



Volume 62 | Issue 1

Article 17

5-1-2019

John's "Embryonic stem cell research: Re-explored considering scientific, philosophical and theological understanding of human life" (book review)

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Recommended Citation

Baumstarck, Joseph Jr. (2019) "John's "Embryonic stem cell research: Re-explored considering scientific, philosophical and theological understanding of human life" (book review)," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 62: Iss. 1, Article 17.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2572-7478.2076>

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Book Reviews



John, S. P. (2017). *Embryonic stem cell research: Re-explored considering scientific, philosophical and theological understanding of human life*. New Delhi, India: Christian World Imprints. 221 pp. \$32.00. ISBN 9789351482109

In *Embryonic Stem Cell Research* Shaji P. John attempts a truly Herculean task. In simple form his main purpose for writing this book is to “try to present an Orthodox understanding about the embryonic stem cell research” (p. xvi). In a four part work John expands this to include an academically valid recap of scientific progress in embryonic stem cell research, an assessment of the literature regarding the ethical issues associated with embryonic cell research, a comprehensive defense of the Orthodox Church’s theological position on human life, and suggests how the previous three sections can be combined to formulate an orthodox position on the myriad ethical dilemmas generated by embryonic stem cell research.

The footnotes and bibliography support John’s statements and conclusions well. In fact, these resources alone make this a valuable work, especially for readers not intimately familiar with Orthodox theology, ethics, or embryonic stem cell literature. John uses primary sources from a wide variety of historical documents, scientific journals, ethical writings, and theological research. The use of primary sources is convincing, fair, and distributed throughout the wide ranging opinions presented in the relevant fields of study. Secondary resources support John’s conclusions and assessments well and help him distill the primary sources into an understandable and manageable whole. Overall, given the complexity of the issues John decided to tackle *Embryonic Stem Cell Research* should be readily understandable for upper level undergraduate students and above. Other readers may find the book valuable for information on specific aspects of these issues.

In the first part John delineates where embryonic stem cell research is today. He discusses the historical developments leading to the present state and assesses the claims made for embryonic stem cell research. John shows how and why stem cell research, and specifically embryonic stem cell research, can provide benefits to society. While the benefits are clearly identified the detriments are fairly noted as well. John clearly points out that for embryonic stem cells to be obtained unborn babies are destroyed. He also discusses alternative sources of stem cells that may be available and the limitations of these types of stem cells in relation to embryonic stem cells.

The second part presents a historical review of the philosophical views which contributed to our modern understanding of human life. He juxtaposes scientific views of life to these philosophical views. John does a thorough and fair job of noting the differences between these views and how these differences contribute to opinions about justification for embryonic stem cell development. Using a predominantly Orthodox ethical framework John shows how the philosophical and scientific positions address and fail to address a significant number of ethical concerns resulting from this development.

Part three steps back to delineate the Orthodox position regarding human life in a general sense. This chapter is well done and utilizes many resources to make an Orthodox position understandable and coherent. Although some concepts related to an Orthodox understanding of human life may initially seem familiar to western Christians this chapter is worth pursuing in detail to assimilate the nuanced differences between typical western understandings and Orthodox positions. In a straight forward, open, and honest manner John presents Orthodox views of humanity in ways that make them understandable to western readers and allows him to build the final chapter.

In the final chapter the first three parts are integrated into a coherent Orthodox position regarding embryonic stem cell research. Some readers might be tempted to skip the previous chapters and read just this chapter and that would be a serious mistake. John clearly notes that an Orthodox position regarding humanity is not compatible with embryonic stem cell research or further development. Despite the possible benefits which might follow from this research the ethical problems are insurmountable from an Orthodox religious position.

Despite the many positives *Embryonic Stem Cell Research* suffers from poor editing. Numerous grammatical errors are prevalent. These errors are consistent with Asian or Indian languages being translated to English. The book is published by one of the larger Indian publishing companies. Christian World Imprints has recently published meaningful works on quality paper with clear type and solid bindings. Final editing into English continues to be a concern with this publisher and needs to be addressed.

Reviewer

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