

# **'The Sanctity of Life'**

***A conference arranged by Ryedale Christian Council at Ampleforth  
30<sup>th</sup> April 2011***

## **Presentation by Lord John Habgood**

Not everyone, I suspect, will welcome the word 'sanctity' in the title of today's discussion. It has overtones of the word sanctimonious which smacks of hypocrisy, or alternatively it may jar against some people's beliefs, or lack of beliefs. But what is or is not sacred? So let me start by paraphrasing its meaning as over-riding value. This is what we shall be discussing today - the over-riding value of life in all its stages, from conception and birth right through to the end.

The organisers of today's gathering have wisely provided me with their definition of the sanctity of life. I am not sure whether or not you have all been given a copy of it, but it is worth quoting at the start of our meeting, so that we can all be sure that we know what it is that we shall be discussing. "The sanctity of life is defined as the conviction that all human beings at any and every stage of life, are to be perceived as sacred, as persons of equal and immeasurable worth and of inviolable dignity. Therefore they must be treated with the reverence and respect commensurate with their elevated moral status, beginning with a commitment to the preservation, protection and flourishing of their lives."

It is a powerful and comprehensive statement, under-girded by beliefs about what we human beings are at every stage of life. Put simply the Christian faith describes us as children of God created by God. We matter to God, and every life has a unique significance. Another typically religious way of expressing this unique significance is to assert that we have souls as well as bodies, souls which are precious to God. I hope therefore it may be helpful to dwell for a little on what this language about souls actually means in different circumstances.

The Times newspaper not long ago launched a new Saturday supplement called Body and Soul. Newspapers these days tell us a lot about bodies, more perhaps than all of us need to know. But I was eager to discover what this journalistic enterprise might have to tell us about souls in the 21st century. The answer was "not much with any direct bearing on religion". The word as used nowadays seems to refer mostly to lifestyle, health, psychology and relationships - in fact to all those aspects of living which are not merely physical. Soul in this modern context seems to be interpreted not so much as a thing we possess, the possession of which makes us the people we are, and in some sense guarantees our eternal destiny. Instead it seems to be used as a word for the way we live, a quality or dimension of personal life.

For Plato the soul was an immaterial entity, distinguishable from the body and capable of surviving the body's death. ( It was part of the eternal world of Ideas, rather than the transitory world of human existence as something which can exist independently of the body. ) In this sense it was possible to talk about 'possessing' an immortal soul.

For Aristotle, on the other hand, body and soul were one, Body is the 'substance' of which we are made, and soul is its 'form'. According to this interpretation we do not 'possess' souls; we are souls, and our soul is what makes each of us a living human being, with our physical nature and our spiritual nature inseparably bound together. For Aristotle, therefore, the soul was not inherently immortal. The early Christian theologians were mostly, because this was the fashion at the time disciples of the philosopher Plato who as I have said regarded the soul as a separate and immortal entity. But when Aristotle's philosophy was rediscovered in Mediaeval times, both understandings of the soul were rather confusingly combined. It was believed in Aristotelian style to be the 'form' of the body, but also, in Platonic style, to have been created by God, and implanted in the body by

God at a particular moment in human development. Theologically, some of the force of the Aristotelian way of thinking could be put to good use in relation to life after death by envisaging the soul not as a separate immortal entity, but as giving 'form' to a new resurrection body.

The pendulum swung back again in the 17th century when modern philosophy began with the rigid distinction between body and mind (or body and soul), drawn by the French philosopher, Descartes. It was a disastrous distinction, which dominated Western thought for centuries, and still to some extent does so today. But with growing understanding of the close relationship between mind and body, and of the growth of personality, and after centuries of philosophical debate, all this is changing, and a modernised version of Aristotle's concept of the soul is beginning to look much more attractive and defensible. It is also much more in line with the concept of soul which seems to underlie the use of the word in The Times. 'Soul' nowadays is mainly about what we are, as persons, and how we live.

I tell this rather complex philosophical story because we need some insight into history, if we are to understand the things which divide many Christians today, particularly as regards the status of embryos and if and when they too have souls. An analogy with words and their meanings may help us to get a better grip on what a modern understanding of the relation between body and soul might look like. Words are things. Like bodies, they are objects in the world, which we can see and hear. They have letters and syllables and sounds - and meanings. But the meaning of a word, like the incoming of a soul in a body is not an extra bit of the word which can be added on, or taken away, like an extra letter. The meaning of a word relates not to its structure, its bodily components as it were, but to what it is for, what it is intended to convey. Meanings are not part of the ordinary physical world. They belong within human discourse. They are bound up with our ability to reflect, to understand and to communicate and they are transferable. The same meaning can be conveyed by totally different words in different languages, just as in Christian belief Jesus rose from the dead in a new kind of body.

When we talk about 'souls', therefore, we are making the point that human life cannot be described simply in terms of bodies, any more than words can be described simply as marks on paper. We have direct evidence of this other dimension of reality in the fact of our own self-awareness. This is not an extra bit of our body, but a way of being what we are. Self-awareness, in turn, grows out of our ability to communicate with one another, and is enormously heightened by language, which makes this communication possible at ever increasing depth. Language, too, can enable us to transcend our immediate circumstances, to express thoughts which have never been expressed before. As souls, in this sense, we live, and move, and have our being within a network of relationships; we become persons through our encounter with other persons; and in Christian thought overarching all these relationships, is an all-encompassing relationship with God - which is no doubt why religion has been of such enormous importance in the formation of human society. God, as it were, is the ultimate point of reference, the ultimate source and ground of our relatedness. And it is the fact of being involved in this network of relationships, finding its focus in God, which confers on human beings a dignity and worth, not dependent on achievement or any other kind of merit, but on divine love and divine promise.

That is one way of telling the story of what we are. I believe it not only makes sense theologically, but can make good sense of our evolutionary history. On this understanding we don't have to ask when human beings first emerged from our primaeval non-human ancestors. Nor do we have to specify a moment in time when the first soul was implanted. Like everything else in nature, the qualities and capacities we recognise as 'soul' grew gradually as our ancestors developed more and more profound relationships with each other; and thus included a relationship with the reality which transcended them and which they came to know as God. It follows, as Aristotle realised, that animals, too, may have capacities which it is proper to think of as a primitive sort of soul. I was making a similar point at a meeting of the British Association some years ago, when I was Archbishop. It was picked up by the Press, and resulted in the immortal tabloid headline 'Apes have souls too, says Primate.'

If this is true of us in evolutionary terms, it is equally true, I suggest, in terms of individual human development. There are huge difficulties in imagining God implanting souls in developing embryos at a precise moment, whether at conception, implantation in the uterus or any other time, not least because of the enormous natural wastage of embryos. It would be a very strange world if the hereafter was to be populated by hundreds or thousands of times more immortal souls than have ever lived on earth as persons. It makes much more sense, in my view, to think of our souls as developing with our bodies. We develop gradually as persons, with increasing ability to respond and relate to others, even in the womb. Thus embryos have a God given value at every stage, and with a value that grows as more and more they begin to manifest themselves, but it is not unreasonable in the earliest stages at least, to think of them as not so valuable as to override every other consideration. Assuming that these other considerations are not trivial, and bearing in mind nature's wastefulness and the slow process of formation, it is not easy to decide at what point other considerations about human needs and happiness should be given priority over organisms which have not yet developed any of the qualities of personhood.

The law, as always, represents a balance between competing values. When IVF was shown to be successful, there was, and still is, a pressing need for further research on embryos to improve the techniques. This was, in my view, the main moral justification for permitting such research - but only within strict limits. The 14-day rule, which is now the basis of the law on such matters, stipulates the maximum length of time which any embryo which has been experimented on, or modified in any way, should be allowed to survive. Its rationale is that this 14 day limit represents the time after conception when the first cells which are destined to become the future person, can be clearly identified. It is also the time beyond which twinning cannot take place. Development beyond the first 14 days thus marks a first stepping stone on the road to individual personhood.

Likewise the latest time at which an abortion is permitted is the time at which the growing foetus is reckoned to be able to survive out of the uterus. These are not arbitrary limits, therefore, but they depend on judgements about the process of development and on the state of our knowledge.

As always happens, though, one advance leads to another, and IVF has opened up a whole new range of opportunities for doing things to embryos, which may or may not be justified. Cloning is an obvious, and much publicised, example, and it is widely accepted that there are no serious medical reasons for allowing it to be done.

So-called therapeutic cloning is a different matter altogether. It need not entail breaking the 14-day rule by allowing a cloned embryo to develop beyond this limit. The point is to allow an embryo to grow to the stage when so-called stem cells can be harvested. Stem cells are the cells from which all other cells are grown, and the idea is to use these to repair diseased tissues and organs. But if these new cells are not to be rejected by the person receiving them, they need to have the recipient's genetic structure. This can be done by taking a spare embryo from some other source, and transferring to it genetic material taken from almost any tissue belonging to the person who needs to be healed. Hence therapeutic cloning. It is an enormously promising, but very controversial technique, and the strong reactions against it are in my view mistaken.

We can contrast it with much more controversial proposals to manipulate the genetic structure of an embryo destined eventually to grow into a person. This might be justified on the grounds that it is a way of eliminating serious genetic diseases. At present there is no chance of such interference being permitted in this country. It would in any case be ruled out by the huge risks to the lives and well-being of those born as a result of such manipulation. Genetic manipulation is still a very hit and miss affair. But there are other more general reasons for being cautious, bound up with the nature of the soul as I have tried to describe it. And it is to these that I now turn.

The sense of dignity and worth inherent in personal life is fundamental to medical ethics just as much as it is inherent in our own Christian belief in the God given value of human life. In adults the sense of dignity and worth takes the form of an emphasis on patient autonomy. Patients should in the last resort be allowed to make their own judgements about what is best for them. There should

be an absolute right, for instance, to refuse treatment - when it is only their own well-being which is at stake. People are autonomous individuals, and should be treated as such. However, the proviso that the matter should concern only themselves is important, because my theme so far has been that as persons we are essentially and fundamentally part of a network of relationships. Thus what we do to ourselves, or allow others to do to us, may also have profound effects on other people.

In contrast medical practice, on the whole, has a bias towards the needs and wishes of individuals. The wider social implications of a particular form of treatment may not loom very large in the minds of those primarily concerned about an individual's need, or distress, or their insistence, for instance, that they must have a child by whatever means. So I end with a topical example - sex selection - which can illustrate how these wider social implications might be relevant.

The government has recently decided, rightly in my view, that sex selection should only be allowed in cases of medical necessity, e.g. when there is a known sex-linked hereditary disease, but not for social reasons, e.g. for family balancing. Why the difference? There is a problem, first of all with the techniques. One of them, sperm sorting, is simple to perform, and depends on the relative swimming capacities of sperm carrying the X or Y chromosome. Its great drawback is that it is not very reliable - it would seem that not all sperm are equally good swimmers. But snag is that reliability is what matters most when the birth of a child is at stake. The other technique, which involves the selection of embryos of the right sex in the course of IVF, can be wholly reliable, but the technique is invasive, and IVF does not have a high rate of success. There are thus serious practical difficulties in all current forms of sex selection, enough to throw doubts on the value of doing it for what are in the end purely social reasons. But there are also more profound reasons, of an ethical or social kind, why we should be cautious about allowing such a deeply personal matter to become yet another consumer choice.

We can be sure that, in the first instance, those pioneering parents who have at last received a longed-for son or daughter are likely to be deeply loving and appreciative. But techniques, once available, tend to become familiar, then begin to arouse greater expectations, and finally may become almost routine. This is more or less what has happened with abortion. Children used to be thought of as gifts from God. What kind of a gift is it that we reject because it is inconvenient? Or what kind of a gift is it that we have carefully chosen for ourselves, to match our own specification? I suggest that the social implications of freely available sex selection would inevitably, in the long run, bring consumerism right into the heart of one of the most profoundly personal experiences of human life. It would also, I believe, contribute to a subtle change in general perceptions of what children are - no longer gifts, but carefully chosen commodities and possessions. This is already happening in the USA where I gather that it is possible to buy ova and sperm from so called 'glamour models'. Sex selection is not just about choice. It touches fundamental relationships. It touches the soul.

There are numerous other examples in which similar issues arise. All in one way or another raise questions about what persons are, and how our relationship with one another, and ultimately with God, should make us sensitive to the effect of our actions on other people and on the kind of society we live in. Crossing boundaries and pioneering new techniques is all very exciting, particularly if they are going to help people in need. But not to think ahead about where they might lead us would be wickedly irresponsible.

These are complex matters and the four questions I have suggested you might discuss were deliberately chosen because they don't require much knowledge of some of the complexities I have been exploring but it is as well to be aware of the complexities working in the background.