Human Genetic Technologies and Islamic Bioethics

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Asia is the hub of biotechnological superpowers – South Korea, Japan, India and China are receiving enormous federal backing and funding to intensify research in biotechnology. Muslim societies have advanced tremendously due to modern cultural standards, high standards of education and healthcare, and the surge and influx of information through the internet and cable TV. Universities are competing with each other to expand their research programs, determined not to be left out of this biotechnological century.

Egypt, which houses a notable institution like the University of Al-Azhar which other Muslim countries look up to for fatwas or Islamic rulings on contentious issues in the life and medical sciences, is itself initiating research using embryonic stem cells left over from infertility treatment [1]. Embryonic stem cells possess pluripotent qualities which means they are capable of issuing into a number of cell types. Research on such entities has enormous benefits and appears to promise an end to human suffering. The Islamic precept, ‘to avoid evil, harm or sufferance and to seek benefits’ seems to favor therapeutic cloning, stem cell and gene therapy. Muslim scientists argue that early embryos less that 14 days old have ‘no life’ and, rather than leave them to perish, why not use them for research for the benefit of human beings? There is an air of general acceptance for stem cell research in countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Singapore and Malaysia, in the midst of debates and pending approvals for such research.

Muslim legislators begin to fear that the New Human Sciences would open up Pandora’s box and unleash the unknown. How can they wisely attend to the myriad of ethical problems that follow human genetic technology? The development of Islamic guidelines, rules and regulations was needed as a framework to tackle more and more possibilities that were yet to come.

Recent contemplation of bioethical matters in Islam has incorporated the utilization of the concept of maqasid al-Shari`ah. The maqasid seeks to protect five basic