

Com II  
15<sup>th</sup> (CUS)

Christian Beliefs and the Ethics of  
in-vitro fertilization and abortion.

by Paul Badham.

Discussant's Remarks by Christian R. Gaba.

Dr. Badham's paper aims to "explore the grounds on which many Christians claim that their opposition (to in-vitro fertilization and abortion) is a necessary or inevitable part of an authentically Christian outlook". A distinctively Christian belief, according to the paper, must derive from three sources -- "Scriptures, tradition of the Church throughout the ages and an informed reasoning working today within the framework of faith". The main prop for Christian opposition to IVF and abortion the paper mentions as the consideration of the foetus as a human person and that destroying it is equivalent to murder. Hence the main preoccupation of the paper is with the extent to which the three main sources, which the author regards as making an outlook authentically christian, lend a distinctive support to the attribution of personhood to the embryo.

The author affirms that the Bible teaches the value of human life since it forbids the murder of any human being. However, he does not think the biblical view is that the foetus is a person or that it should be regarded as having rights. The bible for example imposes the death penalty on a woman for pregnancy out of wedlock which implies no concern for the foetus that is killed together with the woman. The Bible also differentiates between punishment for causing death to an adult human being, which is death, and causing death to an unborn foetus, which is a fine. On the issue of abortion, Dr. Badham finds the Bible silent and considers this

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silence noteworthy in the sense that no straightforward appeal can be made to biblical teaching in support of any view one may hold on abortion. Dr. Badham also finds unconvincing the stance that references to the conception of some key figures in the Bible and biblical description of pregnancy as "being with child" support the attribution of personhood to the foetus.

In evaluating elements in Christian tradition to which Christian opposition to in-vitro research and abortion might appeal, the author's considered view is that prior to the teaching of Pius IX based on the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, one finds virtually no significant support for dating personhood from conception with the result that, except one wants to order one's life by the papal rulings of the last century, one does not stand on a firm ground in tradition to strongly oppose in-vitro research or early abortion. One can, however, claim justification for opposition to late abortion. Dr. Badham also assesses evidence from Christian reasoning today and thinks that any Christian who wants to employ his reasoning faculty so as to present a coherent and intelligible account of the Christian vision of life cannot possibly acquiesce in dating personhood from conception for two main reasons. First, it could lead to the rejection of a central element in historical Christianity essential to a coherent theodicy namely belief in a future life. Second it does not help the inquiring mind today to satisfactorily understand the christian doctrine of humanity made in the image of God because 'reason' which is linked to the idea of personhood, involves some essential non-innate qualities like moral responsibility, spiritual

awareness and aesthetic sensibility all of which are developed, cultured and nourished throughout life. Christian reasoning today, then, in the author's view, is simply not on the side of a dogmatic stance on the issue of in-vitro research or abortion.

The author concludes that an evaluation of the three sources that make a view authentically christian does not legitimately provide any adequate justification for the current 'Christian' opposition to IVF research and the absolutist stance on abortion. Dr. Badham does not envisage a change to necessarily occur in the prevailing Christian attitude to both IVF and abortion as it did happen in the case of some other medical practices, surgery, anatomical research and anaesthesia for instance even though IVF, for example, has immense possibilities for positive good. However, since the biological origin of each human being dates from conception, the author's position is that embryonic research must be made to enhance human welfare and fulfilment and abortion be seen as the morally preferable course available at times since the human condition is not devoid of choosing between two evils.

As one reads Dr. Badham's paper one cannot help thinking aloud.

First how "Christian" is a Christian view? Of course, as the paper rightly points out, a Christian position must <sup>derive</sup> ~~derive~~ from at least the Bible supplemented by elements from Church Tradition and Christian reasoning contemporaneous with the view in question. But that these sources do not justify any absolutist stance, here in relation to IVF research and abortion, makes a Christian view relative rather than absolute. Even in

these "Christian" sources themselves one discovers that the elements appealed to may be culture bound -- there is for instance in the Bible a "Hebrew" and a "Greek" perspective labelled "Christian" to be carried by all Christians today. Again, that the author draws examples from only the traditions of some Christian groups and even here from some geographical areas only shows how unrepresentative a supposed Christian view can be much more to absolutize this view. Perhaps this is what Dr. Badham wants to underline when he puts Christian in inverted commas in the conclusion.

Second the question of the abandoning of some tenets regarded as central in historical Christianity. Rightly has the paper stated that "Christians today were not bound to share all the beliefs of their long-dead predecessors". But what does one do with a suggestion not to abandon a belief regarded as a central tenet of historical Christianity if the centrality of these tenets themselves is under grave suspicion today in the light of the Qumran texts for example.

Third the author does not see a change necessarily happening in prevailing Christian attitudes to IVF and abortion as it has happened in the case of initial Christian opposition to some other medical practices, indeed to new discoveries initially thought anti-Christian. Can one not say that the unlikeli<sup>h</sup>hood of this change is in the foreseeable future only in view of the fact that despite the bellicose resurgence of fundamentalist views the Secularization process in cutting deep even into the so-called central tenets of Christianity? Fourth, the question of the Unity of the Sciences which brings all knowledge down to the feet of an Absolute Value, ~~concerned~~<sup>conceived</sup> easily in the thought systems of a particular religion. That in Christianity no view can be supported in an absolutist fashion is a sure

testimony to the plurality of absolute values which is a central characteristic of our planet. Perhaps the only absolute value that the fast growing secular world can acknowledge, while fully recognizing the religious as well as the non-religious interpretations of life, is what John Hick refers to as the "transformation of human existence from Self-centredness to Reality-centredness".

In this regard, the new Cultural Revolution, no matter where it occurs today and whatever form it may take must reckon with the secular factor and not least also with the plural and therefore the non-absolutist values of human existence. There will certainly be a deep regard for life and medical science will contribute immensely here to the good of humankind. But it should be remembered that the human condition will continue to be characterized by ethical dilemmas, for instance, in IVF research and abortion, which should not be regarded situationally as morally bad.