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Consistent Bioethics and Christian Consistency

by

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The joining of the words, bios and ethics, into bioethics may seem superfluous. Can there be, one may ask, an ethics which is not about life or bios? Bioethics is on its way to be a kind of ethics which is more about success in manipulating life than about life itself. In the process, bioethics compromises its claim to being a science, that is, a consistent reasoning.

The process is already parading on the front page of major newspapers. A case in point is the triple headline in the November 26, 1992, issue of the *New York Times*. The first headline was about "success in using fetal tissue to repair a brain" impaired by Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Huntington's disease. The second was about "hopeful breakthrough". The words "success" and "hopeful breakthrough" served to mollify those relatively few who may have had ethical reservations about success as an ethical justification. Indeed the third headline claimed that the "technique could benefit those with degenerative diseases and alter ethical debate."

Throughout the report, which covered more than half a page, the word ethical has not occurred even once. But there was no shortage of references to scientists who described the technique as "feasible" and the results as "spectacular" or "dramatic" that fulfill an "almost excessive promise." This repeated emphasis on success was to oppose doubts that might arise about the ethical character of the procedure. Everything was done to de-emphasize the cost, about thirty thousand dollars per patient, of the successful operation. The smallest factor in that cost was the price of embryos. Fetal tissues are very cheap in a land where over two million or more abortions have been performed every year for the last thirty or so years.

Still, as little as possible was to be said about the fact that in each case one needed "multiple abortions to be scheduled within hours of the five-hour fetal implant operation." Dwelling on this and similar details of the procedure might have, of course, increased the number of those relatively few who on grounds

other than religious oppose abortion. In Western democracies by far the largest number of those who oppose abortion or hold the sanctity of human life as a basic bioethical principle come from religious groups — non-liberal Christians and orthodox Jews. But they are not supposed to speak of their religious reasons in public and in legislative debates. The assumption is that such reasons are not rational.

This separation of the religious from the rational, or in our case, the religious from the ethical, has many illustrations. A most interesting example was provided by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister of the late John F. Kennedy. She protested against those who referred to her brother as one who would have opposed the anti-abortion stance of Catholic bishops in the United States. She insisted that her brother firmly endorsed the right of anyone to free speech. She also claimed that her brother had a positive and comprehensive view on human life and fetuses and that this interest reflected his moral values.

Without specifying what that comprehensive view and those moral values were, or what was their source, Eunice Kennedy Shriver held them to be different from her brother's religious views and values. She asked in the same breath: "Do we not understand that religious beliefs and moral values are not the same?" A fearsome question, hiding a fearful misunderstanding. In Eunice Kennedy Shriver's case that misunderstanding produced the statement that while respect for human life from its inception is a moral value, it is "not a religious doctrine like belief in the virgin birth, or even the sacredness of Jesus." (Letter to the editor, *New York Times*, May 13, 1990, p. 18). She obviously thought that only those propositions are religious that one can only know through revelation.

She seemed to forget that in the context of biblical revelation not a few propositions are offered that can also be known by mere reason. There is no need for revelation to know that killing is a seriously immoral act. Does this mean that the fifth commandment is merely an ethical truth and not also a religious truth? The same could be said about theft and lies.

In modern democracies the separation between religious beliefs and moral values is now being pushed to the extreme. In the process, morality, or ethics, is becoming a mere cover-up for something else. That something else is the taking of statistical patterns of behavior for ethical norms. But when any such pattern is allowed to parade as a norm, no norms will be left. The result is a march into the marshlands of ethical relativism. There bioethics ceases to be a science, that is, a consistent discourse about ethics.

The relativistic view of ethics has received a notable endorsement in a recent book by Laurence H. Tribe, professor of constitutional law at Harvard University. Already, the title of his book, *The Clash of Absolutes*, indicates this relativist approach. It is, of course, true that both the pro-abortionist and the anti-abortionist sides hold their respective positions as absolute truths. Professor Tribe, a staunch advocate of the right to abortion, resolved this conflict by redefining the absolute: "Absolutes themselves may be contingent; they arise out of particular social contexts, problems, and concerns that change as society changes."

The claim that "absolutes may be contingent" is a perfect case of what George Orwell called "doublespeak." We know whom he had in mind. Their Hungarian victims would, however, be wrong in thinking that their now liberated language

is always on high moral ground. About many a statement concerning bioethics, now current in Hungary, one could say what George Orwell said in 1947 in an essay about "Politics and the English Language": "One ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language . . . Political language — and this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists — is designed to make lies sound truthful, and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

This is what has been happening for some time in secularist bioethics. It is ruled by the consideration that the majority is morally right, which, of course, is no more than to claim that statistics is the supreme moral principle. Proponents of that bioethics also hold as supreme principle the quality of life, without ever giving a specific definition of what is meant by that quality. Clearly, it cannot mean a perfectly or even essentially healthy life. In that case most mankind would lose its right to live.

If absolutes are contingent, it makes no sense to think about bioethics as a consistent field of inquiry. In other words, any society which lives by the rule that it is free to change its moral philosophy, has no right to a bioethics based on unchangeable propositions. Therefore modern democratic society will have to settle with a bioethics that can be rewritten, at least in part, with every new progress in scientific success. Legalization of success will then be a routine matter for a new parliament or for another referendum. Such a society can claim consistency only by being consistent in not claiming it.

Bioethics as a truly consistent science can only be had on two conditions: One is the stating of a set of propositions that are absolutely valid. Such are propositions that cannot be reduced to any other propositions. Among such principles are the sanctity of the human individual and that such an individual is not emerging slowly from embryonic development but is present there from the very start of that development. Scientific arguments, taken from genetics, may help in this respect, but they will not clinch the argument.

It should be enough to think of most specialists of Hox genes. In the report about their recent biennial meeting none of them was quoted as seeing a proof of the sanctity of the individual in the marvelous effectiveness of those genes in the earliest phases of human embryonic development. Yet some of them saw in the operation of the Hox genes a replica of the old Aristotelian theory that the male sperm carries within it a homunculus, a miniature but fully formed man, only to grow to full size in the womb. In fact some of them even saw a strange parallel between the Hox genes and the homunculus Jesus often drawn within the light beam that carries, in Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation, the message from the Archangel Gabriel to Mary. (See report in *New York Times*, Feb. 23, 1993, pp. C1 and C9).

This, of course, may lead immediately to the second part of the title of this presentation, Christian consistency. Such a consistency has something to do with Christ, to say the least. He indeed laid down some very stark principles of consistency for his followers. Suffice it to think of his words about the impossibility to serve two masters. Or his warning that anyone who had already put his hand on the plow must not look backward. Or his comparison of the

Kingdom of God with the precious pearl for which one had to sell all that one possessed. Or his request that one should part with one's own eyes and hands if they prevented one from entering the Kingdom of God. Or his warning that his followers should be consistent to the point of being ready to take up their cross every day. And by that cross he did not mean some little daily inconvenience but the most cruel form of execution ever devised by man.

There should be much food for thought in these statements of Christ for Christians who think that while moral compromise is not possible in general, it is possible in some bioethical matters. Christ was certainly most compassionate but never to the point of compromising, that is, to being inconsistent with any principle laid down by him. He did not hint that some lasting profit still could accrue to the one who gained the whole world but in the process lost his very soul. Unless one takes these words at face value, one will side with those who have been conducting a campaign of vituperation against John Paul II, following the release of his letter to the Catholic archbishop of Sarajevo, dated February 2, 1993. The Polish pope urged that victims of rape who are about to give birth to unwanted babies be supported with full Christian love. Indirectly the pope voiced a consistent view of the unconditional moral evil of abortion.

The charge against the pope is that he has no compassion. But once compassion is set as a supreme standard one is left speechless in reference to that mother, daughter, and their doctor in America — all Christians of Polish descent — who were the first to carry out a new experiment in bioethics. It consisted in implanting the married daughter's fertilized ovum in her mother's womb so that the daughter, with a defective uterus, might have the fulfillment of becoming a mother. Together with their doctor, they invoked the principle of Christian compassion.

False appeal to Christian compassion can be made not only by individuals but also by large Christian denominations. A case in point is the decision made in early September 1991 by the General Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, with more than five million members. Its monumental exercise in inconsistency took place in reference to abortion, an exercise approved by 905 of the delegates as against 70. On the one hand, the General Assembly declared that "Human life in all phases of its development is God-given and, therefore, has intrinsic value." But the Assembly also endorsed abortion "as an option of last resort." To tie these two irreconcilable statements together the Assembly had to resort to an ambiguous use of the word "presumption." According to the same declaration "the strong Christian presumption is to preserve and protect life." But do we, Christians, have a Christ-given freedom to barter principles for presumptions, and lose consistency in the process? Would not this be the worst kind of presumption to be made by a Christian?

This dawned on a doctor who became a pastor in a fundamentalist Christian Church, again in America. All of a sudden he stopped performing abortions. Then he was approached by a woman with circulatory problems who had already had one stillbirth, but gave up the use of contraceptive drugs and became pregnant again. She now asked the doctor to perform an abortion. He refused. He said that before he had become a pastor, he might have done it. "My

circumstance have changed and I have tremendous responsibility in the church . . . Saying 'no' was very difficult in some sense. But in another sense, it was easier because my decision was made for me." (*New York Times*, Sept. 8, 1991). He obviously meant that Christ has already decided for him. It was another matter whether the doctor's endorsement of contraceptive practice as a "conscientious use of birth control" was consistent with that decision of Christ and with the sign in the doctor's office that Life Is Sacred.

All this illustrates that even within Christian ranks there is still an awful lot to do toward a consistent bioethics. Outside Christian ranks bioethics is already governed by opportunism. Every new offering is convenient. Such a bioethics is a caterer to expediency. To make matters worse, the legislative implementation of that ethical meandering will be taken for ethics. Only a few realize that a chasm has, for some time, been opening up between legality and morality.

What about a country like Hungary? It is a traditionally Christian country, it still counts many Christians, though not as many as we would like to think. And it counts many others as well. In such a country, which is typical Western country, bioethics will be formulated in various ways. Far from all of them will be in compliance with Christian principles, let alone in a consistently principled way which is Christian. There will be a variety of bioethics. Obviously the one which will be legislated and relegislated will fall short of the Christian ideal.

The question is how short. The answer to this depends partly on the number of Christians and on the measure in which they are consistent with their Christianity. First, Christians must not forget that democracy, like any political system, is merely the art of the possible. And as long as Christians keep in mind that they live in a fallen world, they will not look even on democracy as the art of the impossible. Democracy is not a mechanism that assures justice, but rather a framework that gives anyone the right to struggle for justice as he or she sees it. The point was succinctly made by Masaryk around 1922 when Hungarians in the newly formed Czechoslovakia asked him how many rights they would have. As much, Masaryk replied, as they will struggle to acquire for themselves.

The same answer is true of Christians with the mechanism of modern democracy. They will have to struggle and do so consistently. They should also know that Christ would never reconsider his statements that his followers will forever be under pressure in this world. Christian consistency is not so much a question of arguments as of persuasion, or prayer, and of heroism, if necessary. In a growing number of cases of secularism is acting — through its universities, academies, television, radio, publishing houses, news media and political mechanisms — in a dictatorial way within an allegedly democratic context.

The following may indeed take place in the not too distant future. It is a scenario written in 1981 by one of the great 20th-century American writers, and certainly the greatest American Catholic writer of our times, Walker Percy, a doctor turned novelist. In a letter which he wrote to the *New York Times* (published in its June 11, 1981, issue) Percy noted the irony that in supporting pro-abortion legislation, the secularists, usually swearing by science, now try to ignore an elementary scientific fact. It is the fact that the life which begins from the moment of the fertilization of the ovum is a human life and nothing but

human. Then Percy conjured up a court case with a biology teacher in the dock. He is told by the judge that it is merely a personal opinion that a fertilized human ovum is an individual human life. He is also told by the judge that in public schools no one has the right to propogate private opinions. The biology teacher, Percy continues, caves in and, like a modern Galileo, submits. But in turning away he is heard to murmur: And yet it moves, It's alive.

Such a confrontation is now appearing on the horizon in America, the leader in world democracy with an ever heavier touch of secularist totalitarianism. A proof of this is the latest American legislative program, called FOCA (Freedom of Choice Act). If enacted, any doctor can be thrown into prison if he or she refuses to perform abortion and other new-fangled bioethical acts. If FOCA becomes law, Catholic hospitals, which in the United States form 15 percent of all hospitals and last year alone cared for 56 million patients, can be penalized for not allowing abortion and similar medical acts of bioethical "success" which are and remain radically immoral from the Christian viewpoint.

Christians will be under pressure, but pressure alone will assure their sameness as Christians as time goes on. For as long as Christians are under pressure, they can be sure that they are the followers of Christ, the pledge of consistency or sameness. It is about Him, and Him alone, that could be stated that He is the same — yesterday, today, and forever.
