



Religion and Stem Cell Research

By Lori P. Knowles

Many of the world's religious leaders have opined about the moral acceptability of stem cell research. While research using adult or cord-blood stem cells is relatively uncontroversial, there is no consensus on the acceptability of using human embryos in research of any kind and therefore, no consensus on the acceptability of deriving human embryonic stem cell (hES) lines or using those cell lines in research. There is also no consensus on whether somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) should be used to create hES lines with specific characteristics. Religious duties to 1) respect and protect human life because it is sacred, and 2) to prevent and alleviate human suffering, create tension in evaluating the moral acceptability of hES research from a religious perspective. A third religious duty to protect and promote distributive justice by providing access to therapies for all people creates boundaries or limits on acceptable stem cell research.

Articulated religious opinions about stem cell research primarily deal with the moral acceptability of hES research, based on whether blastocysts are viewed as persons. In moral philosophy a distinction is made between that which is *human life*, as opposed to non-human life or non living material, and *human persons*. Human persons enjoy a special moral status, and a right to life goes with that status. As such, others have a duty not to harm them. Human life, on the other hand, while mandating respect does not equate with personhood and all the rights to protection that go with it. Some religions accept this distinction while others do not. For some religions, human embryos are human persons from the moment of conception, while for others the important moment is the moment of ensoulment, when the embryo or fetus develops or obtains a soul. Ensoulment

is sometimes thought to occur weeks or months after conception. These differing opinions reflect diverse views held by and within the major world religions. It is important to note that without exception, groups within each of the major religions hold contrary views on the morality of hES research. It is not possible in this forum to survey all the different opinions within one religious tradition, but readers need to take note of that diversity. In addition, only a sample of the world's religions is represented below.

Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches

While the formal authorities for the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches have come out in favor of stem cell research using adult stem cells, they have condemned hES research as immoral and illegal. The official position of these churches is that a human person begins at conception and the human embryo has the same moral status as human persons. Consequently, research on human embryos, including hES derivation and subsequent use is unethical, and if it involves the willful destruction of embryos, it is homicide.

For these religions, it makes no difference if the embryos that are used would be discarded or destroyed as surplus to fertility needs. Creating excess embryos that may have to be discarded is, in and of itself, viewed as immoral and wrong. Nor does it matter that the embryos would be used in the service of the relief of suffering. Since the underlying belief is in the embryo's right to life, any use of the embryo that is not for its own good is immoral and therefore, impermissible. There is no consequentialist or

utilitarian approach that would make this act acceptable. While in other realms one can argue that in order to save many lives it is ethical to sacrifice a few, religions appeal to a duty-based ethic that focuses on the moral duties of each person. In this realm, a person has a duty to help others and a duty not to take the life of another person.

The belief in the personhood of human embryos also means that it is not possible to use hES lines previously derived from human embryos or to use therapies derived from hES research. The idea is that these cell lines and therapies are tainted by the immoral act of killing the embryo. To use them would be to become complicit in the immoral act. As mentioned above, no religion is monolithic. Even in the Catholic tradition there are many individuals and groups that do not believe the embryo is a human person, but believe that its ensoulment is the morally relevant time with regard to personhood.

Protestant Churches

Unlike some churches, the United Church of Christ, a mainline Protestant denomination has no one voice that speaks for it. In addition, there is no official position of the United Church on the status of the embryo. As Ronald Green testified before President Clinton's National Bioethics Advisory Committee, "That is not to say that we have no opinion or do not care about their rightful status before God. But officially, we have never declared that we regard embryos as persons. Some of our members would agree with that delectation; many – perhaps most would not agree, believing instead that embryos have an important but lesser status."¹ Adherents to the United Church have declared that they are open to embryo research but consider that the goals of the research are of paramount importance. In addition, considerable emphasis is placed on the need for both public discussion and for oversight of the research rather than leaving it as an unregulated private enterprise. As in many religions there is a religious mandate that the benefits from this and other medical research be distributed evenly and justly to all those in need, regardless of resources or geography.

The Anglican Church, another mainline Protestant religion, is sharply divided on the ethics of hES research. Official

positions vary from country to country on the moral status of the embryo and therefore, on the morality of embryo research in general. The Protestant Church of Germany is also similarly divided. These divisions show just how personal an issue stem cell research can be. For these churches like for the lay public, weighing the moral status of the embryo and the need to help ailing and suffering people is not a simple calculus.

Judaism

The rules of the Jewish culture are shaped by both religious text and rabbinical law. Both of these sources are relevant to the explanation of Jewish attitudes to hES research. In contrast to the Christian religions mentioned above, Orthodox Jews believe that embryos do not have the same moral status as human persons. In fact, gametes and embryos outside a human body do not have any legal status under Jewish law. The result therefore, is that embryos created by IVF have no special moral or legal status. Under Jewish law (*Halcha*) the fetus does not become a person (*nefesh*) until the head emerges from the womb. When the embryo is implanted it is "as water" up to the fortieth day. After that time and before the fetus emerges from the woman's body it is a potential life and has great value. There is no consensus on when ensoulment occurs, but generally it is thought to occur sometime after the fortieth day. It gains full human status, however, only once it emerges from the woman's body. Since embryos used in hES research are ex corporeal (outside the body), according to the Jewish faith it is possible to use excess IVF embryos in research. There may, in fact, be an imperative to do so.

In addition to the Jewish views on the moral status of the human embryo, the Jewish religion places great emphasis on preventing and alleviating suffering. This leads to a deep belief in the morality of and value in pursuing medical research. As one Jewish scholar has written, "Our bodies belong to God; we have them on loan during our lease on life. God, as owner of our bodies, can and does impose conditions on our use of our bodies. Among these conditions is the requirement that we seek to preserve our lives and our health."² This commitment to preserving one's body and health is joined by a commitment to

1 Testimony of Ronald Cole-Turner, *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research, Commissioned Papers*, Volume III Religious Perspectives, 2000: A-1. http://www.bioethics.gov/reports/past_commissions/nbac_stemcell3.pdf

2 Testimony of Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research, Commissioned Papers*, Volume III Religious Perspectives, 2000: A-1. http://www.bioethics.gov/reports/past_commissions/nbac_stemcell3.pdf

helping others and alleviating suffering. So there is a moral imperative to help those who are suffering from diseases and to explore the potential of all types of stem cell research. This belief leads Jews to have a generally favorable view of stem cell research including hES research.

Islamic Countries

Like other countries around the world, Islamic countries have been involved in stem cell research now for several years. Among Islamic countries Iran took the lead in hES research in 2003. In Iran, Turkey, Singapore (with a majority of Muslims) and other Islamic countries, embryo research policies are influenced by the religious belief that full human life with its attendant rights begins only after the ensoulment of the fetus. This is generally believed by Muslim scholars to take place at 120 days after conception (although a minority belief indicates ensoulment takes place 40 days after conception). This fact, in conjunction with the importance articulated in the Qur'an of preventing human suffering and illness, means that the use of surplus IVF embryos for stem cell research is relatively uncontroversial. What remains controversial in the Muslim world is creating embryos for the purposes of research.

As with other religions, Islam and its followers have differing points of view on these issues. For example, in Egypt, a conservative religious country, the Muslim head of the Egyptian Medical Syndicate stated that embryos are early human life and should never be used in research, while the Chairman of the Islamic Law Council of North America has declared that the embryos being used in stem cell research are outside the body and therefore have no potential to become human beings. This, in his opinion, makes them acceptable under Islamic law as sources for hES research. As in other religions and countries the acceptability of hES research varies tremendously and the controversy is almost entirely due to differing views on the moral status of the human embryo.

Hinduism and Buddhism

Hinduism is a dominant Asian religion that varies significantly in traditions and beliefs. Closely related to Hinduism is Buddhism. There is no central Hindu or Buddhist authority to pronounce religious positions on stem cell research. There is also no Hindu or Buddhist

teaching that directly addresses the morality of stem cell research. Central teachings of the religions, however, are informative of how Hindus and Buddhists think about stem cell research. In general, a fundamental tenet of Hinduism and Buddhism is the importance of practicing compassion toward others. Medical research, with its aim to help others is, therefore, viewed favorably and consequently, adult stem cell research is widely accepted.

As with other major world religions, embryonic stem cell research is much more controversial. An additional central tenet of the Hindu religion is the mandate to avoid harming other living things. Life in all its forms is viewed as sacred and this mandate to avoid harm mediates against stem cell research since the embryo is seen as a living being. While views on the moral status of the human embryo differ, in traditional Hindu belief, conception is the beginning of a soul's rebirth from a previous life. Some Hindu traditions place the beginning of personhood between three and five months of gestation, while few believe that the soul's rebirth can occur as late as the seventh month. Most Buddhists have adopted the classical Hindu teaching that personhood begins at conception.

Though Buddhist teachings do not directly address the issue, like Hinduism there are two main tenets – the prohibition against harming or destroying others (*ahimsa*), and the pursuit of knowledge (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuā*) – that divide Buddhists. Some Buddhists argue that embryonic stem cell research is in accordance with the Buddhist tenet of seeking knowledge and ending human suffering, while others argue that it is a violation of the notion of not harming others.

A central belief of Hinduism and Buddhism is that an individual's soul or self is eternal. In Hinduism the soul is believed to be passed from one living being to another in a process called reincarnation. In Buddhism reincarnation is described differently as the rebirth of the self. These beliefs that the soul or the self are reborn lead to a greater acceptance of cloning technology. To many Hindus and Buddhists cloning appears to be closely related to the transmigration of a person's soul from one body to another or to a rebirth of the self. For this reason, although the use of embryos in stem cell research remains a divisive issue in these religions, the use of cloning technology in stem cell research is less controversial.

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