

The Bishop of Oxford, Scientist and Heretic

Over the last forty years, traditional believers have been forced to put up with the ruminations of many modernising iconoclasts but Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, surpasses them all. Recently, Harries turned his attention to cloning and wrote in *Church Times* saying that it is “right and necessary”. He began, “Fundamental research needs to be done before any progress can be made in finding any cure to the range of serious diseases such as Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and others”.

Pope John Paul cautioned against this approach recently: “The results achieved in various fields of science and technology are considered and accepted by many as *a priori* acceptable. In this way, one ends up expecting that what is technically possible is in itself ethically good. But this is to perceive truth and justice as something modelled around the work of man himself – as in the attempt to appropriate the sources of life through experiments in human cloning”.

There are two points to be made here. First, there is no guarantee that research using cloned humans will lead to the discovery of cures for *any* disease. If it were known that such research would lead to cures, there would be no need for the research in the first place. Harries is trying to put his *a priori* eggs into an *empirical* basket. The result is the predictable mess. Secondly, the notion that the finding of cures for serious disease legitimates human cloning is a utilitarian argument which asserts that the ends justify the means. Whereas traditional Christian theologians, Catholic and Protestant, affirm that morality is *deontological* – derived from the fact of being and interpreted through the philosophy of natural law. By this ethical principle, some acts are *always* wrong. The destruction of innocent human life is one of those acts.

Harries considers the assertion that “Either the early embryo is a person, or it might be” - and he denies that this is the case. This is a piece of philosophical illiteracy at a very exalted level. No philosopher would argue that the embryo is a person, for the word *person* is a term which connotes advanced human capacities such as self-awareness, rational thought, making choices and having conscious and meaningful relationships with other human beings. (For an excellent introduction to the concept of a person, see P.F. Strawson’s classic *Individuals* OUP 1959)

The point is that though by no means could an embryo be described as a *person* – neither could three-months’-old infants for that matter: would Harries permit lethal experiments on *them?* – it is certainly a human being; and it on this basis that it has the right not to be killed.

Harries’ primary confusion leads him to make assertions which are truly bizarre. He further seeks to justify cloning on the grounds that, in any case, “There is in nature a very high level of embryo loss”. This is an argument exactly matching the argument that because some people accidentally fall under buses it is permissible for us to push more of them in the path of the number 56 to Islington. You would think that even a man so deeply in thrall to bio-technology and utilitarianism would understand that natural death is not the same thing as unlawful killing, murder.

But the hypotheses of bio-technology and the superstitions of scientism provide Harries with what he clearly regards as his most convincing argument in favour of

human cloning. He informs us that, “Before the 14-day cut-off-point – that is the emergence of the primitive (*sic*) streak or beginning of a nervous system – it is not obvious that you have an individual”. From this statement we see that Harries is no better at defining *individual* than he was when he had a try at *person*. For whatever the status of the cell-cluster before the emergence of the primitive streak, *it was always and nothing else but* the material out of which the individual could develop. No such surviving cell-cluster has ever gone on to become *anything else but* an individual. Christian moral philosophy clearly prohibits the destruction of innocent human life at *any* stage in its development.

This is the same Richard Harries who once cautioned us about the language used by the priest at Mass: “People who are groping their way into Christianity can suddenly find themselves shocked and horrified at the sacrificial, cannibalistic language of the Eucharist. Christians do not take seriously enough people’s sense of horror at going to a Eucharist or Mass and hearing the imagery of sacrifice and eating God”. He recommends that we use expressions such as “the food of angels” and “the bread of life” instead. In other words, instead of Our Lord’s words of Institution in which he explicitly told us, “This is my Body...This is my Blood” we are to splash about among the sugary euphemisms of the Bishop of Oxford.

T.S. Eliot said, “You shall not deny the body”. In his two ill-judged philosophical excursions, Harries denies both the Body Sacramental and our solid flesh.