

Missing the meaning: A response to John Burn

Professor Burn does not have a strong grasp of his Church history. The Bull of Convocation *Aeterni Patris* was promulgated on 29 June 1868, the year before the Vatican Council, not in 1869. Neither the Bull nor the Council asserts that 'as a precautionary principle, life should be considered to commence at conception'. Professor Burn is perhaps conflating the Bull with Constitution *Apostolicae Sedes* of 12 October 1869, which rescinded the distinction between animated and non-animated foetus in the canon law on abortion, overturning the legislation of Pope Gregory XIV and returning to the policy of Pope Sixtus V. This technical legal change did not amount to a declaration that the soul was given at conception, nor did it alter the moral evaluation of abortion.

Professor Burn also asserts that Benedict XVI has 'declared that ensoulment might occur at conception'. He gives no reference to an encyclical or any other document where this declaration is made. As far as I am aware no pope has ever 'declared', as pope, that ensoulment happens at conception, nor indeed that it happens later. Nevertheless, all popes, as far as I am aware, have held and believed that the deliberate destruction of the embryo at any stage of development is a grave sin. In this respect at least, Catholic teaching has not changed. It is well expressed by the Second Vatican Council, 'from the moment of its conception (*a conceptione*) life must be guarded with the greatest care' (*Gaudium et Spes* 51).

The meaning of the word 'conception' here, as indeed the meaning of words generally, is not to be derived from ancient etymology but from customary use. The word conception has long been used in the Catholic tradition to mean the beginning of existence of the embryo at fertilisation. It is of course true that in society and among scientists and politicians there are deep differences as to the proper *moral* status of the early embryo but there is widespread agreement that a human development *begins* at fertilisation. This is implicitly acknowledged in Professor Hunt's reference to implantation at 'five days' or to development of the primitive streak after '14 days'. '14 days' after what? After fertilisation.

Professor Burn also seems to imply that the Catholic Church was among those who at some point opposed cadaver organ donation. In fact, even before the procedure was routine, Pius XII accepted it as legitimate in principle (Allocution to a Group of Eye Specialists, 14 May 1956). The Church has never forbidden autopsy for scientific or forensic reasons. Furthermore, Mendel, the very founding father of the science of genetics, was a Catholic priest. The Church is in favour of scientific innovation, just as long as it is pursued in an ethical manner.

Embryo research is objectionable not because it is new or yucky, but because it destroys human embryos. It should be noticed that the description Professor Hunt gives of cow-hybrid embryos is contentious at best. He implies that these are not really embryos and states that the stem cells produced are 'adult stem cells'. If this were true it would be odd that the law needs to prohibit so very

clearly the implanting of such embryos in a woman or in an animal. This is surely forbidden because these embryos may have the capacity to develop in the womb. Most scientists describe these embryos as '99.9% human' or as 'categorically human'. From an ethical point of view, a human-cow hybrid should probably be regarded as a cloned human embryo that has been created using a transplant from a cow. If these would be human embryos then they should not be created for use in experiments. In contrast 'induced pluripotent stem cells' are not embryos. No scientist or legal system calls them embryos. They do not raise the same ethical or theological problems as human embryos.

Professor Burn states that 'a cell does not have a soul'. In a modern context where people can hardly make sense of an adult having a soul, soul-talk is almost inevitably misleading, and to use it casually is to caricature. Clearly Professor Burn does not see the profound significance of the human embryo, which is what invites respect. Others do see this significance. In general, it is unwise to boast of failing to see something.

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