The Secularization of Bioethics

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There has been long-standing interest in the question of the role of religion in bioethics. In 1993, the Institute of Religion in Texas celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of its first Houston Conference on Medicine and Technology by organizing a conference on the present state of religion and medical ethics. The commemorative conference re-examined the role of religion in bioethics by “looking back and looking forward.” The tone of this gathering was nostalgic and somewhat somber, as reflected, for instance, in the title of a paper by Stephen Lammers, “The Marginalization of Religious Voices in Bioethics.” The chagrin is understandable: in 1968, theologians had opened up the field of bioethics; in 1993, they found themselves slighted in academic and public discussion.

Interest in the question was also reflected in a research project titled “Theology, Religious Traditions, and Bioethics,” edited by Daniel Callahan and Courtney Campbell and published in a 1990 supplement to The Hastings Center Report. Callahan, a cofounder of the Hastings Center, one of the first bioethics institutes, lamented the loss of contributions from religion to bioethics and the consequent impoverishment of the field:

The most striking change over the past two decades or so has been the secularization of bioethics. The field has moved from one dominated by religious and medical traditions to one now increasingly shaped by philosophical and legal

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concepts. The consequence has been a mode of public discourse that emphasizes secular themes: universal rights, individual self-direction, procedural justice, and a systematic denial of either a common good or a transcendent individual good.3

The Meaning of Secularization

This essay will outline how secularization has taken place in the field of bio-ethics, provide some plausible causes, and offer thoughts on the future prospects of religion in the debate. First, however, a clarification of terminology is necessary. Theologians, churchman, statisticians, and sociologists alike have written a great deal about secularization, but they have not reached an agreement on its meaning.4 While it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into this debate, the meaning of “secularization” as used today derives from the writings of sociologists Max Weber (1864–1920), Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), and Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), who used the term to perpetrate the religion-in-decline thesis. For the last three centuries, a number of secular seers predicted the fall of religion, each forecasting its demise and eventual disappearance within their lifetimes.5 By the early twentieth century, “secularization” has become a code word for this Enlightenment thesis, which subscribed to rationalistic, positivist, and evolutionary conjectures that religion, being a man-made invention, would eventually give way to science.

By the late 1950s, “secularization” became a popular catchphrase with enthusiastic support from anthropologists and social scientists.6 More recently, however, the thesis has been challenged by the fact that in many parts of the world, including the industrialized United States, religious faith has not disappeared but remains as vigorous as ever. As some began to abandon the secularization thesis, others proposed further elaboration and refinement of terminologies.7 Hence, though the term remains...

5 Thomas Woolston, Voltaire, Auguste Comte, Thomas Jefferson, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Sigmund Freud all offered prophesies and theories of how this would inescapably come about.
ambiguous and is tainted with a predetermined ideology, for the purpose of this paper, “secularization” can be defined as a description or theory of the increasing loss of religious influence and authority at the different levels of life—on the societal level, the organizational or institutional level, and the level of individual religiosity.8

Secularization Involving Different Spheres of Society

Since the times of the Enlightenment, secularism has encroached upon the hegemony of religion in different public spheres of society. One by one, the traditional control of religion in vital areas of the social order began to crumble under the secular challenge of politics, culture, science, economy, judicial activism, philosophy, and education. In the West, most modern democracies have taken to heart the dictum of “separation of State and Church” or the Rousseauian proposal of a secular state of laïcité, where laws, government programs, and education must strictly be founded on nonsectarian principles. America differed from Europe in that the secularizing forces did not garner sufficient support to overthrow the religious dominance in many of these areas until the past century. Sociologist Christian Smith calls this the “secular revolution,” which occurred not as a natural or inevitable consequence of modernization but as “the outcome of a struggle between contending groups with conflicting interests seeking to control social knowledge and institutions.”9

Secularization has had the greatest impact in American higher education, where the explicitly religious (Christian) ideals and authority that once held major influence in the leading institutions now have little sway at all. It happened across the board—from Ivy League schools to state universities, in Protestant colleges and Catholic institutions. Academics all over have come to accept the unspoken Enlightenment assumptions that belief is nonrational (if not wholly irrational), that it lies outside the bounds of intellectual inquiry, and that it is of marginal significance in human life. This defection of colleges and universities from their denominational loyalties is due to a series of economic, administrative, professional, and religious factors. Different denominations originally erected Protestant schools to produce learned clergy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Protestant liberalism, which colluded with secularists in orienting the educational system toward research and professionalism, regularly overtook the evangelical thrust of these schools. Catholic higher education withstood secularizing tendencies until the 1960s, when complex cultural and ecclesial factors caused a crisis of identity, which boosted the desire of


8 Adapted from Dobbelaere, “Secularization,” 1–213.

university administrators to enter into the mainstream and contributed to a preference for academic excellence over their schools’ religious moorings.10

Ethics and theology were probably the last strongholds against the erosive tide of secularity, but they eventually succumbed as well. This is predictable, since theological speculations and research are invariably linked to the now secularized academia. For the mainline Protestant churches, decades of collaboration with secular forces in the educational field eventually broke down when the secular forces deemed the all-encompassing liberal Protestant ideals too “sectarian.”11 Catholicism, drawing on its European encounter, was able to withstand the encroachment of Enlightenment thinking for many years. Notwithstanding courageous resistance in many parts, the discord generated by the papal encyclical Humanae vitae was the straw that broke the camel’s back.12 Before Humanae vitae, the natural law approach of Catholic medical ethics found perfect harmony between faith and reason, with its ultimate foundation in God. In the fallout of Humanae vitae, the uprising of a revisionist morality challenged the adequacy of natural law reasoning to address the moral questions of the day. Theologians such as Alfons Auer, Franz Böckle, Louis Janssens, Bruno Schuller, Josef Fuchs, Charles Curran, and others made an ominous proposal of “autonomous morality in a Christian context”13 that effectively negated any distinctively Christian contribution to ethics. Likewise, proportionalists began to affirm that ethical decisions fall under the category of right and wrong, but not good or evil.14 All of this spelled trouble for the Catholic Church, and even the Protestant ethicist Paul Ramsey noted that “due to the uncertainties in the Roman Catholic moral theology since Vatican II, even the traditional medical ethics courses in schools under Catholic auspices are undergoing vast changes, abandonment, or severe crisis.”15


Bioethics received its legacy from a tradition of medical ethics dating back to the Hippocratic tradition, spiced with Jewish and Christian inspiration, supplemented by scholasticism, natural law, and moral theology, and subsequently codified to personify a godly, virtuous, gentlemanly comportment of the medic.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, religion played an important role as a precursor discipline of medical ethics until the late 1960s. The rise of the new discipline, later coined “bioethics,” can be attributed to many factors. Above all, medicine in the post-World War II period provided a new arsenal of treatment options that were not previously available or imaginable. For the first time in history, medicine gave humanity the possibility of controlling and manipulating its nature and destiny in the areas of procreation, prolongation of life, genetic enhancement, and creation of clones, hybrids, and the like. With new medical advances came new challenges in ethics on many fronts. New-found resources brought with them the age-old questions of just distribution, legitimate uses of technology, and justified manipulation of nature.\textsuperscript{17} The debate over contraception was among the test cases of novel technology and ethical substance.

Naturally, theologians and religious ethicists were the first to tackle these puzzles, and many of them, including Joseph Fletcher, Paul Ramsey, and Richard McCormick, later became significant spokespersons for early biomedical ethics. However, the timing could not have been worse. Secularity had cast its ominous shadow over the enterprise, as theologians in their attempt to engage in dialogue with the world sometimes compromised their doctrines. Some adapted their message, thereby diluting it; others sought a neutral nonpartisan language in philosophy; and quite a few dropped their clerical garb and eventually their faith on this treacherous journey. Stanley Hauerwas complains that

\begin{quote}
\textit{even though religious thinkers have been at the forefront of much of the work done in the expanding field of “medical ethics,” it is not clear that they have been there as religious thinkers.} Joseph Fletcher, Paul Ramsey, James Gustafson, Charles Curran, [a\&] Jim Childress, to name just a few, have done extensive work in medical ethics, but often it is hard to tell how their religious convictions have made a difference for the methodology they employ or for their response to specific quandaries.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

The repercussions of these secularizing tendencies in disputes on methodology and content in both Catholic and Protestant theology had important consequences for the

\textsuperscript{16}See David F. Kelly, \textit{The Emergence of Roman Catholic Medical Ethics in North America: An Historical, Methodological, Bibliographical Study} (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979); Albert R. Jonsen, \textit{A Short History of Medical Ethics} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).


\textsuperscript{18}Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church} (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 70.
burgeoning field of bioethics. The debates absorbed the best minds of philosophy and theology, and a good number of them, bitter from the debate over *Humanae vitae*, eventually careered into bioethics and eschewed further theological “double-talk.” Among some prominent examples are André Hellegers, who served on the papal birth control commission but later dissented and founded the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown, and Daniel Callahan, who, disillusioned with *Humanae vitae*, became an atheist and co-founded the Hastings Center. Both these institutions with their now secular orientation contributed to the marginalization of religion in the bioethical discussion.\(^{19}\) An example of how secularization occurred at the personal level comes from bioethics pioneers who were laicized from their clerical states, including Joseph Fletcher, Warren Reich, Albert Jonsen, John Fletcher, and Daniel Maguire.

For the general population, the contraceptive controversy was but a passing issue. Medical delivery was undergoing drastic restructuring due to innovations, and patient care suffered from inattention, lack of communication, dehumanization, and outright unscrupulous abuses. The public and the government frantically called for ethical guidance. Traditional Hippocratic ethics, natural law, virtues, and moral theology all appeared somewhat *passe*, unfit for the current circumstances.\(^{20}\) To be fair, theology and theologians did come up with some key insights. But it was philosophy that the budding field of bioethics fell back on, perhaps because theology was itself vacillating at the moment.

American philosophy, now thoroughly secularized with the analytical approach of Anglo-American ethics inherited from David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill, reformulated bioethics in terms of prima facie principles.\(^{21}\) Among the different approaches, principlism, proposed by Tom Beauchamp and Jim Childress, became the most popular model of bioethical decision making to be applied in policy making and at the bedside, especially after receiving semi-official recognition in the *Belmont Report*.\(^{22}\) Even though the philosophy’s four principles were supposedly on equal footing, the principle of autonomy eventually overshadowed the discourse

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\(^{21}\) Jonsen, *Birth of Bioethics*, 65–89.

The secularization of bioethics. The possibility of a true moral consensus founded on principlism and its variants was at best problematic. By toppling the paternalist ideal, it had inadvertently fueled blatant individualism with a reductionist concept of the person that was ultimately unsatisfactory as an ethical system. Discontent soon brewed, as the consensus achieved by this ethic appeared contrived, and its uncritical support of the status quo as a possible façade masked the ideologies and interests of those in power. Bioethics no longer looked like a dialogue to discover truth. Legal concerns began to trump ethical ones. Thus, in response to the insufficiency of principlism, a plethora of competing models gained prominence—virtue ethics, casuistry, narrative ethics, feminist care ethics, phenomenology, and utilitarian ethics, to name a few—all seeking to relocate ethics in the context of the situation or the character of the moral agent.

To its credit, principlism still presupposed common morality and based itself on foundationalist reliance of norms. The challengers, in eschewing principles, tended to view morality as relative to the particular context and in no way generalizable to other situations. Casuists and contextualists, in their zeal for rejecting principles, become prone to situational ethics. Utilitarians ended up justifying anything under the sun, and were not very far from hedonism and libertarianism. Principlism and

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24 The tendency of bioethics to become an ideology has been noted by several authors. John Evans’ important sociological study demonstrated how the bioethics profession rose to prominence precisely because it served as a buffer between the concerned public on the one hand and the political and economic agendas of the rich and powerful on the other. See John Evans, *Playing God? Human Genetic Engineering and the Rationalization of Public Bioethical Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and D. Callahan, “Bioethics and Ideology,” *Hastings Center Report* 36.1 (January–February 2006): 363.


its contenders all suffered from the germ of intuitionism, which is tantamount to moral emotivism.\textsuperscript{29} When moral skepticism abounds, nihilism or relativism becomes inescapable—a conclusion that pragmatists willingly accepted and put into practice.\textsuperscript{30}

Bioethics, as Gilbert Meilaender puts it, lost its soul in the process:

\begin{quote}
Bioethics fashioned for this purpose will offer a lowest common denominator agreement. It will bracket matters on which we might intensely disagree—the nature of the human person, the meaning of suffering, the foundation of human dignity. Its focus is public, and, aiming at consensus on policy, it is more likely to lead to moral routinization than to prophetic witness.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Clearly, the moral high ground has been lost when renowned ethicists justify infanticide, bestiality, eugenics, the production of human clones, the harvesting of organs from the not-yet-dead, and the creation of human-animal hybrids to work as slaves.\textsuperscript{32} Bioethics has become a secular creature that not only rejects religion but now questions the very possibility of reason itself.\textsuperscript{33} This puts the entire ethical enterprise in jeopardy, as it can no longer give moral guidance to the pressing questions of the day.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{29} See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory} (London: Duckworth, 1981), 22.


\textsuperscript{31} Gilbert C. Meilaender, \textit{Body, Soul, and Bioethics} (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 18.


Some Theories on the Secularization of Bioethics

Secular bioethics is a sick patient in need of intensive therapy; however, the diagnosis turns out to be rather complicated. After an extensive review of the literature, three sets of theories can account for the secularization of bioethics. The first postulates a macro-historical process of modernization under the social theory of Max Weber mentioned previously. As society advances and takes on a modern rather than a superstitious mind-set, it must substitute some secular equivalents for religion. Therefore, in the area of ethics, responsibility will necessarily change hands from the theologians to the secular experts.35 The second set of theories sees secularization as a consequence of an expanding democracy in pluralistic societies. Since different communities have different understandings of the good, the role of the government is to provide a neutral ground of agreement, based on the lowest common denominator. This “overlapping consensus,” a concept taken from the political theory of John Rawls, would have no place for religion in a naked public square.36 A third theory understands secularization as a competition for jurisdiction among different professions, much like a turf war. The new profession of bioethicists was the winner of this contest, wresting away the traditional jurisdiction of the theologians, but acting as a buffer for the scientists before the anxious public.37

No one theory explains all the intricacies of the secularization of bioethics. Conceivably, more sociological empirical research in this area would be worthwhile. But the question is a deep one, and no easy answer will suffice. At root is an uncertainty about the place of religion in democracy, and about situating religious ethics in public ethics. A thorough analysis would require remarkable familiarity with the different disciplines of history, sociology, political theories, theology, and philosophy. Alasdair MacIntyre, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, H. Tristram Engelhardt, Stanley Hauerwas, and Jeffrey Stout have written extensively on these subjects and contributed lofty insights, but each comes from his own background and has been unable to cover all the angles with an all-embracing synthesis.38

Resurgence of Religion

Daniel Callahan, a herald of the field, laments that the “marginalization of religion in bioethics effectively downgraded one potential source of vigor to explore the larger questions,” which includes the cultural questions of bioethics, the roles

37 See Evans, Playing God?
and possibilities of medicine, our understanding of human health, and our thinking about the living of a life.39 Despondently, he resigns himself to the thinning of the bioethics debate. As important questions on the goals of medicine receive scarce attention, he even finds himself on the margin by bringing up these issues.40 Without a doubt, secular bioethics, with its excessive attention to crisis issues, has ignored the deeper interrogatories of human suffering and death, the quest for the true good without which ethical inquiry is fruitless, relevant questions of justice and charity, cost containment and overpaid specialties, and other concerns of sociological import.41

The inadequacy of secular bioethics calls for a re-examination of the possible contributions of religion and theology. The pendulum swings again, however, and much has been written on this subject in the last decade, as witnessed by a cursory search of the bioethics literature of the last fifty years (Figure 1).42 In terms of content, religion can provide the historical nexus that is shared by a majority of the society, by furnishing symbols and narratives that everyone can understand even

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40 Callahan received a cold shoulder from the bioethics community in discussing these issues, which he eventually published in *Setting Limits: Medical Goals in an Aging Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).


42 Using the ETHX database at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics (http://www.georgetown.edu/research/nrcbi/databases/ethx.htm) on August 10, 2006, the author determined the number of religious publications as a percentage of total bioethics publications each year from 1955 to 2005. The results are summarized in Figure 1. The original data and details of the search are available from the author.
if they no longer practice their faith. Religion can also provide the ends or telos of human existence, giving meaning to human nature, the good life, suffering and death, health, and the ends of medicine. Religious communities can offer bioethics a model of unity in diversity, and a covenant model of health care. They can take on a prophetic witness of justice, emphasize the importance of virtues and holiness in the providers, and give testimonies of caring and self-sacrifice in medicine. In terms of methodology, the debate has centered on whether it is possible, or even desirable, to translate the theological language into a secular one. While it may be true that content, community, and methodology can be replaced by some secular counterparts, it is only organized religion with its structures and convictions that can make a consistent, substantive, and serious proposal to bioethics.

Hence, a ray of hope appears on the horizon for religion to re-insert itself into the bioethical debate, which has become impoverished by its absence. Nevertheless, the challenge is great for churches and believers to make such a difference. Theology must reclaim orthodoxy without compromising with secularism. The religiously inspired academies need to re-discover their original inspiration and search for truth through faith combined with reason. It would mean a re-examination of the much-ignored themes of virtues and justice, spirituality and obedience, and sin and holiness in morality and in bioethics.

Richard Neuhaus once remarked in this context that “successful revolutions are vulnerable to, and sometimes provoke, counterrevolutions.” What we need today, therefore, are counter-revolutionaries who are not afraid to speak out and engage the secular world of bioethics in unequivocal terms, using sound philosophical reasoning, and—even unabashed theological insights.

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