

**Nigel Cameron** and **Calum MacKellar** look at the Church of Scotland's unprecedented position

# CLONING and the Kirk

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## key points

**B**ouyed up by the success of Dolly the Scottish Sheep and manipulated by atheistic working party members, the Church of Scotland's ruling body, the Kirk, has made the unprecedented move of approving therapeutic human cloning. In aligning itself with the UK government's ethically rogue position on cloning, the Kirk is now on a moral collision course with almost all other expressions of Christian opinion around the globe, as well as the United Nations. Many Church of Scotland members are deeply distressed by this ruling which has turned their denomination into a rogue church.

**T**he Church of Scotland has made a dubious mark for itself by approving the cloning of human embryos for research, swimming against the moral tide of the likes of the United Nations General Assembly, The Council of Europe, The World Council of Churches, President Bush and the Roman Catholic Church. And although the majority vote of the Kirk during its General Assembly in May 2006 cannot remove the dignity given by God to human embryos, the Church of Scotland is now on a collision course with almost all other expressions of Christian opinion around the globe.

### What happened?

How has this happened in what used to be a bastion of biblical principles? There are stories of working parties on which most participants were not even members of the Kirk including known atheists working in the field of embryonic stem cell technology. There are rumours about the role of the Science Religion and Technology Project of the Church of Scotland, chief puppeteer of the Kirk's approach to science and technology and an advocate for the less savoury ambitions of the biotechnology industry. But probably the most significant reason for the majority vote is the strong utilitarian influences that have now established themselves in the Kirk. And these have decided that human embryos can no longer have full moral status because they have

become useful to researchers!

Scotland of course has reason to be proud of the efforts that went into cloning Dolly. Our problem in the UK is that back in the 1980s, with the Warnock Report and in contrast with almost every other nation on the planet, the creation of embryos for experimentation was endorsed. And despite the fact that almost no other democratic nation has followed our lead, the UK government has stuck to its unethical and lonely guns and decided that creating cloned human embryos for research was a good thing.

### World opinions

Most nations do not allow any cloned embryos to be created. Feeling on this matter is so strong that the world's first global policy statement on bioethics has been approved by another general assembly, that of the United Nations: the UN Declaration on Human Cloning decided by nearly three to one to urge all nations to ban all forms of human cloning.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine of the Council of Europe, which is the world's first biopolicy treaty, specifically prohibits the creation of human embryos for research through any means including cloning. At present, out of the 46 countries of the Council of Europe:

- **19 member states** have ratified the convention, making it legally binding in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Lithuania,

Moldova, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey.

- **13 member states** have signed their intention to ratify the convention as soon as their national parliaments have enacted the necessary legislation: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, France, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia and Montenegro, Switzerland, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Ukraine.
- **One member state** – Sweden – had signed its intention to ratify the convention but has since legalised the creation of human embryos for research, thus making ratification impossible. In doing so, Sweden is the only country to have openly and publicly repudiated its previous ethical stance.
- **Five member states** have not signed the convention because they find it too liberal, giving insufficient protection to human beings, especially human embryos: Austria, Ireland, Germany, Liechtenstein and Malta.
- **Six member states** have not signed the convention because they are either too busy on other matters to consider new legislation on biomedical ethics, too small or have only just joined the Council of Europe: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Monaco and Russia.
- **Two member states** – United Kingdom and Belgium – have publicly indicated that they have no intention, at present, of signing the convention. This is because, amongst other things, it would prohibit the creation of human embryos for research through cloning or other procedures.

### Rogue states

So the UK and Belgium are the only states refusing to sign the convention because of their very liberal bioethical stances. And in this regard, they are beginning to be seen by the rest of Europe as ethically rogue states in which any number of moral principles can be disregarded if they become a hindrance to scientific research. In other words, many countries such as Turkey are now in a position to look down upon the UK and question the manner in which the British government drafts its extensive but unethical legislation in the field of biomedicine.

### Dangerous precedents

And for the Church of Scotland, which is a moral body, to support the UK government in its unethical isolation, to knowingly reject European Human Rights Legislation and to support the creation of human embryos specifically for destructive research can only but create a very dangerous precedent. It will completely undermine the Church's reputation and Christian witness both at home and internationally.

The Catholic Church, true to its commitment to human life from the beginning, is against cloning for research. No surprise perhaps. What is remarkable is that the World Council of Churches (WCC), at the other end of the spectrum on so many issues, takes

the same view. And if the Catholic Church and the WCC are of the same mind, if President Bush agrees with environmentalists and radical feminist leaders, then the Church of Scotland should be very concerned about its unethical stance, which is in opposition to most other countries, lobby groups and established Christian churches around the world.

But the Church of Scotland did not only endorse human cloning. In its General Assembly of May 2006, it also agreed that human embryos left over from IVF could be used for destructive research. But in doing so, it did not mention that there are already more than 110,000 frozen human embryos stored in the UK and already available for research.<sup>2</sup> It failed to indicate that scientists have already destroyed 18,000 human embryos.<sup>3</sup> It ignored the reality that UK researchers would go to prison if they destroyed human embryos in at least eleven European countries including Slovakia, Poland, Germany, Ireland, Norway and Italy. And it completely overlooked the fact that many infertile couples in the UK are seeking to but cannot adopt these embryos.

### Sacrifices

Instead, the Church of Scotland preferred to disregard the views of a significant number of its members who believe that these human embryos can be considered as children. The Kirk is now openly endorsing a practice that could be compared to the human sacrifice of children for a perceived potential benefit in the health field. This is not dissimilar to the practice of the Phoenicians some 3000 years ago, as they also sacrificed their children to their gods for some perceived potential benefit in their quality or length of life.<sup>4</sup> And it is difficult to describe the deep sense of distress and shame that these Church of Scotland members now experience towards their denomination.

### Rogue church

This is not a debate about the freedom of science, or about abortion, and we certainly cannot allow it to become a debate about boosting the profits of the biotech industry. The importance of a clear moral framework to guide policy as we fast-forward into the momentous challenges of the biotech century is incalculable. Controversial procedures such as cloning have emerged as the flashpoint ethical questions of our generation, a unifying force that draws together in opposition bodies of men and women of principle from across the cultural and political spectrums. It is unfortunate that the Kirk is not one of these bodies. Instead it has betrayed its responsibility and spiritual calling and become an ethically rogue church that encourages the rest of society to slip down the slippery slope to a 'brave new world' where godly principles are dismissed as outdated.

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Roslin Institute's Ian Wilmut

Strong utilitarian influences have now established themselves in the Kirk

### references

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4. Leviticus 18:21