

The Orthodox Church in the World

from 'The Soul of the Embryo and 'in Vitro' Fertilisation'

In accordance with the tradition of the Fathers, soul and body are created at the same time. A human being is not conceived without a soul. The human soul is closely connected with life, and the embryo is endowed with a soul at the same time as it is conceived. The soul is in the embryo “from the first moment of conception”. The soul is not an offshoot from the parents’ soul and it does not come from the parents’ genetic material. God creates it.

St John Chrysostom says that God made Adam by taking dust from the earth, breathing into it, and man became “a living soul”. The same happens for every human being. For that reason he says that bearing a child “has its origin above, in God’s providence, and not in nature or in coming together, but in God’s providence”.

I have written a book in Greek called Bioethics and Biotheology, and I am concerned about all these ‘bioethical’ issues, such as how Orthodox theology deals with contemporary molecular biology, genetic engineering and biomedical research, particularly issues connected with the beginning of life, its prolongation and the end of biological life. It made an impression on me that even medical school professors accepted the book.

I know the problems that exist, and that some scientists claim that from the day when fertilisation of the egg takes place and the zygote is created until the fourteenth day there is no soul. On the fourteen day after conception the first neural tissue is created from which the brain will develop, and they assert that the soul exists from then on. The brain begins to be

differentiated between the third and twenty-eighth week. The heart is differentiated from the third week and its formation is completed in the sixth week.

As I mentioned earlier, however, there are many patristic passages, which say that the soul exists from the first moment of the embryo's conception, before the heart or the brain begin to be differentiated. I know of no patristic passages that assert the opposite. For that reason in the Church we have feasts celebrating conceptions: the Annunciation of the Mother of God, which is the day on which Christ was conceived; St Anna's conception of the Mother of God; the conception of St John the Baptist. We celebrate the moment when the zygote is created, the first fertilised egg, because from then on the soul exists, and that soul is expressed according to the development of the body.

When I went to Seattle in the USA, to the university, to speak about Orthodox theology, I had a discussion after the talk with a professor of neurology. I said something to her about Freud and she laughed, saying: "We don't believe in Freud because we believe that everything comes from the brain and not from some sort of unconscious." As we know, the brain is the factory that produces chemical compounds, and the chemical compounds produce electrical energy. In answer to a question she asked on the subject, I told her that in the Orthodox Church we do not believe what Plato asserted about the soul. The soul is not simply inside one part of the body but, as St Gregory Palamas said, "The soul is everywhere in the body", in the reason, the heart and all the parts of the human body. As essence it is in the heart, and as energy it is in the brain and the whole body, and it acts in all the bodily organs. In any case, the soul is very closely linked with life. There cannot be life in a human being without there

being a soul.

Although the human being's genetic material originates from his or her parents, the soul is directly created by God at the moment of conception.

With regard to in vitro fertilisation, I should say that to a certain extent we accept it. However, there are certain things that take place which we cannot accept from an Orthodox point of view. For example, we cannot accept in vitro fertilisation using sperm from a donor, when the woman's egg is fertilised by sperm from a man other than her husband. Nor can we accept the fertilisation of a large number of eggs, between eighteen and twenty, when finally only two or three fertilised eggs are implanted and the rest are frozen and will eventually be killed.

In the case of couples who are unable to conceive and have children, there are various ways of dealing with childlessness. One is for couples to accept this fact as the will of God, to remain childless and to devote themselves to the Church so as to help people. Another is to adopt an orphaned or abandoned child. If, however, they want to have their own child, come what may, the Church can accept in vitro fertilisation, provided that it uses the couple's own genetic material, and does not leave 'spare' fertilised eggs.

Human beings, of course, are free and we cannot violate their freedom. But there is also repentance and we treat the problems that are created. We cannot, however, adopt and bless all the methods that modern science uses and accept them in their entirety.

When Christians ask us, we tell them the Church's view, and after that they are free to do as they wish. When they repent, we try to cure them with love and the therapeutic methods that our Church possesses.