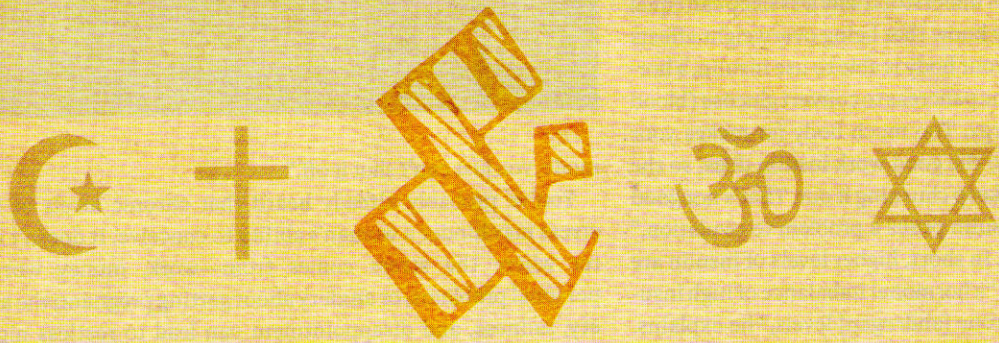


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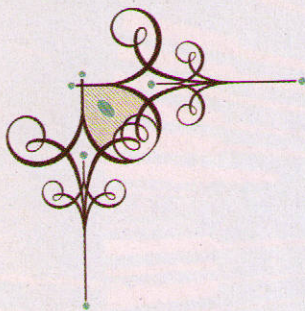
Fertility

Most religions encourage family-building, but there are surprising differences in their views on fertility treatments and even adoption.

By Jan Goodwin

Illustrations By Edel Rodriguez





After trying for five years to become pregnant, Kelly Romenesko and her husband, both of whom had fertility problems, decided to use IVF (in vitro fertilization). A middle- and high- school French teacher, Kelly asked the Catholic school where she'd worked for nearly six years for a few days off to complete the treatment. The IVF was a success, and a few weeks later Kelly informed her school administration that she was pregnant. Two days later she was called into the superintendent's office and fired on the spot. By using IVF to conceive her child, Kelly, now 39, had violated her teaching contract, in which she agreed to uphold the teachings of the Catholic Church.

"I had no idea that the church had a doctrine prohibiting IVF. We were lifelong Catholics, religion was an

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important part of our lives, but no one ever told us about this," says Kelly, of Darboy, Wisconsin. "The contract I signed was vague, and I assumed it referred to the Ten Commandments."

Kelly says she was sick to her stomach over what happened. "I didn't even get the chance to say goodbye to my students. I had to come back and clean out my belongings after the students had left, as if I would pollute them. I'd been really excited to learn I was pregnant, that Eric and I were finally going to share our love with a baby, who, in fact, turned out to be our twin daughters, Alexandria and Allison. To have this happen was devastating."

The couple sued over Kelly's firing, and finally settled out of court with the school and their diocese. Kelly and her husband Eric are no longer Catholic, and their twin daughters, now age 3, were baptized Lutheran. "To have this happen because we brought two beautiful children into the world is very strange. It shook my faith to the core," says Kelly. "Our daughters were premature, and it was touch and go at first. It was very hard to deal with this without the support of my church community at the time. But my daughters mean everything to us. They are precious miracles."

When making a decision about whether or not to pursue fertility treatments, couples have many factors to consider, including the cost, the medical risks and side effects, the stress and psychological effects, and even sometimes the legalities (such as when donor eggs are used). But for people who are religiously observant, as so many Americans are, faith can play a powerful role in how they proceed in their quest for parenthood.

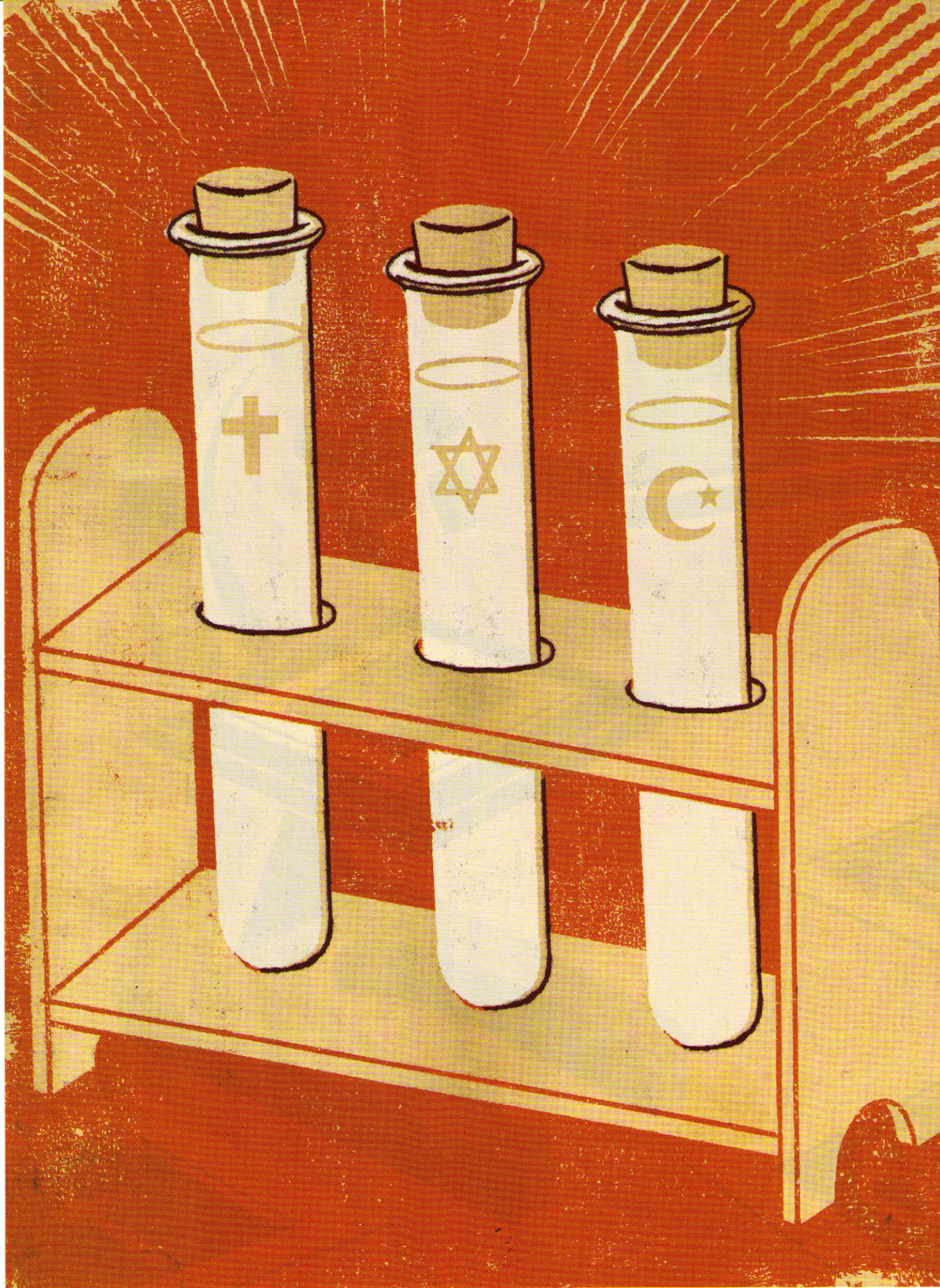
As the Romeneskos learned, observant Catholics cannot pursue "test-tube" fertility treatments. These ART (assisted reproductive technology) procedures, which involve handling human eggs or embryos, are considered mortal sins, according to the *Donum Vitae* (Gift of Life), a document drawn up in 1987 by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which was headed by then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.

But it isn't just the Catholic Church whose religious precepts inform a wide range of spiritual beliefs concerning fertility treatments. As reproductive science continues to advance, many religions are examining how these nascent technologies fit into their doctrines, and which should be welcomed, which proscribed.

The option to adopt may also be affected by religious tenets. A Muslim couple in Egypt was heartbroken and stunned when, after adopting their son as an infant, they were informed last year that he would no longer be able to live with them. The boy had turned nine, and since his adoptive mother hadn't given birth to him or breast-fed him, it was now *haram*, forbidden under Islamic law, for them to be together.

As a newly emerging "theology of fertility" continues to develop, *Conceive Magazine* consulted bioethicists, physicians, scholars, and religious leaders to learn how different faiths view infertility technologies and adoption. Bear in mind that there may be different interpretations within the same religion, or within the different denominations or sects of those faiths. And recognize, too, that in many cases these interpretations apply to only the most observant members of a religion.







Judaism

The first mitzvah, or commandment of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) is be fruitful and multiply. "It is central to Judaism," says Rabbi Michael Gold, author of *Hannah Wept, Infertility and Adoption and the Jewish Couple* (Jewish Publication Society of America). But in the Bible, the three couples who founded the Jewish faith—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel—were all infertile, the rabbi points out. Which may be why Judaism is fairly liberal when it comes to infertility treatments.

"If Orthodox Jewish couples are not expecting a child within three to six months of marriage, it can be very anxiety-producing," says Douglas Rabin, M.D., a leading reproductive specialist in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, and an Orthodox Jew. "After a year it is even more so because of enormous societal pressure." So there is great incentive for couples who have not conceived to seek medical help.

Most fertility treatments are accepted and even welcomed in very observant Jewish communities. "But some reproductive techniques do raise serious questions in Jewish law," Rabbi Gold explains. Judaism places strong emphasis on lineage, and who is a Jew. "You are born Jewish if your mother is Jewish. No legal procedure or court decree can erase that identity," he says. "It's when you use donor sperm or egg that this introduces the important issue of Jewish identity." That ongoing debate is profound and multi-sided. In fact, Yeshiva University in New York City, which has one of the largest Orthodox rabbinical seminaries in the country, offers a course in infertility and Jewish law so that rabbis who graduate from the program can knowledgeably counsel their congregations.

The use of fertility drugs is permitted by Judaism, as are sperm washing, ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection), and IVF. Reform and Conservative Jewish teachings permit IVF using donor sperm and eggs, while under Jewish Orthodoxy—between 12 and 15 percent of America's over five million Jews—some rabbis will approve third-party donors and some not. "Unlike the Catholic Church, there is no actual doctrine on this," says Rabbi Gold. "As Jews, we are allowed to be nature's partner, and help things along. But it's when you start borrowing eggs or sperm that this could affect the child's future Jewish identity," he explains.

Jewish law can affect other aspects of reproduction and medical treatment as well. For instance, most Orthodox rabbis will not permit masturbation as a means to collect semen for testing or use in fertility procedures. Instead, couples may be advised to use a special "collection condom" to provide the sperm sample. Also, since Orthodox couples are not permitted to have sexual relations when the wife is menstruating and for seven days afterward (after which she purifies herself in a *mikvah*, a ritual bath), if a woman has a short cycle she may need drugs to extend her cycle in order to become pregnant.

The Talmud (a book of oral Jewish law) historically considered that a man who was married for 10 years without conceiving a child

could divorce his wife and marry another woman to attempt to have a baby. This practice is no longer followed. "In my case, we'd still be infertile," says Rabbi Gold. "My wife and I both had fertility problems, and treatments didn't work. We ended up adopting, as are more and more Jewish couples."

Talmudic law has restrictions regarding unrelated individuals of the opposite sex being alone together, and these restric-

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tions can have an effect on how adoption is managed in an Orthodox family. Since adopted children are not blood relatives, the restriction might apply even within families; once an adopted boy reaches the age of 13, or a girl turns 12, they may not be alone with an adult family member of the opposite sex.

But Orthodox Judaism has practical solutions to this hurdle; for instance, it can be easily overcome by giving another adult a key to the house, so that they can in effect be a chaperone at any time. "As long as the husband or wife are in town, or if not and another adult has access to the house, then the couple's rabbi can find solutions to overcome these restrictions," explains Dr. Rabin. "These laws have been explored and refined for three thousand years. Judaism is a user-friendly religion, and very pragmatic."

Because many of these issues are subject to different rabbinical interpretations, Rabbi Gold recommends that couples discuss these issues with a rabbi ahead of time. "Try to find one who is sensitive to infertility and adoption issues," he says. "The bottom line is, you need to be able to get up in the morning, and live your life with integrity."

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ethicist at The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, an organization frequently consulted by the Vatican and Catholic bishops. "IVF flows from the fundamental mistake our society made decades ago that contraception must be part of marriage. Contraception and IVF are two sides of the same coin. What is contraception? Sex without babies. What is IVF? Babies without sex."

"Couples who use IVF sometimes hold to the idea that once they get married, they have a right to a child," says Father Pacholczyk. "We never have a right to a child, because a child is a gift, not an entitlement or something we possess like property. When a couple gets married they do have a right to marital acts, which are ordered and disposed toward the gift they seek and hope for."

Father Pacholczyk, recognizes, however, that America's 75 million Catholics are probably making use of IVF at about the same rate as the general population, and that, like the Romaneskos, most Catholics are only vaguely aware of the Church's position on ART.

Besides IVF, there are other fertility treatments that are also problematic under Catholicism. Sperm washing, for instance, is a problem for two reasons: because it requires masturbation, which always violates the meaning of marital intimacy, and because the subsequent use of washed sperm during fertility procedures replaces the marital act by the husband.

Father Pacholczyk goes on to explain that numerous fertility treatments are permitted and encouraged by the Church. "Clomid is a fertility drug that is used to help a woman ovulate, and so assist or restore natural function. The Church permits and encourages any such approaches to fertility which assist the marital act to achieve a pregnancy, rather than replacing that marital act with another kind of act. Surgery for endometriosis is another fertility treatment that is morally acceptable. There are many others."

The Vatican does approve NaPro Technology (natural procreative technology), which was developed by Thomas Hilgers, M.D., director of the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction in Omaha, Nebraska, and a clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Creighton University School of Medicine. The NaPro website (naprotechnology.com) describes the technology as an effective natural alternative to ART, "identifying the problems and cooperating with the menstrual and fertility cycles to correct

the condition, maintain human ecology, and sustain the procreative potential." For observant Catholics, it may offer the best chance for a baby. "If NaPro fails for you, there are no other medical options for an observant Catholic," says Eileen Kummant M.D., a practicing NaPro physician in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Critics in the medical profession, however, call it "anti-science," stating that NaPro makes claims that are not scientifically proven.)

For Catholic couples who are not able to conceive and carry a pregnancy, the Church is fully supportive of adoption.

Evangelical Christianity

More than one-quarter of Americans consider themselves evangelical Christians, and there is no single authority in the Protestant church. Teachings have generally been permissive regarding fertility treatments... but not universally so.

Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes on the Baptist Center for Ethics' website that "infertile couples who try to conceive through in vitro fertilization or test-tube babies are on morally shaky ground."

Mohler says it is a "glaring inconsistency" for evangelicals to condemn the destruction of human embryos for stem-cell research while "ignoring or dismissing" destruction of embryos in IVF clinics. "While we celebrate the birth of a child and the gift of life, we cannot blind ourselves to the harsh and grotesque reality that this technology also means the destruction of human life," he says.

Another prominent Baptist, C. Ben Mitchell, Ph.D., the director of The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois, and a bioethics consultant for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, writes

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on the Center's website, "Some high-tech reproductive technologies do not by themselves violate the sanctity of human life. For example, IVF, AIH (artificial insemination using the husband's sperm), GIFT (gamete intrafallopian transfer), and ZIFT (zygote intrafallopian transfer) do not require that embryos be destroyed. They can, however, place embryos at risk, especially if combined with embryo freezing." He points out that some ART methods, such as surrogacy and third-party donation, "violate God's ideal for the family."

"Just because these technologies are available," he writes, "does not mean that they ought to be used or that they pass ethical muster. Couples should be encouraged to discuss their religious and moral commitments with their doctor before they begin therapy."



Christian Science

The Christian Science Church has no official policy on infertility treatments. However, since Christian Scientists prefer not to use doctors, medicines, or immunizations, Christian Science healing practitioners try to help people overcome fertility or other health problems through prayer. "When someone is sick, we heal through the teaching of Jesus. And this includes infertility," explains Kari Mashos, a teacher of the church's healing methods and a practitioner herself at The First Church of Christ, Scientist in Boston.

Mashos herself had difficulty conceiving. "I know personally how heart-wrenching it is when you long for a baby," she says. She consulted Christian Scientist scriptures. "I realized that genetics couldn't overpower God as the only creator. The more we go into physiology, the deeper we can get stuck into thinking we have no options. It enslaves us. Throughout the Bible, women who couldn't conceive, prayed to God, and then had children. I now have two. There is tremendous power in prayer."

Adoption is viewed positively by the Christian Science Church. "We are all from the same heritage," says Mashos. "Everyone is equally loved and cherished by God. Everyone has the right to health, love, and a home."



Hinduism

"Hinduism clearly states that marriage is for the purpose of children, sex, companionship, and for performing religious duties together. All fertility treatments are permitted unless they are detrimental to the health of the person involved," says Arvind Sharma Ph.D., professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University in Montreal. He continues, "India is quite open to Western science."

Hindu myths also assist in the acceptance of fertility technologies, he says, as they are full of examples of unusual conceptions,

such as instances of conception taking place through divine assistance. And Dr. Sharma explains that religions of Indian origin, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, contain stories of embryo transfers. "So we are not shocked by modern techniques."

Hinduism also accepts adoption.



Buddhism

When there are good ethical reasons for using fertility technology, there would be no objections on Buddhist grounds to the technology itself, explains Rita Gross, Ph.D., a Buddhist and professor emerita of comparative religion at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire.

Damien Keown, a founding editor of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, has written: "Buddhism teaches that life may come into being in a variety of ways, of which sexual reproduction is but one, so sexual reproduction has no divinely sanctioned priority over other modes of procreation."

However, Gross goes on to explain that, in fact, there are some serious ethical concerns. "If one wants to practice compassion through raising a child, there is no lack of children already born who need love and care," she says. "The obsession to have a biological child, especially in an already overpopulated world, could be viewed as extremely self-absorbed. Buddhist ethics urges us to appreciate deeply the fundamental equality and sameness of all beings." In other words, Buddhist teachings may favor adoption over the pursuit of high-tech fertility treatments to produce genetic offspring.

A further consideration, according to Buddhist teachings, is that destroying "extra" embryos created in IVF cycles is problematic. "Since there is no need to create embryos in a world of abundant needy children, the extra problem of creating embryos only to destroy some of them is a real violation of the Buddhist precept about not taking life," she says. ■