

*Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21<sup>st</sup> century social issues*

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# THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE AND ITS DOWNGRADE

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**What is the sanctity of human life?** It is certainly a pretty cumbersome and rather quaint-sounding phrase. But what does it convey? ‘Sanctity’ refers to anything sacred. And ‘sacred’ means dedicated to God, proceeding from God, set apart, something not to be violated. In other words, ‘sanctity’ is shorthand for declaring that human life is God-given, special and inviolable. Furthermore, it is a creational attribute – it did not arise later as some Greek concept, or as a smart idea from the Enlightenment.

Though it is a phrase never used in Scripture, it is readily deduced. First, human life is special because we alone bear ‘the image of God’ (Genesis 1:27). Second, we are continually sustained by God because, ‘...he himself gives all men life and breath’ (Acts 17:25). Third, we have a duty to respect, cherish and protect this God-given gift (Genesis 9:5). Fourth, to kill another deliberately is an offence to a holy God (Genesis 4:10). Fifth, the incarnation reasserts this sanctity (John 1:14, Hebrews 2:17).

The abridged hermeneutic of these five declarations is contained in the sixth Commandment, ‘You shall not murder’ (Exodus 20:13). As Calvin comments, ‘... God holds the life of man too dear to allow innocent blood to be shed with impunity.’

Now, just to reinforce these doctrines, a little catechism. Question 1: of all man’s sinister activities, which is the most heinous? Answer: living in defiance of God. Correct. Question 2: which is the second most heinous? Answer: taking the life of another human being. Correct. Deliberately killing one who bears the *imago Dei* is the second greatest anathema. Not only is it the second great offence recorded in the Bible (Genesis 4), it is also the supreme abrogation of the second greatest commandment (Matthew 22:39).

Certainly the fact that men are ready (willing and able) to destroy the life of an innocent man (woman or child) must be among the greatest evidences of our total depravity. Matthew Henry calls it, ‘a scarlet, crimson sin... a sin of the first magnitude.’

**The beginning of the downgrade.** The rot set in from almost the very beginning, when Cain murdered Abel (Genesis 4). The second man killed the third. Why? The Bible's answer is surprisingly vivid, even frightening. It is because, '... sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you...' (Genesis 4:7). So let none of us think that we are immune – the thoughts and deeds of such a terrible sin may be lurking not far from us (Matthew 5:21-26).

Indeed, over the last 50 or so years, we have witnessed the most rapid downgrade in the notion that human life possesses sanctity or inherent preciousness. Nowhere is this decline more evident than in the ethics and practice of modern medicine. The foundations of medicine were the Hippocratic Oath and Judaeo-Christian doctrine. The former specifically forbade abortion and euthanasia, while the latter conferred meaning, dignity and protection on all human life. Together they kept medicine safe and wholesome for more than twenty centuries.

So how did this decline come about? Like most revolutions it crept in surreptitiously. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify six key events that help us to grasp the downgrade more clearly. They form a hideous, circular pattern. They start with adults and then progress to the unborn, the newborn, the embryonic, the disabled and finally, the elderly again.

### **1. The Nazi Holocaust**

The Holocaust was based on a single, simple premise — that 'there are people with lives not worthy to be lived.' When first proposed in the 1920s, this idea was firmly rejected by the German government, but within a decade it had become official German policy.

Initially, the killing plan was directed at the terminally ill and those mortally wounded from the First World War. Then it grew to encompass healthy but unconscious victims of accidents and battles. Next, it included the mentally ill. Eventually came the Final Solution and the death of six million Jews.

Yes, of course, the plan was masterminded by Hitler, but it was doctors who were largely responsible for its execution. They had forgotten the Hippocratic-Christian roots of their training. Yes, human life may have had a sanctity, but that was overridden by economic and eugenic considerations. Human life had suddenly become cheap.

### **2. The 1967 Abortion Act**

Abortion has had the most powerful corrosive effect upon the sanctity of human life. It seems like madness, but the reality is that we deliberately destroy our own offspring. We really do. Can there be a more awful crime than to kill the most defenceless, voiceless and vulnerable?

Of course, abortion has occurred throughout history and within all cultures, but it had generally been regarded as a horrid practice and deemed unlawful. What we did in 1967 was not to prohibit abortion, but to legalise it. Now in the UK we abort more than 200,000 unborn children every year. And we claim there is virtue in such a public policy. The sanctity of human life was bulldozed by political expediency and the so-called 'woman's right to choose'. Human life became even cheaper.

### 3. The case of John Pearson

John Pearson was born in Derby City Hospital in 1980. He had Down's syndrome and his parents rejected him. His paediatrician, Dr Leonard Arthur, prescribed 'nursing care only', which consisted of no food, but large and regular doses of dihydrocodeine, a painkiller. Baby Pearson was moved to a side ward and, inevitably, three days later, he died in the arms of a nurse.

Dr Arthur was charged with his murder. Two days into the trial this was reduced to attempted murder. Eighteen days later, amid legal misdirection and medical confusion, Dr Arthur was acquitted. Nevertheless, the death of John Pearson said something blunt about our attitude towards disabled children – it said that some should die. Such cruel infanticide mocks us all.

### 4. The Warnock Report

During the 1980s, developments in embryology and assisted reproductive techniques, such as IVF, were outstripping our legal, social and bioethical thinking. So in 1982, a Committee of Inquiry was set up to investigate and make recommendations concerning these new technologies. It was chaired by Mary Warnock, and the Warnock Report was published in 1984.

This Report proposed virtually a free-for-all as far as human embryos were concerned. It recommended that they could be sold, bought, created for research, frozen and destroyed. Without much awe, little reverence, and virtually no dignity, human life was trivialised beyond compare. It was now just a biological phenomenon. The Report ducked and fudged the key issues. This was bioethics at its worst – reprehensible thinking leading to awful practice.

### 5. The case of Anthony Bland

Anthony Bland was a victim of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster in 1989. His chest was crushed, his breathing stopped and his brain was deprived of oxygen. He was diagnosed as being in a permanent vegetative state (PVS). But, contrary to popular belief, he was *not* on any high-tech apparatus, such as a life-support machine. He was fed through a nasogastric tube and he required constant nursing care, but his condition was stable and he was not dying.

Nevertheless, his doctor, and later his parents, went through the courts asking that his food and water be withdrawn. Eventually in 1993, the law lords ruled that it would not be unlawful to withdraw treatment. Their grave and gross error was that they defined food and water as *treatment*. So, unsurprisingly, on 3 March 1993, nine days after the pump of his nasogastric tube was switched off, Tony Bland died.

Do not take *my* word for the pivotal significance of this case. Let the bioethicist, Peter Singer, explain. In the Prologue (p. 1) to his *Rethinking Life and Death* (1995), he wrote, 'After ruling our thoughts and our decisions about life and death for nearly two thousand years, the traditional western ethic has collapsed. To mark the precise moment when the old ethic gave way, a future historian might choose 4 February 1993, when Britain's highest court ruled that the doctors attending a young man named Anthony Bland could lawfully act to end the life of their patient.'

## 6. The Joffe Bill

The previous five landmarks are not the end of the matter. There is worse to come. Despite the warnings from the Nazi Holocaust, euthanasia has yet to be fully implemented. The Netherlands, Switzerland, Oregon, Belgium and France have already legalised some limited types of euthanasia, but full-blown, state-controlled, mass euthanasia is not here, yet.

But be warned. Euthanasia is coming out of the shadows and into the mainstream. For example, the Lausanne University Hospital in Switzerland has become the first hospital in Europe to allow assisted suicide groups, such as Exit and Dignitas, into its premises to help terminally-ill patients die.

Lord Joffe's Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill, currently before Parliament, will be a real test for us in the UK. This is the third version of the Bill, and its second reading is due in the House of Lords on 12 May 2006. Lord Joffe and his supporters claim that this Bill seeks to legalise only assisted suicide rather than voluntary euthanasia *per se*, which had been the aim of the previous two Joffe Bills.

Lord Joffe is determined to get some form of legalised euthanasia onto the Statute Book. My guess has long been that it would come in 2008, but it may be sooner. And when it does come, we will witness the downhill shift from assisted suicide to voluntary euthanasia, to non-voluntary euthanasia to involuntary euthanasia.

And then, the end will have come – there will be nothing else to legalise. Once we have permitted the killing of the embryonic, the unborn, the newborn, the disabled and the elderly, who is left? The sanctity of human life will have become a mere memory. That is, unless you and I do something to oppose this downgrade. Evangelical Christians must stand in the breach and resist it.

John Ling

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