

Some religious practitioners try to defend male circumcision by claiming that studies have shown it prevents sexually-transmitted diseases. It is more likely that the Jews and Muslims in these studies were protected by their own prohibitions against intermarriage and sexual activity outside of marriage. Circumcision is no substitute for safe sex in preventing disease.

Any cutting of a girl's genitals by a religious community wishing to carry on their own ancient tradition has been a felony under US law since 1997, when Congress outlawed female circumcision. The law specifically prohibits religious exemptions to female genital cutting of any degree.

The Committee on Bioethics of the American Academy of Pediatrics stated in a 1997 policy statement:

Constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion do not permit children to be harmed through religious practices, nor do they allow religion to be a valid legal defense when an individual harms or neglects a child.

Obviously, infants are not aware of circumcision's religious significance, and few Jews or Muslims actually choose to be circumcised. Circumcising them as children negates their own right to choose.

Circumcision is especially troublesome because the cutting is not done on a boy's face or arm, but on his organ of sexual pleasure. The circumciser intrudes into a boy's future by permanently altering his penis, his capacity for pleasure, and thus, his experience of sex.

Changes in Practice

Voices within the progressive Jewish community have been struggling with their practice of ritual circumcision for over 170 years, since the beginnings of Reform Judaism. Some of circumcision's biggest public critics have been Jews.

Alternative *bris shalom* (covenant of peace) ceremonies have been performed by Jews to meet the symbolic and communal obligations of the traditional ritual by welcoming newborns into the Jewish community without the pain, trauma, bodily violation, and risks associated with the surgery.

Conclusion

NOCIRC's reasons for opposing religious circumcision are the same as the reasons we oppose any child's circumcision. Neither physicians nor ritual circumcisers have the right to alter a boy's penis. Every child deserves the unaltered genitals he or she was born with. This is their absolute, universal, inalienable, and nonnegotiable right as human beings.

NOCIRC's mission is to provide factual, up-to-date information on circumcision and on the benefits of intact genitals. When today's parents of any religion feel free to explore this information and to act on it without coercion, they often choose to leave their baby intact—the way he was created.

Resources

Bris Shalom Ceremony
www.NOCIRCoFMI.org/BrisShalom.htm

Jewish Circumcision Resource Center
www.JewishCircumcision.org

Brit Shalom Celebrants
www.circumstitions.com/Jewish-shalom.html

Jews Against Circumcision
www.JewsAgainstCircumcision.org

Muslims Against Circumcision
<http://www.Quran.org/khatne.htm>

Christians for Wholeness
www.Acts15.org

Catholics Against Circumcision
www.CatholicsAgainstCircumcision.org

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Educating a New Generation

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People Want to Know

What

about

Religious

Circumcision?

an educational pamphlet from

NOCIRC of Michigan

www.NOCIRCoFMI.org

Why We Care

NOCIRC recognizes the inherent right of all human beings to an intact body. Without religious or racial prejudice, we affirm this basic human right.

Religious circumcision is the only religious ritual that involves cutting off part of a child's body. He cannot give his consent to this amputation. This makes the practice a cause for concern by children's rights advocates everywhere. Unlike any other religious ceremony, circumcision always leaves permanent scars on a child.

Fears about anti-Semitism sometimes arise when male circumcision is questioned. Those who choose to freely examine the practice of circumcision in a historical, scientific, and ethical context will find these fears to be unwarranted.

Jewish Circumcision

The practice of circumcision predates Judaism. Peoples as diverse as the Jews, Muslims, and South African Xhosas all practice it, but none of them invented it. The specific origins of circumcision are lost in antiquity, but the earliest records of the ritual are from Africa.

In Judaism, circumcision is performed during a ceremony called a *bris* (or *brit milab*), and is done by a religious practitioner called a *mohel* on the eighth day of an infant's life. Most mohels are not physicians and are not licensed or regulated by any governmental body.

The mohel leads the ceremony at the boy's home in front of his parents, relatives, and invited guests. If the mohel is not a physician, he is unable to legally obtain and administer adequate forms of anesthesia. He recites prayers and the baby is given his Hebrew name. A party follows the ceremony.

Ritual circumcision as practiced by Jews is the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, the first Jew. God said to Abraham in Genesis 17:10-12:

This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of a covenant betwixt Me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among

you, every male throughout your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any foreigner, that is not of thy seed.

Circumcision does not make a boy Jewish. Jewish law says that a boy born to a Jewish mother is Jewish, regardless of whether he is circumcised.

Circumcision is practiced both by observant Jews and by Jews who do not regularly practice their religion. Circumcision was never universal in Judaism. Notable Jews from Moses to Theodore Hertz (the founder of Zionism) declined to circumcise their sons. Today in Sweden only 40% of Jewish boys are circumcised.

Large numbers of Jewish babies in the United States are circumcised not by mohels on the eighth day, but by non-Jewish physicians without a ceremony in hospitals immediately after birth. This does not satisfy the religious requirements of Jewish circumcision. Non-observant Jewish parents frequently base the decision to circumcise their sons on social conformity and on family pressures.

The 12th-century Jewish scholar, philosopher, and physician, Moses Maimonides, recognized the damage from circumcision that men report today:

The fact that circumcision weakens the faculty of sexual excitement and sometimes perhaps diminishes the pleasure is indubitable. For if at birth this member has been made to bleed and has had its covering taken away from it, it must indubitably be weakened.

Muslim Circumcision

For Muslims, circumcision is required, but it is not one of the basic tenets of Islam. It was practiced by Arabs prior to Islam. They adopted circumcision from the Jews through their common ancestor, Abraham.

Circumcision is not mentioned in their holiest book, the *Koran*, but it is in the *Hadith*, a collection of the sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad.

The Hadith spells out five practices to be performed for bodily purification and cleanliness: 1) trimming the moustache, 2) trimming the nails, 3) plucking out the hair of the armpits, 4) shaving pubic hair, and 5) circumcision. The Arabic term, *khitān*, is used to refer to both male and female circumcision.

The *Hadith* says, “*Khitān* is required for men and is a noble deed for women.”

There is no uniform set of regulations for circumcision, no specified age (other than before puberty), no prayers to recite, and no authoritative ceremony to follow. In the US, Muslims have their boys circumcised by a doctor after birth in a hospital, and it is done without a ceremony.

Female circumcision has been practiced for centuries in many Muslim countries, but its practice predates Islam.

Christianity and Circumcision

There is much confusion about the need to circumcise among Christians because circumcision is required in the Old Testament of the Bible.

However, circumcision was never a requirement in Christianity. St. Paul made this clear in Galatians 5:2-6:

I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “Except when performed for strictly therapeutic medical reasons, directly intended amputations, mutilations and sterilizations performed on innocent persons are against moral law.” (N. 2297)

Modern Perspectives

Physical cleanliness was used frequently in the Bible to symbolize *moral* purity and the obedience of an individual before God. The rewards from God for such righteousness included good health and long life.

Only in modern times were direct links made between good hygiene and good health. Circumcision then became confused with good health because of its Biblical association with purity, but modern science has shown that it simply has no advantage over regular bathing.