Christian Moral Teaching on Sex, Family and Life

Richard Swinburne

As we all know, traditional Christian teaching on many moral issues, but in particular on sex, family, and life is regarded by all non-religious and some religious believers as totally and evidently mistaken. Of the issues in this area, I shall take time to consider and only very briefly the issues of adultery, divorce, fornication, homosexual sexual acts, contraception, abortion, suicide and euthanasia, all which have been declared morally wrong by traditional Christian morality; and also the traditional teaching that the husband is head of the family, and so wife and children have an obligation to obey him. My main concern will be with the general principles for determining whether and why traditional Christian teaching on these issues is correct, rather than with the particular solutions to each issue. In this paper I seek to analyse the general structure of any plausible defence of traditional views on these issues. All arguments begin from premises, and my arguments in this paper begin from many premises, some of them much disputed. They are however all premises which can themselves be defended by arguments quite independent of the issues of the present paper; and I have myself tried to defend all of them at some time or other. So here are my premises:

1. The fundamental moral principles are necessary truths, independent of the existence, nature or will of God; and many of them are discoverable by humans. These principles are principles about which states of affairs are intrinsically good, and which actions are morally good, and which among the latter are moral obligations (or duties). (Actions which we have an obligation not to do I call 'negative obligations' or 'wrong' actions.) Moral obligations are always one person's obligations to someone else (one cannot have obligations to oneself); and positive obligations arise only from commitments made by someone – explicitly or implicitly, or benefits received by them.
2. There is a fundamental moral principle that beneficiaries have an obligation to please their benefactors, and to please them to a greater degree, the greater the benefit. If the

beneficiary is able either to accept or reject the gift, he or she must accept it before the obligation arises. But if the beneficiary is not in this position, then if the gift is an evidently good gift, the obligation still arises. Hence the obligation on children to please their nurturing parents who have given them much love and care, sustanance and education long before the children were in a position to accept or reject these gifts. An obligation to a benefactor includes an obligation to treat the gift with respect and use it only for the kinds of purpose for which – explicitly or implicitly - it was given. Hence if an aunt gives a child a new dress for Christmas, the child has an obligation not to cut it up and make a different dress from it. This obligation remains, whether or not the child likes the dress; yet if she doesn't like the dress, it may be that she does not have an obligation to wear it.

3. God is our creator; and everything we are and have is a gift from God, except those few gifts given to us by others, principally our parents, whose ability to give their gifts is itself a gift from God. Hence we have an enormous obligation to please God which -given premise (2)- includes an obligation to treat his gifts to us with respect, and to use them only in the ways which – explicitly or implicitly – God has laid down. God's instructions for the use of his gifts are commands.
4. God does only good actions, actions for which there is a reason. Hence he will only command some action which it is good that he should command.
5. God has reason to command us to do actions which are obligatory or forbid us to do actions which are wrong for reasons independent of whether he has commanded or forbidden them. I will call such actions intrinsically obligatory or wrong. The reason may be either to inform us of obligations which we have not discovered, or to draw our attention to obligations of which we are aware and so to put pressure on us to conform to them. For one or other of these reasons parents often tell their children to do what they are obliged to do anyway.

6. God, like any other benefactor such as parents or the state, has reasons also to command humans to do actions which would not otherwise be obligatory. These reasons include (A) coordinating imperfectly obligatory actions so as to ensure the realization of a good overall goal. This may involve telling different humans to do different actions. God may tell Jonah to preach to Nineveh, and some other prophet to preach to Babylon and so on, in order to ensure that his message is heard everywhere. Otherwise all the prophets might preach to Nineveh, and Babylon and other cities would not then hear the message. But coordination may require instead everyone doing the same action, when many other incompatible actions would be equally good - so long as everyone did them. God may tell all Christians to worship together each week on a Sunday rather than on a Thursday, in order to ensure that the Christian community worship together. (By 'imperfectly obligatory actions' I mean actions of a kind such that there is an obligation to do some action of that kind, but not an obligation to do any particular action of that kind.)

The reasons also include (B) getting humans to do actions of a kind which would be good only if many similarly positioned humans did the same actions. It is only good to fight for your country in a just war, if you have some prospect of success; and that will be the case only if many others of your countrymen do the same. If there are not many volunteers, the state will need to impose conscription, and so make many others obliged to fight. In due course I shall suggest cases where God needs to impose obligations for such a reason.

The reasons also include (C) getting us - for our sake - into the habit of doing more than we are obliged. Getting people to do what would otherwise be supererogatory for the above or any other reasons serves the additional good purpose of beginning to make them naturally good people. Parents rightly try to get their children into habits of doing more for family, neighbours, and others than they are strictly obliged to do. They want their children for their childrens' sakes to be naturally good people. So too does God, and God who wants the very best for us wants us to be saints. It seems to me that the command of Jesus to the

rich young man to ‘sell what you own, and give the money to the poor’ (Mark 10:17-27) is designed to serve that purpose. And whenever God commands individuals or particular groups to do actions for any of the previous reasons, there is the additional good that the individual or group is selected for a special task. To be selected by the commander for a particular role in his plan is always a privilege.

7. Jesus Christ was God incarnate, and for that reason his teaching about important moral issues is true. He founded a church to interpret and develop that teaching; and so ensures that any virtually unanimous church teaching on such issues is also true. That teaching may include teaching both about which are the fundamental principles, and about what are the actions which become obligatory in virtue of God's existence or command.
8. That teaching is included in the Bible as interpreted and developed by the Church, and perhaps also – if it does not conflict with the Bible – in some extra-biblical teaching.
   The Church which authenticated the Bible as God’s revelation had for the first 1400 years of its existence certain rules for interpreting the Bible, in particular in respect of its moral teaching. One such rule, stated by Augustine is ‘to recognise that some commands are given to all in common, others to particular classes of persons’ (*De Doctrina Christiana* 3.17.25). A second rule is that – as the Bible itself declared – the Apostles inspired by the Holy Spirit declared that the whole Mosaic law no longer applies (Acts 15:5, 19-20, 28-29). The only part which remained was ‘that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.’ So any part of Old Testament teaching which could be regarded as Mosaic Law no longer applies. Appeals to the Bible for moral teaching must therefore normally rely on the New Testament. A third rule was Augustine’s rule that ‘whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as metaphorical’ (*De Doctrina Christiana* 3.10.14). This rule assumes that the Christian reader comes to the text with a prior understanding of what constitutes ‘purity of life or soundness

of doctrine', that is that the Bible must be interpreted in the light of the Church's prior understanding of these things. So we who come to the text must understand it in the same way, that is in the light of any understanding we may have of which passages were seen as the key to interpreting other passages, and any knowledge we may have of the Church's understanding of 'purity of life, or soundness of doctrine' apart from that recorded in the Bible. Although this third rule, unlike the previous one , is not itself contained in the Bible, it seems a natural one to use – since the Church selected which books should be part of the Bible partly on the basis of their conformity to a prior understanding of the Christian message. And since it was for the first timeonly in AD361 that any list of the books of the Bible identical to that of today's churches was compiled by any church authority[1], Christians of the first three and a half centuries would not without such prior understanding have had the materials whence to draw out a full understanding of the Christian message.

So given my eight premises including these rules for determining the content of Christian teaching, I now apply them to the issues which I have listed, on which traditional Christian views hold that some action is wrong (or obligatory), while secular morality denies that. I begin by asking whether any of the actions traditionally forbidden are intrinsically wrong. In my view only adultery, late abortion, suicide and so euthanasia are intrinsically wrong.

Adultery is condemned by the seventh of the Ten Commandments and the condemnation was reinforced by the clear implications of the teaching of Jesus.[2] I understand by 'marriage' a union of a man and a woman who have solemnly promised life-long fidelity to each other; and by 'adultery', sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, at least one of whom is married to someone else without that other spouse's permission. This is clearly a breach of that solemn promise, and for that reason manifestly wrong. And even much secular morality will agree with that. For the same reason divorce (with remarriage) without mutual consent would be wrong; secular morality however on the

whole allows this. The recipient of a promise can always release the promiser from their obligation to keep the promise; and so intercourse outside marriage with the consent of the other spouse cannot be wrong for this reason; but if divorce with remarriage is wrong for some other reason, as I shall be arguing in due course, such intercourse will be wrong for the same reason.

I now turn to abortion. Whether abortion is condemned in the Bible depends on how various texts are interpreted. The Septuagint translation of Exodus 21:22-3 claims that if an embryo is aborted by people fighting causing a miscarriage in a pregnant woman, then 'life is given for life' if the embryo is formed; in other words a late abortion constitutes a serious wrong deserving capital punishment. The Hebrew does not however carry any such implication. The condemnations of φαρμακία (the practice of giving drugs) in Galatians 5:21, φάρμακα (drugs) in Revelation 9:21, and φαρμακοί (those who administer drugs) in Revelation 21:8 and 22:15 may well have abortifacients in mind. Abortion at any stage of pregnancy was condemned by unanimous Christian teaching from the earliest Fathers (*Letter of Barnabas* 19:5) until the last century, and so may reasonably be held to constitute central Christian teaching. Once a foetus is a particular human being, then abortion is killing that individual. Killing another human except to save some other human life, or perhaps as punishment for killing, is also – I suggest – intrinsically wrong. This killing is wrong for the reason developed by Don Marquis, that it deprives the aborted human foetus of 'a future like ours'.[3] The fact that the foetus, like any person in a coma, is not currently mentally or physically competent is not relevant. But everything now turns on the issue of at what stage of development does the foetus become a particular individual person. The 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§2274) held that the embryo 'must be treated from conception as a person'.[4] However it seems to me, as a substance dualist, that a person is a mental substance whose identity is determined by his non-physical soul; and that there are no grounds for postulating such a soul until there are grounds for postulating that the foetus is

conscious, and that there are such grounds only at the stage when the brain exhibits patterns of neural activity typical of conscious humans. This might be at something like 22 weeks. There is no reason to suppose that before that time, it is determined which soul is connected to the foetus and so who the person is. For someone who is not a substance dualist however it might seem to follow that mere physical continuity is sufficient to determine who the foetus is; and from that it would seem to follow that abortion at any stage does deprive a particular individual of a 'future life like ours', and so is intrinsically wrong. We cannot discuss in this context which theory of personal identity is correct; and so I must leave it with the claim that if human persons only come into existence at the same time as human consciousness, abortion before that point is not intrinsically wrong. It may however still be wrong for a different reason, and I will come to that issue in due course.

The obligation not to commit suicide is one recognised today by almost all Christians, but it cannot claim any Biblical authority or any Church authority before the fourth century.[5] It is nevertheless, I suggest, an intrinsic obligation, in the sense that the obligation exists independently of God commanding it, but in this case -unlike the two previous cases- that it applies to everyone depends on the existence of God, and so on him having created us. If not to commit suicide is an obligation, it must be an obligation to someone else. Sometimes it would be an obligation to other humans – those who have a right to our help and love, such as our children. Aristotle thought that suicide constitutes a wrong to the community,[6] who has a right to our services – but that seems to me to exaggerate the rights of the community. Surely the universally applicable reason is that, as Aquinas claimed[7], it is a wrong to God, who has given us life, to throw the gift back when it is not as satisfactory as it should be . The gift of life is such a large gift, that we should do our best to make our life a good life, however difficult the circumstances. To throw it away before it has reached its natural end would be like the act of a child who throws away a valuable toy at the moment it does not work very well. But clearly there are limits to the

obligation to try to make the toy work, and so by analogy to the obligation to take extra-ordinary measures to keep ourselves alive (e.g. by refusing to take painkillers)rather than letting ourselves die. And if suicide is wrong, so is euthanasia in the sense of helping someone to commit suicide (for to help someone to do wrong is wrong). But it goes without saying that one's first reaction to any suicide can only be sorrow and compassion for the suffering (actual or foreseable) which led to the suicide. But I suggest that objectively – given that there is a God – suicide is wrong. If there were no God, I do not think that suicide would always be wrong.

I cannot see that any of the actions which I listed prohibited by traditional Christian teaching other than adultery, late abortion, suicide and euthanasia , are intrinsically wrong. The Catholic 'natural law' tradition has sought to show that these other actions are 'disordered' or 'unnatural' actions, and for that reason wrong. The best contemporary statement of this tradition known to me is Alexander Pruss's book *One Body*. Pruss argues that bodily organs have 'functions' and they 'strive' or 'try' to 'fulfil' their functions. For example, Pruss argues, the penis has the function in intercourse of omitting semen into a vagina which it strives to do; and to prevent it from doing this is unnatural and so wrong. [8] It seems to me that to 'strive' or 'try' is an intentional action which only intentional agents can do; and that even if I am mistaken about this, it still doesn't follow that it would be morally wrong to do what is unnatural.

So I pass to consider the other moral issues on which in my view the correctness of the traditional view depends on God having commanded its observance. In considering each issue, I shall first consider to what extent the traditional view is well rooted in the Bible and/or early Christian tradition, and then I shall go on to consider whether God would have had a reason (of a kind listen in Premise 6) for commanding its observance. While it is reasonable to believe that God has issued a particular command, even though we cannot think of any possible reason why he might have done so, it would be unreasonable to

believe this with respect to many such purported commands, since this would begin to make it implausible to suppose that Bible and Christian tradition can tell us much about God's commands. I begin with remarriage after divorce, which I shall call simply 'divorce'; and I shall consider it together with the prohibition of sexual intercourse outside marriage, as the same issues arise with both.

There seems to me no doubt at all that Jesus himself forbad divorce (Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18), possibly the subject to the exception recorded in Matthew's Gospel (5:31-2 and 19:3-12) μ□ □πι πορνεία, which is normally translated – though perhaps incorrectly – as 'except for fornication' that is extramarital sexual intercourse , which in this context constitutes 'adultery'. St Paul added an amendment to deal with a situation which did not face Jesus in his ministry to Jews, to allow a Christian husband or wife to remarry if their non-Christian spouse deserts them (I Cor.7:15). While both Catholic and Orthodox have recognised a form of the 'Pauline privilege', and the Orthodox Church has allowed divorce on the grounds of adultery, and detailed application of these rules has involved much casuistry, there can be little doubt that anyone before 1700 who advocated divorce outside those limits (and in particular advocated divorce by consent) would have been regarded as heretical.

St Paul condemns πορνεία , and although some of the relevant passages in his letters are compatible with a translation of this as denoting a particular kind of sexual intercourse outside marriage (e.g. with a prostitute) rather than as 'fornication', not all of them are. I Corinthians 7:1-2 condemns all heterosexual intercourse outside marriage, and for the nineteen centuries church tradition was unanimous in echoing that condemnation.

What reason would God have for prohibiting divorce and sexual intercourse outside marriage? My answer appeals first to the evident fact that humans influence each other by their behaviour, quite independently of any arguments which they hear for behaving one way or another. 'Lots of other normal people do it. I'm just an ordinary human. It's

unreasonable to expect me to be a total saint' epitomizes the way humans think about many moral issues. It takes a considerable effort to resist the tide of examples provided by the behaviour of others. And my answer appeals secondly to the moral understanding that most of us have that the ideal family (a marriage of spouses devoted to each other and their children) is a good thing. It is obviously good for anyone to have a partner who loves them and whom they love, when both of them regard loyalty and support of the other as a primary life-long obligation; and who cooperate in begetting, nurturing and educating children in the right way. These two points have the consequence that if society normally regarded it as obligatory to confine sexual intercourse to lifelong marriage and did so confine it that would make it a lot easier for families to approach an ideal state.

If sexual intercourse is confined to intercourse within marriage that will make the intimacy of marriage special and so make husband and wife unique partners for each other. Someone who has saved the satisfaction of sexual desire for a spouse will be able to regard and be regarded by that spouse as uniquely their own. And it is plausible to suppose that if people get used to having casual sex before marriage, it becomes more natural to commit adultery when the marriage becomes difficult or boring; and it is highly plausible to suppose that the example of many people abstaining from sexual intercourse before marriage will influence others to take their marriage more seriously.

The prohibition of divorce is obviously a considerable burden on those whose marriage seems to have broken down. Why should God make divorce difficult or impossible – say for a wife to divorce a cruel (though not unfaithful) husband? These instructions have never been seen as forbidding a temporary separation in such circumstances, but why should not the wife marry again? An apparent breakdown of marriage may be repairable. But that is much more likely to happen if the spouses regard themselves as bound by their original commitment never to give up attempting to overcome difficulties in the marriage. And even if all the attempts of some couples to make their marriages work fail, the

persistence of these couples in this task will encourage other couples to try harder to make their marriages work; and these other couples may succeed in this task. And further if separated spouses do not remarry, that will bring home to others considering marriage the seriousness of the marriage commitment and deter them from entering into marriage too lightly.

It would be a fairly useless act for just one person to abstain from sexual intercourse outside marriage or not to divorce a spouse since it would have very little influence. But if God makes it obligatory for everyone to abstain from extra-marital sexual intercourse and from divorce, and religious believers recognize this command and seek to obey it, then that would create a climate of practice which would have considerable influence on those who seek to break the prohibition . Hence God has a reason of kind [B] to prohibit such acts. In so doing he makes it possible for those who find themselves thereby in a situation where it is difficult to keep the command, to play a special role in God's plans for humanity, and thus to develop sanctity through generous service to others. The existence of such a climate is perfectly compatible with those who obey the prohibition showing great sympathy for people in difficult marital situations who break the prohibition.

I come next to homosexual sexual acts (between consenting adults). It has been traditional to assume that the Bible and subsequent Christian tradition has condemned such acts. I'm going to assume , despite the effects of many[9] to show that the Bible and various theologians all meant something different by (what seems to many of us to be) apparent condemnations of such acts, that some such passages as I Corinthians 6:9-10 and Romans 1:24-27 and the continuing weight of subsequent tradition does condemn such acts. Where, after all, do we *ever* find before the twentieth century *any* explicit approval of such acts by *any* theologian orthodox in other respects?

So I pass to consider what reason God would have for prohibiting such acts; and I suggest that the same kind of consideration applies to the prohibition of homosexual acts as

to the prohibition of divorce or extra-marital intercourse. Having homosexual orientation is a disability – for a homosexual cannot beget children through a loving act with a person to whom they have a unique lifelong commitment. Of course some homosexuals do not want to beget children, but the behaviour of other homosexuals indicates that they clearly do; and a disability is a disability whether or not the disabled person minds about it. (If they didn't have the disability, they might realize that it is good for them that they don't have it.)It might one day be possible for some complicated operation to combine the genetic material from two sperms or two eggs so as to produce a fertilized egg, though there are very considerable difficulties to be overcome before this could be achieved. But if it could be achieved, then two lesbians could only produce another female. And two gay men would need an egg from another female into which their genetic material could be inserted, and the womb of a surrogate mother in which the fertilized egg could grow into a baby. Then the whole process would mean that the resulting baby would have three or four 'semi-parents', some of whom might not have any subsequent role in nurturing them. And, as I read the much disputed evidence available on line about whether children nurtured by homosexual parents flourish as well as other children, the balance of that evidence seems to me to indicate that children whose nurturing parents are also their male and female biological parents in a happy marriage flourish better than all other children. And so that is the kind of reproduction and the kind of marriage which we should be encouraging; and those who cannot provide it for their children have a disability. The possible development of this kind of genetic engineering would not alter this fact. Disabilities should be prevented.

The evidence seems to me to indicate clearly that genes and environment (nature and nurture) both play a role in determining sexual orientation; and also that this orientation is *sometimes* to a considerable extent reversible[10]. So if there was a general recognition in society of an obligation to abstain from homosexual acts, that would prevent homosexual behaviour being presented as an option for young people of equal value to the

heterosexual one which makes possible procreative marriage. That would deter the young from wondering whether they are really homosexual when previously it would not have occurred to them, in consequence experimenting with homosexual sexual acts, getting accustomed to such behaviour and so developing a homosexual orientation. Such a climate of opinion that homosexual acts are wrong,would encourage those who have begun to develop such an orientation to go no further; and it would encourage research into how the orientation can be cured. Medicine has made great strides in recent years. Diseases of mind or body hitherto believed incurable have proved curable; it would be odd if sexual orientation was the only incurable condition. But it looks as if for many homosexuals, but probably not for all, their condition is now incurable; and sympathy, not censure, must be our first reaction – as it must be for all those who find themselves in any situation not of their own choice where their sexual longings cannot be satisfied in a happy marriage. Yet if older and incurable homosexuals abstained from homosexual acts that would have a great influence on young and curable ones; and the older ones would be doing a great service to others, and one which would help to make them themselves saints. But of course, if I'm mistaken in supposing that the climate of clear, yet sympathetic opinion would make any difference to the sexual orientation of any humans who would otherwise acquire a homosexual orientation, we would need to look for some other reason why God would prohibit homosexual sexual acts, or to look again at the meaning of biblical texts and supposedly authoritative church tradition. But I stress that inability to discover a reason why God might have prohibited one kind of act would hardly count much against the reliability of the Church's moral tradition that God had prohibited acts of this kind- although inability to discover any reasons why God might have prohibited any of the kinds of acts which I have been discussing would, I think, count significantly against the reliability of the Church's general moral tradition.

I come next to the issue of contraception within marriage. Although, in my view, the Bible expresses no clear view about the morality of the temporary use of contraception within marriage[11], all contraception was condemned with virtual unanimity by those Fathers and scholastics who expressed a view. Their justification for this condemnation must therefore lie in its derivability from 'unwritten tradition'.

If one holds, as many of the Fathers and scholastics seem to have held, that procreation was the sole divinely ordained purpose for sexual intercourse, then it immediately follows that contraception is a wrong to God – for it is using the divine gift of sex for a purpose contrary to the donor's wishes. There is however quite a lot in the Bible, which understands sexual intercourse as a cement for the companionship of marriage, which is good in itself. While in the Genesis 1 account of God creating men and women, God said to Adam and Eve 'Be fruitful and multiply', in the Genesis 2 account of this God created women as 'helpers' and 'partners' for men, in consequence of which 'they become one flesh', and Jesus himself cited the Genesis 2 words 'become one flesh' as what happens in marriage (Mark 10:7-8). And some of the Fathers recognised the uniting of married couples as a good purpose of sexual intercourse, additional to the purpose of procreation. But once it is acknowledged that marriage has at least one good purpose other than procreation, the issue arises whether it might be legitimate to have intercourse in order to fulfil the other purpose or purposes when procreation would not be a good thing. That procreation was sometimes not a good thing was often acknowledged. 'Lactantius speaks of a Christian who is too poor to raise a large family. The only solution for such a man is absolute continence'[12] Yet why should it be wrong to have intercourse while taking steps to avoid procreation? Unless God had forbidden it no one would be wronged thereby, so why would God have forbidden it?

To answer this question, we need to follow Augustine in distinguishing between those commands directed only to a certain group of people and those directed to all people

at all times. We can, I suggest, recognize the former if we see the point of God issuing the command being constituted by the circumstances in which the group to which they were originally directed lived, but which have no point in other circumstances. For example until the fourteenth century Christians believed that God had forbidden usury – that is, lending money which the borrower had to return with interest. Until the fourteenth century most money lending was lending by the rich to the poor – and surely the poverty of the borrower provides a good reason for God to forbid the lender demanding interest. But since that time the growth of complicated financial arrangements has had the consequence that much money lending is by the comparatively well-off to prosperous businesses who use the borrowed money to make a lot more money, and then of course the wealth of the borrower means that there is no longer any reason to forbid the lender demanding interest.

Now the point of God forbidding contraception (if he did forbid this) was presumably because – as Genesis 1 reports God saying to Adam to Eve – he wanted humans to 'be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28). It is plausible to suppose that if contraception had been practiced widely in early centuries, the human race would have died out. But plausibly humans are now `much nearer to 'filling the earth'. If contraception were not practiced now, the earth would soon become very crowded, and indeed too crowded to grow enough food to feed all humans. And that, I suggest, is a reason why, as with usury, the circumstances which made the command a good one for God to issue no longer hold; and so it is plausible to suppose that contraception within marriage is no longer wrong. But again, if I am wrong about this, we would need to look for some other reason why God would have forbidden contraception which may or may not still apply today, or to look again at the tradition, in this case (in the absence of relevant biblical passages) the tradition of church teaching.

That brings me back again to the issue of the morality of early abortion, which on a substance dualist view, would not constitute homicide. Yet despite the fact that most of the

Christian Fathers were substance dualists – early abortion was still traditionally regarded as a mortal sin. Why it might be the case that contraception is not now forbidden is because God intended sexual intercourse to serve not merely the purpose of procreation, but also the purpose of cementing the unity of the married couple. But pregnancy has no other conceivable purpose for which God would have provided it, except the production of another human being. So God might reasonably have commanded us not to interrupt this process, just as we – if we gave some child the seed of a rare and beautiful flower – might tell the child to weed and water it so that it eventually flowered. Forbidding abortion will not lead to an over-populated world, as long as contraception is used to a moderate degree.

And finally I come to the issue of family headship. 'Wives, be subject to your husbands' wrote the author of the letter to the Ephesians (5:22), an instruction repeated in other New Testament Letters.[13] Until the last hundred years Christians have always regarded the husband as head of the family, centred on husband and wife, who should nurture and education their children. Yet, it seems to me that there is no necessary moral truth which makes male headship obligatory. It requires an explicit divine command to do so. But clearly any institution needs a system for resolving differences about how the institution should act. Some sort of 'majority vote' system is used by many institutions. But of course that is of no use in a two-member organisation, such as marriage. Clearly too, the married couple ought to seek agreement on matters central to the institution if they can – on where they should live, how their children should be educated, and so on. But if they cannot reach agreement, one of them must have a casting vote. Otherwise the marriage will only survive, if one spouse is emotionally weaker or less selfish or keener that the marriage should survive than is the other. Better to have a clear legal rule, one dependent on virtually unalterable differences in the nature of men and women and their role in sexual intercourse and the procreation of children. God might have had some reason for making the husband head of the family, or he may have done so by an arbitrary decision in virtue of having a

reason to make an arbitrary decision of kind [A]. Just as with driving on the left or driving on the right, it doesn't matter which rule is adopted; but it does matter that some rule should be adopted. And just as the state which owns the roads has the right to lay down that rule, so God who instituted marriage, has the right to lay down who should be the head of the family.

The common principle at work in all these obligations and prohibitions which are created by the will of God is that some of us are required to conform to the obligation or prohibition for the sake of others – the other spouse, or others in other marriages, or others not yet married, or others yet to be born. Many of these obligations and prohibitions are designed to create a climate of opinion where marriage will be regarded as a sacred institution, in which loving couples can produce a loving family, to secure the institution against influences which weaken it, and to make it possible for more humans to enter into it. The prohibitions and obligations are only likely to have this effect if many people conform to them. God has the reason for imposing them as obligations on all of us, so that we may help the marriages of others, and thereby make ourselves naturally good people.

I should add in conclusion that if I am right in claiming that most of the moral obligations which I have been considering are obligations only because God has commanded them, there is no point in rebuking non-Christians for not conforming to these obligations; the only way to get them to conform is to get them to become Christians, and then they may begin to appreciate arguments for conforming to them.

Notes

1. For this point, and for the principles used by the Church to recognize Christian books as inspired and so suited for incorporation into the Bible, see my *Revelation*, second edition, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 186-7.
2. Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18, confirmed by implication in Matthew 5:27-28 and 19:18-21, and John 8:11
3. See Don Marquis 'An Argument that Abortion is wrong' in (ed.) H. LaFollette, *Ethics in Practice*, Blackwell Publishing, third edition, 2007, updating an earlier article of Marquis in *Journal of Philosophy*, 1989.
4. Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* 1a:118.2 ad2) followed Aristotle in holding that the foetus went through vegetative and animal stages – that is had 'nutritive' and 'sensitive' souls- before it became human; from which it follows that early abortion would not be killing a human person. The *Catechism* does not go as far as saying that the embryo is a person from conception, but only that it must be so treated; and it may be saying that as we do not know at what stage of development the foetus has a human soul we should from the beginning give it the benefit of the doubt.
5. Augustine had a powerfully influential condemnation of suicide in *The City of God* 1.16-27. But, while writing that there was no reason to admire those who kill themselves because they cannot bear pain or disgrace, he had no general theory of why suicide was wrong.
6. *Nichomachaean Ethics* 5.11.
7. While also giving both the (to my mind) bad reasons that it is contrary to 'one's natural inclination, and also to the love by which one ought to cherish oneself', and the reason given by Aristotle, Aquinas wrote: 'Life is a gift made to man by God … Therefore a person who takes him own life sins against God .. God alone has authority to decide about life and death' – *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae.64.5.

8. Thus ‘it appears to be a necessary condition of something’s being a body part that it have service to the body as a purpose .. It must actually be striving .. to promote this purpose' – Alexander Press, *One Body*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, p. 99.
9. For one example of such efforts, see David Newheiser, ‘Sexuality and Christian Tradition’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 43(2015) 122-145.
10. See my brief summary of this evidence, as assessed up to 2006, in my *Revelation* second edition, Oxford University Press, 2007, Additional note F. The Spitzer study to which I refer there has subsequently been disavowed by its author; but a subsequent in-depth study of a group of Christian homosexuals trying to change their sexual orientation seems to confirm the view that the sexual orientation of some, but perhaps not most, homosexuals can be changed to a significant degree. See Michelle Wolkomir, *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggle of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men*, Rutgers University Press, 2006. And if so, it is certainly likely that many more can be prevented from becoming homosexuals, given the right environment. (See my ‘Replies’ to various criticisms of my philosophical views in (ed.) N. Mossner, *Richard Swinburne*: *Christian Philosophy in a Modern World,* Ontos Verlag, 2008, p. 223 n.14.
11. Genesis 38:8-10 is sometimes cited as a condemnation of contraception. Onan was meant to ‘raise up offspring’ by his dead brother’s wife, but ‘since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went into his brother’s wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death.’ But what is being condemned here is not any occasional spilling of semen, but the total refusal to raise offspring by what was in effect his wife.
12. *Divine Institutes* 6.20.25, as summarized in J.T.Noonan, *Contraception*, Harvard University Press, 1965,p123.
13. Colossians 3:18, I Peter 3:1, Letter to Titus 2:5.