

SEMINAR ON MORAL THEOLOGY

The seminar covered a distinct topic in each of its sessions.

I. EUTHANASIA

Panel: David F. Kelly, Duquesne University
Carol A. Tauer, The College of St. Catherine
James J. Walter, Loyola University of Chicago
Moderator: Thomas A. Shannon, Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Each of the panelists was given fifteen minutes to raise whatever issues seemed critical to a discussion of active euthanasia. Professor Tauer discussed the use of morphine to control pain despite the knowledge that it might hasten death. She suggested that the distinction between foreseen but not intended effects and foreseen and intended effects often seems to be a distinction without a difference, and asked whether it could bear the weight it is often made to bear in argument. She also raised the issue of how to critically assess one's moral instincts against the practice of euthanasia even while one was unable to offer good, persuasive arguments against it.

Professor Walter began by clarifying the terms of the discussion and outlining the theological and ethical issues he thought were at stake in the discussion. Among these issues were the meaning of God's dominion over life and human stewardship for life, of the redemptive worth of suffering, and the changing cultural evaluation of death. He argued for the social prohibition of active euthanasia as a matter of public policy and law even while acknowledging the moral permissibility of active euthanasia in some exceptional and rare cases.

Professor Kelly presented three cases as a way of illuminating the issues, among which he stressed the difficulty of assessing the intention of the agent, the danger that a move to legitimate active euthanasia would confuse the agreement presently in place on the moral permissibility of letting people die, and the emerging issue of the meaning and implications of the concept of medical futility. He, too, argued for a social prohibition on euthanasia despite the lack of any moral argument that would ground an absolute prohibition in every case.

The panelists' comments provoked a vigorous discussion in the seminar. Among the points of consensus these seemed to emerge: that we are unclear on how our theological claims should bear on the euthanasia argument; that the distinction between killing and letting die has moral significance but that significance needs to be clarified; that greater clarity and dissemination of awareness on the moral permissibility of withholding and/or withdrawing treatment in many cases would greatly ease the social, cultural pressures toward active euthanasia.

II. WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF

Panelists: Eileen Flynn, St. Peter's College
Robert Marko, Aquinas College
Thomas Schubeck, John Carroll University
Kenneth R. Himes, Washington Theological Union
Moderator: James P. Hanigan, Duquesne University

Professor Flynn offered six unconnected reflections about the war, ranging from the Catholics bishops' wisdom in leaving final judgment to the consciences of Catholics, to the problems raised by the managed news about the war made available to the public. Professors Marko and Schubeck focused, in different ways, on the meaning of right intention and how one would assess right intention before and during the war. Marko considered Augustine's treatment of the question while Schubeck argued for an historical analysis of American government policy statements over the last fifty years. Professor Himes offered several reflections on what war could or could not be said to achieve, and pointed out some disturbing cultural trends during and after the war. While there was agreement among the panelists and the seminar participants that there was a just cause for resorting to war, there was no agreement on whether the other conditions of just war theory had been met, especially in regard to the criteria of right intention, last resort, and proportionality. The discussion that ensued also raised questions about how the criteria are to be understood and applied, and whether they are useful and adequate any longer for assessing modern warfare.

The seminar concluded with the participants suggesting topics for next year's seminar and the election of Professor Eileen Flynn to a two-year term as co-moderator of the seminar, succeeding Professor Patricia Jung.

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