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Embryo Research: some Christian Perspectives

Report by the Mission and Public Affairs Council

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'That this Synod, believing that children are a gift from God in creation and that the welfare of any child created by third party donation of eggs or sperm is of overriding importance, including the need of the child for a father:

a. affirm marriage as the ideal context for the procreation and rearing of children;

b. note the ethical considerations of gamete donation contained in *Personal Origins;*

c. believe that treatment should normally be given to women only during years when, under normal circumstances, they might conceive; and,

d. welcome the decision of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to phase out payments for donors.

EMBRYO RESEARCH : SOME CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

A report from the Mission and Public Affairs Council

Introduction

1. This paper offers some reflections on the science, theology and morality of using human embryos for therapeutic research purposes. It draws on previous papers by the Board for Social Responsibility produced for briefing purposes during the late 1990s and early 2000s. It also uses material from the Annual Report of the Ethical Investment Advisory Group, which is currently considering the investment policy of the Church towards companies which engage in stem cell research. Appendix One lists previous Synodical debates on the subject, and Appendix Two lists Board responses to relevant consultations. Deliberately, this paper does not come to specific policy conclusions which, with fast-moving technical developments, can become easily outdated. Rather, it aims to explore the perspectives Christians have brought to the ongoing debate, and to offer a framework of ethical reasoning which will enable a continued contribution in the light of our fundamental convictions about God and the humankind he so lovingly created.

The human embryo and its legal status

2. The human embryo is formed when a sperm penetrates an egg or ovum, fertilising it and merging with its genetic material to form a unique genome. A fertilised egg forms a blastocyst four days after conception, with two types of cell: an outer layer (which becomes the placenta and other supporting tissues needed for fetal development) and an inner cell mass (the stem cells). If fertilisation takes place within a woman's body, the fertilised egg will travel during the first 14

ii. regards as essential the suggestion in the Warnock Report for a national licensing authority (already welcomed by the Board for Social Responsibility) to regulate research and to control infertility services, and welcomes the suggestions made by the Board that such an authority should continue the debate on the moral aspects of technologies concerned with human embryology and fertilisation and to this end membership of the authority should include representatives from the social work and legal professions and from members of the Churches skilled in moral theology.'

In February 1988, the General Synod debated a Private Member's Motion (Dss Una Kroll) on the Warnock Report and carried the following motion:

'This Synod in the light of the commitment of HM Government to proceed to legislation on Human Infertility Services and Embryo Research:

i. reaffirms the General Synod Resolution of July 1983, "that all human life, including life developing in the womb, is created by God in his own image and is therefore to be nurtured, supported and protected";

ii. welcomes the commitment of HM Government to establish an Independent Statutory Licensing Authority to regulate research and infertility services;

cell nuclear replacement embryos for research is not forbidden but such embryos must be destroyed after 14 days.

Therapeutic potential of the human embryo

5. The inner mass of the embryo consists of stem cells. These cells are what ultimately become all the different cells of the human body, from fingernails to lungs. If they are removed from the early embryo (destroying the embryo in the process) their pluripotency can be channelled in such a way as to grow into whichever cells are desirable from a therapeutic point of view. Currently incurable diseases such as Parkinsonism, Alzheimer's Disease, liver and heart disease etc are all potentially curable by the creation and transplantation of healthy cells specific to the diseased area: neural cells for Parkinson's or Alzheimer's; heart and liver cells for heart and liver disease, etc. If the stem cells are genetically identical to the patient needing the cell transplant, then there is no rejection of the donated cells. This is the advantage of cell nuclear transfer or therapeutic cloning. The patient gives a cell of his or her own body, the nucleus of which replaces the nucleus in the egg, thereby creating an embryo which is a clone of the patient. Stem cells harvested from such an embryo will be genetically identical to the patient needing the transplant.

6. Cells have the capacity to divide and proliferate. This means that once stem cells have been harvested from embryos, they can continue growing on their own as stem cell lines. A bank for stem cell lines has been established by the Government, overseen by an ethics committee. This bank will provide a continuous source of stem cells for future research and treatment, avoiding the need to create 'factory lines' of new embryos for stem cells each time they are needed. However, cell transplants from stem cells are not imminently available. Currently Parliament has passed laws that permit

respect for the embryo by using it for the good of all in morally serious ways.

Conclusion

58. In reflecting on these issues all Christians will seek to frame their views in the light of the fundamental convictions about God and humankind which shaped the teaching of the early Church. Whatever particular policy conclusions Christians may come to, they will agree that it is vital that scientific and medical developments be celebrated and encouraged, but they must also be carefully and critically assessed to ensure that such developments are compatible with the dignity and vocation of human kind as created by God to which the Christian faith witnesses.

life? The new developments promise benefits of various kinds in the advance of scientific understanding and medical knowledge, and in the eradication of serious disabilities. But in Christian thought, where the ends are not simply taken to justify the means, it must be a prior question whether what is done in pursuit of these goals is itself morally acceptable. To take a parallel case: medical research on adult subjects may be aimed at highly laudable ends, but must nonetheless respect the constraints on such research which are required by a respect for the dignity of human subjects.

The fetus in the Christian tradition

10. It should be noted that, historically, Christian writers refer to embryonic and fetal life only when they are dealing with punishments for killing life in the womb. Where distinctions are made between different stages of development of the embryo and fetus, this is in order to grade the seriousness of the crime. Even when distinctions are drawn, destruction of the embryo or fetus remains a serious crime at all stages of development. Because developments are so recent, the countervailing good of using embryos for medical treatment does not figure at all.

11. The Septuagint translation of Exodus 21.22 was the version most commonly used by the early Christian Fathers as well as by the New Testament writers. It was followed in the old Latin version of the Bible which became the language of the moral tradition of the west. According to this text in its Septuagint version, if anyone strikes a pregnant woman and she miscarries, then if the fetus is formed the penalty is death; if on the other hand the fetus is *me exeikonismenon*, not yet so formed as to be a copy or portrayal of the human form, then the penalty is a fine.

underlay the majority opinion in the Warnock Report and it is the basis for the of the HFE Act of 1990, with its restriction of embryo growth *in vitro* to 14 days and its permission to use embryos within that limit for tightly defined and specifically licensed research purposes. The embryo is being regarded as very much more than a 'speck of protoplasm', for it may only be manipulated for serious purposes that otherwise would be unattainable.

51. Those who take a developmental point of view may incline to take a less cautious stance in relation to practices which might yield obvious benefits to the infertile, those suffering from debilitating illnesses and to scientific research generally. In contrast to earlier Christian views concerned mainly with gradations of wrong on procuring or performing abortions, modern debate about the morality of embryo research has to take into consideration the enormous potential good to which this research could lead.

52. It should be noted that an absolutist view of the embryo does not accord with actual practice. Funeral services are not held for embryos that fail to implant and are lost. Few would suggest that heaven is peopled - by a large majority - by embryos of fewer than 14 days' gestation.

53. The arguments in favour of a developmental view of the embryo are not, however, uncontroversial.

54. First, the uncertainty about whether an early embryo will go on to become an individual human being or will become two or none, is just that: an uncertainty. Ought we to argue from our uncertainty about whether something is true (ie whether the early embryo will finally become an individual human being) to its being false (ie that the early embryo is not

formed *(nondum formatd)* and therefore not yet endowed with its senses. (Quaestionum in Kept III n 80).

Basil wrote to Amphilochus

> A woman who deliberately destroys a fetus is answerable for murder. And any fine distinction as to its being completely formed or unformed *(ekmemorphomenou kai an exeikonistou)* is not admissible among us.

14. Basil's letter, which was a commentary on the canons of the Church, itself became included in the canons of the Church. Basil's ruling on the subject, which specifically mentions the distinction between the unformed and formed fetus, and condemns the abortion of both, was repeated at later councils and was finally incorporated into the legislation of the Trullo, which functioned as the disciplinary aspect of the fifth and sixth ecumenical councils at Constantinople.

15. The seventh century **Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Penitentials** and the **canon law of the Latin Church** from the 11th century made a distinction between the formed and the unformed fetus, with abortion of the former carrying more severe penalties than abortion of the latter. This was mirrored in the teaching of the Church, with the exception of Pope Sixtus V in 1588, and was reflected in English law. The teaching of St Thomas Aquinas favoured a later ensoulment. He said that the soul did not enter the male fetus until it was 40 days old, and the female fetus until it was 90 days old. This philosophical view paralleled the dominant medical understanding of conception and quickening.

45. In the debate in the House of Lords on the Regulations of 2001, the Bishop of St. Albans said: "There is a world of difference between understanding that discrete package of information [about embryo research] and knowing, imaginatively, what its implications might be. I do not necessarily need more information; what I need, and what I believe the public needs, is more wisdom.

46. "The problem is that wisdom is not a commodity nor is it easily or rapidly achieved. If I look at people I believe to be wise I think that they share certain salient characteristics; they seem to be able to integrate, at a deep level, experience, learning and reason; they are open-minded but bring to that open-mindedness a shrewd wit; their thinking is marked by an inherent and self-authenticated elegance; they are forgetful of self; they are measured... [Similarly] an appreciation of beauty cannot be hurried; it requires humility, eyes cleansed by love and a willingness to be seriously patient. Therefore I am making a plea for wisdom to be given as much room as the excitement, verve and pace of scientific discovery."

The rights and wrongs of embryo research

47. The principle that the ends do not justify the means underlies the current British legislation regulating the use of embryos (the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 and the 2001 Regulations), since they permit research on embryos of up to fourteen days old but no more. If this principle had not underlain the framing of the legislation, the Act might have countenanced experimentation on embryos at whatever stage, providing the good outweighed the harm. Since it does not take this view, it holds in effect that embryos prior to 14 days old are not to be accorded the same moral status as embryos at subsequent points in their development. the compassion which is properly extended to women who find themselves faced with difficult decisions.

The source and expression of new life in Scripture

20. hi this section some passages from Scripture are cited for reference as representing the biblical witness upon which Christians have drawn.

21. Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. **(Genesis** 2.7)

22. When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. **(Exodus 21.22,** see above)

23. Your hands fashioned and made me; and now you turn and destroy me. Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and will you turn me to dust again? Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit. **(Job 10.8-12)**

24. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. **(Psalm 139.13-16)**