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A RELIGIOUS JUSTIFICATION OF THE ROLE OF SCIENCE IN HUMAN REPRODUCTION

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&
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Abstract

Giving birth to children is very important in many African societies, because children are portrayed as evidence of fruitfulness and blessings from God. In fact, there is a saying that children are the gains of a marriage. Amid this huge burden and societal expectations, some couples are encumbered with this weight as a result of some medical challenges in the area of procreation. Scientific advancements have offered interventions to mitigate this problem, as is evident in other human endeavors, where scientific solutions have come to the rescue through a number of reproductive technologies. Extant literature on human reproductive technology have focused largely on the procedures and ethical perspectives with scant attention paid to it from a Christian religious perspective. This study therefore, explored a religious justification of the role of science in human reproduction. This was with a view to addressing the concerns that have been raised by varying adherents of religions and schools of thought regarding the ethics of reproductive technologies. The aim of the study was to answer questions on whether reproductive technologies contravene the natural way of human reproduction and whether they tamper with the supremacy of God. The paper concludes that there is no justifiable reason for rejecting the gift of knowledge of God to humanity through science in the area of human reproduction using St. Augustine's Concept of Knowledge that all human knowledge comes from God.

Keywords: Human Procreation, African Culture, Christianity and Reproductive Technologies

Introduction

Unlike the West, where emphasis is not placed on having children, most African societies believe that families without children are somewhat incomplete. In fact, from the point of joining a couple in holy matrimony prayers, it is said that in nine months, the couple will invite people to celebrate the birth of their newborn. The communal nature of living in most African societies, where matters that concern a person are everybody's business, makes matters worse for couples having challenges in the area of giving birth. Thus, undue pressure is placed on newlyweds, as they are expected to start a family immediately after marriage. Religious institutions, extended families (especially in-laws), and everyone within the social circle of the couple eagerly await a protruded stomach; once this expectation is not met within a year or two, the woman, in most cases, gets unsolicited advice on getting pregnant. When procreation problems are established, solutions are tenaciously sought.

Human reproductive problems are as old as the history of humanity; thus, seeking interventions to have children is not new in cases in which children are desired. In the olden days, women in Africa having reproductive challenges "marry" another wife for their husbands in order to have children. Similarly, families where the husband is seen as the source of the problem allow a male sibling or anyone chosen in the family to impregnate the woman. Due to modernity, some of such crude ancient methods of interventions are no longer popular. Religious solutions are very popular as testimonies abound on miracle children from years of childlessness. The subject of miracle is a metaphysical concern in philosophy and even within religious circles, its manifestation cannot be enforced by humans. Thus, some couples have not found succor in the area of procreation through religious means, thereby necessitating medical/scientific help. Scientific advancements in the area of reproductive technologies have made procreation possible to couples with challenges in giving birth. As progressive as scientific interventions in reproduction appear, they are seen as unnatural, thereby giving room for skepticism and outright rejection within some circles, especially the religious ones.

The place of religious traditions does not make it easier; this is because people who are religiously inclined adjudicate scientific roles and procedures in aiding human reproduction as tempering with the supremacy of God. It is believed that God is the creator and intelligent designer responsible for the creation of human beings, whom he mandated to procreate and fill the surface of the earth, taking dominion over other creatures such as the birds in the air, the fishes in the sea, and the plantations in the Garden of Eden.

Conversely, some human beings are created with certain kinds of dysfunction, such as barrenness and impotency, in their reproductive systems. Curiosity herein compels man to ask questions such as, is God not really omnipotent (all powerful) to make all humans perfect? Are beings made with incapacities by nature to reproduce, created by a lesser god other than the Almighty God? Are there no remedies to the problem of infertility and barrenness in God's creatures (men and women)? These kinds of questions and other related ones, especially the injunction in Genesis 1:28, justify the importance of procreation and wariness in accepting scientific interventions in giving birth. Therefore, this paper seeks to analyze reproductive technologies from the perspective of the Christian position on reproduction, with the aim of justifying this development.

Reproductive Technological Solutions to Childlessness

Most couples who are naturally dysfunctional in procreation find themselves on the verge of yielding to adopt a child or children or give up their dream of having children. Against the aforementioned alternatives, what becomes for couples who are not willing to adopt yet have the desire to have their own children whichever way? Reproductive technologies have been invented, but questions are being asked regarding the ethics of such reproductive technologies.

In the traditional African context, childlessness is often characterized by ill-luck, curse, consequences of actions or many other factors. When normal sexual encounters among couples fail to bring forth offspring due to some challenges, they tend to resort to spiritual men and women for solutions. If the interventions fail to produce

results, the man is pressured and advised, in most cases, to take a second wife or even a third wife as the case may be, just to have the desired offspring. A similar trend is seen in the Bible, for example, when Sarah could not bear Abraham a child, Sarah, knowing the necessity of offspring through volition offered her female servant to Abraham her husband, "Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her" (Genesis 16:2). Abraham, in conformity with his wife's opinion, had a sexual relationship with Hagar, the maidservant, for the course of child procreation. Although the scripture was not specific to the ethics of such an act, the effect of the action could be evaluated in light of its long-term consequences.

Scientifically, it is now possible for couples to have a child following advancements in knowledge acquired and utilized. Such knowledge is useful, as Western techniques have provided alternatives for couples willing to have a child¹. Although these processes contradict the natural order of procreation, the result leaves the couple satisfied and fulfilled. Lending credence to the sciences, the following are alternatives available to couples who are incapable of reproducing. According to George,

These alternatives revolve around the artificial insemination of a woman's ovum by her husband's sperm, artificial insemination of a wife with her husband's sperm, artificial insemination of a wife with a donor's sperm, eventual implantation into the woman's uterus, transfer of eggs from a donor to a woman's womb before fertilization, embryo transfer from a donor to outside of the uterus (ectogenesis), cloning, or nuclear transplantation².

For the purpose of this discourse, a few of these reproductive techniques will be considered before delving into religious appraisal and justification of the role of science in facilitating reproduction in humans.

¹ A. Randy (2000) *Pro-Life Answers to Pro-Choice Arguments*. Sisters, Ore: Multnomah. Pg. 33.

² H. K. George (1979) *Bioethics: A Textbook of Issues*. Reading Mass.: Addison-Wesley. Pg. 68.

- 1. In Vitro Fertilization (IVF):** This procedure has a very high success rate and it has been embraced over the years in different parts of the world. It involves the joining of a woman's egg and her husband's sperm outside the body, that is, in a laboratory dish and the fertilized egg implanted into the woman's uterus. This may also involve a fertilized egg and sperm of donors which are implanted into the woman, who carries the pregnancy to term.
- 2. Artificial Insemination by Husband (AIH):** This is a simple scientific procedure in which the husband's sperm is collected and inserted into his wife. There are a number of possible reasons why husbands may be unable to impregnate their wives. He may be impotent, unable to sustain erection because of an accident or disease, or he may have a low sperm count that makes it difficult for enough sperm to reach the egg and fertilize it. A man may be away from his wife for long periods of time because of the nature of work or war. In such cases, artificial insemination is one treatment option.
- 3. Artificial Insemination by Donor (AID):** A husband may sometimes be sterile, with no sperm with which to impregnate his wife. This condition may be caused by a genetic defect, environmental contamination, disease, or some deformity with no known cause. In such cases, some couples resort to using sperm provided by a donor, who is often anonymous. The donor sperm was then inserted into the wife to allow fertilization.
- 4. Surrogacy:** A surrogate mother is a woman impregnated with the eggs and sperm of another couple; that is, she is not the biological mother of the child she bears. She carries the pregnancy to term, and when the child is born, she relinquishes the baby to the couple with whom she enters the agreement. A couple may choose to enter into such a legal arrangement if the wife is unable to conceive, if she suffers miscarriages and cannot keep a pregnancy, or if she faces serious health problems during pregnancy.

The egg implanted in the surrogate mother may be the wife's egg, fertilized by her husband, or by a donor. Alternatively, the

egg may have been donated by another woman and fertilized by her husband's sperm.

- e) **Human Cloning:** This is the scientific genetic creation of an identical copy, also called the clone of a human being. Cloning is primarily used in reference to the artificial creation of a person through the synthetic creation of human tissues and cells. This process involves reproduction of human cells and tissues. This procedure is performed by cautious removal of tissues and cells from a person's body to produce her/his replica. There are many gray areas, regulations, and laws surrounding the procedures of cloning (which may change in the future); thus, it is not popular and may not be an easy option for human reproduction, compared to other technologies.

Socio-Cultural Issues on Human Reproduction

Prior to new reproductive technologies, pathways to parenthood are increasingly multifaceted, in which individuals subsequently become parents.³ Reproductive dysfunction is a serious problem that can result in broken homes or marital instability if not handled appropriately. Having children is not usually taken with levity in most African communities. In fact, this is considered a social obligation. Thus, parenthood is regarded as culturally mandatory, making childlessness socially unacceptable. There is a lot of stigmatizations of parents unable to give birth due to the high level of value placed on children.⁴ For most people within a given societal framework, bearing children is a priority in their existence. Fertility plays an important role in women's lives. Therefore, a woman

³ M. W. Henny & B. V. Floor (2007) The Influence of Social and Cultural Factors on Infertility and New Reproductive Technologies: *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 65, <https://DOI:10.1080/01674820701447439>

⁴ B. A. Olugbenga & W. O. Adebimpe (2014) Prevalence of Infertility and Acceptability of Assisted Reproductive Technology Among Women Attending Gynecology Clinics in Tertiary Institution in South Western Nigeria: *GynecolObstet (Sunnyvale)*, 1-7.

continues to be subjected to pressure as she becomes desperate when she receives a diagnosis of infertility.⁵

In this regard, failure to fulfill this important societal obligation has huge social consequences. Couples suffering from infertility experience stigmatization. Stigmas generally mean the presence of an unseen mark of disapproval, which makes the lucky people who consider themselves as “insiders” to create a line of non-inclusiveness around the unlucky “outsiders” with the intention of preventing them from accessing a group.⁶ In most cases, women bear the burden of reproductive dysfunction, and society subjects them to heavy stigmatization. The experience of a woman having challenges with giving birth is stressed by John Mbiti when he said that “unhappy is the woman who fails to have children, for whatever other qualities she might possess, her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide: she has become the dead of human life, not only for the genealogical life but also for herself.”⁷ The stigmatization that such women face in society ranges from divorce, abuse, loss of social status, inability to perform communal activities, isolation from people, etc.. They sometimes experience some sort of verbal abuse in their social circles, as people give them unsolicited advice. Infertility also results in marital insecurity, fear, rejection, and abandonment by husbands. Therefore, a woman who experiences challenges such as these as a result of an inability to procreate is faced with problems or issues that would make her willing to go any length to make sure she has a child of her own.

With the advent of Reproductive Technologies, constrained couples who never thought they would have a child of their own are being given new hopes to become parents. After several efforts or

⁵ V. Bergum (1997) *A Child on Her Mind: The Experience of Becoming a Mother*. London: Bergin and Garvey.

⁶ G. Falk (2001) *STIGMA: How We Treat Outsiders*. Prometheus Books: <https://www.buffalostate.edu/sociology/falk>.

⁷ J. S. Mbiti (1990) *African Religions and Philosophy*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire, USA: Heinemann, 110.

attempts to conceive have proven abortive, a couple may decide to opt for reproductive techniques as a means of overcoming childlessness.

A Christian Religious Justification of Scientific Roles in Human Reproductive Technologies

Procreation is seen as God's gift to all human creation. He created humans to reproduce and, in the process, fill the earth. Each human being receives the gift of life at birth and every new day is added to his/her existence not only to live but also to bring forth fruits. This makes procreation to be seen as a positive blessing as well as a divine commandment to be fruitful and multiply and the replenish the earth (Gen. 1:28).

Children are considered gifts by God to humankind. It could be said that the greatest gifts are the precious gifts of life themselves, the children with whom God have blessed man. The value that God placed on children can be found in many verses in the Bible, such as:

“Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of warrior are sons in one's youth”. Psalm 127:3-4.

The above passage entails that children are generally God's heritage to couples. Child-bearing is believed to be the work of God, and it is not ideal for men to take up responsibility. While many couples experience this blessing, many others live frustrated. However, barrenness or inability to procreate is generally considered a sign of negativity; sometimes, some people see it as a curse, while others attribute barrenness to nature. Although there are different opinions among Christians about the use of fertility treatments or reproductive technologies, it is possible that many adherents of the religion use these reproductive processes. Others may play active roles in inventing and implementing techniques using assisted reproductive technologies. Some men and women with constraints on procreation consider themselves to be at a disadvantage because they cannot fulfill their expected roles in the divine order of procreation. However, some Christian couples are not yoked with the need to give birth; thus, they believe they are free to decide not to have children or to have, while

some argue that the command in Genesis 1:28), “be fruitful and multiply” applies to all marriages.

It is argued that God blessed humanity with the gift of procreation, and because of this fact, it is an important factor in marriage. According to Pretorius, procreation is the basis for cohabitation and the main object of any marital union. He made use of some Bible verses to support his position, “of him who fears the Lord it is said, your wife shall be a fruitful vine” (Psalm 128:3) In addition, it is only as a mother of the sons whom a woman has presented to the family does she enjoy certain considerations in the society at large; this is used to judge her fruitful or not.⁸

The Bible in Proverbs (17:6) also points out that “children are the crown of old age.” This implies that these children will provide for their parents in old age. Having children is a general desire of couples, and it is believed that without this natural biological urge to procreate, the human race may become extinct.⁹ With these assertions, there is great emphasis on the need for offspring, especially in marriage.

Christians constitutes 2.2 billion people globally, which is around 31.5% of the world population. Within this religious group, there are different blocs that represent different schools of thought regarding assisted reproduction. According to Arthur¹⁰, while sampling the opinions of Christians on reproductive technologies, he submits that while some are in support of it, others are entirely opposed to assisted procreation because it negates God’s original design for procreation. The position is that undergoing infertility treatments using reproductive technologies is a stepping stone to destruction.

⁸D. H. Pretorius 1975, “Childlessness” in *Church and Marriage in Modern Africa*. EDD: Groenkloof, South Africa: Ecumenical Research Institute, 112.

⁹ J. K.Opoku. & P. Addai-Mensah. 2014, *A Comparative Analysis of In-Vitro Fertilization from the Christian and Islamic Point of View*: Published by the European Centre for Research Training and Development. UK, 50.

¹⁰ G. Arthur (1989), *The Religious Response to Reproductive Technology: The Christian Century*, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/7632734>, 11.

They argued further that “fertilization is only allowed when it is the result of a conjugal act, that is, sexual intercourse between husband and wife. To that end, Arthur raises the question of whether it is proper for science to interfere with natural reproduction”.¹¹ Numerous eggs are retrieved from the ovary of a woman after fertility medication has been taken. On the other hand, the sperm of the man is collected through masturbation or he may be asked to ejaculate into a condom, and the sperm would be collected immediately. This is the reason children born through assisted reproductive means are often referred to as “test tube babies.” The final stage of fertilization occurs when the eggs and sperm are brought together in a glass where fertilization occurs. Obviously, reproductive technologies bypass the marriage or copulation of a man and a woman, which is believed to be the traditional means of achieving pregnancy, instead of helping it achieve this natural end (marriage).

It is easy to object to artificial insemination on the basis that it is unnatural and a deviance from the natural plan that children must come from physical sexual intercourse between couples. If this critical line of reasoning is followed in other areas of medical intervention, such as wearing glasses for eye defects, skin grafting, in-plants, and other popular medical procedures, they should also suffer the same fate because they are also unnatural.

It is also believed that the use of donor gametes interferes with a third party in the holiness of marriage and that in such a situation, the genetic (real) mother or father of the child could well be someone outside the marriage because emphasis is on the sources of the eggs and sperm, which are later manipulated by a technician to allow fertilization. Donor eggs or sperm are not infrequently used. This implication is what has made some Christians judge assisted

¹¹ G. Arthur (1989), *The Religious Response to Reproductive Technology: The Christian Century*, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/7632734>, 11.

reproduction immoral.¹² Some critics posit that reproductive technology will endorse the perception of children as products rather than as distinct human beings that are supposed to be cherished in their own rights.¹³ However, they fail to understand that children conceived through this procedure are also created by God, just like children who were given birth in a natural way. Therefore, like every other child, children conceived via reproductive technology regardless of the circumstances of their conception and birth should be loved and cherished as no child chooses circumstances surrounding his or her birth.

St. Augustine's Theory of Knowledge

Stating concisely the personality of St. Augustine of Hippo before delving into his theory of knowledge. He was born in Thagaste, a small town now known as Souk Ahras in Algeria. He was the first of the three children and believed to have lived between 354-430BC. He was a church father and writer, who is believed to be “not only the bridge that links ancient philosophy and early Christian theology with the thought of the medieval ages, but one who, in his philosophical prowess, most especially in his epistemology, developed some of the most important ideas of Descartes and Malbranche, Berkeley and Kant.”¹⁴

On Knowledge: The simple sense of 'know' or 'know' connotes something as information. The concept of knowledge constitutes the basis of this study, which is fundamentally concerned with Human Reproductive Technologies. According to Keith¹⁵:

It is precisely this sense that is fundamental to human cognition and requires both theoretical speculation and practical sagacity.

¹² M. H. John (1998) *Begotten Not Made: A Catholic View of Reproductive Technology*. United States Catholic Conference: Washington D.C.

¹³ G. Arthur (1989) *The Religious Response to Reproductive Technology: The Christian Century*, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/7632734>, 12.

¹⁴ R. Nash (1969) *The Light of the Mind: St Augustine's Theory of Knowledge*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

¹⁵ L. Keith (1990) *Theory of Knowledge* Boulder And San Francisco: Westview Press. Pg 2, 3.

To do science, to engage in experimental inquiry and scientific ratiocination, one must be able to tell whether one has received correct information to obtain scientific knowledge of the world.

Keith further maintained “that a theory of knowledge must not necessarily be a theory about the meaning of epistemic words, rather than a theory about how people come to know what they do. Rather, it may be one explaining what conditions must be satisfied and how they may be satisfied in order for a person to be knowledgeable about something”.¹⁶

St. Augustine on Knowledge: Within philosophical circles, the most notable problem in St. Augustine’s epistemology is that his works did not formulate any direct or clear systematic theory of knowledge. It is believed that in any successful study of Augustinian epistemology, three paradoxes must be resolved: “how the intellect is both passive and active; how the forms are distinct from and not distinct from the human mind; and how man’s mind is and is not the light that makes knowledge possible”¹⁷.

According to Van Der Bos, Augustine, in his *De Trinitate* explicitly and in a systemic manner narrated the process by which one acquires knowledge.¹⁸ In expounding the nature of divine illumination, Nash discusses four advanced interpretations: the Thomist (which he rejects as not faithful to St. Augustine’s general philosophy), the Franciscan, the Formalist, and the Ontologist. His proposition for a modified ontologist’s view addresses the nature or essential features of being and things that exist. According to Nash,

¹⁶ L. Keith (1990) *Theory of Knowledge* Boulder And San Francisco: Westview Press. Pg 2, 3.

¹⁷ R. Nash (1969) *The Light of the Mind: St Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

¹⁸ A. Van Der Bos (2017) *Augustine on Knowledge: Divine Illumination as An Argument Against Scepticism*. Research Master Thesis S2217473, Rma: Religion & Culture Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Pg. 39.

St. Augustine, in his synthesis of Christian theology and Neoplatonic philosophy, held that

All creation partakes of truth in varying degrees, that man, as the highest part of creation, created in God's image and thus sharing to some degree the divine nature, is able to know truth through the divine light and the light of his own mind¹⁹.

This study sheds light on numerous facets of St. Augustine's theory of knowledge and offers a new phase of interpretation of his idea of divine knowledge on the subject of reproductive technology. A proper understanding of the theory of knowledge illuminates how man apprehends the divine ideas and knowledge for existence, essence, and fulfillment is the core emphasis in this work, which solves and reconciles some impediments to human fulfillment; for instance, human reproduction being the subject matter of this paper.

According to the Bible, "*For the Lord Gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding*" (Proverbs 2:6). "*For wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul*" (Proverbs 2:10).

An exposition of the aforementioned biblical passages maintains and reiterates the belief that knowledge originates from God through intimacy. This knowledge becomes profitable to man for innovation and inventions, for human growth and development, as a solution to human needs and impediments to attaining a fulfilled life given by the creator and giver of life, God. Thus, for this same God to give humanity the gift of knowledge on in vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood, and artificial insemination by husband and donor (AIH) and (AID), he has allowed it. There is no justifiable reason for rejecting this gift of knowledge to humanity. On this basis, the need arises to channel human knowledge and understanding to invent reproductive technologies to solve and curb the problem of

¹⁹ R. Nash (1969) *The Light of the Mind: St Augustine's Theory of Knowledge*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

childlessness among couples who desire to have their children but are impeded due to one challenge to the other.

Conclusion

Evidently, human interventions occur in almost all areas of life, ranging from agriculture, as seen in the rise from crude farming to technological advancements in animal husbandry and crop production to transportation, which has evolved over the years. Technological advancements have made it possible for the gospel and messenger of the gospel to be ubiquitous courtesy of social media. Human knowledge is not static and what appeared to be figments of imagination or science fiction only a few decades ago has become a reality today. Humanity stands to benefit a lot from embracing and supporting scientific prowess in all areas of existence, including procreation, as long as they are within stipulated guidelines and ethical laws.

Human beings, the highest of God's creations, afford humans with a divine acumen in knowledge of existence and essence. Through the light of divine illumination of the heart of men, Christians believe that knowledge comes from God and the knowledge comes through maintaining a relationship and fellowshiping with the deity, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." (James 1:5).

The position maintained by St. Augustine (as posited earlier in this study) that all knowledge comes from God in this context justifies the explicit display of prowess in medical knowledge of improvising means of human reproduction. Through scientific knowledge, most challenges related to human reproduction are remedied. However, most times, it is questioned whether or not reproductive technologies do not tamper with the supremacy of God even though they solve the problem of procreation, for example, in human cloning, an exact replica of a person is formulated. This question and other similar ones are justifiably asked and answered because, even with the huge and undeniable success of the sciences, there is a limit to what science can

do or know. These limitations find succor most times in metaphysical answers that affirms the supremacy. Human reproductive technologies do not tamper with the supremacy of God because God alone remains the giver of life.

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