

Tentatio October 2001 - The Terrorism-Ethics Connection

A remarkable connection has come about between the events of September 11th and the way we view ethics in America. Prior to that terrible day, America had been living according to the ethics of personal relativism and public utilitarianism. In one day, we became a people united by the wrenching realities of our own absolute standard of right and wrong. With virtual unanimity we turned to God. The President quoted from the Bible. Public officials asked for prayers for our nation. The wall of separation of church and state was breached. Jesus Christ was named in prayers in stadiums, in interviews with the suffering on national television, and in crowded churches across the country in days to follow. No one with any authority challenged the consensus in America that what had happened in New York and in Washington D.C. was anything other than an ungodly wrong against an innocent and helpless people. Ethics moved from personal relativism to the objective demand for justice against wrong-doers. And we called on God for help.

A month before, we were engaged in debate over the ethics of stem cell research: defenders of embryonic human life pitted against those who would destroy such lives in the course of research, such research being justified on the argument of the greatest good for the greatest number... Utilitarianism, claiming justification on the ground of beneficial outcomes and Deontology claiming justification on the ground of the universally held principle of Do Not Kill helpless, innocent human life. But whereas utilitarianism spoke with much authority before September 11th, deontology has spoken with greater authority among Americans since, demanding the righting of the wrong against helpless, innocent human beings on hijacked planes and in targeted buildings. It will be important to remember the kind of people we became and not fall back into the careless ethic of utilitarianism that seeks the sacrifice of human embryonic life in the name of expediency and a Brave New World.

BREAKFAST WITH THE FATHER OF STEM CELL RESEARCH

I was privileged to be one among several hundred people who listened as James Thomson, developmental biologist and first to isolate embryonic stem cell lines from human embryos, described his hopes for the future of stem cell research. Thomson is a very nice man who is, nevertheless, a thorough-going utilitarian. Although he justifies his utilitarian ethic on the basis of *it is better to use discarded embryos than to let them go to waste*, he has little appreciation for the objective moral issue inherent in destroying a human life at this early stage of development. He makes the classical argument for such embryos as being human, but not yet a "person." In this classical argument the word "person" is an assigned value we place on human life, not one inherent in that life itself. It is the same argument that justifies abortion on the grounds that an "unwanted child" is better off aborted than born. Worth, it is assumed, is determined by us. Thomson claims a weak argument for the human embryo not having the moral status of a "person" based on the process known as "twining" in which it is not clear in early

embryonic development whether the human life in development will end up as one life or two, making human identity unclear at this stage. The response to such an argument is that whether it is one or two human lives all human life is to be valued as it seeks the fulfillment of birth.

Thomson did say that there appears to be more evidence that adult stem cells may, in fact, provide more than differentiated stem cells and that adult stem cells may prove to do much of the ground work targeted by embryonic stem cell research except that it is more labor intensive and costly. In the end, however, the outcome may not be a lot different. Most interesting was Thomson's belief that the goal of stem cell research is only penultimately the cure of disease. Ultimately, the goal is that of disease prevention. He believes that much of what is being done with embryonic stem cells now is merely clarifying the mechanisms that lead to disease and it is hoped that disease processes will be so well understood that intervention to prevent their development may be the final outcome. This sounds good if it could be accomplished with sources other than human embryonic life.

All of us want to cure or prevent disease, but at what moral cost shall we pursue it? Where shall we draw the line in "using" human lives for our purposes, especially when those human lives are at our mercy and have given no permission for us to sacrifice their lives? This same argument could be made about the 40 plus million lives that have been terminated in abortion. The use of human embryos for research is another version of the abortion issue since it is expediency that drives each. Have we not learned from the damaging effect on human lives in addition to the fetus that further travel down this road is leading us into deeper disrespect for and cheapening of human life. At this point, only a spiritual perspective seems to offer us a better vision for the future and a path down which we might be able to pursue research morally. Pastors and theologians need to speak to these bioethical issues in a way understandable, if not acceptable, to the church and society.