



Concept Paper

Stem Cell Research in the service of human life? Ethical and Theological Reflection

World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland and Volos Academy for Theological
Studies, Volos, Greece

9-11 November 2009

1. Introduction

The project Faith, Science, Technology and Ethics is a follow-up of the major Conference “Faith, Science and the Future” that was held in 1979 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA. Organized by the unit of Church and Society of the World Council of Churches it attracted more than 400 participants from around the world. This conference strengthened the churches’ ability to respond to many ethical issues posed by modern technologies and sciences at that time and gave a great impetus to the theological commitment to address bioethical issues, in particular those with implications for human beings. Thirty years later new technologies have emerged, particularly in the area of human genetics, with new possibilities, raising new challenges and ethical dilemmas. In this context, the present theological reflection intends to recommit ourselves to these bioethical struggles in the light of our historical legacy starting from 1979.

2. Participants

Some 40 participants will come from all over the world, from various Christian traditions as well as from the Islamic, Jewish and Hindu traditions. All the participants have been involved in some way in issues relating to stem cell research in their respective countries. Scientists, medical doctors, theologians and ethicists form the bulk of the delegation. Special attention has been given to including youth delegates so as to listen to young voices during this remarkable event: eight youth participants will be part of the consultation.

3. Objective: There are two main objectives of the conference along with remembering World Council of Churches path breaking global conference on Faith, Science and Future in 1979:

3.1 Engaging with present: The Faith, Science, Technology and Ethics project focuses mainly on stem cell research this year, as research in this area is developing at a very rapid pace; therefore theologians and ethicists need to constantly reassess the ethical issues. It was one of the small group topics discussed at the 2007 Global Consultation on Biotechnologies and the Ministry of the Church held in Johannesburg. By focussing on the specific field of stem cell research it is hoped that fundamental theological ethical principles regarding genetic technologies will emerge, which may then be used in other areas of genetics research or its applications. Beginning with stem cell research, the ultimate goal is to empower churches to actively engage in these issues with both their promises and problems, in solidarity with people at the grassroots level.

3.2 Charting the future: This consultation will address the importance of churches actively engaging in bioethical issues and will guide future actions of churches on bioethical issues. The perspectives of churches are direly needed in this regard. The conference will explore various possibilities to actively promote the participation of the global churches in bioethics from their respective theological perspectives.

4. Strategies

The consultation approaches the issue through three methodological stages to understand the issue clearly and to act on the issue theologically through global churches:

4.1 Understanding the science: Stem cell research involves complex scientific techniques; competent scientists will present the scientific advancements as well the ethical concerns associated with stem cell research of relevance to scientists. Grasping the basic science will help demystify the facts for theologians and ethicists and alert them to future scientific possibilities and applications so that they may have a basis to form their own opinion in full awareness of the state of the art science.

4.2 Discerning the ethical issues: Ethicists and theologians may identify further ethical issues in addition to those concerning scientists working in the field. The second day of the reflection will be dedicated to finding and addressing such ethical issues associated with stem cell research from different contexts and religious perspectives.

4.3 Responding theologically: Pastors, theologians and leaders of other faiths are called on to speak out, counsel and advice about ethical concerns associated with scientific research and its applications. As Christians, theologically addressing and understanding the issue is important to be able to formulate practical policies associated with bioethical dilemmas for the church and its people around the world. How can theologians coordinate the response through their theological knowledge and experience with God, church and the world?

5. Outcomes

The outcome of the conference is an impact indicator through which we can evaluate the process and measure the success of the conference. Apart from the lively interaction, networking and knowledge dissemination throughout the conference, we would like to produce two important tools for future interaction and to promote and sustain global churches active participation in the bioethical issues:

5.1 Conference report/publication

A consultation report will be published with selected writings and deliberations, which will be the means for the consultation to disseminate the knowledge globally with humanity. A working methodology to promote churches' participation in bioethics will be developed and distributed to the global churches.

5.2 Ethics blog

An ethics blog will be opened from Jan 1st, 2010 to promote leadership in the field of ethics among global youth. This will be a place of information sharing and networking to promote joint work in this world to address the great challenges of our times.

6. Conclusion

Stem cell research and the theological and ethical issues associated with it are profound and its impact over humankind is remarkable. As a global faith community this conference would be a great place of mutual learning and mutual service to deepen understanding of ethical issues associated with stem cell research and help to respond theologically with clarity so as to encourage the faith community to make better decisions on the bioethical issues in their respective contexts.