

The Secular Turn of Bioethics

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For many people, bioethics is a big word that speaks of heated controversies about cloning, stem cell research or end of life issues. These debates appear to pit the religious against the secular, and the conservatives against the liberal establishment. While there is some truth to that, it is a little known fact that bioethics has a humble origin with roots that are religious. The story of how bioethics turned its back on its former allegiance is all the more pressing since this knowledge can shed some light on the current controversies.

Since time immemorial, religion has been an integral part of medical ethics. Recent studies have demonstrated that the Hippocratic Oath was originally formulated in a religious community founded by Pythagoras. In the West, Christianity has clearly influenced the founding of hospitals and the care of the sick. Along with this came a long tradition of medical ethics based on the sacraments and the virtues. Ethical analysis further matured with the contribution of theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas and Francisco de Vitoria.

Many of the codes of medical ethics professed by physicians today were undoubtedly of Christian inspiration, and Catholics have produced very sophisticated manuals on medical ethics up until recently. In fact, if you look at the names of the pioneers in the early days of bioethics, which began in the late 60s in America, a great number of them were clerics or very committed laypersons.

Nonetheless, there has been a struggle since the Enlightenment to cast religion outside all spheres of society. We can certainly see this happening in the areas of culture, science, economics, law, philosophy and education. Ethics and theology were probably the last strongholds until they eventually succumbed as well. Beginning in the 60s and the 70s, a good number of theologians and religious ethicists unwittingly yielded to the secular pressure to conform. The causes of this secularization are complex, but two crucial events will be mentioned: one is the secularization of the academy and the other is the theological debates in this period.

Secularization of the Academy

Many Ivy League universities the likes of Princeton, Yale and Harvard were originally founded by Protestant denominations where religion was fervently practiced and promoted. At the turn of the last century, partly due to economic pressures and partly due to the desire to become *inclusive* in an increasingly plural culture, many of these academies dropped their distinctive Christian features.

Catholic colleges and universities were also affected by this desire to shed themselves of their supposedly *sectarian* image. Thus, many institutions of higher studies became severed from their religious roots. This is still hotly debated today



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among Catholic educators, as witnessed by the question of implementing John Paul II's apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

As most bioethicists were reared in the academic circle, many of them moved along with their institutions down the secular path.

Secularized theology?

It was also an age of theological experiments and controversies. At the turn of the last century, the Protestant denominations were embroiled in the questions of demythologization of the Scripture, Protestant liberalism, the Social Gospel movement, and the *death of God* theologies. Their Catholic counterparts, around the same time, were modernism and semirationalism. In the 60s, all these propositions came to the fore as leading theological currents.

Vatican II sought to address many of these issues as the Church confronted the postmodern era. However, a major incident that greatly impacted the development of moral theology was the contraception controversy, especially with the issuance of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. This encyclical was not well received by many Catholics. Some 600 theologians signed a letter of protest that originated with Father Charles Curran. This definitely undermined the Church's authority in making pronouncements in the areas of morality. As a result of this rejection of official Church teaching, many theologians began to criticize natural-law theory, especially its insistence on objective moral evil and absolute norms.

What came as a result of this discontent has been termed the *new morality*, or proportionalism, which has since then plagued many seminaries and theology departments. This error was specifically addressed by Pope John Paul II in the 1994 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. But the problem persists in many parts of the Church.

Bioethicists affected by secularization

On a historical note, many of the founders of bioethics were disgruntled Christians who defected from the Church structures to found alternative secular bioethical institutes, and in the process marginalized the input of theology. To give a few examples of Catholics who were affected by this: André Hellegers was a gynecologist who sat on the papal birth-control commission established to inform the Pope on the morality of the pill. He was quite disappointed with *Humanae Vitae* and he eventually founded the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown. Daniel Callahan was editor of *Commonweal* magazine but left the religious scene to co-founded the Hastings Center. Both the Kennedy Institute and the Hastings Center were influential in the early years of bioethics. Albert Jonsen, Warren Reich and Daniel Maguire were all former priests turned bioethicists, all of them prominent in the field for their secular orientation.

Another glaring example of the secularizing effects on theologians is the case of Joseph Fletcher. He started writing in the 1950s when the word *bioethics* did not yet exist. In those days, he was an Episcopalian priest, but by the 1980s, Fletcher had left ministry and become a member of the Euthanasia Society. In the end, he advocated not only euthanasia but also non-voluntary sterilization, infanticide,



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eugenic programs, and reproductive cloning. He eventually died a militant atheist.

Bad timing

This happened at a time when society was restless with exciting medical discoveries which brought with them the age-old questions of just distribution, legitimate use of technology and justified manipulation of nature. Around that same time, scandals broke out about horrendous medical experiments being done on patients without their previous knowledge. The public and the government were scrambling to find an ethical framework, but they found traditional ethics and theology deficient to provide the answers because of their internal conflicts. Thus, bioethics was born as a government-sanctioned, objective and non-sectarian discipline based on secular philosophy that can be equally applied in policymaking and at the bedside. However, the consensus it sought was a mirage, as bioethics becomes prone to manipulation by the rich and the powerful. As discontents brewed, new models arose on the horizon, seeking to relocate ethics in the context of the situation or the character of the moral agent. Inadvertently, this puts secular bioethics on the path toward ethical relativism, liberalism and nihilism. Secular bioethics soon became a monster which not only rejects religion but now questions the very possibility of reason itself.

The future of religion in bioethics

Secular bioethics has been deemed inadequate for a lot of right-thinking individuals, especially when some of its devotees justify such preposterous theories as infanticide and eugenics. Moreover, many people are dissatisfied with the inability of contemporary bioethics to address the deeper questions of life, those regarding the human nature, suffering and death, the meaning of health and the ends of medicine.

Meanwhile, religion has been addressing these issues for centuries. Hence, there seems to be a ray of hope for theology to play a more significant role in bioethics debates in the future. However, the challenge remains great. There is a need for theologically trained bioethicists, and this would also imply the need to recuperate sound theological investigations, especially in the religiously inspired academies. Fortunately, it appears that the tide is turning as younger generations of scholars are willing to challenge the dominant secular culture and its relativistic mind-set.

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