

WHY RELIGION DESERVES A PLACE IN SECULAR MEDICINE

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Does secular medicine exist?

Does secular medicine exist? Of course, medicine as a science exists—that is, medicine as a body of knowledge about how the human body functions, about what makes it function well, about what causes it to malfunction, and about what restores it to health. I don't doubt the existence of medicine as a modern tradition of natural, empirical science—as I'm sure you will be relieved to hear. Nor do I doubt the existence of medicine as a body of practices arising out of that science and designed to remedy different kinds of bodily malfunctioning. So if what is meant by 'secular' medicine is empirically based science and practice, then I do not doubt it.

What is probably meant by 'secular' medicine, however, is something different. Not empirical science, nor the practices that arise out of it, but a medicine that is completely independent of religion, and one that is therefore rational, and upon which all rational human beings can be expected to agree. This I do not believe in. I do not believe that it does exist or that it can or that it should.

Empirical medical science raises questions that are not susceptible of an empirical answer. It can tell us about the development of the human fetus, for example, but it cannot tell us what a 'person' is or at what point the fetus becomes such a thing. That's a philosophical or theological question. Nor can medical science tell us under what conditions it is permissible to kill a person. That's an ethical question. Questions of philosophical or theological anthropology, or questions of ethics, cannot be answered simply by appeal to empirical data and thereby to medical science. That does not mean that their answers are irrational: appeal to hard empirical data is not the only form of reason. So are appeals to moral intuitions about what's good and right, to logic and rational consistency, and even to beauty. However, given the longstanding controversy that attends such issues as the definition of the human person and the conditions for permissible killing, it is clear that applying 'reason' to such matters does not produce consensus, and nor is it likely to any time soon. So the ideal of secular medicine as a realm of reason *and therefore* as untroubled by deep metaphysical and moral disagreements is a fantasy. Even if medicine were religion-free, its peace would still be disturbed by disputes between philosophical schools—Aristotelian, utilitarian, and Kantian, to mention only a few.

Why 'religion' is not simply irrational

Religion, therefore, is not uniquely awkward. It's not the only disturber of the peace in the ethics of medical practice. Philosophy can disturb perfectly well on its own. Nevertheless, it is widely supposed that religion should be kept out of 'secular' space—whether medical or educational or political—because it is by nature irrational and dogmatic. After all, religion is a matter of faith, not reason, isn't it?

Well, yes and no. For sure, religious believers can believe some crazy things—although it must be said that craziness is in the eye of the beholder. Christians regard Hindus as crazy for believing in reincarnation. Muslims regard Christians as crazy for believing God to be both one and three (as do Unitarian Christians). And Protestants regard Catholics as crazy for believing in the literal transubstantiation of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist. Craziness is not, however, the monopoly of religion. The twentieth-century saw many instances of atheist craziness of the fascist or communist kind: Stalin's purges, Hitler's Holocaust, Pol Pot's killing

fields. And to some of us, even right-thinking Enlightenment liberals can be crazy in their simplistic, picture-book understanding of religion, their dogmatic refusal to pay attention to its complexity and ambiguity, and their totalitarian conception of ‘reason’. Nevertheless, it’s true that religion can be crazy, even if it isn’t always so.

It’s also true that religious believers believe in things that they can’t put under a microscope or demonstrate mathematically—God’s existence, for example, or cosmic teleology or the afterlife. But, then, many unbelievers have faith in human dignity and in the unstoppable progress of human history, neither of which can be proven empirically or logically, and the latter of which, it seems to me, is highly dubious.

It’s true that believers aren’t always very good at articulating a justification for what they have faith in. But, then, it’s only a very small and highly educated portion of humanity that is much good at articulating justifications for anything. It’s true that even highly articulate religious believers (such as I) can’t produce an incontrovertible justification for having faith in a good God in the face of the terrible evils that are evidently permitted to stalk the world. I know of no theodicy that is absolutely convincing—and I’ve read quite a few. However, if articulate theists have some difficulty justifying their faith in God in the face of the world’s evils (as we do), it seems to me that articulate atheists have no less difficulty justifying their faith in human dignity in the face of a fundamentally blind, cold-hearted cosmos. Atheists think that you have to throw off God to secure human freedom; I think that you have to affirm God to ground human dignity.

So the fact that religion involves faith does not mean that it is bereft of reason. Unbelievers, of course, doubt that religion commands *sufficient* reason. But believers will beg to differ and, if they’re articulate, they’ll give reasons for doing so.

Augustinian secularity and the place of religion in it

Secular space—whether in medicine or elsewhere—cannot expect to be free of conflict between different kinds of reasoning. (And here, for those of you who’re interested in contemporary political philosophy, I disagree both with Jürgen Habermas and with John Rawls.) In medicine, conflict is an irremovable fact of life even at the empirical scientific level, which occasions controversy about what the data really are and about how to interpret them. But it is all the more true at the metaphysical and ethical levels. Secular space, therefore, is not and should not pretend to be ‘neutral’, transcending conflict. According to its original meaning, developed by St Augustine in the early 5th century AD, the word ‘secular’ refers to the time *before* the unambiguous establishment of divine government—God’s kingdom—in the world. The *saeculum* is the age when the wheat and the tares grow together, the age when the City of God and the Earthly City are inextricably intertwined, the age of spiritual and moral mixture and ambiguity. In this secular age, peace in the polis or city or state is the result, not of natural uniformity, but of negotiation and compromise between rival viewpoints—in Augustine’s time and place, between pagan and Christian. Compromise is often unstable, since seldom are either of the parties to it entirely satisfied or the terms of agreement cover a multitude of differences waiting to graduate into controversies. The fruit of this compromise—secular peace—is therefore provisional and limited. It does not so much abolish disagreement as establish a basis for further negotiation, which can either tighten consensus or loosen it.

If we take this Augustinian conception of secularity instead of the anti-religious ‘secularist’ version, and if we admit that religion is not simply or invariably

or uniquely irrational, then it follows that religion should be allowed to sit at the table of public negotiation—whether in the legislature or in the governing body of a professional (say, medical) association or institution. To take a seat at the negotiating table, however, implies a readiness to negotiate and so to persuade; and that has implications for what one *does* at the table, for how one *behaves*.

I'll return to that in a moment. Right now, however, let me point out that, of course, not everyone is willing to negotiate. Not everyone is willing to take a seat at the table of public deliberation, perhaps because he sees the ears of majority opinion as firmly stopped against the truth. In such a case the only options that remain to a dissenter are those of resentful acquiescence, exile, or coercion, even violence. If you really do believe that abortion is indistinguishable from murder, and that the Pro-Choice lobby has a permanent stranglehold on law and public policy, then it might seem rational for you to generate mass protest (which is a form of political coercion) or even to shoot healthcare workers who perform abortions. In my view to take up the option of violence in such a case would be wrong, partly because it is not true that *all* abortion is equivalent to murder, partly because effecting a change in the law about abortion in the USA or the UK is not impossible, and partly because any illegal resort to violence threatens to dissolve society into a horrendous anarchy, where the weak lie at the mercy of the strong. This last is a very great evil, stifling most forms of human flourishing. Nevertheless, even if we regard such a resort to violence as premature and disproportionate, we need to acknowledge, unless we are absolute pacifists, that for all of us there will be extreme situations, where the use of illegal violence is morally justified. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others committed themselves to assassinating the German head of state in 1944, it was not just because of the regime's policy of public hygiene in eradicating the toxic Jews, or its eugenicist policy of killing the miserable and burdensome and subhuman handicapped; but these were among the reasons for their option of violence. And make no mistake: this violence was illegal. Many Germans at the time, and some even today, regard the July '44 plotters as criminal traitors, and it was not until the late 1990s that the criminal convictions against them were formally lifted.

My main point here is this: that negotiation is never the only option; that *in extremis* the defence of a great good against a great medical evil could justify resort to violence; and that, even if we think that the killing of abortionists is murderous, it's probably not because we think the use of illegal violence to be always and everywhere wrong.

But let's return to the negotiating table. We're here because we rightly recognise that the resort to violence is morally hazardous and socially dangerous at the best of times, that the unsatisfactory compromise on which political peace is built is usually tolerable, and that, in a liberal society, we can always work to revise the compromise in a more satisfactory direction. In order to do that, however, we have to negotiate; and in order to negotiate successfully, we have to persuade; and in order to persuade, we have to be persuasive.

Persuasive religion and the abortion controversy

For religious believers, what does this mean? What does it take to be persuasive? First of all, it takes the abandonment of all sheer appeal to authority—whether to that of the Bible or of the Pope or of the Qu'ran. Such appeals are both imprudent and disrespectful. They're imprudent, of course, because they're unlikely to move those who don't recognise them. But they're also disrespectful, because they fail to notice that, in a secular and therefore plural context, the people you're addressing might not

share your religious assumptions. To appeal to religious authority, therefore, is to refuse to engage with your auditor's difference, pushing past as if it were of no account—as if it were so stupid or wicked as to be beyond rational consideration. The appeal to authority refuses to concede that contradiction might have any ground at all. To non-believers this is bound to seem insensitive and *gauche*, if not high-handed and insulting.

Positively, if I, as a religious believer, am going to succeed in persuading you, as an agnostic or atheist or different kind of religious believer, of my moral view, then I will have to show you that your view has weaknesses or problems, that these cannot be adequately repaired in your terms, but that they can be repaired in mine. So, for example, if you are an uncompromising advocate of women's right to choose whether or not to abort a pregnancy, I'd point out that there are no very strong reasons why such a right should cease upon the birth of a child. If women have the unqualified right to kill fetuses, there is no very cogent reason why they do not have the right to kill infants. The Romans used to accord this right to the male parent (until Christians had it withdrawn), and contemporary utilitarian philosophers such as Peter Singer and, most recently, Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva, have argued that there could be justification for restoring it to parents in general. Suppose that you, the Pro-Choice advocate, agree with me that giving mothers the right to kill infants would not be a good idea—not if we want to have a humane society where weaker persons aren't abused by stronger ones. If you agree with me on that, then you are bound, I suggest, to reflect critically on what it is about a child that rightly constrains the mother's liberty to kill it, and then to go on to ask whether that property is ever acquired by the fetus, and when. In other words, you are bound to take seriously the issue of the status of the fetus, and not just the mother's freedom. Once I've persuaded you onto that territory, you might come to agree with me that the same reasons for according a child the right not to be killed by its mother apply more or less equally to the fetus at a certain point. We can argue, of course, about where that point is; and we might not agree. But wherever you eventually decide to draw the line, you have ceased to be simply 'pro-choice' and I have succeeded in persuading you to move toward my moral position.

'My moral position', yes; but what's *religion* got to do with it? Religion has the following to do with it. As a Christian, alongside other biblical monotheists, I esteem the lives of human individuals very highly: all individuals are equally the creatures of one divine Father, and each has a special vocation in their time and place. As a consequence, even if I believe that it can be morally right for one individual to take another's life, I think that killing is a morally and socially hazardous business and that it should never be done casually and without cogent reason.

What is more, as a Christian who finds in the life, teaching, and death of Jesus crucial clues about the nature of the human good or human fulfilment, I believe that living well involves meeting obligations as well as claiming liberties and rights, and that sometimes meeting an obligation can be seriously costly.

Further, as a biblical monotheist of a Christian sort, I am sensitive to the plight of the 'poor'—that is, the weak and vulnerable. Historically, of course, this category includes women, and in many parts of the world it continues to include them. But it also includes immature human beings, certainly children and arguably fetuses, at least beyond a certain point in their development.

Further still, as an Augustinian Christian I see history as morally ambiguous and sometimes tragic. In regard to many moral issues, there may well not be a perfectly satisfactory solution. We may have to settle for a somewhat messy

compromise. We may have to admit that it is not clear at what point a developing human being becomes a person deserving of the civil right not to be harmed under normal circumstances. We may have to draw a line at a point that commands some reason, but not very strong reason. But it's far better that we admit the uncertainty that attends the status of the fetus than that we pretend that it isn't an important consideration at all.

Finally, as an Augustinian Christian I think that the roots of human wrongdoing reach far deeper than mere ignorance or social malformation. They lie in our loving the wrong things or loving the right things too much. They have to do with our worshipping things that are not worthy of our worship, and our being possessed and driven by them. Therefore, the danger that faces a liberal society that emphasises individual freedom, that specifies freedom as a freedom to choose, and that exposes the individual to the excitation and engineering of material loves or appetites by commercial powers, is that it creates a society whose citizens are psychically incapable of seeing beyond their own inflated stomachs and paying due attention to the rightful needs of others. The danger facing a liberal society that is substantially consumerist is that it grows citizens who are disposed to be careless of others, and especially careless of fetal others, who can barely kick back.

All this by way of explaining the religion that lies behind my views on the moral question of abortion, and the religious nature of the ground onto which I would like to persuade the uncompromising 'pro-choice' advocate. At this point you might be inclined to say, "That's all well and good, but much of the moral position you occupy does not *require* religious belief. For example, you don't have to be religious to have a high regard for human individuals, or to recognise moral obligations as well as rights, or to be sensitive to the needs of the vulnerable, or to be alert to the morally corrosive influence of consumerist liberalism".

To this I would reply that I haven't yet claimed that my moral view is one that *only* Christian monotheistic religion *can* ground. My claim so far is merely that this is a view that such religion *does* ground, and that it is therefore a religious view, even if not exclusively so. Whether there are equally good or better grounds is an argument we have yet to have. We might have that at the table of public negotiation about medical law, education, and practice, but it's more likely that we'll have it in the corridors outside or in the café on the ground floor. If I succeed in persuading you that, all things considered, my religious ground is more supportive than the alternatives, then the moral view of abortion to which I have persuaded you will seem religious in an even stronger sense.

Religion as a matrix of 'liberal' negotiation

Religion is, of course, famous for its bad manners. Stereotypically, it's dogmatic, strident, unreasonable, and violent. But a stereotype is a stereotype: it presents as typical what is in fact occasional. For sure, sometimes religion does live down to its stereotype, but not always. And, again, religion does not have a monopoly of dogmatism and stridency: atheism, whether fascist or communist or even just Dawkinseque has been known to stop its ears and turn up the volume.

But if religion is sometimes a source of bad behaviour, it can also be a source of good. So, during one of the periods of European history that gave rise to the secularist stereotype of religion, the so-called Religious Wars running from the mid-16th to the mid-17th centuries, pleas for tolerance and reason were heard to arise from Christian lips. In the English part of this period—the traumatic English Civil War—there were some whose Christian faith served to make them, not at all zealously

violent, but moderate and liberal. I think here especially of a local Oxford hero, the diminutive Lucius Carey, Lord Falkland, a Protestant Anglican with a high-pitched voice and a gift for friendship, who was appalled at the religious and political polarisation that was overtaking the 1630s, and who wrote in his treatise, *Of the Infallibility of the Church of Rome*”:

I confess this opinion of damning so many, and this custome of burning so many, this breeding up those, who knew nothing else in any point of religion, yet to be in a readinesse to cry, *to the fire with him, to hell with him* ... These I say, in my opinion were chiefly the causes which made so many, so suddenly leave the Church of Rome

... If any man vouchsafe to think, either this, or the author of it, of value enough to confute the one, and informe the other, I shall desire him to do it ... with that temper, which is fit to be used by men that are not so passionate, as to have the definition of reasonable creatures in vaine, remembering that truth in likelihood is, where her author God was, in the still voice, and not the loud wind; ...¹

Sometimes religion can be, not at all the sworn enemy of generous, liberal attitudes, but their very mother.

If this seems unlikely, let me explain how this can be. Christianity is structurally humanist in its credal affirmation of the special dignity of human being made in the image of God—a dignity intensified by God’s assumption of human flesh in the Incarnation. According to this high vision, human beings are not merely the random result of the blind operation of physical forces, nor their activity simply determined by genes or chemistry, nor their asserted significance just so much desperate whistling in the enveloping cosmic dark. No, in Christian eyes humans are the creatures of a benevolent divine intelligence, which has striven through natural evolution to bring about individuals who flourish in freely understanding and investing themselves in the truth about the world’s good.

In such a vision, there is truth—be it sometimes complex and internally plural—to be understood: as the creation of the one wise God, the world possesses a given rationality that is there for rational beings to grasp. The *point* of engaging in conversation with other human beings, therefore, is to discover the truth—and not, for example, simply to bend their will to your own.

Further, according to the Christian vision of things, human beings are not only rational but finite and fallible, and they are made to flourish in society. Therefore their reasoning needs to be social: they need to reason *together*. Conversation, therefore, is an important social endeavour. It is not properly an occasion for the egotistical display of wit, for the scoring of clever points, for the assertion of superior rhetorical power, or for the domination of the weak by the strong. It is rather about the common searching out of the truth, and common deference to its authority.

Believing as it does in the (complex) unity and rationality of things, Christian humanism dignifies human conversation with a serious moral significance. It also has the resources to grace it with generous, ‘liberal’ virtues:

- an openness to being taught and corrected, since it sees humans as finite and fallible;
- a readiness to confess conversational dishonesty, since it also sees them as sinners;
- respect for others as potential speakers of the truth, since it regards everyone as a potential medium of God’s Word;
- a tolerance of strange and unwelcome views, since finitude and fallibility

forbid us to identify what's true with what's familiar;
patience with frustrations in understanding, since truth is as much self
-revealing as grasped, and since faith sustains the hope that what is
now seen through a glass darkly shall yet be seen face to face;
and forgiveness as a reaction to conversational injustice—to wilful
misrepresentation and provocation, to expressions of contempt and
evasive sleights of hand—since all victims are perpetrators too.

Through the regular practices of worship and prayer, through the reading and study of Scripture, through spiritual direction and pastoral guidance and corporate discipline, Christian monotheism fosters a view of reality, in which attitudes such as these appear as conversational virtues, not vices. And the pacific negotiation of disagreements—especially emotive, ethical disagreements—in secular, plural societies *needs* virtues such as these. It needs citizens who are so formed as to be *capable* of restraining themselves, capable of transcending themselves so as to hear uncomfortable truths, capable of intellectual and existential courage, capable of admitting error, capable of absorbing and forgiving petty injury, capable of hopeful and resilient patience, and capable of countenancing compromise without sinking into despair or cynicism. The typical liberal virtues of tolerance and fairness just aren't enough to see us through the storms of controversy, especially when the storms persist for years, even decades. Christian monotheism, and the institutions and practices to which it has given rise, can help.

From manner to content (1): What biblical monotheism can give secular medicine

So one important contribution that the Christian monotheist version of religion can make is to foster a set of conversational virtues that will help to make public discussion liberal, not just in the sense of free and open, but also in the sense of generous—'liberal' as in 'liberality'. Christian monotheism can help keep the *manner* of conducting bioethical controversy generous and cooperative. But beyond manner, what about content? What has Christian monotheism got to offer bioethical discussion materially, as well as formally?

One important thing that biblical monotheism has to offer—whether in its Jewish, Christian, or Muslim forms—is support for humanism. This might sound very odd, since religion is commonly distinguished from, and even contrasted with, secular humanism. Surely religion is authoritarian? Surely God reigns at Man's expense? Surely humans must therefore choose between religious slavery and humanist liberation? Not necessarily. Without doubt monotheism has sometimes taken on institutionally and socially oppressive forms, not least in the Christian church, and that can only be lamented, confessed and repudiated. Do such moments of oppression undermine Christianity's claim to be humanist? No, they don't. No human institution of longstanding can display an historical record that entirely consists with its anthropological and moral principles. Sin infects institutions—including churches—as well as individuals. Moreover, the fact that an institution from time to time contradicts the views espoused by its own Bible and repeated in its own liturgy merely makes it inconsistent. It does not nullify its affirmation. Indeed, the institution deserves some credit for continuing to affirm the very views by which its own conduct stands condemned. Inconsistency in virtue is surely better than consistency in vice.

I've just implied that the Bible is humanist. How so? The Bible is humanist in the sense that it has a very high view of human dignity and destiny. In the opening chapters of its very first book, Genesis, the creation of humankind is presented as the

climax of all God's creative endeavours, Uniquely among creatures human beings are created "in the image of God", which probably means that God delegates to them the responsibility for the creative management of the rest of creation: "Then God said, 'Let us make human kind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'" (Genesis 1.26). Note that God here does not hoard authority; he devolves it. Note that he does not reduce humans to the status of slaves, but dignifies them with the status of vice-gerents or subordinate stewards. Subordinate, yes: not little gods possessed of absolute autonomy, not loose canons ready to wreck the deck of the heaving world. Accountable, yes; but not slaves.

This is where the Bible begins; and the whole of the subsequent biblical story about God's striving to rescue and perfect his creation is focused on the salvation—the bringing to wholeness and health—of his human creatures. Biblical monotheistic religion is fundamentally humanist.

What is more some eminent contemporary philosophers doubt that notions of universal human dignity, basic human equality, and natural human rights have a secure home outside of a biblical theological frame-work. Thus the legal and political philosopher, Jeremy Waldron writes: "I actually don't think it is clear that we—now—*can* shape and defend an adequate conception of basic human equality apart from some religious foundation".² When I tell you that Waldron is, in fact, a practising Episcopalian, his witness might seem less impressive, because prejudiced. After all, that's the kind of claim one might expect a believer to make. But one can find similar views among avowedly atheist philosophers. Here, for example, is Jeffrie Murphy, writing in his atheist phase: "[for me it is] very difficult—perhaps impossible—to embrace religious convictions", and yet "the liberal theory of rights requires a doctrine of human dignity, preciousness and sacredness that cannot be utterly detached from a belief in God or at least from a world view that would be properly called religious in some metaphysically profound sense".³ And here is Raimond Gaita: "The secular philosophical tradition speaks of inalienable rights, inalienable dignity and of persons as ends in themselves. These are, I believe, ways of whistling in the dark, ways of trying to make secure to reason what reason cannot finally underwrite. Religious traditions speak of the sacredness of each human being, but I doubt that sanctity is a concept that has a secure home outside those traditions".⁴ And even the eminent European public intellectual, Jürgen Habermas gestured in the same direction, when he said in an interview with *Le Monde* newspaper a few years ago that religious traditions "have the distinction of a superior capacity for articulating our [presumably, liberal humanist] moral sensibility"⁵ and that secular society cannot afford to sever itself from these "important resources of meaning".⁶

Religion, specifically in its biblical monotheistic forms, offers a worldview in which notions of universal human dignity and equality makes sense. It offers theoretical support for humanism. And this support is needed. For not all worldviews do support humanism, and some actually corrode it. For example, the Hobbesian picture of the human world as a no-holds-barred war of each against all, until prudence guides the instinct of self-preservation to make social contracts, is not at all a flattering one. At natural base, Hobbes' human beings are brutes, driven by the fear of pain and death; and this is the anthropological assumption that underlies much modern political philosophy. I have a hunch that it also influenced the application of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection to human affairs in Social Darwinism. This is the view that moved the German High Command to precipitate the

horrendous First World War by launching preventative war against France in 1914. If international relations are basically about the survival of the fittest, and war is the natural means of deciding that, then it follows that war should be launched whenever one has the best chance of winning it. In 1914 the German military reckoned that war was inevitable, and that the longer the delay, the higher the odds stacked against Germany. So they attacked, and four years later 20 million lay dead, with millions more maimed and bereaved. Social Darwinism is also discernible in the reasoning of Adolf Hitler, who provoked a war that killed between 50 and 60 million.

Not all worldviews support humanism. Humanism, and the liberal ethos that depends on it, are not the natural, default position. They are fragile and vulnerable. Awareness of this, I think, was one of the main motives behind the work of the pre-eminent contemporary spokesman of liberal political theory, the late John Rawls. Rawls was aware that liberal values and the larger views that support them are not universally held, and that a liberal ethos is therefore contested and vulnerable. There will always be views that would suppress it—what he calls ‘unreasonable’ comprehensive doctrines—and there is no guarantee that these will not prevail,⁷ as they did in the case of the Weimar Republic.⁸ The virtues of tolerance, of being ready to meet others halfway, of reasonableness, and of fairness comprise political capital that can depreciate and constantly needs to be renewed.⁹ Consequently, Rawls tells us, “the problem of stability has been on our minds from the outset”.¹⁰ Also consequently, Rawls was eager to build as broad an alliance of support for a liberal ‘overlapping consensus’ as possible and, in striking contrast to liberal secularists, he sought allies in certain ‘reasonable’ forms of religion. For my purpose, it is significant that the two examples of ‘reasonable’, liberal-friendly religion that he gives—Catholic Christianity and Islam—are both forms of biblical monotheism.

So, biblical monotheism supports humanism. That’s all very good and nice, but what’s it got to with medicine? The relevance of humanism to medicine is that it affirms that the primary purpose of medical practice is the promotion of human well-being. Now, that might be true, but surely it’s a truism? Surely it’s a truth so obvious and universally accepted that it hardly needs affirming? Actually, it’s not as obvious or as universally accepted as it looks. Humanism affirms that the proper purpose of medicine is the service of the well-being of *all* human beings—not just the Greeks, but also the barbarians; not just the citizens, but also the slaves; not just the rich, but also the poor; not just the articulate, but also the illiterate; not just those capable of living the kinds of life we hold dear, but also those who cling to kinds of life we reckon worthless; not just those who will reward our sleepless efforts by recovering, but also those who will stubbornly defy them by dying. The equal dignity of all human beings is easy enough to sign up to in principle. In practice, however, it’s much harder to recognise in the actual faces of the old, the awkward, the ugly, the demented, and the moribund.

What is more, the medical profession, like any other, is about career and status and promotion. And if you’re of an academic bent, it can also be about the solving of knotty scientific problems. There’s nothing wrong with any of that, of course. But it does mean that the motives of physicians, nurses, and other health-care professionals are several, not single; and where there are several motives, there is scope for conflict; and that raises the question, “Are you being formed into the kind of medical professional, whose loves are so well ordered that you are capable of putting the best interests of your patients first?”

Further still, human beings like having power and medical professionals have a lot of it. There’s nothing wrong with power as such: power enables us to achieve

things, and without it we can achieve nothing. But the possession of power involves temptation. We like feeling powerful, and one way to feel powerful is to dominate and manipulate others. This is a temptation for healthcare professionals. You may know of the infamous English case of Dr Harold Shipman, the General Practitioner who was convicted in 2000 of murdering fifteen patients by lethal injections of diamorphine, but whose victims—mostly elderly and mostly women—are reckoned to number about two hundred and fifty. No one knows why he did it, and no one ever will, since he hanged himself in prison in 2004. In some cases there appears to have been a financial motive, but not in all. I would speculate that, in addition to greed, the sheer pleasure of power had something to do with it; and in support of my speculation I note that serial killers are commonly supposed to be obsessed with manipulation and control—of which suicide is a further expression.

The humanity of medicine is not something that we can afford to take for granted. We need medical professionals whose particular view of the world—of what's good and right, of what makes moral sense—forms them in the virtues that make them capable of practising medicine humanely. Biblical monotheism is one such view.

From manner to content (2): Christian monotheism, physician-assisted suicide & voluntary euthanasia

So far my discussion of what biblical, and therefore Christian, monotheism can contribute to the content of secular, plural medicine has been quite general: a conviction about the equal dignity of all human beings (or at least persons), and a sense of primary obligation to serve their well-being. Let me move toward a conclusion by becoming more specific. I've already made comment on abortion, so I won't revisit that here. Instead, I'll turn first to physician-assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia, and finally to genetic enhancement. What does Christian monotheism bring to the discussion of the ethics of these as medical practices? (Because time is running out, my answer must be brief and selective.)

Both sides in the debate about physician-assisted suicide (henceforth, 'PAS') and voluntary euthanasia (henceforth, 'euthanasia') are concerned about human welfare. Those who argue in favour of making it legal for doctors to assist patients to commit suicide or to kill them upon request are concerned about the wretchedness of the lives of the patients. Those who argue against legalisation are not unconcerned about the wretchedness of patients who want PAS or euthanasia, but they are also concerned about the practical ramifications of legalisation with regard to other patients. The decisive question, it seems to me, is whether it is possible to permit doctors to perform PAS or euthanasia without weakening a general societal commitment to support human life in adversity, and without exposing vulnerable patients to subtle pressure to 'choose' to die. What does Christian monotheistic religion contribute to an answer to this question?

One thing is a healthy suspicion of 'autonomy'. Christian tradition has long recognised a limited sphere of autonomy, where the individual should be free to make up her own mind about what moral obligations and vocations require in a particular case, here and now. This is what is commonly known as 'conscience'. But the freedom of conscience is a morally responsible freedom. It operates within the bounds set by objective moral obligation and vocation. It doesn't vault itself above them. Immanuel Kant would not have demurred: for him, the individual's autonomy is exercised *under the moral law that is given in and with universal human rationality*. With this kind of morally responsible autonomy, Christianity should have no quarrel.

Usually, however, the kind of autonomy that is asserted in the debate about PAS and euthanasia is not of this qualified, responsible kind. Rather, it is absolute and libertarian, as in “My life is my property, and I have the right to dispose of it when and how I choose”. To this the Christian should, I think, respond: “Whether or not you *have* such a right is not something that you can establish merely by asserting it. It depends on whether or not you are subject to overriding obligations to other people, which constrain your choice of PAS or euthanasia”. Are there in fact such obligations? There would be, *if* granting a certain class of patient the right to PAS or euthanasia would undermine any societal commitment to support human life in adversity, and *if* it would expose a much larger number of patients to abusive manipulation. *If* that were the case, then larger considerations of social good would preclude the granting of a small class of individuals the right to PAS or euthanasia.

“*If* that were the case”: but is it in fact so? The answer to this is necessarily speculative, but it is not therefore fanciful. It can appeal to reasonable considerations of logic, of experience, and of human nature. Among these, a Christian formed by religious belief and practice to care for the equal dignity of all humans and to be especially sensitive to the plight of those at the bottom of the social heap, would point to the fact that in the USA and in the UK the minority of those lobbying for the right to PAS tends to be economically secure, highly educated, articulate, independent, and accustomed to control, whereas the majority of patients are far less self-confident, far more dependent on others, and therefore far more vulnerable to abuse. In the UK, as Rabbi Julia Neuberger has pointed out in her 2008 book, *Not Dead Yet: A Manifesto for Old Age*, at any one time about 500,000 elderly people are being abused, mostly by close relatives. In such circumstances, it is not wilfully pessimistic to suppose that, if patients were granted a right to PAS, many of them would be persuaded to choose it as a means of ending misery that is socially manufactured. The humanity of a society is to be measured by its care for the most vulnerable: to grant patients the right to PAS, where social circumstances such as I have described obtain, would be to abandon many of the poor to the mercy of unscrupulous relatives.

From manner to content (3): Christian monotheism and genetic enhancement

Finally, a few remarks on what Christianity has to say about the ethics of genetic enhancement. Some Christians argue against enhancement on the grounds that it is ‘unnatural’ or ‘playing God’. I think that this is a mistake for two reasons. First, as I explained earlier, according the opening chapters of the Bible, human beings were created in the image of God in order to exercise dominion over the rest of creation. That is to say, God delegated to humans certain god-like responsibilities and powers. By our created nature, we are intended to use our unique rational powers to act creatively. As a consequence of this, second, much that we do is ‘unnatural’ and artificial: we create novelties, we manufacture, we fabricate. Medicine itself is an obvious case in point: through art and technology medicine makes possible what would not otherwise be possible, it transcends what is natural, it turns back disease, it makes amputees to walk. Therefore the fact that genetic enhancement involves interference in natural processes and manufactures artificial effects is, morally speaking, beside the point. The moral issues lie elsewhere. They lie in the amorality of the qualities to be enhanced, and in the obsession with what’s perfectible to the exclusion of what’s important. So what is it that the proponents of genetic enhancement would typically enhance? Answer: I.Q., physical beauty, physical strength and visual powers. There is nothing morally objectionable about any of these, but nor is there anything morally commendable. The product of such enhancement

could easily turn out to be a very clever, gorgeously beautiful, highly fit, and clear-sighted Nazi. Would that really amount to a civilisational advance? Is it the kind of enhancement we need? Don't we rather need citizens who are wiser, more patient, more honest, more courageous, more generous, more compassionate? Don't we need people who can see through low I.Q., deformity, and weakness and find humanity on the far side? From a Christian point of view, I suggest, the moral problem with much genetic enhancement is not its novelty, but its amorality—its exaggerated interest in second-order goods, and its distracting obsession with manufacturing what can be manufactured instead of growing what needs to be grown. Its moral flaw, to use Augustinian terms, lies in its disordered love.

Conclusion

In this address I have argued that medicine should be considered 'secular', not in the *secularist* sense of being religion-free, but in the Augustinian sense of being a forum for the negotiation of rival spiritual and moral views. I have argued that religion deserves a place at the secular table of negotiation, because it is not simply or invariably or uniquely irrational. Nevertheless, in deciding to take a seat at the table, the religious believer commits himself to being persuasive, and that involves abandoning any sheer appeals to religious authorities, thinking one's way sympathetically into the viewpoint of one's opponent, identifying points of common ground, and then reasoning her—step by step—toward one's own position. So, yes, religion must learn table manners—it must learn to *behave* in public. Sometimes, however, religion does not need to be constrained to behave. Sometimes it behaves well naturally, because its own convictions naturally generate the virtues that sustain good behaviour. Sometimes, as John Rawls recognised, religion can be an important matrix and model of generous, liberal conduct. One example of such religion would be Christian monotheism. But monotheism does not only bring good manners to the negotiating table; it also brings particular views of human being and ethical issues. It not only models form; it provides content. One instance of such content is a high, humanist view of human dignity, which is not an inevitable part of the cosmic furniture and which we cannot afford to take for granted. Other instances are the notion that individual autonomy is properly bounded by social obligation, a special sensitivity to the plight of the poorer and weaker, and a preference for virtues such as wisdom and compassion over qualities such as cleverness and looking good. There is much of value that certain kinds of religion can bring to secular medicine. For sure, religion has to learn to behave. But, equally, so does atheism.

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NOTES

¹ Lucius Carey, *Sir Lucius Cary, late Lord Viscount of Falkland, his discourse of infallibility, with an answer to it: and his Lordships reply. Never before published. Together with Mr. Walter Mountague's letter concerning the changing his religion*, ed. Thomas Triplet (London: Gartrude Dawson, 1651), pp. 14-15, 25.

² Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 13.

³ Jeffrie Murphy, "Afterword: Constitutionalism, Moral Skepticism, and Religious Belief", in Alan S. Rosenbaum, ed., *Constitutionalism: The Philosophical Dimension* (NY and London: Greenwood, 1988), p. 239.

⁴ Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 5.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "Habermas entre démocratie et génétique", *Le Monde*, 20 Décembre 2002, p. VIII: "En ce qui concerne les questions fondamentales d'éthique politique, les voix religieuses ont au moins le même droit de se faire entendre dans l'espace public.... C'est dans ce contexte d'une sécularisation qui 'déraille' qu'il faut situer mon intérêt pour une approche respectueuse des traditions religieuses qui se distinguent par la capacité supérieure qu'elles ont d'articuler notre sensibilité morale." Habermas has reiterated this point more recently in "Religion in der Öffentlichkeit", which was first published in Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), p. 137.

⁶ Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge", p. 109. Habermas has reiterated this point more recently, too, in "Vorpolitische Grundlagen des demokratischen Rechtsstaates?", in Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, p. 116. This essay was first published in October 2004.

⁷ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 65. See also *ibid.*, p. 126.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. lxi-lxii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157 and n.23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.