

Christian and Islamic Perspectives on the Ethical Dilemma of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)

Stephanie Sariles

Department of Biology; College of Arts and Sciences

Abilene Christian University

After defining IVF procedures and the associated biomedical ethics with each, I will compare and contrast Christian and Islamic perspectives on IVF. Christianity in general does not accept IVF, because it is an unnatural method of reproduction that can affect Christian traditions such as parenthood and marriage. Despite this view, Protestants, in particular, have opened up to IVF as a method for treating infertility. Islam fully accepts IVF provided the married couple follows Islamic law. Sunni Muslims do not accept gamete donation, but Shi'ite Muslims are more flexible with gamete donation and surrogacy.

The development of reproductive technology has become an answered prayer for several infertile couples around the world. Reproductive technologies, such as artificial insemination and in-vitro fertilization, have become common options offered by physicians for patients, who desire to hold their own child in their arms even though medically the probability for them to naturally conceive are low. Although this scientific development has become a solution for infertility and often viewed as a miracle for some, it has been a controversial decision that has caused rifts between a person and their faith. The ideas of a sole creator, the natural order of life, and marriage laws have come into question due to the development of the scientific intervention in reproduction. Religions across the nations have argued their stance on reproductive technologies. In-vitro fertilization (IVF), for example, has become an ethical dilemma discussed throughout the world by several doctrines of faith, in which each has developed their own perspective, according to their foundation and beliefs. Religions who share similarities in their doctrines have accepted and denied different aspects of in-vitro fertilization, such as Islam and Christianity. Islam and

Christianity share several similarities in beliefs and doctrines, however, these religions do not share the same perspectives in regards to the ethical dilemma of in-vitro fertilization. Islam focuses on the interaction between marriage laws and IVF, while Christianity concentrates on the interaction between IVF and a natural order of life designated by a sole creator. This comparative analysis between two religious views of IVF demonstrates that religion is a factor that contributes to the ethical dilemma of reproductive technologies and influences the societal perspective on IVF.

Standard IVF

Sir Robert Edwards introduced in-vitro fertilization in 1978. The procedure for IVF has changed since 1978 and has become more complicated by implementing gene therapy and gamete donation, however, standard IVF or “simple case” IVF will be the main focus of this paper. Standard IVF involves a married couple in which the sperm comes from the husband and the ovum is from the wife. Once the pre-embryo is formed, it is implanted into the wife’s

uterus.¹ Before the pre-embryo is formed, the infertile woman undergoes hormone treatment, which allows the woman to produce more than one egg on her next cycle. Her cycle is then monitored carefully to detect the moment in which the eggs are ready to be removed.² These eggs are then placed onto a petri dish to be fertilized by the husband's sperm. Anywhere from 48 to 72 hours after fertilization and the embryos have cleaved once or twice, they are transferred to the wife's uterus. If the transfer is viable, the embryo develops naturally with minimal medical intervention. Sir Robert Edwards used a similar basic technique to "create" the first IVF baby, Louise Brown.

IVF and Medical Ethics

Edwards knew ethical dilemmas would arise from the introduction of IVF as a method for reproduction; however, he didn't shy away from the ethical issues. Medicine, in Edward's opinion, differed from science because they had different objectives. Medicine is driven by the daily need to treat patients, the ability to assess different techniques, and the opportunity to prescribe expensive medicines.³ Edward's interest in discovering the solution to infertility began with developing relationships with physicians at the National Institute of Medical Research in London, who spoke of the numerous infertile patients that would benefit from his reproductive research that he had been conducting on animal embryos. As Edwards and his research team continued to work on reproductive technologies through animal embryos, they believed IVF was a significant clinical imperative to develop, which would allow them to help millions

across the world, who suffered from infertility. His ethical stance on reproductive technologies was adopted through the clinical imperative and the inalienable rights of couples to have their own child, as long as they did no harm.⁴ "Do no harm" is derived from the Hippocratic Oath, which is recited by physicians once they have completed all their boards and examinations. The oath states, I will use regimens for the benefit of the ill in accordance with my ability and my judgment, but from what is to their harm or injustice, I will keep them.⁵ In order to understand this statement, it has to be viewed in two parts. Injustice speaks to the physician's duty to ensure that the patient will not be harmed by moral transgressions, while harm speaks to the physician's duty to heal the sick.⁶ Physicians have adopted Edward's ethical stance, in which, if the infertile patient consent to the treatment and no harm is done then IVF can be used as a method to heal infertility. Edwards developed IVF in order to cure infertility among the world's population, which was considered fully legitimate by the ethical committee in the UK known as the House of Lords. However, Edwards understood that when in-vitro fertilization would be presented as a cure for infertility, it would be viewed as unacceptable to several people.⁷

Descriptions of Religions involved in IVF Ethical Dilemma

Religion has played a key role in the ethical dilemmas surrounding the advancement of reproductive technologies, particularly Christianity and Islam. Christianity contains several doctrines that could be expanded on, however, for the purpose of this paper, Christians believe

¹ McCormick, R.A., 1997

² Singer, P., 1985

³ Edwards R.G., 2007

⁴ Edwards, R.G., 2007

⁵ Miles, S.H, 2004 (59)

⁶ Miles, S.H., 2004

⁷ Edwards, R.G., 2007

Jesus Christ was sent by God to save all of humanity from eternal death. They also believe that Christ is the center of the Bible and part of the Holy Trinity. This would include God the father, Christ the son, and the Holy Ghost. Christianity can be divided into two main groups Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Roman Catholicism accepts seven sacraments, which are confirmation, penance, extreme unction, baptism, Holy Communion, holy orders, and marriage. Protestants derived from the opposition to the Roman Catholic rule in the early 16th century. Protestants can be divided into several denominations, but as a whole they have several core beliefs including only two of the seven sacraments. These are baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁸ Christianity, particularly Protestantism, is often compared to Islam. This comparison is often made due to the text-centered religion, the parallels between how the texts are interpreted, and the problems that arise through an absence of centralized authority figures and structures.⁹ Islam's central belief is that Muhammad was a messenger of God, but Muslims do not worship him.¹⁰ They follow the teachings found in the holy Qur'an, which was revealed to Muhammad, who was deemed as the final prophet of Allah. Islam has foundational principles called the five basic pillars that address prayer, alms tax, fasting, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and one God who appointed Muhammad as the final prophet. Islam is divided into two sects Sunni Muslim and Shi'ite Muslim. Sunni Muslims believe that Abu Bakr is the rightful caliph, while Shi'ite Muslims believe that Mohammed Ali is the rightful caliph. Christianity and Islam are distinct religions that are often compared due to their similar doctrines and faith ideologies, but they have different

perspectives in regards to the ethical dilemma of IVF.

Christian Perspective on IVF

Christians, both Protestants and Roman Catholics, generally are opposed to IVF and often reject reproductive technologies as a method for conception. Roman Catholics are opposed to any medical intervention that disrupts the natural process of reproduction from birth control to IVF. Protestants are hesitant to accept IVF, but are more open to the idea of IVF as a treatment for infertility.

In 1869, Pope Pius defined an animated and unanimated fetus to be the same and not have any distinctions. The Pope removed the distinction in order to mandate the punishment for abortion at any stage, which led to the opposition to birth control. This set the precedent for the Roman Catholic perspective on reproductive technologies. This mandate from the Pope supported the Church's stance that the soul and life begin at conception.¹¹ The Roman Catholic Church has opposed artificial birth control because it is an unnatural medical intervention of conception that defies Christian tradition.¹² The tradition being violated by birth control is the reproductive dependence on sexual intercourse. Another reason birth control is opposed by the Catholic Church is due the severance of the link between intercourse and procreation. Any procedure or object that breaks the link between intercourse and procreation is deemed unnatural. This idea of unnatural conception was carried over to reproductive technologies. Conception outside of its natural context is wrong due to the belief that sex without the possibility of conception is unnatural and defies the order of life. According to the Catholic Church, IVF is an

⁸ Nesbitt, R.B., 1962

⁹ McGrath, A.E., 2007

¹⁰ Ali, S.R., 2007

¹¹ Jones, D.G., 2004

¹² McDowell, J.D., 1998

unnatural method of conception and should not be accepted. This stance has been the official Roman Catholic position on assisted reproductive technologies. Since Pope Pius' statements, other institutes have supported his claims such as The Potential Academy for Life in 2004. They supported the official Roman Catholic view on artificial reproductive technologies because these technologies are on the same level as desiring a product that has good quality.¹³ The reduction of a child to a product removed the natural process of conception, which paralleled the views of the Pope. The Pope viewed sexual intercourse between spouses as a natural act, which gave God-given designs to reproduction.¹⁴ However, the Vatican does not oppose the unnatural medical intervention of dialysis, respirators, or blood transfusions as it does IVF.¹⁵ These procedures help sustain God's design not create it; therefore, they are acceptable to the Catholic Church. According to the Roman Catholic Church, unlike the procedure of dialysis, IVF is an unworthy method of creating a new life because it replaces God, who is the sole creator of life. Kevin Kelly, a devout Catholic, however, in 1987, opposed the Catholic position because he saw the greater significance in the integrity of human relations as love, marriage and parenthood, in which, these could not be defined by the single physical act of intercourse.¹⁶

Even though Catholics oppose IVF, due to the unnatural process that removes the link between intercourse and reproduction, Protestants believe that intercourse and reproduction are independent from each other. Protestants view the purpose of intercourse as the capacity to express love, which is

fundamental in a marriage.¹⁷ This view allows the temporary postponement of reproduction; therefore, accepting the unnatural perspective of birth control. Protestants lean towards the total relationship between spouses rather than the act of intercourse that leads to conception. This allowed for the acceptance of birth control. IVF should not be problematic to Protestants because conception as the result of intercourse is not an issue. The total relationship of a couple is more important than the physical act of intercourse. Even though Protestants were accepting of birth control there was still opposition to IVF. Paul Ramsey established the foundations of the Protestant's response to IVF in the late 1970s. He envisioned that IVF would damage the family and marriage. This belief would be supported by Lass Bass who stated that the production of humans in laboratories was no longer human procreation and would lead to the slow destruction of parenthood.¹⁸ The idea of parenthood would be a concern for Protestants and as a result generated great opposition to IVF. They feared that IVF would encourage parents to become obsessed with having a child of their own that is genetically similar to them.¹⁹ The obsession over a genetically similar child threatens the purpose of Christian parenthood, which is a commitment to nurture a child, not to provide genetic inheritance. Protestants favor adoption as an alternative to IVF because adoption supports Christian parenthood traditions. Ramsey's concerns were dismissed after Louise Brown was born. The birth of the first IVF baby changed Christian writings because it was evident that IVF was a viable medical procedure for conception.²⁰ Protestants could not accept that baby Louise should

¹³ Jones, D.G., 2004

¹⁴ McCormick, R.A., 1993

¹⁵ McDowell, J.D., 1998

¹⁶ McDowell, J.D., 1998

¹⁷ McDowell, J.D., 1998

¹⁸ Jones, D.G., 2004

¹⁹ McDowell, J.D., 1998

²⁰ Jones, D.G., 2004

have never been born just because she was conceived through IVF and not “naturally.”

Islamic Perspective on IVF

Both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims are open to IVF as long as the procedure and the couple are following Islamic law. Islam is open to IVF, however, it has set strict rules due to the threat that IVF poses to the institution of marriage and family, which compose the center of Muslim society. Both denominations of Islam view husband-and-wife IVF as an uncontroversial procedure due to the stigma that infertility carries.²¹ In the Middle East being stigmatized as abnormal due to medical issues, such as infertility, isolates the couple from the rest of the society. This fear of being an outcast in society in conjunction with prophet Muhammad advocating for treatment of disease, assisted reproductive technologies, like IVF, are welcomed in Muslim culture.²² Even though both Sunni and Shi'a Islam accept IVF as a treatment for infertility, they have diverged in their interpretation of Sharia law, also known as the Islamic law.

Sunni Muslims have accepted IVF as a method for reproduction, but follow the decrees that fatwas have set for assisted reproductive technologies. Fatwas concerns are in the protection of sanctity of life, conception within marriage, no confusion of family lineage, no mixing of genealogy, and designating the gestational carrier to be the mother.²³ These fatwas have influenced Muslim physicians, who have defined the guidelines that are accepted in the Middle Eastern medical communities in regards to assisted conception. According to these medical guidelines, artificial insemination with the husband's semen is allowed. IVF is only allowed between marriages and must

be carried out by an expert physician. Also no third party donors are allowed and all forms of surrogacy are forbidden.²⁴ As noted by these guidelines, IVF is acceptable as long as the procedure remains between the married couple. This is in obedience to the fatwas. As stated above, the fatwas assure the conception within marriage. An important aspect of Sharia law is fidelity in marriage. In the Middle Eastern countries, marriage is viewed as a contract between husband and wife.²⁵ According to Sharia law, adultery would be breaking the terms of this contract and a serious offense. This offense is punishable by death to the offender. The use of a third party as a donor would be illegal according to Zina.²⁶ Zina is the term for Sharia law that is concerned with sexual relationship outside of marriage. The donation of gametes and the use of a surrogate is adultery, which defies Sharia law. Besides the legal repercussions of this defiance, the consequence of not following Zina is the confusion of kinship relations.²⁷ The confusion of kinship relations leads to indirect disobedience to fatwas, which are concerned with the confusion of familial lineage.

Shi'a Islam up till the late 1990s agreed with Sunni Muslim decrees in regards to gamete donation, however, the Supreme Jurisprudent of the Shi'a Muslim branch issued a fatwa that allowed the donation of gametes to be used in assisted reproductive technologies.²⁸ This decree, however, does not apply to all Shi'ite Muslims because of their religious practices that differ from Sunni Islam. Shi'ite Muslims practice ijithad, which is precedence given to individual religious

²¹ Clarke, M., 2008

²² Mahmoud, F., 2012

²³ Mahmoud, F., 2012

²⁴ Inhorn, M.C., 2006

²⁵ Inhorn, M.C., 2006

²⁶ Inhorn, M.C., 2006

²⁷ Clarke, M., 2008

²⁸ Inhorn, M.C., 2006

reasoning.²⁹ This individualism allows Shi'ite Muslims to come to their own conclusions in regards to whether gamete donation is right or wrong. Several Shi'a authorities still prohibit gamete donation, or any third party involvement during IVF, while others have found flexibility and openness to donation during IVF procedure.³⁰ This difference of opinion in regards to the third party involvement is found within the Shi'a community, but has not been translated into the Sunni community. Another religious practice that is found in Shi'ite Islam, but not in Sunni Islam is mut'ā. Mut'ā is the practice that allows for the temporary marriage between a single Muslim woman and a married or single Muslim man for a fixed time period and payment.³¹ This religious practice has allowed flexibility in regards to sperm or egg donation because it revokes the issue of adultery within a marriage. Even though the religious practices of ijithad and mut'ā have allowed the acceptance of gamete donations during IVF, Shi'ite Muslims follow strict rules in how donation is practiced. These rules are: a couple in need of a donor must attend Shi'a religious court, where the decisions will be made case-to-case. In this case-to-case decision, the infertile couples' case is reviewed. The couple must bring a witness to testify on behalf of their relationship and their IVF doctor must present evidence of their inability to conceive naturally. A woman that is married and requesting a sperm donor will be denied because she is not able to participate in a mut'ā marriage.³² The infertile couple, regardless of Shi'a acceptance of gamete donation, must follow the decision made by the religious court.

Literature Cited

²⁹ Inhorn, M.C., 2006

³⁰ Inhorn, M.C., 2006

Conclusion

Assisted reproductive technologies have become widely accepted across the different continents since the introduction of Louise Brown, in the late 20th century. IVF is an option that physician around the globe offer to infertile couples as a method for conception, however, the ethical dilemma of IVF is much more complicated. The comparison between the Roman Catholic, the Protestant, and the Islamic views of IVF displayed the interaction between religion and assisted reproductive technologies. Christianity does not accept IVF, because it is an unnatural method of reproduction that can affect Christian traditions such as parenthood and marriage. Despite this view, Protestants, in particular, have opened up to IVF as a method for treating infertility. This view correlates with physicians who view reproductive technologies as a method to treat illnesses. Islam fully accepts IVF provided the married couple follows Islamic law. Sunni Muslims do not accept gamete donation, but Shi'ite Muslims are more flexible with gamete donation and surrogacy. These different perspectives on IVF have influenced society and the application of assisted reproductive technologies in different medical communities. In the Middle East, IVF is a common practice because Islam has accepted this method of conception and Islamic law is used to guide the rules of IVF treatment for an infertile couple. Christian perspectives on IVF are still changing and this method of conception has become a more common practice. The analysis of Islam and Christian views of IVF reveal the complicated dilemma that exist between religion and reproductive technologies, which influences the society around them.

³¹ Inhorn, M.C., 2006

³² Inhorn, M.C., 2006

- Ali, S.R., Liu, W.M., Humedian, M. (2007). Islam 101: Understanding the Religion and Therapy Implications. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35(6), 635-642.
- Clarke, M. (2008). New Kinship, Islam, and the Liberal Tradition: Sexual Morality and New Reproductive Technology in Lebanon. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14(1), 153-169
- Edwards, R.G. (2007). Reminiscences on Learning about Morals and Ethics in Biomedicine. *Ethics, Law, Moral Philosophy of Reproductive Biomedicine*. 2(1). 7-11.
- Inhorn, M. C. (2006). Making Muslim Babies: IVF and Gamete Donation in Sunni versus Shi'a Islam. *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry*, 30(4), 427-450.
- Jones, D. G. (2014). Christian Responses to Challenging Developments in Biomedical Science: The Case of In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF). *Science & Christian Belief*, 26(2), 143-164.
- Mahmoud, F. (2012). Controversies in Islamic Evaluation of Assisted Reproductive Technologies. *Islam and Assisted Reproductive Technologies: Sunni and Shia Perspectives*, 70-98.
- McCormick, R.A. (1997). Therapy or Tampering: The Ethics of Reproductive Technology and the Development of Doctrine. *Bioethics*. 4. 97-122.
- McDowell, J. D. (1998). Ethical Implications of In Vitro Fertilization. *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, 2, 505-508.
- McGrath, A. E. (2007). Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution- history from the sixteenth century to the twenty first. 190-200.
- Miles, S.H. (2004). The Hippocratic Oath and The Ethics of Medicine. 55-65.
- Nesbitt, R.B. (1962). A Protestant Believes, 40-58.
- Singer, P. (1985). IVF: The Simple Case. *Making Babies: The New Science and Ethics of Conceptions*, 544-548.