

Why is this tradition so pervasively disregarded? The American story seems utterly crucial to the endeavor of producing theology here. How might we continue to excavate this legacy?

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BIOETHICS AND HEALTHCARE

Topic: The Vocation of the Moral Theologian: Theory and Practice
 Convener/Moderator: Mark Miller, St. Paul's Hospital, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
 Presenter: Thomas Shannon, Worcester Polytechnic Institute

The science and technology of genetics today presents the ethicist with an enormous methodological challenge in assessing the tremendous innovations which introduce the unknown both in regard to consequences and parameters. In an attempt to sketch a moral methodology for the contemporary ethicist, Shannon first drew from Catholic history. There was the manualist methodology of seeking probable opinions. This was replaced by the post-Vatican II struggle for moralists between the ecclesial role of presenting Church teaching and the vision of informing and guiding the correct use of conscience, described in part through the exercise of *epikeia*, "the virtue of those who correctly understand and apply moral truth." The latter methodology involved something of the shift to the subject, to postmodernity, to experience. How, now, does the moral theologian serve the whole Church, particularly in "the formation of a community that realizes its moral truth from within itself and has that experience validated through [a] reappropriation of the tradition"?

Shannon first offers two serious cautions. Historical consciousness ought to reveal to us that all is not sweetness and light in human moral thought and action. An acknowledgement of the evil rampant in history, the sufferings of whole peoples, the destruction of nature, and so forth are part of who we are. Genetic innovation contains within itself at least the potential for much evil, such that the role of the moral theologian must include an attentiveness to systemic distortions in the face of the good genetic research can do.

Second, Shannon suggests that moral theologians, precisely in their role of assessing genetic knowledge, must recognize their own limited perspectives. Accordingly, a major part of our role "is to listen and to learn and to begin incorporating the reality of other perspectives into our thinking and writing." Such attentiveness, however, may mean that *hybrid* forms of thinking will arise—and a key question to face is whether or not a hybrid can retain some validity beyond the *purity* of the original identity. Perhaps a unitary Catholic approach to moral issues must give way to the reality of "multiple sources of

identity, multiple sources of experience, multiple interpretations of tradition, and multiple sources of fidelity.”

Shannon offered a model from Bonaventure for thinking about the task of the ethicist today. Bonaventure speaks of God providing us with two books to read: the book of Scripture and the book of nature. One can imagine one part of the book of nature, the genetic *book*, in its various combinations of the four basic acids, A, C, G, and T, which make up all genes. Learning to *read* this book takes on dimensions analogous to the multiple levels upon which we have learned to read Scripture. For example, to engage the book of nature, one needs to come to terms with the reality of *all* life being interrelated. Furthermore, Bonaventure employs the “doctrine of exemplarism,” arguing that what is created bears the likeness and traces of its Maker. Hence, the book of nature opens to the divine—while the book of Revelation provides the complement necessary to understand these traces. An imaginative reading of the book of nature helps us to actualize our redemption initiated at baptism as we enter into the order intended by God; we do so with a response of respect and reverence, rather than domination.

A striking reflection from the book of nature comes with the realization that all life lives off of life, which suggests we might explore the use of gene material to *repair* genetic flaws. Conceptually, might we also *re-formulate* or *re-edit* the text; can we then introduce new themes and conclusions? Further, we can see our human selves as providing a conscious, loving voice to a mute creation and of being in service to organic life. We can also bring our surprise or awe to the amazing flexibility, adaptability, variation and renewal of life in the book of nature.

The beauty of this analogy of reading the book for ethical reflection on genetic discovery lies in the multiple layers of interpretation, the need to read from different perspectives and disciplines, the openness to complexity, and a deep openness to many layers of reality. The analogy further reveals that “our status as humans is in profound solidarity with this book [so that] our corresponding responsibility as readers is to give a clear and rich reading.” The analogy clearly applies also to our reading of the Scriptures.

A lively discussion followed around issues such as the image of God behind so much suffering, etc. in reading the book of nature, the meaning of disability in the face of evolution, the role of hybrids, the Church’s response to modern biotechnologies, the question of who is exploited in these developments, the meaning of a “bad gene,” evaluating various readings as interpretations (Are they all equally valid?), learning to privilege the reception of a text rather than the text itself, and questioning whether the two books—of Scripture and of Nature—are so different.

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