

**COMMITTEE II**  
The Value of Human Life

DRAFT - 9/15/1986  
For Conference Distribution Only

**CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND THE ETHICS OF  
IN-VITRO FERTILIZATION AND ABORTION**

by

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The Fifteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences  
Washington, D.C. November 27-30, 1986

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Christian Belief and the Ethics of In-vitro Fertilisation and Abortion.

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In-vitro research has immense possibilities for positive good. One of the greatest blessings of human life is the "heritage and gift of children,"(1) and this is something that in-vitro research has already given to many formerly childless couples. It was a joyful and natural human instinct that led the future Pope John-Paul I to welcome so warmly the birth of the first test-tube baby,(2) before further consideration of the issues involved led his Church to a more negative stance towards such research. Yet the restoration of hope to barren couples is only the first of many good things that in-vitro research may bring. It also offers the possibility of reducing or eliminating some of the terrible handicaps which can be passed on through genetic defect, and it offers the potential of a deeper understanding of the workings of the human organism and hence the possibility of future cure or prevention of some forms of disease.(3) Hence, as Cardinal Basil Hume has written, if the question were considered "solely in utilitarian terms", everyone would be in favour of the continuation of such experiments. However the Cardinal believes that if consideration is given to the "absolute moral

values" inherent in the "Judaeo-Christian tradition" a very different conclusion will be reached.(4) And in this, Basil Hume speaks for much Christian opinion; for many of the pressure groups campaigning against the continuation of in-vitro research do so from avowedly Christian premises.(5) Thus, although working parties of moral theologians and scientists set up by the Churches have sometimes been favourably disposed towards the continuation of such research, (6) Christian opinion at grass-roots level seems strongly opposed to it, and such opposition is also at present the unequivocal stance of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.(7)

When we turn to consideration of abortion we are confronted by a comparable situation. On the one hand, many countries have adopted 'liberal' abortion laws which enjoy a fair measure of popular support. On the other hand, such reforms, though sometimes supported by liberal theologians and even by quasi-official anglican or protestant commissions,(8) are bitterly opposed by a groundswell of ordinary Christian opinion in all Churches, as well as by the official teaching of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. In Britain, for example, most women now want the present liberal law to stay, (9) while by contrast, explicitly Christian opinion has swung dramatically against it. Thus, though the British Abortion

Act of 1967 followed very closely the recommendations made in 1965 by the Church of England's Board for Social Responsibility, Anglican opinion has changed so dramatically since then that the General Synod now wishes the law to be radically amended, and has affirmed by a majority of 256 votes to 2 that "life developing in the womb, is created by God in his own image, and is, therefore, to be nurtured, supported and protected." (10)

Hence on both in-vitro research and abortion a clear difference of opinion appears to exist between utilitarian or pragmatic secular thought and the views of many contemporary Christians. This difference is important because the continuation of both in-vitro research and of liberal abortion laws are at risk at the present time. Already in-vitro research is very restricted in the United States of America, while in Britain two attempts to prohibit it altogether have been headed-off only by Parliamentary filibustering. Liberal abortion laws are still bitterly attacked in several European countries, and in the United States of America, a change of personnel in the Supreme Court might well remove the constitutional defence of the woman's 'right to choose'. Already Congress has banned federal medical aid for abortions for the poor, while the U.S. Administration now denies funds to any Third World Aid agency which encourages abortion, thereby

reducing its availability in precisely those areas most at risk from over-population and famine. It is apparent that "the Catholic Church and the fundamentalist Protestant religions form the backbone of the anti-abortion movement," (11) as well as spearheading the onslaught against in-vitro research. I want therefore to explore the grounds on which many Christians claim that their opposition is a necessary or inevitable part of an authentically Christian outlook.

### Historical Comparisons

I am prompted to question this Christian position not least because, as a Church Historian, I am very conscious of how Christians of previous ages have vehemently denounced medical practices which today no Christian would dream of questioning. For centuries Christian opinion forbade the giving of medicine, (12) the practice of surgery, the study of anatomy, or the dissection of corpses for medical research. Later the practice first of inoculation and then of vaccination faced fierce theological condemnation, as did the initial use of quinine against malaria.(13) The introduction of anaesthesia, and above all the use of chloroform in childbirth, were seen as directly challenging the divine edict that "in pain you shall bring forth children,"(14) and

hence were violently denounced from pulpits throughout Britain and the USA.(15) But today, there can be few Christians who would seriously question the morality of surgery, anatomical research, or anaesthesia. Yet many of the arguments used against in-vitro research today are similar in kind to those formerly employed against the medical innovations of earlier ages.(16) Accusations of 'playing God', or of unwillingness to accept that God knows best what is right for that person, or failing to appreciate the dignity of the human body made in the image of God, or prying into sacred mysteries, were charges routinely brought against the first students of anatomy, and against those who sought to combat the onslaught of disease or suffering by surgery, newly discovered drugs, or anaesthesia.(17)

It seems that there is a strong tendency for believers in a divine providence to oppose innovations in medical practice as implying a lack of faith and trust in God's good purposes. Yet after the medical practice in question has become common, opposition tends to fade, and the formerly criticised activity of the doctor comes to be perceived as being in itself a channel of God's sustaining love and as the vehicle of his sustaining providence. Consequently, although the practice of medicine had to fight bitter ecclesiastical opposition in early centuries, a very close relationship now

often exists between doctors and clergy (18) and medically trained Christian missionaries have made a substantial contribution to the world-wide diffusion of western medicine. It is therefore possible that if in-vitro research is permitted to continue, and if much observable good follows from it, then the present Christian outcry against it may gradually fade, and like other medical techniques it may come to be seen as a God-given gift to the human race. Indeed I have already heard a grateful mother, speaking on a radio programme about her experience of medically assisted fertilisation, describe it as a "gift from heaven". (19)

However a change of this kind in the prevailing Christian attitude may not necessarily happen, because one key argument used against both IVF and abortion is substantially different from the arguments used against earlier medical innovations. This is the argument that from the moment of conception the pre-embryo is a human being, and therefore as much entitled to protection and care as any adult person. This claim is the foundation of the 'absolutist' case against both abortion and IVF research, on the grounds that the foetus is a person and hence that destroying it is equivalent to murder. The dating of personhood from the moment of conception enjoys substantial support across a wide spectrum of the Christian

community nowadays, and indeed many see it as axiomatic that a committed Christian will, on this ground, wish to ban in-vitro research and repeal existing abortion legislation. What I wish to do is to question the validity of such an assumption, and explore whether Christian belief necessarily entails the view that a foetus in the earliest stages of its development should be regarded as already a human person.

My starting point will be the premise that a belief cannot be regarded as distinctively Christian unless it can be shown to be based on the teaching of the Scriptures, the tradition of the Church through the ages, and the requirements of an informed reason working today within the framework of faith. This does not imply any spirit of either biblical or ecclesiastical fundamentalism, as if Christians today were bound to share all the beliefs of their long-dead predecessors. But it does suggest that if there is any sense in which Christianity can be regarded as a 'revealed' religion, there must be some foundation in the sources of Christian tradition or in the framework of Christian belief, for any opinion which is to be put forward as characteristic of an authentically Christian outlook. On the basis of this premise let us therefore examine the opinion that an embryo is a human person.



### The Teaching of the Bible

The Bible certainly teaches the value of human life,(20) and forbids the murder of any human being. But life, in biblical terms, commences only when the breath enters the nostrils and the man or woman becomes "a living being", (21) and this has consistently been taught in the Jewish tradition since biblical times.(22) Consequently in biblical terms the foetus is not a person. This is brought out clearly in the laws relating to murder. For though the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 state clearly "you shall not murder", the text goes on, in the following chapter, to differentiate between causing the death of an adult human being and causing the death of an unborn foetus. For whereas "whoever hits a man and kills him is to be put to death,"(23)... "if some men are fighting and hurt a pregnant woman so that she loses her child, but is not injured in any other way, the one who hurt her is to be fined".(24) There is no suggestion in the Old Testament law, as there is in a comparable Assyrian one, that "he who struck her shall compensate for her foetus with a life". (25) Indeed the biblical text does not even regard the loss of her foetus as causing the woman 'harm', for it goes on to specify what should happen "if any harm follows."(26) At no point is any consideration given to the notion that the foetus itself might be thought to have rights. And this absence of concern for the

foetus is also implied by the imposition of the death penalty on women who conceive out of wedlock, without any consideration being given to the fact that this killed both the foetus and the woman.(27)

Turning to the issue of abortion as such, I somewhat puzzled that biblical fundamentalists who oppose abortion so strongly, should pay so little heed to the silence of the Bible on this issue. It is always dangerous to imply that "silence gives consent". Nevertheless, the silence is surprising, given that the deliberate causing of a miscarriage seems to be referred to in ancient Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Hittite, and Persian laws, (28) and as we have already seen the Assyrian law states quite categorically that killing a foetus is equivalent to homicide.(29) Since the Old Testament drew upon "a common background of legal jurisprudence shared throughout much of the ancient Near East" (30), it is noteworthy that no identification of abortion with homicide is made in the Old Testament, even though many other ancient laws were incorporated, albeit in modified form. But whether this silence is significant or not, the fact ought to be faced that whatever views one may hold about abortion, no straightforward appeal can be made to the teaching of the Bible, for the Bible simply does not discuss it.

Old Testament laws, like the ones we have been discussing, flow from the dominant 'Hebrew' perspective under which a human being is essentially an animated (i.e. breathed-into) body in which heart, kidneys, bowels, liver, inward parts, flesh and bones, all shape and determine character and emotions.(31) But, in some later biblical writings, there are also traces of 'Greek' influence in which the human being is essentially an immortal soul which enters and informs a body prepared and ready for it.(32) On neither the 'Hebrew' nor the 'Greek' understanding is it intelligible to date personhood from conception. Hence no biblical writer does so. Some scholars have suggested that the attention given to the conception of such key figures in the biblical narrative as Isaac, Samuel, John the Baptist, or Jesus implies a view that conception marks the true beginning of the human person in biblical terms.(33) It has also been suggested that the biblical description of pregnancy as "being with child" supports this view. But this is to push the evidence too far. It is only natural that if one yearns for a child, or looks forward to one who will inaugurate a new age, then one will be interested in the fact of his conception as the necessary prolegomenon to the longed-for birth. Yet the focus in all the accounts is entirely on the future birth, and what the person will accomplish during his life.(34) None of this implies that

personhood could be present from conception and, as we have seen, on no biblical understanding of personhood could such a view be expressed.

### The Tradition of the Church

Now, although there seem not to be any biblical grounds for opposing early abortion or IVF research, the situation is rather different when we come to the tradition of the Church. For "all early Christian thinkers without exception rejected abortion,"(35) and, according to Gerald Bonner, "until the twentieth century no serious Christian of any denomination would have attempted to defend abortion-if at all-except in the rarest and most exceptional circumstance."(36) Moreover it is a plain fact of history that abortion and infanticide, which were commonplace in the ancient Graeco-Roman world, ceased to be so as Christian influence spread.(37) At first sight, therefore, there seems to be a strong case for claiming that those who oppose abortion today have Christian tradition on their side.

However the issue is not as simple as critics of abortion suggest. For as the Church of England report on Abortion points out, although Christians have insistently extended the protection of the law to the child in the womb,

"at what point in its development the foetus became entitled to this protection was, from very early times a matter of doubt".(38) The dominant view of the early Fathers was that though abortion was always wrong, there was a radical difference between early and late abortion. Hence no canonical penalties were incurred for an abortion carried out in the first eighty days of pregnancy, (39) and Saints Augustine, Jerome and Thomas Aquinas all insisted that early abortion could not be classed as homicide.(40) According to St. Augustine, "there cannot be said to be a live soul in a body which lacks sensation, when it is not formed into flesh and so not yet endowed with sense."(41) In accordance with the medical beliefs of that time, the distinction between early and late abortion was characterised by talk of a difference between a 'formed' and an 'unformed' foetus, or an 'animate' or 'inanimate' one. The terms need not concern us and we would use different expressions today. They matter only as testimony to the deeply felt conviction in the Christian tradition that there is a moral difference between the status of the foetus in the earliest stages of its development and in its later growth. What is important for our present purposes is that, for the first nineteen hundred years of the Christian tradition, a distinction was made between early and late abortion, and it is not possible to claim that the Fathers of

the Church thought that the embryo was a human being from the moment of conception. They did not.(42)

The decisive change in the Roman Catholic attitude to abortion stems from the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. In this statement Pope Pius IX affirmed that "the Virgin Mary was, in the first instant of her conception, preserved untouched by any taint of original sin".(43) But this is only intelligible if it can be supposed that Mary's personhood and moral sense could be thought of already present "in the first instant of her conception". Consequently Pius IX found it necessary to break with past teaching and insist that from the moment of conception a human being, with full status as a person, already exists. And so, in 1869, Pius dropped the reference to an "ensouled foetus" in the grounds for excommunication for abortion, thus making, for the first time, early as well as late abortion a ground for excommunication. (44) This teaching was further explicated in the papal decrees of 1884, 1889, and 1902, which forbade direct termination of a pregnancy even in circumstances where, as in ectopic pregnancies, the result of non-intervention was the certain death of both mother and child.(45) It seems significant however that the Catholic conscience has not been willing to follow the implications of papal logic on this point, and a casuistry based on the doctrine of double effect

has now been developed to circumvent the rigour of the papal pronouncements.(46) But I suggest that the fact that in practice Catholic doctors find it morally impossible to treat the lives of foetus and mother as having equal significance, is itself a ground for questioning the validity of a doctrine which asserts it.

If we then evaluate the elements in Christian tradition to which opponents of in-vitro research or abortion might appeal, we find that, apart from those who feel bound by the papal rulings of the last century, there is a relatively weak basis in the tradition for strong opposition to in-vitro research or early abortion, but a very significant basis for opposing abortions carried out late in the pregnancy. On the otherhand the view that personhood dates from conception, has virtually no significant support in the tradition prior to the teaching of Pius IX.

### Christian Reasoning

If neither the Bible, nor Christian tradition offers much support for the dating of personhood from conception, what of Christian reasoning? By this I mean reasoning which operates within the framework of faith, so as to present a coherent and intelligible account of the Christian vision of life. Some

features of a Christian perspective include belief that God works through the processes of life to create beings who can "feel after him and find him", (47) and enter into an eternal relationship with him which can triumph through death. It is presupposed that life has meaning and purpose, and that the challenges and adversities of this life are, in some sense, necessary features of an existence which shapes the individual for his or her eternal destiny with God. (48)

The early Christians were worried that aborted fetuses, being unbaptised, would end up in Hell, (49) and their mediaeval successors speculated about the innocent unbaptised living for ever in a half-world of Limbo. (50) The mind boggles to think of the problems such speculations would encounter today, given that we now know that in the ordinary course of nature, 70% of fertilized ova fail even to reach the stage of implantation. (51) According to the Second Vatican Council, salvation no longer depends on baptism, (52) and according to Pope John-Paul 2nd, "every person, without exception, has been redeemed by Christ". (53) Yet if belief in the universal salvific will of God (54) is joined to a belief that every single fertilised ovum is a human person, then Christians would have to postulate a heaven populated largely by unformed zygotes! Simply to state this implication is to indicate that Christian reason cannot acquiesce in so bizarre



a conjunction of doctrines. Clearly this problem could be circumvented by abandoning belief in a future life. But such a move would be to eradicate one of the central tenets of historical Christianity, and one which seems essential to a coherent theodicy.(55)

Further, Christianity teaches that humanity is made in the image of God.(56) It has traditionally been supposed that it is in the capacity to reason that this likeness exists. However, 'reason', in this context, is not simply an intellectual matter, but is linked to a notion of the human person having moral responsibility, spiritual awareness and aesthetic sensibility. Such qualities are not innate. They have to be developed, cultured, and nourished throughout life. Hence many Christian writers have spoken of this world as "a vale of soul-making", (57) expressing the view that what is most distinctive of personal character and individuality is shaped by the experiences of life, through interaction with other human beings, through the tasks and duties of everyday life, and through communion with God. On this understanding of what it means to be a human being, it would simply be an absurdity to ascribe full possession of personhood to a new born baby, let alone to a developing foetus, and still less to an embryo. Rather, personhood will not be something that can

be categorically defined as present at any particular moment in time; but it will be described in terms of a continuum from almost non-existence at the moment of conception to increasing expression in the life of the mature adult and, if the Christian hope is realised, to fullest expression in the life of the world to come.

Hence I suggest that if a serious attempt is made to spell out a reasoned understanding of what Christian faith might mean today, it will be extremely hard to justify a dogmatic stance on the issues of in-vitro research or abortion.

### Conclusion

I have tried to show that the current 'Christian' opposition to IVF research and the absolutist stance on abortion, cannot legitimately find adequate justification by appeal to the Bible, Church tradition or Christian reasoning. Hence such pressure groups have no right to invoke the moral weight of historic Christianity for their opinions. An alternative Christian response might recognise that since the biological origin of each individual adult stretches back to the moment of his or her conception, it will be natural to feel a sense of concern about the appropriate use of human

tissue, and wish that embryonic research be adequately regulated and directed only to ends that enhance human welfare and fulfilment. With regard to abortion, it would seem that no one identifying with the Christian tradition could ever see this as a good in itself. But insofar as choices between two evils sometimes have to be made, there may be occasions when abortion is the morally preferable course. In such circumstances it would seem appropriate that any justifiable abortion should take place at the earliest possible moment in the foetus' development.

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9. 30% of British women wish the present law on abortion tightened compared with 53% who wish it either to remain as it is or to be still further liberalized. The Times February 2nd. 1980.

10. Church Times July 22nd. 1983.

11. The Times February 13th. 1985.

12. Didache 2:2. (There may also be Biblical opposition to medicine in the condemnation of "pharmakeia" in Galatians 5:20 since although this is usually translated as a ban on sorcery, reference to any Greek dictionary will make it clear that its primary meaning is "medicine, drug or remedy" and this is the meaning of pharmacy in every other context.)

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14. Genesis 3:16.

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