Scientific freedom

Simona Giordano, Marco Cappato

Stem cell research represents the most promising field of investigation for treatment of many degenerative diseases. The veto against this research condemns millions of people to a life with little hope of cure

O vous, les boute-feux, ô vous les bons apôtres, Mourez donc les premiers, nous vous cédon le pas, Mais de grâce, morbleu! laissez vivre les autres!

Last year, Rome hosted the first meeting of the World Congress For Freedom of Scientific Research.

The Congress was organised by the Luca Coscioni Association, an organisation of scientists, patients and citizens committed to freedom of scientific research and the assertion of the rights of patients and disabled people.

The Congress was exceptional for at least three reasons:

First, the moving force of the whole congress, and of the many struggles for freedom conducted by the Luca Coscioni Association, has been Luca Coscioni himself, the President of the Association. Despite the severe degenerative illness that rendered Luca immobile and destined him to tragic and premature death, Luca remained committed to the ideals of freedom, and on the first day of the Congress, just days before his death, he eloquently expressed his appeal. This not only touched every one present, but also reminded us all that when we talk of scientific research, we talk of real people, who have real lives and real illnesses, and who are destined to die prematurely and in agony unless treatment is found—and hope for treatment for many degenerative diseases bears upon embryonic stem cell research. Luca reminded us that while the public discusses the ethics and limits of scientific freedom, and while some policy makers use their energy to impede scientists in their efforts to improve the lives of millions of people, many of those millions are actually condemned to a life of horror and to a horrifying death. Luca made his appeal with these words:

The first meeting of the World Congress for Freedom of Scientific Research comes at a particularly difficult time in my life ...

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis does not limit intellectual skills, it makes you fully aware of feelings of despair and fear of lifetime. A time which is violently becoming narrower and which forces me to address the urgency of the price that millions of people around the world are paying and will have to pay to a culture of power, a culture of class ... imbued with anti-scientific dogmas and prejudices, which exclude scientific knowledge and which exclude individual freedom to benefit from knowledge. Stakes are too high to let time pass, more time pass ... To the violence of this cynical prohibition on scientific research and on the fundamental rights of citizens, I have responded with my body, which maybe many would have liked to see just as a hopeless prison, and today I respond with my thirst for air—because I am truly breathless—which is my thirst for truth, my thirst for freedom.

The second unique feature of the World Congress for Freedom of Scientific Research is that it has represented a unanimous appeal coming from Rome, the heart of Europe. The geographical location has symbolic and political significance. The Congress was held at the Campidoglio, in the very centre of the Eternal City. The historical importance of the place is testified by, for example, the choice of Campidoglio as one of the symbols represented on the coinage of Europe, the Euro. The Campidoglio was, before Christianity, the place where the pagans devoted their cult to the Goddess Moneta. By a peculiar coincidence, it happened that Roman coins were made at the nearby temple of Goddess Moneta; from this peculiar fusion, the word Moneta started to indicate the currency (hence the word money). The place is of incredible artistic beauty; the main square was designed by Michelangelo Buonarroti

and is a place of touristic, artistic and architectural attraction, as well as being a place for policy decisions. But what is even more important is that this place, a theatre of illuminated and lay discussions, is just a few miles away from the Vatican, a small and influential State that has exercised enormous weight on other European States' policies on freedom of research. As we all know, pope Giovanni Paolo II and now pope Benedetto XVI, ex Cardinal Ratzinger, have solemnly condemned embryonic stem cell research, and their potent voice has been welcomed by the governments of several European countries, such as Germany, Italy, France, Malta and Ireland. It is not insignificant that experts came from all over the world to oppose the papal anathema and to explain why freedom of research is so precious to all of us.

Finally, the Congress provided a platform to launch an important action at an international level: a petition (a democratic tool envisaged by European Treaties) calling on the European Parliament to ensure that

- (a) The EU Seventh Framework Programme on Research renews the funding of research projects on stem cells obtained from supernumerary embryos.
- (b) Eligibility to funding be extended to research projects on nuclear transfer (inappropriately called "therapeutic cloning").

The petition can be signed online at <http://www.freedomofresearch.org> (the proceedings of the Congress are also available at the site).

This petition has so far achieved an important landmark: on 15 June 2006, the European Parliament rejected the attack by fundamentalists who oppose scientific progress and confirmed the possibility of funding—as has been the case until now—research projects on embryonic stem cells. Some parts of the Parliament's proposal can be improved: in particular, it is not fully clear whether research on somatic cell nuclear transfer will be funded. Moreover, at the time of writing this editorial, the Council of European Ministers has not confirmed the decision taken by the European Parliament. And finally, some of the political implications of decisions taken are currently open to wide ethical debate. However, the proposal of the European Parliament represents an important achievement in terms of protection of freedom of research in Europe, and the Congress on Scientific Freedom has played a fundamental role in this process.

We need to remember that those who oppose scientific research do not only

oppose the work of a category of professionals, the scientists, but also indirectly influence the fate of the innocents who could benefit from scientific progress, and who may die, often in agony, without new treatments. It is now established in the international scientific community that stem cell research represents probably the most promising field of investigation for the treatment of many degenerative diseases. The veto against embryonic stem cell research condemns millions of people to a life with little hope of cure. This could turn into a death sentence for millions of people. When a policy deliberately exposes millions of people to the risk of premature death,

this tragic waste of life has to be justified, with stringent arguments that leave no room for any reasonable doubt that this was inevitable, or was required to prevent an even greater evil. The veto on embryonic stem cell research, instead, is based on a belief (that the embryo is a person and should be treated as such), and therefore it is based on an article of faith. Democratic societies are characterised by tolerance and the cohabitation of different ideas and faiths. In no democratic society, however, should the life of a person be put at risk on the basis of the beliefs or faiths of others. Belief, faith and conscience are essentially personal; when they are not simply permitted to

individuals but imposed on societies, freedom is replaced by tyranny.

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