

THE ISLAMIC VIEW ON STEM CELL RESEARCH

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Abstract: Islam's obligation towards knowledge coupled with its tradition towards not allowing surrogate parenting or embryo adoption, leads many Islamic scholars to believe that the Qur'an can be used to support stem cell research.

Islam has a theology based legal system that dictates law based upon divine and immutable revelation.¹ The main authority of Islam, the Qur'an, is not an encyclopedia of how to live one's life.² There are several other sources of truth in Islam but it is the Shari'ah that contains the body of legal literature.³ Muslims believe that the Shari'ah teaches Muslims how to worship according to the Qur'an and the ways of the Prophet Muhammad.⁴ However, Islamic law is flexible and is supposed to be analyzed under current times to deal with new problems.⁵

To analyze Islam's stance towards stem cell research, once again the status of the embryo must be determined. In Chapter 23, verse 12-14 the Qur'an teaches:

¹ Stephen J. Werber, *Cloning: A Jewish Law Perspective with a Comparative Study of Other Abrahamic Traditions*, 30 SETON HALL L. REV. 114, 1156(2000).

² The Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th Century of the Common Era. Muslims believe that it encompasses all spheres of human life and contains God's guidance in teachings and commandments. *Islam: A Brief Introduction* at www.islam101.com./dawah/IslamBrief.html (last visited March 11, 2002).

³ Religiousconsultation.org, *The Right to Contraception and Abortion in Ten World Religions* at www.religiousconsultation.org/islam_contraception_abortion.htm (last visited November 10, 2001).

⁴ *Islam: A Brief Introduction* at www.islam101.com./dawah/IslamBrief.html (last visited March 11, 2002). According to Islamic scholars, the Sacred Law (Shari'ah) encompasses all activities of human life and teaches that all secular activities become acts of worship if they are "performed with pure and righteous intention seeking God's pleasure." *Id.*

⁵ Religiousconsultation.org, *The Right to Contraception and Abortion in Ten World Religions* at www.religiousconsultation.org/islam_contraception_abortion.htm (last visited November 10, 2001). This principle is called ijithad, which means to analyze and argue from Qur'anic principles, using logic and analogy to solve a current moral problem. *Id.*

We created (khalaqna) man of an extraction of clay, then we sent him, a drop in a safe lodging, then We created of the drop a clot, then we created of the clot a tissue, then We created of the tissue bones, then we covered the bones in flesh; thereafter We produced it as another creature. So blessed be God, the best of creators (klaliqin)!⁶

This passage has been interpreted to indicate that a fetus is perceived as a human life, only later on in the biological development because of the Qur'an's use of the words "thereafter We produced him as another creature."⁷ Additionally, many scholars indicate that ensoulment of the fetus does not occur until the end of the fourth month of pregnancy (120 days).⁸ However, tradition states:

Each of you possesses his own formation within his mother's womb, first as a drop of matter for forty days, then as a blood clot for forty days, then as a blob for forty days, and then the angel is sent to breathe life into him.⁹

Additionally, the Shari'ah makes a distinction between actual life and potential life, determining that actual life should be afforded more protection than potential life.¹⁰

Thus, under most interpretations of Islamic law, the embryo is not considered a person

⁶ Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Cloning in the Qur'an and Tradition*, at www.people.virginia.edu/~aas/article.articler.htm (quoting the Qur'an 23:12-14) (last visited November 19, 2001).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* Scholars point out that since the issue of ensoulment is never actually mentioned in the traditions, making this distinction must be done cautiously. *Id.*

⁹ Abdulaziz Sachedina, Ph.D. National Bioethics Advisory Commission, *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research, Volume III, Religious Perspectives*, G-4(2000)(quoting Sahih al-Bukhari [d.870] and Sahih al-Muslim [d. 875], The Book of Destiny [quadar]).

¹⁰ Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, *An Islamic Perspective on Stem Cells Research*, at www.islam101.com/science/stemCells.htm (last visited March 11, 2002.)

and the use of it for stem cell research does not violate Islamic law.¹¹ Also, under this same line of analysis, stem cells from aborted fetuses would also be permitted if the abortion was performed before the fourth month of pregnancy.

Additionally, Islamic law prohibits surrogate parenting, adoption and the adoption of human embryos due to the importance of determining a child's true parentage and inheritance rights.¹² This would free up any excess embryos for research purposes since under Islamic law, they could not be used by anyone but the couple who created them. The Washington based Islamic Institute stated, "Under Islamic principle of the 'purposes and higher causes of the Shari'ah (Islamic law),' we believe it is a societal obligation to perform research on these extra embryos instead of discarding them."¹³ Several Islamic scholars have also pointed out that cloning embryos for therapeutic uses would also be permitted.¹⁴

Many Islamic scholars also point to the belief that all knowledge emanates from God and that as such, human beings have an obligation to use that knowledge to serve

¹¹ However, there is no one unified juridical body representing all of Islam. Different countries follow different interpretations of the Qur'an. Abdulaziz Sachedina, Ph.D. National Bioethics Advisory Commission, *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research, Volume III, Religious Perspectives*, G-5(2000).

According to Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, since an embryo in the lab is not in a woman's womb, it is not in its natural environment and can not survive, therefore leading Dr. Siddiqi to believe that an embryo is not human at that stage of development. Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, *An Islamic Perspective on Stem Cells Research*, at www.islam101.com/science/stemCells.htm (last visited March 11, 2002).

¹² Jon Sheffi, *Disparities in Embryonic Stem Cell Research Legislation in American and England*, at <http://web.mit.edu/jscheffi/www/stemcell.htm> (last visited November 11, 2001).

¹³ Ayesha Ahmed, *U.S. Muslims Give Support to Embryonic Stem Cell Research – Survey*, at www.islam-online.net/english/News/2001-08/29/article6.shtml (last visited November 10, 2001).

¹⁴ Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Cloning in the Qur'an and Tradition*, at www.people.virginia.edu/~aas/article.articler.htm (last visited November 19, 2001). However, other Muslim legal scholars disagree. For instance, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Nasr Farid Wasil, calls cloning, "satanic." *Id.*

human society.¹⁵ Like Judaism, Islam places an obligation on its followers to seek out knowledge, scientific knowledge in particular, since it is a part of human nature as created by God.¹⁶ As stated by Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina:

‘The will of God’ in the Koran has often been interpreted as the processes of nature uninterfered with by human action. Hence, in Islam, research on stem cells made possible by biotechnical intervention in the early stages of life is regarded as an act of faith in the ultimate will of God as the Giver of all life, as long as such an intervention is undertaken with the purpose of improving human health.¹⁷

Thus, Islam’s obligation towards knowledge coupled with its tradition towards not allowing surrogate parenting or embryo adoption, leads many Islamic scholars to believe that the Qur’an can be used to support stem cell research.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the religious perspectives on religion, it is interesting to note that the religions that have strong traditions of legal and religious law, namely Judaism and Islam, support most forms of stem cell research. These two religions also support their beliefs on when life begins and stem cell research by interpreting specific religious texts. While the Catholic Church has put the issue of stem cell research on the forefront of its agenda, Pope John Paul II does not point to any specific biblical text that supports the Catholic Church’s concept of when life begins.

While science may never answer the question of when life begins, Catholicism, Judaism and Islam have answered the question in some ways that support and in other

¹⁵ Werber, *supra* note 1, at 1160.

¹⁶ *Id.*

ways that prohibit the use of stem cells, even for therapeutic means. In America, it is the politicians who will decide whether or not stem cell research is allowed. However, those politicians will undoubtedly be influenced not only by their own religion but other religions that are vocal on the subject. Due to the influence religion can exert over the public and politicians, specifically, when it comes to moral arguments, religions such as Judaism and Islam need to be more vocal in their support of stem cell research to balance out Catholicism's almost blanket prohibition of the medical advance.

¹⁷ Abdulaziz Sachedina, Ph.D. National Bioethics Advisory Commission, *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research, Volume III, Religious Perspectives*, G-6(2000).