

*Is There a Need for
Catholic Identity in Bioethics?
(A Young Layman Questions Himself
About The Peasant of the Garonne)*

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One of the growing fields of applied ethics is bioethics. The practice and delivery of health care have given rise to numerous ethical questions over the last thirty years, and rapidly developing new technologies promise to continue to challenge our ethical thinking. The Catholic Church has maintained a presence in health care from its inception as part of the healing ministry of Jesus. Even in the midst of the current crisis in which many hospitals and medical facilities are merging or closing due to financial constraints, the Catholic mission in health care remains strong—although not without its challenges. As a natural consequence, Catholic scholars have regularly addressed moral issues relating to health care long before the term “bioethics” was coined. Certainly, the roots of a Catholic approach to bioethics can be found in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. One could also point to the influential Spanish Dominican, Francisco de Vitoria, who in the 1500s developed the work of Aquinas in regard to withholding and withdrawing medical treatment, and the difference between ordinary and extraordinary means. Today this work is carried on in the United States by the American Bishops, by groups such as the Catholic Health Association and the National Catholic Bioethics Institute, as well as by ethics committees in local Catholic hospitals, and by Catholic women and men across the country.

But this involvement is coming under fire today. In our culture dominated by secular humanism, the views and arguments of Catholics appear to have no place, at least in so far as they come from our Catholic identity. Following

upon the political notions of separation between Church and State, it would seem reasonable to some in bioethics that debates must involve only secular ideas, which presumably will appeal to all parties involved. I would suggest that this notion of “secular” is beginning to be taken rather strongly in bioethics, excluding any arguments coming from a religious tradition—whether specifically scriptural or theological in nature or not—as inappropriate in the public discourse. These thoughts raise the question of whether or not a specifically “Catholic” approach to bioethics is legitimate? I would like to consider this question from a slightly different perspective: *Is there a need for a Catholic identity in bioethics?*

In my paper, I want to examine the growing attitude of resistance to arguments with religious associations, both in the political and public arenas, and more specifically within the field of bioethics. Then, I will raise a challenge to such resistance as unjust and unreasonable. Finally, I want to end with a personal reflection on the need for a “Catholic” identity in bioethics as part of the temporal mission of Catholic scholars. It is my belief that a Catholic presence does not destroy the pluralism of public debate, but rather enriches it, in that the spirit of Catholic scholarship is a search for truth.

PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND RELIGIOUS PERSONS

Can a person, as a Catholic, participate actively in America’s public discourse and debate of bioethical issues? The typical answer is often, “It depends what you mean by “as a Catholic.”

Lying beneath the surface of the question of what it means to be “a Catholic” is the deep cavern of debate regarding the separation of Church and State. I do not mean to imply that such debate is unimportant—in many ways it may be all-important to the future of our country as a land of moral conviction. But the scholars writing on this issue offer little consensus as to the original intent of the Framers of the Constitution, and they indicate wide divergence of opinion as to the purpose of the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment, and conflicting visions as to the height, breadth, and width of Jefferson’s “wall of separation.” Should the application of the Establishment Clause protect religion and religious institutions from interference and persecution from the State? Or, should any application of the Clause aim solely at protecting the integrity of the democratic political process in this country from the influence, and some would say corruption, of religious institutions? To an extent, the divergence of opinion is unsettling: How does the separation of Church and State in America impact those who accept a specific religious tradition? Do we have a place in public discourse in this country, or

must we live with a separated psyche—private religious beliefs and secularized public ideas?

It is interesting to note that forty or more years ago several scholars did not think this would be an issue any longer—that is, the question of Church and State should have disappeared by now (not settled, just vanished as an irrelevant concern). Consider one prominent example, *The Secular City*, published by Harvey Cox in 1965. Cox and others¹ anticipated that human society would become increasingly secularized as a result of scientific and technological development. What was heralded as the overcoming of myth and superstition (Cox's view of religious faith) would eventually be explained away by modern disciplines such as psychology and neurology—in short, scientific rationality would lead to the demise of organized religion. One gets the sense that this was supposed to occur through a direct correlation—the more we learned, the less we were supposed to believe. Cox and the others were wrong, and Cox admits this in a paper he published in 1996, “Religion and Politics after *The Secular City*”: “We are in the midst of a religious resurgence all around the world, and without realizing, measuring, and weighing in the importance of this resurgence, we don't understand the world we are living in.”² Of interest is the fact that Cox claims this “resurgence” was unanticipated:

So here we are at the end of the twentieth century which was supposed to see the withering away or the marginalization of religion, but something quite different is happening. . . . [I]t was unanticipated because the scholars who were thinking about religion forty years ago were still steeped in the myth of modernity, in the idea of progress, of the gradual overcoming of superstition by science and technology and rationality. They were *so* sure that religion could be explained away on the basis of sociological, psychological, or neurological theories that they really didn't appreciate how profound—and I would say ineradicable—the religious dimension of human life is. It is not going away.³

¹ For some illustrative examples see: Bryan Wilson, *Religion and Secular Society* (London: C. A. Watts, 1996); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967); Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Anthropological View* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); and Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966).

² Harvey Cox, “Religion and Politics after *The Secular City*,” in *Religion and the Political Order: Politics in Classical and Contemporary Christianity, Islam and Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1996), p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*

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Now it would be hard to say just how many “scholars” really believed this, or if this idea was truly anything more than a hope for some of them, but the general consensus today is that religion does matter in human society.

The corollary to this is that it does not seem possible, for better or worse, to keep religion entirely out of the public and political arenas, even given current debates regarding the Establishment Clause. Cox himself offers the following remarks in the conclusion of his essay:

Our present religious resurgence . . . marks a tidal change in human spirituality. It is a recognition that modernity has in some measure failed, and that for many people, the bright promise of what science was supposed to do for us has now turned to ashes. The scientists themselves, perhaps more than anyone else, now recognize that we should count on science for a much more limited role. We are thankful for what science can do, but we don't count on it as the Messiah. The age of scientific and technological messianism is over, and now the door is open for something else. I think that religions are going to play an important role in whatever that “something else” is. But it is going to be good news *and* bad news.⁴

Not exactly a ringing endorsement for religion and people of faith, but an endorsement nonetheless.

In the volume in which Cox's essay was published, many scholars consider the implications of religion in the public and political arenas. They question how they misjudged religion, why it has resurrected itself, and what impact this new resurgence will have in contemporary society—all the while noting that religion, for better or worse, is here to stay and will be part of public discourse. Other authors on religion and politics make similar claims. For example, in his essay, “Religion as a Political Interest Group,” Anthony Champagne writes:

Religion is a powerful force in the lives of the American people, far more powerful a force than political scientists have traditionally been willing to grant. Religious concerns include a vast number of political, social, and economic issues, ranging from compulsory vaccination laws to sex education to nuclear proliferation. Today, that which is the domain of the state and that which is within the domain of religious faith substantially overlap.⁵

Such scholars are hard at work, trying to clarify how religion should function in our pluralistic society, what role it should have in politics, what its limits

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ Anthony Champagne, “Religion as a Political Interest Group,” in *Religion and Politics*, ed. W. Lawson Taitte (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1989), p. 117.

are, how far it should extend, and so forth. A noble cause to be sure, but one which has yet to arrive at consensus.

However, I believe it is important to emphasize that simply because religion seems to be resurging, and that in some sense religion seems to be more recognized in the political sphere now, these developments do not ensure that religious people are allowed to be a part of public discourse—at least in a *substantial* manner. Frank Guliuzza, in his work, *Over The Wall: Protecting Religious Expression in the Public Square*, captures this concern vividly:

[A]lthough religious believers are becoming ever more active in politics and political debate, many academic and cultural elites dismiss religious-based argument from dialogic politics. If I am correct, then the frequency of political activism by religious believers does not mean that they are taken seriously, or even welcome in the marketplace, by many academic and cultural elites.⁶

The danger here is that even though things may seem fine and peaceful on the surface, religious voices and attitudes may be getting silenced and neutralized in more subtle ways in this country. Guliuzza explains the danger further:

What a growing number of scholars are telling us is that the complex relationship between religion and politics has been damaged. The problem, they maintain, is that the two institutions do not fully interact in contemporary American society. Specifically, religious voices are neutralized and are thus restrained from many parts of American public life. Even though religion permeates the political and social environment, it is abrogated effectively by the actions of many cultural and intellectual elites.⁷

What is particularly troubling is that the religious voice is being silenced *qua* religious—without any regard for the merits or truth of the claims brought forth by religious people. As Guliuzza notes:

It is staggering to fathom the general contempt with which religion and religious people are held on college and university campuses. . . . This contempt might be understandable if intellectuals had reached their conclusions after serious study, but often scholars react to “religion” without employing the careful inquiry they devote to their own areas of expertise. Consequently, it is not uncommon for academics to casually dismiss religious argument as unworthy of serious discussion.⁸

I believe that part of the problem here is that the difference between a “religious argument” and “an argument from a religious person” is becoming more

⁶ Frank Guliuzza, *Over the Wall: Protecting Religious Expression in the Public Square* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

and more blurred. If our current understanding of the separation of Church and State does not allow the former, is there any room left for the latter?

The emphasis on the academic and intellectual level, then, is significant. It would be hard to prove that religious people are not welcome in the public arena, for there seems to be ample evidence to the contrary. Religious people and religious groups are gaining in numbers and presence. Cox's "resurgence" suggests itself everywhere. But does *mere* presence matter? Not really—not when it comes to public discourse. At a time when America is recognizing the need to empower disadvantaged groups in our communities, and to provide more open and public forums because of our diversity, the religious voice seems to be effectively "marginalized" from those very forums. But this "marginalization" is subtle, as Guliuzza explains:

The pressure to privatize religion is more subtle than an overt restriction on political participation. Remember I am distinguishing between the treatment religion receives by intellectual elites from the public at large. Citizens who are religious are welcome to the political debate as *citizens*. They can bring whatever intellectual arrows that are in their quivers to the fray—with one exception. Increasingly, religious argument is unwelcome.⁹

Without necessarily accepting Guliuzza's whole thesis, I think he makes some valid points regarding the religious person in public and political discourse. The religious person is welcome as a citizen—that, on the surface seems appropriate. But if, at the same time, religious argument is dismissed by cultural and intellectual elites without even being heard, what value does the participation by religious people in public debates hold for both the religious person himself, and for the public? Very little I am afraid. Even worse would be the rejection of any arguments that come from religious people, simply *because* they come from religious people, and regardless of whether such arguments are based upon theological or scriptural sources versus arguments based on valid reasoning which happens to concur with a person's religious beliefs. It is the latter attitude that I see gaining momentum in the field of bioethics—the marginalization of arguments from religious persons without any serious consideration of the merits of those arguments.

THE SECULARIZATION OF BIOETHICS

In terms of the political implications of the separation of Church and State, and the impact of prevailing attitudes for public discourse and debate, much more could be (and will need to be) said. But I want to narrow down

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

my focus specifically to the field of bioethics. Even though Cox and others have conceded that religion has not died, there is no mistaking the increase in secularization in our country and the impact such secularization has had on what we believe public discourse should look like.

In bioethics, for example, issues are still treated largely in terms of their technical dimensions, and to a certain degree on their legal implications. Some mainstream ethicists will discuss "values," but values-talk is embedded in the private lives of those involved, not in the public discourse of the "issues." Certainly, the "secularization" that has been occurring in American society has also touched the public discourse of bioethics. In 1990 Daniel Callahan noted this development:

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 increasingly shaped by philosophical and legal concepts. The consequence has been a model 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.¹⁰

This "systematic" rejection of transcendent ideals is evidenced in recent texts in bioethics, which are more and more taking on a legalistic flavor, as well as in the media on shows such as *20/20*, *Dateline*, and *Frontline* when they feature bioethical issues. When cloning, the human genome project, or reproductive technologies are addressed, the focus is scientific. Even the "Health Minute" reports that are part of nightly newscasts primarily focus on technological breakthroughs, with little serious effort to engage in any ethical considerations during the reporting. There is evidence to suggest that Guli-uzza's claim is correct, and that religious voices are being neutralized within the field of bioethics, as well as in other aspects of our society.

As an illustration, I want to point to two examples from the discourse of bioethics which reflect this "marginalization" of the religious voice. First, consider the remarks of Justice Stevens in his dissenting opinion on *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* (1989), one of the landmark abortion cases following the wake of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. The Supreme Court was considering the constitutionality of a Missouri law that prohibited the use of public funds for counseling a woman to have an abortion that was not necessary to save her life, that also prohibited the usage of public facilities for abortions except in cases where the mother's life was at risk, and which required abortion doctors

¹⁰ Daniel Callahan, "Religion and the secularization of bioethics." *Hastings Center Report*, July–August, 1990, p. 2.

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to test the viability of fetuses over twenty weeks gestation. In part, however, attention was drawn to this case because a preamble had been affixed to the law which stated that: "life begins at conception and that unborn children have protectable interest in life, health, and well-being."¹¹ Note Justice Steven's discussion regarding this point from the law's preamble:

I am persuaded that the absence of any secular purpose for the legislative declarations that life begins at conception and that conception occurs at fertilization makes the relevant portion of the preamble invalid under the Establishment Clause . . . the preamble, an unequivocal endorsement of a religious tenet of some but by no means all Christian faiths, serves no identifiable secular purpose. That fact alone compels a conclusion that the statute violates the Establishment Clause. . . . Bolstering my conclusion that the preamble violates the First Amendment is the fact that the intensely divisive character of much of the national debate over the abortion issue reflects the deeply held religious convictions of many participants in the debate. The Missouri Legislature may not inject its endorsement of a particular religious tradition into this debate, for "[t]he Establishment Clause does not allow public bodies to foment such disagreement."¹²

It is important to note, however, that in the actual bill that was signed into law by the Governor of Missouri in 1986, no religious arguments were included. That is, the statement in the preamble to which Justice Stevens reacts is not offered as a religious argument *per se*—but rather as a conclusion of medical science and reason. However, because of associations that were suggested by certain *amici* for Reproductive Health Services, it was concluded that the point regarding conception was an endorsement of religion, and thus invalid under the Establishment Clause. Justice Stevens did not even consider this as a point worthy of consideration on its own merits. There are numerous people who would accept the statement regarding life beginning at conception on purely scientific grounds. The idea of "life at conception" has been excluded from the public discourse on abortion—at least at the highest levels of the Supreme Court where, unfortunately, it matters most.

A second example comes from the recent debate over physician-assisted suicide. One of the leading proponents of assisted suicide is Timothy E. Quill, M.D. In his various discussions of this topic, Dr. Quill has addressed the Principle of Double Effect, which is often employed in arguments against his view that assisted suicide is morally permissible. Double Effect helps to explain why allowing a person to die under certain circumstances (i.e., when

¹¹ Missouri Senate Committee Substitute for House Bill No. 1596 (1986), preamble.

¹² Justice Stevens, dissenting opinion, *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, 492 U.S. 490 (1989).

treatment is medically futile or there is the presence of a grave burden for the patient) may be permissible, when the intention is not to kill the person, but rather to act for some other important good. At the same time, Double Effect rather clearly shows that assisted suicide is impermissible, because the actual "assistance" here requires that one intend to kill the patient. Now, Quill objects to this principle at many levels. Note, however, the first reason Quill offers for rejecting the Principle of Double Effect in a 1997 "Sounding Board" article in *The New England Journal of Medicine*:

The rule of double effect has many shortcomings as an ethical guide for either clinical practice or public policy. First, the rule originated in the context of a particular religious tradition. American society incorporates multiple religious, ethical, and professional traditions, so medicine must accommodate various approaches to assessing the morality of end-of-life practices.¹³

Quill does go on to present other reasons to reject this Principle, at least as it might apply to assisted-suicide. But what is striking is that his very *first* claim against Double Effect is that it comes from a "particular religious tradition," which he notes earlier in the article specifically as the Roman Catholic tradition. Quill's remaining comments hark back to this initial remark, albeit rather subtly. In explaining the development of the Principle of Double Effect Quill makes note that it developed in the Middle Ages. Later, suggestions are made that the Principle rests on an ambiguous and old-fashioned notion of intentionality, one which modern psychology suggests does not reflect the complexity and ambiguity of the human psyche. The implication is one of the religious medieval tradition versus modern psychology—or more strongly, superstition versus science. Quill also notes that philosophers and theologians who attempt to apply the Principle often have trouble doing so clearly. Dr. Quill's consideration of the Principle of Double Effect seems tainted by his perception of it simply as a religious concept. It is again worth noting that in current applications of Double Effect, no religious or theological arguments are asserted in its defense. It is offered as a rational Principle in its own right, but people like Quill would marginalize its application because of its religious association.

Many other examples could be offered in further support of this marginalization of the religious voice in public debates on issues in bioethics. Religious health care institutions are coming under greater pressure to perform

¹³ Timothy E. Quill et al., "The Rule of Double Effect—A Critique of Its Role in End-of-Life Decision Making," in *The New England Journal of Medicine* 337, no. 24, December 11, 1997, p. 1770.

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treatments that secular society deems necessary and important—with religious objections being viewed less and less favorably in the media. Religious hospitals and health care facilities are charged with being unresponsive to the needs of the community, especially in regards to reproductive rights and women's health issues. The reasons for not providing certain treatments and drugs are characterized as “Catholic reasons”—not just “reasons.” How can religious institutions respond if their voice is marginalized in the public debate? Do religious health care facilities have a place in the public forum? If yes, how much of their “religious” side can they bring into the public realm? Does it depend on what one means by “Catholic”? Is the Catholic role only valid if it is first secularized?

A CHALLENGE IN THE NAME OF JUSTICE

Even granting that some levels of separation between Church and State are valid within the American political system, the presence and participation of religious believers in public discourse must be allowed in the name of justice.

To support this, it must be noted that there is a distinction between the *political* realm and the *public* realm that needs to be drawn out more clearly. Modern *political* debate has been setting the tone for *public* discourse—but the two are not co-equal. What may not be appropriate for a State to do, is not necessarily, *de facto*, inappropriate for society—especially a society that claims to be genuinely pluralistic and diverse. As Richard McBrien notes in his essay, “The Future Role of the Church in American Society”:

The discussion of the general topic of religion and politics, and of the more specific topic of church and politics, is confused when the distinction between society and state is collapsed. The separation of religion-church and state is not the same as the separation of religion-church and society.¹⁴

Given this distinction, I would argue that to achieve justice at the *political* level, where direct theological and scriptural argument would not seem appropriate, there must be a correlating openness to a plurality of views at the *public* level, within the rules of civil discourse. How else could our country achieve the common good, unless all parties are allowed a presence at the discussion table? This in no way implies that we have to meet all the interests that come forth in our society—*political* policies will have to discriminate in some sense. But to achieve fairness in a pluralistic society, the *public* forum

¹⁴ Richard P. McBrien, “The Future Role of the Church in American Society,” in *Religion and Politics in the American Milieu*, ed. Leslie Griffin, published under the auspices of *The Review of Politics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 87.

will need to be open—and open in a genuine manner, not just to those views and causes deemed politically correct. To exclude some voices (those of traditional religious backgrounds or the religious right) in the name of allowing others to speak more freely is simply discrimination in the very worst sense. We must also become more careful about lumping all groups into one—all religions and religious people do not bear the burden of the acts of a few who claim to be following God's commands. Each case, each act, each idea must be considered on its own merits.

And so, it would seem perfectly legitimate for religious institutions and religious persons to participate in *public* discourse within society, even if more direct *political* activity was not likewise legitimate. As McBrien explains:

Although the activity of the U.S. Catholic bishops on nuclear weapons and abortion, for example, is concerned with policies which are established by the *state*, the bishop's involvement in these issues occurs in and through the channels a democratic *society* provides for public debate. In such a society voluntary associations play a key role, providing a buffer between the state and the citizenry as well as a structured means of influencing public policy. The church itself is a voluntary association. As such, it has the constitutional right to raise and address what it regards as the moral dimension of public issues, and to encourage its own members to engage in the same public discussion of these issues. . . . Whatever Thomas Jefferson's metaphor about a "wall of separation" may mean constitutionally for the relationship between church and state, it can have no inhibiting impact, constitutional or otherwise, on the relationship between church and society.¹⁵

In short, accepting the limitations of our *political* system in terms of religion does not mean that we must accept the marginalization of the religious voice *and* the religious person that is occurring in contemporary *public* discourse.

The same concerns were reflected in an article written by Daniel Sulmasy and Edmund Pellegrino in response to Quill's arguments against Double Effect. In their well reasoned and thorough essay titled, "The Rule of Double Effect: Clearing Up the Double Talk," these authors address Quill's claim that the religious association of Double Effect is a hindrance to its effectiveness as a moral guideline:

This is a very odd position. Should the commonly held position that stealing is morally wrong be rejected simply because it can be found (Exodus 20:15) in the commandments of a particular religious tradition? The religious origins of a moral principle or rule should not preclude its

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 87–88, 92.

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discussion in civil society. Nor should the congruence between a moral argument's conclusions and the teachings of a religion undermine the validity of the argument. An exhortation to exclude such rules and principles in the name of tolerance seems itself highly intolerant.¹⁶

The crucial point that Sulmasy and Pellegrino underscore is that whereas the Double Effect was developed by religious people, no specific theological or scriptural arguments are asserted in its defense:

There is nothing about the rule of double effect that is inherently religious. The fact that it was developed by theologians does not vitiate the fact that it might be morally true. Nothing about the rule presumes any knowledge of scripture or the teachings of any religion. All that is required is a belief that certain actions are absolutely morally prohibited, or, more controversially, at least a belief that consequences are not the sole determinants of the morality of an action. . . . A logically rigorous argument against the rule of double effect would deal with the rule on its own terms.¹⁷

Having made the point that Double Effect needs to be considered on its own merits in public discussions of bioethical issues, the authors go further and call Quill to task for this inappropriate attack. They do not let Quill get away with this attempt to marginalize the principle simply because of its religious origins:

To raise the question of the origins of the rule as a reason to discredit it is a form of the logical fallacy of the *ad hominem* argument—to claim to discredit an argument because of who states it. . . . The argument that it should be rejected out of hand simply because it originated with a particular religious tradition is completely unwarranted.¹⁸

Sulmasy and Pellegrino get to the heart of the problem here, and challenge Quill's blatant *ad hominem* remarks. One wonders whether or not these important points were given due attention—Pellegrino is a well-known Catholic doctor, and Sulmasy, who has a Ph.D. and M.D., happens to be a Franciscan. I can only hope their article was considered on the merits of its arguments and not simply on its origins.

Nonetheless, I believe that we must continue to challenge such *ad hominem* attacks raised against the arguments of religious persons, and call for serious consideration and discussion in their place. This is the only

¹⁶ Daniel P. Sulmasy and Edmund Pellegrino, "The Rule of Double Effect: Clearing Up the Double Talk," in *The Archives of Internal Medicine*, 159, March 22, 1999. See p. 548.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 548–49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 549.

way we can hope to reach Truth. Whatever *political* needs our country may have for separation of Church and State, I do not believe there is a corresponding need for such a strong secularization of ideas in *public* discourse—certainly not to the extent of marginalizing the arguments of religious persons without further consideration. Our country has come such a long way in regards to recognizing the dangers and injustices of exclusion, with women and minorities for example, that it seems a shame to forget what has been learned.

BUT WHY SPECIFICALLY CATHOLIC?

If one grants the arguments given thus far, a further question remains. Why insist on a specifically “Catholic” approach to bioethics? Is there really a need to make such an explicit identification? Indeed, if what has been said thus far is true, perhaps insisting on a “Catholic” identity would be counterproductive in today’s public climate—that is, if the voices of religious persons are being marginalized, would it not be more effective to voluntarily secularize the “Catholic” approach so that the ideas would be more acceptable? One might even wonder if specifically “Catholic” positions, for example on birth control and assisted reproduction, should be withheld from public debate in the hope of fostering better cooperation within our diverse society? I find this line of reasoning troubling for Catholic scholars and Catholic institutions. I believe that such an attitude accepts the *ad hominem* attacks that are made within public discourse as legitimate criticisms of the ideas of religious persons, rather than recognizing such attacks as fallacious attempts to neutralize the questioning of morally troubling positions. And so, I recognize two significant reasons why there is, indeed, a need for a “Catholic” approach to bioethics within contemporary American society. First, I would insist that the Catholic approach brings a unique perspective to the table that is founded on a carefully thought out understanding of the human person—an understanding that is lacking within the general arena of bioethical discussion. Second, I believe that developing a specifically “Catholic” approach to bioethics is appropriate for Catholic philosophers as part of fulfilling their temporal mission as Christians. To aid my reflections on these points, I turn to the work of Jacques Maritain in his final reflection, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, and to John Paul II’s encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio*.

Let me begin by noting that, while one may speak at times of “Catholic bioethics,” the Church, as noted consistently in official documents and teaching, cannot have an authoritative bioethics. Bioethics is an applied field of philosophy, and as John Paul II reminds us in *Fides et Ratio*, there is no

“official philosophy of the Church, since the faith as such is not a philosophy.”¹⁹ However, as Maritain notes in *The Peasant of the Garonne*: “[F]aith itself demands to be completed by a . . . theology. And theology cannot take shape in us without the help of that natural wisdom of which human reason is capable, whose name is philosophy.”²⁰

For Maritain, this statement is a reflection of his belief that there could be a genuine “Christian philosophy.” Much has been debated regarding the notion of a “Christian philosophy,” but I want to focus specifically upon Maritain’s explanation of how natural such a development would be in the Christian who also happens to be a philosopher—the two roles are not antithetical:

After all, a Christian can be a philosopher. And if he believes that, in order to philosophize, he should lock his faith up in a strongbox—that is, should cease being a Christian while he philosophizes—he is maiming himself, which is no good (all the more as philosophizing takes up the better part of his time). He is also deluding himself, for these kinds of strongboxes have always poor locks. But if, while he philosophizes, he does not shut his faith up in a strongbox, he is philosophizing in faith, willy-nilly. It is better that he should be aware of it.²¹

Simply put, I would say that Catholic philosophers are not two people, but one. And as one person, it is certainly possible to develop oneself as a philosopher and be true to the demands of philosophical inquiry, without at the same time offending one’s fundamental religious beliefs. In fact, I would claim that in the name of philosophical consistency, a Catholic philosopher must carry out this task.

In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II also addresses the notion of “Christian philosophy.” He notes that there can be a genuinely

Christian way of philosophizing, a philosophical speculation conceived in dynamic union with faith. It does not therefore simply refer to a philosophy developed by Christian philosophers who have striven in their research not to contradict the faith. The term Christian philosophy includes those important developments of philosophical thinking which would not have happened without the direct or indirect contribution of Christian faith.²²

John Paul II is not naïve to the demands of philosophy which require it to be independent and autonomous. However, he expresses in his letter a belief

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 76.

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 85.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²² John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 76.

that philosophy and the Christian faith are compatible: “[P]hilosophy must obey its own rules and be based upon its own principles; truth, however, can only be one. The content of Revelation can never debase the discoveries and legitimate autonomy of reason.”²³

In addition to the compatibility of philosophy and faith, there is a practical role that the development of a “Christian philosophy” can serve, which was recognized by both Maritain and John Paul II. In *The Peasant of the Garonne*, Maritain explains:

It seems clear that in its very capacity as philosophy, Christian philosophy is, on its own level, better “situated” than theology for the dialogue. . . . Dogmatic differences are not philosophy’s concern, at least not directly. The object of its investigation belongs to the natural order and has to do with that natural ecumenism the desire for which, however frustrated, naturally haunts the human mind. Not only is dialogue with non-Christians much easier for philosophy, since each of the parties can more easily receive from the other valuable contributions for his own thought, but the possibilities for intellectual agreement in this field are also of much vaster scope.²⁴

In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II echoes this important “bridging” role of philosophy:

Philosophical thought is often the only ground for understanding and dialogue with those who do not share our faith. . . . Such a ground for understanding and dialogue is all the more vital nowadays, since the most pressing issues facing humanity—ecology, peace, and the co-existence of different races and cultures, for instance—may possibly find a solution if there is a clear and honest collaboration between Christians and the followers of other religions and all those who, while not sharing a religious belief, have at heart the renewal of humanity.²⁵

The recognition of the practical value of philosophy for the Church in no way undermines the value and validity of philosophy as an activity in and of itself. Rather, this is simply a recognition of the applicability of philosophical reflection and insight for day to day life.

What, then, does the Catholic philosopher bring to the “real world” of public discourse regarding issues in bioethics? First, I believe, is the focus on the human person that is inherent within the philosophical and theological traditions of the Church, and the primacy of the person over the community. As Maritain explains:

²³ Ibid., no. 79.

²⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, p. 165.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 104.

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In that community of human persons which is a society, the Church, in keeping with the demands of truth, gives primacy to the person over the community; whereas today's world gives primacy to the community over the person—a highly interesting and significant disagreement. In our age of civilization the Church will increasingly become—bless Her—the refuge and support (perhaps the only one) of the person.²⁶

I find these words both true and stirring. There is ample evidence that in the years since Maritain wrote these words, the world has not reformed her ways. Nor should one mistake the current emphasis on “autonomy” in American bioethics for a genuine respect for the person. Abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, genetic manipulation, cloning, stem cell research all pose serious threats to the dignity of persons. The Church, and specifically Catholic philosophers interested in bioethics, have an important duty to continue to call attention to the dignity of human persons.

The affront to the dignity of human persons is due, in part, to the lack of a clear understanding of human nature in the contemporary arena, especially within scientific discourse. In his own time Maritain made note of this lack:

I am told by trustworthy friends, the best representatives of the world of technicians feel much more concern for the mystery of the *true* man, and are much more open to a genuine realism, than are those who belong to the intelligentsia. What they lack is a thorough idea of man, which no one in the intelligentsia furnishes them, and which it would be up to philosophers and theologians worthy of the name to propose them.²⁷

This need has only become more pressing in contemporary American society. Indeed, with developments in the Human Genome Project we may be on the verge of changing what it means to be human, yet few in the scientific community seem concerned. They simply do not understand the seriousness of what we are doing because they lack a critical understanding of what they are working upon. Biology, neurology, psychology, sociology, and genetics are setting the tone for public discourse, none of which can offer a complete understanding of human nature. Nor have the various philosophies of modernism and postmodernism offered anything to help our understanding.

In sum, Catholic philosophers have something truly important to share in this debate, if only the intelligentsia will allow the arguments of religious persons to be heard. The secularized and largely scientific attitudes that dominate public discourse simply do not address all the questions relevant to human society. As Maritain explains:

²⁶ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, p. 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

It is clear that science as such has nothing to tell us about the problems which matter most to us, and about the idea of the world, of man, perhaps of God, which we cannot escape forming for ourselves, any more than about the torment of the absolute, the "why were we born?"; the "to what can we wholly give our hearts?"; the desire for that fire which will burn us without consuming us, which as hidden as they may be, are there, in our very depths. All of this remains completely outside the scope of science.²⁸

And if the strong notions of separation between Church and State continue to set the tone for public discourse, these issues will not be brought to the forefront at the very time when they matter most to us as a society—on the brink of so many long lasting and deeply impacting decisions. The philosophical conclusions of Catholic philosophers who are drawn to such issues because of their faith background are indeed relevant for our society as we consider where we are heading in the next millennium. It would be a terrible tragedy to simply allow American society to continue unknowingly into the future with so many important questions and issues left unconsidered because of the "religious associations" of those questions and issues.

In addition to these reasons for developing a specific "Catholic" approach to bioethics, I want to offer one final reflection. These last thoughts are more subjective in nature, and are drawn from Maritain's own reflections on the temporal mission of the Christian in *The Peasant of the Garonne*. Early in the book, Maritain makes the following remarks:

The age we are entering obliges the Christian to become aware of the temporal mission which he has with respect to the world and which is like an expansion of his spiritual vocation in the kingdom of God and with respect to it. Woe to the world if the Christian were to isolate and separate his temporal mission (then it would be wind only) from his spiritual vocation! The fact remains that this temporal mission requires him to enter as deeply as possible into the agonies, the conflicts, and the earthly problems, social or political, of his age, and not hesitate to "get his feet wet."²⁹

However, as we jump into the water, Maritain reminds us that this temporal mission is not the only duty of the Christian. One must be careful, he notes, to avoid "kneeling before the world."³⁰ Rather, the Christian must always remain dedicated to his spiritual calling. Thus, a Christian is required to: "love the world with that love which is charity as a creature of God on the way to its own natural ends, and therefore to cooperate in its temporal

²⁸ Ibid., p. 113.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 56.

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struggle against injustice and misery.”³¹ The mission to work within the world is not a subsequent call to abandon Truth in order to make living in society more convenient, and with less conflict:

Charity has to do with persons; truth with ideas and with reality attained through them. Perfect charity toward our neighbor and complete fidelity to the truth are not only compatible; they call for one another. . . . It has never been recommended to confuse “loving” with “seeking to please.”³²

The Catholic philosopher must in fact remain dedicated to Truth if he is to manifest true charity.

Finally, Maritain does not suggest that all Catholics who engage in philosophy must carry out this temporal mission in the concrete. Rather, he suggests that there are those among the laity who will be drawn to such work, for example in the field of bioethics, as “a calling.” This notion of “a calling” seems echoed in *Fides et Ratio*, when John Paul II issues a challenge to Catholic philosophers—which he admits is daunting—to help people “come to a unified and organic vision of knowledge”:³³

I appeal also to *philosophers*, and to all *teachers of philosophy*, asking them to have the courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of authentic wisdom and truth—metaphysical truth included—which is proper to philosophical enquiry. They should be open to the impelling questions which arise from the word of God and they should be strong enough to shape their thought and discussion in response to that challenge. Let them always strive for truth, alert to the good which truth contains. Then they will be able to formulate the genuine ethics which humanity needs so urgently at this particular time.³⁴

This “call” is issued by the Pope to those philosophers who are interested in the specific tasks he is addressing in this letter. There is no demand for all Catholic philosophers to carry out these tasks—the freedom of philosophical enquiry will undoubtedly call some towards other philosophical tasks. But I believe that this call from the Pope for Catholic philosophers to work in a genuinely philosophical manner for the betterment of humanity serves as the ultimate foundation for a specifically “Catholic” approach to bioethics. It certainly embodies the spirit of my own involvement in the field.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

³³ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 85.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 106.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, the goal of this paper was simple: to justify the need for a specifically "Catholic" approach to bioethics. In public debates on bioethical issues there is a need to support and promote the unique perspective that the Catholic Church has on the primacy and dignity of the human person. Contemporary thinking about human nature needs to be revitalized by the philosophical wisdom embodied in the Catholic tradition. Here lies one manner in which Catholic philosophers can fulfill their temporal mission in the world today—a mission that is further supported by the Pope's encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*.

Discussion of the above points required an examination of the current milieu of public discourse on bioethical issues, in which it was argued that the voices of religious persons are being marginalized, without due consideration for the positions and ideas being espoused. I believe that such current intolerant attitudes need to be challenged by philosophers at all levels, and within all fields of study. It will be important to continue to distinguish political needs for separation from public and social needs for openness in the pursuit of truth.

In the end, to reflect back upon Cox's former belief that religion would eventually be replaced by science, I believe that Cox and others who shared his position, were wrong because they were only looking at religion and religious institutions, all the while underestimating the religious *person*. For example, as a lay person, it is my understanding that what makes Catholic health care "Catholic," is not the fact that there may be a chapel in the hospital, nor that there may be crucifixes in patient rooms, nor that a religious order may run the institution and have members sit on the Board of Directors—none of these factors represents the totality of Catholic health care. Catholicism is about a *way of life*—a life that is in touch with the present, yet not disconnected from the past. The *way of life* embodied in Catholicism is connected with the tradition of Christianity—a living tradition represented in Church teaching, council documents, papal letters, the writings of holy women and men, the Gospels, and the Word, Himself, Jesus Christ. To think of Catholic health care as something offered by certain people, or in certain buildings, is to impoverish what in its deepest reality is a healing ministry. In sum, being "Catholic" is not limited to following certain rules and rituals, but rather encompasses the totality of one's life in an imitation of the life of Christ.

Life involves action, and action is the arena of ethics. Hence, the need for a "Catholic" approach to bioethics flows from the *way of life* to which all Catholics and Christians are called. Even if there did not exist a single hospital

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in this country affiliated in any formal way with the Catholic Church, there should still be Catholic health care wherever there are Catholic nurses, doctors, therapists, administrators, etc. In a similar fashion, I believe that a “Catholic” approach to bioethics should exist wherever Catholic philosophers apply their philosophical training to the field of bioethics. The “calling” here is a personal one—part of the mission of a Christian in the world today, and as genuine as the calling of Catholics to any vocation. However, the actual presence of Catholic hospitals, health care facilities, and academic institutions, especially those devoted to the study of bioethics, allows for a more concrete, physical presence—that is, a sacramental presence—in our communities, states, and nation. Catholic philosophers today have inherited a tremendous gift from the tradition they work within, as well as an incredible opportunity to foster the living presence of Christ and the search for truth within the world today. Perhaps the greatest strength we have to stand on is that the wisdom of the Catholic tradition strives to be reasonable—this is the heritage left to us by the great Church fathers and doctors. Not that we will ever know the mysteries of this life fully, but that there is reason here—the reason of God. If this is the case, as Catholics believe, then we find an answer to our question, “Why the need for a *Catholic* identity in bioethics?” Truth!