

### **How Theology Could Contribute to the Redemption of Bioethics from an Individualist Approach to an Anthropological Sensitivity**

Moderator: James Pambrun, St. Paul University, Ottawa

Reporter: Thomas A. Nairn, O.F.M., Catholic Theological Union, Chicago

To open the conversation: James J. Walter, Loyola University, Chicago

The respondent, James J. Walter, began the seminar by briefly summarizing Professor Doucet's argument and his own response, together with a description of the brief discussion which followed the original presentation. Only one written question had been submitted, asking whether the debate concerning abortion, especially the U. S. bishops' campaign for a constitutional amendment banning abortion, had any effect on the marginalization of Catholic bioethics from the public debate. Both Walter and Doucet agreed that the abortion debate occurred after such marginalization had already begun and therefore had at most a confirmatory effect, possibly justifying in the public's mind the marginalization that had already occurred. We spent the next twenty minutes discussing the paper at tables. The group then directed additional questions to the two speakers.

The ensuing discussion focused on the language which moral theologians use in addressing our various publics. The first questioner suggested that it is difficult for the church to have a contribution to make to the public debate when the voices of Catholics are indistinguishable from those of other Americans. In response, Walter acknowledged that theologians often neglect addressing the church community, spending much of their energy at the level of public policy. He added, however, that there are three audiences that theologians must address, the church community, those who affect public policy, and society at large. Theologians need to be multilingual, using different languages to address these publics. Doucet answered that moral theologians need to acknowledge that we do ethics specifically from the discipline of theology. We must be clear about what we are doing and our religious warrants. We should not be afraid to speak religious language when it is appropriate.

The group then addressed the four principles which the original paper suggested were part of the secular paradigm: autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice. One questioner asked regarding the actual difference it would make if one brings an anthropological sensitivity to this paradigm. Doucet responded that such sensitivity would not necessarily change the meaning of the terms but would rather expand one's understanding regarding the need to respect

the sick person as one who is vulnerable. The discussion of justice, for example, would include not only the issue of allocation but would also question where resources come from, from whom they are taken, and to whom they are given.

Another participant asked whether the principles can be challenged by a postmodernist, nonfoundational approach to ethics. Walter responded that the current paradigm assumes that everybody means the same thing by these words, but this is obviously not the case. Focusing on the debate between foundationalism and nonfoundationalism, he suggested that theologians should not look for a universal foundation, but a foundation within Christianity. This remains foundationalist, but not universalizable outside of the community.

Returning to the distinction between the language of public policy and religious language, one participant noted that there are competing understandings even within the Christian community and asked whether and how one is able to separate the language of public policy from that of religion. Walter mentioned that it is not a question of language as much as it is one of the spheres in which language is spoken. In the public sphere, it is necessary that many languages are spoken. This is even the case in the sphere of the religious community. There is no Esperanto in any sphere. In the public sphere, religious language might be out of place, but religious values remain relevant. For example, the value of the dignity of person functions on all three spheres, but the language used to describe this value may change.

As we moved toward the end of the discussion, a participant suggested that even though there seemed to be a general agreement regarding the importance of this anthropological focus, we theologians nevertheless still need to develop a broader and deeper level of public discourse that is based upon reasoned reflection on human experience, similar to what our natural law tradition tried to establish. Partially agreeing with the questioner, Doucet suggested that we need to move beyond both the diversity of traditions and the "universal neutrality" of the secular paradigm to develop a language of solidarity based upon what is common in experience.

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