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*For centuries, religious communities have provided direction, discernment and doctrine on issues of fertility, childbearing and family formation. Today, however, there is a relative silence when the issues shift to infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). The rapid growth of ARTs has outpaced religious and ethical discernment. This Open Letter calls for awareness, dialogue and education so that religious leaders and clergy will be better prepared to counsel and advocate for safe, effective and accessible reproductive technologies.*

## **OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES**

As religious leaders, we are committed to promoting the spiritual, emotional, and physical health of all people, including their reproductive health. We assist women, men, and couples seeking to be parents, and counsel many who are considering assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). During the past thirty years, millions of women and men have used ARTs to try to have children.

Yet many technologies have been developed without intentional ethical deliberation regarding their complex and varied implications for individuals, families, and society. Most religious leaders have not been prepared to educate and counsel their congregants about ARTs. Moreover, there is growing concern about the promotion of high-cost technologies that have low rates of success. We further recognize the intense yearning that many people feel for biological children, yet we are acutely aware that many children need adoptive and foster care parents.

In this *Open Letter*, and its accompanying Guidebook, *A Time to Be Born*, the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing invites you into a discussion about the moral and religious implications of these technologies.



### **RESPECT FOR LIFE**

Religious traditions affirm that life is sacred. Our faiths celebrate the divinely bestowed blessings of generating life and call for all children to be nurtured and valued.

Religious traditions have differing beliefs on when life begins and the moral status of the embryo and the fetus. These differing religious understandings profoundly affect individual decisions about the use of ARTs, but no one religious viewpoint should determine public policy or medical practice. We urge that the creation and handling of embryos always be regarded with respect and humility.



## MORAL AGENCY

The use of ARTs is always a serious moral and medical decision. We affirm women and men as moral agents who have the capacity, right, and responsibility to make their own decisions about reproduction, including pregnancy, contraception, abortion, adoption, ARTs, gamete donation and surrogacy. This right should be accorded equally to all persons regardless of marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and race. These decisions must be based on informed consent about medical and health risks. They are best made when they include a fully informed conscience, and insights from one's faith, community, and family.



## SACRED TEXTS AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Over time, people of faith approach sacred texts and traditions with fresh questions, changing circumstances, and new understandings. In light of the discrimination that has resulted from religious traditions' over-identification of women with fertility and biological reproduction, there is a need for broader interpretations of texts such as "be fruitful and multiply" and those that present infertility as a penalty for sin or unfaithfulness. Yet, religious traditions can be a rich source of spiritual and moral support for various kinds of creativity, generativity, and family formation. Children are a blessing, not a requirement or entitlement. We honor those sacred texts and traditions that welcome diverse families, individuals with disabilities, persons without children, and alternative family formations as part of a commitment to foster just and loving social relationships and communities.



## RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND TECHNOLOGY

Fundamental questions of values and ethics are raised by expanding understandings of science and the development of technologies unimagined by earlier generations. Technological advances must be developed responsibly, cognizant of how marginalized persons and communities have been harmed by forced sterilization, eugenics, and medical experimentation in the name of progress. Theologians, ethicists, clergy, health advocates, and the scientific community need to be in dialogue to understand the cultural context within which science operates and to respond to the societal issues raised by scientific discovery and technological development.



## **ACCESS, SAFETY, AND PUBLIC POLICY**

There are biological and social conditions that cause individual infertility, such as harmful environmental conditions; the failure to adequately prevent, screen, and treat sexually transmitted infections; and postponement of childbearing for career, economic, or personal reasons. Faith communities must support public funding for prevention, screening and diagnosis of infertility in addition to access to information, health care and unbiased counseling about ARTs. As long-term health implications of some procedures are still unknown, there is a need for increased regulation to safeguard health, research to determine the risk of ARTs, and caution on the use of resources for ARTs that are high risk and low success. The availability of effective and safe ARTs should respect the diversity of family structure and not exclude on the basis of partner status, economic circumstances, or sexual orientation.



## **A CALL TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

We call on leaders of all faiths to prepare themselves to offer counsel compassionately, competently, and justly to individuals and families making decisions about the use of ARTs.

We urge religious leaders to:

- Become knowledgeable about the teachings of their faith tradition, sacred texts, and current science and technology related to reproduction, families, and ARTs.
- Have a highly developed referral network of professionals who provide pregnancy, abortion, adoption, and genetic counseling that is comprehensive, medically accurate, nondirective, and unbiased.
- Educate their faith community about ARTs through preaching, study groups, healing services for infertility and reproductive loss, as well as education for young adults about the complexities of surrogacy and egg and sperm donation.
- Assist families in developing strategies to share with their children, who are adopted or conceived through ARTs, the circumstances of their conception and family history.
- Promote denominational study of pastoral and ethical responses to ARTs such as access, use, and counseling.
- Publicly advocate for counseling, accurate medical information, regulations to safeguard health and prevent negative outcomes, and increased research regarding risk and efficacy of ARTs.
- Engage in public discourse about the social and ethical issues involved in ARTs and speak out against ART practices that violate human rights and dignity.

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IN CLOSING

The broad spectrum of assisted reproductive technologies calls for deeply personal and complex moral decisions that are unprecedented in human history. As religious leaders, we seek to promote what is best for individuals, couples, families, children, and society and to support those who face these decisions. Religious leaders and theologians have an integral role to play with families, medical providers, and scientists as these technologies unfold.

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