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The future of religious bioethics

The future of religious bioethics

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Besides being trained as a physician and holding a doctorate in ancient Greek philosophy, I am a theologian. I studied protestant theology for seven years and I became utterly fascinated by a subject matter Richard Dawkins has tried to ridicule as nothing but a delusion. I do not consider myself a believer. In religious bioethics, however, I have a strong belief. This polemic may thus be read as an agnostisist's attempt at defending religious bioethics. [1]

This brings me first to a question I have addressed to my religious colleagues in academic bioethics. Why do so many religious bio-ethicists behave in their ethical deliberations as hard core secular bioethicists? That, is, why do they so seldom make use of their own conceptual and normative heritage? Throughout the years I have tried to track down an answer to this question, but so far none of my religious colleagues have provided me with anything of substance. In the absence of an insider's answer, I will put on the plate four polemic suggestions for consideration:

- They are afraid of becoming bioethical outsiders.
- They strive to become bioethical mainstreamers.
- They yearn for moral influence.
- They do not trust their own moral heritage.

In short, they have a striking family resemblance with the rest of the players in the field! This brings me, for a second, to a question of a less polemical kind, which I also believe it is important to address: Why is a pluralistic society in need of religious bioethics? Again a set of tentative answers will be put to test:

- A pluralistic society is in need of the voices of religious bioethics to prevail as a pluralist society.
- A pluralistic society is in need of the voices of religious bioethics to learn tolerance: For tolerance to prevail there must be someone or something to challenge aspirations of tolerance.
- A pluralistic society is in need of the voices of religious bioethics to flourish.

Defending religious bioethics makes it, however, also necessary to come up with an explanation of its alleged assets. Here follows a participant observer's observations:

First observation: Religious bioethics presides over a particular sort of narratives, i.e. of man's relation to a god - or in non-monotheistic religions several gods - and the implications of that for man's moral agency in the world. The core narratives of religious bioethics deal with bans, beliefs and beneficence, with doubt and covenants, with empathy as well as with disobedience, disgust and disgrace. In addition, such narratives deal with sacrifice and betrayal, with sanctuaries and sacrilege, with shame and revenge, with guilt and atonement. Finally, the core narratives of religious bioethics deal with miracles and magic, with divine and human forms of suffering, with all sorts of yearning (carnal and spiritual yearning such as sex and hunger, atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation as well as hate, revenge and reprisals). Second observation: Religious bioethics is nurtured by divine absolutes and of command. Third observation: Religious bioethics sanctifies human life. Fourth observation: Religious bioethics is not utopian; it is an ethics for the interim; it is echatological. Fifth observation: Religious bioethics insists on the sacredness as well as the imperfection of (human) life. Sixth observation: Religious bioethics - in particular Christian bioethics? - insists that atonement is a basic motivation for moral action. Seventh observation: Religious bioethics reminds us that humans - also in their moral motivations - are more than rational beings; our beliefs and yearnings, our emotional aspirations, hopes and disgusts are also players in the moral terrain. Eighth observation: Religious bioethics insists on speaking truth to power. Ninth observation: Religious bioethics aims at enhancing the invisible lives of moral strangers. According to the prominent religious bioethicist, Tristram Engelhardt Jr., the term 'moral strangers', identifies individuals who in small or large areas do not share a common concrete religious, moral, or philosophical viewpoint. People meet as moral strangers when

- they have different views regarding the morality of a particular endeavor, such as euthanasia, surrogate motherhood, or justice and health care, and
- have no common "content-full" moral or philosophical framework, which would allow a rational, morally content-full resolution of the controversy at issue.[2]

Tenth observation: Religious bioethics reminds us about the intrinsic opacity of the moral terrain of human deliberation.

Final observation: Religious bioethics provides us with a conceptual, epistemic and normative vocabulary that may prove to be useful in addressing burning bioethical issues of today.

To exemplify my last observation, let us take the case of chimeras. As stated by Insoo Huyn and colleagues, “[c]himeras are organisms containing cells from two or more zygotes or the imperfect equivalents thereof... Scientists widely consider chimera studies to be indispensable for answering fundamental questions in stem cell and developmental biology... Much of the controversy with chimera research reflects uneasiness with crossing what are assumed to be morally inviolable species borders”. [3] It might sound strange in the ears of non-theologians, but Christian theology is in the possession of a very long and noble tradition with regard to the study of chimeric entities, through its most prominent subject field, christology, which is a field of study concerned with the nature of Jesus the Christ, particularly with how divine nature and human nature can co-exist in one person. And it is in fact this study of the inter-relationship of these two natures that is the primary preoccupation of christology. [4] If Christian bioethicists made more effort to make use of their own conceptual heritage in trying to understand contemporary issues in bioethics, it might be that they would end up in coping with the issue of e.g. chimeras in a much more authentic way. That is, in the same way as theologians have done for centuries in relation to the understanding of the double nature of Jesus the Christ, they could try out the epistemic and normative possibilities embedded in the conceptual vocabulary of christology to address the issue of what it morally entails to be a living being of several natures. Thus, by looking back into the conceptual heritage of its own traditions religious bioethics could become an innovative and foresighted – rather than a reactionary – player in the academic field of bioethics.

References

- 1. *The word agnosticism originates from the ancient Greek word γνώσις (gnōsis) = knowledge, with the prefix a- added to it, and represents the philosophical view that the truth value of certain claims - particularly metaphysical claims regarding theology, afterlife or the existence of God, gods, deities, or even ultimate reality - is unknown or, inherently unknowable.*
- 2. Engelhardt Jr, HT, *Bioethics and secular humanism. The search for a common morality*, London 1991.
- 3. Huyn I et al., *Cell Stem Cell* 1, August 2007, p. 161.
- 4. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christology>.

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