

ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVES ON THE STATUS OF THE EMBRYO

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Abstract. *This article describes the nature of the embryo from a religious (Orthodox Christian) point of view. The issues associated with the beginning of a human life and the present state of scientific developments has made the status of the embryo a major controversial issue. For some religions, the human embryo is a human person from the moment of conception, but for the others, the more important moment is the moment of ensoulment- when the embryo or foetus develops or obtains a soul. The official Church texts express the orthodox anthropology which is based on Christological doctrine. The common guideline of all the Churches is that the embryo is regarded from the standpoint of having both a human beginning and a human potentiality. From the very moment of conception, the embryo is not considered simply as a fertilised egg but as a perfect human being. Over time, the status of the embryo has been formed so that today we might appear to have a new way of thinking, but we have to accept that this way of thinking has actually persisted for more than two millennia. This question of the status of the human embryo has been debated by many in the medical field, secular philosophy and by religious scholars. The conclusion reached is that the human embryo must be regarded as a neighbour.*

Keywords: *embryo, bioethics, contemporary ethics, foetus, fertilization.*

Introduction

The human embryo has been broadly defined as "the developing human during its early stages of development"¹. This period extends to the end of the eighth week when all the major structures are present. This period extend by the time when all major structures are present and that is end of the eighth week. This embryo is a union between an egg and sperm. Egg and sperm are collectively referred to as "gametes" and they contain all the genetic information inherited from the parents. Most world religions teach that all human life is sacred. But, when they need to define the status of the embryo in relation to the evolution and usage of scientifically reproductive assisted technologies, they have various views on whether or not, or at what point an embryo is considered a human being. The three main views concerning the status of the embryo are:

- The embryo is merely human tissue and not a person as such.
- The embryo in its earliest form is only potentially human and must be differentiated from a foetus on its way to being born.

¹ K. L. Moore, K. L., T. V. N. Persaud, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology*, 7th edition, Philadelphia, Saunders, 2003.

- The embryo is, from the point of conception, already a human person, although it is at a vastly different prenatal stage².

For some religions, the human embryo is a human person from the moment of conception, but for others, the more significant moment is the moment of ensoulment - when the embryo or foetus develops or obtains a soul. Also, we can ask the "standard questions" about³ when a human life actually begins, or precisely when the embryo is to be accorded the status of an individual human person for whom these basic rights (of respect, protection and preservation of life) may be claimed? Sometimes is hard to give a straight answer to these questions. As Dr. Carnley⁴ said: "*To try and answer the question of when life begins is a little like trying to answer the question of when middle age begins...*" Oliver O'Donovan argues this case using Jesus' parable and the Samaritan and the Jew, who discover each other to be the neighbour of the other. Jesus is not offering a criterion-of-neighbourliness, he tells a story of its discovery through the expression of mercy and tells the lawyer to 'go and do likewise' (Luke 10, 37). O'Donovan says that there is no criteria of personhood and our attempts to locate personhood in any human attribute are all category errors⁵.

Different positions throughout history

Some scientists are not satisfied with the Christian Tradition for treating the early human embryo with "graded status and protection". They claim that in Christian history we can find varying positions of different theologians, and Fathers of the Church that had different perspective and interpretation about status of the embryo. We will present the most important thoughts throughout history:

The early Christian writings (like Didache 2.2 and Epistle on Barnabas 19.5) on the issue are simply that: "*you shall not murder a child by abortion*", but those writings also considered the question of when human life began asserted that the spiritual soul was present from conception. The Early Church adopted a critical attitude towards abortion because of the sanctity of human life. St. Basil the Great said that we do not consider the fine

² J. K. Opoku, & E. Manu, "The status of the human embryo: an analysis from the Christian and Islamic viewpoints", in *European Journal of Biology and Medical Science Research*, 3 (5) (2015), p. 21.

³ P. Carnley, *Reflections in Glass: Trends and Tensions in the Contemporary Anglican Church*, Sydney, HarperCollins, 2004.

⁴ P. Carnley, *Reflections in Glass: Trends and Tensions in the Contemporary Anglican Church*, p. 253.

⁵ A. Cameron, *The Bishop and the blastocyst: a case-study in handling science theologically*, 2014, Downloaded 18.10.2016., from <https://www.moore.edu.au/Media/Default/PDFS/AJC/Cameron-A.-The-Blastocyst-and-the-bishop-2004.pdf>, accessed 29. 09. 2016.

distinction between formed and unformed⁶. During the fourth and the fifth centuries some theologians debated the beginning of human life: is it in the moment of conception, or when the spiritual soul is "infused" on the 4th day?⁷ However, they thought that abortion was gravely wrong, like an offence against God the Creator. In the canon law of the Latin Church from the eleventh century⁸ the abortion of a formed foetus carried heavier penalties than did the abortion of an unformed foetus. From the twelfth until the seventeenth century, most Christians in the West were convinced by the anatomy of Galen and the philosophy of Aristotle that the spiritual soul was infused forty days or so after the conception. During this period, there was no suggestion that the unformed foetus was expendable, it was continued to be regarded as sacrosanct. It that period it was confirmed that it is never legitimate to harm the embryo directly, only in the course of trying to save the mother's life⁹. From the seventeenth century the biology of Galen and philosophy of Aristotle started to fade and there was a variety of other theories. One increased the significance of "fertilization" – the moment of the union of male and female gametes. This theory was confirmed in 1827 with the first observation of a mammalian ovum. This scientific development informed the decision of Pius IX in 1869 to abolish the distinction in legal penalties between early and late abortion¹⁰. The thoughts that were brought to the Second Vatican Council and Lambeth Conference 1958 about the sacredness of life and saving a life were in continuity with the belief of the Early Church. This was a constant feature of the Christian tradition despite a variety of beliefs.

Saint Basil the Great states in his Letter 188¹¹ that a distinction that was valid for Jews in Exod 21, 22-23 between a formed and an unformed embryo no longer applies. The killing of an embryo or foetus will have a spiritual impact equivalent to that of murder according to Orthodox Christians. The issue of the status of the embryo is not only essential in order to make us able to adjust our behaviour to abortion, but also, to prenatal diagnosis, selection and therapy, in vitro fertilization and transfer, embryo experiments, genetic manipulations, cryopreservation etc. Two public opinion surveys, which asked respondents to evaluate the status of the embryo, showed that one quarter to one third of respondents regard the

⁶ N. Koios, "Embryo and foetus as seen by Orthodox Church", in *Periodicum biologorum*, CXI, no. 3 (2009), p. 359–363.

⁷ D. Jones, "A Theologian's Brief", in *The Center for Christian Ethics*, 2005, p. 39.

⁸ D. Jones, "A Theologian's Brief", p. 39.

⁹ J. Connery, *Abortion: The Development of the Roman Catholic Perspective*, Chicago, IL, Loyola University Press, 1977, p. 366.

¹⁰ D. Jones, "A Theologian's Brief", p. 40.

¹¹ H. T. Engelhardt Jr., "Orthodox Christian Bioethics: Some Foundational Differences from Western Christian Bioethics", in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, XXIV (2011), no. 4, p. 496.

embryo as having minimal status (e.g. the same as that of a cluster of cells) and a similar proportion it as having status equal to that of a human being.¹² A recent study¹³ examining the intentions of US citizens in relation to obtaining personal genetic tests for screening purposes finds that those who are more religiously involved have more negative attitudes to those kinds of tests.

The position of the Eastern Orthodox Church:

The Orthodox Churches of Russia, Greece and Romania have their official statements about bioethical issues. The other Orthodox Churches have assigned specialist scientists to the task of formulating their position on these issues. Those documents are not official ecclesiastical documents, but rather suggestions and reflections. The moral status of embryonic life does not constitute a result of mental activity or scientific investigation, but is a fruit of ethos, that is for Orthodox theology and for everyone who has deep ethical concerns about bioethical questions. Throughout history, the Orthodox Church expressed and formulated its experience and teaching regarding the nature of the embryo in various ways. It has been expressed through Canon Law, through the writing of the Church Fathers, through the wording of Christological doctrine - "*where a condensed body of the teaching on the mystery of God's incarnation and the theanthropic person of Jesus Christ can be found*"¹⁴. We have already mentioned some testimonies from the Bible and from the Church Fathers, but we can also mention the encounter of the Theotokos with Elisabeth and the leaping of the embryo- St. John the Forerunner after recognizing the embryo Jesus (Luke 1,41). Conception has its sacred character and it is underlined by the Orthodox Christian Church with honour and the celebration of the conceptions of the persons involved in the divine economy: the mystery of Jesus Christ's conception on the Day of Annunciation of the Theotokos, the conception of Maria the Theotokos, and the conception of Saint John the Forerunner¹⁵. Also, from the Letter of Barnabas we can see: "*You shall not destroy your conception before they are brought forth, nor kill them after they were born*". Saint John Chrysostom wrote that abortion is a crime worse than murder. In the Canons we can also find

¹²Those two studies are: R. Pardo and F. Calvo (2008), "Attitudes toward embryo research, worldviews, and the moral status of the embryo frame", in *Science Communication*, XXX (2008), no. 1, p. 8–47. K. Hudson, J. Scott, R. Faden, *Values in Conflict: Public Attitudes on Embryonic Stem Cell Research*, Washington DC, Genetics & Public Policy Center, 2005. For the whole analyses see: Allum, N. & E. Sibley, & P. Sturgis, & P. Stoneman, "Religious beliefs, knowledge about science and attitudes towards medical genetics", in *Public Understanding of Science*, XXIII (2014), no. 7, p. 833–849.

¹³Allum, N. & E. Sibley, & P. Sturgis, & P. Stoneman, "Religious beliefs, knowledge about science and attitudes towards medical genetics", p. 835.

¹⁴N. Koios, "Embryo and foetus as seen by Orthodox Church", p. 360.

¹⁵N. Koios, "Embryo and foetus as seen by Orthodox Church", p. 360.

protection of the embryo and foetus.¹⁶ Abortion is not a criminal act against personality, but a criminal act against the family and morality according to Canon Law¹⁷. The only situation when the Church makes an exception is when the pregnancy is potentially harmful delicate and the life of a mother is at risk situation. In these circumstances¹⁸ the mother will have priority because she already has a connection and responsibility to other members of family. Embryos have both a human beginning and a human potentiality. All the components- genetic material, morphology, physiology are entirely human. The fertilized egg cannot revert to its former status, because fertilization means that the characteristic of a new human life has been irrevocably determined.

The spiritual status of the embryo

Everything we have said about the embryo leads to the conclusion that the beginning of man's biological life is identical to the creation of psychosomatic inherence. Every embryo from the moment of conception is caring a soul. We can find similar passages about significant spiritual events like we described (Luke) in the Old Testament where 'from the womb' there was indication that the embryonic status constitutes a stage of human evolution during which the grace of God acts upon man (David¹⁹, Isaiah²⁰, Jeremiah²¹). In Genesis 2, 7²² we can find a statement of particular interest for the status of the human embryo. The Hebrew word for the "breath of life" is ruach and for "living being" is nephesh. This means that life comes from God and contains the spirit of God. The ruach was perceived as a

¹⁶ Canon 91 of the "Penthekti" Ecumenical Synod- "As for women who furnish drugs for the purpose of procuring abortions, and those who take fetus-killing poisons, they are made subject to penalty for murder".

Canon XXI of the Synod in Ankyra "Regarding women who become prostitutes and kill their babies, and who make it their business to concoct abortive means, the former rule barred them for life from communion, and they are left without resource. But having found a more philanthropic alternative, we have fixed the penalty at ten years, in accordance with the fixed degrees."

¹⁷ З. Чворовић, *Право и Православље*, Београд, Catena Mundi, 2014, p. 192.

¹⁸ Ц. Брек, *С намаје Бог: кључна питања хришћанског живота и вере*. Београд, Штампарија СПЦ, 2012.

¹⁹ "For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works! Thou knowest me right well". Ps. 139: 13.

"Upon thee was I cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me thou hast been my God". Ps. 22: 10.

²⁰ "The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name... And now the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant..." Is. 49: 1, 5.

²¹ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations". Jer. 1: 5.

²² "... the Lord formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being". Gen. 2: 7.

moral lifestyle, and nephesh indicates life²³. Also, in Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, he claims that his calling dates back to the period of his gestation, therefore God calls, sanctifies, designates and nominates people from their embryonic age²⁴. When people are questioning the rights of the embryo, we need to remind them that the embryo is a person under development, it is an entity. And those ethical rights of the human embryo are the right to a human identity, right to life and right to eternity. The embryo has the right to develop its personality and to show its own identity and science and society must respect this right. Right to life we need to acknowledge to the embryos because the embryo's natural course of development is the same as that of every human being. The sole aim of existence should be its life. The third right is the right to eternity because embryo has the prospect for immortality. From the moment of its conception it is destined to pass into the life of eternity. As bishop Nikolos²⁵ wrote: "*This reveals the right of God to repeat His image in man*". Only when we understand and define the ontological status of the embryo, towards which we assume personal responsibility, the society can and must regulate the behaviour towards the embryo. We need to understand the embryo's personal nature. Man is a person because he has been created in the image of God (imago Dei), who is personal. God created him in His image, virtually giving him through this the capacity to tend towards similarity with Him. But we always need to have in mind that God did not just create the soul in His image, but the entire human being with its psycho-somatic unity²⁶. Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Saint John Damascene, had the same viewpoint, that body and soul are created simultaneously²⁷. Saint Maxim the Confessor said that the relationship between body and soul is permanent, not optional, not mandatory, according to the archetype of the union of the two natures in Christ. St. Maxim rejects their "pre-existence", or the "existence of the one before the other", but accepts their "coexistence". That is the reason why we do not separate, because it is unity. A person is a multidimensional reality, but also a mystery. Multidimensional reality is visible through his/her

²³ J. M. Vorster, "A Christian ethical perspective on the moral status of the human embryo", in *Acta Theologica*, CCCI (2011), no. 1, p. 192.

²⁴ N. Hatzinikolaou, "The Greek Orthodox position on the ethics of assisted reproduction", 2008, p. 28, Downloaded 17. 10. 2016, from <http://www.bioethics.org.gr/MMLN%20assisted%20repro.pdf>.

²⁵ N. Hatzinikolaou, "The Greek Orthodox position on the ethics of assisted reproduction", 2008, p. 28, Downloaded 17. 10. 2016, from <http://www.bioethics.org.gr/MMLN%20assisted%20repro.pdf>.

²⁶ S. N. Bute, & I. Stoica, "The dignity and the status of the human embryo from an Orthodox perspective", in *Romanian Journal of Bioethics*, VIII (2010), no. 1, p. 140.

²⁷ N. Hatzinikolaou, *The Embryo and Its Development in Regard to Its Formation as a Complete Human Being*, 2002, Downloaded 22.10.2016, from <http://www.bioethics.org.gr/en/index.html>.

attributes like uniqueness and unrepeatability. Each person is unique, both spiritually and physically. The person is also a mystery because he/she cannot be known exhaustively by the knowledge of its attributes. Those mysteries come on the one hand from the person's creation according to the infinite mysterious image of God and, on the other hand, from man's capacity and destiny to grow and to continuously transfigure this mysterious image. The mystery of the human being in its quality of a person comes as well from its act of transcendence towards God. The person continues increase towards the likeness of God because it is open to the transcendent, so we can say that human embryo is a sacred, independent and ontological one, it has begun to live and to develop autonomously through the fact that God called it to life. Through its individual and unique existence the embryo is an "other" and Orthodox theology gives the human embryo the character of being in the image of God as well, with a view to becoming like Him²⁸.

Conclusion

The belief about status of the embryo has been shaped by scientific advances in biomedical sciences and by religion. Religious groups influence the public regarding bioethical positions and this is particularly evident with issues concerning procreation, abortion and infertility therapy. All Christians will seek to frame their views in light of the fundamental convictions about God and humankind and they will all agree that it is vital that scientific and medical developments be celebrated and encouraged, but they must also be carefully and critically assessed to ensure that those developments are compatible with the dignity which is created by God. It is easy for the Church to ignore the contemporary medical challenges, social pressure or to repeat old dogmas, but the world will renounce the Church if no answers are provided. We must accept scientific progress. Careful Biblical and Patristic extrapolation is required to solve the problems that were not faced at the time in the past. We can quote Bishop Nikolaos²⁹: *"The future as a potential bears more weight than present time as a reality; for the kingdom of God, the eschaton, is closer to the truth than the tangible and visible world of the present. Respectively, the embryo is more what it can become; a human being with a living soul, and less what it appears to be; a developing cellular organism"*.

²⁸S. N. Bute, & I. Stoica, "The dignity and the status of the human embryo from an Orthodox perspective", p. 141.

²⁹N. Hatzinikolaou, *Nature and Status of the Embryo: Orthodox Christian Approach*, Strasbourg, Paper presented at the 3rd Symposium on Bioethics, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1996.

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