

The Status of the Embryo in Church History

By Dr Greg Pike

Current excitement in the scientific community about the use of human embryonic stem cells (ES cells) coupled with so-called therapeutic cloning¹ has reignited the debate about experimentation using human embryos, and in doing so prompted a re-examination of our understanding of their moral status. Deliberations such as these must naturally cause us to reflect upon abortion, in that human embryos are likewise destroyed in that act.

Prior to the scientific era, abortion was the only practice in which human embryos and fetuses were manipulated in any way. It is, therefore, important to review the scientific, moral and philosophical considerations that fuelled opposition to or support for abortion to see what light can be shed on our contemporary understanding of the moral status of the human embryo. In the West, the Catholic Church is the source of the major institutional condemnation of abortion and any process by which human embryos are destroyed. Because those moral positions are of such long-standing, it is natural that they should be subject to close scrutiny on a continuous basis.

I am not a Catholic. But like any other scholar involved in bioethical research and reflection I recognise that one must give a fair and accurate account of the Catholic teaching involved before subjecting that teaching to a critique. Which is why it is disturbing to find recent commentaries in the scientific and ethics literature misrepresenting the Catholic Church's historical position on abortion, and the considerations that have influenced the Church's gradual refinements of its position, and then suggesting that the Church has been inconsistent in what it has been saying about the moral status of the human embryo.

For example, a recent article in the journal *Science* by Noëlle Lenoir, member of the French Conseil Constitutionnel, perpetuates common misunderstandings about the attitude of the early Church to the status of the unborn and then sets up those misunderstandings in opposition to the Church's more fully developed moral position. Lenoir said:

The Catholic Church did not immediately condemn abortion. In the 5th century A.D., Saint Augustine believed that the fetus was part of a woman's body and thus

¹ The expression 'therapeutic cloning' refers to a process in which human embryos would be created by employing the same cloning techniques used to create Dolly the sheep, allowed to develop to the blastocyst stage (6 days), from which ES cells of the inner cell mass would then be harvested, destroying the embryo. It is then hoped that these ES cells may be able to be coaxed down specific cell lineage pathways to produce tissues and perhaps organs for implantation back into the same individual from which the clone was derived, thus avoiding problems with tissue rejection.

deprived of any sensation of its own. It was only in the 13th century that abortion was condemned by the church as against nature and against a woman's duty to bear children.²

With regard to the early, undivided Church's view on abortion, John T. Noonan, Jr. makes it apparent that the position of the early Church could not have been clearer.

The Christian opposition to abortion is strong testimony to this Christian concern for life. As early as the *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, the Way of Death is that of "killers of children" (*Didache* 5.2). In *The Letter of Barnabas*, probably an early-second-century document, the command is set out plainly: "Thou shalt not kill the fetus by an abortion or commit infanticide" (*Letter of Barnabas* 19.5). In the second century Athenagoras and Clement of Alexandria attacked abortion with zeal. Two apocryphal but orthodox works, the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*, testified to popular Christian abhorrence of the abortifacient. In the third century abortion was rigorously and directly condemned by Tertullian and Cyprian. The fourth-century compilation, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, condemned the killing of a formed fetus (7.3.2).³

Furthermore, David Braine⁴ adds to this already impressive body of united opinion by reference to the following early Church writers or gatherings, in which abortion is clearly condemned:

The Council of Ancrya: Canon XXI, AD 314

Basil the Great of Cappodocia: First Canonical Letter, AD 330-379

John Chrysostom AD 334-407

Minicius Felix: The Octavius AD 180/92⁵

Tertullian: Apologeticum AD 197⁶

Lactantius: The Divine Institutes AD 305/10

Ambrose: Six Days of Creation AD 386/9

² Noëlle Lenoir, Europe Confronts the Embryonic Stem Cell Research Challenge, *Science*, 25 February 2000, 287, 1425-1427.

³ John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception. A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*; Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, MA, 1965, 87-88.

⁴ David Braine, *Medical Ethics and Human Life*, Palladio Press, Great Britain, 1982.

⁵ "In fact, it is among you that I see newly-born sons at times exposed to wild beasts and birds, or dispatched by the violent death of strangulation; and there are women who, by the use of medical potions, destroy the nascent life in their wombs, and murder the child before they bring it forth ..."

⁶ "But with us murder is forbidden once and for all. We are not permitted to destroy even the foetus in the womb, as long as blood is still being drawn to form a human being. To prevent the birth of a child is anticipated murder. It makes no difference whether one destroys a life already born or interferes with its coming to birth. One who will be a man is already one ..."

Jerome: Letter XXII AD 345-420

By their condemnation of abortion, the recognition by the early Church of the status of the unborn is clear. The broad consensus within the early Church is also clear. In the Middle Ages, the Church did make a distinction between abortion of the formed versus the unformed fetus, but only in terms of the *degree* of penal sanction. Abortion was at all times considered gravely immoral, but more lenience was attached to early stages compared with later stages.

The reference by Lenoir to Saint Augustine raises more difficult issues about the time at which ensoulment was believed to occur. The argument about ensoulment was influenced by the biology of the day, which was primarily derived from Aristotle, and taken up in the views of Saint Augustine. Saint Augustine, drawing upon this limited biological knowledge, believed that 'unformed' flesh which was deprived of sensation could not be said to possess a 'live soul'. The underlying belief was that a soul could only exist in matter able to receive it. This 'unformed' flesh, based upon Aristotle's belief, existed up until forty days after conception for males and ninety days for females, after which time the fetus was considered 'formed'. However, Saint Augustine still considered that the 'unformed' embryo could be ensouled 'in some way', and with humility states,

No matter how diligently the most learned of men investigates and reasons, I do not know whether he can ever discover when man begins to live in the uterus, and whether life is present even when it is hidden and not yet manifested by the movement of the living creature.⁷

Thus, Noonan is correct in saying that Saint Augustine entertained a "cautious agnosticism on ensoulment", acknowledging that "man did not know when the rational soul was given by God."⁸ Furthermore,

Perhaps, as St Augustine said with enlightened prudence, we will never reach the point of completely lifting the veil of mystery, but perhaps we will have a clearer comprehension of that bud of life that unfurls into existence "like a seed that dreams in the snow", in whose secret "there stands the tacit awareness of that which lies beyond".⁹

Germain Grisez is correct when he notes that to suggest the existence of a prepersonal entity, which only later becomes a person "posits two entities where only one is

⁷ St. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, c. 86, PL 40, 272.

⁸ John T. Noonan, Jr., *The Morality of Abortion. Legal and Historical Perspectives*. Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, MA, 1970, 15-17.

⁹ Salvino Leone, *The Ancient Roots of a Recent Debate*, In *Identity and Statute of Human Embryo*, Proceedings of Third Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Ed. By Juan De Dios Vial Correa and Elio Sgreccia, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, February 14-16, 1997, 47.

necessary to account for the observed facts.” And, “entities are not to be multiplied without necessity.”¹⁰

Indeed, in scientific terms this accords with ‘Occam’s Razor’, which states that out of multiple explanations posited to account for the facts, the simplest is most probably correct.

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa called upon the ‘principle of unity’ to explain the necessity for the existence of the soul from the moment of conception.

Since the man who consists of soul and body is one sole being, we affirm that there must be attributed to him one sole common principle of existence, lest he be found to be both antecedent and anterior to himself.¹¹

In any case, while ensoulment may remain a philosophically unresolved problem, and some may vote for a delayed assignment of the soul to the fetus, there can be little doubt that in the embryo there resides, at the very least, *human life*, preparing for a future, a new entity with a nature received from both parents, exhibiting a clear inclination and with ‘a hope of becoming’.

And so, the *probable* presence of a soul is sufficient to protect against the risk of taking the life of a person. By analogy, one should never fire a gun randomly in a dark room in which there existed a possibility of killing another person. The chance of committing so great a crime would be sufficient cause for restraint.

Despite these considerations on the deepest questions about the complete nature of the embryo, at no time did Saint Augustine sanction abortion. In fact he spoke in strong terms against it. Attacks upon human life, born or unborn he considered evil.

As far as Jerome and Augustine were concerned, the theoretical distinction [between the presence or absence of the soul] led to no difference in moral disapprobation. They simply adopted language broad enough to condemn both contraceptive acts and acts destroying the fetus after conception ... Augustine thus condemned three kinds of act: contraception, the killing of the fetus before it is formed or “lives”, and the killing of the live fetus.¹²

Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome did not have access to current knowledge on embryology and the remarkable complexity and directedness of the early formative days following fertilisation. But we do. The Catholic Church has naturally and consistently developed Saint Augustine’s in principle position in the light of recent scientific findings, to what we now know as the teaching of the Catholic Church today. But the teaching is, in principle, the same teaching.

¹⁰ Germain Grisez, *Living a Christian Life* Vol. 2, Franciscan Press, Quincy University, 1993, 493.

¹¹ *De hominis opificio*, 29

¹² John T. Noonan, Jr., *The Morality of Abortion. Legal and Historical Perspectives*. Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, MA, 1970, 15-16.

Modern embryology is, in fact, completely consistent with Augustine's moral intuition. We know that the genetic reality of the embryo from fertilisation powers a self-directed developmental process of blinding complexity, and although reliant upon nutrition and protection from either its mother's body or, in the case of IVF, a particular biochemical environment, the early embryo is a completely separate entity. Resident in its DNA are all the commands necessary to assemble the human form and set in motion characteristics which, interplaying with the environment, eventually produce the person of adult life. Even when implanted in the uterine wall, the embryo draws only what it needs from its mother but remains biologically distinct.

The *quality* of the early embryo, if only a few cells, is essentially human just as the quality of the adult of several trillion cells, each carrying the same DNA, is likewise essentially human. Although it is not until about the seventh or eighth week that the embryo begins to 'look' human, up until this point it has been no less human, and indeed the secret of its visible form is present in its DNA. Modern embryology and genetics have extended our sight beyond recognition of a visible form, unveiling as it were, the previously mysterious machinations of development. If anything, embryology and genetics 'up the anti' for those who want to deny moral status to the human embryo.

In summary, the position of the early Christian Church on the status of the embryo, and its due protection, is all too clear. Unfortunately, where this clarity is misrepresented and the early Church made to look relativistic in its opinion, weight is added to a point of view that devalues embryonic and fetal life to the extent that the destruction of nascent human life is justified in the name of science and medical advance.