductive health care, either directly or through referral. We condemn physical and verbal violence and harassment directed against abortion clinics, their staffs, and their clients.

We must work together to reduce unintended and unwanted pregnancies and address the circumstances that result in the decision to have an abortion. Poverty, social inequities, ignorance, sexism, racism, and unsupportive relationships may render a woman virtually powerless to choose freely. We call for a religious and moral commitment to reproductive health and rights; there must be access to comprehensive sexuality education and contraception, including emergency contraception.



RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

No government committed to human rights and democracy can privilege the teachings of one religion over another. No single religious voice can speak for all faith traditions on abortion, nor should government take sides on religious differences. Women must have the right to apply or reject the principles of their own faith without legal restrictions. We oppose any attempt to make specific religious doctrine concerning abortion the law for all Americans or for the women of the world.



A CALL TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Religious leaders have been in the forefront of the movement for abortion rights for more than fifty years. We call on leaders of all faiths to prepare themselves to offer counsel compassionately, competently, and justly to individuals and families faced with pregnancy decisions. We urge them to:

- Advise and assist adolescent women in involving parents and family members in their decisions, while acknowledging that not every family can offer this support
- Provide age-appropriate faith-based sexuality education that underscores the importance of planned childbearing and responsible sexual decision-making, including abstinence
- Encourage parents to talk openly and honestly about sexuality with their own children
- Counsel women facing pregnancy decisions to reflect, pray, examine their own conscience and faith, and talk with partners and family members
- Support with love to those who choose adoption or termination of their pregnancies, including providing worship opportunities for those who seek them to mourn losses from miscarriages, stillbirths, and abortions
- Provide financial and emotional support for those women who carry their pregnancies to term and provide loving community for them after birth
- Publicly advocate for reproductive rights — including sexuality education, contraception, prenatal care, adoption, and abortion — through sermons, public witness, and involvement in the political process.



IN CLOSING

More than thirty years ago, many religious denominations passed courageous resolutions in support of women's moral agency and their right to a safe and legal abortion. Despite numerous legal challenges and social, scientific and medical advances, we reaffirm this theological commitment: women must be able to make their own moral decisions based on conscience and faith. We call for increased dialog and respectful listening with those who disagree with us. With them, we share the vision of a world where all children are loved and wanted. We renew our own call for relational and reproductive justice for all.

The Open Letter was developed at a colloquium of theologians sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and funded by the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation. Participants included Rabbi Dr. Rebecca Alpert, Temple University; Rev. John Buehrens, First Parish in Needham, MA; Rev. Ignacio Castuera, Planned Parenthood Federation of America; Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; Rev. Stacey L. Edwards, Trinity United Church of Christ; Rabbi Dr. Sue Levi Elwell, Union for Reform Judaism; Rev. Dr. Larry L. Greenfield, Protestants for the Common Good; Rev. Debra W. Haffner, Religious Institute; Frances Kissling, Catholics for a Free Choice; Kate Ott, Religious Institute; Rev. Mark Pawlowski, Planned Parenthood of South Central Michigan, and Leslie Watson Malachi, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.



RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR ABORTION RIGHTS

Many religious denominations have passed policies in support of legalized abortion. They include:

American Baptist Church • Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Episcopal Church • Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Jewish Reconstructionist Federation • Presbyterian Church (USA)
Union for Reform Judaism • Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ • The United Methodist Church
United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism

More than 40 religious denominations and organizations are members of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

More than half (53%) of US Catholics identify themselves as pro-choice, and more than six in ten (61%) believe abortion should be legal.

More than 8 in 10 US Jews identify themselves as pro-choice.

More than 2400 religious leaders have endorsed the Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, which calls in part for a faith-based commitment to sexual and reproductive rights, including access to voluntary contraception, abortion, and HIV/STD prevention and treatment.

THE
RELIGIOUS
INSTITUTE
ON SEXUAL MORALITY, JUSTICE,
AND HEALING

304 Main Avenue, # 335
Norwalk, CT 06851

www.religiousinstitute.org