

Let's talk about circumcision



A proposal to ban circumcision for non-medical reasons in Iceland has generated a heated debate over whether banning the practice would amount to an attack on religious freedom. [Kai Möller](#) outlines his own opposition to male circumcision, and argues in favour of an open debate over the issue in which both sides are respected and there is an attempt to reach common ground.



Iceland's parliament building (The Alþingi), Credit: [Stefán Birgir Stefáns \(CC BY-ND 2.0\)](#)

Iceland's plan to become the first European country to ban non-therapeutic male circumcision has once again brought this controversial practice to the public consciousness. One factor that complicates its discussion is that some people feel that criticising circumcision brings them uncomfortably close to the company of Antisemites and Islamophobes, and some defenders of the practice have accused critics of the corresponding attitudes. A recent episode of [Moral Maze](#) on Radio 4, as well as an [opinion piece](#) in the Guardian from a few years ago, provide vivid examples. So how can we avoid arguing about circumcision in a prejudiced way?

Here is a first and unappealing idea. We can play it safe by always adopting the position that does not offend the respective minority. We can say that we are in favour of allowing circumcision, same sex marriage, gender neutral toilets, and so on, to avoid all charges of prejudice and bigotry. The problem with this view, however, is that we thereby allow others to (indirectly) determine our moral views, rather than confidently and pro-actively making a positive case for what we believe is right. Furthermore, it does not do justice to our interlocutor either because by focusing on avoiding offence, as opposed to what is morally right, we do not engage with him or her as a moral agent, that is, someone who is interested in and capable of responding to moral reasons. There is, therefore, no alternative to our thinking issues through for ourselves, in good faith, and without any fear of accusations of bigotry. This is what I have done for the case of ritual male circumcision over the last couple of years, and here is my considered judgement:

1. Circumcision involves the amputation of about 50% of the penile skin. The foreskin is richly enervated and of great importance for sexual activity because it enables the 'gliding action' which stimulates the penis during intercourse or masturbation. In circumcised penises, the glans is always exposed and goes through a process of keratinisation, which reduces its sensitivity. I cannot think of a reason to refer to such a significant interference with the male sexual organ – one which changes its look, functionality, and sensitivity – as anything but genital mutilation. This is further strengthened by a comparison with female genital mutilation, where the exact equivalent to male circumcision, namely the amputation of the clitoral foreskin, is uncontroversially regarded as a form of female genital mutilation.
2. Ritual circumcision of babies is done without effective pain relief. This means that circumcision inevitably

imposes excruciating pain on babies. I think that it is categorically impermissible to impose such pain on a baby for anything less than a truly compelling reason.

3. I believe that there is something deeply wrong with sacrificing a body part of *another* person without their consent. It is an entirely different thing for a person to decide to sacrifice his own foreskin (or other body part) to his God or cultural community. This is a proper exercise of autonomy that an adult can make, but it cannot be made for a child by his parents – it is *his* body, and he has a right that it be preserved, respected, and protected until he is old enough to make an informed decision.

My work has led me to be strongly, unambiguously, and unapologetically opposed to male circumcision. Yet there is nothing antisemitic or Islamophobic about my argument: on the contrary, it takes Jews and Muslims who are in favour of circumcision seriously as moral agents by providing moral reasons that try to convince them that their position is wrong. This attitude is not only theoretically preferable, it also works in practice. I have recently published a [scholarly article](#) criticising circumcision as a human rights violation, and over the last couple of years I have presented my arguments at various academic conferences and events, with many Jewish and Muslim participants.

The discussions were controversial but almost always respectful. They revealed that there is considerable debate among Jews and Muslims about the pros and cons of circumcision. Some are opposed to circumcision or curious and open-minded about it. (Surely these people are not antisemitic or Islamophobic?) People came up to me and talked, often very movingly, about their personal struggles with the question, or the disagreements within their families. When we leave identity politics aside, refrain from lazily accusing each other of prejudice or bigotry, and begin to actually talk to each other in an honest and straightforward way, such encounters can happen. We may not be able to reach agreement, and sharp divisions may remain. But we display the courage to look each other in the eye, go through the hassle of trying to develop the best possible argument for our view, and bring up the patience to listen to the other side's views, trying to reach some common ground. In short, we treat each other as moral agents. It's a very democratic thing to do.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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