The Breath of Life: Christian Perspectives on Conception and Ensoulment

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Is "human life" strictly a biological phenomenon measured from the moment when sperm and egg combine? Or does "human life" not actually begin until the immaterial aspect known as "the soul" appears at some indeterminate point? This essay examines the views held by various adherents of the Christian faith regarding the concepts of "conception" and "ensoulment" and the relation of these views to contemporary ethical issues having to do with abortion, in vitro fertilization, contraception, and stem cell research. The essay discusses the fact that Christians historically have been characterized by a marked lack of unity concerning the teachings of the Bible and tradition on these issues. The paper concludes with a discussion of how Pre-existentianists, Traducianists, and Creationists might or might not be troubled by contraceptive and abortive procedures, depending upon their varying convictions regarding ensoulment.

In *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph number 2270 states that "human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person." Paragraph 2274 continues in the same vein: "Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being." And paragraph 2322 concludes that "from its conception, the child has the right to life. Direct abortion . . . is a criminal practice, gravely contrary to the moral law. The Church imposes the

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canonical penalty of excommunication for this crime against human life."[1]

In an *amicus curiae* submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court in October 1988, the Eastern Orthodox Church stated its conviction that "modern science has borne out the prescient wisdom of the Holy Fathers of the Church, that life begins at conception, and at no other arbitrary or scholastically derived juncture."[2]

In May of 1982, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a "Resolution on Abortion and Infanticide" which contained the following phraseology: "Whereas, Both medical science and biblical references indicate that human life begins at conception, and Whereas, Southern Baptists have traditionally upheld the sanctity and worth of all human life, both born and pre-born, as being created in the image of God . . . Be it finally RESOLVED, That we support and will work for appropriate legislation and/or constitutional amendment which will prohibit abortions except to save the physical life of the mother."[3]

And on January 22, 2007, Bill H.R. 618 was introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives by Representative Duncan Hunter (R-CA)—a born-again Southern Baptist—proposing that the terms "human person" and "human being" be defined as "each and every member of the species homo sapiens at all stages of life, including, but not limited to, the moment of fertilization, cloning, or other moment at which an individual member of the human species comes into being."[4]

The examples above give clear evidence that a majority of Christians in the modern world—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—believe (or are supposed to believe) that human life begins at the moment that sperm and egg unite. Given this presupposition, it is natural to conclude that the termination of a pregnancy at any stage is tantamount to the murder of a human being. The impression is given in numerous books, articles, and websites that failure to hold either the presupposition or its implication is sufficient cause for calling into question an individual's spiritual sanctification—if not his or her actual salvation.

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[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1994), 606–607, 618.

[2] "An Orthodox View of Abortion," http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/abortion.aspx.

[3] "Southern Baptist Convention Resolutions on Abortion," http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/baptist/sbcabres.html.

[4] "H.R. 618—Right to Life Act," http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h110–618.

But the conviction that "human life begins at the moment of conception" is not the historic norm among religions in general. Even in the history of Christianity there has never been a united voice on this issue. In actuality, neither the Christian Scriptures nor modern science provide sufficient data to enable us to draw indisputable conclusions regarding this topic. Much of our confusion may be attributed to our failure to distinguish between the concepts of "life" and "ensoulment."

Distinguishing Between "Life" and "Ensoulment"

Our first order of business must be to define and discuss the distinction between "life" and "ensoulment." There are several extant definitions and lists of criteria for establishing what comprises "life," but a comprehensive definition may be found in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which states that "living entities [are those which] metabolize, grow, die, reproduce, respond, move, have complex organized functional structures, heritable variability, and lineages which can evolve over generational time, producing new and emergent functional structures that provide increased adaptive fitness in changing environments."[5]

Using such a definition leads to the conclusion that "life" is certainly not exclusive to human beings. The term "living" may be just as applicable to animals or even plants. Cows and owls, dogs and frogs, mice and lice; all are "alive" according to science. Until quite recently, however, no non-human creature has been accorded the same status as a human being. Each lacks "something" that distinguishes humans from all other living forms on the planet. Philosophically and religiously speaking, this distinctive aspect is called "the soul": an immaterial "something" that endows a human being with an intellect, emotions, a will, and an autonomous "sense of self." This "something" cannot be identified under a microscope; it cannot be described in terms of size, shape, texture, color, or the like. But it is presumed to exist nonetheless.

It is the matter of "ensoulment"—of when a soul becomes present in a human—that most concerns us in this essay. For it is one thing to speak of "when life begins," but quite another to speak of when "the soul" enters or is present in a human body. These are

[5] Bruce Weber, "Life," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Spring 2006 edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta; http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2006/entries/life.

entirely distinguishable items, and though they *may* be simultaneous in their origins, they are not *necessarily* so. One can maintain that "life" begins at the moment of conception *without* holding that "ensoulment" occurs at that same time, and such a distinction could potentially lead to very controversial convictions regarding various moral and ethical issues extant today.

Ensoulment in the History of Religions

Christianity

We will begin our study of ensoulment with the Christian religion. Views regarding the time and means of this phenomenon vary greatly even within this single religious system, and so Christianity's theological considerations of this subject will provide us with a template for classifying the views of other religious systems of thought, both Eastern and Western.

It is important to note that when dealing with the topic of "ensoulment" within the parameters of Christianity, we will mainly be examining "Christian," not necessarily "biblical," views. Despite claims to the contrary, the canonical Scriptures of the Christian faith do not directly answer the question of when "life" begins or when "ensoulment" occurs. To illustrate: Psalm 139:13, which contains David's conviction that "you [God] created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb,"[6] is often used as a model verse for Christian pro-life activists. But what does this passage actually teach us? The literary genre of the Psalms in general, as well as the context of this particular psalm, are not scientific in orientation. The intent of the psalmist is to praise God, and David is using the forms that are appropriate in a psalm—poetry and metaphor—to get his point across: that God is to be praised because God cares enough to know David intimately.

Even if for the sake of argument we were to consider Psalm 139:13 literally rather than metaphorically, the passage could still be construed as saying no more than that God sovereignly brought about the life of David, one of God's closest followers and "a man after his own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). The passage does not necessarily imply

[6] All Scripture references are from the Holy Bible, Today's New International Version TNIV (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001, 2005).

that God "creates the inmost being" of *every* fetus in *every* womb; it could well be that God sovereignly chooses to "create the inmost being" only of those that he knows through his foreknowledge will reach full-term in their development. Neither does the passage address the issue of when such an inner-being creation occurs for those in which God does choose to do so.

A parallel example would be that of Jeremiah 1:5, which says: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart." Some have concluded that this verse proves that God considers fetuses in the womb to be human beings, loved and known by him. Others, however, are persuaded that the passage says only that God knew that this particular fetus in this particular womb would become Jeremiah—an important prophet—and indicates that God in his sovereignty planned the creation of Jeremiah even before his conception, just as Ephesians 1:4 indicates that *all* of God's elect were chosen "before the creation of the world."

Because of the ambiguity of these and other scriptural passages, the history of Christianity has seen the development of three distinct views with respect to ensoulment: Pre-existentianism, Traducianism, and Creationism.

Pre-existentianism. Pre-existentianism is the belief that souls are preexistent entities who await bodies to enter. According to this concept, the body is essentially "accidental" and relatively unimportant; a human being is complete without a physical body. Historically, very few within Christian circles have held or taught this view, though the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints adopted it in the nineteenth century and certain New Age groups have more recently attempted syncretisms between Christianity and Eastern reincarnationism that include forms of pre-existentianism. From the standpoint of the historic canonical writings, however, there is no support for the idea of "souls awaiting bodies." To the contrary, there are several passages which speak of the physical body as an essential aspect of humanness as well as the physical manifestation of the members of the church both now and in eternity (see, for instance, 1 Corinthians 6:15–19 and 15:35–44).

Traducianism. The doctrine of Traducianism teaches that the "soul" is present in both the sperm and the egg when they unite. The combination forms a new "soul" automatically and immediately. Traducianism has been held by at least some Christians since the church's earliest years. Tertullian (c.160–c.225), for instance, wrote

that "we allow that life begins with conception, because we contend that the soul also begins from conception; life taking its commencement at the same moment and place that the soul does."[7] Clement of Alexandria presented a much more detailed description:

> The embryo is a living thing; for that the soul entering into the womb after it has been by cleansing prepared for conception, and introduced by one of the angels who preside over generation, and who knows the time for conception, moves the woman to intercourse; and that, on the seed being deposited, the spirit, which is in the seed, is, so to speak, appropriated, and is thus assumed into conjunction in the process of formation.[8]

The Traducianist view was also held by Gregory of Nyssa (335–c.394) and Maximus the Confessor (c.580–662). The latter's argument was based on the example of Christ, who had been pronounced by the Ecumenical Church councils to be fully human and fully divine from the first moment of his conception—implying that he possessed a spiritual soul from that instant. If, as the Bible teaches, Christ was like us (humans) in all things except for sin, then it must be true that all human beings receive a spiritual soul at conception as well.[9]

Some scholars hold that the Traducianist view best explains the transmission of original sin. Bruce Waltke, for instance, concludes that "on the basis of inherited sin, . . . man's spiritual element is passed on mediately from Adam and not as the immediate creation of God, who does not author sin."[10] If the soul is automatically generated by the joining of sperm and egg, God avoids the accusation that he has indirectly been party to the transmission of sin. But here a question arises: if the soul is brought forth by the union of the parents, then are they to be seen as the true creators of life and God only an interested (or even disinterested) observer? Traducianism is essentially deistic in

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[7] Tertullian, "A Treatise on the Soul," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* vol. 3, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. C. Coxe (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 27.

[8] Clement of Alexandria, "Excerpts of Theodotus," in Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* 50.

[9] Cited in David Albert Jones, "The Appeal to the Christian Tradition in the Debate about Embryonic Stem Cell Research," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* (July 2005): 274.

[10] Bruce K. Waltke, "Reflections from the Old Testament on Abortion," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19, no. 1: 12.

that God's creative powers are held to have initiated life—including the soul—*only* in the case of Adam and Eve. Since that time, the generation of "life" and "soul" has been the prerogative of humans alone.

Creationism. The doctrine of Creationism maintains that the "soul" is created and introduced into a fetus by God at a point of his choosing, either at the time of a fetus's first breath, as was the case with Adam in Genesis 2:7, or when God in his sovereignty knows that a fetus is not going to be spontaneously (meaning "naturally") or intentionally aborted.

Theologian Louis Berkhof—a staunch proponent of Creationism—sees a marked distinction in the Bible between the body, which is taken from earth, and the soul, which is given by God. Significantly, the creation story is the first example of this distinction. Genesis 2:7 says that "God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." Ecclesiastes 12:7 adds the comment that "the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." And Hebrews 12:9 makes the distinction between "human fathers" and the "Father of spirits," concerning which the seventeeth-century Swiss Reformed clergyman Francis Turretin comments, "Why should God be called 'the Father of spirits' in contradistinction to 'the fathers of the flesh' unless the origin of each was different?"[11] While these passages are not sufficient to bring us to a conclusion as to when the soul is introduced into the body, they do allow us to conclude that "body and soul are not only represented as different substances, but also as having different origins."[12] Physical substance comes from physical origins, and spiritual essence from a spiritual source. Berkhof maintains that Creationism is the most biblically-based view, claiming that "it is more consistent with the prevailing representations of Scripture than Traducianism."[13]

Berkhof is just one of the more recent representatives of a stream of thought that is rooted both in ancient Hebrew beliefs and in Aristotelian philosophy, a stream that is shared today by rabbinic Judaism and by much of Islam. Aristotle equated "life" and "soul," but described different kinds of the latter: vegetative, sensitive, locomotive,

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[11] Francis Turretin, "Creationism or Traducianism: The Origin of the Soul," quoted by the website "On Doctrine"; http://www.ondoctrine.com/2tur0005.htm.

[12] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 199.

[13] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology,* 199.

and intellectual. "In general," Aristotle believed, "soul is imparted to the body in stages as each part is formed, and the specific soul is not actually present until the form is complete."[14] This "completion of form" takes place on the fortieth day after conception for males, and on the eightieth day for females. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) was a proponent of this view, and Thomas Aquinas (1205–1274) adopted Aristotle's schema practically in its entirety. Aquinas held that

> the body was formed gradually through the power transmitted by the male seed but the spiritual soul was directly created by God when the body was ready to receive it. Thus the embryo was believed to live at first the life of a plant, then the life of a simple animal, and only after all its organs, including the brain, had been formed, was it given, by the direct and creative act of God, an immortal spiritual soul.[15]

The Creationist views of Augustine and Aquinas were the norm in the Christian West from the early fifth century to the late nineteenth century. The Justinian Code of the sixth century excused from penalty abortions performed prior to forty days after conception. Pope Innocent III (c. 1216) and Pope Gregory IX (c. 1241) both affirmed the distinction between "vivified" fetuses (older than forty days) and those younger than so.[16] Not until the *Effraenatum* of Pope Sixtus V in 1588 did the forty-day rule vanish and abortion was declared illegal at any stage of fetal existence. But this ruling was rescinded by Sixtus's successor Gregory XIV, and this repeal lasted until 1869, when Pius IX reinstated the earlier decision. Even so, Pius's decree did not become canon law until 1918—a mere ninety years ago.[17]

With respect to Protestantism, the writings of John Calvin and Martin Luther were interpreted by their immediate successors as supportive of the Traducianist position. Over time, however, many in the Calvinistic stream returned to the Creationist position, while

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[14] Jones, "The Appeal to the Christian Tradition," 274.

[15] Jones, "The Appeal to the Christian Tradition," 275.

[16] See John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 88, 91, 232.

[17] See David M. Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 268–269.

Evangelical Protestants—derived mainly from Lutheran Pietism—have remained nearly unanimous today in their advocacy of Traducianism.

Judaism

In Jewish law, a fetus becomes a full-fledged human being when the head emerges from the womb. Before that moment, the principle that applies is that of *ubar yerekh imo*: "the fetus is the thigh of its mother," meaning that it may not be considered an independent entity but is instead a "partial life."[18] This view is based on Exodus 21:22, which says that if a woman miscarries due to being struck by men fighting, and she herself is not seriously injured, the offender is to pay the husband of the woman a monetary fine for the loss. What is significant here is that the Mosaic Law requires "life for life" (Exodus 21:23). The above scenario, then, implies that the fetus is of worth (since payment is required for its destruction) but not of equal worth to, say, the life of the mother (or the punishment of the offender would have been death). The distinction is made here because the fetus is not considered to be *nefesh adam* ("a man") but rather *lav nefesh hu* ("not a person") until it is born.[19]

Philo (20 BCE – 50 CE) was the first to address seriously the issue of ensoulment, using the scenario of Exodus 21:22 as his starting point. The Septuagint translation of the Tanakh had rendered the word *ason* in this passage as "form" rather than "harm," thus changing the meaning from "if [there be] no harm [that is, death, to the mother], he shall be fined" to "if [there be] no form [yet, to the fetus], he shall be fined. . . . But if [there be] form, then shalt thou give life for life."[20] Whereas the previous (and correct) translation would require only a fine for an abortion at *any* stage of a pregnancy, Philo makes a "before and after" distinction. He writes:

> If one have a contest with a woman who is pregnant, and strike her a blow on her belly, and she miscarry; if the child which was conceived within her is still unfashioned and unformed, he shall be punished by a fine, both for the assault which he committed and also because he has prevented nature—which was fashioning

[18] *Babylonian Talmud,* "Hulin," 58a. Cited in Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law,* 253.

[19] Rashi, *Yad Ramah.* Cited in Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law,* 255.

[20] Cited in Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law,* 257.

> and preparing that most excellent of all creatures, a human being—from bringing him into existence. But if the child which was conceived has assumed a distinct shape in all its parts, having received all its proper connective and distinctive qualities, he shall die; for such a creature as that is a man, whom he has slain while still in the workshop of nature, which had not thought it as yet a proper time to produce him to the light, but had kept him like a statue lying in a sculptor's workshop, requiring nothing more than to be released and sent into the world.[21]

Philo held that the time of having assumed "a distinct shape in all its parts" was the fortieth day after conception, following the Aristotelian line of thinking.

Another context bearing upon this issue is that of the Sabbath laws, which contain no general permission for a violation in order to save a fetus. The wording of the Talmudic discussion of this issue suggests two conclusions: "The fetus is not a person, not a man; but the fetus is indeed potential life and is to be treated as such."[22]

One further illustration will serve to show just how complex this subject can actually become. There is within Judaism a factor known as "doubtful viability," which holds that an embryo remains an embryo until thirty days after its *birth*, becoming only then a *bar kayyama*, a viable, living being.[23] We find, then, in Judaism the same ambiguity regarding fetal life that we noted in Christianity.

Islam

As the latest of the Abrahamic faith systems, Islam was able to build upon the thinking of its forbearers. The Aristotelian forty-day time period was incorporated into Islamic theology using the Qur'an's Surah 23:12–14 as a starting point. This passage describes conception and fetal development in poetic form:

> Then We placed [man] as (a drop of sperm) (*nutfa*) in a place of rest, firmly fixed; then We made the sperm into a clot (*'alaqa*) of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a (foetus) lump (*mudgha*); then We made out of that lump bones and clothed the

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21 Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus,* II, 19.
22 Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law,* 264.
23 Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law,* 253–254.

> bones with flesh; then We developed out of it another creature. So blessed be Allah, the Best to create!

Two *hadiths* (traditions) relate specifically to this passage. One states that "each of you is constituted in your mother's womb for forty days as a *nutfa*, then it becomes an *'alaqa* for an equal period, then a *mudgha* for another equal period, then the angel is sent, and he breathes the soul into it."[24] The second states that "when forty-two nights have passed over the sperm drops, Allah sends an angel to it, who shapes it and makes its ears, eyes, skin, flesh and bones. Then he says, 'O Lord! Is it male or female?' And your Lord decides what he wishes and the angel records it."[25] Amplification of the latter *hadith* is found in Ahmad ibn Hanbal's *Musnad*: "When Allah wants to complete its creation, He sends an angel. He tells the angel that which He commands for it: for example, male or female, unhappy or joyful, short or tall, weak or strong, and he makes the person healthy or infirm."[26]

Muslims who follow this line of reasoning believe that ensoulment occurs on or immediately after the one hundred twentieth day of fetal life. At this point, the fetus is a fully constituted human being with specific rights. For instance, in circumstances similar to those found in Exodus 21:22 above, *diya* ("blood money") is due to a couple who has lost their child, that child being considered a complete human being.

The Shi'ites have worked out an even more elaborate scheme of valuation, using a commentary on Surah 23 attributed to their first Imam, 'Ali:

> If the foetus is aborted prior to the coming of the spirit, then the blood money will be a hundred dinars divided into five parts as follows in accordance with the stages of the developing foetus as described by the verse: Fertilized ovum (*nutfa*): 20 dinars. Clot of blood (*'alaqa*): 40 dinars. Lump of flesh (*mudgha*): 60 dinars. Bones (*'izam*): 80 dinars. Flesh appearing on bones (*lahm*): 100 dinars. After the coming of the spirit it will be the full blood money. Since it is a full human it will be a thousand dinars for a

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[24] Sahih Muslim, *Kitab ul-Qadr,* cited in Muslim ibn al-Hajja al-Naysaburi, ed., *Sahih Muslim,* vol. 5 (Cairo: Dar al-Sha'b, n.d.), 496.

[25] *Sahih Muslim*, 499–500.

[26] Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad,* vol. 1, 374–375.

> male and five hundred for a female in accordance with the gender.[27]

Similar to what we found in Judaism, however, "even within the first four months (i.e., 120 days), Islam regards life as sacrosanct."[28] For instance, if a pregnant woman is found guilty of a capital crime, her execution is postponed until after her baby is born. Life is given by Allah, and all to whom Allah gives this gift—including embryos—have the right to enjoy it.

Eastern-Reincarnationist Views

The Eastern view of life and death is much different from that of the West, mainly due to Eastern religions' belief in reincarnation. These religions contain an interesting combination of Pre-existentianism and Traducianism. The Pre-existentianist component is seen in the fact that the *atman* (in Hinduism) or the *skandhas* (in Buddhism) are non-material, eternally-existing entities that move from body to body within the illusion of *maya*. This belief does not, however, speak to the issue of when these entities become present within a fetus, and we find that the traditional Hindu/Buddhist teaching regarding the entry of the *atman* or *skandhas* is Traducianist in essence. This is indicated in Buddhism's concept of the twelve-linked chain:

> From the very earliest days, the theory of co-conditioned causality, or *pratityasamutpada*, the doctrine of the interrelatedness of all phenomena, was interpreted embryologically. In the form which came to be standard, dependent origination was expressed as a circle of twelve causal factors or links, which seem to operate simultaneously. As applied to the foetal development of an individual, the first three links of the chain are ignorance, which gives rise to karma foundations, which in turn give rise to consciousness or *vijnana*.[29]

Vijnana, according to the fourth-century philosopher Vasubandhu, is comprised of the five *skandhas*, which are present within

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[27] Sayyid Hashim al-Bahrani, *Al-Burhan fi tafsir al-Qur'an* (Lebanon: al-Mu'assasat al-'Alami li-al-Matbu'at, 1999), 335–336.

[28] Anthony Kyriakides-Yeldham, "Islamic Medical Ethics and the Straight Path of God," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* (July 2005): 217.

[29] R. E. Florida, "Buddhist Approaches to Abortion," *Asian Philosophy* (March 1991): 3.

the womb at the moment of conception and produce the reincarnated life.

> What this boils down to is that Buddhists traditionally have understood that the human being begins at the instant of conception when sperm, egg, and *vijnana* come together. As Taniguchi puts it, "there is no qualitative difference between an unborn foetus and a born individual."[30]

In recent years there has been an influx of Eastern ideas into the Western world, and a "Westernized Eastern worldview" has developed. Gary Zukav, author of *The Seat of the Soul*, writes from such a position and his down-to-earth book is understandable to the masses. Zukav maintains that the body and soul are separate, with the soul being eternal. "A soul has no beginning and no end," states Zukav, and, therefore, no one actually has the power to "kill" a fetus.[31]

Generally, Western "New Agers" like Zukav adopt the doctrine of reincarnation from Eastern thinking but reject its Traducianist corollary. Driven by the abortion controversy in the United States and Europe, Western advocates of Eastern philosophy have adopted the view that "life in this world begins when the spirit enters the child immediately *after* birth."[32] This process has been worked out in exacting detail:

> A fetus still does not possess *ki*. This condition continues while the child passes through the birth canal, and the spirit-body (*reitai*) enters the child at the moment it comes in contact with the outside air (*gaiki*), and it experiences *ki*. . . . When the child comes in contact with the outside air, the spirit—which is made of *ki*—enters the child at that moment and is able to see the *karma* of that child. This becomes that child's *karma* for its entire life.[33]

In countries such as Japan where traditional Buddhism holds sway, the Traducianist view of ensoulment has led to a rapidly growing phenomenon involving the practice of *mizuko kuyō*, a shrine-ceremony that is believed to consign the departed souls of aborted

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[30] Florida, "Buddhist Approaches to Abortion," 3.

[31] Gary Zukav, *The Seat of the Soul* (New York: Fireside, 1989), 185.

[32] Komatsu Kayoko, "Mizuko Kuy and New Age Concepts of Reincarnation," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 30, no. 3–4 (2003): 273.

[33] Kayoko, "Reincarnation," 273 n. 16.

and miscarried fetuses into the care of the Bodhisattva Jizo Bosatsu. *Mizuko* (literally "water babies") are believed to inhabit a limbo-like plane of existence that is neither heaven nor hell, but which at night is dark, cold, and inhabited by demonic spirits that frighten the tiny beings. Jizo appears to comfort and protect those fetuses whose mothers have invoked his aid. This ceremony has become enormously popular since the early 1970s due to its alleged ability to assuage any guilt that may be felt from the act of abortion and to prevent any curses upon family members which might be forthcoming from the departed souls. Thus we have here an interesting syncretism employing a folk usage of religious psychology.[34]

The Influence of the Sociology of Religion on Theories of Ensoulment

One would be foolish to think that religious views—including views of ensoulment—are developed solely from scriptural (that is, revelational) sources. Human norms, expectations, and resolves about the existence of life are at least partially, and perhaps even chiefly, formed by the society in which people live. If that society has a high infant mortality rate, for instance, then individuals become hardened to the inevitability of death. On the other hand, if the society is characterized by a low mortality rate, then they become sensitized to the cruelty of death. Compared to societies of the past, today's Western world has fewer life-threatening concerns. As a result, intense emotions are expended on what would earlier have been considered "lesser issues."

For example, an individual may today feel the same emotional intensity when deprived of television as a person living in the Middle Ages would have felt being deprived of food. The point is not that the modern person is shallow, but that human beings have a range of emotions to choose from, and the entirety of that range will be used in any given environment. People feel irritated when they do not receive what they desire to be part of their norm. Thus, a common irritation for an American might be a day without television, while a common irritation in the Middle Ages would have been a day without dinner. The intensity of their feelings is the same. Feelings are either based upon or are in reaction to the absence of what someone considers to be his or her "normal" circumstances. Thus, an individual's or a

[34] For an excellent study of this phenomenon, see Kayoko, "Reincarnation."

society's convictions and feelings about matters of conception, ensoulment, contraception, abortion, childbirth, and the like are based on the normative expectations regarding "life" and "death."

Another sociological influence that molds one's view of "life" is the family unit. The most important function of the family in the past was survival. Today the chief function is generally seen to be "comfort"—a notion that is in essence a "feeling." Sociologist James Davison Hunter explains, "Feelings [today] play a prominent role at all points of the family life cycle: in uniting couples, in rearing children, in binding families together. Yet the emotional factor has not always figured so prominently. It was nearly foreign to family dynamics in centuries past."[35] What is significant about this distinction in regard to our topic is the attitude toward birth and children that each family type produces. In the past, if a wife was pregnant her concerns were "Will I survive this pregnancy?" or "Will there be enough food and clothing during the time I'm unable to work?" There was no need for the couple to bond over the upcoming (potential) baby because they had other means of bonding, through working together to survive and provide for their family. Now, couples have little to bond over after the initial feelings of "being in love" disappear. In a society of equal rights, governmental assistance, and wealth, both the husband and the wife are able to survive independently of one another. Other means of bonding emotionally had to evolve to protect the marriage relationship. One of these means was through the wife's pregnancy. Today, the wife's as well as the husband's concerns are "How do we feel about the pregnancy?" or "How should we prepare for the baby?" If the family unit is anticipating and relying on a new baby's arrival to solidify the family unit, then that baby is worth more emotionally today than it would have been in the past.

The evolution of the family unit's function, and thus the family members' worldviews, is also marked by a change in how infants and children are treated. In the past, children were given little serious recognition. Indeed, "childhood was not considered a distinct and separate period of life. No distinction was made between the young and old in work or in play, aptly symbolized by the fact that children and adults wore similar dress. Infants were distinct from adults, of course, yet

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[35] James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 83.

they were typically regarded with a measure of indifference."[36] Hunter explains why infants were often virtually ignored. First, there was little time for recreation or "bonding time." Second, there was a high rate of infant mortality. Whether rich or poor, one in three babies died within the first three years of life. One in two never reached adulthood. The obvious reaction, then, was that "it was simply too much to expect parents to allow maternal and paternal affections to grow and to invest energy in the child's future given the likelihood that the child would not live to see that future." Consequently, "infants, for all practical purposes, did not really warrant human status."[37]

It should be obvious why such sociological factors contributed in large part to a Creationist view of ensoulment rather than a Traducianist view. The high mortality rate of earlier centuries caused mothers and fathers to become accustomed to babies dying near birth or shortly thereafter, and Creationism's tenets—that God would not introduce a soul into an infant he knew would never have a chance to live—would be of enormous comfort.

Mortality rates also correlate with whether a society is agricultural or industrial. Agricultural communities become accustomed to death as a normal part of a rural lifestyle. Farm animals die, animals are killed on a regular basis for food, and population control of strays and pets is necessary for people to have enough to eat. If the society in which one lives involves the necessary killing of other life forms, then human beings become familiar with and understanding of the necessity of death. Since in earlier centuries even human infants were unlikely to reach adulthood, people did not consider life "sacred" until a much later age. This is difficult for a modern person to understand, but "in many societies practicing infanticide, infants were not deemed to be fully human until they underwent a rite of initiation that took place from a few days to several years after birth, and therefore killing before such initiation was socially acceptable. The purposes of infanticide were various: child spacing or fertility control in the absence of effective contraception; elimination of illegitimate, deformed, orphaned, or twin children; or sex preferences."[38] Feelings

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[36] Hunter, *Evangelicalism,* 84.

[37] Hunter, *Evangelicalism,* 84.

[38] Michael S. Teitelbaum, "Population," in *Britannica Online Encyclopedia* (September 2007); http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-60664.

about when life begins, then, are often significantly influenced by a specific environment and its view of death.

Further, since life in general was not a given, there was no room for either human or animal life to be prized. Today's pet cemeteries would be laughable to previous generations. But during the Middle Ages, says Hunter, "it was not uncommon for children who died in infancy to be buried in the garden or next to the house in the same way that people of later centuries buried domestic dogs or cats."[39]

As nations became less agriculturally based and more industrialized, their exposure to and acceptance of death decreased proportionally. As a result, the attitude toward fetuses, infants, and children began to change. Child psychology first emerged during the late eighteenth century, when "maternal indifference gave way to affection and sentimentality." Significantly, "accompanying the sentimentalization of childhood and adolescence was the view that children were not just 'charming toys' but 'fragile creatures of God who needed to be both safeguarded and reformed.'"[40] Since many in modern nations do not encounter death, not even on a small scale, life itself has become sacralized in a way that previous generations would have found irrational. And because life has been imbued with such sacrality, Traducianism—which sacralizes human life from the very point of conception—is a much more fitting position for modern industrialized societies.

Implications

Our discussion of ensoulment has clear implications for many of the leading issues with which our contemporary societies are dealing, including abortion, contraception, in vitro fertilization, and stem cell research. It can be readily understood how significant one's view regarding ensoulment is for these phenomena. Simply put, if one is a Traducianist, completely convinced that an embryo is a fully-ensouled human being from the first seconds of its existence, then the destruction of unused fertilized eggs, the harvesting of stem cells from fetal tissue, forms of contraception that are essentially abortifacients, and all elective abortions performed at any stage of the gestation period would be considered the termination of *human* life. If, however, one

[39] Hunter, *Evangelicalism,* 84.
[40] Hunter, *Evangelicalism,* 85.

is a convinced Creationist, holding that ensoulment does not occur until—at the earliest—the fortieth day after conception, and possibly not until as long as thirty days after birth itself, then one's convictions concerning the abovementioned procedures may be vastly different from those of the Traducianist. Let us examine the implications of these views more closely.

Traducianism

Almost without exception, Traducianists are pro-life in orientation. Given their presuppositions, it is completely logical for them to be utterly convinced that "abortion is nothing less than murder, the taking of innocent human life."[41] Even in the absence of incontrovertible revelational or scientific proof for their position, they are convinced that to err at their end of the pro-life/pro-choice spectrum shows greater moral integrity than advocating a position at the opposite end. Few—if any—Traducianists harbor any doubts whatsoever regarding the rightness—or righteousness—of their position. The same cannot be said for proponents of the other views.

There are, nevertheless, several problematic aspects of the Traducianist view. For one thing, in their attempts to gain the support of a majority of Westerners, pro-life advocates must often present their case in a skewed fashion. This is so because "lacking a secular rationale, pro-life forces nevertheless try to marshal *apparently* secular support for the fetal right to life. One stratagem is to generate moral concern for early stages of human life by playing on their later stages. . . . Abortion opponents never carry posters depicting newly conceived embryos, which when magnified look more like buckyballs than people."[42]

Additionally, Traducianists must often go to extremes to prove that abortion causes mental harm (in the form of guilt, trauma, or the like) as well as physical harm (in the form of sterility and other gynecological difficulties). Given that in most cases "the research that specifically aims to causally link mental health problems and abortion has been conducted by those opposed to abortion,"[43] the published

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[41] Waltke, "Reflections," 3.

[42] Thomas W. Clark, "Faith in Hiding: Are There Secular Grounds for Banning Abortion?" in *The Humanist* (July-August 2007): 27–31.

[43] Warren Throckmorton, "Abortion and Mental Health," *The Washington Times* (January 21, 2006): A13.

studies, especially in nonscientific journals and magazines, are often unreliable. For instance, a study conducted in New Zealand and published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* found that those who had an abortion prior to age twenty-one were more likely to have a mental disorder from ages twenty-one to twenty-five than those of the same age who did not become pregnant or who did become pregnant but did not abort. However, this study has been dismissed by the American Psychological Association as inconclusive because it was not well designed enough to determine whether abortion itself contributes to an increased risk of mental illness. According to Nancy Russo, Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at Arizona State University, "for U.S. women, pre-existing mental health problems, relationship quality, and whether the pregnancy was wanted or unwanted are key factors determining post-abortion mental distress, not the abortion itself." Dr. Russo also believes that "telling women an abortion is wrong may create guilt and shame in some, but those feelings are rooted in social disapproval and not abortion per se."[44]

The general assumption that exists within the Christian community—that those who have undergone abortions incur *higher* rates of psychological distress—is not borne out by objective research. According to the APA's briefing paper on abortion, "Well-designed studies of psychological responses following abortion have consistently shown that risk of psychological harm is low. Some women experience psychological dysfunction following abortion, but post-abortion rates of distress and dysfunction are lower than pre-abortion rates."[45] Based on these studies, it would be possible to argue that refusing to allow the termination of an unwanted pregnancy could conceivably add *more* to the sum total of pain and distress in the modern world than an abortion would yield. One is left with the excruciatingly difficult choice between the permanent destruction of an unborn fetus—the status of which is ambiguous—or permanent damage to the psyche and life circumstances of an already-living person.

Also problematic is the fact that Traducianists are often far from consistent in their position regarding pre-birth embryology. If the pro-life advocate's purpose is to save lives by saving embryos, why are

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[44] Throckmorton, "Abortion and Mental Health," A13.

[45] David M. Fergusson, L. John Horwood, and Elizabeth Ridder, "Abortion in Young Women and Subsequent Mental Health," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 47, no. 1 (January 2006): 20.

fertility clinics, which house frozen embryos that are discarded when no longer needed, not targeted as frequently and to the same extent as abortion clinics? One seldom picks up a newspaper and reads about pro-life advocates picketing fertility clinics. As Irving Weissman points out, "Most people who object to destroying human embryos for research don't protest [in vitro fertilization] itself, which routinely produces embryos that end up being destroyed."[46] On the contrary, these institutions are often praised by the religiously devout, who see them as "a blessing from God so that couples can become parents." If pro-life advocates truly believed embryos were human beings, they should also require that all embryos created by in vitro fertilization be implanted and brought to term. They should be advocating the enforcement of fetal health and the outlawing of certain forms of contraception. Do such inconsistencies mean that pro-life advocates do not actually believe an embryo is a person? No, but they appear to indicate that many Traducianists choose the implications that are the most "trendy," or have quite simply not considered that their views have implications for other areas besides abortion.

Stem cell research and in vitro fertilization opponents, along with anti-abortion activists, all have the same intense emotions that fuel their rhetoric. But they fail to note that the illogic of many of their actions damages their credibility, often irrevocably. They seem also to be unaware or uncaring of the fact that there are equally intense emotions that are driving those who have an opposing view. To a man or woman caring for an invalid spouse or child, or to a couple desperate for a child of their own, there is an inescapable poignancy to questions such as Weissman's: "Does the fate of an embryo matter as much as the health of a living person?"[47]

Finally, there is an interesting theological problem that arises for those holding the Traducianist position. According to *New York Times* writer Gina Kolata, 31 percent of women experience a known miscarriage,[48] and even this figure is considered by many to be on the low side: "The true rate of early pregnancy loss is close to 50% because of the high number of chemical pregnancies that are not

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[46] Jon Cohen, "Stem Cell Pioneers," *Smithsonian* (December 2005): 82.

[47] Cohen, "Stem Cell Pioneers," 80.

[48] Gina Kolata, "Study Finds 31% Rate of Miscarriage," *New York Times* (July 27, 1988): 15.

recognized in the 2–4 weeks after conception."[49] This statistic becomes extremely problematic if all of those miscarriages are deemed actual human beings. First, it seems clear that the human body *does* regularly abort fetuses spontaneously. Why would God have designed female physiology in such a way that for every life that is produced, another is destroyed?

Next, consider that the cumulative population of the earth throughout history is estimated to be approximately 60 billion persons.[50] If that number represents the 50 percent that survived pregnancy, then there are at least 60 billion souls that did *not* survive and who have never lived a day on earth. If those souls are innately evil, as Christianity teaches on the basis of such passages as Psalm 58:3 ("The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies," ASV), then more than 60 billion human beings were essentially born into hell. How disturbing to think of souls being eternally tormented without ever having the chance of living an earthly life. Some, of course, would argue that infants are innocent, and therefore those 60 billion souls are all in "heaven." But even this claim is theologically problematic, for would it not imply that "heaven" is overwhelmingly populated by fetuses that were spontaneously or intentionally aborted? Is this a heaven that Jews, Christians, or Muslims would be satisfied to be a part of?

Creationism

If the tenets of Creationism are true and the fetus does not have a soul until it is given one by God at a time determined by his sovereign will, then the social issues we have discussed above do not necessarily involve the termination of a human life. The issue may be stated thusly: "The debate about the rights of the embryo is often framed as the question of whether or not it's a person. . . . The substantive issue about personhood is whether the zygote and later stages of the embryo and fetus have the same rights as uncontroversial existing persons. . . . The current secular consensus, however, is that all stages of human life do *not* merit equal protection."[51] With this statement, Creationists could generally agree.

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[49] John C. Petrozza, "Early Pregnancy Loss," eMedicine website (November 15, 2007): http://www.emedicine.com/med/topic3241.htm.

[50] Martin Rees, *Our Final Hour* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 136.

[51] Clark, "Faith in Hiding," 28.

In addition to the religious and theological considerations discussed above, the implications of this doctrine are most harmonious with statistics, reason, and psychologists' findings. The problems encountered with Traducianism disappear almost entirely. Proponents of Creationism are able to say in good conscience that "God does not create a soul for a fetus that he knows is going to be a spontaneous or induced abortion, or for a fertilized ovum he knows will be discarded."

Creationism, then, appears to be much more amenable to statistics concerning the body's natural disposal of early life forms. The Creationist view is also most in line with what is, to many, psychologically obvious: "We intuitively understand this [that embryos do not have souls] when we judge, uncontroversially, that it is *not* a human tragedy that a high percentage of fertilized eggs never achieve implantation but are expelled naturally during menstruation." It is generally observed that people naturally feel more concern for later stages of human life because "ordinary human psychology generates different levels of concern for different stages. We are generally more protective and concerned about an entity that clearly has sentience and self-pertaining interests than something that clearly has neither." After all, "unless ideology intrudes, we naturally feel more concern for a person with fully developed capacities and a network of established relationships than we do for an entity possessing neither."[52] Therefore, "as societies secularize, it becomes increasingly difficult for religious ideologies to suppress [what is] psychological reality."[53]

Does all of the above imply that since a fetus in the earliest stages of the gestation period may be without a soul, termination of a pregnancy or the destruction of fertilized ova are inconsequential acts? Not at all. In actuality, Creationists may well be just as opposed to abortion, stem cell research, and certain forms of contraception as Traducianists. But their objections will be of a different nature.

Conclusions: How Shall We Then Live?

In the end we find that we are faced with a division of duties and responsibilities. Science is able to tell us about "life," using its own quantifiable criteria. If an object is growing, with cells dividing and

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[52] Clark, "Faith in Hiding," 28.
[53] Clark, "Faith in Hiding," 29.

metabolic processes occurring, if it moves and if it reproduces, it is "alive." And while "life" is, of course, significant in and of itself, the above characteristics are just as true of animals as of human beings.

Therefore to scholars of religion there falls a much more intimidating task. We are called to speak of that which science—with all of its remarkable and subtle instruments—can say nothing about. Seeking to remain neutral concerning this issue or ignoring it completely is unacceptable and amounts to an inexcusable neglect of our calling in life. It is our lot to speak of "the soul," of how its presence within a collection of living tissues distinguishes mere "biological life" from truly "human life." We believe that inherent in this task are at least three objectives to which we should give our full attention and which we should make every effort to fulfill.

First, we must teach in our classrooms and in other venues in such a way that the general public learns that the matter of ensoulment is an enormously complex issue. We must show by example that the implications of such an issue should not be undermined by denial or neutrality, but should be approached in a loving, fair, and nonjudgmental fashion. We must explain that religious beliefs regarding this subject—even within a single religion such as Christianity—span a very wide spectrum, and all attempts to simplify these matters in an unrealistic manner will doom us to continued misunderstanding and acrimony. Neither natural science nor revelation—natural or special—has produced sufficient data for surety regarding these issues. Consequently, discussion and debate regarding contraception, abortion, in vitro fertilization, and stem cell research must be brought to a higher level of sophistication than is currently extant.

Second, in the course of our discussions we should adopt a vocabulary that avoids hyperbole and unwarranted assumptions. Terminology that is brutal and accusatory, such as "murderers" and "baby-killers," should be eliminated. After all, can we know with absolute certainty that the abovementioned activities do indeed involve "murder"? If there is no incontrovertible revelational teaching regarding this issue, might one not essentially be violating a moral requirement that *is* incontrovertible (for example, "Thou shalt not bear false witness") by misinforming the public concerning "what God has said" regarding these subjects? Why not focus our attention and resources on larger issues, such as the spiritual, sociological, psychological, and physiological tragedies that give rise to the very ethical issues we are discussing?

After all, there are many other reasons for objecting to elective abortions. One may argue, for instance, that contemporary pro-choice attitudes toward abortion rights ultimately represent the following:

A. *Disrespect for God's creative purposes and for human existence in general.* Being nonchalant about abortion expresses disregard for God's ordered plan for humanity. The Creator designed a natural way of reproducing life and abortion is a rejection of that design. Becoming pregnant involves the creation of a potentially eternal being, and to adopt an attitude of just "getting rid of" such a being devalues and degrades the entire concept of human existence.
B. *A cavalier and rebellious attitude toward human sexuality.* God made men and women physiologically different so that they would be able to "fill the earth" with progeny (Genesis 1:27–28) and to enjoy physical intimacy within the protective confines of a marriage covenant (Hebrews 13:4). There is nothing about abortion that is either pro-creation or pro-intimacy. A non-committal, non-intimate approach to sexual intercourse is in violation of God's revealed plan for humankind (1 Corinthians 6:15–20).
C. *A "cover-up for evil" (1 Peter 2:16).* In the overwhelming majority of cases, a woman who elects to terminate her pregnancy is seeking to avoid or reject the consequence of her sexual sin. She is availing herself of what essentially becomes a last-ditch method of birth control. But procuring an abortion in order to nullify the consequences of sexual sin is ultimately unsuccessful; instead, it brings other evil consequences. For example, since China has enforced population control laws and legalized late-term abortions, pregnancy termination has now become a means of sex selection, resulting in discrimination against females and contributing to a gender imbalance in the population.
D. *Economic irresponsibility.* Seen from a financial perspective, abortion is an enormously wasteful medical procedure. As crass as it may sound, a condom costs fifty cents while an abortion costs hundreds of dollars. It is irresponsible and selfish for persons who lack the discipline to use a proper means of birth control to then place the burden of payment upon taxpayers, who indirectly support abortions through

government subsidies of organizations such as Planned Parenthood.

Lastly, we should do all in our power to provide a "middle way" between the extremists that inhabit *both* ends of the pro-life/pro-choice spectrum. It is a tragedy that the church is often the last place a woman who has had an abortion will go. A simplistic judgmentalism will succeed only in polarizing individuals and groups. Anonymous letters such as one received by Dr. George Woodward that threatened, "If you continue I will hunt you down like any other wild beast and kill you,"[54] are all too often highlighted by the media and do nothing to resolve the situation.

We believe that a majority of Christians do not condone such behavior. They are instead embarrassed by and apologetic concerning such fanatical attitudes. But separating themselves from extremists in the eyes of a watching world will require more from spiritually-minded persons than pink-cheeked apologies. Such separation will require patient listening, careful and thoughtful discussion, and self-sacrificing compassion. It will require a frank willingness to acknowledge a multitude of possible truths, and, therefore, a necessary change in the overall approach of opponents to abortion to these issues.

These are truly awesome responsibilities. As ambassadors of the kingdom of heaven, our words and our actions concerning these issues can have profound implications for social structures, for moral and ethical considerations, and for the psyches of both women and men. Let us therefore be "shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16) in our stewardship of the concept of "ensoulment" and of its implications for humanity.

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[54] Melinda Liu, "Inside the Anti-Abortion Underground," *Newsweek* 29 (August 1994): 28.