

Correspondence

Dear Editors:

The Vatican's new doctrinal statement¹ condemns a long list of medical procedures that could assist infertile couples to have children. The mid-nineteenth century saw a comparable struggle between theology and a new obstetrical practice. Many theologians (and theologically inclined physicians) argued that anesthesia was ungodly. They based their argument on the Book of Genesis, which says that all women share a uniquely female punishment for Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. An irate God had pronounced this sentence upon Eve in particular, and upon women in general: "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16). Accordingly, in 1847, when Dr. James Young Simpson used chloroform to reduce the suffering of his patients during childbirth, his practice was "sinful"; by reducing the pains of labor he had contravened the will of God. In the words of one clergyman, "chloroform is a decoy of Satan, apparently offering itself to bless women, but in the end it will harden society and rob God of the deep, earnest cries which arise in time of trouble for help."² Despite their concern for the spiritual—if not the bodily—well-being of women, theologians eventually lost that battle. The punishment of Eve has not disappeared from the Book of Genesis, yet today we seldom hear the scripturally based objection to anesthesia. The

demand for procedures to alleviate pain is now so well established, and is so much a part of common sense, that even the fundamentalist clergy would lose credibility if they continued to object.

Harkening nostalgically back to the idea that anguish is uplifting, the Vatican's new doctrinal statement proposes that the suffering of infertile couples should be turned into "spiritual fruitfulness." The statement calls on governments to enact laws to prevent a husband and wife from having a child by in vitro fertilization. According to the statement, fertilization outside the womb is a sin even when the procedure poses no threat to the fertilized egg. Yet the Bible nowhere prohibits conception outside the womb. Indeed, unlike the use of anesthesia during childbirth, in vitro fertilization does not contravene any utterance ascribed to the Deity.

The choice is not even so simple as either to ignore a scripture or to follow it. Theology is already a house divided. Those who seek redemption could even find a biblical mandate for the development of medical procedures that are still on the horizon.

The Book of Genesis has something to say about cloning. The practice is scarcely ungodly. "And of the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man" (Genesis 2:22). The tissue sample

taken from Adam would have contained his genetic code, including the paired XY chromosomes that determined that Adam was male. God must have deleted the Y chromosome, and doubled the X, to produce the XX female genotype. In all other respects, Eve, grown from Adam's tissue, would have been another member of his clone.

Here, then, is a scripturally based goal for medical science, if one is needed. In our post-lapsarian world, the children of Adam and Eve have been left to their own resources. Like most vertebrates, we have been reproducing through the union of sperm and egg. But eventually, through God's grace and the Laboratory, some religious pioneers might follow their biblical calling by returning to the original, Edenic form of procreation.

Be that as it may. Theology produces strange fancies. Let us reaffirm and celebrate the constitutional guarantees that no sect may use our laws to impose religious doctrines on dissenters.

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References

1. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on respect for human life in its origin and on the dignity of procreation, *New York Times*, March 11, 1987: A14, col. 1.
2. Haggard HW, Devils, drugs, and doctors, 1929, 108.