# Bush, the Pope and stem cell research

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Things were easier for the Pope in the Middle Ages. In the early years of the irreconcilable conflict between science and religious obscurantism, the head of the Roman Catholic Church could place Galileo under house arrest or have Giordano Bruno burned at the stake. But the days of the Inquisition and the rack are long gone.

John Paul II has no authority to enforce the dictates of the Vatican against research into stem cells obtained from human embryos. He was reduced to pleading with the President of the United States, at a meeting outside Rome on July 23, to give the orders to halt a scientific endeavor which has vast potential to benefit mankind.

Bush is considering an executive order which will either authorize, limit or ban federal funding of research which makes use of stem cells obtained from embryos. There is widespread confidence in the scientific community that such research offers the best prospect for the treatment or cure of some of today's most terrible afflictions—Parkinson's disease, juvenile diabetes, spinal cord injuries, even cancer.

James Thomson of the University of Wisconsin and John Gearhart of John Hopkins University first isolated human embryonic stem cells in 1998. Similar cells in adults were discovered later. The area is one of the most promising targets of biological research, but has been hampered by a 1996 law imposing a complete ban on federal funding, partially relaxed by an executive order issued last year by the Clinton administration.

Unlike most cells in the body, which have a rigidly defined function, stem cells have the ability to grow into different kinds of tissue. In adults, however, this capability is more limited—i.e., stem cells in the nervous system have the capability to produce different kinds of nerve tissue, but cannot develop into liver or kidney tissue. Stem cells obtained from fetal tissue in the first week after fertilization, however, are termed "pluripotent," which means they have the ability to give rise to all the various cell types which make up the tissues and organs of the body.

The exact chemical and biological conditions which trigger the future development of stem cells are not yet known. Research is focused on understanding these causes, which could ultimately make possible the regeneration of tissue and even entire organs of the body to replace those damaged or destroyed by injury, cancers and other diseases. Some experimental therapies based on stem cells are already in use with cancer patients.

With an unerring historical instinct, the Catholic hierarchy has responded with hostility to a scientific advance that has the potential to give mankind greater control over its biological destiny, and thereby diminish the sphere of the unknown, the uncontrollable, the irrational, the less-than-human—i.e., the sphere of religious superstition.

Church representatives have sought to extend their reactionary opposition to abortion, *in vitro* fertilization, cloning, and other medical and scientific practices, into an absolute prohibition on any form of research which involves the destruction of tiny clumps of human cells—an embryo initially being smaller than the period ending this sentence.

Fr. Robert Sirico spelled out the doctrine in its most extreme form recently in a column published in the *Wall Street Journal*: "At every stage of development, human beings (whether zygote, morula, blastocyst, embryo, fetus, infant or adult) retain their identity as an enduring being that develops through the stages of life. From conception, we possess the genetic blueprint necessary for development; we are beings organized for maturation as members of the human race."

Here pseudo-scientific sophistry and religious dogmatism join hands. That such cells contain a genetic blueprint making them "potential" human beings does nothing to establish their viability or actual humanity.

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As one commentator pointed out, modern cloning techniques can produce a full-grown animal from no more skin cells than the body loses from a vigorous scrubbing. Should washing your hands then be equated with infanticide? As for a primordial "identity" from conception on, it is a well-established fact that embryos can split, forming separate but genetically identical twins, for weeks after conception.

There are genuine ethical issues which arise in biological and genetic research, but these relate to the perversion of science in the service of profit and power. They result not from the violation of religious taboos, but from the impact on science of the social relations which prevail in a class-divided society.

Thus one potential "compromise" reportedly under consideration by the Bush administration is to limit stem cell research to those lines which have already been extracted from frozen embryos which were to be discarded from fertility clinics, while banning the creation of any further lines from new embryos. This would amount to a government-established monopoly for the biomedical companies which have bought up the available lines, especially Geron Corporation, which recently formed a stem cell research joint venture with Celera Genomics, the biggest biotechnology firm.

Monday's meeting of Bush and the Pope was a natural fit—the representative of the most reactionary political force on the planet, American imperialism, and the representative of the most reactionary ideological force, organized religion.

Bush's own performance was a mixture of inept groveling—he addressed the Pope as "sir" and repeatedly pronounced himself to be in awe—and cynical political calculation. His White House handlers have decided after extensive polling that advance consultation with the Pope would make a stem cell decision sit better with Catholic swing voters.

There are a number of political issues on which John Paul II has adopted a more enlightened position than the Republican president—aid to the poor countries, the death penalty, militarism. But he chose not to discuss those subjects, and instead lobby Bush on a topic where the pontiff is planted firmly in the medieval world.

Bush and the Pope made a brief public appearance together before the press, but no reporter dared question the appropriateness of Bush taking counsel on stem cell research from the leader of a religious institution fundamentally hostile to this entire field of science. One might as well consult the Flat Earth Society on the budget for NASA.

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