

- Belief in “delayed ensoulment” among mediaeval Western Christians was founded on a mistranslation of scripture and on an outmoded embryology.
- Even when the doctrine of delayed ensoulment was believed, Christians continued to extend moral and legal protection to the human embryo from the beginning.

All the authorities cited by Professor Dunstan in favour of embryo research in fact regarded the deliberate destruction of the early embryo as homicide or as something at least analogous to homicide. None sanctioned the intentional destruction of unborn lives at any stage of development. Dunstan’s thesis that the Christian tradition lends support to destructive research on early human embryos simply turns history on its head! While it is regrettable that this fallacy has been uncritically restated by the Bishop of Oxford and by the Primate of Australia, it is encouraging to see it squarely contradicted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, among others: my article, “A theologian’s brief”, was written as a submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Stem Cell Research and was endorsed by a number of theologians, including Rowan Williams, at that time Bishop of Monmouth.²²

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Christianity and the human embryo

Response to: The human embryo in the Christian tradition

R Gill

Perhaps the gradualist position on abortion has re-emerged repeatedly because it corresponds to pastoral experience

At one level David Albert Jones’s paper is very successful. Despite the high reputation of the late Gordon Dunstan, first as a mediaeval historian, then as an ethicist of considerable influence within the Anglican church, and finally as a pioneer medical ethicist, his crucial 1984 article appears to be overdrawn. Some caution is now needed before endorsing his claim that the Christian tradition according the embryo the full moral status of a human person from conception is “virtually a creation of the later nineteenth century”. Dr Jones produces a wealth of historical scholarship to challenge it.

At another level, however, Dr Jones is not concerned about nuancing a historical claim but about demonstrating that “licensing destructive research on

human embryos for the sake of medical progress...cannot be justified...on the basis of the Christian tradition”.¹ Unfortunately there is quite a large gap between these two claims. Manifestly “the Christian tradition” is not a unified tradition even within Jones’s own historical account. He admits himself that the Roman Catholic tradition diverged at times from what he clearly regards as the norm (especially its “perennial” theologian, Thomas Aquinas). And he is less than frank in admitting that many Reformed Christians would discount all Christian tradition except that of the Bible. To insist that it was an error in the Greek translation of Exodus 21.22–23 that was responsible for Aquinas’s view, combined with faulty Greek biology, is to miss both the point

that nobody before the discovery of DNA could give an adequate biological account of human generation and the point that the Bible does not actually discuss the precise point when the embryo achieves the full moral status of a human person (let alone when it might be said to have a soul that survives death).

In fact, Dr Jones’s paper does not even discount the opening quotation from the Bishop of Oxford. On Dr Jones’s own account, there was a “re-emergence of the early Christian view within the Roman Catholic tradition”. Also, in earlier Christian thought (notably Aquinas and, on one occasion at least, Augustine) there was “an awareness of a developing reality”. Where he differs from the Bishop of Oxford is in his assumption that this “re-emergence” was the authentic tradition and that its opposite, based upon a developing reality, was an error. Quite a number of other Catholic and Evangelical Christians share this assumption, but others do not and it does not derive unambiguously from the historical (let alone biblical) evidence.

Gordon Dunstan’s own ethical position was also considerably more complicated than Dr Jones suggests. He helped to shape the cautious Anglican support for the legalisation of abortion in the 1960s, but by 1974 he was already expressing considerable reservations:

The facts of the incidence of induced abortion invite only one conclusion: that abortion is now being widely legalised and practised because that is what people want—an indication for medical intervention for the destruction of life unknown in our ethics before.²

By the end of his life he had changed his mind again and spoke from the floor of the Royal Society in October 2000 defending embryonic stem cell research. An important clue about why he regarded such change as justifiable for thoughtful Christians is given in his 1974 account of Anglican bishops in the first half of the 20th century changing their minds about the legitimacy of barrier contraception (still disallowed within official Roman Catholic moral teaching and regarded in earlier Catholic tradition as homicide). Anglican bishops condemned contraception on the grounds that it would “threaten the race” in 1920; recommended “abstinence from intercourse” as the “primary and obvious method of limiting parenthood” in 1930, but conceded that “other methods” might also be used; and then in 1958 argued that in an overpopulated world methods of contraception were to be left to couples to make their own “positive choice before God”. For Dunstan, having taken the theological and historical arguments fully into account, what emerged slowly was:

a moral judgment already made, tested and acted upon by Christian husbands and wives, episcopal and clerical as well as lay, for years before; they had, despite ecclesiastical discouragement, admitted contraception into their married lives and could not convict themselves of sin in having done so (Dunstan,² p 48).

I doubt if Dr Jones would recognise the legitimacy of such a (pastoral) method in Christian ethics, but Gordon Dunstan regarded it as characteristic of Anglicans, and perhaps finally of Aquinas as well. It is just possible that the gradualist position on abortion (articulated principally by John Habgood rather than by Dunstan) has re-emerged repeatedly within Christian tradition precisely because it responds to pastoral experience. For many women (as well for doctors and pastors), it seems that there really is a fundamental difference between the trauma and grief surrounding perinatal death and the disappointment and sometimes deep frustration of an early spontaneous abortion. Indeed it seems that it is quite normal for women to have a sense of the increasing value and importance of fetuses as they develop in the womb: and for many there does seem to be a real qualitative difference between using a coil or pill to prevent implantation and undergoing a late term abortion. The very fact that late term induced abortions in Britain still represent only a tiny

proportion of all induced abortions (even though they are slightly rising at the moment) does seem to indicate as much.

In my view, there is also something odd theologically about believing that an embryo has a soul that can survive death from the moment of conception. Since a majority of early embryos abort spontaneously, in terms of this belief it would appear that heaven is mostly populated by them rather than by people who had actually been born. At a less celestial level, it also means that it is not only embryonic stem cell research and induced abortion that must be disallowed, but most forms of IVF as well. In other words “a moral judgment [about IVF] already made, tested and acted upon by Christian husbands and wives” (and, of course, by many other morally sensitive people) must now be judged to be homicide. I find that very difficult to accept.

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