

ABORTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EASTERN RELIGIONS: HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

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Abstract

Considering that contemporary society becomes increasingly pluralistic from the religious viewpoint, non-Christian religions' view on bioethical issues as abortion should concern not only historians of religions or theologians, but especially physicians. In this study, we present abortion as seen by Hinduism and Buddhism, two oriental religions comprising almost one and a half billion followers. The sacred Hindu texts that are very clear about abortion correlating it with the most grievous sins a Hindu could commit, and the doctrine regarding the karmic law and rebirth constitute the foundation of the intransigent attitude of Hinduism towards abortion. As for Buddhism, the traditional embryology and the principle of non-violence, seen by Buddhists as a way of life, determine a similar attitude concerning abortion. More than that, if a Buddhist monk even incites to abortion he is "defeated" and scourged with total exclusion from the monastic order, the severest punishment a monk can experience. Despite all these, in India, Thailand or Japan the rate of abortions is very high, a situation caused mainly by the progressive secularization of these societies, since more and more Hindus and Buddhists are excluding the religious and moral precepts from their lives.

Keywords: Abortion, Hindu bioethics, Buddhist bioethics, Hinduism, Buddhism.

Considering the fact that abortion is not just a medical or demographical issue, but especially a moral one, all major religions, regardless their origin and theology, disagree – each one of them with specific arguments – with abortion, considering it if not a homicide, at least a grievous transgression. Living in an area dominated by the Christian

paradigm, we are or we should be familiarized with the Christian attitude towards abortion. Nevertheless, nowadays society becomes increasingly pluralistic from a religious viewpoint. For this reason, non-Christian religions' view on abortion should concern not only historians of religions or theologians, but especially doctors, regarding the

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importance of the physician-patient interrelation. Considering this, we concisely present the perspective of Hinduism and Buddhism – two of the most representative eastern religions, with a number of adherents summing up a quarter of the planet population – on abortion.

1. Hindu View on Abortion

Before presenting the Hindu view concerning abortion, we have to point out that Hinduism is quite different from the western concept of religion. It is rather “*a complex set of interrelationships among many sorts of people, belief systems, and practices rather than a single uniformly structured, bureaucratically organized, and centrally codified religion*”, as John Grimes *et al.* state (2006). For this reason, some scholars suggest that it is not quite correct to speak about *the* Hindu view on a subject, but rather about *one* Hindu view, which can be divergent from *another* Hindu point of view. Therefore, they consider that Hinduism does not have a unique, static, dogmatic, and perennial view on abortion and other issues concerning bioethics (Chandrasekhar, 1994). Nevertheless, there is no evidence that Hinduism ever accepted or encouraged abortion and although sometimes it is considered that the high abortion rate of India can be explained by a permissive Hindu attitude, the statistics prove the opposite: more than 80 percents of the Indian women disapprove abortion and 56 percents consider it a heinous crime (Menski, 1996). Accordingly, the explanation for this high abortion rate might be found somewhere else, as we will see, but not in a supposed “liberal” Hindu attitude concerning this issue. In fact, abortion does not even represent a debate subject for the Hindus, as long as the sacred texts, tradition, and doctrine are very

clear in condemning it.

1.1. Abortion in the Hindu Sacred Texts

The Sanskrit terminology regarding abortion is illustrative for the classical Hindu view on this matter. While abortion is denominated by *garbhahatya* (pregnancy destruction) and *bhrūṇahatya* (foetus murder), the terms for involuntary miscarriage are *sraṁsana* and *garbhasrāva*, referring to the falling or emission of the embryo (Lipner, 1989; Chandrasekhar, 1994). This differentiated terminology is important because it suggests the moral distinction between abortion and miscarriage: while abortion implies intention and consequently responsibility for killing an embryo or foetus, the miscarriage is unintended and morally neuter.

Another suggestive Sanskrit word related to abortion is *bhrūṇahan*, meaning “the killer of an embryo” or “the killer of a learned Brahmin”. The belief that if someone kills an embryo before the sex is known, the unborn child would have been a male who could grow up, learn *Vedas*, perform sacrifices, and bring great benefits to the humans and to the gods explains the semantic linkage between killing an embryo and killing a Brahmin (Patton, 2002). This association can also be seen at a more abstract level: the sacrificial fire is considered a womb (*garbha*), as *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* states: “*Āhavanīya* [the sacrificial fire] is the womb (seat) of the gods” (12. 9. 3. 10), and as the one who lets the sacrificial fire to extinguish is also associated to the one who kills an embryo. On the other hand, the keeper of the sacrificial fire is the Brahmin and the person who kills the Brahmin produces, indirectly, the extinguishing of the sacred fire (Patton, 2002). This association also homologates

the similarity between abortion and one of the most terrible sins – if not the most terrible one – the killing of a Brahmin. All the Hindu scriptures, when referring to abortion, reflect and reinforce, directly or indirectly, this conception.

Although the *śruti* texts (the central canon of Hinduism) do not explicitly forbid abortion, they clearly postulate protection for the embryo and assert that abortion is a morally intolerable act. In the *Vedas*, the earliest Hindu scriptures, there is an indirect reference to the status of the unborn human. Vishnu is depicted as the “guardian of the future infant” (*R̥gveda* VII, 36.9) and, as Julius Lipner assumes, this educes the idea that the embryo, because of its inviolability and vulnerability, needs a special protection ensured by Vishnu, the god who was considered the protector of life and order, since the Vedic period (Lipner, 1989).

Another indication of the special status of the unborn is the multitude of rites prescribed especially by *R̥gveda* and accomplished in different moments of the pregnancy starting with conception – *Garbhādhāna* and *Garbhalambhana* rites, to ensure the blessing and the tutelage of the gods –, continuing with *Puṁsavana*, at the end of the first trimester, *Garbharakṣana*, in the fourth month, and *Jātakarma*, at the time of delivery (Laale, 1996). All these rites prove not only the special status, but also the special care that the embryo/foetus requires.

The first mention of abortion is in *Atharvaveda*. When the text speaks about passing the guilt for a lesser crime to someone who already committed a more serious sin, in an ascending order of wickedness, *Atharvaveda* states: “Enter into the rays, into smoke, O sin; go into the vapours, and into the fog! Lose thyself on the foam of the river! 'Wipet

off, O Pūshan, the misdeeds upon him that practiseth abortion!’” (VI, 113.3; VI, 112.3) [1]. Pushan who, among other attributes, is the protector of the travelers and of those who have lost their way in life, burden himself with the misdeeds of the humans. But even Pushan has to find a scapegoat to put these sins on and for this position is designated the most sinful person, namely “him that practiseth abortion”. Nobody is beneath him, a greater sinner does not exist, and the guilt cannot be transferred further (Lipner, 1989; Chandrasekhar, 1994). This text is a clear indication that in the ancient Indians’ perception abortion was the most heinous crime and the abortionist was considered a person who deserved to be burdened with the misdeeds of all humans.

In a similar sense, *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, referring to those who consume beef, says: “[...] Such a one indeed would be likely to be born (again) as a strange being, (as one of whom there is) evil report, such as ‘he has expelled an embryo from a woman’, ‘he has committed a sin’; let him therefore not eat (the flesh) of the cow and the ox [...]” (III, 1.2.21).

The *Upanishads* also condemn abortion. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, one of the oldest *Upanishads* (IX-VIII BC), referring to the state of consciousness when everything that is important for a Hindu ceases to be so, says: “Here a father is not a father, a mother is not a mother, worlds are not worlds, gods are not gods, and Vedas are not Vedas. Here a thief is not a thief, an abortionist is not an abortionist, an outcaste is not an outcaste, a pariah is not a pariah, a recluse is not a recluse, and an ascetic is not an ascetic. Neither the good nor the bad follows him, for he has now passed beyond all sorrows of the heart.” (4.3.22)

[2] The same idea is present in *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*, when Indra says: “When a man perceives me, nothing that he does – whether it is stealing, or performing an abortion, or killing his own father or mother – will ever make him lose a single hair of his body.” (3.1)

As long as we can see, although there is no explicit interdiction of abortion in *śruti* texts, this is suggested by placing the “embryo killer” along with matricides, patricides and thieves, with pariah (those without a caste) and with the most sinful and degenerated members of the society.

The prohibition of abortion is expressed more directly and explicitly in the *smṛti* texts, where are stipulated also sanctions for the abortionists. *Gautamadharmasāstra* indicates: “A woman becomes an outcast by procuring abortion, by connection with a (man of) lower (caste) and (the like heinous crimes).” (XXI, 9) and *Āpastambadharmasūtra* states: “Now (follows the enumeration of) the actions which cause loss of caste (*Patanīya*). (These are) stealing (gold) [...], homicide, neglect of the Vedas, causing abortion, incestuous connection with relations born from the same womb as one's mother or father, and with the offspring of such persons, drinking spirituous liquor, and intercourse with persons the intercourse with whom is forbidden.” (I, 7.21.7-8)

These two *dharmaśāstras* express more than disagreement towards abortion, establishing a social-religious sanction for the abortionist: the loss of caste. If we take into account that the caste determined and still determines the way of life and social status in the Hindu society, but also the eventuality of liberation from *saṃsāra*, losing the caste is one of the heaviest punishments. On

the one hand, a pariah is socially damned for the rest of his life; on the other hand, he loses any possibility of liberation in this life and very probably in many other future ones. We can realize how severe is the mistake a mother having an abortion can make, from the Hindu perspective, looking at the severity of the punishment, as it is stipulated in the traditional texts.

As long as the woman's acts penalised with the loss of the caste can be reduced to three: murdering her husband, slaying a learned Brahmin and destroying the fruit of her womb, we can conclude that for the Hindus abortion is not only a sin, but also a serious social misdeed, with important social and religious consequences.

Although *Manavadharmaśāstra* considers women that practiced abortion ones of the most degenerated members of society, the punishment for the abortionist mothers is only a religious one, forbidding the offering of water libations to them: “Libations of water shall not be offered to those who (neglect the prescribed rites and may be said to) have been born in vain, to those born in consequence of an illegal mixture of the castes, to those who are ascetics (of heretical sects), and to those who have committed suicide, to women who have joined a heretical sect, who through lust live (with many men), who have caused an abortion, have killed their husbands, or drink spirituous liquor.” (V, 89-90).

Finally, *Mahābhārata*, by counting the abortionist along with the vendor of Soma juice, the weapon-maker, the one that injured his friends, the violator of the guru's bed etc. and by associating him with the slayer of the Brahmin, makes a clear statement concerning the abortion's moral turpitude. (5, XXX).

We mentioned here only the most important *śruti* and *smṛti* texts concerning abortion, but we consider that

these are enough for depicting the classical Hindu view on abortion, as it is reflected by the sacred literature.

1.2. Conception, *Karma and Ahiṃsā*

Besides the sacred texts, Hindu arguments against abortion ground in the doctrine also. Taking into account the Hindu embryology and the belief in rebirth determined by *karma* “the foetus is not developing into a person but, rather, is already a person in the moment of conception”, as Coward and Sidhu state (2008). *Caraka Saṃhitā* and *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, the ancient medical treatises of Ayurvedic medicine, postulate that for conception to accomplish the union between biological elements is not enough but is required the intervention of a superior agent for creating a new life. *Caraka Saṃhitā* states: “The combination of sperm, ovum and life-principle implanted in the womb is known as embryo. Embryo is the product of *akasa* (ether), *vayu* (air), *tejas* (fire), *ap* (water) and *pṛthvī* (earth), being the seat of consciousness. Thus, embryo is the aggregate of the five *mahabhūtas* (elements) being the seat of consciousness which is regarded as the sixth constituent of embryo.” (Jain, 2003). It results from here that the union between spirit or life-principle (*atman*) and the biological body happens at the moment of conception and the embryo is from his very first moment an embodied soul. Because the soul enters the body along with his individual past *karma*, accumulated in the previous lives, every embryo has a unique identity, it is not only flesh from the mother’s flesh but a distinct life, with all his attributes, although yet un-manifested (Jain, 2003).

The first consequence of this perception is that abortion is associated

from the moral point of view with manslaughter. More than that, it brutally stops the unborn’s past lives karmic energy manifestation (and implicitly its consumption). Therefore, abortion affects the *atman*’s destiny, especially because once incarnated in a human being he could acquire liberation from reincarnation cycle (*saṃsāra*). On the other hand, the abortionist burden himself with negative *karma*, which will manifest in this life or in the next ones and will considerably estrange him from *mokṣa* (liberation).

Another reason for rejecting abortion is the Hindu principle of “non-killing” or “non-violence” (*ahiṃsā*) since abortion is a violent act towards a human being yet unborn. Although *ahiṃsā* does not have the same extent as in Buddhism and Jainism, many Hindus interpret it as an interdiction of killing vulnerable beings, among which we can count the human embryo or foetus, while some others consider *ahiṃsā* in a positive way, as a duty to protect life, inclusively the life of the foetus. Anyway, despite these interpretations, the result is the same: abortion is an infringement of the principle of non-violence.

1.3. Abortion: A Social and/or a Moral Concern?

It can be argued that the three “pure” castes’ special care for the human unborn is grounded in the social and religious male offspring need. Socially speaking, they ensure family’s continuity, at maturity they will take over and continue their father’s occupation and will economically support the entire family. As for their religious role, once boys reach maturity they will accomplish domestic rites but especially the compulsory libations for the spirits of the ancestors (Lipner, 1989; Damian, 2007).

Considering these, it is assumed that for Hindus abortion represents rather a violation of social than religious principles, the sacred texts mentioned above being interpreted as an interdiction only for the three pure castes – the only ones that have access to the sacred literature – and not for the *śūdras* or the outcastes (Chandrasekhar, 1994). From this point of view, the main reason of condemning abortion is not the moral concern – the respect for the life of an unborn person –, but a social one: it imperils the stability and preservation of the social order and structure.

Before accepting this statement as definitive, we should consider that in *dharma* the social and moral principles are inextricably intertwined. Where *śruti* and *smṛti* texts speak about abortion, they place it along with grievous social misdeeds, which simultaneously incur a strong moral reproof. As Julius Lipner indicates (1989), abortion is considered abreast with drunkenness, incest, and the illicit miscegenation of the castes, which are mainly social transgressions, but it is also listed with unchastity, thieving, violating guru's bed, and especially with killing, matricide, patricide, or killing in general, which are moral and religious transgressions. The same author considers that the interdiction of burning the pregnant wife on the husband's funeral pyre (*sati*) implies that the moral status of the unborn is not the subject of social demands. Even the terminological difference between abortion and miscarriage denotes that abortion is primarily a moral transgression. Simultaneously, despite of socially stigmatized life and exclusion from caste, abortion is never recommended in case of the pregnancy resulted from illegitimate intercourse of different castes' members (*pratiloma*). For instance, although *Manavadharmaśāstra* (X) harshly

condemns such relations, it also elaborates rules of life and conduct in order to include such persons into the Hindu social system, and it never recommends abortion to save them from a life of sufferings and harshness.

We can conclude that from the Hindu point of view, abortion is both a moral and social transgression. It seems that there is a single situation when traditional Hinduism finds abortion morally acceptable: when the life of the mother is in peril. In the chapter *Chikitsasthana* of *Sushruta Saṃhitā*, Sushruta considers that the doctor who assists at birth must act with respect and care both for mother and foetus, but the same text stipulates that "it is best to cause the miscarriage of the foetus, for no means must be neglected which can prevent the loss of the mother" (Lipner, 1989; Chandrasekhar, 1994; Jain, 2003). This perception characterised the Hindu medicine until modern times and it seems that saving the mother's life is the only situation when Hinduism accepts abortion. Nevertheless, in contemporary India, confronted with serious public health problems, uncontrollable population growth rate, and large-scale of illegal abortions, abortion has been legal since 1971. *Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act* allows abortion if the continuance of the pregnancy involves a risk to the life of the pregnant woman or will injury her physical or mental health, if the child will suffer physical or mental abnormalities or the pregnancy is caused by rape or the failure of a birth control device. In many of its points, this law estranges itself from the traditional Hindu view on abortion and a direct consequence of this is that many traditionalist Hindus strongly disapprove it, the perception of the large Hindu population being still grounded in the religious attitude towards abortion.

Nevertheless, it seems that the numbers do not reflect this attitude: at the end of the 80s, the number of abortions reached 3.9 million and about 11 million nowadays (Sharma, 2005; Tribe, 1992). We consider that the argument of a fundamental difference between ideal and what is permitted or accepted in Hinduism, between the conduct of the saint and the one of the ordinary Hindu eludes that from a moral and religious traditional point of view Hinduism never accepted abortion. The explanation for this high rate of abortions might rather be found in the economical and social circumstances of contemporary India that make material concerns to have the precedence in the Hindus' life, and not in a supposed moral dichotomy of Hinduism, which clearly expresses against abortion.

2. The Buddhist View on Abortion

If Buddhism did not yet assess an official opinion concerning issues as assisted suicide, organs transplant, stem cells research etc., it pronounces very clear towards abortion, considering the deliberate termination of a pregnancy a homicide. Therefore, Buddhism strongly disagrees with and, with few exceptions, morally condemns abortion. Such an attitude has a triple ground: first, the Buddhist doctrine about the identity and constitution of the human being, *karma*, rebirth and, the most important one, the moment when the human person begins to exist; second, the Buddhist ethics, especially the first precept of the moral conduct, *ahiṃsā*, a compulsory moral commandment both for monks and for laymen; third, there are the monastic rules that clearly forbid abortion. Starting from these three points, in the next pages we will synthesize the main Buddhist arguments against abortion.

2.1. The Traditional Buddhist embryology – an argument against abortion

At the fundamental question: “When does life begin?”, Buddhism answers very clearly: at the right moment of conception. Conception is considered the natural process that takes place when three conditions are fulfilled: there is an intercourse, the woman is in the fertile period and a “spirit” or deity (Sanskrit: *gandharva*; Pali: *gandhabba*) is present. *Majjhima Nikāya*, one of the earliest Buddhist texts states: “It is by the conjunction of three things that conception comes out. If there is coitus of parents but if that is not the mother’s period and if there is no presiding deity of generation (*gandhabba*) present, – then no conception takes place. Or if there be coitus of parents at the mother’s period but with no presiding deity present, – again there is no conception. But if there be a conjunction of all three factors, then and only then does conception take place.” (I, 266)

As for *gandhabba* entities, in the Indian pre-Buddhist mythology these were a kind of semi-gods somehow similar in characteristics with the Christian angels. Buddhism took over the belief in these entities and considered them reincarnations of the persons who fulfilled only the minimum moral precepts. Later on, the term received some other meanings, as the intermediary state between death and a new incarnation (in Mahayana Buddhism), or the consciousness of the dead person that endeavours to rebirth (in Theravada Buddhism) (Buswell, 2004; Harvey, 2000). For this reason, some authors interpreted the text from *Majjhima Nikāya* as a reference to a consciousness, which is looking to incarnate in the moment of conception. Therefore, the consciousness is not an emergent

propriety of the embryo developing process, but one of the necessary conditions of coming into being and formation of the embryo (see *Digha Nikāya* II, 62-63). After conception, the material and spiritual constituents of the new being inextricably unite “as a mixture of milk and water” and remain united until they are again separated by death (Keown, 2005). *Vinaya Piṭaka* states very clear that “[h]uman being means: from the mind’s first arising, from (the time of) consciousness becoming first manifest in a mother’s womb until the time of death, here meanwhile he is called a human being” (III, 73). Therefore, as Shoyo Taniguchi suggests, “there is no qualitative difference between an unborn foetus and a born individual” (Florida, 1991).

Another argument against abortion is that since the embryo assumes shape around an entity which already passed through different previous lives, it is just a continuation of life and not a new one. Although this entity cannot be exactly considered a “soul”, Buddhist texts speak about intermediate stages, which make the karmic transition from one life to another. For instance, the Yogācāra and Sarvāstivāda Buddhist schools consider that *viññāna* (pāli: *viññāna*) – the consciousness – lays in an intermediary state between two incarnations until it will be present and participate in conception. By its presence, consciousness joins and at the same time is the ground for the other four aggregates (Sanskrit: *skandhas*, Pali: *kandhas*): matter or form, sensation, perception and mind that form the human being from the very moment of conception (Bernhart, 1998; Buswell, 2004; Florida, 1991; for Buddhist anthropology see: Achimescu, 1999). Despite the fact that this intermediary state of consciousness is still in debate in

the Buddhist circles, it is still widely accepted the belief that a kind of vital continuity between the previous and the next reincarnation exists. The conviction that life precedes the moment of conception derives from this belief. [3]

There are Buddhists who accept abortion invoking that the five aggregates that constitute the human being are gradually acquired and they increasingly develop. For instance, the second aggregate, of sensation (*vedanā*), is missing as long as the central nervous system is not formed yet. The argument is that as long as the embryo does not possess all the five aggregates (some of them physically manifested), it cannot be considered a human being. On the contrary, the orthodox Buddhist tradition clearly stipulates that the five aggregates are present from the moment of conception, the first moment of the complete human being. The moment when central nervous or sanguine systems develop is not very important, as long as the embryo has all the five aggregates, although yet un-manifested. Further, according to the doctrine of reincarnation, the embryo is not just a “potential person” who arises from nothing but also an entity which carries along the karmic energy of a recently deceased person. Of course, the shape of the body changes through rebirth, but the body is in a continuous change anyway. The person at the moment of conception is the same with the born one, only in an incipient stage of development (Keown, 2005; Tsomo, 2006).

According to this Buddhist perception of the embryo as a human being *in nuce*, abortion is clearly considered a homicide and an infringement of the first Buddhist precept of moral conduct: the non-violence (*ahiṃsā*).

2.2. Buddhist Ethics' View on Abortion

The essence of the Buddhist ethics is synthesized in the first five moral precepts (*pañcasīla*) compulsory for all Buddhists, laypersons and monks: to abstain from taking life (killing), from taking what is not given (stealing), from sexual misconduct, from false speech (lying) and from drinks that cause heedlessness. The first of these precepts is the most important one and it refers to the interdiction of killing not only human beings but also animals, regardless their size. [4] As Karma Lekshe Tsomo suggests (2006), the emphasis on this interdiction can be explained by the fact that taking life causes suffering, because every living being cherishes its own life and wants to avoid dying. Moreover, taking life interrupts the being's life cycle and migration within the cyclic existence. Further, killing a living being is a "grievously unwholesome action" for the one who kills.

Considering the embryo a fully human being, Buddhism considers abortion an infringement of this essential moral precept. A living being is anything which has *pāṇa* (Sanskrit: *prāṇa*), life and breath or "breath of life", equivalent of metabolism. Consequently, abortion, which is the killing of a human being, represents the grievous sin a Buddhist could commit and for this reason it implies a terrible moral burden, which affects not only the present life of the foetus and of the responsible ones but also the next rebirths. Taking into account that every act or intention from the present life influences both this and the future lives identities and circumstances, the mother, the abortionist, and the person that should be born estrange themselves from enlightenment and sink more deeply into the suffering chain of reincarnations

(Tsomo, 2006; Keown, 2005; Florida, 1991).

Another reason that explains Buddhist disapproving attitude concerning abortion is that the human life, with its moral and spiritual development potential and eventually enlightenment is considered a rare and precious opportunity in the long succession of reincarnations. For the unborn human being this opportunity is destroyed through abortion. Although it can be naively argued that abortion represents only a delay of a rebirth that could happen later on, in another time, from another parents, and with a different body, the karmic law will work. The embryo/ foetus will experience anger and anxiety in the moment of abortion, which will negatively affect his *karma*, and therefore his next reincarnation might not be as auspicious as the one that has been brutally interrupted (Harvey, 2000; Tsomo, 2006).

Besides killing a human being, abortion implies some other grievous sins for the mother, as greed, hatred and delusion. The greed represents a passionate attachment and determines the persons who decide to abort to consider only their own interests and comfort. Hatred manifests in the attitude towards the foetus that is considered a cause of discomfort, and motivates the decision to eliminate him. Delusion leads to denying that the foetus is a living being and to the idea that "I" own the foetus and "I" do what I want to do, in the context in which Buddhism speaks about "non-self" (Sanskrit: *anātman*; Pali: *anattā*) (Florida, 1991). Anyway, the next lives of the abortionists will be full of distress and torments. A *Jātaka* story (V, 269) shows that they are going to hell, together with the matricides and adulterers, and a poem from *Petavatthu* (I, 6, 7) speaks about two women who caused abortion to

another woman and reborn as ill-smelling ghosts who devour their own children (Harvey, 2000). Beyond the “frightening” role of these stories for the simpleminded adherents, they illustrate the general Buddhist perspective on abortion as a grievous sin with very serious consequences.

While the Western debate concerning the mother’s right to decide on her own body and the foetus’ life implicitly is still in progress, the Buddhist viewpoint is clear: the mother is not the owner of the being she wears in her womb. This being is a different person since the very moment of conception, having his own identity and being distinct from the mother’s body. On the contrary, the Buddhist texts praise the kindness of the woman who suffers the pain of delivery, gives birth, and bears the burden of raising a child, but never assert mother’s propriety right on foetus. On the other hand, what Buddhists are looking for is the self-improvement and self-renunciation by following the path of Buddha. This implies rejecting greed, hatred and delusion, and embracing kindness, selflessness, and self-control on the path of wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) (Harvey, 2000; Tsomo, 2006; Florida 1991).

2.3. Buddhist Attitude towards Abortion Reflected in the Texts of the Monastic Rules

The old scriptures of Theravada do not explicitly prohibit abortion. For sure, this does not mean a tacit acceptance. The first explicit forbiddance of abortion is in *Vinaya Piṭaka*, a conduct code for monks and nuns. This text strictly prohibits monks’ (*bikkhu*) and nuns’ (*bikkhuni*) involvement in practicing abortion and stipulates punishments for those who would infringe this rule (Perrett, 2000). The text states:

“Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life or should look about so as to be his knife-bringer, or should praise the beauty of death, or should incite (anyone) to death, saying, ‘Hullo there, my man, of what use to you is this evil, difficult life? Death is better for you than life’, or who should deliberately and purposefully in various ways praise the beauty of death or should incite (anyone) to death: he also is one who is defeated, he is not in communion” (III, 73). The text also explains what defeated means: “just as a flat stone which has been broken in half cannot be put together again, so the monk who has intentionally deprived a human being of life is not a (true) recluse, not a (true) son of the Sakyans, and is therefore called one who is defeated” (III, 74). Taking into account that the same text speaks about the moment when the life of a human being starts and when it ends (see III, 73 *supra*), the interdiction of killing or inciting to kill can be interpreted as encompassing the interdiction to abort, practice abortion, or instigate to abortion.

The same monastic rules underline the importance of intention in reference to abortion. Therefore, if an unfaithful wife asks a monk for an abortive preparation, he gives it to her, and the child dies, the monk is defeated. If a wife asks for an abortive potion for her rival wife and the child dies, the monk is defeated. If the mother dies but not the child, the monk is not defeated and his sin represents only a grave offence, taking into account that the intention was to kill the baby, not the mother. (See forth *Vinaya Piṭaka* III, 83-84) This account on intention is important first because it makes the difference between abortion and miscarriage, and second, it makes abortion mainly a moral decision.

These directions are addressed to the monks because, as Damien Keown

considers (2005), they usually were counselors and confidants of the families. Therefore, they were frequently informed about unwanted or illegitimate pregnancies and were asked for solutions. According to the text we have mentioned, the monk who practices or incites to abortion is “defeated”. This is the most severe punishment a Buddhist monk could get and consists in his banishment from the monastic community (*sangha*) for good.

2.4. Circumstances When Buddhism Agrees Abortion

In some cases, Buddhism allows abortion. For example, when abortion is induced for saving the mother’s life. The fact that the sacred texts do not mention anything about therapeutic abortion is interpreted as an implicit acceptance. A similar attitude concerns with the pregnancy resulted from sexual assault, although the mother who carries on such a pregnancy from compassion for the child obtains many merits (Harvey, 2000). The Buddhist has a different attitude in situations when the foetus is diagnosed with severe physical or mental disabilities: the handicap is a manifestation of the child or parents’ *karma* and therefore abortion is unacceptable. Another reason for this attitude is the humanitarian one. Shoyo Taniguchi rhetorically asks: “Which is more qualified as a human, a severely handicapped person full of loving-kindness (*mettā*) or an Olympic gold medallist full of jealousy and greed?” (Harvey, 2000). Buddhism adopts the same attitude when abortion is motivated by parent’s or single mother’s economical difficulties.

3. Conclusions: Abortion – Between Natural Law and Secularization

First, leaving aside the specific doctrinal arguments, we can notice that the Hindu and Buddhist attitude towards abortion is quite similar to the Christian one: the embryo/foetus requires respect, has the right to live, abortion is associated with homicide or infanticide, the abortionist will suffer serious consequences in this life or in the other(s) etc. From a theological point of view, this identity of opinions is explainable and very natural. Just as manslaughter, theft, rape etc. were always and in all places banned because all human beings “shew the work of the law written in their hearts” (Rom. 2, 15), so it is abortion for all who “do by nature the things contained in the law” (Rom. 2, 14), abortion is associated with homicide and represents a transgression of the natural moral law, this fundamental moral code of the humankind.

Second, it seems that the increasing of global abortion rate contradicts the previous statement. Indeed, if we refer only to countries with preponderant Hindu or Buddhist population, in India are performed about 11 million abortions every year; in Thailand, a Buddhist country where abortion is illegal and are imposed strict penalties – prison and fine for the mother and the abortionist – the statistics register an abortion ratio of 19.5 per 1000 births; in Japan it is almost the same situation, except that here abortion is legal. We consider that these data do not contradict our last statement. If Hinduism and Buddhism might be considered preservers of the natural moral law because of their moral precepts, both begin to lose more and more from their influence in the lives of their adherents. In the order of life priorities, the moral principles are moved on the second plan or further or even

totally eliminated. We consider that this phenomenon can be explained by the progressive secularization of the East, which inverts the natural values scale. The Western civilization is an illustrative precedent regarding the individual and society's progressive estranging from religion which causes losing of the life-guiding moral principles. Therefore, we can assert that the rate of abortions and

the easy acceptance of abortion by a society is directly proportional with the secularization degree of that society, because the secularized individuals live only for now and here and only to achieve their economic or social objectives, and they are willing to sacrifice not only their religious beliefs and principles, but also the life of an unborn human being.

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Notes

1. See *Hymns of the Atharva-Veda*, translated by Maurice Bloomfield, *Sacred Books of the East*, 42, 1897; Ralph T. H. Griffith translates “wipe woes away upon the babe-destroyer”, inducing rather the idea of infanticide.
2. See *The Early Upaniṣads*, annotated text and translation by Patrick Olivelle, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998. Max Müller translates “a murderer not a murderer” but in the note he mentions the original Sanskrit term *bhrūnahān*. For this reason, the text might be read “a murderer of a Brahmin is not a murderer of a Brahmin” or “the slayer of the embryo no longer a slayer of the embryo”, as Julius Lipner does.
3. This is a very simplified perspective, as long as the discussion concerning the existence of a principle that transmigrates is a very complex one. For a critical analysis, see M. G. Barnhart, p. 280-288.
4. In the Buddhist thought there is the idea that the gravity of killing a living being is directly proportional with the size and complexity of the victim. Therefore, it is less serious to kill a mosquito than a dog, a dog than an elephant, and an elephant than a human being. This way of seeing things is explained by the fact that a stronger intention is necessary to kill a dog than a mosquito, or a man than an elephant. Considering this, those Buddhists who accept abortion argue that if it is induced in the incipient development stage of the embryo abortion produces less negative *karma* than if it is performed in the later stages. See P. Harvey, p. 316-318.