

There is no doubt that bioethics has become a burning issue for all ethical thinking. In our present situation, against the background of an increasingly complex interplay between scientific research, moral framework, and social consequences, there is no major ethical question that does not impinge on life and death issues. Traditional values are in a state of flux, threatened by powerful interests wishing to redefine the inherited moral consensus on what it means to be human and to be person.

Evangelical ethics is in the midst of this changing scenario. In the last twenty-five years, there has been a growing interest amongst Evangelicals in the challenges coming from the bioethics field. In the Evangelical world, we have now a fair number of publications and scholars as well as various study centres which have been set up. There are also lobbying initiatives which are beginning to take place around the globe. Evangelical activism has found another area of involvement and Evangelicals now share in the wider discussion. Is all well, then? No. Although it is probably too early to attempt a thorough evaluation of what Evangelical bioethics is articulating theologically, promoting culturally and achieving politically, it is important that some important questions be asked at this initial stage in order to raise awareness on critical directions that although they might appear to be winning the day, are utterly unsatisfactory. The hope is to provoke a fruitful debate on how Evangelicals should respond to bioethics issues in faithful and useful ways.

1. Is the recourse to natural theology the business of Christian ethics?

Many Christian attempts to deal with bioethics tend to rely on ontological categories which are mainly shaped by natural theology. In fairness it must be said that there is no Evangelical writing on bioethics which is not concerned to let the Bible contribute to the discussion. The problem is that already assumed ontological presuppositions which are governed by Aristotelian-Thomistic interpretations of biological data strongly influence the way in which the Bible is read in this respect. One could write an entire thesis on the Evangelical (mis)readings of Psalm 139, for example, whereby the poem is understood in Roman Catholic terms of “life as substance in itself”, or “life as absolute” rather than in Biblical, relational, and covenantal ways. Another example would be the treatment that the *imago dei* motif receives in some Evangelical literature. Quite often the Christian anthropological vision which is developed is fraught with philosophical ideas shaped by classical thought.

The problem with this kind of natural theology is that it equates biological life with human life and gives a philosophical warrant to it. The biology of man is his humanity. Once you have the biology working, you have a man. Now, the simple equation between the two is a gross mistake in that it conceives humanity in a monistic way. It elevates biology to the supreme norm of humanity and it bypasses other important features of Biblical anthropology such as relationships.

In Christian terms, anthropological monism (i.e. man's nature is an arithmetic unity) is a mistake as erroneous as anthropological dualism (i.e. man's nature is the mingling of two elements). On the one hand, Roman Catholic bioethics (and, sadly, much Evangelical bioethics) tends towards monism whereby biology determines humanity. On the other, secular bioethics tends towards dualism whereby humanity is detached from biology and ascribed to social negotiation. Both are wrong. The Christian alternative is thinking according to the trinitarian pattern of one and many at the same time. This means that biology is important but it is not the only norm to take into consideration. Humanity is not less than biology – it is always something more.

Since bioethics heavily encroaches on anthropology, it is important to have our Biblical anthropology right. Are we going back to natural theology, either monistic or dualistic, instead of turning to the Triune God attested in the Scriptures? If it is true that scientific practices force us to stretch our anthropological categories in order to account for the ever growing power to intervene in human life, it is frustrating to see Evangelicals going back to natural theology, instead of working out a Biblical anthropology.

2. Is the "sanctity of life" a Christian perspective?

In Evangelical bioethics there is much talk of "the sanctity of life", sometimes even referred to as the "sacredness of life". According to this view, life is

inherently sacred and should be recognised as an absolute value. Sacredness and absoluteness go hand in hand. These expressions are used in order to safeguard and to protect human life from any attempt to destroy, dispose and arbitrarily manipulate it. Although this protective attitude is commendable, a radical question should be asked. Is it Christian at all to ascribe sacredness to a gift (as life is a gift) which is precious but not to be deified? In other words, every gift from the Creator God is good, but the Bible strongly warns us not to elevate one element of creation to a "sacred" status. Attributing absoluteness to a created reality by way of "sanctifying" it means shifting from a Biblical worldview where God alone is sanctus, sanctus, sanctus to a pagan worldview where parts of creation are elevated to a higher position.

Much of the contemporary debate in bioethics originates from thoughts which at their root are nothing less than idolatrous. On the one hand, Roman Catholic ethics, with its strong reference to the "sanctity of life", is in danger of biolatry whereby biological life is considered as absolute and thus divinised. On the other, secular ethics, with its powerful appeal to the "quality of life", is in danger of egolatry whereby either individual choices or social conventions are considered as absolutes and thereby divinised. Both positions are idolatrous and must be rejected. The Christian alternative is to start from a Biblical account of creation, the fall and redemption with all its implications for ethics and science. With this uncritical talk of the "sanctity of life", isn't Evangelical bioethics missing the

devastating thrust of the Bible in its denunciation of idols and its command to build a coherent worldview in which God alone is confessed as sanctus? The good intention to protect life must not fall prey to an unholy alliance with pagan motives.

3. Is pro-life versus pro-choice the real alternative?

Another prominent feature of present-day Evangelical bioethics is its adherence to the “pro-life” sector of public opinion. This position stems from deeply held convictions based on the “sanctity of life”. Again, one needs to be aware of the good motivations behind the alignment to the pro-life camp which is generally opposed to radical pro-choice supporters. Yet, the automatic alliance between Evangelical bioethics and the pro-life front needs to be questioned in the light of Biblical principles. Pro-life positions point to the existence of binding, objective norms. Pro-choice arguments stress the autonomy of individual freedom. The Bible is both for life and for responsible choice. The two do not necessarily need to be polarised and opposed as often happens.

In contemporary bioethics, Roman Catholic ethics is basically normativist in that it strongly appeals to universal and natural norms. Secular ethics is instead either situationist, as it appeals to ever changing situations, or subjectivist whereby it elevates the individual as the supreme reference point. Both positions are wrong. The Christian alternative is to view all three areas relating to norms, situations and

subjects in a triangular moral discourse. In other words, the Biblical worldview acknowledges the importance of having norms, but it also encourages personal and corporate responsibility in confronting different contexts.

Contrary to normativist, situationist and subjectivist reductionism, Christian ethics can account for valid norms, changing situations and different subjects in a way that a pro-life versus pro-choice type of approach cannot. Instead of automatically camping for pro-life concerns over against pro-choice trains of thought, Evangelical bioethics should seek to articulate better the relationship between the safeguarding of life and the responsible exercise of legitimate choice in ethics.

4. Is Christian Hippocratism the Evangelical proposal for present-day medical ethics?

The final question has a wider thrust and applies to medical ethics in general. This is an area which is experiencing a transformation in terms of models of medicine practice. Many trends in modern medicine are questioning the traditional Western Hippocratic framework with more contractualist approaches.

What is the Christian response?

Many in Evangelical circles would say that “Christian Hippocratism” is the suitable model to fight for. The idea behind such a proposal is to combine the classical medicine in the Hippocratic tradition and Christian concerns about personhood and the ethics of caring. The theological rationale is provided by the typically Roman Catholic idea that

the Christian message is the result of a synthesis between nature and grace, in this case between Hippocrates and Christ. As a matter of fact, traditional Roman Catholicism was built on the “Aristotle-Christ” synthesis whereas modern Roman Catholicism has developed other kinds of syntheses, not least the “Kant-Christ” synthesis. Now, Christian Hippocratism is perfectly compatible with this theological vision aimed at Christianising the pagan world by way of absorbing it into a wider synthesis. The question is whether the Roman Catholic genius is the Biblical manner of coming to terms with pagan culture? Is Evangelical Christianity called to make a synthesis with paganism or is it called to propound a cultural alternative based on Biblical principles and aimed at public relevance? Instead of calling for a Christian Hippocratism, shouldn't we work harder to shape a viable Christian model for medical ethics?

The overall impression is that Evangelical bioethics seems to be incapable of coming to terms with the challenge of applying consistently an Evangelical worldview to ethical issues. Instead of approaching these difficult issues from a Biblical perspective and trying to think them through in a creative Christian

way, the tendency is to depend on extra-Biblical categories which are strongly upheld by Roman Catholic moral theology in the present-day situation. The outcome is that much Evangelical bioethics works according to a type of thinking which is not Evangelical at all. Less theological laziness and more faithful creativity is needed if we don't want simply to repeat wrong arguments which Roman Catholics are saying better than us.

Until now Christian reflection has been on the defensive with respect to recent scientific developments. It has tried to resist developments rather than contributing to shape them by suggesting workable ethical frameworks. Taken by surprise and trapped in static categories, it has lost contact with the new frontiers created by irresistible advances. Whereas the Reformation had encouraged the development of science by providing a renewed cultural paradigm for it, contemporary Evangelicalism campaigns for introducing bans and moratoriums with little constructive input. The result is that science goes galloping on and positive Christian influence on it is very superficial. May these somewhat provocative questions help us to engage in bioethics in a different way.