



Letters

The Status of the Embryo

Rev Chris Cook, Professor of Psychiatry at University of Kent at Canterbury, remains unconvinced that embryos should be accorded the unequivocal status of 'human being'.

Peter Saunders' HFEA submission on the status of the human embryo (*Triple Helix* 2000; Autumn:12-13) helpfully summarises some of the arguments in favour of a more conservative stance. However, I doubt that anyone is arguing that 'human embryos are not human beings worthy of respect because...' If the embryo is a human being, it is incontestably worthy of respect. If it is not a human being, it may still be worthy of respect because of its potential for development into such a being.

The crucial question is how we should define what it means to be a 'human being'. If humankind is made in the image of God, it would seem that the characteristics which are fundamentally human are unlikely to be biological in nature. It is, of course, a vexed question as to what the crucial characteristics of the *imago dei* actually are. However, the capacity for inter-personal relationship is surely an important consideration. To me, this seems closer to the concerns of scripture than a focus on biology.

If the high spontaneous abortion rate suggests that the majority of human beings have never entered into human/human or human/divine relationships (in the sense that we normally understand such relationships), and if they have never been capable of any kind of independent rational or volitional action in this world (however simple), what does this imply for our understanding of what it means to be human? Does it become possible to argue (*pace* Augustine) that the majority of human beings have never sinned? How would we then re-evaluate the work of Christ in this context?

I agree that the value of human life is not defined by 'normality' of body or mind. However, I do not believe that the status of the human embryo should be defined by its normality. The soul is not eternal, and presumably does not precede the existence of the embryo. However, why should it 'logically' follow that the soul exists from the point of conception? Such arguments do not help us to define the status of the human embryo - they follow on from a

predetermined position on that question.

I think that we should be grateful to Dr Saunders for stimulating our thinking in this difficult area of ethics, philosophy and theology. However, I remain to be convinced that the embryo should be accorded the unequivocal status of 'human being' (whether or not qualified by phrases such as 'in an early stage of development').

Cheshire GP and Anglican Synod member Sheila Grieve feels that Peter Saunders' views are unrepresentative.

The Autumn issue of *Triple Helix* causes me some uneasiness; in particular the submission by Peter Saunders to the HFEA, presumably on behalf of the membership. This certainly does not represent my views, and I question whether it represents the views of the majority of CMF members. In the 1996 survey of members' views about the status of the embryo, only 36% of the total doctor sample believed life had full value from the moment of fertilisation and only 20% of the total sample would not prescribe methods of contraception which might work by preventing implantation. These figures suggest that the majority would not be happy with the absolutist view and intemperate language of Dr Saunders' submission. Did Dr Saunders claim to be making the submission on behalf of CMF membership when he said 'with the HFEA Act the devil is not in the detail, but in the very foundation'?

CMF General Secretary Peter Saunders replies.

Those who see the embryo only as a potential human being usually don't make clinical decisions in its favour when it comes to the crunch. Chris Cook employs two of the common arguments used to justify a more liberal stance; namely that embryos' (alleged) high mortality and poor capacity for relationship raise doubts about whether they have souls or possess the *imago dei* and are therefore human beings. Readers will have to re-read my original article (and the fuller web version at www.cmf.org.uk/pubs/nucleus/nucjul98/deadly.htm) to judge the merits of my counter-arguments; but either way, I still maintain that the benefit of any doubt should be given to the embryo. The HFEA submission was a personal one, and not representative of

CMF, although interestingly, Sheila Grieve does not mention that 66% of the student sample in the 1996 survey sample believed life had full value from the moment of fertilisation. If, as I have argued, embryos are human beings, then the devil certainly is in the very foundation of the HFEA Act, since it offers them very little protection.

Jodie and Mary

Barts graduate Fiona Schneider is outraged by Siamese twin pics.

I was outraged by your last editorial page (*Triple Helix* 2000; Autumn:3). John Wyatt offers a sympathetic and balanced Christian view on 'Jodie and Mary': 'as Christians we must firstly be concerned to protect the dignity, privacy and grief of the family'. It is incomprehensible to me that you then have a photograph of the children. I am appalled by your lack of sensitivity and intrusion into the private sphere of this family. I hope you will apologise to the parents. Has sensational journalism eroded the CMF judgement?

Pharmaceutical Medical Director Jane Barrett feels similarly.

I was concerned to see the photograph of the Manchester conjoined twins with no reference to the fact that their parents had given consent for the photograph to be published. In view of the fact that the wishes of the parents have been so similarly overridden, can you reassure me that permission was sought, and consent given?

The Editors reply.

No photograph of the Manchester twins has been released, only drawings. The photo in *Triple Helix* was of a similar pair of twins and obtained from the Press Association. We are sorry that this was not made clear and the point is taken. The response from readers has been varied. In contrast to those opinions expressed above, others have said that it was the photo, rather than the editorial, which moved them most to outrage over what was done to those two little girls. John Wyatt's article in *Nucleus* (see *Eutychus* on p14) uses stronger language than his editorial to condemn the action taken by the surgeons. *Triple Helix* readers are welcome to ask for a copy.