Hello, my name is Brian Earp; I am a Research Associate in the philosophy department at the University of Oxford, and I conduct research in practical ethics and medical ethics, among some other topics. As you saw from the program, my topic today is the ethics of infant male circumcision—specifically as it is performed for religious reasons.

I should begin by saying that in debates on this topic, I’ve noticed that there is sometimes a very serious reluctance to address the issue of religious motivation directly. And this is true even among those who are otherwise outspoken in their opposition to circumcision on other grounds. For example, in 2007, ...continued on p. 8

Can Religious Beliefs Justify Circumcision?
Brian D. Earp

Originally published with references included by Oxford University’s Practical Ethics Blog.
http://blog.practicalethics.ox.ac.uk

The New Circumcision Policy Statement - A Trap for the Unwary
Peter W. Adler
ARC Legal Advisor

In the September issue of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a new circumcision policy statement. The Report claims that circumcision protects against penile cancer and HIV, and that the health benefits outweigh the risks, which are very low. The AAP does not recommend circumcision, but states that parents should make the decision, weighing the health benefits and risks in light of their own religious, cultural, and personal beliefs. The Report also states that insurance should pay for it.

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German Intactivists Gather for Berlin Demonstration
Jonathan Friedman
December 12, 2012

On December 12, 2012, people gathered from all over Germany to demonstration in front of Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. This was just a stone's throw from the Bundestag (German parliament), where politicians were about to hold a final debate and vote over a bill to legalize forced ritual male circumcision on children. The bill was made law by an overwhelming majority.

I'm currently traveling across Europe to visit some friends, and I am glad that I was able to participate in perhaps the largest intactivist demonstration that I've ever been to. There were over 80 people present, including German men who were circumcised as adults without their full consent. The demonstration was organized by a collection of ex-muslim, humanist, atheist and feminist organizations.

There were three politicians who spoke passionately against circumcision on the stage, including Ali Ulu, a member of the Pirate Party from Cologne. He came out against circumcision a few years ago by giving a well-publicized ...continued on p. 15

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NYC Intactivists picket the German Consulate — p. 13
Executive Director's Message  
December 8, 2012

We are coming to the close of a remarkable year. Webmaster Jonathan Friedman and I continue to work hard to improve our website, our newsletter, and the visibility of intactivism and of ARC. Our work has borne very satisfying fruit over the past twelve months.

Germany has of course been center stage this year in the intactivist world. Just as we went to press, the German parliament finished debating two bills, one legalizing circumcision as long as it’s “medically sound,” and one banning the practice until age fourteen and after that only with the patient’s consent. While the second bill appeared consistent with the decision this past June by a Cologne Appeals Court upholding a child’s right to bodily integrity, it is the first bill, legalizing circumcision, that passed into law. It is extremely noteworthy, however, that 100 legislators voted against the bill upholding circumcision, with another 46 abstaining, while 91 legislators supported the alternative bill protecting boys’ genital integrity, with another 31 abstaining on that one. This demonstrates substantial support for our position, and compares favorably with the unanimous vote upholding the legality of circumcision that took place last year in California.

Unfortunately, a gross double standard is evident in the news we just received as we were going to press that the same United Nations whose only official document centrally relating to circumcision was filed by ARC is pressing for a global ban on female genital cutting. Genital cutting of males is protected while females are protected from cutting.

Good news in recent months includes several positive pieces of news from Europe. In October, Finland’s third largest party, True Finns, has demanded a ban on the ritual circumcision of minors. In November, Canada’s Supreme Court handed down its cursory decision upholding a conviction in a grisly case of a crude home circumcision. Also BMC Public Health published an article from South Korea by DaiSik Kim et al. showing that rates there are plunging as people become educated about the harms of male circumcision.

Germany’s official Paediatric Association, the Berufsverband der Kinder- und Jugendärzte (BVKJ), has joined the Dutch Medical Association and broken its silence on infant circumcision – scoring two major points for genital integrity.

The BKVJ prominently cited Attorneys for the Rights of the Child and our e-letter to Pediatrics criticizing the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).

ARC is proud to announce that we recently released a list we have been painstakingly compiling since our founding in 1997 of all known significant legal awards and settlements in circumcision-related lawsuits. We believe that a substantial majority of the cases included in this list are unknown to the intactivist community. After extended discussions with our legally experienced board members, we have concluded the time is right to publicize this information regarding the financial consequences that often flow as a result of the damage and suffering sustained by unfortunate victims of male circumcision.

Accordingly, it might be appropriate for us to note that this newsletter issue marks...
the one-year anniversary of our release and distribution on our website of our “Know Your Rights” brochure, whose production was assisted by ARC Secretary and Intact America Director Georganne Chapin.

This completes ARC’s 16th year, another key event, as well as my 18th full year of intactivism.

This issue is stuffed with great contributions: 1) In an exclusive preview of what should prove a landmark contribution, Oxford ethicist Brian Earp contributes his recent presentation at the Helsinki symposium on ethics, religion, and male circumcision, “Of Faith and Circumcision: Can the Religious Beliefs of Parents Justify the Nonconsensual Cutting of their Children’s Genitals?”; 2) Exclusive to the ARC Newsletter, ARC Legal Advisor Peter Adler contributes his thoughts regarding the American Academy of Pediatrics’ policy statement and technical report on male circumcision; 3) Exclusive to the ARC Newsletter, a firsthand photoreport by ARC Newsletter Editor Jonathan Friedman on the recent protest in Berlin regarding the new law; 4) Exclusive to the ARC Newsletter, Martin N. translates a short yet vivid first-hand account of a circumcision at age ten by an anonymous Turkish author; 5) A story and photo montage from the groundbreaking September-October 2012 Helsinki Symposium at which I presented my paper, “Protecting all from genital cutting - law, human rights and medicalization.”; 6) Exclusive to the ARC Newsletter, a photoreport by webmaster Jonathan Friedman on a meeting held at the New York German consulate regarding genital integrity with a top consular official; 7) Photoreports on the New Orleans Convention of the AAP by three different authors—veteran contributors Carl Augustsson and Aubrey Terron (formerly Aubrey Taylor) and ARC board member Marc Angelucci; 8) A photoreport on tabling regarding intactivism at Atlanta Pride; 9) Photographs of the Castro and Folsom Street Fairs; 10) Reprints of several outstanding blogs; and 11) News reports.

We are again very honored that In Search of Fatherhood magazine (http://globalfatherhooddialogue.blogspot.com) has featured me on the cover (along with a couple other activists) and has published, in its Autumn 2012 issue, my article on genital autonomy adapted from the paper I presented on September 1, 2011 at the conference held at the University of Keele in England on "Law, Human Rights, and Non-Therapeutic Interventions on Children." This is the same article scheduled to be published soon by Global Discourse (http://global-discourse.com).

Besides the genital autonomy article, I have four other papers in progress and due to be completed and published in the coming months, including one expanding on the e-letter recently cited by the German pediatric organization addressing the August policy statement and technical report by the American Academy of Pediatrics, one based in part on my presentation at the Helsinki symposium and examining the legal decision in Germany this past June and subsequent developments, one addressing human rights violated by circumcision, and one examining problems with informed consent in general and as applied to infant circumcision.

We deeply appreciate the support each of you offers us, be it financial, emotional, logistical, as colleagues, or a combination of these roles. I have said it before and will continue to say it till I’m blue in the face that we literally could not do it without you! As has always been the case since we started, 100% of all tax-deductible donations go directly to defraying the costs of safeguarding children. Donations can be sent to J. Steven Svoboda, ARC, 2961 Ashby Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94707, or made through paypal at our website (www.arclaw.org/arc_donate) or using the paypal address arc@orel.ws.

I wish everyone the merriest of Christmases, retrospectively wish all the happiest of Hanukkahs, and I hope everyone has a very joyful New Year.

J. Steven Svoboda
Executive Director
Attorneys for the Rights of the Child

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2012 Genital Autonomy Conference

J. Steven Svoboda

N OIRC’s twelfth, and my ninth, international symposium was set in the charming capital city of Helsinki from September 30-October 3, 2012. This was great for me personally as it allowed me to finally see the city that I had missed seeing due to illness my only previous time there in 1985. I have a good friend who lives two hours from Helsinki but whose band was playing in the capital the evening before the symposium started so he was able to meet me and give me an extensive and much appreciated tour of the city, including an unforgettable lunch at a Lapp restaurant.

This symposium marked another step forward for the intactivist movement. As discussed below, my presentation addressed the very exciting legal decision handed down in Cologne, Germany in June, probably the greatest legal victory ever and the clearest judicial acknowledgment to date of the right to bodily integrity. Norwegian Child Ombudsman Dr. Anne Lindboe’s appearance documented that we have on our side powerful, persuasive, well-educated allies who are willing to go to great lengths to protect genital integrity. Dr. Lindboe showed a film of her visit to the Simon Wiesenthal Center in New York City where she steadfastly maintained her commitment to protecting children despite efforts of those she met with to dissuade her from her mission.

The principal organizers—NOCIRC President Marilyn Milos, Sexp Foundation’s Eeva Matsuuke, and Genital Integrity’s David Smith and Richard Duncker—put together a fabulous event that well over a hundred folks attended. I was able to renew connections with old friends and colleagues, such as James Loewen, David Gisselquist (complete with adorable grandchild), Dr. Gert Van Dijk, bioethicist for the Royal Dutch Medical Association (KNMG), Dr. Sami Aldeeb of Switzerland, Dr. James Snyder, Dr. Robert Van Howe, Dr. Frederick Hodges, Dr. George Denniston, filmmaker par excellence Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon, Ken Drabik, Dan Strandjord, Dr. Mark Reiss, Michael Thomson, M. Novoa, Paul Mason, John Geishker. One special treat was the presence of the man who helped encourage me to found and then later mentored me in ARC’s early years—Tim Hammond. We also had the chance to match faces to people who had previously just been Internet monikers, such as conference observer Dr. Charli Carpenter and Dr. Morten Frisch. One particular treat was to meet my roommate, Brian Earp of the Ethics Department at the University of Oxford, with whom I have already embarked on several projects and who I dare say is fast becoming a valued friend.

Sexpo’s participation did mean that this symposium, differently from some past symposia, had a significant majority of presentations that were not centrally devoted to topics relating to genital integrity. These talks, while valuable in their own right, are not included in this report as they are not pertinent to our mission.

A Finnish mother made one of the most unforgettable presentations of this or any symposium, movingly yet simply telling her compelling story. Married to a Nigerian man, she became pregnant and after the boy’s birth, the father started to pressure her to have the boy circumcised. The mother put her foot down and the issue was seemingly resolved,
but at five months of age, the boy was spirited away and circumcised without anesthetic by a well-connected doctor acting at the father’s direction. While the local court found that the doctor erred for not seeking the mother’s consent, still he was acquitted of criminal wrongdoing. The father was found guilty only of criminal assault. For her courageous story, the young mother received an enthusiastic standing ovation from symposium attendees.

Professor Sami Aldeeb Abu-Sahlīch followed with an engaging, idiosyncratic, far-ranging comparative study of Islamic, Judaic, and Christian law and their impacts on physical integrity. Sami treated us to an absolutely uproarious video recreating Abraham’s dialog with God about sacrificing his son.

We were treated at this symposium to not one but two of Frederick Hodges’ erudite presentations. The first one debunked the famous image of a supposed Egyptian circumcision, throwing into question the oft-repeated implication that this procedure has been commonplace for millennia. The familiar image in fact probably depicts a genital shaving procedure. While some archeological and literary evidence suggests that some Ancient Egyptian males were subjected to either a dorsal slit or a circumcision, no evidence exists that these practices were widespread or long-standing.

Gert van Dijk of the Royal Dutch Medical Association (KNMG) discussed the strong KNMG position against male circumcision that he helped bring into fruition. Gert credited three factors helping contribute to this development: 1) the evolution of human rights and the ever-evolving moral community, now including women and gays; 2) growing concern with complications, and 3) the discrepancy between the KNMG’s strong anti-FGM position and lack of a position on male circumcision. He has stopped short of calling for a ban, fearing one could drive the practice underground. Despite numerous barriers to change in the wake of the KNMG statement, slowly change is happening. Human rights have a history of prevailing.

Steffan Jansson led a film presentation on banning circumcision in Sweden. In 2001, Sweden became the first country in the world to pass a law regulating circumcision and forbidding non-medical circumcision if the boy refuses to consent. The long-term goal must be to work for the abolition of a custom that is violating the child’s integrity and decisions over their own body and religious belief.

Bob Van Howe gave his typically excellent, fast-paced, dryly humorous debunking of the AAP’s August 2012 policy statement and technical report. Bob wryly listed “things that don’t exist according to the AAP: foreskin, ridged band, condoms, hepatitis B or C, and the right to bodily integrity.” Bob is coauthor of a paper regarding the AAP that Brian Earp and I are currently finalizing for publication early in 2013. As we will discuss, the AAP fails to make its case on so many levels, displaying sloppy scholarship, highly biased and technically incompetent review of the evidence, failing to examine benefits, and failing to quantify harms, thereby rendering their laughable attempt to weigh harms against benefits inevitably doomed. Bob discussed how the AAP disinters and breathes life back into excuses for circumcision that were debunked decades ago—urinary tract infections, cancer up. STIs do not affect infants and thus should not be a part of the discussion of infant circumcision. Besides, the overall risk of STIs is higher in circumcised males.

Bob included an extensive demolition of the three African studies on which the AAP hangs its hat. These studies had results that were suspiciously close to identical, so much so that there is only about a 2% chance of this happening. The African studies had highly motivated, highly compensated participants. In Africa, 11 out of 18 countries have a prevalence of HIV infection that is greater in circumcised men. There is no association between the foreskin and HIV infection in general African populations. In 5-10 years, it will become clear that the African experiment in circumcision to stop HIV is a colossal failure. HIV infections peaked in the late 90’s and the epidemic is already starting to come under control.

Epidemiologist Morten Frisch recently released an outstanding large-scale study of the consequences of male circumcision for men and their female partners, and he proved as outstanding a presenter as he is author. He discussed in detail the methodology and results of his study of sexual dysfunction and circumcision as recently published in the International Journal of Epidemiology. Many men reported problems with maintaining erections and with premature ejaculation. While males who are circumcised encounter a threefold increase in difficulty of reaching orgasm, female partners of circumcised men encounter an eightfold increase! Frisch circumvented already legendary problems he encountered in the review

Filmmaker Elyahu Ungar-Sargon and wife Pennie Ungar-Sargon (photo/James Loewen)

Intactivist professor and author William "Mack" O’Barr (photo/James Loewen)

Stalwart Long Island intactivist Anthony Losquadro (photo/James Loewen)
imparing functionality.

Earp delivered one of the best papers of the conference, arguing the moral and ethical impermissibility of removing healthy tissue from another’s body without their consent. Brian’s paper, “Of Faith and Circumcision: Can the Religious Beliefs of Parents Justify the Nonconsensual Cutting of Their Children’s Genitals?”, is presented in full elsewhere in this newsletter. Mark Reiss gave us a ten-year follow-up report on his tireless work promoting brises shalom or peaceful brises. A growing minority of Jewish families are adopting nonviolent circumcision.

I led off Tuesday, October 2, the final day of the symposium proper, with my talk, analyzing the June 2012 German court case upholding a child’s right to bodily integrity. Put simply, the child’s rights trump parental rights. Ensuing arguments claiming that the decision violated religious rights evidence a misplaced understanding of the proper scope of options available based on a parent’s religion with respect to procedures that may infringe on a child’s rights. Chronic issues are evident in the recurring tendencies toward “balancing harms against benefits,” and distinguishing male genital cutting as “nothing like” female genital cutting.

I argued that a recurring theme, also visible with the California ballot initiative and subsequent court case, entails non-judicial entities taking on quasi-judicial roles in a rush to protect so-called religious circumcision. I pointed out that, instead of appropriately prioritizing the interests of the child patient, all too often other entities are prioritized such as parents and society.

Keele University Professor Michael Thomson proposed that the best interests standard be replaced with what he believes would be a more straightforward approach of examining capabilities affected by a proposed medical intervention involving children. This approach would be consistent with Joel Feinberg’s “open future” approach.

Attorney Husein Muhammed, who is both Finnish and Islamic, presented a paper analyzing circumcision among Finnish immigrants. Jews and Tartar Muslims are Finland’s primary circumcising populations. The legality of circumcision is not yet clear, resulting in a dangerous situation in which physicians are therefore reluctant to
circumcise and parents may find themselves seeking help from non-professional circumcisers. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs plans to introduce legislation similar to the Swedish law to ensure that circumcisions are done by physicians.

Frederick Hodges presented on another intriguing, unique historical topic as only he can do, discussing Project MK-ULTRA, launched in 1953 by the CIA to investigate the possibilities of mind control. The CIA funded Cansever’s research into the psychological effects of male circumcision. Although this study challenged the wisdom behind the increasing drive toward mass involuntary newborn circumcision in the US, no one paid attention to it. The CIA wanted to know whether circumcision had any psychological after-effects, possibly because it wanted to see if it would weaken American male ego-strength. The redacted CIA report on the research differs from Cansever’s published report, suggesting that Cansever made discoveries that never made it into print. The study did establish that circumcision renders a subject more susceptible to suggestion.

John Geisheker contributed a cogent discussion of the need to gather better information on morbidity. Circumcision is not regulated; no protocols have been established, outcomes are not tracked, and there is no registry. Unusually, the responsible surgeons—most often, obstetrician/gynecologists—fail to take responsibility for post-operative care of this procedure.

Probably the hit of the symposium was Anne Lindboe, a pediatrician and the Norwegian Ombudsman for Children. Beautiful, poised, and eloquent, she proved herself a perfect spokeswoman for our movement, telling us that the Ombudsman’s office believes the procedure should be delayed until age 15 or 16 so the child can make his own decision. As a Children’s Ombudsman, she is also responsible for Jewish and Muslim children and they also must be protected.

Dr. Lindboe even showed a video of a visit to the Simon Wiesenthal Center in which she was told that she “has done tremendous harm” and is disrespectful. She nevertheless steadfastly, politely maintained her unshaken advocacy of the child’s right to bodily integrity. She overviewed harm caused by circumcision, stating that young boys should be protected against traditional practices such as circumcision until they have reached an age where they are able to understand the consequences of the procedure and are capable of making their own decision.

Jussi Nissinen courageously discussed his own story of psychological harm from his circumcision at age five, eventually reducing virtually the entire room to tears. He described feeling ashamed of his mutilated penis in the locker room and his attempts at foreskin restoration. He said, “I don’t know what sexual pleasure and fulfillment could be like.” When he tried to talk to a doctor, he was told the problems were all in his head.

Australian attorney and former Tasmanian Children’s Commissioner Paul Mason discussed how corporal punishment became accepted by the United Nations as a human rights issue. We can learn much from how activities on this issue fought the long battle requiring infinite patience. As many people know, ARC organized a delegation to the UN in 2001 that put male circumcision officially in the UN record for the first time as a human rights violation. Now there are signs that the coming year, 2013, may bring further human rights intactivism with the UN. Paul didn’t give his talk because he was preempted by Anne Lindboe, whom he invited to speak.

At various points throughout the symposium, observer R. Charli Carpenter, a political science professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, interviewed me pursuant to a book she is writing about social movements including intactivism. I discussed in detail our work regarding human rights and the United Nations as well as overviewing the range of activities in which ARC has been involved over the years.

The final day included a series of workshops. Ever since first meeting him at the Keele Symposium in 2008, I have always felt that filmmaker Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon has an engaging and pleasant approach. He outlined for us a loophole within Jewish law allowing commandments to be overridden in order to protect human dignity.

Richard Russell shared in detail how he has managed to live with the results of a botched circumcision. Tim Hammond, my mentor in ARC’s early years, came to his first symposium since Oxford in 1998 and caught everyone’s attention describing his detailed harm documentation efforts. A Muslim imam
or religious leader had been continually advocating for the permissibility of medically performed circumcisions. After seeing the photographs sent to Tim by survey respondents, he came face to face with the reality of harm that he had not confronted before. No longer able to deny the harm of circumcision, he asked Eeva how he could help in the battle.

Peter Ball discussed restoration efforts and the harm of circumcision. Paul Mason and John Dalton facilitated a wide-ranging, extended group brainstorm session regarding how to best frame our message in order to effect meaningful change. The discussion was informed by recent significant events such as the AAP policy statement and the Cologne court decision.

Three cheers for this great event, which stretched over four days and gave many of us ample energy to redouble our efforts at protecting children. We look forward eagerly to the Thirteenth Symposium, scheduled for Boulder, Colorado, in the Summer of 2014.

Harry Meislahn of the Illinois chapter of NOCIRC—a prominent anti-circumcision organization—was asked if he would argue that Jews should discontinue circumcising their babies, along with secular or Christian parents who might be doing it out of cultural habit or because they thought it might be good for the baby’s health. He replied: “No. I don’t prescribe for Jews, at all. This is an absolute loser. I’m not Jewish. … I withdraw from this field because it generates lots of heat [and] very little light.”

He went on to say, however: “I would maintain that a Jewish baby feels pain just as a non-Jewish baby feels pain, and there are Jewish men, just like non-Jewish men, who are real angry that this was done to them.”

The philosopher Iain Brassington has recently expressed a similar concern. On the Journal of Medical Ethics blog, he wrote: “Though I [have] mentioned the [recent] decision of the German court that ritual circumcision constituted assault, I’ve wanted to stay clear of saying more about it [because] it seemed too potentially toxic.” To give another example, the bioethicist Dan O’Connor from Johns Hopkins University—in an article entitled “A Piece I Really Didn’t Want to Write on Circumcision”—has recently said that: “when [a reporter] calls my work and ask[s] if there is a bioethicist in the house who will give the anti-circumcision viewpoint, I beg off. … I would be a terrible interviewee anyway, [since I would have to preface] my every argument against circumcision with rambling spils about what loving and caring parents my [Jewish] friends are.”

Finally, as a philosopher colleague of mine wrote to me in a recent email: “To be honest with you, I am strongly anti-circumcision. The reason I don’t [write papers on the topic] is that I have a large number of circumcised Jewish … friends who I think would be offended if they found out [about my views].”

Like all of the men I have just mentioned, I find myself in the position of being very skeptical about ritual circumcision on ethical grounds—for reasons I will give in just a moment—and yet I am well aware that since I myself am neither Jewish nor Muslim, I have an especially good chance of offending someone who is when I publicly criticize this practice. This chance is, of course, magnified by the fact that circumcision is seen by some as a central, or even obligatory, ritual in each of these faiths. And just like the bioethicist Dan O’Connor and the philosopher colleague whose email I quoted above, this potential for causing offense extends to many of my closest friends, to colleagues of mine, and to a pretty wide range of people I have no particular interest in irritating.

So perhaps there is a reason to hesitate. Because religious convictions are a deep, and certainly emotionally-charged,
aspect of the lives of so many, attempts to question a religiously-motivated practice—especially by one who is not religious, or differently religious—can lead to outcomes that are very far from productive. To illustrate, here is a quote from a comment I received on my Facebook page in response to a post I published on this topic in 2011:

Sorry Brian, you’re entitled to your non-Jewish opinion, but we’ve been doing very nicely for 5,771 years with this ancient tradition of our people. And I don’t even know who the hell you are, but this kind of nonsense just pisses me off.

So, as I say, sometimes the conversation doesn’t turn out to be as productive as I’d hoped. Part of what I think is going on here, is that we have an unwritten rule in polite society that says that certain ideas or practices are out of bounds for critical discussion. The English humorist Douglas Adams made essentially this same point in a speech he gave in Cambridge in 1998. Talking about religious customs specifically, he said:

‘Here is an idea or a notion that you’re not allowed to say anything bad about; you’re just not. Why not? — because you’re not!’ If somebody votes for a party that you don’t agree with, you’re free to argue about it as much as you like; everybody will have an argument but nobody feels aggrieved by it. If somebody thinks taxes should go up or down you are free to have an argument about [that], but on the other hand if somebody says ‘I mustn’t move a light switch on a Saturday’, you say, ‘Fine, I respect that.’

Now, obviously I don’t have any arguments about whether or when it’s OK to use a light switch. I do want to focus, though, for a second on this idea about respect. I don’t think it actually is showing respect to anyone to give an automatic pass to anything they say or do just because it might have to do with their religious practice. I think that sort of avoidance has much more to do with fear than with respect—fear that you might upset the person, or fear that you might sound stupid for not knowing more about the custom, or fear that the conversation might turn out to be awkward, or whatever the fear might be.

Respect, it seems to me, is very different from this. Respect has to do with taking certain positive things for granted. In my own experience, for example, I sometimes talk with my Jewish friends and acquaintances about my views on the ethics of circumcision. And I respect them enough to know that they’ll listen with an open mind, really consider what I’m saying, and assume the best of intentions on my part. And most of the time, they respect me enough to know that I will do them the same courtesy, which, of course, I will. Respect is not about avoidance, then. It is about the opposite of avoidance—it is about engagement, conversation, communication—so long as these are done in a fair-minded and well-intended way.

I also think that there is something potentially very condescending about the idea that someone’s feelings—religious or otherwise—might be so fragile and irrational that instead of just saying what you really believe, and having an honest conversation about it, you should tiptoe around, and blush, and make excuses, and pretend that you don’t mean what you mean or think what you think. That doesn’t seem like real respect either—and I think my religious friends would be rightly insulted if they thought I was operating out of this mindset when I talked with them about their beliefs and practices.

So, having said all that, in what follows, I am simply going to trust that I can engage directly with the ethical arguments for and against religiously-motivated circumcision, without having to hedge or qualify, or worry about whether I might offend someone for whom this practice is seen as being too sacred to talk about. People are free to disagree with me, of course, and I will be happy to take on board any constructive criticism they may have to offer. But I do want to spend the rest of my time dealing directly with the arguments.

I will start with an argument against religiously-motivated circumcision, and then I will consider some common objections.

The premise of my argument is this. As a rule, it should be considered morally impermissible to sever healthy tissue from another person’s body—perhaps especially if that tissue is coming from the person’s reproductive organs—without first asking, and then actually receiving, that person’s permission.

Now, ordinarily, and with respect to almost every case we could imagine, this would count as a foundational ethical principle. It does presume that the individual is an appropriate unit for moral analysis; it does presume that individuals have rights as persons, that bodily integrity is one of those rights, and that the infringement of that integrity can only be permitted under conditions of informed consent.
Of course, someone could question or even deny any one of those presumptions, but then they would have to come up with a better way to ground their own moral theories that didn’t inadvertently create a justification for having parts of their body cut off without their permission. I’m not saying this is impossible, but it’s something to look out for. And actually, I think there is a competing metaphysic hidden within religious defenses of circumcision—and it’s one that downplays the relevance of the individual, and specifically the individual as a child, to independent moral consideration—but I will come onto that point a little bit later on.

For now, let’s assume that the ethical premise I’ve given is a reasonable one, and let’s take it for granted to see what follows. Well, since ritual circumcision involves the removal of healthy tissue from the genitals of a newborn or young child, and since babies and young children are incapable of giving meaningful consent to such a procedure, our principle is obviously violated, and therefore circumcision is unethical on this theory.

Now, this is not just abstract philosophy. As most of us know, a recent decision by a German court in Cologne—which said that ritual circumcision is a form of assault—relied on ethical reasoning very similar to what I have just laid out. And as we also know, this conclusion was not very readily accepted by a large number of religious leaders within Judaism and Islam, and even within some corners of Christianity. This last point should be a little surprising, of course, since the founder of Christianity—Paul (or Saul) of Tarsus—was explicitly and even energetically opposed to the practice of circumcision, as he made very clear in his letters to the earliest Christian churches. And, as Sami Aldeeb pointed out in his speech yesterday, this was the official church position for a pretty long time.

But, leaving that aside, what this reaction to the Cologne decision means is that we can look at some objections to the argument I have given that are not just hypothetical, but that have actually been given—and very recently—as serious attempts to defend ritual circumcision against the charge that it is an unethical practice. And I would like to consider a few of these objections one at a time.

The first objection is that religious circumcision is an ancient tradition, and one that is felt to be very important to the practice of Judaism or Islam. For example, Dieter Graumann, the president of the German Central Council of Jews, has said, “Circumcision of newborn boys is a fixed part of the Jewish religion and has been practiced … for centuries.” He then went on to criticize the Cologne ruling as being “outrageous” and “insensitive.” An Islamic representative, Ali Demir, made a similar point: “this is a … procedure,” he said, “with thousands of years of tradition behind it and [a] high symbolic value.”

Now, as I was preparing this talk, I wondered about whether I should count these sorts of statements as actual “objections” to the ethical case made by the German court. Seemingly, it should go without saying that something’s having been done for a long time does not in any way amount to an argument for its moral permissibility. The thing might actually be morally permissible, of course, but this just wouldn’t be the way to show it. The more I thought about it, however, the more I came to believe that I couldn’t just pass over the “ancient tradition” argument as a sort of a straw man. This is because this exact line of reasoning has been repeatedly cited in recent weeks, by a number of influential religious leaders, in a seemingly sincere attempt to shape public discussion on this topic. So I need to spend a little bit of time responding to this view, with what would otherwise be a statement of the obvious:

Many practices that are now seen as very clearly unethical had been going on for an extremely long time before anyone had the idea to question them. Examples include slavery, footbinding, the cutting of female genitals, and beating disobedient children with sticks. Usually these practices persisted without much alarm for one of two reasons. Either the moral standards that they would eventually be seen as violating had not yet had been developed, or those standards did exist for other cases but just weren’t commonly seen as applying to the practice itself until enough people sat down and made the connection. I think what’s happening right now with circumcision is not so much the first of these, but more the second. In other words, the relevant ethical principles—about bodily integrity, consent, protecting the vulnerable in society, and so on—have been available to us for quite some time now. It’s just that we’re so used to circumcision as a cultural habit, that many people fail to see how blatantly inconsistent this practice is with the rest of their own moral landscape.

My colleague Anders Sandberg has given
an argument for this view that I think is worth considering in a little bit of detail. He writes:

It is interesting to consider a fictional case: suppose I come up with a religion that claims [that] male nipples are bad, and should be removed in infancy in order to prevent various spiritual and medical maladies, as well as showing faith. I have no doubt that getting this new practice approved anywhere would be very hard, no matter how much I and my adherents argued that it was a vital part of our religion. No doubt arguments about unnecessary mutilation and infringement of children’s self determination would be made, and most would find them entirely unobjectionable. If my religion joined the chorus of religious critics to the German decision it is likely that the others would not appreciate our support: after all, they do not want approval for all religious surgery, just a particular one. And nobody likes to be supported by an embarrassing supporter.

But this seems to suggest that what is really going on is [a] status quo bias and [something about] the social capital of religions. We are used to circumcision in Western culture, so it is largely accepted. It is very similar to how certain drugs are regarded as criminal and worth fighting, yet other drugs like alcohol are merely problems: policy is set, not based on actual harms, but … on a social acceptability scale and who has institutional power. This all makes perfect sense sociologically, but it is bad ethics.

Now, I don’t think that Anders’ scenario is completely water-tight, and I don’t think that a theologically sophisticated religious person would find the “male nipples” example to be an appropriate or a complete analogy. But I do think that Anders is onto something when he suggests that if the “ancient tradition” objection does carry any weight in this conversation, it is for sociological reasons rather than ethical ones. In fact, I don’t see that this objection does any argumentative work for the defender of religious circumcision: It might work as a rhetorical strategy to affirm the social capital of his religion, but it isn’t an argument.

OK, I would like to move on to a second objection that I have heard a number of times in response to the Cologne decision, and one that is potentially a little harder to deal with. This objection is that circumcision is divinely mandated and hence obligatory for religious Jews and, according to some interpretations, maybe Muslims as well. In Judaism, as we all know, the mandate is even specific about the exact timing of the procedure: according to the book of Genesis, the baby’s foreskin must be removed on the eighth day after birth. And this timing is, according to a number of vocal religious commentators, quote, “non-negotiable.”

I want to start with this idea about non-negotiability. My first question is, according to whom? Certainly people like Dieter Graumann, the president of the German Central Council of Jews I mentioned before, has repeated this claim. And so have a number of influential, usually conservative or Orthodox Jews, some of whom have been saying some very authoritative-sounding things on behalf of, quote, “the Jewish people”. But this seems to me to be really disingenuous—and actually I find it somewhat offensive—since “the Jewish people” is not a collection of uncritical sheep who all think the same thing. “The Jewish people” do not uniformly adhere to the exact same theology. And, specifically, “the Jewish people” includes a large and growing number of religious and non-religious individuals—including some very intelligent and morally insightful individuals—who simply do not believe that circumcision is a “non-negotiable” component of their faith. I suppose someone could argue that certain conservative representatives within Judaism are theologically correct, and everyone else is deluded, but that would take a lot of time and energy and it would be an argument that would probably fail to convince anyone who didn’t already hold that view. Also, it would be much harder to express as a sort of simple axiom, which is what the newspapers seem to appreciate, and so instead we get these public declarations that make it sound like Judaism is a monolith and that there is no meaningful debate to be had about the religious requirements implied by certain passages within the Torah.

Another point is this—and, again, I wish I were attacking a straw man here, but based on the mainstream, public debate I have seen going on in the last few weeks, I feel that some very basic points about the philosophy of religion need to be brought up as reminders. First, even though a person or a group of people may sincerely believe that a given practice is divinely mandated, it doesn’t
necessarily follow that it is divinely mandated. Second, even if something really is divinely mandated, it doesn’t follow that it’s non-negotiable. Third, even if something is felt to be non-negotiable, it doesn’t follow that it’s morally permissible. And this brings us very quickly to the classic dilemma about what you’re supposed to do when God tells you to do something that’s unethical.

We all know the puzzle about Abraham and Isaac: God tells Abraham that he must sacrifice his son. So what should Abraham do? There are a couple of well-known possibilities in logical space here. One option is that Abraham should assume that he’s misunderstood something. Since killing innocent children is unethical, and since God is a morally perfect being, God must not really have said that. Another option is that he starts to wonder if maybe he wasn’t really talking with God after all, but maybe it was Satan, or maybe just a voice in his own head. Or he can conclude that God is not as morally developed as he used to think, or is even a source of evil. Whichever way he chooses to go, the correct answer is, no, I will not kill my son. That would be totally depraved, and in fact I can’t think of very many things to do that would be less ethical than that. So, no, I refuse to do it. That’s the correct answer.

Obviously a lot of people have looked at this case over the centuries, and I’m not the first one to give the analysis you just heard. As a number of commentators have noticed, there is a pretty big conflict in this story between the requirements of morality and the requirements of the divine mandate. Kierkegaard (1843) thought he could solve the puzzle by talking about the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” This is the idea that we should use our faith to rise above mere ethics and morality and enter into a higher, and more absolute relationship with the divine. Now I think that this is a very dangerous thing to propose. And I think it has real consequences, one of which is that the religiously-motivated suspension of morality has been a source of a lot of suffering, for a lot of people—including marginalized and vulnerable people—for a very long time.

But my sense, actually, is that the large majority of contemporary religious believers don’t actually do this. What I mean is, when something is felt to be unethical, what they actually do is one of two things. Either they revise their understanding of what is divinely required in the first place; or else they engage in these very complicated psychological maneuvers—many of them unconscious—that lead them to conclude that the thing must not be unethical after all, even though it really looks like it is from every other perspective. So for circumcision, for example, they might downplay the harms of the procedure, or use euphemisms like “snip” or “flap of skin” when they talk about what’s being cut off; they might emphasize the health benefits, or exaggerate the differences with female genital cutting, or exaggerate the similarities to vaccination, and a whole range of strategies that make it seem like circumcision isn’t really that bad.

I have seen one major exception to this approach, however. And this comes from an interview conducted by the filmmaker Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon. The clip starts with an Orthodox Rabbi named Hershy Worch talking about circumcision. He says:

It’s painful, it’s abusive. It’s traumatic, and if anybody who’s not in a covenant does it, I think they should be put in prison. I don’t think anybody has an excuse for mutilating a child. ... Depriving them of [part of their] penis. We don’t have rights to other people’s bodies, and a baby needs to have its rights protected. I think anybody who circumcises a baby is an abuser, unless it’s absolutely medically advised. Otherwise – what for? ...

After a moment of what I interpreted as stunned silence, you can hear Eliyahu asking a really pertinent question:

How does this covenant alleviate your ethical responsibility that you just so articulately posed? How is it that being in this covenant exempts you from that term … how can you not call yourself an abuser?

The Rabbi actually cuts him off and says:

I’m an abuser! I do abusive things because I am in covenant with God. And ultimately God owns my morals, he owns my body, he owns my past and future, and that’s the meaning of this covenant – that I agreed to ignore the pain and the rights and the trauma of my child to be in this covenant.

Now, I want to say that I actually have a lot of respect for this Rabbi. I think that his statements reach a level of honesty, and empathy, and Kierkegaardian philosophical consistency that has been otherwise lacking from the wider public conversation on this issue. Here is someone who acknowledges, without hedging or qualification, that he is torturing a child. But he doesn’t take this knowledge as an excuse to go back to his scripture and re-interpret the original commandment, nor does he allow himself to believe that circumcision is a harmless little snip. He just doesn’t resolve the dissonance. Instead, he takes responsibility for his religious commitments, as well as for his behavior, and I think that by doing this, he gives us a rare and unmediated example of the power of religious belief to justify—what he acknowledges is—the violent assault of a child.

So what should we do with this? I started with the idea that it should be considered morally impermissible to remove healthy tissue from another person’s body without getting that person’s permission. And since circumcision violates that rule, I said it was unethical. Then I tried to show that the “ancient tradition” objection doesn’t get us off the hook, nor do the points about circumcision’s being divinely mandated or non-negotiable. So at this point, it seemed like we should be able to stick with the conclusion that circumcision is unethical.

But now we have something different. Now we have this idea to think about that maybe there’s something bigger than ethics — something like this direct relationship to the divine.

I said at the beginning that I thought there was a hidden metaphysic behind
religious defenses of circumcision, and I think now that we’re getting a better sense of what that is. I think it’s this idea that an individual human being, such as a child, is not really the ultimate object of moral analysis.

Instead there are these other obligations, obligations that come from a community identity, obligations that come from a concern about historical continuity, or ritual continuity; obligations that come from a special covenant between a god and a group of people. And the effect of all this is that the individual child becomes a sort of a non-entity. His body becomes not his body. His pain becomes a sort of instrument in fulfilling a higher purpose.

And so, I think before we can get anywhere in this discussion, we are going to have to just acknowledge that that is a different metaphysic. I think we have to acknowledge that certain religious commitments are based on a meta-ethical view of the universe that is in direct conflict with Western ideas about individuals, human rights adhering to those individuals as individuals, and the notion that children and infants, above all, need special protection because they can’t defend those rights on their own.

I guess my response to this conflict is that obviously we can, in theory, adopt any metaphysical view under the sun. We could try to organize society around a view that involves sacrificing human hearts in order to make the crops grow. We could adopt a view that says it’s ok have slaves, and wage war, and take our neighbor’s land and belongings. We could adopt a view that says that animals should be set on fire and burnt at the altar; or one that says that sparing the rod will spoil the child, or that our daughters should be stoned to death if they disobey, or whatever we want. All of these views are logically possible, and many of them are historically accurate. Many of them find direct textual support as well in the holy books of major religions. And even in 2012, a number of these practices are apparently psychologically sustainable under conditions of social isolation, and dogmatism, and ignorance, and are still going on in many parts of the world.

But that isn’t how we think about things in Western societies. We have a different sort of worldview that we use to make sense of concepts like human rights. And I think we like this metaphysic because it allows us to do things like construct a coherent and sensible legal code. It allows us to do things like prosecute cases of rape and criminal assault.

And it allows us to say that these things are wrong not just arbitrarily, or because God says so, or because we just feel like doing it that way, but because we have reason to say so. They are wrong because individuals have rights. They are wrong because those rights include things like bodily integrity, and they are wrong because the infringement of that integrity requires consent. So the idea I want to leave you with is this. If we think that there is any chance that we should give up these basic concepts—so that we can defer to a worldview that says that things like community identity are more important than individual identity and bodily integrity—then we’ll have to pay the price of that choice and face it honestly. And that means that the very same people who are asking for the religious freedom to perform circumcisions in a secular society, would have to be prepared to give up their own right to complain if someone wanted to cut off a part of their body, or interfere with their genitals, or that of their daughters or sisters or wives. That is, as I say, a logically possible universe. But it isn’t one that I would want to live in, and I don’t think you can have it both ways. Thank you.

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**German Circumcision Bill**

**NYC Intactivists at the German Consulate**

November 23, 2012
Jonathan Friedman

On Friday November 23, 2012, I gathered with fellow NYC intactivists outside of the German Consulate to prepare for a demonstration. The demonstration was called in response to the German government’s debate on legalizing circumcision. The first round of three debates was held a day earlier in the German parliament.

When I arrived outside the German consulate shortly after 11am, I was greeted by the Barefoot Intactivist and Nicholas Socha. As we were assembling our signs, Bernd Georg Reindl (Consul, Head of Political and Scientific Department), stepped outside and invited us in for a discussion. We were surprised and delighted at the gesture, and joined him inside the lobby.

Reindl was very interested in hearing what we had to say. He had just been looking over the arguments put forth in the parliamentary debate from the previous day. I think he was surprised to meet us and anticipated a valuable discussion.

Reindl’s ultimate concern seemed to be with Germany’s reputation: “Germany cannot be the first one to ban circumcision,” he repeatedly stated.

We discussed how immediately following the Cologne Court’s decision, hospitals throughout Europe stopped performing circumcisions. Many of these countries have long been debating the issue of circumcision, with political parties and medical organizations posturing for legislation. We argued that if Germany could ban it, it would give others the courage to ban it.

We discussed the functions of the foreskin and the effects of circumcision on masturbation and sex. Reindl was
He gave examples of blood transfusion for Jehovah's witnesses and metzitzah b'peh as cases where the state intervenes because they are life-threatening cases.

In regards to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Reindl claimed that in the debates on writing the CRC, male circumcision was excluded because predominantly Muslim countries would not have signed it.

As for religious rights, we discussed how circumcision violates the religious freedom of the child, which is what brought up the Jehovah's witness case in the first place. Reindl was in favor of saving the life of the child by performing a blood transfusion and barring the child from entering heaven (according to the parent's belief). Circumcision, we argued, if done later in life, would not have such severe religious consequences, if any.

The argument about sex discrimination was something that Reindl couldn't dispute, except he referred again to his belief that, legally, male circumcision is not protected under the CRC.

Reindl agreed that all of our arguments were valid, but again, was ultimately concerned with Germany being the first to ban circumcision. We ended the discussion, thanked him for inviting us in for a talk, and stepped outside for a demonstration.

It was very sunny outside, a bit cold and a little windy. The Barefoot Intactivist brought a drum, so we were loud and noticeable. We did a few chants in English and German, including “No Excuse for Genital Abuse!” and “Beschneidung ist unrecht - auch bei jungen,” which translates to: “circumcision is wrong - also for boys.”

We received lots of positive responses. A taxi driver waiting for a traffic light told us that circumcision was against his religion. He was Greek Orthodox. Two maintenance workers also gave us a thumbs up.

Anthony Losquadro from Intaction.org read a letter to Germany’s minister Angela Merkel, which can be viewed on Youtube. He then went inside and delivered it to the consulate.

It was great to see so many intactivists come out on such short notice. We didn’t bring flyers or pamphlets this time, but I feel like people got the message because our signs were great and we had a drum.

..."German Intactivists Gather for Berlin Demonstration," continued from p.1

Ali Util, ex-Muslim politician from the Pirate Party, addressing demonstrators in front of the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin interview with the media. Ali’s own circumcision story shocked many, as he could recall explicit details, and described the ordeal as “a completely horrific experience... burned into my mind forever.” His story gave many people the courage to speak out against circumcision and to work for protecting children.
Germany’s Catholic Bishops Conference said it hoped the bill would help safeguard religious freedoms. No comment was immediately available from the country’s Central Council of Muslims.

 Resolution OK’d to Ban Female Genital Mutilation
 The Associated Press
 December 21, 2012

The UN General Assembly unanimously approved a resolution Thursday calling for a global ban on female genital mutilation, a centuries-old practice stemming from the belief that circumcising girls controls women’s sexuality and enhances fertility.

It also has been linked to religious and cultural practices, although Muslim and Christian leaders have spoken out against it.

Although not legally binding, General Assembly resolutions reflect international concerns and carry moral and political weight.

The UN said in 2010 that about 70 million girls and women had undergone the procedure, and the World Health Organization said about 6,000 girls were circumcised every day.

The resolution calls the practice harmful and a serious threat to the psychological, sexual and reproductive health of women and girls.

It calls on the UN’s 193 member states to condemn the practice and launch education campaigns to eliminate it.

Germany Passes Law to Protect Circumcision, Overruling Court Decision
Madeline Chambers
 Reuters
December 12, 2012

German politicians passed a law on Wednesday to protect the right to circumcise infant boys in a show of support for Muslims and Jews angered by a local court ban on the practice in May.

The ban – imposed on the grounds that circumcision amounted to “bodily harm” – triggered an emotional debate over the treatment of Jews and other religious minorities, a sensitive subject in a country still haunted by its Nazi past.

The outcry prompted Germany’s centre-right government and opposition parties to draw up legislation confirming the practice was legal – overruling the decision by a court in the western city of Cologne.

The new law passed by an overwhelming majority in Bundestag lower house said the operation could be carried out, as long as parents were informed about the risks.

Jewish groups welcomed the move.

“This vote and the strong commitment shown … to protect this most integral practice of the Jewish religion is a strong message to our community for the continuation and flourishing of Jewish life in Germany,” said Moshe Kantor, President of the European Jewish Congress.

It meant a lot to have representatives from Terre des Femmes, a women’s rights organization campaigning to end male and female circumcision. It’s quite different in the States, where intactivists are often ridiculed or lambasted for mentioning female circumcision. I felt like I was in good company.

After the speakers were done I participated in my first “Bloodstained Men and their Friends” performance. A group of us, mostly men, dressed up in white body suits with blood-red crotches, and stood with our backs facing the crowd. An audio clip of a baby's cries during a circumcision aired over the speakers, and, one-by-one, we each turned around to face the crowd at 10-second intervals.

The word betroffener is used to describe men who were circumcised, and connotes something along the lines of survivor or victim. Although inside the Bundestag, just a few steps away, our voices were almost completely ignored, I am glad that the circumcision debate is happening in Germany, a country where human rights is taken seriously by its population.

Our campaign is certainly not over, and I’ll be meeting with intactivists during my stay here to strategize on how to have a direct dialogue with muslim and Jewish communities, and to see how else I can contribute to the movement here.

Irmingard Schewe-Gerigk of Terre des Femmes discusses why feminists must oppose male circumcision

“Bloodstained Men and their Friends” Perform at the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin

Jonathan Friedman
In sharp contrast, the Royal Dutch Medical Association calls circumcision dangerous, unconstitutional, and urges its physicians to deter parents. This April, a German court ruled on those grounds that circumcision is criminal assault. The court stated that circumcision causes irreversible bodily harm, and that boys' rights to bodily integrity and autonomy outweigh their parents' religious and other rights.

Should parents say yes or no to circumcision (physicians are likely to solicit the business)? It would be wise to say no, given that no medical association in the world recommends it. But let's assume that parents want to weigh the pros and cons. Which version of the facts is true? And is circumcision ethical and legal? We don't amputate girls' breasts at birth even though it would prevent breast cancer.

The Benefits Argument

The AAP's claim that circumcision has health benefits is false and misleading. Parents will mistakenly assume that the surgery will benefit their sons. In fact, it does not prevent urinary tract infections, penile cancer, or HIV. At best, it reduces the risk. Thus, about 99 to 199 foreskins are sacrificed for every urinary tract infection prevented, and UTIs can be treated with oral antibiotics. Infants are not at risk of penile cancer, a rare disease in old age that is prevented by washing. Thus, hundreds of thousands of foreskins are sacrificed to help one unhygienic man in old age. Infants are not sexually active, so they are not at risk of HIV. Even if circumcision reduces the risk of HIV by 60%, that is a statistically insignificant 1.3% absolute reduction, and the operation does not prevent HIV. Only abstinence, monogamy, or safe sex prevent HIV, so circumcision is completely unnecessary. It would again be sacrificial to circumcise more than one million boys per year to benefit a few random men who do not practice safe sex.

The Risks

The AAP also has understated the risks, even admitting that the true rate is unknown, which makes balancing the risks impossible. Whatever the rate, circumcision risks catastrophic injury such as infections, loss of all or part of the glans or the entire penis (one circumcision device maker went bankrupt as a result of lawsuits), and death. One expert estimates that circumcision kills more than one hundred boys per year in America, a study the AAP fails to mention.

The Surgery

The AAP Report also does not describe the foreskin or the surgery. The foreskin is the size of a postcard in the erect male, and is replete with blood vessels and nerve endings. The surgery is highly invasive and brutal. As videos show, boys are strapped down and literally skinned alive, often without anesthetic, which is largely ineffective anyway.

Boys try to escape, scream, show high stress levels, and some go into shock. Circumcision also interferes with sleep, eating, and maternal bonding, and increases sensitivity to pain, possibly for life.

Harm

The AAP does not mention harm, as it should, since it discusses weighing benefits and risks at length. Circumcision harms all boys and men. It is harmful to cause pain, to cut off living body parts, to radically change the appearance of the penis, to reduce its length and girth, and to leave a scar. The AAP's claim that circumcision does not affect sexual function is false. As anyone can see, after circumcision, the foreskin can no longer glide effortlessly back and forth. The surgery also removes the most sensitive parts of the penis. It can cause erectile dysfunction, and women are more likely to reach climax with an intact partner. Many men are extremely angry at physicians and their parents for having circumcised them against their will. Since circumcision is "all pain, no gain", and men do not choose it for themselves, parents should say no to it.

Ethics

The AAP's own ethics committee states that a physician's duty is to his or her patient, irrespective of the parents' beliefs. Physicians who consider parents' religious, cultural, or personal preferences and beliefs violate this rule of medical ethics. Physicians who circumcise also violate the first principle of medical ethics, "do no harm".
The Law

As to the law in America, the German court was correct. The Constitution’s Bill of Rights gives every individual - including every boy - the right to life and bodily security, to freedom or autonomy, to choose his own religion, and to the same protection of the law from genital cutting as girls enjoy. Children are not slaves and parents do not own them. Physicians and parents cannot risk harming children or harm them for religious reasons or any reason. Circumcision is also criminal assault, as the German court found, and child abuse. In fact, physicians and parents have a legal duty to protect their children from circumcision. Lastly, the fundamental rule of Medicaid law is that Medicaid only covers necessary medical care, not unnecessary, elective cosmetic surgery. In recommending that Medicaid pay for circumcision, the AAP is advising its members to break the law.

In summary, the AAP Report will mislead unwary parents, physicians, hospitals, Medicaid officials, and legislators. The AAP Report has put profits ahead of the health and wishes of boys and men. Circumcision is medically, ethically, and legally unjustifiable. It still crazy and sacrificial after all these years. The rules are, "his body, his decision" and "do not operate on healthy boys."

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2012 AAP Conference in New Orleans
Carl Augustsson
October 20-22, 2012

The American Academy of Pediatrics recently held their annual conference in New Orleans, LA.

This conference brings together doctors from around the United States and from foreign countries. Inside the convention, numerous interests, both business and non-profit, are allowed to set up booths. Intact America has always had a booth inside this annual convention. However, this year, with less than a week to go, Intact America was told that it had been expelled from inside the convention. This year it was particularly important for us to be there, as the American Academy of Pediatrics had just recently released a ridiculous statement claiming that the benefits of circumcision (of which there are none!) outweigh the risks.

However, while they were able to kick us out of their convention floor, they were not able to silence our voices. Instead, we simply moved outside. Thankfully for us, the weather was beautiful, with warm temperatures and not a hint of rain. As a result, we picketed outside of the convention grounds for three days straight, from 8am to 4:30pm, Saturday October 20, through Monday October 22. I myself was there on Saturday and Sunday.

There were several rules which we had to follow. For example, we were required to keep moving, and we had to stay on the sidewalk. The New Orleans Police Department was rather strict about enforcing this rule. For example, on the Saturday morning when we had just arrived and were putting our signs together, the police came up to us to tell us to keep moving, and that they had already received a complaint. How more obvious could it be that the American Academy of Pediatrics is afraid of us exposing the truth? However, I must emphasize that the New Orleans Police Department was fair to us, as they no doubt received numerous requests from some of the doctors to “get these Intactivists away from us.”

We set ourselves up across the street next to some benches on the sidewalk. At that spot there was a fence surrounding a vacant lot. We placed several banners on this fence. The largest one was a collection of adult men holding their baby pictures, along with their names and the years in which they were circumcised. The caption at the top of the banner read “I Did Not Consent.” One other notable visual we had were men in white body suits with bloody crotches.

While we did receive some negative feedback from some of the attendees, we received far more positive feedback, especially from the European and Latin American doctors. Some pointed out that back home no one is cut and that most doctors would refuse to do this. They find it strange that this exists in the US. Many of them asked to take pictures of us holding our signs. I must have posed for over a dozen pictures. The first one I posed for was for the head of the German equivalent of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Just days earlier he had testified in the German Parliament against a proposed law designed to protect the ability of parents to cut their sons. The Jewish and Muslim groups in Germany have been arguing that most boys in the US—of all backgrounds—are cut and that there is no opposition to this. He had argued that no, rates in the US have been declining and that there is an Intactivist movement. He took my picture to prove that point. Another doctor from Mexico City took my picture to put in his office. It’s important to note that we also got support from many of the US doctors as well. Such support helps give us the strength to keep fighting.

One of the highlights of our rally was the press conference which we held at noon on Saturday. The first person to speak was Georganne Chapin, the founder and head of Intact America. After which, four brave men, ranging in age from early 60s to late 20s, spoke about how
they deeply resent what was done to them. They spoke about the pain of having to come to terms with their loss. No doubt, being circumcised must be painful enough in its own right (I am myself intact, so I can only imagine); however, it must be even harder to publicly speak out against this injustice. I salute these four brave men, and my heart goes out to them and all other mutilated men. One of the four, Anthony Losquadro, even looked up the doctor who had cut him and called him. He asked this now retired doctor questions like “did I scream”, and “how did you feel strapping me down like that.” While the doctor never did answer any of his questions, he did at least have the decency to listen to Anthony and even encouraged him to keep talking. Anthony thanked him for listening. After all, he could have easily hung up.

The message to doctors is simple: if you don’t want to get this awkward phone call one day: PUT THE KNIFE DOWN NOW!!!

I really enjoyed meeting so many other intactivists. Likewise, it’s good to know that we are getting the message out more and more. Look for videos on YouTube by James Loewen about the rally.

Protest at Academy of Pediatrics Over Circumcision
Double Standards in New Orleans
Marc Angelucci
ARC Gender Equity Strategist
National Coalition for Men
October 30, 2012

Female infant circumcision is rightfully illegal but it is Ok to circumcise infant males! Nonsense.

On October 20, 2012, Carl Augustsson and I participated in a protest against infant male genital cutting outside of the national meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) at the Convention Center in New Orleans, Louisiana. The protest was organized by the organization Intact America to challenge the AAP for its recent decision that folded to political pressure and altered its prior position that there are no medical benefits for routine infant male circumcision. The AAP’s new report still did not recommend circumcision but found there are medical benefits that outweigh the harms.

In 2010, the AAP issued a report stating “female genital mutilation” is unacceptable other than a non-mutilating incision, or “cultural nick.” Then, in response to public outcry, the AAP changed its position to say even a cultural nick on an infant girl is genital mutilation. But the AAP’s 2012 report on male circumcision completely ignored the human rights of boys and failed to examine the double standard and issues of medical ethics in the permanent amputation of a functioning erogenous organ from a baby boy without his consent or any medical need.

The report also ignores the findings of medical associations throughout the medically advanced world. The Royal Dutch Medical Association found the male foreskin is “a complex, erogenous structure that plays an important role in the mechanical function of the penis during sexual acts, such as penetrative
intercourse and masturbation.”

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia said the foreskin “is rich in specialized sensory nerve endings and erogenous tissue” and should not be removed from baby boys absent a medical need.

A recent study in Denmark found circumcised men have a much higher rate of sexual problems.

The protest went well and was mentioned in the local New Orleans news and in a Washington Post blog.

Circumcision is not medically necessary. Males on reaching the age of majority should be able to decide whether circumcision is right for them.

AAP Demonstration
Aubrey Terrón
(formerly Aubrey Taylor)
October 20-22, 2012

I’ve tried to be at the American Academy of Pediatrics annual convention every year since I got into demonstrating as an intactivist and learned that it was a hot location. I’ve managed for a few of the last 10 years to be either inside helping to staff booths in the exhibitors hall for NOCIRC, or outside with signs and information. This year it was particularly important to have a strong intactivist presence, since the long awaited new circumcision policy came out with the claim that the benefits outweigh the (admittedly untold) risks.

I was disappointed when I learned that the AAP was convening in New Orleans. The rule there for demonstrators is “keep moving,” so that means it’s not as easy to engage pediatricians in conversation. Some still talk to you, (and we did stop moving for that, though there were occasional complaints) but it’s not at all like when your group is stationary. Perhaps being mobile makes the doctors feel like we can’t be prepared for or avoided, or they assume that in order to strike up a conversation, they would have to march with us like little wooden ducks at the fair.

Our group was of typical size, about 25 at its thickest, but holy moly did we bring the signage! We had new signs, old signs, BIG signs, little signs, professional signs and handmade pins-on-a-corkboard signs! We had challenging signs, nice signs, rational signs and even insulting signs. Most of the big ones went just across the street where the parking lot manager was kind enough to rent us the fence space. Everything was in perfect view of traffic and the attendees coming and going. There was a giant sign of a circumstraint (blown up to adult size) and some of the men wore white disposable painter’s overalls with red painted groins. It was quite something to see them stand in front of it, arms outstretched.

Along with fantastic new signs that were a reminder of who ought to be making any decisions about unnecessary body modifications, Intact America provided protesters with 2 new great looking handouts. Several people brought their own as well. Even with the “keep moving” rule, I handed out more than 150 cards myself.

We certainly got their attention! As usual, complaints were made and attempts to have us removed were thwarted by our right to be there. Someone went so far as to see if they could get our signs taken down from the fence, with no luck. Our display for the evening exodus was to line up on the median holding signs, and the guys wore their ‘bloody’ outfits. That got a lot of pictures taken.

The occasional defensive comments were heard, some angrier than others, but we got a lot of thumbs up, and even a couple of doctors that admitted to being angry and embarrassed by having to be associated with the new policy. The foreign attendees too, expressed concern, and even disbelief at the “circumcision problem” here in the U.S.; some even promised us that they would “talk to” their American peers. I overheard one doctor say that it wouldn’t be a meeting without us there. I agree.

Pride Parades & Festivals

2012 Atlanta Pride Parade
Aubrey Terrón
(formerly Aubrey Taylor)
October 13, 2012

Intactivists march during Atlanta Pride 2012

This year, Atlanta’s Gay Pride Parade hosted intactivists for the 2nd time in a row. Our sophomore run was undertaken by a few enthusiastic marchers and got a great response from the crowd. It was clear by the faces in the crowd that our signs were being read and pondered. We were lucky to again borrow some that were made by the intactivist movement’s tireless patron Dan Bollinger. While there’s always a jeerer or two in every crowd, we got a lot of hoots and woots and even rounds of applause. We’ll be sure to be there again next year as well; there was even some talk of a booth, if it can be afforded.
2012 Folsom and Castro Street Fairs
(Photoreport)
San Francisco, CA
September 29 & October 7

Intactivist literature at the
Bay Area Intactivists Booth,
Folsom Street Fair, September 29

Bay Area Intactivists Booth at
the Castro Street Fair, October 7

Frank McGinness, Jonathon Conte
and Lloyd Schofield at the
Castro Street Fair, October 7

Bay Area Intactivists educating festival-goers at the Folsom Street Fair,
September 29

Jonathon Conte educating festival-goers
at the Castro Street Fair, October 7

Jonathan Conte (center) greets
celebrities at the Folsom Street Fair,
September 29

Bay Area Intactivists' Valeria Barnes
and Richard Homayoon at the
Folsom Street Fair, September 29

Bay Area Intactivists at the Castro Street Fair, October 7
Announcements

German Bill Passed Legalizing Infant Male Circumcision
J. Steven Svoboda
December 15, 2012

In the wake of the landmark legal decision this past June in Cologne, German legislators have passed a bill specifically allowing infant male circumcision. As pointed out by German activist Meike Beier, it is extremely noteworthy that 100 legislators voted against the bill, with another 46 abstaining, while 91 legislators supported an alternative bill protecting boys' genital integrity.

A new article on the bill's approval appears below. We are currently working on a paper addressing German developments.

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Germany Approves Bill to Protect Male Circumcision
Frank Jordans
December 12, 2012
The Associated Press

German lawmakers approved a bill Wednesday that explicitly permits male infant circumcision, ending months of legal uncertainty after a court ruling that the practice amounts to bodily harm led to an outcry from Jewish and Muslim groups.

Germany's government moved swiftly to draft a law following the Cologne regional court decision in June. The ruling didn't amount to a ban but raised fears of possible prosecutions.

The head of Germany's main Jewish group expressed relief at the vote, which passed with 434 lawmakers in favor, 100 against and 46 abstaining.

"The circumcision law finally restores legal certainty," said Dieter Graumann, the head of Germany's Central Council of Jews. "What's important for us is the political message of this law, which is that Jewish and Muslim life is still welcome here."

Restrictions on religiously motivated circumcision would have been particularly sensitive in Germany because of the country's persecution of Jews and other minorities during the Nazi period.

Proponents of the law, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, noted that failure to protect circumcision would have risked making Germany the only country in the world to ban a practice that Jews and some Muslims consider an ancient and essential part of their religious traditions.

The new law grants parents the right to have their sons circumcised by a trained practitioner. Once the boy reaches six months of age, the procedure needs to be performed by a doctor.

Some critics of circumcision in Germany have argued that the right of the child to bodily integrity trumped a parent's right to make a decision on his behalf.

A minority of left-wing lawmakers in Parliament proposed that parents should have to wait until the boy is 14 so he can give informed consent, noting the procedure is irreversible.

Such a delay would have contravened Jewish religious law, which requires that boys are circumcised on the eighth day after birth in a ceremony seen as their entrance into a covenant with God. Muslims also usually perform the procedure early in a boy's life.

Germany, a country of some 82 million people, has a population of about 250,000 Jews and about 4 million Muslims.

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Austrian Circumcisers Face Criminal Charges
J. Steven Svoboda
December 15, 2012

Two Austrian circumcisers, a rabbi and a mohel of Vienna, are facing criminal charges of inflicting grievous bodily harm. The charges mention the child's right to physical integrity, the absence of informed consent, and that religious motivation does not excuse the wrongful act.

The announcement we received appears below.

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Charges Brought Against Two Religious Circumcisers For the First Time in Austria
J. Steven Svoboda
December 5, 2012

Charges are being brought against the community rabbi and mohel of the Jewish Religious Community in Vienna. The rabbi has stated himself that for religious reasons he has performed operations, where there was no medical indication, on the genitals of over 1000 male babies. The second accused is a general practitioner who runs a circumcision centre in Vienna and is specialized in ritual Islamic circumcision. He is also the president of the Islamic Religious Community in Vienna. On his website he proudly presents photos of circumcised children online. The doctor also faces charges by the disciplinary commission of the Chamber of Doctors. The rabbi will also be charged for violation of medical law.

Circumcision is a severe trauma for children.

"The removal of the penis foreskin is a surgical operation on the physical integrity of the patient. In cases where there are no medical reasons, it is a matter of deliberate grievous bodily harm," explains Anja Oberkofler, lawyer. Even nowadays the operation is often carried out without an anaesthetic and is extremely painful: babies have no protective mechanism and because of the
shock often fall into a momentary coma. The circumcision ritual is often performed without any explanation and frequently also without any anaesthetic; for little boys aged between 6 and 8 this causes severe trauma. The foreskin is the most sensitive part of the penis and thus highly erogenous tissue. When it is removed the glans is covered by a layer of hard skin. This can result in the loss of sexual sensitivity and a limited ability to achieve an orgasm, as testified by many of those affected. Possible complications can occur after the operation such as bleeding or mutilation: according to current medical information the ratio is between 2 and 10 per cent.

Religiously motivated bodily harm is not per se exempt from punishment

A further reason for the charge: for an operation with such grave consequences it is necessary to gain the consent of the person concerned. This does not occur in the case of babies and children. As lawyer Oberkofler stated, “It is incomprehensible why religious approval to inflict grievous bodily harm should be exempt from punishment.” Austria has signed the UNO convention on the rights of children which contains a regulation concerning punishment for the circumcision of children due to religious reasons. The right of protection of bodily integrity is also anchored in the Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union. “The fundamental right of the child to have physical integrity ensured cannot be annulled by arguing for the religious freedom of the parents. The religious freedom of the parents in bringing up their children ends where grievous bodily harm inflicted on their child begins,” she says.

Charge brought by victim of abuse and circumcision

The charge is being brought by Sepp Rothwangl, who was subject to sexual abuse in his childhood by a member of the church. “Nowadays I see it as my duty to ensure that children should not suffer physical and emotional harm because of religious privileges which go unpunished.” Rothwangl has also been instrumental in organizing the campaign against church privileges; signatures are at present being collected for this campaign. “I am totally against special rights for religious communities, because it should not be allowed to mutilate children’s sexual organs in the name of religion without being punished,” stated Rothwangl. “This is where civil society and the rule of law have to intervene.” The campaign against church privileges is therefore also in favour of bringing the current criminal charges.

Afflicted persons break their silence

The second person bringing charges is Cahit Kaya, who was circumcised as a child according to Islamic ritual. “I would have liked to have had the freedom myself to decide whether I would be circumcised or not”, says Kaya today. “But without my consent, without any information and without any preparation on the part of the doctor nor on the part of my parents, I was circumcised in a state hospital in Vorarlberg. Many Moslems suffer a great deal from the sexual consequences of their circumcision and are ashamed to have been a victim of this operation. If they do indeed talk about it, then only in their very closest circle of friends. This silence finally has to be broken.”

Canada's Supreme Court Upholds Guilt of Dad Who Performed Home Circumcision
J. Steven Svoboda
November 20, 2012

A decision has been handed down by the Supreme Court of Canada in a grisly case of a crude home circumcision. The decision, as alluded to in the below article, is quite cursory.

Father Who Circumcised His Son on the Kitchen Floor Loses High Court Appeal
The Canadian Press
November 16, 2012

The Supreme Court of Canada has abruptly dismissed the appeal of a British Columbia man who tried to circumcise his four-year-old son on his kitchen floor with a carpet-cutting blade.

The boy needed corrective surgery to repair the damage from the botched procedure.

In a 7-0 ruling from the bench, the justices left intact a Court of Appeal ruling convicting the man of aggravated assault and assault with a weapon.

The man, identified only as DJW, was convicted at trial in October 2009 of criminal negligence causing bodily harm and acquitted on the two assault charges.

The appeal court restored convictions on the assault counts and stayed the negligence charge, conditional on the conviction for aggravated assault.

The man’s appeal to the Supreme Court sought to have the assault charges thrown out again, but the justices dismissed the case from the bench, saying their reasons would be available in 48 hours.

The original trial was told the man felt his religious beliefs required that his son be circumcised. Doctors advised him to wait until the child was older and stronger before performing the procedure.

In its factum on the case, the Crown dismissed the religious reasoning.

"This is a case about child abuse," the Crown argued. "This is not a case about the applicant's religious freedom or circumcision generally."

DJW’s lawyer argued that the man took safety precautions, including extensive research on the topic of circumcision.

"The appellant's actions were performed with reasonable cause ... and without intent to assault or in any way harm his son," the factum said.

The trial judge found the kitchen was not a sanitary place for a surgical procedure, that the blade used wasn’t as sharp as a surgical instrument and it was inappropriate to use a veterinary product to try and staunch the bleeding from the boy’s partly severed foreskin.
DJW’s religious background was as a Jehovah’s Witness, although he was "disfellowshipped" by his family and the church. The Crown said his religious education and associations later led him to believe that male circumcision was a covenant with God.

He attempted to circumcise himself in 2005 and could not stop the bleeding. He had to go to an emergency room where a doctor sutured the wound.

His name is under a publication ban to protect the child’s identity.

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**Steven's Paper on Genital Autonomy**
*Published by Two Journals*  
J. Steven Svoboda  
November 20, 2012

We are again very honored that *In Search of Fatherhood* magazine (http://globalfatherhooddialogue.blogspot.com) has featured me on the cover (along with a couple other activists) and has published, in its Autumn 2012 issue, my article on genital autonomy, that is, on the importance of protecting all children from genital cutting regardless of whether they are male, female or intersex. The article also looks at the practice of cosmetic female genital cutting by consenting adults. The article is titled, "Promoting Genital Autonomy by Exploring Commonalities between Male, Female, Intersex, and Cosmetic Female Genital Cutting," and is adapted from the paper I presented on September 1, 2011 at the conference held at the University of Keele in England on "Law, Human Rights, and Non-Therapeutic Interventions on Children." This is the same article scheduled to be published soon by Global Discourse(http://global-discourse.com).

I have four other papers in progress and due to be completed and published in the coming months, including one expanding on the e-letter recently cited by the German pediatric organization addressing the August policy statement and technical report by the American Academy of Pediatrics, one based in part on my presentation at the Helsinki symposium and examining the legal decision in Germany this past June and subsequent developments, one addressing human rights violated by circumcision, and one examining problems with informed consent in general and as applied to infant circumcision.

More details on all five papers will be provided later.

We owe a big debt of gratitude to *In Search of Fatherhood* for having featured our work and having discussed intactivism in detail no fewer than four times (and three times this year). Anyone interested in a sample copy or a subscription to *In Search of Fatherhood* can contact editor Diane A. Sears at insearchoffatherhood@gmail.com.

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**German Pediatric Association Cites ARC in Statement to Parliament Attacking Circumcision**
November 18, 2012

Germany’s official Paediatric Association, the Berufsverband der Kinder- und Jugendärzte (BVKJ), has joined the Dutch Medical Association and broken its silence on infant circumcision — scoring two major points for genital integrity.

The BVKJ prominently cites Attorneys for the Rights of the Child and our e-letter to Pediatrics criticizing the AAP Technical Report and Policy Statement. Since our e-letter was not published by Pediatrics, the BVKJ presumably located it on The National Coalition for Men’s website, www.ncfm.org, which was kind enough to publish it. A warm thank you to NCFM and also to Martin N.

Here is a translation by Martin N. of the pertinent paragraph of the statement:

The American lawyers' association for children's rights, ARC, has likewise criticized the AAP position statement in a letter to Pediatrics magazine. The letter highlighted errors and inconsistencies, and went so far as to challenge the AAP’s own bioethics representations as contravening numerous civil and criminal provisions of the law.

Here is James Chegwidden's report on the BVKJ statement. James is a UK barrister and a highly valued collaborator in our work:

First, the Association gave evidence on November 28 to the German Bundestag, which is debating a bill authorising non-therapeutic circumcision of male minors. Its President (Dr Wolfram Hartmann) has composed and signed a long statement on behalf of the BVKJ (link below; apart from the English language abstract on page 8, the document is in German but apparently eventually is to be released in English for worldwide distribution). The conclusion: “The bill before Parliament (authorising ritual child circumcision) ought for paediatric reasons to be utterly rejected”. It urges the government to opt for an alternative, allowing circumcision for adults who consent to circumcision but banning non-therapeutic circumcision on anyone under 14 years of age.

http://www.kinderarzte-im-netz.de

Secondly, the document also goes strongly on the attack against the AAP’s technical report and policy statement on circumcision, criticising the AAP’s bias and its conclusions.

Here is the abstract: “The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recently released its new technical report and policy statement on male circumcision, concluding that current evidence indicates that the health benefits of newborn male circumcision outweigh the risks. The technical report is based on the scrutiny of a large number of complex scientific articles. Therefore, while striving for objectivity, the conclusions drawn by the eight task force members reflect what these individual doctors perceived as trustworthy evidence. Seen from the outside, cultural bias reflecting the normality of non-therapeutic male circumcision in the US seems obvious, and the report’s conclusions are different from those reached by doctors in other parts of the Western world, including Europe, Canada, and Australia. In this
commentary, a quite different view is presented by non-US-based doctors and representatives of general medical associations and societies for pediatrics, pediatric surgery and pediatric urology in Northern Europe. To these authors, there is but one of the arguments put forward by the AAP that has some theoretical relevance in relation to infant male circumcision, namely the possible protection against urinary tract infections in infant boys, which can be easily treated with antibiotics without tissue loss. The other claimed health benefits, including protection against HIV/AIDS, genital herpes, genital warts and penile cancer, are questionable, weak and likely to have little public health relevance in a Western context, and do not represent compelling reasons for surgery before boys are old enough to decide for themselves.” - German Paediatric Association (BVKJ)

Finnish Party Proposes to Ban Male Circumcision
J. Steven Svoboda
October 11, 2012

Finland's third largest political party, True Finns, has renewed its proposal to ban ritual circumcision of boys.

The below article also mentions the recent symposium held from September 30-October 3, 2012 in Helsinki.

Finnish Party Plans New Bill to Ban Circumcision
October 2, 2012
Jewish Telegraph Agency

Finland's third largest party, True Finns, has demanded a ban on the ritual circumcision of minors.

In a debate held Sept. 26 at the Finnish parliament in Helsinki, Vesa-Matti Saarikala, a lawmaker for True Finns, reiterated his calls in March to outlaw the practice in Finland.

Saarikala, 28, said he would submit a bill proposing to criminalize ritual circumcision in boys younger than 15 years of age, according to the online edition of Yleisradio, Finland's national public broadcasting company.

"The Finnish constitution guarantees everyone the right to personal integrity," Saarikala is quoted as saying. Saarikala, a critic of what he called perceived integration problems among immigrants, also pointed out that female circumcision "is already considered assault" in Finland. The fact that circumcision in males is legal in Finland, he said, constitutes legal discrimination.

With 39 seats out of 200 in the lower house, the socialist-conservative True Finns is Finland's largest opposition party.

Jouko Jaaskelainen, a lawmaker for the Christian Democrats, said in parliament that circumcision was a minor procedure and that research showed it was helpful in preventing diseases.

On Sept. 30, an international conference of critics of ritual circumcision opened in Helsinki.

Gideon Bolotowsky of the Central Council of Jewish Communities in Finland told JTA that he did not foresee a ban on circumcision in Finland in the near future.

"Those trying to ban circumcision are hard-pressed to present scientific evidence that circumcision is harmful," he said.

Bolotowsky added that the critics of circumcision in children "have had the rug pulled from under their feet" because of the publication in August of a new research by the American Academy of Pediatrics suggesting that the procedure may protect heterosexual men against HIV and that the health benefits outweighed the risks connected to the procedure.

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Tradition vs Individual Rights: The Current Debate on Circumcision

Robert Darby
Brian Earp
November 2, 2012
The Conversation (Australia)

Non-therapeutic circumcision of male infants and boys has always been a controversial issue — and never has opinion been more polarised.

In the United States, medical authorities have just overturned 40 years of sound science-based policy by deciding that the health benefits of circumcision — while not great enough to recommend the procedure as a routine — are sufficient to allow parental choice in the matter and coverage by medical insurance plans.

This move has been heavily criticised by medical ethicists in both the United States and abroad. They fault the new policy not only for downplaying the risks and complications of the procedure, but also for failing to take into account basic principles from bioethics as well as human rights.

The rest of the world has moved on. In Europe and elsewhere, the question is no longer about whether there are any good “medical” justifications for routine circumcision — the consensus is that there are not. Instead, it’s about the much thornier issue of cultural and religious rationales.

In Germany, a court recently found that non-medically-indicated circumcision constitutes bodily harm and is thus unlawful. In Australia, the Tasmania Law Reform Institute has recommended that it be legally prohibited in most cases, with limited exemptions for religious practice.

In Helsinki, an international conference heard many distinguished speakers criticise unnecessary genital surgeries of all types, whether performed for medical or cultural reasons, and whether on boys,
girls or intersex children. The resultant declaration formally defended the right of all children to bodily integrity.

Given its recent history, Germany is arguably the worst place in the world to see a decision in favour of child rights that could also be interpreted as directed against Jewish religious practice. Both Jewish and Muslim organisations have responded with outrage, attacking the ruling as an assault on religious freedom, and hurling accusations of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

Problematically, as Lena Nyhus has argued in The Jerusalem Post, when such serious charges are raised without adequate care and discretion, they risk losing their force.

“Outrage” is not an argument. But the claim that circumcision is “non-negotiable” for Jews because it is “divinely mandated” in Genesis does carry some weight.

Against this, a growing number of Jews believe that circumcision is inconsistent with Jewish ethics and has no place in contemporary religious practice. They point out that many things are “divinely mandated” in the Bible, but are happily “negotiated” by modern Jews — up to and including circumcision.

Biblical literalists will not find these arguments convincing, but they do not have a monopoly on the practice of Judaism.

What we are really witnessing is a clash between traditional patriarchal values, emphasising group conformity, and those of secular modernity, emphasising individual autonomy.

The most honest defenders of circumcision acknowledge that it is a cruel disfigurement, permissible only because God commanded it — witness orthodox Rabbi Hershey Worch quoted in Eliyahu Unger-Sargon’s documentary film Cut:

“It’s painful, it’s abusive. It’s traumatic, and if anybody who’s not in a covenant [with God] does it, I think they should be put in prison. I don’t think anybody has an excuse for mutilating a child. ... Depriving them of [part of their] penis.”

But still it must be done, because as the Rabbi concluded, “God owns my morals.”

Since at least the mid-19th century, the question for Jewish people has been the extent to which they should relinquish traditional observances and integrate into the broader society. Jewish critics of circumcision first emerged in Germany in the 1840s, igniting a debate within the religion that has flared on and off right up to the present.

In response, their conservative opponents cited both traditional arguments (cultural and religious obligation), and the new discoveries of Anglo-American doctors that circumcision was helpful against such intractable health problems as masturbation, syphilis, epilepsy and tuberculosis.

We see the same tendency today: supporters of circumcision on health grounds cite religious requirements as a reason for why it shouldn’t be restricted, while those who support it for cultural reasons cite “health benefits” as a reason for why it should be expanded.

Regrettably, a number of analysts in the world of philosophical bioethics have been reluctant to take a public stand against this sort of vacillation. Discussion of circumcision is inhibited by the fear that objective analysis will incite accusations of intolerance.

Writing on the Journal of Medical Ethics blog, the philosopher lain Brassington recently stated,

“Though I [have] mentioned the decision of the German court that ritual circumcision constituted assault, I’ve wanted to stay clear of saying more about it [because] it seemed too potentially toxic.”

Likewise, the bioethicist Dan O’Connor from Johns Hopkins University has said, “When [a reporter] calls my work and ask[s] if there is a bioethicist in the house who will give the anti-circumcision viewpoint, I beg off.”

Lingering in the background is an unwritten rule that says critical discussion of certain ideas is automatically out of bounds. As Douglas Adams observed, “If somebody votes for a party that you don’t agree with, you’re free to argue about it as much as you like.” But if somebody mentions something about their religious practices, “you say, ‘Fine, I respect that’.”

Adams’ point is that this avoidance is not really “respect” at all. It is about discomfort, or fear of ruffling too many feathers, being misunderstood, or being accused of harbouring prejudice.

Respect is something else entirely. Respect assumes that while someone may disagree with you, she will consider your points with an open mind, and judge your argument on its merits.

Respect assumes that we should be able to look at one another’s most cherished practices in light of the ethical advances of recent centuries without getting into a shouting match.

It’s time we took a critical look at the culturally-motivated cutting of the genitals of infant boys. And we call upon our colleagues, both religious and secular, to engage in this important dialogue. Respectfully.

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**Uniting the Next Generation of Parents Against Circumcision**

Molly McFly

*Beyond the Bris*

November 14, 2012

Reprinted by Permission of Beyond the Bris

As a nineteen-year-old woman, I only have one friend who is already a parent. She is an incredible mother to her young daughter, whose sex protected her from the circumcision debate. The rest of my peers are college-aged adults who spend an appropriately smaller amount of their free time than I do pondering infant welfare and debating a common practice that was probably performed on themselves or on their brothers. Yet in a
few years, these people and I will become the newest generation of parents in America.

Being a left-leaning blogger (and young woman with a fascination for the beauty of reproduction) I’ve fallen into Internet debates about circumcision countless times. For months, I scoffed at anti-circumcision propaganda as nothing more than overzealous people elevating a minor issue out of proportion. I barely skimmed their websites, because, after all, weren’t circumcised penises cleaner than natural ones? Why couldn’t these “activists” spend their time advocating for a legitimate cause? No doubt this socially influenced ignorance is the reason so many wonderful parents have circumcised their sons in what they believed was their best interest.

Before becoming an activist, I had discussed circumcision with a few friends who were proudly intact, and even after hearing their stories, I pathetically announced, “Well, I’m Jewish. My sons are going to be circumcised. It’s a big cultural thing.” Never mind that my personal relationship to Judaism is religiously lax and that I wear piercings, dyed hair, and makeup. My opinion was unequivocal: When it came to the permanent alteration of my hypothetical children’s genitals, no decision-making process need occur on account of my ethnicity.

It wasn’t until I saw a YouTube video about circumcision from a young woman who was pregnant with twin boys that I understood the disturbing nature of circumcision. A few hours of research on the Internet turned my formerly cavalier attitude about the procedure into a passionate quest to study and defeat it. Spreading knowledge about circumcision to people of all backgrounds is beneficial to our pro-cutting society, but my age group is a particularly important audience for this information because we are the next generation of parents who will be deciding whether to circumcise our sons. So when I realized how urgent I felt about spreading this message to my peers, I considered which pieces of information made me receptive to intactivism so that I could propagate them effectively. The following outlines a small portion of what most strongly influenced my understanding of circumcision as a violation of human rights.

Circumcision is the only unnecessary surgical procedure in the United States that is performed without a patient’s consent. In fact, the United States is the only country in the world that routinely performs the procedure on infants for non-religious reasons. There are no compelling medical benefits to circumcision, but there is an abundance of information illustrating the damage it can create.

Foreskin amputation dates to biblical times, but it became a popular practice in the 19th century when doctors believed it would prevent male masturbation. (Some scholars theorize that this intended prevention of Onanism—spilling one’s seed—is the same reason why circumcision became a law of the Torah). In other words, the foreskin is such a crucial part of male sexual pleasure that doctors believed its removal would eliminate the ability to pleasure oneself altogether.

The movement of a foreskin along the shaft and over the glans of the penis retains lubrication during intercourse and masturbation, which is why its absence forces many men to use synthetic lubricant during sexual activity. It should be noted that this difficulty maintaining lubrication also adversely affects female sex partners.

When medical professionals realized that circumcision was ineffective at preventing masturbation, they invented other reasons to justify its practice. Lunacy, epilepsy, orthopedic problems, and hernias were touted as conditions curable by circumcision. Society has an apparent compulsion to justify this barbaric practice to preserve its honor, as popular contemporary myths include that circumcision is more hygienic and prevents the spread of HIV. These myths are usually pretenses for the so-called “cosmetic benefits” of the procedure, which is not only a weak social construction but is also an unforgivable reason to surgically alter a non-consenting infant’s genitals.

In fact, male infants are born with their foreskins fused to the head of the penis like a fingernail is to a nail bed, and cleaning the child’s intact penis requires no more effort than wiping a finger. The foreskin does not need to be especially cared for until the boy is several years old and capable of handling this insignificant task. On the contrary, circumcised infants have surgical wounds on their penises for weeks or months following the procedure that can easily become infected by urine and fecal matter in their diapers. This result is certainly far less hygienic than keeping the penis in its natural functioning state and requires parents of circumcised boys to monitor their son’s health much more closely than parents of intact babies.

Foreskin is not merely an extra fold of skin. It serves to protect the glans of the penis and keeps it sensitive by shielding it from external damage from clothing, debris, and excessive air exposure, among many other potential disturbances. When it is amputated, up to 20,000 sexually sensitive nerve endings are removed with it. Without a foreskin, the glans of the penis develops a callus-like layer of keratin over it, which severely reduces sensitivity. This reason partially contributes to the fact that circumcised men have 450% of the chance of developing erectile dysfunction that intact men do. (Shocking, but nonetheless true.) It is no coincidence that Israel and the United States have two of the highest Viagra usage rates in the world.

Mutilation is defined as “the cutting off or permanent destruction of a limb or essential part,” and with the information available today, we can no longer deny that circumcision meets this criterion. Circumcision has physically and emotionally wounded millions of people. Many men regret and mourn the amputation of a body part from a procedure in which they had no choice. Worst of all, these suffering men are the lucky ones. A recent study has estimated that more than 100 infants die every year in the United States alone as the result of complications from circumcision. There are many more non-fatal complications. Many circumcised men enjoy fulfilling
sex lives without issues, but this does not outweigh the disturbing implications of this harmful operation.

No penis is superior to another, nor is any vulva. Everyone should have the privilege of loving his or her genitals whether altered or intact. These incredible organs not only bring us intimacy and pleasure, but they are also the vessels through which we create life. Protecting that life is the eternal purpose of any parent, and I implore my peers: as we evolve into mothers and fathers, give your child the freedom to love his body exactly as nature made it. Understand that his cosmetic reconstruction is not your choice.

We spend nine months growing a human being. We have no right to disfigure the miraculous product of that effort with a scalpel.

On the way home the pain set in. The physical pain subsided with time, but it still haunts him to this day. Today Önder Özgeday is 29 and studying social sciences. In the weeks after the operation he had to take a powder bath every day. Nevertheless, his penis got inflamed and it was months before it finally healed.

Images that still recur

“These are the images that always come back,” says Önder Özgeday. He sits in his dorm room in Bochum - outside it’s cold and gray - and remembers how upset he was after the procedure.

“At the time, I thought that everything was proper.” He had trusted his parents and they had considered circumcision a given. “It happened primarily from Muslim tradition, though my parents were not particularly religious,” he says. In addition, a pediatrician had suggested it.

Circumcision victims find like-minded people on the Internet

But during puberty Önder Özgeday noticed that he had been modified. “It’s a shock when you look at other guys and realize just how different it’s supposed to be.” He developed mental problems, his relationship with his parents and his culture of origin suffered, and eventually he broke down.

On the Internet, he found kindred spirits. He realized that others had similar problems to his. And finally he made contact with the club “Mogis e.V.”, which advocates and campaigns for the victims of various forms of violence. Meanwhile, Önder Özgeday is feeling so strong once again that he is ready to fight for the right to physical integrity. He wants to tell his story, in order that the concerns of circumcision victims will be heard.

Opponents of circumcision were never really given a chance to be heard in the public forum, criticizes Christian Bahls, president of the association “Magis”. It was mainly just advocates for the right to circumcise who dominated talk shows and the current legislative process to legalize childhood circumcision – today is the first reading in the Bundestag. “It doesn’t get properly challenged”, adds Önder Özgeday. It angers and hurts him when he hears circumcision trivialized in public, and everyone saying it’s the right of parents to decide.

He is convinced of the illegitimacy of circumcision. For him, the fundamental right to bodily integrity is above all else about an individual’s freedom of religion. “Why didn’t I have this right?”

Moreover, in the current debate over circumcision one point keeps getting exploited. We’re having the wrong debate. It hasn’t been about the welfare of children, but rather the practice of religion. “Circumcision may help against bacteria,” “it might discourage masturbation,” “it’s religiously mandated”—the arguments keep changing, but the goal remains: to legitimize and indemnify the practice of religion. In this instance one should be able to reflect, and institute reforms as appropriate.

He is happy whenever circumcision gets discussed

When Önder Özgeday browses the internet, he gets the impression that there are a lot of other men struggling with similar problems worldwide. But no one seems to be speaking out. “It doesn’t fit with the image of Muslim masculinity; you don’t go public with personal issues. Who wants to question his manhood?”

And so he’s glad when problems with circumcision are discussed at all. He believes many parents would opt against circumcision if they knew enough about it. His parents didn’t know enough, says Önder Özgeday. But since then, had they understood it, they might have approached it differently. The psychological damage is mending, but Önder Özgeday must live forever with the physical consequences of circumcision.
Grace Adeleye Guilty of Killing Baby in Botched Circumcision

BBC News
December 14, 2012

A nurse has been found guilty of manslaughter after causing a baby's death by botching his circumcision.

Grace Adeleye, 67, carried out the procedure on four-week-old Goodluck Cauergs at an address in Chadderton, Oldham, in April 2010.

The boy bled to death before he could reach hospital the following day.

Adeleye was found guilty of manslaughter by gross negligence at Manchester Crown Court.

The nurse, who denied the charge, had told the jury she had done "more than 1,000" circumcision operations without incident.

The court heard that Adeleye and Goodluck's parents were from Nigeria, where the circumcision of newborns is the tradition for Christian families.

Adeleye, of Sarnia Court, Salford, was paid £100 to do the operation.

The jury was told that she carried out the procedure using a pair of scissors, forceps and olive oil and without anaesthetic.

She had claimed there had been "no problem" when she left the infant and that his parents had been pleased with the operation.

However, the court heard that when Goodluck's parents had changed his nappy several hours later, they had found a large amount of blood and phoned Adeleye, who had told them to redress the wound.

Goodluck's parents called an ambulance the following morning and he was taken to the Royal Oldham Hospital, where he died a short time later.

A spokesman for NHS Oldham said the family went to the hospital and asked for a circumcision, "they would have been advised to go to an approved practitioner who would have charged £100, the same as Grace Adeleye".

Following the guilty verdict, Adeleye was bailed while pre-sentencing reports are prepared.

The Crown Prosecution Service's Jane Wragg said the case "was not about the rights or wrongs of circumcision, but the grossly negligent way in which the procedure was undertaken".

"Goodluck Cauergs was a healthy little boy whose tragic death was wholly unnecessary," she said.

"Goodluck died because the standard of care taken by Grace Adeleye in carrying out the circumcision fell far below the standard that should be applied.

"She also failed to inform his parents of the risks and possible complications, which ultimately led to his tragic death."

7-Year-Old Loses Genitals After Circumcision, Fighting for Life

Rajendra Sharma
The Times of India
November 23, 2012

A seven-year-old boy is battling for life after a circumcision surgery went horribly wrong at a private hospital in Alwar on Thursday. The boy's genitals had to be cut off in an attempt to save his life, said sources. An FIR has been lodged against the hospital authorities after the relatives of the boy created a ruckus.

The boy, Imran, was admitted to Sarnia hospital in Alwar town on November 10 for circumcision. According to sources, after the operation, some equipment was used to prevent bleeding. However, electric current accidentally passed into his private parts and the boy suffered serious injury. On November 13, the boy was referred to a private hospital in Jaipur. After investigating the case, the doctors in Jaipur advised the boy's relatives to remove his genitals as it was necessary to save his life. The operation was conducted and his genitals were removed. Three days after the operation, the boy was again admitted to Sarnia hospital in Alwar.

The boy is now fighting for life while his relatives are protesting outside the hospital in Alwar.

Imran's grandfather Ayub Khan said: "The circumcision was carried out by Dr Tayyab Khan, a physician at Sarnia Hospital. He is not a surgeon. The licence of the hospital should be cancelled for carelessness."

Imran's uncle Fakruddin Khan said that the operation was to be completed in just 30 minutes but the doctors took four hours. "Two days after the circumcision, the doctors advised us to take the boy to Jaipur. When we took the boy to Jaipur, the doctors there immediately informed us that the boy's private parts were completely damaged and his genitals had to be removed. After operation, we tried to admit the boy in different hospitals but no hospital admitted him. The last option for us was Sarnia hospital. So we brought him here back after his genitals were removed in Jaipur."

However, denying the allegation, Dr Tayyab Khan said the circumcision was carried out by a surgeon Hariram Gupta. He said it was just an accident.

Former minister Nasru Khan also reached the spot to calm down the situation but all his efforts went in vain. Nasru Khan and the protestors were involved in a heated argument at the spot. The protestors alleged that he was taking the side of the hospital.

The hospital administration assured the relatives of the boy that the hospital would bear the expenses of the boy's treatment.