



Abortion Rights
Coalition of Canada

Your
Voice for Choice

Coalition pour le droit à
l'avortement au Canada

Canada's only national political pro-choice advocacy group

POB 2663, Station Main, Vancouver, BC, V6B 3W3 • info@arcc-cdac.ca • www.arcc-cdac.ca

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The Catholic Church and Abortion

Introduction

Of all the religions, Catholicism is the most commonly associated with being fervently anti-abortion. While other religions are partially or wholly against abortion,¹ it is the Catholic Church one first thinks of in Canada, quite possibly due to the prevalence of this religion in the country, especially historically-Catholic Quebec. According to the 2016 Statistics Canada National Household Survey, there are 12,810,705 Catholics in Canada, the largest group in the Christian category by half, and the largest religious group overall.²

The Catholic Church and Abortion

Most people likely believe that the Catholic Church has always been strictly against abortion and that they have always argued that life begins “at the moment of conception”.³ In truth, the total ban on abortion as advocated by the Catholic Church (currently) is to prevent the possibility of taking an “ensouled” life (ensoulment is the concept of when a “person” has received their soul).

Ensoulment was never historically considered to happen at “the moment of conception”. In fact, before 1869 (when Pope Pius IX’s papal bull *Apostolicae Sedis Moderationi* was issued), there were two dominant Catholic views on abortion: Thomas Aquinas’ argument that ensoulment occurred 40-80 days after conception, and the pastoral argument that ensoulment happened at “quickening”. Prior to 1869, abortion of an embryo/fetus prior to ensoulment was considered a sin along the lines of

¹ The Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodoxy, and Classical Hinduism are strongly opposed to abortion, as are other Christian religious sects, such as the Baptists. Other religions believe in “personhood” at a specific stage of gestation, or are not strict regarding whether abortion is wrong or not.

² Statistics Canada. *2011 National Household Survey: Data tables – Table Directory*. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Dir-eng.cfm> Data Table: 99-010-X2011-32. Of the 32,852,320 who answered, 22,102,745 were Christians (with Catholics being 12,810,705 of this group). The second largest group was No Religious Affiliation at 7,850,605.

³ While the “moment of conception” argument is often taken by those who would never choose abortion (and most people accept this opinion as valid), scientifically speaking there is no “moment”, as fertilization of a zygote is a 24-hour process.

masturbation and contraception, not a sin requiring excommunication, such as the murder of a person (which it is today).⁴

Not all those who identify as Catholic believe the same as the upper echelons of the church – in fact, a great number of Catholics in the UK and US believe that the right to choose should fall to the woman (or transgender person).⁵

Today in Canada

In Canada, while Catholicism is still the most prevalent religion, it is possible the lack of formal attendance at church contributes to the pro-choice attitude of the country as whole. In Quebec, 75% identify as Catholic, but only 11% attend as regular worshippers.⁶ The social shifts since WWII towards atheism, divorce, premarital sex, women working outside the home, and LGBT rights has likely caused even those who identify as religious to become more secular and open to other lifestyles and viewpoints, especially in terms of how these topics are considered in their nation from a legal and political standpoint. Most people are content to keep a “live and let live” mentality when it comes to controversial issues, at least when it pertains to those outside their family.

Interestingly, while religious affiliation has been dropping over the years, a 2015 study showed that the decline was in plateau, due to the increase in immigration from religious countries.⁷

Conclusion

While ARCC supports everyone’s right to religious freedom, approaching abortion from a religious (and specifically Catholic) viewpoint is problematic legally and scientifically. As Canada is a secular country, Papal bills and religious beliefs should be respected as personal choices but not the basis of public policy.

⁴ Pollitt, Katha. *Pro: Reclaiming Abortion Rights*. New York: Picador. 2014.

⁵ The Independent, Most UK Catholics support abortion and use of contraception. Sept 18, 2010. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/most-uk-catholics-support-abortion-and-use-of-contraception-2083291.html> (7/10 British Catholics believe women should have the right to choose.)

Gallup. Catholics Similar to Mainstream on Abortion, Stem Cells. March 30, 2009. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/117154/catholics-similar-mainstream-abortion-stem-cells.aspx> (40% of American Catholics also believe abortion is morally acceptable.)

⁶ M.D. and Erasmus. Why Francophone Canada is so post-Catholic a place. *The Economist*. Sept 23, 2016. <https://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2016/09/quebec-and-catholicism>

⁷ Hutchins, Aaron. What Canadians really believe: A surprising poll. *MacLeans Magazine*. Mar 26, 2015. <http://www.macleans.ca/society/life/what-canadians-really-believe/> (“One in every two immigrants to Canada between 2001 and 2011 was either a Catholic or a Protestant.”)