

## **Religious Perspectives on Life**

*No consensus exists on the exact point at which a person becomes a person or the value of a fetus. Included below are various religious texts on "personhood." The last section contains various biological ideas about personhood, with no consensus in that field either.*

### **Reform Judaism**

The Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 69b states that: "the embryo is considered to be mere water until the fortieth day." Afterwards, it is considered subhuman until it is born.

"Rashi, the great 12th century commentator on the Bible and Talmud, states clearly of the fetus 'lav nefesh hu--it is not a person.' The Talmud contains the expression 'ubar yerech imo--the fetus is as the thigh of its mother,' i.e., the fetus is deemed to be part and parcel of the pregnant woman's body." This is grounded in Exodus 21:22. That biblical passage outlines the Mosaic law in a case where a man is responsible for causing a woman's miscarriage, which kills the fetus. If the woman survives, then the perpetrator has to pay a fine to the woman's husband. If the woman dies, then the perpetrator is also killed. This indicates that the fetus has value, but does not have the status of a person.

There are two additional passages in the Talmud which shed some light on the Jewish belief about abortion. They imply that the fetus is considered part of the mother, and not a separate entity:

- One section states that if a man purchases a cow that is found to be pregnant, then he is the owner both of the cow and the fetus.
- Another section states that if a pregnant woman converts to Judaism, that her conversion applies also to her fetus.

From ReligiousTolerance.org ([http://www.religioustolerance.org/jud\\_abor.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/jud_abor.htm))

### **Catholicism**

Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception.

– Catholic Catechism paragraph 2270

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.

– Jeremiah 1:5

Your hands shaped me and made me. Will you now turn and destroy me? Remember that you molded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again? Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese, clothe me with skin and flesh and knit me together with bones and sinews? You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in your providence watched over my spirit.

– Job 10:8-12

On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God.

– Psalm 22:10

## **Presbyterianism**

Because of the great diversity in the scientific and theological disciplines as to when life begins, no single religious position should claim universal opinion and become law.... If religious freedom of choice is to be maintained, then all acceptable alternatives must be available for competent, moral, and loving choices to be made.

– 1978 Statement on Abortion

Strongly affirms its belief in the sanctity of life.

– 1980 Statement on Abortion

The Presbyterian Church exists within a very pluralistic environment. Its own members hold a variety of views.

– 1983 Statement on Abortion

We affirm that the lives of viable unborn babies—those well-developed enough to survive outside the womb if delivered — ought to be preserved and cared for.

– 2006 Statement on Abortion

## **Assemblies of God (Pentecostalism)**

The Scriptures regularly treat the unborn child as a person under the care of God. “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:13-16).

God inspired Moses to include in the Scriptures a law that brings the sanctity of the lives of unborn children into focus. “If men who are fighting 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. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Exodus 21:22-24). It should be noted that the value of the life of both the mother and the child is such that even if there is no critical and lasting harm to either, the responsible party must be fined. However, if either the mother or the premature child is seriously injured or dies, then the severe penalties of the law are to be applied, possibly in this case those having to do with manslaughter (Exodus 21:13; Numbers 35:22-25). It is clear that the life of the unborn child is precious, and even a non-premeditated injury inflicted on the unborn is a serious crime.

– “Sanctity and Human Life” (2002)

## **United Methodist Church**

The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of a person’s existence on earth. While individuals have always had some degree of control over when they would die, they now have the awesome power to determine when and even whether

new individuals will be born. Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion.

– The Social Principles statement on Abortion (2004) from The Book Of Discipline

The Social Principles, while not to be considered church law, are a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation as historically demonstrated in United Methodist traditions. They are a call to faithfulness and are intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit. The Social Principles are a call to all members of The United Methodist Church to a prayerful, studied dialogue of faith and practice.

– The Social Principles background from The Book Of Discipline

## **Buddhism**

The Maha Tanhasankhaya Sutta (Pali canon) states that conception is dependent on the coming together of three things: the mother and father come together; the mother is fertile; and the being to be reborn is ready. The term “coming together” means “same place, same time.” Thus this passage implies that consciousness appears at the time of conception. The Maha Nidana Sutta is even clearer. It states that if consciousness does not enter the mother’s womb, mentality and physical form cannot ‘coagulate’ inside the womb. In yet another passage, conception is said to depend on the “six elements”, including consciousness. All of these statements occur in discussions of the key doctrine of dependent origination and thus carry great authority. In the monastic Vinaya, too, the appearance of the embryo is equated with the arising of the “first mind, the first consciousness” in the mother’s womb. Thus all of these contexts treat conception as involving a combination of mental and physical factors, with the mental factors primary. This of course reflects the basic philosophy of Buddhism that mind is the forerunner of all things.

So the texts state that consciousness is present from the inception of life. A being who is conscious can feel pain, and therefore deserves moral consideration. It goes without saying, however, that the ability of a newly conceived embryo to feel pain is very rudimentary, perhaps comparable to someone in a deep coma or under a deep anaesthetic. According to Buddhism these are states of consciousness, but too dim to be noticed when compared with the glare of waking consciousness. The texts frequently speak of the “growth, increase, and maturing” of the newly reborn consciousness. In accordance with the findings of science, the texts speak of the gradual development of the embryo’s sense faculties. But unlike the scientists, they do not assume that consciousness does not appear until the senses develop. So while the embryo certainly deserves moral consideration, its limited capacity to feel pain means that killing an embryo falls short of “murder.”

From Buddhnet.net: “When Life Begins” by Bhikky Sujato  
(<http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/ebdha328.htm>)

## Islam

In the hadith [saying or act ascribed to the Prophet Mohammed] of the 40s, it is mentioned that at 40 days a Nutufa is formed which is a blood clot and at the next 40 days another stage is reached which is called Alaqa and in the next 40 days a 3rd stage of development of the fetus which is called Mudagha. Then, the angel is ordered to write the sustenance life span, deed and whether the child's life is happiness or misery and then he blows the spirit into him. In another version, he asks "My Lord! Is this a male or female?" which means that the gender is decided at that time. There seems to be some controversy about this hadith as some believe it is a weak narration and others believe that life begins at 120 days when the ruh or spirit is blown.

– from “Ethical Controversies in Abortion - an Islamic Perspective” By Shahid Athar ([www.teachislam.com/dmdocuments/33/ARTICLES/1/Ethical%20Controversies%20In%20Abortion.pdf](http://www.teachislam.com/dmdocuments/33/ARTICLES/1/Ethical%20Controversies%20In%20Abortion.pdf))

We created you from dust, then from a sperm-drop, then from a clinging clot, and then from a lump of flesh, formed and unformed - that We may show you. And We settle in the wombs whom We will for a specified term, then We bring you out as a child, and then [We develop you] that you may reach your [time of] maturity. And among you is he who is taken in [early] death, and among you is he who is returned to the most decrepit [old] age so that he knows, after [once having] knowledge, nothing. And you see the earth barren, but when We send down upon it rain, it quivers and swells and grows [something] of every beautiful kind.

– Qur'an 22:5 (translation by [Qur'an.com](http://Qur'an.com))

## Biology

Biology offers a number of stages in the life cycle that have been seen as candidates for personhood.

- Fertilization/Conception: when a unique genome is made
- Gastrulation/Segmentation: when only one unique individual can be formed
- When the heart begins to beat
- When fetus acquires human-specific brain pattern/activity
  - o Brain waves in lower brain (brain stem) - 6-8 weeks of gestation
  - o Brain waves in higher brain (cerebral cortex) - 22-24 weeks of gestation
- Fetal movement, or "quickening"
- When fetus is capable of feeling pain (No scientific consensus on gestational date)
- When fetus is capable of cognition (No scientific consensus on gestational date)
- Fetal Viability: when fetus is capable of living independently from the woman
- Birth