



The Latimer Trust

PO Box 26685
London N14 4XQ

Chairman: The Rev'd Dr Mark Burkill
administrator@latimertrust.org
www.latimertrust.org

Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 31

PRE-EMBRYOS AND POST-CHRISTIANS

The passage during the past parliamentary year of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act marks a further milestone on the sorry path to a post-Christian society. Its detailed provision for the licensing of the new biotechnology finally confers a public benediction on research and clinical practice which has so far operated in the shadow of being merely not illegal. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, with members who are mostly enthusiasts for the new enterprise, is a curious body. Its licensing tasks could as simply have been undertaken by a unit of the civil service. Why another quango, from this anti-quango government? No doubt there is political advantage in keeping decisions of this kind at one remove from government, so if there is scandal or controversy over some new technique the Secretary of State will be able to say that Parliament established the Authority to take these decisions.... No doubt the medical-scientific community feels more secure policing itself (more or less). More important, the Authority will undoubtedly be a fount of advice on new developments, of which there will be an endless stream. It will take on the function of a kind of 'standing Warnock', helping to skew any future debates in a permissive direction. All in all, those who lobbied so hard for Parliament to permit embryo research (and they included most of the heavyweight medical-scientific bodies) have reason to be extremely pleased with themselves.

It is worth noting two of the stratagems they adopted, and remembering that they faced an uphill task. The Warnock Report was published in 1984, and essentially recommended allowing everything that the scientists could do/wished to be allowed to do with the lone exception of surrogacy. Some of us were a little cynical about that exception, since it ensured headlines along the lines of 'Warnock says No to rent-a-womb' in place of 'Warnock says Yes to human vivisection'. In fact the Committee, for all its liberal composition, was deeply divided on the central issue of embryo research, voting only 9-7 in favour of allowing the fertilisation of ova specifically for this purpose. Yet even so public reaction, which led to Enoch Powell's provocatively titled Unborn Children (Protection) Bill, supported by a large majority of MPs, caught the establishment by surprise, and rendered impossible any attempt at government legislation along Warnock lines for several years. When finally a bill was presented, it offered MPs the unprecedented opportunity to choose between alternatives on the key issue of the legislation (for or against embryo research). As the final, pro-research vote showed, this face-saving device was no longer necessary. The battle for the hearts and minds of our legislators had been lost and won, and the majorities were in the bag.

The stratagems worth noting were these: the establishment of the so-called Voluntary Licensing Authority (Warnock had spoken of establishing a Statutory Licensing Authority), helping pave the way and in the process showing that the profession could police itself (the name changed impertinently to Interim Licensing Authority shortly before it worked its way out of a job); and the coining of the term 'pre-embryo' for the 'pre-14 day embryo', which was less successful since the government had the honesty not to use it in its consultation documents or the bill itself, however widely it was swallowed by the media. These, combined with intensive lobbying (much of it paid for from public funds) and sympathetic media coverage, helped turn the parliamentary and to an extent the public tide between 1984 and 1990. The coup de grace was supplied by a rash of media coverage of handicapped children and their families with the meretricious suggestion that embryo research can cure handicap.

It should be added that the most important speech to be made during the entire parliamentary process was that of the Archbishop of York, It offered Christian baptism to the pro-research lobby, and seemed to confer (much needed) respectability on a poor case, (The speech is published and answered point by point in an editorial in Ethics and Medicine: a Christian Perspective on Issues in Bioethics 6:1 (1990); available also as a pamphlet from CARE.)

There is a sorry footnote to add to this story: the bill offered an opportunity to reform the law on

abortion which was eagerly taken up by the pro-life lobby. In the event, the time-limit was lowered from 28 to only 24 weeks, a change which makes only a scintilla of practical difference. A balancing change was that exceptions would be allowed to the 24-week limit in serious cases of prospective handicap or threat to the mother's health. Alas, by a combination of accident and design these exceptions were not permitted simply up to 28 weeks, but all the way to term. It remains to be seen how the courts will interpret this fundamental change in the law, but it leaves us with a major liberalisation where many had hoped for restriction, breaking the link between the abortion limit and the notion of viability.

Some comments.

1. The key issue in the debate has been, and remains, that of deleterious research upon the human embryo. It is not that there is nothing else afoot: the agenda grows longer every month as the advance of biotechnology and the retreat from Hippocratic-Christian values leave ever larger tracts of conduct exposed to the inhumanity which, in whatever disguise, is the plainest mark of the post-Christians around us and the fruit of their increasingly pervasive thinking. Whether or not we believe we may subordinate the dignity and rights of a tiny member of our own species to fundamental inhumanity is and will remain the litmus test.

2. Debate in Parliament and press has been handicapped by insularity. The case for embryo research, particularly in the past couple of years, has come to depend on the characterisation of its opponents as flat-earthers or worse. There has been a wilful disregard of the fact that (for example) the specialist multi-national committee of the Council of Europe (CAHBI), perhaps the widest and most representative body to have written a report on this matter so far, has come out in favour of banning embryo research. (I managed to get this fact published in a letter to The Times, but it was the only press reference I saw to the report, of which I picked up a copy at a Council of Europe conference in Strasbourg). Again, West Germany has been considering a government bill covering the same sort of issues as the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. It has all-party support, and seeks to ban embryo research on pain of imprisonment. I could go on. Curiously, the anti-research lobby has made hardly any use of this information either.

3. Christians have, sadly, been divided; or some of them have. Most Catholics, Anglican and Roman, and most evangelicals, have stood together, though - not surprisingly - they have been wearied by the long-drawn out character of the debate, and the tactics of attrition have favoured the medical-scientific establishment, whose resources and vested interests in this discussion are equally sizeable. Some of us find it hard to believe that there could ever be a plainer issue on which to stand together than the immeasurable dignity of the tiniest human being, since we believe that our Lord Jesus Christ has himself in the mystery of incarnation taken the form of a zygote, forever declaring that it is by no means incredible that the very image of God should rest on every such, since he who is the image of God has lived through even this stage in the human story. Had the churches stood side by side, had their leaders joined hands at every stage with the courageous and dignified Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster; in particular, had the bishops spoken in the Lords with vehemence and with one voice, who knows? At least we would have fought the good fight, and been better prepared for the next stage, as the utilitarian values of post-Christian paganism tighten their grip on professional mores and public policy,

4. We must recognise that 'medical ethics' ('bioethics' is the more comprehensive American term) has become the cock-pit of humane, Christian values. Far from being an arcane exercise in professional etiquette (which it was reduced to in a profession whose society accepted the tenets of Christian Hippocratism), medical ethics is now the pit in which the fight is on for truth and goodness and human dignity. The reason is complex though broadly twofold: it links the peculiarly 'Christian' character of traditional, Hippocratic medical values with the fact that the clinical situation is one of power and powerlessness, in which society can experiment on its citizens and try out its new, half-formed views of human nature in a place apart. Yet if we lose the fight here, we have lost it. In the values of embryo research and euthanasia we see the recrudescence of the paganism of classical antiquity which the Gospel (with a welcome for the values of Hippocrates, so close to its own) drove from the field.

By legislating decisively for the values of what I have called elsewhere the 'new medicine', Parliament has rudely reminded us how far down the road to the post-Christian society we have already gone. Perhaps, by the grace of God, the shock will prove salutary, and awaken us in time.

Nigel M. de S. Cameron.

Dr. Cameron, who is Warden of Rutherford House, Edinburgh, is editor of the journal Ethics and Medicine: a Christian Perspective on Issues in Bioethics and has written and edited several books in this area, including Embryos and Ethics. The Warnock Report in Debate (Edinburgh, 1987). His book The New Medicine will be published by Hodders in 1991. He is a member of the other established church in these islands (the Church of Scotland).