

Embryos – a *Forward Together* briefing paper

The following article was written for the November 2006 edition of “Life and Work” but was rejected after two months of negotiations and revision.

Church of Scotland Follows UK in Unethical Isolation

Here is a quiz to try on your friends. What has the Church of Scotland approved at its last General Assembly of May 2006 that all of the following have rejected as being unethical?

- The United Nations General Assembly,
- The Council of Europe,
- France, Germany, Italy and another 29 European countries,
- The Eastern Orthodox Church,
- The Roman Catholic Church,
- The World Council of Churches.

The answer is: *cloning*. In particular, cloning human embryos so that they can be destroyed by biomedical researchers.

In so doing the Church of Scotland is now on a collision course with almost all expressions of Christian opinion around the globe. Indeed, to our knowledge, the Kirk is the only established church in the world to have endorsed such a controversial practice.

Moreover, because many of the arguments for the decision were based on contested science, it is difficult not to suspect that the main reason for the majority vote was the strong utilitarian influences which have now established themselves in the Kirk. And these have led to the view that human embryos could no longer have a full moral status because they had become useful to biomedical researchers!

Of course, it is impossible not to have deep sympathy and compassion for those affected by serious medical disorders which create so much suffering. One cannot emphasise enough the importance of searching for possible new treatments, but does this mean that ethical principles should be put aside? Should some human life be sacrificed just because it has the potential to save, or avoid the suffering of, other human life?

From a purely scientific perspective, every person on this earth is just a large pile of cells made of about 70% water and a few other chemical compounds - piles of cells who will eventually become piles of dust or ashes in 150 years time.

But many Christians believe that all persons, whether they are embryonic or have been born, cannot be reduced to ‘piles of cells’ even though some may be very small, short-lived or unconscious. Instead these Christians accept that every person is amazingly loved and valued by an amazing God - a value

that was demonstrated by the death on the cross of His son, Jesus Christ, out of love for us. And this love of God forms the basis of human personhood, which is a mystery that can never be determined from scientific concepts alone - a mystery which originates in the personal triunity of God.

This is a crucial Christian belief and for many it also gives full moral status to early human embryos even though some may die or split in two, giving identical twins. Full moral status is indeed not dependent on what persons may become, nor on whether they can respond to a relationship, but on the fact that they exist, as such, and are loved by God.

And the fact that moral status is something bestowed by God (and not human beings) was also disregarded in the May 2006 General Assembly when it chose to completely undermine the majority view of the Church of Scotland's 1996 report to the General Assembly - a report which indicated that *"all treatment of a human embryo which is not for the benefit of that embryo is morally wrong and as such all research on human embryos is morally wrong."*¹.

It further contradicts the Deliverance accepted by the Church of Scotland General Assembly of 1985 which *"Reject[s] all non-therapeutic embryo experimentation as being contrary to the Christian belief in the sanctity of life"*. This means that so far as embryo research is concerned, the 1985 Deliverance called for a halt to all experimentation which was not for the benefit of the embryo².

Most nations do not allow any cloned embryos to be created. Indeed, the United Nations voted in 2005 by nearly 3-1 to ask all nations to ban all forms of human cloning. In addition, the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine (1997) specifically prohibits the creation of human embryos for research through any means (including cloning).

Amid all the European countries only two states, namely the United Kingdom and Belgium, have publicly indicated that they have no intention, at present, of signing this European Convention because, amongst other things, it would prohibit the creation of human embryos for research. As a result, both these countries are beginning to be seen, by many Europeans, as ethically 'rogue' states.

And for the Church of Scotland, which is a moral body, to support the UK government in its unethical isolation and knowingly reject European human rights legislation and support the cloning of embryos can only but create a very dangerous precedent. It will completely undermine the Church's reputation and Christian witness both at home and internationally.

But the Kirk did not only endorsed human cloning! In its General Assembly of May 2006, it also agreed that human embryos left over from fertility clinics could be used for destructive research. And although the wording of the Kirk's decisions gives an impression of restrictive carefulness it would still condone the killing of 10,000s of human embryos, 18 000 of whom have already been destroyed by UK biomedical scientists. Moreover, the General Assembly failed to indicate that more than 110 000 frozen human embryos are already stored in the UK, who are now potentially available for this kind of research. It did not mention that UK researchers would go to prison if they destroyed human embryos

¹ Church of Scotland, Pre-Conceived Ideas, 1996, p. 62.

² Church of Scotland, Pre-Conceived Ideas, 1996, p. 5.

in at least 10 European countries including Germany, Poland, Norway and Italy. And it completely overlooked the fact that many infertile couples in the UK are seeking to adopt these human embryos.

Instead, it preferred to contravene the deep sensitivities of a significant number of Church of Scotland members who believe that these human embryos can be considered as children who are loved by God - members for whom the Kirk is now openly endorsing what could be compared to the human sacrifice of children for a perceived potential health benefit - something similar to what the idol worshipers of old practised when they also sacrificed their children to their gods for some perceived potential benefit in their quality or length of life.

And it is difficult to describe the deep sense of distress, anguish and sorrow that these Church of Scotland members experience when reflecting on what their denomination now condones.

The decision to no longer believe that God loves certain persons has completely isolated the Church of Scotland in this field of medical ethics. Because of this, we would like to call on the General Assembly to reconsider its position as a matter of urgency.

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