

First things first

Last year's Westminster Faith Debates revealed a considerable public appetite for religion and ethics. The first of this year's series, supported by specially commissioned research, focuses on the controversial topic of the start of human life. Here two of the debaters present their case

The topic of "Stem-cell research, abortion and the 'soul of the embryo?'" has become more complicated with advances in medicine and technology that give doctors and scientists more power to intervene in the beginnings of life, writes *Linda Woodhead*.

But as the Westminster Faith Debates survey shows, when asked at what point they think human life begins, the largest group – 44 per cent – say "at conception". The figure is higher for Catholics: 60 per cent compared with 50 per cent for both Anglicans and Muslims. However, that does not mean that most people are against abortion. Of those who think that human life begins at conception, half think that abortion should be allowed at least up to 20 weeks, and more than three-quarters think it is acceptable in the first trimester. Of the population as a whole, 40 per cent favour keeping the abortion time limit at 24 weeks, 30 per cent favour reducing it, and a large 19 per cent don't know. Only 7 per cent favour a total ban; that includes Muslims (31 per cent), Baptists (19 per cent) and Catholics (14 per cent). But even that is not necessarily because people do not regard the embryo as a human life. Many do.

Advances in our ability to keep premature babies alive may have influenced attitudes. But they have not greatly changed people's views on the permissibility of abortion.

More research is needed to find out why this is; my guess is that most people approach the issue in a holistic way. The life of the mother is also a consideration and the quality of both her and her child's lives. On this, most religious and secular people agree.

What changes the view for a minority is their belief in a Creator God who imbues each person with rights and dignity from the moment of conception. That factor can outweigh the others. In other words, the "soul" or "human life" of the embryo is not enough to sway the moral argument.

■ **Linda Woodhead, right, is professor of sociology of religion at Lancaster University. The YouGov survey, commissioned by WFD, was completed by 4,437 adults between 25 and 30 January.**



'We can think about absolutely anything. Must not that ability, at least, transcend the limitations of *any* bodily organ?'

The issues to be addressed in the next Westminster Faith Debate on "Stem-cell research, abortion and 'the soul of the embryo?'" have been discussed in the Christian tradition from several different angles, writes *Gerard J. Hughes*. So questions have been raised about souls: do all living things have them? What is it that makes human souls so distinctive? Where do they come from? What happens to them when people die? What is the relation between having a human soul and being a human person? Did Jesus Christ have an ordinary human soul as well as being God?

There are two main philosophical traditions underlying much of the debate. One of these is Platonic in origin. The human soul is a quite different entity from the body which it comes to inhabit: the soul is spiritual, the body material; the body can die and disintegrate, whereas I, my soul, am an immortal spiritual being.

Aristotle took a different view: the soul is

the "form" of the body: by which he meant that the soul was the way in which the elements in the body were arranged. The soul was not a separate thing. Tomatoes, dogs and humans are made of similar materials, but the materials are put together in different ways. The capabilities of the organisms are different, because they have different types of arrangement.

When Aristotle was "rediscovered" in the West, he was seen as a philosopher and as a scientist and many theologians, then as now, took it as one of their ideals to integrate their religious views with the best of contemporary science. The task proved difficult. If a soul is not a separate thing, how can it survive the death of the body? There is a famous passage in Aristotle in which he points out that our ability to think does not seem to be limited in the way in which all our other vital activities are. We can hear only sounds, see only light, digest only certain kinds of nutrient; but we

'The Qur'an stresses the mysterious nature of ensoulment'

The Qur'an offers a fuller account of embryonic and foetal development than the Jewish or Christian Scriptures, and one which is compatible with modern science and embryology, writes *A. Majid Katme*. It mentions the following stages of development in the first 42 days: sperm and egg *nutfah* (literally "tiny drop"); fertilised egg *nutfah amshaj* ("mingling of drops"); implantation *alaqah* ("that which clings"); *mudghah* ("growing lump"); development of bones and muscles; emergence of human features. Thus Chapter 23, verses 12-14, tell us:

We created man from clay
Then we placed him (her) as a *nutfah* in a place
of rest firmly fixed (womb)
Then we shaped the *nutfah* into *alaqah*
And we fashioned the *alaqah* into *mudghah*
And we made out of the *mudghah* bones
And we clothed the bones with flesh
Then we developed out of it a creature
So blessed be Allah the Creator.

The significance of the first 42 days is explained in the following *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): "When 42 nights have passed over the *nutfah*, Allah sends an angel to it, who shapes it, makes it hearing/ ears, its vision/eyes, its skin, flesh and bones. Then he says: 'Oh Lord, is it male or female?' and your Lord

decides what he wishes ... then the angel records it." By this stage – as modern embryology confirms – the basic features of the embryo are formed.

As for the soul of the embryo, Chapter 32, verse 9 tells us that "He (God) harmoniously moulded him (man) and breathed his spirit/soul into him." There is disagreement among Muslims about the point at which this occurs. The Qur'an stresses the mysterious nature of ensoulment: "They ask you about the soul. Say: the soul is a part of my Lord's domain, you have only been given a little knowledge" (Chapter 17, verse 85).

A popular view among Muslims is that the soul is breathed in 120 days after conception. This, in my view, is based on an incorrect interpretation of a prophetic saying; I agree with those who believe that the soul is breathed in at about 42 days. The view that ensoulment occurs around 40 days is more compatible with the Qur'anic verses quoted above, and with a *hadith* which says that "when the woman is pregnant and the baby is fashioned and looking human in the abdomen of the mother, then the angel breathes the soul into him (her) after 40 days, then will be written his (her) fortune, his (her) moment of death, and his (her) happiness and fate."

Muslims believe that the beginning and end of life are fixed by the Creator. It is no more permissible

can think about absolutely anything. Must not that ability, at least, transcend the limitations of *any* bodily organ? If “yes”, does it follow that there is at least some “part” of our soul that could function independently of our bodies – after death, say? Thomas Aquinas held different views at different times in his life. On his broadly Aristotelian approach, the “separated soul” after death and before the general resurrection seemed to be in many ways severely limited. More widely, his views on many of these issues were thought by his more Platonist critics in Paris to be contrary to Christian faith.

And how are we to understand the beginning of human life? On the Platonist view there seems to be no strict point at which the soul has to come and inhabit its body, since the two are in principle quite independent of one another. On the Aristotelian view, there is one organism from an early stage, but that organism develops the abilities of a human being only gradually. At an earlier stage, it is potentially human, capable of developing those capacities, but not actually human until they have been developed.

It is easy to see that issues to do with abortion can arise. On one view, the discussion is whether potentially human beings have (some) human rights; on the other view, one might ask whether there is any problem about performing an abortion before the soul has come to inhabit the body? And what to do if we cannot definitively settle any of these questions?

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for a human being to end the human life of an unborn child than that of a sick or disabled one. However, the seriousness of the action depends on the stage of development. To abort an embryo under 42 days is wrong, but it is forbidden to carry out abortion after ensoulment, i.e. after 42 days from conception. Many Muslim scholars believe that abortion is permissible only when the life of the mother is in danger (though a woman who has had an abortion and repents can be forgiven, as Allah is the Most Merciful and all forgiving).

Like many Muslims, I believe that a Qur’anic pro-life stance casts doubt on the morality of using embryos at any stage for medical purposes. Stem cells are “mother cells” which can differentiate into a variety of specific cells to form different organs. Their discovery has great potential, but only if adult stem can be used. It is no more acceptable to create and then destroy an embryo in order to take stem cells from it than it is to abort a foetus.

■ **Dr A. Majid Katme** is a pro-life, pro-family Muslim campaigner and spokesman of the Islamic Medical Association UK (www.prolifemuslims.com). The Westminster Faith Debates 2013 are organised by Professor Linda Woodhead and the Rt Hon. Charles Clarke, and begin on 13 February. www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates

SARA MAITLAND

‘How do I measure the common good when it is not what I want?’



This month I had been planning to write about the positive influence that seriously bad weather has on neighbourliness, care and courtesy; recognising our own dependence is good for our manners and morals. I was working up to a little parable about the elevating effects of suffering.

Then I got the wireline projection of our latest proposed wind farm. (A wireline projection is a computer-generated image of what you would be able to see, given elevation and contours, from any particular point. Developers create these as part of their planning application and can produce them for any specified view point. I asked our latest developer to run off one to show the view from my front door.) It was pretty grim – another 28 big turbines will be visible from my house, making a planned total of over 50 in a nearly continuous 320-degree arc right round my home.

So now I am suffering and it does not feel elevating.

There is a particular issue here because this wind farm has been very well sited: mine is the only house which will actually overlook any of the turbines. So I have been fretting about the obligations of democracy.

A survey in 2010 established that that 78 per cent of people in Scotland agreed that “wind farms are necessary to meet current and future energy needs”, and that more than half (59 per cent) felt that they were so necessary that how they looked was irrelevant. Moreover in 2011 over 45 per cent of Scots voted for a party (the SNP) that made sustainable energy production a manifesto commitment. I believe in constitutional democracy. I have not got a leg to stand on here.

Except that there is a natural weakness in any democracy-by-ballot system. It cannot measure how much people care, or how well informed they are on any issue. “Yes”, “no” and “don’t know” are hardly sophisticated choices. How many of those 59 per cent who think that how wind farms look is irrelevant have actually seen one? See one on a daily basis? Love

the way they look? Use excessive quantities of energy themselves? Don’t mind much either way? Equally when we vote we cannot be assumed to care equally about every single item in a manifesto. I cannot think of any system that would correct this deficiency without jeopardising the actual benefits to me personally of living in a (loosely speaking) democratic country.

So: I do not want to have to look at 50-plus wind turbines all round my house, some less than a mile away. I do honestly believe they will affect my daily life directly and negatively. During the long construction phase they will damage my silence and thereafter permanently alter my “soundscape”. On a strictly local scale they will be ecologically damaging (although at any larger level they will obviously deliver ecological benefits). The dozen or so which I can already see have changed the atmosphere of my habitat.

But most people want them to be somewhere, and “somewhere” is always “here” for someone – and in this case, not for very many people. How selfish am I allowed to be? How do I measure the common good when it is not what I want? When it is intensely what I do not want? What rights do minorities have to get what they want? I am alarmingly sure what Paul would say to me about humility, the sacrifice of my own desire and submission to the common will.

The relevance of all this for us as Church is pretty obvious. We “profit” profoundly from the sort of liberal democracy we live in. Unlike Christians in many other sorts of political regimes, we are not killed or displaced, or even, let’s be honest, oppressed. We are allowed to worship freely, run our own schools, take money out of the tax pool to support our own charities and express our own opinions – and, as private citizens, live by them.

Church teaching by and large supports Western-style liberal democracy and obedience to the rule of law within such a system. Is there, should there be, a payback? What kind of consideration and value do we give to majority convictions when we do not agree with them? For example, if most people in a country think that the meaning of the word “marriage” has changed so that it no longer necessarily means “for the whole of life” or for “a man and a woman”, do we have an obligation to give this any weight – and if so how much? If not, why not?