

Irreligious Bioethics: a Benefit or a Loss#

Bioética Irreligiosa: Benefício ou Perda

James Drane*

Timothy Murphy's article entitled *In Defense of Irreligious Bioethics*¹ comes over as strange. His arguments for removing religion and religious thinking from the field of bioethics raise more questions about Timothy Murphy than they do about his campaign to make bioethics irreligious. What is behind this odd anti-religion project? What led to his conviction that everyone will benefit if religion and religious perspectives are removed from bioethics? What happened in Murphy's life to bring him to such a bizarre position?

The name Timothy Murphy suggests that he probably was Catholic in his earlier life. Did something happen in his life that lead him to launch a campaign against religion? He must know the history of bioethics and that most of the founders of bioethics had strong religious educational backgrounds. Their religious backgrounds and identities strongly influenced their involvement with the 20th century updating of medical ethics, and their enduring contributions to the new discipline of bioethics.

Albert Jonsen was a Jesuit. Jim Childress and Tom Beauchamp both had background religious education and Childress continued explicitly to promote the interaction of bioethics with religion. LeRoy Walter's post graduate education at Yale was in theology and he became The Joseph P. Kennedy Professor of Christian Ethics. Warren Reich was a priest and former president of The Catholic Theological Society. Tristram Engelhardt was a prominent public religious figure as well as the author of books and journals on Christian bioethics. Lisa Cahill was a professor of theology. Dan Callahan was the editor of a widely respected Catholic journal of religion and politics (*Commonweal*). Edmund Pellegrino was a prominent Catholic physician who became a respected author at Georgetown University after having been president of Catholic University of America. Religion played

an important role in forming the founders of bioethics as persons, as well as their interests and competencies in handling the ethical issues generated by contemporary medicine.

Outside the U.S. some of the first and most prominent bioethicists were either priests. Alfonso Llano S.J., from the Xaverian University of Bogota, Colombia, or prominent Catholic intellectuals as Juan Pablo Beca, from Chile. From Brazil, Márcio Fabri dos Anjos, Redemptorist and follower of the one most prestigious moral theologians of the XX century, The German Bernhard Haring. Leo Pessini, from the Order of Saint Camillus (An Order born in Italy that works in the health care field since XVI century). Alberto Botchatey, Augustinian from Argentina, and Jorge Ferrer, Jesuit from Porto Rico, for just naming. All these people are pioneers in these countries writing the first manuals of bioethics in the region of Latin America. This list of the founders of bioethics shows that not only that they were religious in their personal lives, but that theology had a major influence on their work in bioethics. The point is already more than obvious. Religion played an enormously important role in forming both the founders and the discipline of bioethics. Why then a campaign rid bioethics of any influence from or relation with religion?

The majority of the founders were Catholic and the reason for this is clear. Throughout the Catholic Church's long history, there was a continuing outreach toward the ill and the dying. Male and female religious communities were committed to care for the ill and dying. Church theologians continuingly responded to moral questions which arouse in this care. Let me offer an example.

Before contemporary scientific medicine developed in Germany in the 19th century, not much medical help was available for persons suffering from serious and threatening illness. Most seriously ill persons looked to

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Esse texto foi elaborado como comentário a uma publicação do Prof. Timothy Murphy no *The American Journal Bioethics*. Em seção especial, o periódico convida um pesquisador para desenvolver um texto sobre tema específico, para que seja comentado por outros profissionais convidados, tomando posição em relação às ideias expostas. Todo esse debate é publicado. O artigo não é de *acesso aberto*, mas algumas informações podem ser consultadas no site: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15265161.2012.719262#.VFu1w_nF_yY. Referência do trabalho: "Murphy TF. In Defense of Irreligious Bioethics. *Am J Bioethics*. 2012;12(12):3-10. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2012.719262>".

* Dr. Drane Bioethical Institute, Baron Furness Library, Edinboro University, Edinboro-PA.

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religion for help. Many seriously ill people travelled to religious shrines in search of healing. One of the most popular religious locations was the shrine of Saint James (Santiago) in North Western Spain. The relics of St. James the Apostle were transferred to the north western edge of what now is Spain in order to protect them from Muslim invaders in the 8th century. Long before the Muslims were expelled from the Spanish territory (15th century), Santiago de Compostello had become the most popular of all religious shrines for healing. The route across Northern Spain to the shrine was called *El Camino de Santiago*. Along the *Camino*, religious communities built places where the sick pilgrims could stay and be cared for if they could not continue their pilgrimage. These places of housing and care for sick pilgrims were called *hospicios*. Gradually *hospicios* evolved into *hospitals* and *hospices*.

The religious men and women caring for sick pilgrims over centuries ran into many moral problems and these were referred to respected Spanish moral theologians. The responses of moral theologians to the many ethical questions referred to them, became traditional medical ethics. Their concepts, explanations and distinctions were widely respected for being reasonable and helpful and they became integrated into bioethics when the new discipline became established. Basic bioethics standards, rules, principles etc. have their historical roots in the responses of theologians to questions raised in the caring for sick and dying pilgrims over many centuries. The idea of removing religion from bioethics or making bioethics irreligious amounts to purging bioethics of its centuries old reasonable moral directives, all of which came from religious thinkers.

The distinction between Acts and Omissions, Direct and Indirect Killing, Prolonging Life and Prolonging Death, Patient Consent and Patient Respect, Ordinary and Extraordinary Treatments, Withholding and Withdrawing Treatment, are just a few of the reasonable moral distinctions from late Medieval and early Renaissance theology which later became accepted and integrated into the academic discipline of bioethics. Removing religion from bioethics amounts to purging bioethics of its academic foundations. Raising questions about the

traditional conceptual foundations of bioethics is one thing. Questioning in religion is always respectable and has always operated in Catholic theological culture. A campaign however to make bioethics irreligious is more than strange.

The irreligious bioethics crusade may originate in a pathology, but given the current secular culture in the West it has a place. Atheism and irreligion are more and more common components of today's culture. Timothy Murphy's crusade will make him a leader in groups of people in today's secular culture. He may enjoy this status. Taking on religion, in the sense of arguing for an irreligious bioethics, is however an example of tearing something down, that has enjoyed centuries of broad respect. If what he is dedicated to tearing down is a respected academic religious edifice (an academic cathedral), he is not going to enjoy longstanding admiration for his work. He certainly will not be admired as one of the founders of bioethics.

Since I started with a question about Timothy Murphy's personal story, let me mention a personal story of my own. As the reader will already have figured, there is a religion component to my involvement with bioethics. I studied in Rome and took classes at a Jesuit university there, the Gregorian. The very respected moral theologian there during my years was a priest who had a medical background. His lectures were filled with concrete medical cases which he used to explain moral principles and theological points of view.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, I was actually being given a bioethics education long before there was a discipline of bioethics. I learned about natural law; hard rational analysis of complex concrete cases; attention to personal details; how to apply ethical rules and principles to concrete settings. In other words, without knowing it I was being given training and formation in what later would be clinical bioethics. My own personal religious education in effect was my early training in bioethics. My personal experience is just one example of a much longer and deeper historical relationship between religion and bioethics. This centuries-old historical relationship is a wealth that should not be thrown away. Murphy's personal experience and personal history will

help to understand why he wants to do such a thing and why he has launched such a bizarre campaign. This will help us understand Dr. Murphy better and give us a better understanding of what on the surface appears to be a pointless and absurd project.

A critical reader might think that Dr. Murphy is only talking only about the Catholic religion. The Catholic Church obviously has the longest and deepest relationship with medical ethics, but gradually Protestant theologians joined and participated in shaping an important relationship with the discipline of bioethics. In the Catholic tradition, natural law, rationality, respect for the structure of created reality etc., all contributed to a Catholic moral theology and medical ethics. Catholic hospitals and religious orders who over centuries cared for the ill made a Catholic medical ethics a necessity.

All this history is different from the history of Protestant involvement with bioethics. Some of the founders and early bioethicists were Protestant and as the discipline grew, their numbers increased. One Protestant group, Evangelicalism, created an Evangelical Theological Society, and some of the members of this society became bioethicists. An bioethical article on *euthanasia* appeared in *The Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* in 1976².

In the 1980s articles on bioethics began to appear in different Protestant journals. Brad F. Mellon, a respected Protestant intellectual and cleric, served as chaplain

in a Mennonite institution that cared for the ill. In the 1990s he began attending bioethics conferences and publishing on bioethics topics in Protestant journals. At a meeting of Evangelical Theological Society in 2013 he presented a paper entitled "An Evangelical Foundation for Modern Bioethics". In it he traced some of the personal influences and the history of bioethics in Protestantism. He outlined a Protestant foundation for bioethics focused on scripture. Without ignoring Catholic natural law thinking or denying its historical importance and contribution to bioethics, he argued for an added scriptural foundation from bioethics. In effect he outlined a Protestant methodology from bioethics and a biblically-based foundation for the discipline³.

Mellon's point was that Christian bioethicists cannot simply turn to scripture to find answers to bioethics questions. Scripture however does contain a diversity of voices and a wealth of insight for addressing contemporary bioethics issues. Scripture's insight and wisdom contribute yet another wealth to the discipline of bioethics which would be lost in Dr. Murphy's campaign to purge bioethics of religion.

On the positive side Dr. Murphy's campaign will draw attention to all that has been contributed to bioethics from religion; something that might have been ignored and lost without the influence of his campaign for Irreligious Bioethics.

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