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Contraception and reproductive ethics in Judaism and Christianity
Medical, moral and doctrinal perspectives

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Αντισύλληψη και αναπαραγωγική ηθική στον Ιουδαϊσμό και στον Χριστιανισμό: Ιατρικές, ηθικές και δογματικές προσεγγίσεις

Περίληψη στο τέλος του άρθρου

This paper examines the complex ethical and theological perspectives on contraception within the framework of Judaism and Christianity, with a particular focus on Orthodox Christianity. Through a comparative analysis of scriptural interpretations and doctrinal developments, it explores how both faith traditions have historically addressed procreation, marriage, and the regulation of birth. In Judaism, childbearing is viewed as a divine blessing, yet Jewish law permits contraception under specific conditions, particularly to safeguard maternal health or for responsible family planning. Variations among Orthodox and liberal Jewish communities demonstrate the flexibility within rabbinic interpretation. Conversely, Christian doctrine, particularly in Orthodox Christianity, emphasizes marriage as a sacred mystery, recognizing procreation as a blessed but not exclusive purpose. Early Christian thought placed significant emphasis on childbearing, though contemporary Orthodox teachings prioritize marital unity, love, and spiritual growth alongside procreation. This paper contends that reducing marriage solely to its reproductive function distorts its theological meaning and undermines its holistic sacramental purpose. By investigating both the similarities and differences between Judaic and Christian views, the study illuminates the evolving ethical considerations surrounding contraception, highlighting the enduring role of spiritual discernment, pastoral guidance, and theological nuance in navigating reproductive ethics within both traditions.

Key words

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The question of contraception occupies a significant position within theological and ethical debates, especially in the contexts of Judaism and Christianity. The convergence and divergence of perspectives between these two major religious traditions reflect profound differences in scriptural interpretation, historical experience, and doctrinal evolution. This paper focuses on these contrasting views, primarily within Jewish law and Orthodox Christian teaching, highlighting the theological rationale underpinning their respective positions.[1]

From ancient times, childbearing has been esteemed in both Judaism and Christianity as a divine blessing. The Hebrew Scriptures frequently extol the virtue of fertility, portraying procreation as an integral aspect of God's covenant with humanity. In the Old Testament, childlessness was perceived not only as a personal tragedy but also as a societal stigma. This understanding was largely influenced

by the prevailing belief that lineage and posterity were intrinsically linked to divine favor and, in the Judaic context, to the expectation of the coming Messiah.

In Jewish tradition, however, interpretations of procreation and contraception are nuanced. The absence of explicit biblical prohibitions against contraception has enabled rabbinic authorities to formulate practical guidelines accommodating individual circumstances. Jewish law (Halacha) generally upholds procreation as a central purpose of marriage but permits contraception under specific circumstances, including safeguarding maternal health, addressing financial constraints, or deferring childbearing for serious reasons. Importantly, the Orthodox branches of Judaism reject contraceptive methods that obstruct or destroy semen, reflecting a stringent adherence to the preservation of procreative potential. In contrast, liberal Jewish movements tend to espouse a more permissive approach, interpreting birth control as compatible with responsible family planning.[2]

Within Christianity, perspectives on contraception are similarly complex. The New Testament reiterates the significance of marriage, affirming it as a divinely instituted sacrament. However, its emphasis on marriage extends beyond procreation, underlining the sanctity of marital love, fidelity, and companionship. In the writings of the Apostle Paul, marriage is portrayed as a legitimate avenue to sanctify human desires and prevent moral transgressions. Importantly, whilst childbearing is celebrated, its absence within marriage is no longer viewed as a curse, thus signaling a theological shift from Old Testament paradigms.

Orthodox Christianity has developed a distinctive approach. While it recognizes the intrinsic value of procreation, it does not reduce the meaning of marriage to reproductive function alone. The Orthodox understanding of marriage encompasses broader spiritual purposes, such as mutual sanctification, love, and the cultivation of virtuous living. Theological authorities such as Saint John Chrysostom have argued that childbearing, though honorable, is not the definitive goal of marriage, cautioning against equating reproductive capacity with marital fulfilment.

Furthermore, Orthodox Christian theology consistently rejects any notion that regards the human body or sexual union as inherently sinful, in contrast to certain medieval Western theological interpretations. This distinction reinforces the Orthodox position that marriage is not solely a reproductive institution but a path to spiritual growth and communion with God. This approach is further nuanced by the principle of oikonomia (pastoral discretion), whereby spiritual fathers guide individual couples according to their specific life circumstances.[3]

In this paper, we aim to elucidate these perspectives by critically examining the theological premises underpinning the acceptance or rejection of contraception within both Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. Through this examination, we hope to clarify the underlying principles guiding reproductive ethics in these traditions, highlighting both the continuity and evolution of thought surrounding this complex moral issue.

2. PROCREATION IN THE BIBLE

2.1. Procreation in the Old Testament

Human beings were created *"in the image and likeness"* of God (Genesis 1:26).[4] Human life is sacred, for mankind was not brought into existence merely by a divine command but was fashioned by the very "hands" of God. This signifies the special care and attention that the Creator devoted to humanity, who would become the crowning glory of His creation: *"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being"* (Genesis 2:7).[5] Through procreation, humanity becomes co-creator with God, for God blessed Adam and Eve, saying *"Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it"* (Genesis 1:28).[6]

In the Old Testament, therefore, the bearing of children was regarded as a divine blessing. Conversely, childlessness was considered a curse and a cause of reproach for a married couple. Through the birth of children, a person's existence was perpetuated, and this continuity was seen as a form of immortality. A couple who had offspring ensured the continuation of their lineage, and it was believed that from such a lineage the Messiah could eventually be born. Although procreation was not regarded as the sole purpose of marriage, it was nonetheless highly desired, being counted among the sweetest fruits a couple could receive (I Kings/I Samuel 1:19, 27)[7] *"Then they rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord and returned and came to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah was his wife, and the Lord remembered her. So it came to pass in the process of time that Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel"*, saying, *"Because I have asked for him from the Lord"*, *"For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition which I asked of Him"* (Ruth 4:13);[8] *"So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son"*. Children were understood as gifts from God to the family: *"Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward"* (Psalm 126/127:3).[9] The term "heritage" denotes something of immense value that God

bequeaths to humanity, offering mankind the opportunity to partake in creative work, while through offspring the nation and the tribe are preserved and continue across generations (Genesis 22:17–18),[10] *"blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice"*.

Of course, procreation is not considered the exclusive purpose of marriage, as noted above, even though children are regarded as a divine gift *"Children's children are the crown of old men; and the glory of children is their fathers"* (Proverbs 17:6).[11] The Prophet Malachi admonishes the Israelites who, after having children, would dismiss their wives. Specifically, the prophet declares: *"Because the Lord has been witnessed. Between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore, take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth"*. *"For the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence"* says the Lord of hosts. *"Therefore, take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously"* (Malachi 2:14–16).[12] According to the Prophet Malachi, therefore, the purpose of marriage is primarily the mutual love, respect, and understanding between the spouses, with procreation following thereafter. Naturally, it is a great joy when the children born to a couple are virtuous and walk in the way of the Lord. Otherwise, if the children turn out to be impious, it would have been better for the couple to have remained childless.[13] *"Do not desire a multitude of worthless children, and do not rejoice in ungodly offspring. If they multiply, do not rejoice in them, unless the fear of the Lord is in them. Do not trust in their survival or rely on their numbers, for one can be better than a thousand, and to die childless is better than to have ungodly children"* (Wisdom of Sirach 16:1–3).[13]

Particularly noteworthy is the perspective of Professor Fanaras[14] in his doctoral thesis concerning childlessness in the Old Testament. He states: *"Sterility and childlessness do not necessarily indicate a pathological condition and are frequently considered to serve the spiritual benefit of the couple. Barren women give birth according to God's will, and childless couples among the saints are distinguished for their virtuous lives, even though they were not involved in the upbringing and education of children."* Consequently, both sterility and procreation are ultimately grounded in the sovereign will of God and form part of His salvific plan for humanity.

2.2. Childbearing and its significance in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the bearing of children is indeed considered a blessing. However, marriage also serves as the proper context for the fulfilment of bodily desires, so that individuals are not led into uncontrolled indulgence in carnal pleasures. Sexual relations outside of marriage constitute fornication, which is unequivocally prohibited within Christianity. For this reason, the Apostle Paul advises Christians in his First Epistle to the Corinthians: *"Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband"* (I Corinthians 7:2).[15] Through the carnal union within marriage, couples are able to avoid the temptations of sexual immorality (I Corinthians 7:5)[16] *"Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control"*, and this is presented as one of the principal reasons why individuals should marry (I Corinthians 7:9)[17] *"but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion"*.

These scriptural passages are further analyzed and emphasized in the work of Professor Mantzaridis,[18] who asserts: *"For instance, if one were to accept that the principal aim of marriage is not the personal spiritual perfection of the spouses but solely procreation, then one would also be compelled to consider any marriage which does not result in the birth of children –perhaps due to sterility– as null and void. Neither the Church nor common sense, however, accepts such a conclusion. Moreover, to regard procreation as the chief purpose of marriage would essentially reduce the meaning of marriage to the physical relations between husband and wife, which is incompatible with the Christian understanding of marriage. To equate the purpose of marriage solely with childbearing would be analogous to asserting that the purpose of human life is solely the production of material goods. While it is indisputable that such aspects enhance the human experience and render one's presence in the world more fruitful and meaningful, they do not exhaust the full purpose of human existence."*

Naturally, on this issue, the Fathers of the Church offer differing interpretations based on the New Testament. Some, such as John Chrysostom,[19] concur with the Apostle Paul's view that sexual relations within marriage are not limited to the purpose of childbearing. Others, however, such as Maximus the Confessor[20] and Gregory Palamas,[21] uphold the position that sexual union within marriage primarily serves the purpose of procreation.

Therefore, children are regarded as a blessing within marriage. Nonetheless, in the context of the New Testament, a marriage in which God does not grant children is no longer considered a disgrace or a source of reproach.

3. JEWISH LAW AND CONTRACEPTION

In the texts of the Old Testament, there is no explicit reference to contraception or abortion except the case of Onan (Genesis 38:8–10);[22] *"Onan is killed by God for practicing contraception (in this case, withdrawal) and spilling his semen on the ground"*. In contemporary times, many scholars and authorities argue that contraception –whether natural or artificial, such as abstinence during fertile periods or using pills, condoms, etc.– is permissible within Judaism, albeit under certain conditions.

At this juncture, it is important to distinguish between the various schools of Jewish thought, namely the liberal and the conservative traditions. The liberal schools generally advocate for birth control based on specific, significant reasons. Conversely, adherents of Orthodox Judaism do not unequivocally oppose contraception, though they maintain that the primary purpose of marriage is procreation. Orthodox Judaism explicitly rejects those methods of contraception that destroy sperm or obstruct its passage to the woman's womb, basing this stance on Jewish legal tradition (Halacha). According to this perspective, contraception is only permissible through certain natural methods.

Contraception is broadly permitted across the spectrum of Jewish communities, whether conservative or otherwise, under the following circumstances: (a) Where there is a risk to the woman's health due to potential pregnancy or childbirth (Genesis 9:1,7);[23] (b) where the family is unable to support a large number of children; (c) or where the couple, for serious and justified reasons, must delay childbearing. However, a deliberate refusal to have children altogether is condemned as a manifestation of selfishness.

In modern rabbinic discourse, many rabbis permit the use of the contraceptive pill, reasoning that it does not prevent the entry of sperm into the woman's body and thus the man does not sin before God (Genesis 9:1,7). By contrast, condoms are generally discouraged, as they are believed to diminish male pleasure and lead to the "wasting" of sperm-considered the seed of life. There is notable disagreement among rabbis concerning the use of diaphragms: Some deem them unacceptable for reasons analogous to those cited against condoms, while others approve their use, as the sperm still enters the woman's body.

Additionally, the Talmud, in the chapter entitled *"The Beraita of the three women"*[24] contains numerous teachings on contraception. It is noted therein that a woman may employ artificial contraceptive methods in the following cases: (a) If she is underage at the time of marriage; (b) if she has recently given birth; or (c) if she is already pregnant or in ill health.[24] Furthermore, certain Talmudic passages[25] recommend that women consume herbs that induce sterility, a viewpoint that has been interpreted as supportive of the use of oral contraceptives. According to the Tosefta Yevamot 8:4,[26] men are forbidden from using pills, herbal remedies, or undergoing surgical procedures intended to prevent the fertilization of their wives.[27] Masturbation is also condemned as a means of contraception, equated in some teachings with the severity of murder *"In BT Niddah 13ab,[28] masturbation was equated with murder, idolatry, and adultery. This extremist and ascetic text serves as a prohibition against masturbation, which was expanded to include the use of condoms and, according to some authorities, the use of a diaphragm by a woman. Today's rabbis in the era of deadly sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and some strains of hepatitis, are reluctant to allow condom use for fear that safe sex would lead to prostitution"*.[27]

In contemporary times, however, many modern or Reform Jewish communities accept contraception as a divinely sanctioned means of organizing family life within the framework of responsible family planning.[29]

4. CONTRACEPTION IN CHRISTIAN TEACHING GENERALLY

Those who maintain that the exclusive purpose of marriage is procreation, and that the marital union should exist solely for this purpose –meaning that the avoidance of procreation within the marital relationship is impermissible– generally put forward the following arguments:

(a) In the Old Testament, particular emphasis is placed on procreation, which is regarded as a blessing from God. While this is indeed true, caution is required, as the Old Testament must be interpreted theologically and, more specifically, christologically. Otherwise, its content may lead to confusion or even scandal. The emphasis on childbearing in the Old Testament was directly linked to the expectation of the coming of the Messiah, which is why barrenness was perceived as a disgrace. Furthermore, this emphasis reflected the fear of death and the absence of belief in the resurrection of the dead at that time.[30]

(b) It is also argued that God commanded the first humans, saying *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it"* (Genesis 1:28).[31] According to this view, non-compliance with this divine command constitutes a sin.

However, it is worth noting that in the Western theological tradition, particularly under the influence of Saint Augustine and other medieval Western theologians, marital relations were permitted solely as a necessary evil for the purpose of procreation. Sexual intercourse, in their understanding, was condoned only when it aimed at childbearing; otherwise, it was considered sinful. Moreover, they held that parents were responsible for transmitting original sin to their children through this "shameful" act of conception.

In contrast, Orthodox theology adopts a different approach to the Mystery of Marriage. Orthodoxy regards marriage as a sacred Mystery and does not consider the human body to be inherently evil, as is mistakenly implied in certain Western doctrines regarding marriage.

Some also cite the phrase of the Apostle Paul *"Yet she will be saved through childbearing"*.[32] If this passage is understood literally –that a woman is saved solely through procreation and bearing many children– one must consider what becomes of childless women, virgins, or those who remain unmarried. Are they condemned because they do not bear children? The Church Fathers clarify that *"salvation through childbearing"* refers to the faithful and pious upbringing of children, rather than the mere production of numerous offspring.

Moreover, as John Chrysostom[33] observes, the commandment *"be fruitful and multiply"* has already been fulfilled, for *"the whole world is filled with people"*. Additionally, it is more theologically sound to interpret this phrase as a blessing rather than a strict commandment; otherwise, we would have to regard virgins and celibates as transgressors of divine law. There also exists a theological interpretation attributing the full soteriological meaning of Paul's phrase to the person of the Virgin Mary: Through the birth of Christ from the Theotokos, womanhood was elevated and participated actively in the salvation of humanity.[34]

The aforementioned view –that the sole purpose of marriage is procreation and that marital relations should only occur to produce children– is not accepted by the Orthodox Church, nor by common sense.[35] Reducing marriage to a single dimension of procreation inevitably diminishes its overall meaning, limiting it to the carnal aspect of the marital relationship. Such a perspective is clearly incompatible with the Christian understanding of marriage as a sacred Mystery. To equate the purpose of marriage exclusively with reproduction would be akin to equating the purpose of human life solely with the accumulation of material wealth. Undoubtedly, both procreation and productivity enrich human existence and make one's presence in the world more meaningful and creative; however, they do not exhaust the total meaning and existential purpose of human life.

Consequently, procreation is neither the sole nor the absolute purpose of marriage, but rather a blessed and wondrous fruit of it, granted and sanctified by God. Holy Scripture affirms that childbearing is a gift of divine grace, as conception is granted by God.[7,8] Nevertheless, couples are called to approach the matter of procreation with theological awareness and spiritual conscience, recognizing the profound spiritual dimension of reproduction, so that their participation in this sacred act is conscious and not mechanical.

Parents must understand that by giving birth to children, they bring forth living icons of God; that through procreation, the body of the Church increases, as children become potential members of the Kingdom of God. However, the benefit of procreation depends on the quality of upbringing provided by the parents. Without proper education and spiritual formation, the mere act of giving birth is rendered meaningless. Did not Christ Himself say of Judas *"It would have been better for that man if he had not been born"* (Matthew 26:24).[36] And in the well-known parable, the rich man was one of many siblings –six brothers– yet they all ended up in a place of torment (Luke 16:28).[37]

Therefore, the value of procreation and large families does not lie in the sheer number of children, but primarily in the good and virtuous upbringing (euteknia and kaliteknía). It is not birth alone that makes one a father, but raising children rightly; nor is giving birth sufficient to make a woman a mother, but raising her children in a worthy manner (Proverbs 22:6).[38]

We must also show understanding towards couples who hesitate to have more children, citing the hardships and challenges they face. John Chrysostom[39] underlines that the decision to have children must be made freely and responsibly by the spouses themselves, considering both the spiritual and practical circumstances of their lives. Gregory the Theologian strikingly captures this balance between divine and human responsibility by saying: *"What pertains above belongs solely to God, while what is below also concerns us"*.[40]

Ultimately, human beings are called to govern their actions wisely, avoiding the pitfalls and temptations that arise from uncritical choices. Christians ought to conform to the teaching of Isidore of Pelusium, who advises: *"Do not exceed the limits of nature, nor live beyond measure"*.[41]

4.1. Christian perspectives on contraception: A comparative analysis of Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican teachings

Christian doctrines on contraception are largely derived from theological tradition rather than explicit biblical

mandates. The absence of direct scriptural guidance has led to divergent interpretations among major Christian denominations, particularly regarding the moral permissibility of birth control. Historically, most Christian traditions opposed artificial contraception until the early 20th century, but contemporary views now vary significantly between liberal and conservative factions. This paper examines the theological and ethical positions of Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Anglicanism on contraception, highlighting their doctrinal foundations, historical developments, and pastoral applications.

For nearly two millennia, Christian churches uniformly condemned artificial contraception, associating it with pagan practices and heretical movements such as Gnosticism and Manichaeism. Early Christian writers, including Augustine, viewed contraception as a distortion of natural law, arguing that sexual acts must remain open to procreation. This stance persisted through the Middle Ages and into the modern era, with Protestant and Catholic authorities alike upholding strict prohibitions.

The shift in Protestant attitudes began in the 19th century, influenced by evolving notions of individual conscience and the recognition of sex as a divine gift within marriage. By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church maintained its prohibition, while Eastern Orthodoxy adopted a more flexible pastoral approach.[42]

5. ANGLICANISM: FROM REJECTION TO ACCEPTANCE

The Church of England exemplifies the most pronounced shift in Christian attitudes toward contraception. In 1908, the Lambeth Conference denounced birth control as *"demoralizing to character and hostile to national welfare"*. However, by 1930, the same body endorsed contraception under ethical circumstances, reflecting broader societal changes and theological reinterpretations. The 1958 Lambeth Conference further affirmed that family planning decisions should be guided by the consciences of married couples, marking a decisive break from earlier rigid prohibitions.[43] Anglican theology now permits contraception within marriage, provided it aligns with Christian principles of mutual love and responsibility.[43]

This position contrasts sharply with the more restrictive doctrines of Roman Catholicism and the nuanced pastoral approach of Orthodoxy.

6. ROMAN CATHOLICISM: THE UNYIELDING PROHIBITION OF ARTIFICIAL CONTRACEPTION

The Roman Catholic Church maintains the strictest stance against artificial contraception, rooted in natural law theology and papal encyclicals. Key documents such as Casti Connubii (1930) and Humanae Vitae (1968) declare contraception *"intrinsically evil"*, arguing that it severs the inseparable connection between the unitive (bonding) and procreative (life-creating) purposes of marital sex.[44]

The Church permits only natural family planning (NFP), which relies on periodic abstinence during a woman's infertile phases. NFP is justified as aligning with natural law, whereas artificial methods are condemned for introducing a "barrier" to God's design. Despite this, surveys indicate widespread noncompliance among Catholics, with many rejecting the teaching as outdated or impractical.[44,45]

7. ORTHODOXY: A PASTORAL AND NUANCED APPROACH

The Eastern Orthodox Church adopts a more flexible stance, balancing theological principles with pastoral discretion. While artificial contraception is generally discouraged, exceptions are made for medical or socioeconomic reasons, provided the method is non-abortifacient. Unlike Catholicism, Orthodoxy does not mandate that every marital act be open to procreation, instead emphasizing the holistic purposes of sex, unitive, procreative, and protective of marital harmony.

Orthodox authorities permit natural family planning and, in some jurisdictions, non-abortifacient contraceptives, provided couples seek spiritual guidance. The Church's liturgical cycles, which include periods of prescribed abstinence, further reduce reliance on artificial methods.[14]

To sum up, the three traditions diverge significantly in their approaches to contraception: Anglicanism adopts a permissive stance that prioritizes individual conscience and the well-being of the marital relationship; Roman Catholicism maintains an absolute prohibition grounded in natural law, despite considerable dissent among the faithful; and Eastern Orthodoxy strikes a balance between doctrinal principles and pastoral care, permitting limited use of contraception under spiritual guidance.

These differences reflect broader theological priorities: Catholicism's rigid adherence to natural law, Anglicanism's adaptation to modern ethics, and Orthodoxy's emphasis on sacramental marriage and ascetic discipline. While all three traditions uphold the sanctity of life and marital fidelity, their pastoral applications of these principles reveal the dynamic interplay between theology, culture, and individual conscience in Christian ethics.

8. CONTRACEPTION, ABORTION AND SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Contraception, although traditionally regarded in both Judaism and early Christianity as sinful and prohibited by God, as mentioned above, undoubtedly serves to reduce the incidence of abortions and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. In contemporary times, it is widely acknowledged that contraception –particularly using condoms– helps to prevent unwanted pregnancies, which may pose risks to a woman's health or simply occur at a time when parenthood is not desired. In this way, preventing pregnancy spares women from having to resort to abortion. Abortion is regarded as equivalent to murder in both Judaism and Christianity, as human life is considered to possess both soul and body from the very moment of conception; *"embryos, either from conception or from implantation, are human life that is the moral equivalent of you or me, and that ought to be legally protected in the same fashion"*.[46] Using contraception, a concomitant reduction in unwanted pregnancies would, in effect, lead to a corresponding decrease in the incidence of abortions. Furthermore, contraception contributes significantly to the prevention of the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.[47]

One of the principal rabbinic sources addressing the topic of contraception is the Tosefta Niddah. Throughout Jewish history, there has been considerable debate regarding the permissibility and application of contraceptive methods. Rabbinic discourse has frequently acknowledged the legitimacy of contraception in circumstances where it serves to prevent potential harm to a woman's life. Additionally, the permissibility of contraception is grounded in the principle that women are not religiously obligated to procreate. In contrast, the Tosefta Yevamot explicitly prohibits men from engaging in contraceptive practices.[27]

Contemporary halakhic responsa on contraception have been notably shaped by the collective trauma of the Holocaust, which led to a shift in emphasis away from earlier considerations focused on women's health. Like the discourse surrounding abortion, the increased public scrutiny of contraception has coincided with efforts by certain rabbinic authorities to exert greater control over women's reproductive autonomy. The prevailing approach in modern halakhic literature on contraception tends to adopt a quantitative view of procreation, often neglecting the broader implications for women's physical and mental health, parenting capacities, professional aspirations, and socioeconomic conditions. This perspective is partially influenced by a desire to maintain traditional gender roles, particularly the idealization of women as mothers without engagement in external careers, irrespective of the changing social realities.[27]

In the context of the State of Israel, this pronatalist stance has taken on theological and political dimensions, with demographic concerns motivating efforts to increase the Jewish population relative to secular Israelis and the Arab population. Within the Diaspora, contraception is similarly framed as a response to concerns about assimilation. There exists substantial communal pressure on women to seek rabbinic approval for the use of contraception, even in cases involving child spacing, maternal health risks, congenital anomalies, or other health-related considerations.

Nonetheless, a range of leniencies has developed within halakhic practice, often transmitted through oral traditions, allowing for contraceptive use without formal rabbinic consultation. These leniencies typically apply in situations such as child spacing (particularly for one to two years following the birth of a child), prolonged use after cesarean deliveries (including permanent contraception after three cesarean sections), serious threats to maternal health, chronic exhaustion from successive pregnancies, postpartum depression, psychological distress, birth of a child requiring special care, behavioral challenges among children, recurrent births of children with disabilities, maternal instability with risks of child abuse, and severe financial hardship.

The pronatalist ideology of the Israeli state is further reflected in demographic patterns, such as Jerusalem's distinction of having the highest incidence of Down Syndrome births globally –attributable to advanced maternal age– and Israel's status as the country with the highest density of fertility clinics per capita. Concerns about ecological sustainability and global overpopulation have not significantly influenced mainstream Orthodox rabbinic perspectives on contraception.

Following the discovery of the biological mechanism of ovulation, some Orthodox Jewish women have adopted the practice of delaying ritual immersion after menstruation and the seven "clean days", thereby scheduling ovulation prior to the resumption of marital relations. This method, similar to the Catholic rhythm method, is associated with high failure rates and a reduction in sexual intimacy, including diminished fulfillment of the biblical obligation of onah, which mandates the husband's responsibility to meet his wife's sexual needs.

When rabbinic authorities permit contraception, they tend to prioritize methods generally recognized as carrying higher health risks, such as intrauterine devices (IUDs), oral contraceptives, hormonal implants, spermicides, and

barrier methods like diaphragms, typically used with spermicides. These methods are favored because they do not interfere with the act of ejaculation, instead obstructing fertilization post-coitus. In contrast, medical professionals often recommend condoms combined with spermicides as the safest contraceptive method, although this is categorically prohibited by halakhic decisors (e.g., Tendler). Consequently, Jewish women, when granted permission to use contraception, are frequently directed towards less safe options. As with abortion, increased public discourse around contraception has been accompanied by attempts from certain rabbinic authorities to assert greater control over women's reproductive rights.

Additionally, within the framework of Jewish law (Halakha), the use of condoms as a means of contraception is generally viewed unfavorably, as it is perceived to interfere with the procreative purpose of sexual relations, as it was underlined above. However, Jewish legal tradition acknowledges the paramount importance of preserving human life (pikuach nefesh) and would, therefore, permit the use of condoms when necessary to prevent the transmission of life-threatening diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and other sexual diseases. In this context, the Torah does not impose an obligation of lifelong abstinence on individuals living with such illnesses.[48]

The question of distributing condoms within educational institutions presents a more complex ethical challenge. Judaism upholds the ideal that sexual activity should occur exclusively within the sanctity of a loving and committed marital relationship, and it expresses disapproval of measures that may be interpreted as endorsing premarital sexual activity or alternative sexual practices.

Nevertheless, Jewish ethical thought recognizes the importance of harm reduction, particularly in situations where adolescents may engage in sexual behavior irrespective of normative teachings. Consequently, while abstinence and sexual responsibility are affirmed as the preferred moral standards, the provision of condoms may be reluctantly accepted as a pragmatic strategy-viewed not as an endorsement of premarital sex but as a necessary preventive measure to minimize greater harms. In such cases, it is regarded as the lesser of two evils, adopted with the primary aim of safeguarding health and human life.[49]

As far as Christianity, nowadays, many Confessions have approved contraception for health and socioeconomic reasons. For several decades, the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and the traditional confession of Protestants have consistently opposed the use of what it terms "artificial contraception", including condoms, on the grounds that such practices separate the dual purposes of sexual intercourse: The unitive (expressing love and intimacy) and the procreative (open to the transmission of life) dimensions.[50] From the Church's ethical perspective, the potential of condoms –both male and female– to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) has not been deemed sufficient justification to alter this doctrinal stance.[48]

Even with the emergence of the global HIV/AIDS pandemic, many Christian Confessions maintained their oppositions. The Orthodox Church and many Protestants in the beginning of the 1980 understood and preached that Christian Church could not impose religious prohibitions on secular societies where the primary ethical imperative is to save human lives, irrespective of individuals' moral standing or personal choices. This was something that the Roman Catholic Church started to adopt since 2005 and then.[51] Of course, it should be clarified this that the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholics and the traditional Protestants remain to their belief that Christians should not have sexual relations out of marriage, and they should be no adulterous in their marriage. In a lecture delivered at the Academy of Athens about AIDS, Professor and Academician Nikos Matsaniotis stated the following: *"The emphasis placed on condom use has diminished the importance of another, equally significant message: namely, that sexual abstinence and absolute fidelity within a monogamous relationship are not merely safer alternatives to condoms; they are completely safe. The condom, therefore, is intended for those lacking self-restraint, though it is not always a foolproof method of protection"*.[52] Such medical perspectives, advocating for abstinence, self-restraint, and marital fidelity as means of protection against AIDS, are closely aligned with the moral teachings of the Orthodox Church, expressed by the Holy Synod.[52]

Hence, it can be underlined that mainly the Roman Catholic Church has categorically and formally condemned the use of contraception and all contraceptive methods since the 1960s. This doctrinal position remained unchanged even with the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, even though condoms were promoted as a primary means of prevention, given that the virus is predominantly transmitted through sexual contact. In stark contrast to this stance of the Vatican, Lambeth fathers only explicitly sanctioned condoms for Christian use, when the serious conditions were met.[53] It did not –it does not– extend to all species of artificial contraception that have been developed since. Two further considerations render this distinction meaningful.

Concerning the Orthodox Church has never issued an equivalent absolute prohibition against the use of condoms. This does not, however, imply an explicit endorsement or

recommendation of their use. The Orthodox Church appears to adopt an approach to HIV prevention that aligns more closely with the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO), which are likewise followed by a significant segment of the scientific community. According to this approach, prevention is structured hierarchically: It prioritizes abstinence and self-restraint, followed by monogamous and faithful relationships, the reduction in the number of sexual partners, the avoidance of sexual relations with individuals who have multiple partners, and lastly, the use of condoms.[54]

While the WHO formulates this hierarchy based primarily on the criterion of the effectiveness of each preventive measure –seeking to minimize, if not eliminate, the risk of disease transmission– the Orthodox Church, although not disregarding effectiveness, grounds this prioritization primarily on theological and moral principles. According to the Church Fathers, erotic love is considered a divine gift, intended to strengthen love and unity between human beings. It is viewed as the cohesive force that sustains human relationships and fosters authentic communion between individuals. Given that human beings are psycho-somatic entities, eros is understood to encompass both a spiritual-emotional dimension and a physical, bodily union between man and woman. This union is sanctified and blessed by the Church within the sacramental context of marriage.[54]

It follows that the ethical considerations surrounding contraception, abortion, and sexually transmitted infections within Judaism and Christianity reflect a complex interplay of theological principles, moral teachings, and contemporary public health concerns. While both traditions historically opposed contraception, contemporary Jewish halakhic thought demonstrates a degree of flexibility, particularly in cases where maternal health, psychological well-being, or socioeconomic factors are at stake. Moreover, Jewish law upholds the principle of pikuach nefesh (the preservation of life), allowing for the conditional use of contraception –especially in preventing life-threatening diseases such as HIV/AIDS– while maintaining reservations about methods that interfere with procreation. In Christianity, positions diverge across denominations: The Roman Catholic Church maintains a stringent opposition to artificial contraception based on doctrinal teachings, whereas certain Protestant traditions and the Orthodox Church have exhibited more pragmatic approaches, particularly in the context of disease prevention. Notably, the Orthodox Church adopts a hierarchical model of prevention that places abstinence and marital fidelity at the forefront, but ultimately recognizes condom use as a last resort to protect life. Across these religious frameworks, the consistent emphasis remains on the sanctity of life, marital fidelity, and sexual responsibility; while differing interpretations reflect the ongoing negotiation between enduring theological doctrines and contemporary human realities.[48]

9. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the aforementioned, the issue of contraception reveals the profound theological and ethical complexities within both Judaism and Christianity. Both traditions affirm the sanctity of life and the value of childbearing as a divine blessing, yet they diverge significantly in their respective interpretations of marital purpose and the permissibility of contraception.

In Judaism, the prevailing consensus acknowledges procreation as a foundational element of marriage. However, rabbinic tradition allows for a degree of flexibility in the regulation of birth, particularly when considerations of health, economic stability, or personal well-being are at stake. The Orthodox Jewish community maintains a stricter interpretation, especially in rejecting methods that involve the destruction or obstruction of semen, while the more liberal branches accommodate modern family planning practices, interpreting these within the ethical framework of responsible stewardship of life. The Talmud's acknowledgment of cases where contraception is permissible illustrates an enduring commitment within Judaism to balancing divine commandments with human realities.

Christianity, especially within its Orthodox expression, similarly venerates procreation but frames it within a broader sacramental understanding of marriage. The Orthodox Church resists any reduction of marriage to a purely reproductive function, instead embracing a holistic view where marital union serves as a sacred path to mutual sanctification and spiritual fulfilment. This theological stance reflects the belief that marriage is a microcosm of the Church itself, where love, respect, and cooperation mirror the divine-human relationship. The Orthodox tradition, through the application of oikonomia, allows for pastoral flexibility, guiding couples to consider both their spiritual and material circumstances when making decisions about procreation.

Moreover, the rejection by Orthodox Christianity of Western theological tendencies to demonize the body or view sexuality as inherently sinful demonstrates a commitment to preserving the goodness of creation and the dignity of human intimacy. The Church Fathers consistently affirmed that marriage, sexual union, and even childbearing must be oriented towards virtuous living rather than mere biological reproduction.

A key conclusion drawn from this study is that the insistence on procreation as the sole purpose of marriage leads to a diminished understanding of the marital vocation. Both Judaic and Christian traditions, despite their differences, acknowledge that marriage involves more than biological continuation; it involves ethical responsibility, spiritual growth, and the mutual edification of spouses. The act of procreation, while sacred, is not an end but part of a larger framework of human flourishing under divine guidance.

In contemporary society, where complex socio-economic pressures, health concerns, and personal aspirations shape reproductive choices, both Judaism and Orthodox Christianity offer theological resources for discernment. While preserving core doctrines on the sanctity of life and the value of procreation, these traditions emphasize compassion, pastoral care, and moral responsibility in guiding their faithful. This study affirms that decisions regarding contraception should not be reduced to rigid legalism but approached with prayer, reflection, and guidance, always mindful of the divine purpose of marriage as a vocation of love, faith, and holiness.

Thus, both Judaism and Orthodox Christianity present a nuanced approach to contraception, upholding the dignity of life while recognizing the complexities of human existence. Their teachings underscore the importance of balancing divine commandments with pastoral care, offering a framework where ethical decision-making respects both the sanctity of procreation and the spiritual well-being of the married couple.

To conclude, the ethical discourse on contraception, abortion, and sexually transmitted infections within both Judaism and Christianity reveals a multifaceted relationship between theological doctrine, moral reasoning, and modern public health imperatives. Although both traditions have traditionally regarded contraception as morally objectionable, contemporary Jewish halakhic interpretations have evolved to allow greater leniency, particularly in circumstances where women's physical health, psychological stability, or socioeconomic conditions are at risk. Central to Jewish ethical reasoning is the principle of pikuach nefesh –the preservation of human life– which can justify the regulated use of contraception, particularly in cases aimed at preventing life-threatening illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, notwithstanding enduring concerns regarding interference with procreation. In the Christian tradition, doctrinal positions vary considerably: The Roman Catholic Church continues to categorically reject artificial contraception, maintaining a rigid doctrinal stance, while certain Protestant denominations and the Orthodox Church have adopted more context-sensitive approaches, especially in relation to disease prevention. The Orthodox Church promotes a graded model of prevention, emphasizing abstinence and fidelity as primary moral obligations, yet permitting the use of condoms under specific circumstances to safeguard human life. Despite these internal variations, both religious traditions consistently stress the sacredness of human life, the moral value of marital fidelity, and sexual responsibility, illustrating the dynamic tension between enduring theological commitments and the evolving realities of modern society.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Αντισύλληψη και αναπαραγωγική ηθική στον Ιουδαϊσμό και στον Χριστιανισμό: Ιατρικές, ηθικές και δογματικές προσεγγίσεις

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Η παρούσα μελέτη διερευνά τις σύνθετες ηθικές και θεολογικές προσεγγίσεις σχετικά με την αντισύλληψη στο πλαίσιο του Ιουδαϊσμού και του Χριστιανισμού, με ιδιαίτερη έμφαση στην Ορθόδοξη Χριστιανική παράδοση. Μέσα από συγκριτική ανάλυση ερμηνειών των ιερών κειμένων και της εξέλιξης των δογματικών θέσεων εξετάζεται ο τρόπος με τον οποίο και οι δύο θρησκευτικές παραδόσεις έχουν ιστορικά αντιμετωπίσει την τεκνογονία, τον θεσμό του γάμου και τη ρύθμιση των γεννήσεων. Στον Ιουδαϊσμό, η τεκνογονία θεωρείται θεία ευλογία. Ωστόσο, ο ιουδαϊκός νόμος επιτρέπει την αντισύλληψη υπό συγκεκριμένες προϋποθέσεις, ιδίως για την προστασία της υγείας της μητέρας ή στο πλαίσιο υπεύθυνου οικογενειακού προγραμματισμού. Οι διαφοροποιήσεις μεταξύ ορθόδοξων και φιλελεύ-

θερων ιουδαϊκών κοινοτήτων φανερώνουν την ερμηνευτική ευελιξία του ραβινικού λόγου. Αντίθετα, η χριστιανική διδασκαλία, και ειδικότερα η Ορθόδοξη Θεολογία, παρέχει έμφαση στον γάμο ως ιερό μυστήριο, αναγνωρίζοντας την τεκνογονία ως ευλογία, αλλά όχι ως αποκλειστικό σκοπό. Η πρώιμη χριστιανική σκέψη προσέδιδε ιδιαίτερη σημασία στην τεκνογονία, ενώ η σύγχρονη ορθόδοξη θεώρηση παρέχει προτεραιότητα στην ενότητα του ζεύγους, στην αγάπη και στην πνευματική ωρίμανση, παράλληλα με την τεκνογονία. Το άρθρο υποστηρίζει ότι η περιοριστική προσέγγιση του γάμου αποκλειστικά υπό το πρίσμα της αναπαραγωγής διαστρεβλώνει το θεολογικό του νόημα και υπονομεύει τη συνολική μυστηριακή του διάσταση. Μέσα από την ανάλυση των ομοιοτήτων και των διαφορών στις ιουδαϊκές και στις χριστιανικές αντιλήψεις, η μελέτη φωτίζει τη δυναμική φύση των ηθικών προβληματισμών αναφορικά με την αντισύλληψη, αναδεικνύοντας τον διαρκή ρόλο της πνευματικής διάκρισης, της ποιμαντικής καθοδήγησης και της θεολογικής λεπτότητας στην προσέγγιση της αναπαραγωγικής ηθικής και στις δύο παραδόσεις.

Λέξεις ευρετηρίου: Αντισύλληψη, Γάμος, Ιουδαϊσμός, Σύζυγοι, Τεκνογονία, Χριστιανισμός

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