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Confessions of a “Pro-life” Obama Supporter

W. Malcolm Byrnes

Although I oppose the federal funding of human embryonic stem cell research, I supported Barack Obama for president. I voted for him in November despite knowing that he fully intended to lift the restrictions on embryonic stem cell research that President Bush had put in place. Indeed, I would vote for him again. Why? It is because, like many others, I am not a single-issue voter. Although I disagree with Obama on traditional respect-for-life issues such as abortion and stem cell research, I wholeheartedly agree with him on a host of other important issues—the war in Iraq, universal health care, the importance of diplomacy and dialogue, energy policy, concern for the environment, and global climate change, to name a few.

I also know that I am not alone in this view. There are other liberal Christians out there who are “pro-life” in the broadest sense, opposing not only embryonic stem cell research, but also what they feel are unjust social policies. Liberals of this sort tend to shy away from identifying themselves as pro-life, however, because the term is fraught with political meaning. It has been co-opted by the religious right, by social conservatives with whom they disagree on most other issues. The pro-life movement has become so closely associated with a conservative agenda that most liberals who are opposed to the destruction of human life remain silent despite strong concerns.

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Still, I must confess that Obama's expansion of embryonic stem cell research through executive order on March 9, 2009, was difficult for me. Now stem cell lines derived after Bush's cut-off date of August 9, 2001, as well as the hundreds of thousands of in vitro fertilization embryos in frozen storage in fertility clinics, will be available to federally funded researchers. (The Dickey-Wicker amendment prohibits use of federal funds to actually destroy such embryos; however, private companies can destroy the embryos to create cell lines, which then can be used by researchers using federal grant money). Of course, we all knew this was coming. As a candidate, Obama had promised just this kind of action if and when he became president. Moreover, it is true that the use of abandoned, "left-over" IVF embryos for stem cell research has considerable public support. Many Americans are in favor of it. Finally, we do live in a pluralistic society in which a variety of moral views should be tolerated. But the president and others need to hear the reasons why liberals like me object to federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.

There are many reasons to oppose embryonic stem cell research besides the fact that it involves the destruction of human life, but two in particular stand out. The first is that it can result in the exploitation of women. A popular argument for use of excess IVF embryos for stem cell research is that such embryos will be discarded anyway, so why not make good use of them? Why not use them for the development of potentially life-saving cell replacement therapies? The problem with this argument is that it overlooks the fact that a *financial incentive* (development of potentially lucrative therapies) is present. This incentive will serve to increase the number of embryos produced to a level beyond what is needed for reproductive purposes. Fertility clinics in the United States already produce more embryos than are transferred to the womb; the rationale for this over-production is that it allows selection of the best embryos for transfer. It will be all too tempting and easy for clinics to increase production further. The formal rationale—quality of service—will remain the same, but the true motive will be one based on profit. Indeed, as embryonic stem cell research increases in volume and the demand for embryos increases, more will be produced. In this scenario, embryo production will no longer be driven by reproductive concerns (to the extent that it is now) but instead will be driven by the need to provide researchers with stem cell lines for federally funded experiments. Fertility clinics, which are already notoriously unregulated, will increasingly become factories for producing research-grade human embryos. Commensurate with this will be the exploitation of young women who will be needed in large numbers to supply oocytes for embryo production. Anyone who does not believe in the likelihood of this scenario fails to recognize that (1) we live in a free-market society driven by competition and profit, and (2) the fertility industry is essentially unregulated and will fight regulation of any kind. On this latter point, the standard argument discouraging regulation will be, why would anyone want to regulate an industry whose goal is to promote fertility?

A second reason for opposing the expansion of embryonic stem cell research, in addition to its potential for the exploitation of women, is that human reproduction will become a means to an end. Human embryos will become commodities to be bought and sold. This commodification of human life will be justified by the promise of therapies to heal those suffering from illnesses such as juvenile diabetes, spinal

cord injury, Alzheimer’s disease, and Parkinson’s disease. Accompanying this relief of suffering, however, will be a cheapening of human life beyond the mere act of destroying human embryos for their stem cells. The Bush compromise that allowed stem cell lines derived before August 2001 to be used for research unwittingly served to legitimize the use of cells from embryos for research. Now, with Obama’s executive order, the floodgates to embryonic stem cell research are fully open, and scientists are in a position to tap into the vast reserves of frozen embryos stored in clinics around the country. By expanding the number of cell lines to include these embryos and ones to be produced in the future, a Pandora’s box of potential abuse has been opened. President Bush opened the box a crack, but Obama has thrown the lid wide open. It will be difficult if not impossible to counteract these potential abuses, to forge policies and procedures that prevent the exploitation of women and the commodification of human life. It would have been far wiser to keep the lid permanently shut, and turn instead to other, ethically nonproblematic sources of stem cells such as induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells and adult stem cells, which have shown great promise recently. The biggest losers in all of this will be human individuals in their earliest stages of development (i.e., embryos) and the women who supply the eggs for their production and subsequent destruction.

What is at stake is even greater, though. In truth, we all stand to lose by the expansion of embryonic stem cell research, which inherently involves the destruction of human life. Why is this? Might we not one day benefit from the therapies that may result from such research? Maybe, but at what cost? Life is a precious gift, one not to be taken lightly. If we come to so wantonly discard the precious gift of the fragile embryo’s life, how will we be able to protect life in general? The callousness required to turn a blind eye to the reality of what we are doing to the embryo will spread, and it will erode our very ability to discern what is right and just. Our ability to unconditionally love our brother or sister and the earth that sustains us will recede before the alluring promise of wonderful cures and therapies. Yet deep inside, we will know that embryos are just human individuals at an early stage of development. We cannot hide from ourselves this reality, or the fact that at one time each of us existed as an embryo, a small cluster of cells in our mother’s womb—or, possibly, in a Petri dish if we were conceived through IVF.

All life is sacred, and all life-issues are intimately woven together. A person cannot truly respect the life of one human being if he or she does not respect the lives of all. One who opposes the killing of unborn children through abortion or the destruction of embryos but supports the killing of a man on death row, for instance, is not really pro-life. Likewise, one who is opposed to capital punishment yet supports the destruction of human embryos for stem cell research does not really respect life. The list goes on. How can one be pro-life, yet support an unjust war that has resulted in the deaths of many people or support environmental policies that cause human suffering and the deaths of many of earth’s living creatures? There is no artificial dividing line. The fabric of life extends to all.

The words of C. S. Lewis written over sixty years ago are relevant here. In his book *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis wrote about the dangers associated with our stepping outside of our right relation with nature, what he called the Tao. He warned that if we do this, we may lose our way and not be able to find our way back. By

choosing to expand the sacrifice of human embryos on the altar of embryonic stem cell research, we are running the risk of destroying our right relation with nature. We will be stepping outside the Tao, as Lewis would say, and our estrangement with nature will enter a new dimension. We may lose our moral compass—lose our way—at the very time in earth’s history when human moral leadership is desperately needed to tackle the global crises arising around us. If this happens, how will we be able to act with unconditional love toward our sisters and brothers?

In his executive order expanding the use of federal funds for embryonic stem cell research, President Obama may have been fulfilling a campaign promise. He may have been connecting with the majority of the people who supported him—his political base. But there were others of his supporters, myself included, who were disappointed, though not naively so, for we knew this was coming. Obama missed an opportunity to show moral leadership on a politically controversial issue. Perhaps if he had invested more time and energy in studying recent scientific developments and the ethical ramifications, he would have decided differently. He might have discovered the growing potential of iPS cells and the diminishing promise of their embryonic counterparts. Maybe he was too preoccupied with finding solutions to the economic crisis that now enfolds us. Whatever the case, although he lost this one opportunity, he will have many more to show moral and political leadership in the near future as the National Institutes of Health enact policies for awarding grants and Congress debates stem cell legislation. It is not too late.