

A common cry of biblical Christians in Northern Ireland is that “abortion kills human beings” when even minor changes in the law, such as cases of fatal foetal abnormality, are proposed. Yet the Bible itself conveys a different message altogether. The general view in Old Testament times was that life began with ‘first breath’. Thus in Genesis 2:7 we read: “And the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a human being” (NIV). Indeed, throughout the Bible neither God nor His followers treat the foetus as in any way sacred.

There is a dominant Irish Christian view – it would be fair to describe it as an obsession – that life begins at conception, even though this idea only appeared in the mid-19th century. It is, in any case, biologically and philosophically mistaken. Sperm and egg cells are alive even before they unite. But becoming a person is a different matter altogether. A fertilised ovum, which is just a clump of cells, is no more a person than an acorn is an oak tree or a caterpillar is a butterfly.

A foetus, especially in its early stages, has no moral rights above that of the mother because it satisfies none of the philosophical criteria of personhood. They include sentience, emotionality, reason, communication, self-awareness, and so on. This was recognised as far back as Aristotle, who maintained that man is a ‘rational’ animal. Becoming a human being is a gradual process. The characteristics of personhood only begin to appear late in pregnancy. ‘Quickening’, the first detectable foetal movements around the fifth month, is often taken as a guide.

So too is viability, when survival is possible outside the womb, in some extreme cases in the 20th or 21st week. The English law which allows abortion normally up to 24 weeks is probably a bit too flexible, but its principle, based on common law, is sound. Twenty per cent of pregnancies end in miscarriages and yet there is no public outcry or investigations for possible murder or manslaughter. And we need to accept that there is a world of difference between destroying a life which has not seen the light of day and destroying life after birth. We do not hesitate to throw an egg into a frying pan, but we would if it were a

live chicken. If we really valued precious lives, we would more usefully direct our passion and energy where it truly belongs, not at the fate of a foetus, which is only a potential human being, but at the real, living children of the Third World, the children of the migrant boat people, and the 25 per cent of children in Northern Ireland who live in poverty.