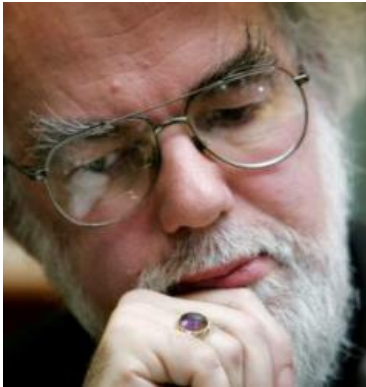


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## The Archbishop and the Embryo

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Archbishop Rowan Williams, Primate of the Church of England and leader of the Anglican Communion was once a human embryo. So was I. So were you. So also were those who would now reduce human embryos to the status of a commodity to be used and destroyed in the name of medical progress.

This archbishop is known for taking tepid and confusing positions on any number of issues. But in response to a proposal to create human-animal hybrid embryos in Great Britain, Rowan Williams has staked out a position that at least protests the subversion of human dignity.

Writing in *The Daily Mail* [London], Archbishop Williams set out his case:

*So where is the big question for consciences? In most people's understanding of what counts as moral behaviour, it's taken for granted that you don't use anyone else just for your own purposes – or even for other people's purposes.*

*A human person, an individual body with feelings and thoughts, needs to be treated, as we sometimes say, as an end in itself, not a tool for someone else's agenda.*

*So we condemn rape, torture and blackmail. We don't allow experiments on people's bodies or minds without their consent. And we don't breed human individuals to create a pool of organs that could be transplanted to save the lives of others.*

*Here is where the problems begin. If a human embryo is produced by non-reproductive cloning, created as a research tool as proposed in the Bill, and then destroyed, is this in the same category as using someone's body as an instrument for your purposes?*

Williams answers this question with a qualified “no.” I think he is wrong in this answer, and he never really defends that position. Nevertheless, after conceding too much at that question, he recovers to make an argument that disrespect for any human embryo (whether defined as reproductive or non-reproductive) will lead to a disrespect for all embryos — and eventually disrespect for all human beings.

He writes:

*But if you put it another way and talk about creating an embryo that could in principle become a distinctive person – because it is already a distinctive organic unity – could this, in the long run, encourage a drift towards a new attitude to human life, an attitude that is more and more fuzzy about the absolute right of an individual not to be used for the purposes of another?*

The archbishop's distinction between reproductive and non-reproductive human embryos is unhelpful in this context, I believe, but he does at least understand and state that the issue of using any human individual “for the purposes of another” is categorically wrong.

Williams also expressed concern about the human-animal hybrids under consideration in Britain, but he came to no clear position.

In the current context of controversy in Britain, Williams risks being called a crackpot. Figures like Baroness Warnock have dismissed all those who oppose human embryo research to be ideologically-driven enemies of progress. In the face of this, Archbishop Williams insists that “more is at stake than just a set of irrational prejudices.”

Yet, the archbishop’s hesitation to speak against the destruction of *any* human embryo for *any* reason as a categorical argument will eventually undermine his case. His argument is a strategy for buying time . . . not for gaining ground.

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