Globethics Repository



Human life in our hands? Churches and Bioethics

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Church and Society Commission;Conference of European Churches
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-15 00:59:42
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/216364

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN CHURCHES (CEC)
Church and Society Commission

'Human life in our hands? Churches and Bioethics'
Results of a consultation organized by the CEC in Strasbourg, 27-29 Nov. 2003

More than 70 representatives from churches from 22 countries from all over Europe came together to discuss some of the ethical challenges posed by recent developments in the biomedical sciences. This was possibly the widest ecumenical gathering of European churches on these issues to date.

The themes of the consultation, introduced by a variety of experts, were:

- genetic testing
- prenatal and pre-implantation diagnosis
- regenerative medicine (with stem cells) and the respect of the human embryo

There were also two round tables on:

- religions and bioethics, with representatives from the Roman Catholic Church, and the Jewish and Muslim Religions
- society, politics and bioethics, with representatives of national parliaments, the Council of Europe and the pharmaceutical industry.

Lively discussions of these controversial issues led both to an understanding of a range of common values and principles, as well as areas of diversity and, on occasion, contradiction. In particular, these values included human dignity based on the conviction that human beings are made in the image of God. Participants valued the importance of listening and talking patiently to one another and learning from each others expertise and experience, recognizing the importance of their biblical and ecclesiastical traditions, and believing that scientific knowledge requires spiritual insights in its application.

As to genetic testing participants accepted some new possibilities for diagnosis and understanding of diseases and possible new therapies, but they disagreed on whether genetics tests should be offered where no treatment is available. They believe that churches should support genetic counselling and offer their own pastoral care. They emphasize the risk of discrimination (for instance by insurance companies) based on genetic information.

Concerning prenatal and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) there was no agreement about the use of these techniques, but there was an agreement that in the case of prenatal diagnosis there should be no social pressure or discrimination against those who choose to refuse it. There was agreement that there should be no selection of embryos for non medical and non pathological reasons, but no agreement whether they should be used for medical reasons. The difficulty of defining precisely what is 'medical' was also recognized. Without diminishing the responsibility to alleviate suffering, the churches should continue to challenge the notion of mental and physical perfectibility, and to recognize the need to acknowledge disease and disability possible part of human life.

Both for PGD and regenerative medicine there was agreement that, in accordance with human dignity, the human embryo is entitled to respect and to some degree of protection. However, there was a great diversity of opinion on the moral status of the embryo and on research and therapeutic uses of embryonic stem cells. There was a broad agreement that research into

adult and placental cord blood stem cells should be encouraged. Reproductive cloning was rejected by everyone. There was a lively controversy about surplus embryos, and in particular about whether there is a moral distinction between their death in the course of research and not keeping them alive. It was agreed that the production of surplus embryos in assisted reproduction should be minimised as far as possible.

Some participants underlined the economic and utilitarian pressure on people – and especially women -- faced with these issues, the tendency of genetic understanding to reduce human beings to their biological and functional dimensions, and that, in a global perspective, many of these issues may be seen as 'luxury' problems.

Participants agreed to continue with reflection and discussion of these issues, individually, with their churches and in the broader ecumenical context, and in particular within CEC. They welcomed the future work of the Church and Society Commission of CEC in this field and its dialogue with the European political institutions. The churches represent a large section of European society which have reflected on these issues over many years, drawing upon centuries of insights from their traditions and religious experience.

Various themes were suggested for consideration, including:
- the problem of surplus embryos
- therapeutic cloning
- patenting of living organisms
- end of life issues
- agricultural and environmental biotechnology
- scientific development and ethical evolution
- relationship between the image of God and human finiteness
- the notion of human personhood

The CEC is a fellowship of 126 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches from all countries of Europe, plus over 40 associated organizations. The Strasbourg consultation has been held under the auspices of Mr. Walter Schwimmer, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, in co-operation with the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), the 'Centre de Sociologie des Religions et d'Ethique Sociale' of the Marc Bloch University in Strasbourg and with the support of Interpharma, the Conseil Général du Bas-Rhin, the Région Alsace, the city of Strasbourg, the Dutch foundation 'Stichting Rotterdam' and the Uniting Protestant Churches in the Netherlands.

The proceedings of this conference will follow later on.