

Theologic-ethical and philosophic-ethical arguments for limited stem cell research

Igor Kišš

The Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches and some Protestant Conservative Churches are strictly critical against the research with human embryos. The main argument of this standpoint is that the human life by conception comes into being from the very moment of joining of female egg with male sperm. Embryo is from this moment the full human being whose life is untouchable. To deprive such embryo of life is the murder. Any research with embryos (also with the aim of the therapy of some heavy diseases) is forbidden. It is necessary to respect consequently the dignity of human embryo from the first moment of its beginning.¹

But this access to the problem of stem cell research has the serious deficiency. It is used as the only ethical argument for solution of this problem in ethical discussions on this research. According to me there are also other serious moral reasons here which compel us to deliberate in embryonic discussions also further ethical arguments which justify the limited terapeutical stem cell research for the benefit of mankind. The shortening of argumentation on stem cell research only to the question in what moment starts the human life is according to me one-sided, not enough solidary with the sick people who would need very much the embryonic therapy and is ethically shallow. Many Protestant theologians and also the secular philosophers however find this argumenta also too dogmatical, uncertain, questionable and also inhumane. The Church cannot interfere into scientific research with its vetoing and bannings and does not deliberate that the aim of this research is to help to the sick people. The history of mankind knows many such cases when the Churches or its representatives were in the past too conservative in theirs decisions and has forbidden to scientists to do e.g. autopsy, vaccination, transplantation of body organs, passive euthanasy, cremation of dead corpses and justified it with some dogmatic principles but after some time had to aknowledge its mistake and finally to accept the scientific progress.

I belong to those group of Protestant theologians, who are supporters of limited embryonal stem cell research for the therapy of some heavy diseases. Naturally I support in the first place the research with adult stem cells and tissues and only secondarily the research

¹ In the Roman Catholic Church the strict condemnation of all stem cell research contains the last instruction of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dignitas personae* published on 12.12.2008. The same condemnation we can read already in the instruction *Donum vitae* of the same congregation from 1987.

with stem cells. I will be very glad when the research with adult stem cells will succeed. But the adult cells are according to scientists not enough efficient. Adult cells are only multipotent in their effects in the cure of some serious diseases. Therefore the scientists dream about totipotent stem cells research. I do not mean that the ethically limited research with embryos and stem cells is morally unacceptable. For this reason many Protestant theologians agree with stem cells research up to the 14 days of conception. In Austria engage himself in justification of limited embryonal research Prof. Ulrich Koertner from Vienna Protestant Theological Faculty,² in Regensburg Prof. Hans Schwarz,³ in England bishop of Oxford Richard Harries,⁴ in the USA at Berkeley University Prof. Ted Peters⁵ and many others. Some aspects of application of embryos by artificial fertilization supports in the Roman Catholic Church also the former Cardinal from Mailand Carlo Martini,⁶ the hot candidate for pope in the last pope elections. More and more American and European politicians support embryonal research. Of course, supports it also the European Parliament in Strassbourg, which is also the significant financial supporters of this research. I want to say that my own opinion is identical just with the Parliament in Strassbourg and its documents and fundamentally also with Roman Catholic Cardinal Carlo Martini. I am not however supporter of this research without limitations. I do not agree e. g. with hybrid embryonal research nor with reproductive cloning research.⁷ Each research must have according to me its clear humane borders. Humanity must be the limitation of all scientific research. But I do not disagree with embryonal research generally, as are doing some Christian Churches.

What are the reasons of such my conviction? I have for my point of view some ethical arguments, which I want now to deliberate with you:

² Körtner, Ulrich.: *Verantwortung für das Leben*. Theological journal Standpunkt., Wien 2001, S. 11-20. Körtner, Ulrich: Forschung muss sein. Journal *Zeitzeichen*, 2008, No.4, 16-18. Körtner, Ulrich: Theologisch-ethische Einschätzung verschiedener Verwendungen von Keimzellen und Embryonen, Lecture at Evangelical Academy Tutzing, 23.-24.6.2008. In internet,

³ Schwarz, Hans: *Töten für die medizinische Forschung? Die Problematik der Forschung mit embryonalen Stammzellen*. Journal *Glaube und Denken* 2002, S. 95-106.

⁴ *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik*, 2002, No. 1, S. 64: He finds as „acceptable to use embryos for therapeutic purposes where no other method was possible.“

⁵ Peters, Ted: *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom* (Routledge, 2nd ed., 2003) and *The Stem Cell Debate* (Fortress Press, 2007).

⁶ The controversial Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, a favourite of dissidents within the Catholic Church many of whom hoped he'd be elected Pope, has given an interview on abortion, embryo research, assisted procreation, AIDS and condom use to the Italian weekly *L'Espresso*, April 21, 2006. The lengthy interview, a dialogue with Italian bioethics expert Ignazio Marino, reveals publicly the Cardinal's differing opinion on matters of sexuality with the Catholic Church. Read: <http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2006/may/06050205.html>. In principle my personal views of issues on stem cell research are the same as the views of Cardinal Martini.

⁷ What pertains to reproductive cloning see the document of UNESCO *The Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights* from 11. November 1997, Art 11: *Practices which are contrary to human dignity, such as reproductive cloning of human beings, shall not be permitted.*“

1. It is not right solution of this problem to prohibit generally all scientific embryo research

Some Christians are convinced that the stem cell research is an interference in God's sovereignty. The man wants to do something what is reserved only for God. But I see in such argumentation a dramatization of the problem, because it would be in contradiction with the teaching about the creation of man to the image of God.

God has created the man to his image. Man is an analogy and a copy of God's original. It does not mean that when God is omnipotent, also the man is omnipotent too. It means that because of the analogy to God the man was created to be in some sense multipotent one. Analogy does not mean in philosophy an identity, but means an affinity (as says it the old Arabic philosopher Averroes). From this reason the man was created as homo sapiens. Consequently the man has the right to use its reason also for treatment of his diseases, to find new medicines, to run the hazard of new surgeries, to improve the methods of curing.⁸ We cannot say that humane scientific activities are in conflict with God's sovereignty. Only the inhumane research of scientists is audaciousness against God. So we can be supporters of the limited stem cell research. Naturally there are also some borders of scientific and also of embryonal research. The reproductive cloning of embryos is e. g. unacceptable because it is against human dignity. This my statement is then in accordance also with decrees of secular international health organizations nowadays which forbid the reproductive cloning. But when the scientists ought to implement the humane aims of science, they have to seek the remedies against the incurable illnesses. Such research cannot be in God's eyes something wrong. The fact that the man was created to God's image gives to scientists the right to do such stem cell research which has humane character of fighting against heavy diseases of humankind.⁹

2. The love for the neighbor oblige us to the help for the incurably sick people

God is love and because we were created to the image of God, we are obliged to help to our incurable sick neighbors. In embryonic treatment God offer us in 21st century the new possibilities of therapy. That would be God's new blessing for the world. Could we be cruel

⁸ The same we can read in document of UNESCO *The Universal Declaration on the Human Genome*, Art .12b: *Freedom of research, which is necessary for the progress of knowledge, is part of freedom of thought.*“

⁹ See the document of UNESCO *The Universal Declaration on the Human Genome*, Article 5e: *Research affecting his or her genome may only be carried out for his or her direct health benefit...if the research is intended to contribute to the health benefit of other persons.*“

and do not help to our neighbors with the new opportunities of medicine science? Also Jesus Christ cured the people. Consequently the same we must also do. It is not sufficient only to preach in the churches about God's love. We have to implement the love also in our practical therapeutical doing. Diaconia is command of Jesus Christ when he washed the feet to his disciples. One form of diaconia is medicine diaconia. We must do it also through the new types of medicinal treatments as the testimony of our love to our neighbors.

3. From the standpoint of science the assertion that full humanization of embryo starts at the moment of conception is still controversial

Scientists have not definitively answered the question of when an embryo becomes a human being. There are different opinions concerning the exact status of an embryo. There are many scientists who are convinced that a potential human life starts at the moment of conception but the full status as a human being is attained only later. Many scientists make difference between developed and undeveloped fetus. At first, an embryo is merely an embryo and we cannot yet consider it a full human being. For this reason we do not bury embryos. The civil laws do not regard gynaecologists who perform abortions in accordance with state laws as murderers. At an early stage of 14 days we cannot determine whether this one embryo will develop into a male or female, or whether perhaps it will develop into two individuals. Even the old theologians vary in their answers to this question. The thesis that an embryo is fully human being from the moment of conception became e.g. an official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church only since 1869.¹⁰ Pope Pius IX canceled the distinction between the "developed" and "undeveloped" fetus, which the church had used until then. Centuries before, however, St. Thomas Aquinas had a different opinion. According to Thomas the "ensoulment," by which the embryo becomes a full human being, happens sometime around the fourth month of pregnancy.¹¹ It is only after the "ensoulment" that the embryo is a full human being. Aquinas draws here on St. Augustine, who had a similar opinion. Quite a number of biologists agree with Aquinas on this point, even though it is really impossible to say for certain when the human embryo becomes a full human being. Even scientists vary in their opinions concerning this question. According to some, it is when the heart of the embryo starts beating. According to others, it is when the electrical functioning of the brain begins.. It is not possible however, to determine when, precisely, this moment occurs.

¹⁰ See Theologische Realencyklopadie, vol. 30, p.635, "Beseelung".

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologie* I 118, 2.

4. Love for neighbor is the queen of all God's commandments and when occurs the collision of ethical duties in our moral life, we have to give priority to love.

From time to time occurs such ethical situation, that we have to decide between two moral duties, which are controversial. When there is a conflict of duties, we must choose the lesser evil and give priority to the duty to love the neighbor instead of to the need to formally obey the commandment. That is the old problem of doing according of *strict ethical deontology* or according to *humane ethical deontology* which knows in some cases also exceptions in moral doing.¹² There is no doubt that destroying the life of an embryo is something evil and we must avoid of it. It must be for us clear. The life of an unborn child needs to be protected from the very beginning because the embryo has the potential to become a human being in the future. But in life we have to face many ethical dilemmas in which we find ourselves face-to-face with situations in which one ethical rule contradicts another ethical rule and we have to decide for the lesser evil. We must not only look at the ethical commandment as such, but also at the consequences of our so called “ethically pure” actions. This can be seen in the ethics of Max Weber and his emphasis on responsibility and consequentialistic ethics¹³. We cannot discard ethical opinions such as these one as a non-permissible utilitarianism. Neither can we condemn it as a crude and unacceptable ethical liberalism. When occurs the collision of ethical duties in our moral life, we have to give priority to love because the love is the queen of all God's commandments (Rom 13,9f). The main Christian commandment is not preservation of life at all costs. That is the main ethical rule in Buddhism and Hinduism, but not in Christianity. In Christianity the law of love is above all other ethical commandments.

Therefore it is not possible completely to prohibit research with 14-day-old embryos. Science has the right to determine which way is more helpful to humanity and is expressing better the duty of love to neighbor. We must choose in such case the lesser evil.

¹² More about the difference between an extreme strict deontology and humane deontology in ethics is possible to read in Kišš, Igor: *Sociálna etika*, Bratislava 2006, pages 50-60 or Kišš, Igor: *Bioethics and human embryos from the standpoint of a Protestant theologian*, journal *Human affairs*, edited by Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava 2004, 14,37-44.

¹³ In Slovak philosophical ethics much about consequentialistic ethics writes particularly Vasil Gluchman in his books. See: *Etika konzekvencializmu*, 1995, Prešov, ManaCon; *Etika sociálnych dôsledkov a jej kontexty*, 1996, Prešov, PVT; *Etika sociálnych dôsledkov v kontextoch jej kritiky*, 1999, Prešov, LIM; *Reflexie o humánnosti v etike*, 1999, Prešov, LIM.

5. Our ethical doing ought to be in analogy with the doing of Jesus Christ and Jesus was not an extreme deontologist in ethics like Pharisees but he discerned between the lesser and greater evil in ethics

Christ himself followed such kind of ethics. Christ's ethics was not an extreme deontology, in which every commandment had to be strictly followed regardless of the consequences or the context. The scribes and the Pharisees took such an extreme ethical position with regard to the question of healing on the Sabbath day. They were extreme deontologists who would admit no exceptions to the rules. For this reason Christ had to say to them. "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Mt 23,24). In these words of Christ about straining out the gnat but swallowing a camel we see an example of how Jesus used the principle of the lesser and greater evil. Christ broke the strict Jewish rule about keeping the Sabbath holy when was necessary to cure somebody on the Sabbath. Christ did the same thing when he did not allow the woman accused of adultery to be stoned (Joh 8,1-11). Jesus praises also king David because, *in extremis*, he allowed his men to eat the bread in the temple that was allowed to eat only to priests (Mt 12, 3-7). Because of this interpretation of the law the scribes and the Pharisees perceived Jesus as a liberal who is breaking the law. Was Jesus perhaps a moral liberal, as understood it the Pharisees? Jesus here then clearly explained that he did not abolish the law by not keeping certain commandments of the law; instead, he fulfilled the meaning of the law by his new understanding of ethics (Mt 5, 17). The basic point of God's law is love toward neighbor. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" – that is Christ's explanation of God's law. "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice', **you would not have condemned the innocent**", says Jesus here (Mt 12, 7). If love for our neighbor demands letting go the law as strictly understood, then we need to oppose an *extreme deontology of Pharisees* that very stubbornly applies the letter of the law. Instead, we need to apply a *humane deontology* and choose the lesser evil. The killing of human embryos in medical research is, of course, evil. At the first glance, such practice seems to be ethical liberalism and the culture of death. But if we do these things in a situation in which there is no other way out, *in extremis*, then such acts help to save other lives. Between the doing of Jesus and the doing of Christians must be analogy. We are obliged to do according to the example of Jesus, as we meet it in the God's special revelation in Christ in Gospels.

6. By solution of the problem of stem cell research Church must observe also the ethical opinion of people

In the past of European history was the Church the good moral teacher of people. Therefore came to quickly spreading of the Church in the first centuries of Christianity. There was the vivid convergency between the questions which sets the people and the answers which gave the Church. The Church was the teacher of the humanization of the world on slavery, on interhuman relations, on option for the poors, on charity etc. That enabled the quickly spreading of mission of the Church and christianization of Europe.

In nowadays Europe we observe the decline of moral authority of the Church. The Church is under critics of many people because of inquisition, clericalism, cooperation with nacism, formalism in piety, wealth of the Church, moral profile of some priests. In the last time came however to differences between the Churches and many state parliaments on the concept of social ethical questions, especially in the field of bioethics. The Churches are in danger of ignoring the moral opinion of humankind, which is mostly for some usage of embryos especially by artificial in vitro fertilization and by terapeutical treatment. The Churches appear to people in the issue of stem cell research too conservative, mediaeval, sometimes not enough humane, dogmatic, stubborn. In Churches is not enough will to aggiornamento, for understanding of new moral bioethical problems of humankind. The humanity of Churches is sometimes too utopic, illusory and not enough responding to the common sense of mankind. In this common sense of mankind, in understanding what is humane solution in questions of bioethic we must hear the voice of God's general revelation. Such voice of general God's revelation must respect also the Churches. In another case it would have a catastrophic impact on mission results of Churches. When will come to flagrant differences between Churches and the moral sense of mankind or world parliaments, it could come to dechristianization of Europa. The mankind can loose the trust in the moral sense of Churches. Not only Churches know what is true humane solution of moral problems. According to the teaching of Apostle Paul also the secular people sometimes know what is good and what is wrong in moral doing (Rom 2,14-15). On the base of general God's revelation also secular people can have feeling what is the right humane doing in some situations. When would come to deep differences between the moral teaching of Churches in bioethical issues and the secular area of mankind, it could have the tragical consequences for the mission of Christian churches in the modern time. The Churches cannot be in prolonged conflict with all mankind and its understanding what is actually humane solution of bioethic problems. The people could turn away from the Churches. We cannot as Churches ignore the voice of natural morality and the general God's revelation on the humane solution of bioethical problems.

Conclusion

In the present time we have in the Churches two different groups in the issue of bioethics. One is strictly against any kind of embryonal research and one which acknowledges the through humanity justified limited stem cell research; one group that is strictly deontological and one that accepts the principle that there are exceptions to the deontological rules, when the love to sick neighbor request the embryonic treatment? How are we to solve the problem of having such two distinct groups in the Churches? Ought these two groups in the Churches live in hostility one to another? Is it well that some Church allows in its Church only one from these two groups and the second group is denounced as extremely liberal and immoral and in last considering as heretical?

In my opinion the solution must be analogical to the question of pacifism in the Churches. Several people in the Churches are against every use of arms and as pacifists they refuse to serve in the military. Other Christians see the use of arms as needed to protect society against aggression. Similarly we must make room in bioethics for both positions regarding the use of embryos. Those who think that we ought not to use embryos for therapeutic aims under any circumstances should hold to their conclusions and avoid using embryos for therapeutic aims. But there must be respect in the Churches also for those who prefer the use of stem cell research in the fight over the most severe diseases of humankind. To say it clearly: in the Churches can live also the Christians who have similar opinions as has pope Benedict XVI., and also the people who have the opinions of the former Cardinal Martini from Milano and are supporting the humane limited stem cell research. It is necessary to formulate state laws in such a way that the life of the embryos is protected to the maximum extend possible. The Churches ought to tolerate both standpoints concerning the use of embryos in analogy to the question of pacifism. By such a solution in the Churches the people will not turn away from the Churches as too much conservative organizations which do not have enough compassion with heavy ill or much suffering people. If we do not accept such solution, the Churches will loose many people or at least many people will be discouraged with the Churches because they are too dogmatic and merciless to suffering people.

Address of the author: Prof. Igor Kišš, Palisády 46, 811 06 Bratislava

E-mail address: prof.kiss@abela.sk

Abstract

Igor Kišš

Theologic-ethical and philosophic-ethical arguments for limited stem cell research

The author of this paper as Christian theologian does not agree with the statement that the only and crucial outlet for all discussions on stem cell research is the question in what moment come into being the human life. If it starts in the very moment of fertilization of female egg with the male sperm then we must strictly refuse any research with embryos. But the author of this paper is convinced that this argument cannot be the only reason in ethical discussions on this research. According to him there are also other serious moral reasons here which compel us to deliberate in embryonic discussions also further ethical arguments which justify the limited therapeutical stem cell research for the benefit of mankind. The shortening of argumentation on stem cell research only to the question in what moment starts the human life is according the author of this paper one-sided, not enough solidary with the sick people who would need very much the embryonic therapy and is ethically shallow. For this reason the European Parliament in Strassbourg, nor the verdicts of constitutional courts of many European states do not accept such argumentation. The European Parliament gives year after year considerable money for this research. The aim of this paper is to resume for Christian and philosophical ethics such ethical reasons which speaks for the properly limited embryonic therapeutical research, albeit the author sees as priority the research with the adult cells. According to him in parallel with the reasearch with adult cells the scientists must have respected also the freedom for a limited embryonic therapeutic research. The author in this paper submits several theological and philosophical moral arguments for a limited stem cell research.

Abstrakt

**Teologicko-etické a filozoficko-etické dôvody
v prospech limitovaného výskumu embryí**

Igor Kišš

Abstrakt

Autor referátu ako protestantský teológ nesúhlasí s tým, že tento problém je dostatočné v etike riešiť len diskusiou, kedy vzniká ľudský život, že totiž vzniká od samého počiatku oplodnenia, a preto ho treba striktnie odmietnuť. Aj keby tomu tak bolo, že plnohodnotný ľudský život vzniká od samej prvej chvíli oplodnenia (hoci sa o tom ešte stále vedú polemiky medzi vedcami, či je tomu naozaj tak a popieral to aj Tomáš Akvinský a cirkevný otec Augustín), autor tohto referátu je presvedčený, že sú tu aj iné vážne morálne dôvody, pre ktoré treba správne limitovaný embryonálny výskum pre dobro ľudstva napriek tomu konať. Dôvodenie proti nemu len z faktu momentu vzniku plnohodnotného ľudského života od samej prvej chvíli oplodnenia, autor tohto referátu považuje za scestné, jednostranne dogmatické, nedostatočne solidárne s tými, čo by veľmi potrebovali embryonálnu liečbu a za argumentačne eticky povrchné. Ani Európsky parlament ani výnosy Ústavných súdov mnohých európskych štátov takéto dôvodenie neakceptujú. Európsky parlament odsúhlasuje každoročne nemalé sumy na embryonálny výskum. Cieľom referátu je teda zhrnúť pre kresťanskú, ale aj pre filozofickú etiku také etické dôvody, ktoré hovoria v prospech správne limitovaného embryonálneho výskumu (aj keď autor sám dáva prednosť predovšetkým výskumu s adultnými bunkami). Tieto etické dôvody neboli dosiaľ dostatočne reflektované a je nutné ich predložiť na diskusiu, aby sa došlo k serióznemu riešeniu tejto

etickej dilemy za alebo proti embryonálnemu výskumu na základe súťaže rôznych etických argumentov. Autor sa v tomto referáte pokúša predložiť viaceré teologické a filozofické etické argumenty v prospech limitovaného výskumu embryí.