

Lesson 6: Religious Studies

Aim

To consider the points of view of major religions towards stem cell research

Objectives

- To understand the ethical and moral implications of embryonic stem cell research
- To understand the ethical differences between research using tissue and embryonic stem cells
- To conduct a debate that raises arguments both for and against embryonic stem cell research from the points of view of different religious beliefs

Curriculum Links

Knowledge, Skills and Understanding

1 e: discuss and evaluate how religious beliefs and teachings inform answers to ultimate questions and ethical issues

1 g: interpret and evaluate a range of sources, texts and authorities, from a variety of contexts

QCA Criteria

2.1i: Identify, investigate and respond to fundamental questions of life raised by religion and human experience, including questions about the meaning and purpose of life.

Key Skills Developed

AO1: recall, select, organise and deploy knowledge

AO2: describe, analyse and explain

AO3: evaluate different responses to...moral issues, using relevant evidence and argument

GCSE specifications

AQA (B): Module 1 B: Thinking about morality, Module 3 B: Relationships, rights and responsibilities, Module 4 B: Contemporary Issues

Materials

RS Information Sheet (1 per students)

Whiteboard and pen

Activities

1. Ask the students to brainstorm some of the major world religions and write their responses on the whiteboard.
2. Explain that the class is going to explore the attitudes of some of these religions towards embryonic stem cell research. Ask the students to decide in pairs which of the religions is 'for' and which 'against' embryonic stem cell research. Ask some pairs to feed back to the whole class, and discuss the reasons for their choices.
3. Ask the students individually to read RS Information Sheet: Stem Cells and the Major Religions.
4. Draw the following diagram on the whiteboard:

For-----Undecided-----Against

The students are to copy the diagram and in groups of 3 or 4, using the information from the Information Sheet they must decide where to place each religion on the line, to represent that religion's attitude towards stem cell research. There may be disagreements in the group, but the members must come to an agreement. They may wish to colour-code the religions for the purpose of the diagram, or to use initials.

5. Ask some groups to feed back to the class, giving reasons for their choices. Were there any difficulties or ambiguities? How did the group come to a consensus?
6. Split the class into 7 groups (approximately 5 students per group). Assign each group one of the religions listed on the Information Sheet. Explain that as members of that faith they are preparing to attend a conference on embryonic stem cell research. Each group must prepare their arguments for or against embryonic stem cell research. They will then present their views to the panel (the rest of the class) and take questions from the floor.

7. Give the groups 15 minutes to prepare their arguments, bearing in mind the following points:

- What is their view on the beginning of life?
- What questions are the representatives of other religions likely to ask?
- What are the potential benefits of embryonic stem cell research?
- What alternatives, if any, are there to using embryonic stem cells? Are these viable?
- Prepare questions to ask the other groups

8. Now give each of the groups 2 minutes to present their view, followed by a few minutes to take questions.

9. Once each group has presented their case, you can conduct an open debate on the issue.

10. **Extension exercise**

It is useful to start by asking students to argue a case that does not necessarily represent their own view. However, once they are comfortable with the format of the debate and familiar with others' arguments, it may be interesting to finish by asking them to express their own views on the subject, which may or may not be related to a religious faith.

Note: You may wish to extend this lesson plan over 2 lessons, allowing the students to carry out research and preparation for the presentations as homework.

RS Information Sheet: Stem Cells and the Major Religions

Most religions do not have any moral objection to the use of adult (tissue) stem cells for research. The complex area of ethical debate arises around the use of embryonic stem cells, as this involves using embryos as a source of cells, and having to create and destroy embryos for the purpose. To analyze any religious stance towards stem cell research, the status of the embryo according to that religion must be determined.

Here is a summary of the views held by 7 of the world's major religions/belief systems.



ISLAM

Following Islamic beliefs in the Quran, the use of embryos for research and therapeutic purposes is acceptable from fertilization through the 40th day of development. Most modern Muslims agree on a moment beyond the blastocyst stage that marks when a fetus becomes a human being. Because of the belief that personhood is a developmental process, the majority of Sunni and Shiite jurists support ethically regulated embryonic stem cell research.

Islam's obligation towards knowledge coupled with its tradition towards not allowing surrogate parenting or embryo adoption leads many Islamic scholars to believe that the Qur'an can be used to support stem cell research.

A foetus is perceived as a human life only later on in its' biological development. Tradition states:

Each of you possesses his own formation within his mother's womb, first as a drop of matter for forty days, then as a blood clot for forty days, then as a blob for forty days, and then the angel is sent to breathe life into him.

The Washington-based Islamic Institute stated "Under the Islamic principle of the 'purposes and higher causes of the Shari'ah (Islamic law), we believe it is a societal obligation to perform research on extra (IVF) embryos instead of discarding them." Cloning embryos for therapeutic uses would also be permitted.



JUDAISM

Jewish biblical and Talmudic law holds that human status as a person is acquired progressively, not at fertilization. Jewish traditions do not give moral, human status to embryos until they have reached 40 days of gestation. The fetus only achieves personhood at birth. Following these views, Judaism supports ethically justifiable research using embryos for research and therapeutic purposes.

Jewish tradition holds that our bodies belong to God. God, as owner of our bodies, imposes conditions on the use of our bodies. Among those is the requirement that we seek to preserve human life and health (pikuah nefesh). As a result of this we have a duty to seek to develop new cures for human diseases.

Jewish tradition accepts both natural and artificial means to overcome illness. Physicians are the agents and partners of God in the ongoing act of healing. We have a duty to God to develop and use any therapies that can aid us in taking care of our bodies. At the same time, all human beings, regardless of their levels of ability and disability, are created in the image of God and are to be valued as such.

We must take whatever precautions we can to ensure that our actions do not harm ourselves or our world in the very effort to improve them. A certain humility, in other words, must pervade whatever we do, especially when we are pushing the scientific envelope, as we are in stem cell research. We are, says Genesis 2:15, supposed to work the world and preserve it; it is that balance that is our Divine duty.



CHRISTIANITY

Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church provides one of the strongest positions in opposition to the use of embryos for research purposes. Catholic belief holds that life is sacred from the moment of fertilization and that the embryo is the inception of personhood, no matter where it exists. The church maintains that every embryo should be given the opportunity to develop into a mature human being.

Embryonic stem cells, as their name suggests, are derived from human embryos. In order to harvest embryonic stem cells, an embryo must be destroyed. The biblical teaching is that human existence begins at conception. The international consensus of embryologists

agrees with scripture in that life begins at fertilization. At the moment of conception, the embryo is 100 percent human, with all 46 human chromosomes and a fully functioning, unique genetic code. Size and location do not determine humanity.

Because research on embryonic stem cells requires the destruction of a living human being, it is against God's will. No amount of promised "benefit" to society or to medical knowledge can justify the killing of a human for spare parts. The end does not justify the means. It is never ethical—in fact, it is morally reprehensible—to mark people for death in order to conduct utilitarian experiments on their body-parts. Killing of embryos is intentional, and premeditated, and is, therefore, murder.

Protestantism

Protestantism ranges from one extreme to the other on the issue of embryonic stem cell research.

Several denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, hold that the embryo is the tiniest form of human life and should not be destroyed, while others, such as the American Presbyterian Church, maintain that the research is acceptable if the goals cannot be reached in any other manner. The majority of Protestants in favour of stem cell research also hold that research must be limited to embryos that cannot be used for reproductive purposes, within a 15-day window from fertilization.

HINDUISM

In traditional Hindu belief, conception is the beginning of a soul's rebirth from a previous life. Some Hindu traditions place the beginning of personhood between three and five months of gestation, while few believe that incarnation can occur as late as the seventh month.

We must ask: "Is a foetus a person?" Hindus believe that it is, for they contend that life begins at conception. Yet Hindus do permit abortion, when it is performed to save the life of the mother. These are not views held by every Hindu on this complicated issue. The debate continues.

Hindus join the followers of most religions of the world in condoning the saving of lives--even at great sacrifice--but the precise extent of that sacrifice is a line that is hard

to draw. The Singapore Hindu Endowment Board recently offered a typically ambiguous statement. "There is no non-acceptance to the use of these [stem] cells to protect human life and to advance life by curing disease, " they said. Later they added: "Killing a foetus is a sinful act."



BUDDHISM

Most Buddhists have adopted the classical Hindu teaching that person-hood begins at conception.

Given the emphasis that Buddhism places on the central virtues of knowledge and compassion, the recent advances in scientific understanding and the prospect of the development of cures and treatments which alleviate human suffering are to be welcomed.

At the same time, however, the Buddhist religion places great importance on the principle of ahimsa, or non-harming, and therefore has grave reservations about any scientific technique or procedure that involves the destruction of life, whether human or animal. Such actions are prohibited by the First Precept of Buddhism, which prohibits causing death or injury to living creatures.



NATURALISTIC WORLD VIEW

This is not a religion, but is included here to represent an agnostic, secular view. Most individuals with a naturalistic world-view would be likely to value embryonic stem cell research. They would assert that the good that can be produced by pursuing such research (e.g., medical advances) outweighs negative aspects.

Regarding when person-hood begins: life is viewed as a biological process of gradual development. Some would reject use of embryos for research past some point in the development, whereas some would take a position more in line with the Judaic position and say that full human status and civic status come only at birth.