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# The Ethical Foundations of Bioethics

by

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The title may suggest either something superfluous or something outright ominous. If bioethics means simply ethics with an application to life phenomena, then it is superfluous to talk of its ethical foundations. But if bioethics means something else, then one faces something ominous, which is more than a mere possibility. For the fact is that bioethics, as widely understood nowadays, is without foundations worth being called ethical.

Ethics has always been about life and nowhere is life more deeply involved than in questions that form the chief topics in bioethics. It is a very new field, in more than one way. In commenting on the establishment of the Hastings Center a mere twenty-five years ago, its retiring founder-president, Willard Gaylin, noted the disbelief prevailing at that time that "there was such a thing as bioethics."<sup>1</sup> But the real novelty is that most of those who since then have been writing on the subject have in mind a very novel form of ethics. Comparing it with ethics as generally understood until very recent times, one is faced with a frightening alternative: Either that "old" ethics was a delusion, or the ethics that parades in the form of bioethics is an ethics in name only, a cover-up for something else.

The old ethics can easily be identified both in its conceptual structure and in its historical reality. As a conceptual structure it is a set of principles involving the categorical assertion that there is an inherent difference between what is morally good and what is morally evil; further, that man is able to know that difference; that he is able to know that the difference is not of his own making but inherent in a human nature in whose production the Creator is specifically involved; that therefore man is not his own master; that man, in feeling remorse for acting against what is morally good, senses a breakdown of his relation to his only master who is God; that there is a moral retribution that has an eternal perspective; that this eternal perspective makes no sense unless the end of man's physical life is not the end of his personal ethical existence; that partly because of

his moral consciousness man has a nature that has inalienable rights and responsibilities because its core is strictly spiritual.

Even a cursory look at such a set of propositions can establish two important points about them individually and as a set. One is that all those principles are purely rational propositions and as such can be declared, developed, and debated by mere reliance on the powers of reason. The other concerns the historical matrix within which those propositions obtained their historical or cultural reality. Those propositions were first held and are still held as a set only within a genuinely Christian context. This fact distinguished Christianity, from its very start, not only from the pagan world but also from Judaism. While the pharisees, or the "orthodox" Jews of Jesus' time, believed in resurrection, subsequent Orthodox Jewish theology failed to develop a firm doctrine about the immortality of the soul. Even today, Orthodox Jewish theology shies away from the doctrine of the soul's immortality, with obvious consequences for framing its ethical propositions. As to liberal Judaism, usually connected nowadays with Conservative and especially with Reform Judaism, its set of ethical principles is very different from the set outlined above, especially in questions of bioethics.

That Christian context or matrix of ethics arose because the earliest Christians looked upon a series of historical events — the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ — as God's most remarkable supernatural intervention in human history. Those events, together with the words of Jesus, as quickly codified in the Gospels, carried an ethical message some of which could readily be translated into the set of ethical principles listed above. Jesus clearly assumed that his listeners could distinguish between the morally good and the morally evil, that they held that difference to be absolute, that the difference had been established by God, that there was a divine retribution that both as a reward and a punishment had two characteristics: it transcended all human imagination (eyes have not seen, ears have not heard . . . ), and it was eternal, in the form either of heaven or hell.

The minds and consciences of those to whom Jesus preached had been formed by the Old Testament tradition, itself steeped in a sequence of historical events. Suffice it to mention the phrasing and promulgation of the Ten Commandments, which, let it be noted in passing, are in some essentials very different from, and in general far superior to (in clarity, conciseness, and depth) the Code of Hamurabi. Further, an implicitly eternal perspective was emphasized in the Mosaic warning that a choice between life and death was involved.

Undoubtedly Jesus' listeners were far better prepared for his ethical message than were the pagans to whom Paul preached. Yet the first chapter to the Romans is a classic proof that Paul could readily assume a broad moral agreement on the part of pagans on a number of crucial points. He could assume that pagans knew that a variety of human acts were inherently sinful, that it was possible to avoid them, and that there was a divine sanction connected with moral rules witnessed by their conscience.

Still, Paul also knew that reference to the deeds and words of Jesus carried a far greater persuasive force than did all general ethical propositions, however valid, aimed at man's natural moral conscience. Christian morality and moral



consciousness was, from the start, riveted in the historical facts of Jesus' words insofar as they had been most intimately connected with and strengthened by his miracles, death and resurrection. In preaching to King Agrippa, Paul could see before his very eyes the dramatic manner in which the moral bearing of Christ's resurrection unfolded itself. King Agrippa listened to him with pure intellectual curiosity until the resurrection of Jesus came up. Then the king quickly cut Paul short, lest he would be forced to become a Christian. Conversion to Christianity has always been much more a matter of moral change than a purely intellectual shift of perspectives.

Owing to various historical factors, the Christian notion of ethics began to dominate the Western World from the time of Charlemagne on. The domination was well-nigh complete during the High Middle Ages. In those centuries practically no intellectual could come forth with a praise of evil men, let alone with a justification of evil immoral acts. The praise of evil acts, at least in the form of novels and bawdy poetry, became noticeable only from the fifteenth century on. A major instance of this is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* where, time and again one is faced with laughter over various forms of immoral behavior, although lamentation would have been the response only a hundred or so years earlier. There is nothing "comic" in Dante's *Divine Comedy* in spite of the poet's graphic references to human frailty.

Moral depravity in the Catholic clergy, and the clergy's heavy reliance on the material benefits of landed property, could but further undermine the domination of Christian ethics. It is no accident that the Franciscan Reform movement centered on the crucial moral role of voluntary personal poverty and on the resolve that even the religious community should not have possessions, especially landed property. Catholic reform movements of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries could cope with relative ease with purely personal sins, but they were hampered by the unethical ballast of what would be called today the various forms of real estate.

The Protestant Reformation was, from its very start, compromised by the pressure of opportunities, that is, the opportunities to get rich on the spoils of confiscated ecclesiastical property. Emphasis on personal freedom of conscience led to such a sudden and spectacular rise of immorality in German lands as to make the old Luther wish that he had never started with his work. Luther did not suspect that four hundred years later a large segment of Protestantism would thematically hold sets of ethical principles that roundly contradict the ones included in the set outlined above. It is a set which, as was emphasized, arose, developed and flourished within the Christian supernatural matrix, that is, in close attention to the great historical facts and events embodied in the very supernatural life of Jesus. In the measure in which the Western World, both in Protestant and in Catholic lands, began to doubt those facts, its morality too became the subject of wholesale doubting.

About this rather painful development within Protestantism it may be useful to recall a few details, so that one may better understand the true physiognomy of bioethics. Insofar as that physiognomy is naturalistic, it owes much to the shift toward naturalism. The latter had been registered in a number of ways. Here I



should like to recall a telling incident. Although I am the only witness, its instructiveness should be very broad. It involves a very prominent Protestant theologian as he and I were discussing questions of ecumenics about twenty years ago. Suddenly, he sighed and said: "Protestantism logically leads to naturalism."

The naturalism in question can take on astonishing forms. Thus one American Protestant theologian defended, in my presence, not only abortion but an unrestricted right to abortion on the ground that in America the Gospel of Jesus Christ must conform to the spirit of individual liberty laid down in the Constitution. Obviously, in the process the Gospel is reduced to the level of the so-called Social Gospel, a purely natural commodity. Naturalism is less obviously present in the remark of a great Protestant moral theologian whom everybody holds to be on the conservative side. A few months before his death, he told me in the presence of two other no less prominent colleagues of his: "The true church is where you feel comfortable." This is the kind of not-too-subtle subjectivism that has always been the principal source of a naturalism that readily accommodates the latest urges and comforts of nature.

It was to this development within Protestantism that Cardinal Willebrands drew, in a significant context, a still not sufficiently registered attention. Had Cardinal Willebrands not been known as a most generous Catholic ecumenist, he would not have been invited to give a lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary, a stronghold of American Calvinism. The year was 1972, the height of ecumenical expectations. He was listened to with rapt attention but there was a moment during his speech when one could almost hear a pin drop. This came after he had noted that some progress had been made in lessening some of the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants. But, he continued, at the same time a new sort of difference was arising between Catholics and Protestants, a difference turning more and more into a chasm. It was about matters ethical. There is indeed today a chasm, which looks unbridgeable, between Catholic moral doctrines and the moral doctrines widely entertained in liberal Protestant circles, usually referred to as the mainline Protestant Churches: Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist.

These Churches saw a great many defections during the last twenty years. Some of them lost more than half their membership. The president of Princeton Theological Seminary calculated that if the rate of defection continues, there will be no Presbyterians left by 2015 in the United States. Where did those go who defected? Some of them gave up altogether their Christian faith. Some others joined fundamentalist churches, which appear, I may add, with increasing frequency even in Hungary. A year or so ago, a prominent Hungarian Reformed theologian drove me by one such newly constructed church in Debrecen, the Calvinist Rome in Hungary. He was not happy at all. Nor was I, but for reasons not entirely identical with his. At any rate, although many of those fundamentalists are very serious about Christian ethics, it is impossible to engage in any meaningful conversation with them.

Still another part of those who defected are swelling the ranks of the so-called Evangelicals. Evangelical Christians want to keep much of traditional doctrine, especially the sense of the supernatural. They rightly insist that it is by keeping the



right morals that one becomes above all a true follower of Christ. Their chief objection to the mainline Protestant churches relates to the various compromises that have been made there in matters of morality. In fact, the Evangelicals think that the real problem with mainline Protestant churches is that the reformers tried to keep something of the Catholic ecclesiastical structure. Consequently, the Evangelicals do their best to remain, as a body, as different from a church as possible. Their local congregations form only very loose, very informal ties with one another. But because they have so high a regard for traditional Christian ethics and because they want to preserve the supernatural, Evangelicals are looking with increasing sympathy toward the Catholic Church. In fact, in order to stem the tide of rampant immorality in the United States, Evangelicals have recently proposed that they and the Catholic Church form a common front. Part of that proposal contains their explicit admission that the Holy Spirit has been working in the Roman Catholic Church. The significance of that admission cannot be emphasized enough.

Obviously, if one has kept any supernatural sensitivity, only something supernatural can be seen in the firmness with which the Catholic Church maintains its doctrine in morals, against huge social, cultural, and political pressures. In addition to the official Catholic doctrine, there are a great many Catholics, clergy and laity, who hold fast to that moral doctrine. They do so inasmuch as they see in the Church the Pillar of Truth. Not surprisingly, the many Catholics who search for compromises in bioethics cannot help fomenting dissent from the voice of the Magisterium. This is why the latest encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, has one unique distinction among its various well-nigh unique features.

*Veritatis Splendor* is perhaps the longest of all the encyclicals in their entire history of a little over two hundred years. It is also the most meditative. Most of its pages cannot be read without gaining the impression that one is being given a most evangelical set of instructions, arguments, exhortations and reflections. Length does not, of course, necessarily make an essential difference. Meditative, exhortative paragraphs and copious references to the Gospels are not absent in other encyclicals. But no other encyclical contains the admission that in matters of moral teaching there is a widespread dissent within the Catholic church, a dissent that goes far beyond the ranks of professors of moral theology. In fact the Pope himself introduces the registering of that dissent with the words that it is a "new situation . . . within the Christian community itself; . . . it is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional doctrine."<sup>2</sup>

The chief form of dissent is consequentialism, or the doctrine that the ethical goodness of an action should be evaluated in terms of the entire impact of the action on the individual's pursuit of happy and virtuous living. Such a pursuit can indeed serve as the basis of moral happiness and even of a genuine ethical philosophy. Much of Aristotle's ethical teaching about that pursuit could be taken over by Thomas Aquinas. But Aquinas also emphasized that supernatural perfection, virtue, and happiness constitute a much higher norm and impose new constraints with far greater force than can be the case with a purely natural ethics.



Consequentialism cannot indeed be shown to be different from Benthamist utilitarianism. There the weighing of the respective amounts of pleasure and pain constitute the foundation of purely natural ethical considerations. But just as Bentham could not give tangible forms in which his "felicific calculus" should operate, champions of consequentialism too have been unable to specify what consequence should weigh more or weigh less. In consequentialism, it is the individual's personal wish that carries the chief weight in what he allows himself.

And this is precisely where modern secular ethical considerations have stood for some time. Kant's categorical imperative, with its absolutely binding rules, carries little conviction today. The same is true of the efforts of the deists who never really invoked their distant God as the sanction of man's absolute ethical duties. Today very few in number are those ethical theorists who follow G.E. Moore's intuitionist ethics according to which man has an innate intuitive perception of what is ethically good in an objective and universally valid sense.

That ethical norms are purely subjective and/or culturally and socially conditioned has for some time been the prevailing view on ethics. This view found support in widely differing trends and ideologies, such as Darwinism, Marxism, comparative cultural studies, Freudian psychoanalysis, existentialism, deconstructionism. To say with Marx that moral and religious norms are but "phantoms formed in the human brain" or "sublimates of their material life processes"<sup>3</sup> is not much ruder than the claim of the logical-positivist, A. J. Ayer, that since moral arguments cannot be scientifically verified they are nothing more than "ejaculations or commands," so many "pure expressions of feeling that have no objective validity whatsoever."<sup>4</sup>

Freud's claim that moral conscience is but an internalized fear of losing the love of one's parents<sup>5</sup> yields no more objectivity than the claim of William G. Sumner, a famous cultural anthropologist around 1900, that "the mores can make anything right."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this is what behaviorists such as J. B. Watson had in mind in claiming that by scientifically controlling someone's mores or behavior anybody can be turned either into a saint or into a profligate.<sup>7</sup> Sartre drew the full logic of his existentialism in stating that since God does not exist "there is no human nature" and "so man cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself."<sup>8</sup> According to Richard Rorty, regarded by some as the most influential philosopher today in America, there is no "core-self" or an inherently human quality. Therefore no action is inherently inhuman, be it as abhorrent as the course of action connected with Auschwitz. If Rorty abhors the holocaust, it is only because history and circumstance supplied him with certain beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

There are, of course, some ethicists within the secular context who plead the truth of an ethics with universally valid objective norms. A rather recent case is the impressive effort of James Q. Wilson. In his book *The Moral Sense* he shows that empirical research can demonstrate that there is a universal moral consensus outside the relatively small circle of intellectuals (a circle which, I would add, includes the much larger number of media people). Outside those circles, Wilson argues, people are led by habits that remarkably survive and outlive changing intellectual and cultural fads. Furthermore, he also shows that the principal



source of moral consciousness for modern times has been the Church's teaching, legislation, and education about marriage and family life. Although not a Catholic, and possibly not a Protestant, Wilson even calls attention to the immensely formative force of the example set by the Church's constant preaching about a family that consisted of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.<sup>10</sup> For, according to Wilson, it is within the family that a human being's social sense is developed, which in turn is the matrix of the adolescent's and adult's moral awareness. Wilson's thesis is confirmed by the much higher proportion of criminals who grew up without the guiding hand of a father. Such is at least the case in the United States where two-thirds of black children and one-third of white children are now born out of wedlock.

Valuable as such conclusions and observations are, they hardly make a dent on the fully relativistic moral atmosphere of educated circles, and of most of those, such as the media people, who set the tone of public discourse about morality. That tone is profoundly subjectivist, pragmatist, hedonist, and relativist, some apparently selfless statements notwithstanding. It is that tone which is a chief characteristic of most of those scientists who are responsible for the creation of molecular biology which in turn gave rise to bioethics, or the new-fangled ethical concern about life.

The creation in question deserves to be called the *Eighth-Day of Creation*.<sup>11</sup> Owing to the discovery of the double-helix structure of chromosomes and of recombinant DNA, molecular biologists have quickly become aware of their ability to re-create human beings, shape them at will, and take in hand the course of man's evolution. Once on that course, anything can be made to order, We are, indeed, already on that course. In only twenty years, man reached the point where the cloning of any individual is not only possible but also feasible and indeed is under way. Preservation of human semen is done on a vast commercial basis. The grafting of the brain or head of a monkey onto another is done openly in some laboratories as a preliminary to attempts to graft a human head onto another human body. Compared with the ethical problems created along these lines, the importation and exportation of brain tissues taken from live human embryos should seem bordering on innocence, gravely unethical as it may appear within the old ethics, though not at all within the new bioethics.

Only a few among leading molecular biologists would hold with Erwin Chargaff that while they are free to harm themselves, they are not free ethically to inflict on others "one iota of danger."<sup>12</sup> No greater is the number of those microbiologists who changed heart, as did Robert Sinsheimer, about the unlimited freedom of scientific research. No longer is it enough, Sinsheimer told the Genetic Society of America in 1975, "to wave the flag of Galileo."<sup>13</sup> That flag is being waved by all those molecular biologists who hold what Chargaff called the Devil's Principle: "Whatever can be done, must be done."<sup>14</sup> That principle had already been obeyed when scientists went ahead with the construction of the atomic bomb on the ground that it was merely superb physics and that after all it was, to quote Oppenheimer's defense of it, a technically sweet project. Laboratories of molecular biology are full of the scent of that sweetness, reminiscent of the fragrance of heroin dispensed to lull ethical sensibilities.



And how about doctors on whom it ultimately depends whether or not the various feats of molecular biology will be applied on patients? Most of them are in agreement with the reasoning one finds in the chapter on abortion in the book *When Doctors Disagree*, a book first published in 1973. In recalling the opposition of some 300 gynecologist-consultants to the British Abortion act, the author finds it strange that a mere 300 should prevail over 15,000 general practitioners and 30 million Britons who want abortion when in need of it. This turning of morality into an opinion poll is sad enough, but even more so is the consciousness with which it is done. On the one hand, the author, Dr. Louis Goldman, claims that the "ultimate ethical sanction lies in the moral sense of the community." At the same time he admits that modern society "may be a sick society," but only to disclaim even the small measure of moral sanity implied in that admission. For his parting shot is a warning that holding on to what may be the healthy or sane ethical view could be equivalent to practicing "the sin of ethical pride, one of the deadly virtues."<sup>15</sup>

Any religious person who shies away from virtue because it may trap him in the sin of spiritual pride is spiritually sick. A society that is so sick as to turn away from the specter of health is in a worse condition than that old pagan society that Paul and other Christians had to confront. No reasoning can be worse than that which U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun gave in explaining why there should be no death penalty: "It seems that the decision whether a human being should live or die is so inherently subjective — rife with all of life's understanding, experiences, prejudices, and passions — that it inevitably defies the rationality and consistency required by the Constitution."<sup>16</sup> In other words, Blackmun claimed that reason or logic or clarity should not be obeyed, because man can sometimes think and act confusedly if not irrationally. But confusion is supported even when recognized as confusion. A case in point is the decision in August 1993 of the New Jersey Supreme Court about a patently absurd adoption ruling. "We cannot continue to pretend," Judge Phillip M. Fredman said in support of his ruling, "that there is one formula, one correct pattern that should constitute a family in order to achieve the supportive, loving environment we believe children should inhabit."<sup>17</sup>

In other words, since modern society has no generally shared ethical principles, the personal wish of anyone should be given as much leeway as possible. This is the argument that supported the criticism in the *The New York Times* of the unanimous conclusion of a panel set up by Governor Cuomo to advise him on ethical matters. The panel unanimously urged the governor to oppose doctor-assisted suicides. But that very influential newspaper quoted without criticism the assertion of the president of the Hemlock (pro-suicide) Society that the panel cannot reverse the groundswell of public support for doctor-assisted suicide.<sup>18</sup> This groundswell is driven by the wish that the law should support in every possible way what the individual sees fit for his self-fulfillment. The very latest and almost macabre case relates to the removal of the sperm from a brain-dead man so that his young widow may be impregnated with it a year from now and have a child. The approval of the deceased young man's mother speaks for itself: "My son loved Pam (the wife) and he loved children. This is what he would have wanted."<sup>19</sup> The Romans of old had a phrase for this:



*stet pro ratione voluntas.*

Our modern society is the first in history that tries to base morality either on personal wishes or on opinion polls. And this is the kind of morality society wants to hear from a new professional group, called medical ethicists or bioethicists. They readily comply, because compliance assures their professional prosperity. Twenty years ago they numbered only a few hundred. Today, in the United States, there are several thousands of them. No hospital, no medical school, no clinic is without one or two. No university is now without a course or two on medical ethics, taught by these ethicists. They can indeed go so far in pleading the cause of ethical relativism as to openly warn, as did two ethicists from the medical ethics program of the University of Wisconsin Medical School in the pages of the *New York Times*, that "an ethicist is no more capable than any random person selected from the phone book to render judgements on the morality of a particular novel procedure such as fetal ovarian transplant. All that bioethicists can offer is a somewhat less politically or emotionally charged, somewhat more dispassionate evaluation of our options." In line with this they recommended to their fellow ethicists that they should never give their personal opinions on anything. Otherwise, the ethicist profession may turn into a "self-appointed, secular version of the Committee for the Defense of the Faith."<sup>20</sup>

If ethicists are, then, supposed to avoid even the semblance of endorsing statements that are objectively and universally valid, what shall they teach? The answer is simple: they will teach the verbal art of avoiding ethical issues while profusely using ethical terms. A professor of medical ethics at a big American University told me that in discussing any case with young doctors, he carefully avoids pushing the discussion to the point where questions about absolute moral good and evil would arise. Only a month ago a long report was published about a newly appointed head of the department of medical ethics at the University of Pennsylvania. Halfway through the interview the reporter, on seeing that the ethicist had no moral agenda, asked: "With no moral agenda, don't you have trouble explaining to people where you stand?" The ethicist replied that he was an "outcome-oriented pragmatist." As such he saw it as his task to establish "what a patient and a doctor want to achieve, and *then* ask what values and principles are needed to get them there."<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, this was an ill-disguised admission that it was the business of bioethics to justify anything the patient and/or the doctor wanted. And the reporter fully sensed this implication as he came back with his next question: "Other medical disciplines have strict protocols. Why is [bio]ethics different?" The answer to this question had already been implied in the ethicist's self-characterization that he was a "bubble-up" ethicist. He wanted thereby to set himself apart from "trickle down" ethicists,<sup>22</sup> namely, those who start from a general principle and apply it to particular cases, as had always been the case in any ethical system respectful of the difference between what is morally good and what is morally evil. In order to give scientific "respectability" to his procedure he argued that there was no need to master the unified field theory in order to launch a space shuttle or to repair a sewer line.

This apparently clever argument merely covered up a fallacy. While one could



argue that not even Werner von Braun needed to know unified field theory, nevertheless the space shuttle would get off the ground only if the practical engineering were in accord with the basic universal principles of true physics, be that physics the unified field theory or not. Disregard of this connection is a celebration of fallacy. Discourses of bioethicists are typically full of these types of fallacies. That reporters can see through the verbal acrobatics of ethicists makes one wonder why an ethicist does not smile on hearing another ethicist hand down his dark words of wisdom. They do not seem, indeed, to be any better than the haruspices of Roman times, about whom Cicero recalled Cato's wonderment as to how they could refrain from laughing when seeing one another.

So much in way of illustration of the conclusion toward which we have been heading, namely, that bioethics, as practiced and articulated nowadays, is without ethical foundations properly so called. What makes this situation far worse is that Christian ecumenical gatherings on bioethics are time and again productive of the same kind of fog and nebulosity that characterizes the discourses of secular ethicists. And as soon as a clear-cut affirmation is made of age-old Christian ethical norms and conclusions on particular, specific issues, it is classified as a purely confessional or denominational matter. Is not this the theological equivalent of the tactic whereby the category of truth versus error is avoided by a convenient recourse to the categories of conservative versus liberal, traditional versus progressive, or to take our case, dogmatic versus ecumenical?

In this process nothing remains safe, not even God's historic Covenant with man, the only really reliable source of the clear-cut positions of Christian ethics. The absolute validity of those positions is indeed dismissed in the recently published *Theological Voices in Medical Ethics*<sup>23</sup> through the method of labeling them "covenantal." What is implied here is the suggestion that a Christian is free to be "Covenantal" or not, or that he has at least some latitude concerning the measure in which he is basing his moral theology on the Covenant of God with man. There is no such freedom. This is precisely a principal point made in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. Indeed, its most persuasive and most inspirational aspect is its covenantal character. Throughout the encyclical the Pope reminds us that there is a Covenant between God and man and that it cannot be reinvented again.

That Covenant culminates in the Church insofar as the Church is the Pillar of Truth, to recall Paul's words to Timothy. And if the Church is such a pillar, it has to be so in matters ethical and bioethical as well. Truth is indivisible. While in matters of dogma it is possible to take cover in endless conceptual refinements and to celebrate ecumenism, in matters of ethics this tactic is not possible, for a very simple reason. Ethical matters, especially matters of bioethics, cut into one's flesh and blood. But even in dogma there are limits. One can argue at length about the validity of this or that form of ordination. But in doing the ordination only that form can be chosen which is undoubtedly valid. And even more relevant is this distinction when it comes to moral questions. There the moment of action all too often cannot be delayed. And an action that kills does not cease to be plain killing if one thinks at length about it after it has been completed.

Here the latitudes of ecumenism are rapidly narrowing, as has been made all



too clear by the establishment of a new Pontifical Academy for bioethics. Only those can be members who unequivocally state their agreement with the Church's teaching on contraception, abortion, and euthanasia. Obviously, it is realized that there is no point in wasting time to re-argue the basics until doomsday comes. Unfortunately, that doomsday may be much closer than we suspect. Western society is approaching the point where it can no longer keep a police force sufficiently large to contain the rapid growth of crime. A society which no longer believes in angels, those touchstones of genuine belief in the supernatural, has now to face the dire consequence: Our society can no longer logically demand that its policeman, or doctors, or lawyers (let alone its politicians) behave like angels.

We Christians have a very limited measure in opposing this trend. The paginization of modern society grows by leaps and bounds. This acceleration is but the latest phase of a process that started two centuries ago, the secularization of Western culture. Who is responsible for it? Of course, the Enemy should not be forgotten. He keeps sowing the cockles until the end of time. Still, we Christians have a share of responsibility in that de-christianization.

Nobody may have specified the source of that share better than a non-Christian thinker of our times. I mean the non-religious Jewish philosopher, Hannah Arendt. In her book *The Human Condition* she speaks of the Cartesian *dubito* as the starting point of that secularization. But she also says that it was relatively harmless as long as it remained in the hands of professional atheists whose arguments "all too often were vulgar and easily refutable by traditional theology." The Cartesian *dubito*, she says, become disastrously effective only when it was grafted onto religious philosophy by Pascal and Kierkegaard, whom she calls "the two greatest religious thinkers of modernity."<sup>24</sup>

Whatever the truth of Arendt's evaluation of Pascal's influence, Kierkegaard certainly fueled a trend, however well-intentioned, towards subjectivism and thus away from the objectively supernatural. Arendt perceived this connection at least to the extent of adding that modern secularism is the fruit of "the doubting concern with salvation of genuinely religious men, in whose eyes the traditional Christian content and promise had become 'absurd'."<sup>25</sup> Much of the new theology is replete with at least covert references to the absurdity of traditional positions. No wonder that the new theology is notably impotent in coping with the thorough lack of ethics in the new bioethics. That void cannot be replenished except through traditional adherence to that Christ in whom God's fullness was made evident to man. The greater the number of Christians who immerse themselves in that fullness, the greater will be their shared confidence that they will stand firm while the horrible storms of bioethics blow wildly through society. But it is precisely tradition, or the lesson of history, that has made all too clear where that firmness is concretely anchored. None other than the "Pauline" Paul described it to Timothy as the Pillar of Truth, which, since he meant by this the visible Church, had to be its very "Petrine" form. Indeed, it alone of all Church-forms has a bioethics with truly ethical foundations.



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17. *The New York Times*, Aug. 11, 1993, p. B5.
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19. *The New York Times*, June 5, 1994, p. 34.
20. *The New York Times*, Jan. 14, 1994, p. A28.
21. Quotations are from p. 78 in Andrew Costello's report about Arthur Caplan in *Philadelphia*, March 1994, pp. 74-83, a report which, as if to make the irony complete, has the title "The Thinker."
22. Ibid
23. *Theological Voices in Medical Ethics*, ed. A. Verhey and S. E. Lammers (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), is a publication connected with the Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics.
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