

# OCA

## ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

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### **Manipulation of the Human Person**

**By Fr. John Breck**

Over the past few months the media have focused almost exclusively on the continuing threat of terrorism at home, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. As a result, our attention has been drawn away from what is potentially a more dangerous threat to our well-being: the virtually uninhibited manipulation and destruction of human embryos in the interests of a “new eugenics.”

Embryonic stem cell research began in earnest in early 1999. It has been driven by the capacity of stem cells to develop into every tissue and organ in the human body. Of equal concern are the increasing pressures to patent human genes, segments of DNA that carry the code of human life. Not surprisingly, the driving force behind these initiatives is economic: they promise virtually limitless profits to the burgeoning biotech industry that provides most of the research funding. Although present emphasis is on the medical potential—ultimately building new organs to replace old, and eliminating various genetic anomalies—the market place is already pressuring specialists to create “designer babies” with preselected characteristics, including, via the wizardry of cloning, another person’s genetic make-up. Where does the Orthodox Church stand on this issue, which involves manipulation of human life at its most basic level? Although neither Scripture nor patristic teaching speaks to the matter directly, together they offer a vision that addresses it very clearly. That vision offers precious insight into the meaning and value of the human person.

Orthodox anthropology—the doctrine of the human person—begins with the Genesis affirmation that every human being is created “in the image and likeness

of God.” However the term “image” is to be defined, it implies what theologians today call “being-in-communion.” The human person is not an isolated entity but a member of a community. And the primary and primordial community is that of the Church, the Body of the risen and glorified Lord, Jesus Christ.

The ultimate model for the ecclesial community is God himself: the eternal life-in-communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. “Be perfect,” Jesus instructs his followers, “as your heavenly Father is perfect.” That perfection, as God expresses it, consists above all in self-sacrificing love, offered as a free gift to the other: to the other Persons of the Holy Trinity, and to the created world, particularly to human persons.

In order for us to reflect the perfection of the Trinity, we cannot avoid engaging in an ongoing struggle against the tendencies of our darker side, what the ascetic tradition calls the “passions.” Accordingly, many of the Church Fathers will make a distinction between “image” and “likeness,” defining “likeness” as the goal of that ascetic struggle, the “unseen warfare” of the soul. Just as every human being is created in the divine “image,” so every one is called to assume the divine “likeness.” The image, in other words, refers to our nature, the “givenness” of human life that we all share. The likeness, on the other hand, constitutes the goal toward which each “person” or particular human being is called to strive. That goal is described by the Fathers as “theosis,” a Greek word meaning “deification.”

It signifies that the purpose and end of human life is to participate eternally in the life of God, in his “energies” or attributes such as justice, truth, beauty and love.

Orthodoxy is well known for its “high christology,” its conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is no less than the God-Man, the eternal Son of the Father who “without change became man and was crucified” in order to work out our salvation. Equally “high,” though, is Orthodox anthropology: its understanding of the eternal value of the human person. However much it may stress the reality of human sin, Orthodox Christianity also acknowledges that the chief aim of human existence—towards which every person is called to strive and struggle—is to glorify God and to enter into eternal and joyful communion with the Persons of the Holy Trinity.

What does this imply with regard to our original question concerning the manipulation and commercial exploitation of human genetic material and human embryos?

Above all, it means that no manipulation of the human person, on the macro or micro level, can be accepted unless that manipulation is for strictly therapeutic purposes that will serve the best interests of the person concerned. This necessarily excludes experimentation using viable human embryos (who, in God's eyes are fully personal, bearers of the divine image, and not merely "blobs of tissue"), just as it excludes the patenting of human genes for commercial ends.

Already physicians are complaining that certain recently developed diagnostic tests involving genes (e.g., for Alzheimer's disease) are not available to them because patents on the procedures are held by private corporations. In America we used to express shock at the way Japanese companies virtually "owned" their employees. The risk today is infinitely greater: that commercial interests will literally "own" us, insofar as they control the use of our DNA.

In 1998, the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America called for a moratorium on experimentation leading toward the cloning of human beings. This appeal was renewed in the fall of 2001, with the bishops' statement condemning embryonic stem cell research and human cloning in general. With completion early last year of the human genome project, that appeal needs to be expanded to cover any and all manipulation of human genetic material for commercial purposes that do not include clear and acceptable therapeutic results. And legislation should definitely be enacted to prohibit the patenting of human genes.

This newly acquired knowledge concerning genetics, with its extraordinary potential for good or ill, must be kept in the public domain. Orthodox Christians should insist on this point through the media and by any other means at their disposal. Otherwise we face the very real risk of succumbing to a new and insidious form of slavery, in which our genetic heritage is literally owned by interests—commercial or governmental—other than our own. Similarly, we need to make clear our unequivocal opposition to the manipulation and destruction of human embryos, particularly since adult stem cells, together with those harvested from umbilical cords, have proven to have as great a therapeutic potential as their embryonic counterparts. The human person, created in the image of God and called to progress toward the divine likeness, is unique and of

infinite value. Any attempt to reduce the person to a reservoir of genetic components or to reproduce that person through cloning, is an offense not only against human rights and human dignity. It is above all an offense against the God who creates and loves each person, and calls each one without exception to share forever in His divine life.