Center for American Progress

Tackling the Moral Questions

See How Various Faith Groups Are Responding to Embryonic Stem Cell Research
By Dan Bennett
March 22, 2007

Major leaps in science often require a new understanding of ourselves and our world. From Galileo's telescope that revealed that the earth revolved around the sun to medical vaccinations and in vitro fertilization, scientific advances can threaten age-old religious truths and alter basic notions of what it means to be human.

Religious leaders and communities sometimes see science as going beyond its proper reach to invade realms that belong to God, and are often—while not opposing scientific discoveries per se—alert to the need for rigorous moral thinking and coherent ethical guidelines to accompany technological advances.

Embryonic stem cell research has been an area of particular interest to faith communities. Embryonic stem cell research holds the promise to revolutionize medicine, offering cures to a host of diseases such as diabetes, ALS, and Parkinson's disease. But the research also creates controversy because the derivation of the stem cells destroys the embryo.

Some religious communities believe that embryonic stem cell research destroys innocent life and should not be allowed. Others believe that while the embryo has moral worth, a group of a hundred cells no bigger than the head of a pin is not the same as a person. They also point out that there are thousands of excess embryos in fertility clinics that are already slated for destruction and could be used instead to find life-saving cures.

Opponents of and advocates for embryonic stem cell research are gearing up for heated political battles. States including **California**, **New Jersey**, and **Connecticut** have recently passed legislation to fund new embryonic stem cell research, while states like **Michigan** and **South Dakota** have laws drastically restricting stem cell research involving embryos.

There is growing awareness of stem cell research among religious organizations, but they hold a diversity of views concerning the morality of the technology. Several faith organizations have taken formal positions concerning embryonic stem cell research, while others have not taken an official stance.

It is important to note that many Judeo-Christian religious groups have hierarchical structures that allow for social statements to be made on behalf of their particular denomination, while others do not. Therefore, major faiths like Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism that lack such structure have not been included in this summary.

With that said, here are the positions of several major religious denominations:

Assemblies of God: The **Assemblies of God** oppose embryonic stem cell research, saying, “Potential medical benefits do not justify destroying human life at any stage of development.” The Assemblies also oppose somatic cell nuclear transfer on the basis that it involves “the creation and destruction of human life for medical research.”

The Catholic Church: There is some debate among Catholic ethicists, but the **Catholic Church** officially opposes embryonic stem cell research, frequently citing Pope John Paul II’s plea for a “culture of life,” grouping the science with abortion, euthanasia and “other attacks on innocent life.”

The Christian Reformed Church in North America: The **CRCNA** has yet to make a formal statement on ESC research, but released a **statement** encouraging adherents to “promote action and legislation that reflect the teaching of Scripture regarding the sanctity of human life.”

Church of the Brethren: The **COTB** has not yet taken an official position; they are expected to release a statement in July 2007 at the COTB Annual Conference.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: The **LDS** has not made a formal statement on embryonic stem cell research. Yet one interpretation of the Mormon doctrine of **ensoulment** states that “an individual human life only begins...when the spirit joins the physical body some time following conception.” Sen. Gordon Smith (R-OR), a Mormon, has used this interpretation to defend the research.

Conservative Baptist Association of America: The **Conservative Baptist Association of America** has not made an official statement regarding embryonic stem cell research.
The Episcopal Church: The **Episcopal Church** supports embryonic stem cell research and was especially supportive of **H.R. 810, the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2005** before it was vetoed by President Bush. A letter signed by two representatives of the church reads, “The Episcopal Church celebrates medical research as this research expands our knowledge of God's creation and empowers us to bring potential healing to those who suffer from disease or disability.”

The Evangelical Lutheran Church: The **Evangelical Lutheran Church** has not yet made an official statement on embryonic stem cell research, but preliminary work is being done to select members of the council that will eventually draft a social statement on the research and other genetic issues. The Evangelical Lutheran Church will not likely consider the statement any earlier than at the 2011 Churchwide Assembly.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church: The **Evangelical Presbyterian Church** has not taken an official position regarding embryonic stem cell research.
The Foursquare Church: The **Foursquare Church** has not made a statement on embryonic stem cell research, but it is probable that a position will be taken at some point

in the near future.

Jehovah's Witnesses: The **Jehovah's Witnesses** have not explicitly addressed stem cell research. They have stated opposition to abortion, believing that life begins at conception, and they have also stated that "the willful destruction of an embryo would be viewed as abortion."

The Lutheran Church: Missouri Synod: The **Lutheran Church: Missouri Synod** does not support embryonic stem cell research because the technology, citing 2001 Resolution 6.13, "necessarily involves the intentional destruction of human beings." Research on adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood is supported by the LCMS.
Mennonite Church USA: The **Mennonite Church** has not made an official statement regarding embryonic stem cell research.

Open Bible Churches: The **Open Bible Churches** have not yet adopted a stance on embryonic stem cell research.

Orthodox Church in America: The American affiliation of the **Orthodox Church** opposes the research, stating, "The extraction of stem cells from embryos, which involves the willful taking of human life...is considered morally and ethically wrong in every instance." The church states that it does support advances in therapeutic medicine, but it does not do so "at the expense of human life."

The Presbyterian Church (USA): The **Presbyterian Church (USA)** stated at their 213th General Assembly in 2001 that, "With careful regulation, we affirm the use of human stem cell tissue for research that may result in the restoring of health to those suffering from serious illness." Throughout its statement on the topic, the notion of responsibility is repeated several times, making it clear that although the church supports the research, the endorsement is not a blank check.

The Reformed Church in America: The **Reformed Church in America** states that "different sources of embryonic stem cells call for different moral evaluations." The RCA is in favor of extracting stem cells from miscarried fetuses, but they are not supportive of the production of embryos for the explicit purpose of testing. The RCA also cautions against "using a surplus of embryos that would otherwise be disposed of," since doing so could lead to the perception of humans as "mere objects and a source of spare parts."

Seventh-Day Adventist Church: The **Seventh-Day Adventist Church** has not yet made a statement regarding embryonic stem cell research, but they have stated their support for **somatic cell nuclear transfer**, writing on their website, "If it is possible to prevent genetic disease through the use of somatic cell nuclear transfer, the use of this technology may be in keeping with the goal of preventing avoidable suffering."

Southern Baptist Convention: The **SBC** is opposed to embryonic stem cell research, citing "vigorous opposition to the destruction of innocent human life, including the destruction of human embryos." The Convention also encouraged Congress to maintain

funding restrictions on the technology, and also encouraged existing laboratories that engage in the science to “cease and desist.”

Union for Reformed Judaism: The **Union for Reformed Judaism** supports embryonic stem cell research, saying “The Jewish tradition teaches us that preserving life and promoting health are among the most precious of values.” The URJ was a vocal advocate of H.R. 810.

Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations: The **Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations** supports the science of stem cell research, saying in a letter to President Bush, “We believe it is entirely appropriate to utilize for this research existing embryos, such as those created for IVF purposes that would otherwise be discarded but for this research.” the UOJC is, however, opposed to the creation of embryos for the specific purpose of research.

Unitarian Universalist Association: The **UUA** was a vocal supporter of H.R. 810, and continues to support a woman’s right to donate eggs and a couple’s right to donate embryos so long as there “is no intention of human reproductive cloning.” In addition to supporting embryonic stem cell research, the UUA supports somatic cell nuclear transfer as a viable and valuable advancement in therapeutic medicine.

United Church of Christ: The **UCC** is fully supportive of federal funding for embryonic stem cell research within “ethically sound guidelines...and the limitations set forth by the National Institutes of Health.” They cite their belief in Jesus’ healing as foundational for their support of this research.

United Methodist Church: The **United Methodist Church** supports embryonic stem cell research, but has four ethical conditions that must be met. The embryos used must not have any future for procreation, the couples donating the embryos must have given consent to have their embryos used for research, the embryos must not have been created solely for research activities, and the embryos must not have been purchased or sold in any way.

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism: The **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism** supports lifting the restrictions on funding embryonic stem cell research, saying “Support of stem cell research evolves from the view in Jewish law that an embryo does not have ‘full capacity or status’ until it is 40 days old.”