

Religion and Stem Cell Research

President Bush's policies on embryonic stem cell research are facing growing opposition. In 2001, he put forward a policy greatly limiting federal support for research that involves the destruction of human embryos. Bush based his policy on his religious beliefs. In doing so, he raised the issue of whether it is appropriate for religious convictions to serve as the basis for public policy, especially when those beliefs are not shared by a majority of Americans.

Currently 79 percent of Americans support embryonic stem cell research. It was this high level of consensus that prompted Ron Reagan, Jr. to declare at last year's Democratic National Convention that the theology of a few should not forestall the health and well-being of the many.

Reagan's point is a good one, and it is also central to the health of our democracy. Public policy should not be based on the distinctive religious beliefs of any one group or person. Rather, political leaders in a pluralistic democracy should create policy based the common good and the broadest possible moral consensus among citizens. It is precisely the unwillingness of governments to impose religion on society that has led to policies that respect diverse perspectives and promote the kinds of freedoms that religious groups enjoy today.

This issue, of course, is neither new nor limited to stem cell research. John F. Kennedy and John Kerry faced concerns from non-Catholics about whether their policies would be influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. Most presidents have at least used religious rhetoric in their political speeches and have acknowledged the ways in which religion influences their views. But it is one thing to find religious support for positions that are widely supported and justifiable on non-religious grounds. It is quite another to justify policies on distinctly sectarian grounds.

Indeed, when narrow sectarian views ground public policy there is a danger not only of alienating the majority, but also of having a religion become more of a political tool for the topic of the day than a respected tradition. That may be happening in relation to the politics of human embryos. One might ask, for example, why political opponents of stem cell research have been largely indifferent to policies that allow private biotech companies to carry out what opponents would have to call the murder of human embryos. Or why there is no visible opposition to the practices of fertility clinics that result in more than 400,000 embryos now in frozen storage. Of course, one might object that the president is merely preventing public funds from being used for research that some find morally wrong. Yet *most* people would have to agree that public funds are often used for purposes they find morally objectionable, such as building atomic weapons or invading other countries. Such is the nature of pluralistic democracy.

This does not mean, however, that religion should have nothing to do with politics or policymaking. On the contrary, religious perspectives often enrich policymaking and

translate well into secular terms acceptable to a wide audience. For example, when the National Bioethics Advisory Commission first considered human cloning, much of the testimony it heard came from religious leaders of diverse traditions. Many used religious language—such as life as a gift of God—in their efforts to shape policy. In the end, religious leaders contributed to the richness of the ethical analysis, and they were part of forging the consensus on which current policy now rests. Former New York Governor Mario Cuomo, himself a Roman Catholic, has called for the same kind of process for exploring the status of the embryo in relation to stem cell research.

In addition, one of the valuable roles religion plays in society is the moral caution it urges in relation to rapidly developing technologies. Regarding stem cells, a religious reverence for embryos has cautioned our society about rushing ahead, and indeed, we now learn that previously unforeseen methods of obtaining stem cells may limit the number of embryos needed for therapies.

Religion has been and should continue to be influential in shaping the morals and policies of our diverse nation. Can a politician be religious and yet not base policy on the distinct terms of his or her faith without being hypocritical? Yes. Indeed, most have. But as Cuomo eloquently stated in a speech at Notre Dame, “The American people need no course in philosophy or political science or church history to know that God should not be made into a celestial party chairman.”

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