

The Reconciliation of Religion and Reproductive Rights:  
Catholicism's Role in the American Abortion Controversy

**Abstract**

This project explores the cultural and cognitive effects of religious faith on psychological conception of justice in the realm of reproductive rights. For the sake of specifying my research question, I confine the scope of my research to Catholicism's influence on opinion about abortion. To further narrow the radius of my research, I restrict my context to Catholicism's influence in the United States due to the increasing attention to and division over abortion in America since Trump's election. In this paper, I draw on psychological, theological, and statistical sources to identify which conditions enable individuals to reconcile Catholic values with permission of abortion.

**Paper**

Given my personal passion for reproductive rights and the political prominence of the pro-choice v. pro-life debate, I see the topic of abortion both relevant and fascinating to study. In this research paper, I analyze the cultural and cognitive influences Catholicism may have on people's perceptions of abortion. More specifically, I aim to determine if and under which conditions individuals can psychologically reconcile Catholic doctrines to permit abortion.

To understand the framework in which Catholicism affects individuals' conceptions of abortion, I conducted preliminary research on how religion influences cognition in general. Although religion is commonly recognized as expansively influential in history and politics, it is rarely acknowledged as an influential factor in cognition.

According to a 2011 study by Shariff at the University of British Columbia, nonetheless, spirituality can have significant impacts on mental processes. Most relevant to the discussion of perception of abortion, belief in God can increase conscientious morality and increase fear of divine punishment, too. In an empirical paper, Shariff distinguishes that different conceptions of God elicit different behavioral responses. Belief in a God who punishes, for example, elicits more fear of consequence than it does interest in reward for moral behavior. Put simply, “the divine stick appears to hold considerably more power than the divine carrot”(Shariff, 2011).

Applying Shariff’s findings to my research, a potential explanation for why Catholics condemn abortion is fear of divine punishment. Regardless of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of Catholic Christianity, fearing punishment of permitting abortion is a prevalent and proven psychological phenomenon. Along with increased conscious morality and fear of divine punishment, effects religion can have on cognition include low tolerance of other opinions when doctrines are embraced in a fundamentalist manner.

Along with understanding how religion can affect cognition, it is important to identify the demographics of those analyzed to contextualize the conclusions of this research. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey of over 35,000 American residents, around 24% of Americans identify as Catholic Christians. Of Catholic Christians in the United States, 51% think abortion should be legal in at least some cases (such as rape, incest, birth defect, threat to mother’s life, etc.) according to the Public Religion Research Institute’s 2015 survey. This statistic, though surprising, is also reflected by the Pew Research Institute’s 2014 survey statistic that 48% of Catholic Christians in the United States thought abortion should be legal in at least some cases.

In the following analysis, I avoid using the popular terms “pro-choice” and “pro-life” due to their ambiguity and variability of interpretation. Rather, I distinguish between pro-abortion and anti-abortion to explicitly denote sentiments of approval or disapproval toward the moral permissibility of abortion.

The founder of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding outlines the intersectionality of culture and cognition in the abortion debate in the 2014 Huffington Post Article, “Abortion: Whose Religious Beliefs Should Prevail?” She argues that “complex moral and personal questions”(1) that determine people’s opinions on abortion can only be answered by following cultural norms and religious values. She details that questions like, “when does life begin?” and “what constitutes personhood?” are often argued by religious leaders to be not scientific but theological matters. Even within the Catholic community, however, there is a range of Catholicism’s influence on perception of abortion.

Firstly, because of its prominence as a primary driver of anti-abortion argumentation, I will analyze Catholicism’s justification for the anti-abortion perspective. Reaffirmed in recent years by Pope Francis, the Catholic Church maintains its position that life begins “from the moment of conception”(Pope Francis, 2016). Upon this Catholic foundation, prominent legal philosopher Francis Beckwith systematically proves the immorality of abortion: “The unborn entity is fully human from the moment of conception. Abortion (narrowly defined) results in the intentional death of the unborn entity. Therefore, abortion entails the intentional killing of a human being” (Christian Research Journal, p. 20).

Along with defense from prominent philosophers like Beckwith and religious leaders like Pope Francis, anti-abortion Catholics often justify their belief with scriptural citations. Excerpts

that support their argument include: “Be fertile and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), “You knit me in my mother’s womb . . . nor was my frame unknown to you when I was made in secret” (Psalm 139:13,15), “You have been my guide since I was first formed . . . from my mother’s womb you are my God” (Psalm 22:10-11), and “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17). When taken to heart in conjunction, this collection of Catholic doctrines soundly asserts the immorality of abortion. Thus, the Catholic psychological conception that abortion is immoral can be attributed to belief that life begins at conception and that killing is wrong.

Occasionally, however, even fundamentalist Catholics have trouble reconciling these two beliefs in special situations necessitating abortion. For example, even confident Catholic philosopher Beckwith reasons in a utilitarian framework that “If there is a high probability that a woman's pregnancy will result in her death (as in the case of a tubal pregnancy, for example), then abortion is justified. For it is a greater good that one human should live (the mother) rather than two die (the mother and her child)”(Christian Research Journal, p. 20).

Along with danger to the mother’s life extenuating abortion, discrepancy in how literally Catholics interpret and abide by scripture can allow room for abortion permittance. Though he did not endorse abortion by any means, Pope Francis recently granted “all priests the authority to absolve abortions”(Pope Francis, 2016). When accused of manipulating Catholic doctrines, Pope Francis defended that he was simply “extending the ability to resolve abortions ‘lest any obstacle arise between the request for reconciliation and God’s forgiveness””(NPR, 2016). Thus, although the Catholic Church maintains its opposition to abortion, extenuating circumstances, utilitarian reasoning, and looser interpretations of scripture can allow some Catholics to permit abortion and still feel absolved by God.

Further, some Catholics can even reconcile their Catholic values and support of reproductive rights to the point of calling themselves “pro-abortion.” As religious philosopher Cahn explains, “religion is rarely all or nothing.” Thus, being Catholic and being pro-abortion are not necessarily mutually exclusive if individuals prioritize some of their values over others. I was initially pessimistic about the existence of pro-abortion Catholics. After purposeful research, however, I collected a diverse array of data about the culturally and cognitively mediated ways in which some Catholics can justify support of abortion.

Beginning with illustrative individual anecdotes, I studied Catholic Priest Broderick Greer’s account of personal reconciliation. Working in a utilitarian framework, he reasons that although “defunding of Planned Parenthood may seem like a noble cause - ‘Save the babies!’ ...“it actually ends up hurting more people than it helps. While this may seem counter-intuitive to people in the anti-choice camp, abortion rates actually fell sharply in the Obama years, debunking the myth that outlawing abortion will somehow decrease abortions. As the years preceding Roe vs. Wade show us: abortions will happen, whether they are legal or not”(Greer, 2017).

Additionally, Greer took into account his personal identity and social role relationships when deciding to compromise his Catholic values to permit abortion. In a discussion with fellow cis-gendered men, Greer recounts asking himself, “Is it helpful for me - a person who will never be personally faced with the complex question of whether or not to have an abortion - to form a rigid, moralistic opinion about the matter? A resounding “No” began to voice itself deep inside of me”(Greer, 2017).

Overall, Greer serves as a memorable and illustrative example of how even devoted Catholics can permit abortion. His rationale behind supporting abortion exemplifies both cognitive and cultural reconciliation. He is able to reconcile his Catholic values and justification of abortion from a utilitarian perspective that abortion helps more than it harms. Additionally, influenced by the individualistic culture of the United States, Greer operates in a libertarian framework that the decision to get an abortion is a personal choice that women have the right to make for themselves.

Christian abortion provider Dr. Willie Parker, too, reconciled his previously fundamentalist Catholic faith with his newfound support of abortion access. As a doctor, Dr. Parker learned the personal accounts of individual patients. Operating in the deep south, Dr. Parker witnessed extensive poverty in both his patients and personal life. From a utilitarian perspective, he ultimately reconciled that abortion served the greater good by alleviating poverty as a “form of family planning”(Rolling Stone, 2017).

Along with operating in utilitarian frameworks, some Catholics permit abortion on the basis of having a different psychological conception of life. Modern philosophers Daniel Dombrowski and Robert Deltete, for example, argue that abortion does not constitute murder if life begins at birth rather than conception (“A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion”).

Broadening my scope to the institutional level, the Catholics for Choice religious coalition serves as an outstanding example of a Catholic organization able to articulate a mission statement reconciling Catholic values with support of abortion. Catholics for Choice does not lazily dismiss Catholic doctrines that condemn abortion, but rather, it values certain Catholic teachings over others to justify abortion. Central to Catholicism are the beliefs that humans can

sin, but also, that human sins can be atoned for and that free will is an essential component of humanity. According to the Free Will Theodicy, free will is essential in humanity so that we can independently forge our own paths as children of God moderated by our own consciences.

With these values in mind, the Catholics for Choice argue that “all women and men are trusted by God to make moral decisions about their lives” and the “individual conscience of each person is recognized as the keystone of moral decision making”(Catholics for Choice). Thus, their vision of a just society is one in which individual choice governs the decision to get an abortion.

Clearly, Catholicism is an influential factor in people's perceptions of abortion. Just as religion manifests itself differently in different people, however, Catholicism does not uniformly determine only one perception of abortion. For some, the Catholic doctrines that life begins at conception and that killing is wrong necessitate that abortion be condemned. For others, however, utilitarian reasoning and prioritization of free will justify abortion as permissible.

Along with dispelling the false myth that all Catholics condemn abortion, this research contributes to several ongoing conversations in the field of psychology. Firstly, adult Catholics who psychologically reconcile Catholic doctrines and reproductive rights exemplify a high degree of mental plasticity in negotiating their religious beliefs and personal opinions. Additionally, conflicting Catholic doctrines and support of abortion exemplifies a common tension between rights and duties. In the case of the Catholic debate over abortion, this tension arises between those who prioritize the right to bodily autonomy and those who prioritize the duty to defend unborn life.

In addition to contributing to popular conversations in psychology, these research findings carry immense implications in the realms of politics and reproductive rights. It is clear that our country is in a state of political division. Now more than ever, interpersonal understanding is key in bridging the many gaps we see and feel. Studying the rationale behind conflicting perceptions of abortion from a psychological perspective would serve as critical step in better understanding others' beliefs. Ultimately, respecting the validity of both pro and anti-abortion perceptions will be necessary in creating political policy that American citizens feel reflects their varied conceptions of justice.

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