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Benedict and Bioethics

Christopher Kaczor

At first glance the background of Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) could not be further removed from questions in contemporary bioethics. What could a person whose academic preparation included a doctorate on the people of God in St. Augustine and another dissertation (*Habilitationsschrift*) on *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* have to teach us about issues such as embryonic stem cell research and the human genome project? While his impressive academic background suits him well for discussions of patristic theology or the high medieval schoolmen, it would seem that a person of Ratzinger's preparation would be ill-suited to respond intelligently to questions in contemporary bioethics and modern technology.

This first impression is gravely mistaken. Although we can become accustomed to thinking that the empirical scientist alone is qualified to tackle questions in bioethics, the questions that implicitly or explicitly need to be answered in bioethical inquiries are not questions for which the scientist *qua* empirical scientist can provide any answers. As Cardinal Ratzinger himself wrote: "The success of modern science is based on the translation of the reality we encounter into quantitative measures. In this way the world becomes measurable and technologically exploitable. But can we not say that the crisis of humanity in our times finds its roots in this method and in its increasing domination in all aspects of human life? Calculation, which in turn is subject to what is quantitative, is the method of what is not free.... [It] must leave us perplexed in the face of that which is truly human." Morality pertains to how we ought to use our freedom; whereas the calculations of empirical science pertain not to freedom but to a quantitative measure of matter mathematically conceived. Such calcula-



tions cannot capture the full range of human experience, meaning, and value. There are questions essential for bioethics, for which no empirical test can provide a satisfactory answer: What is the point of human existence? How ought we to live? What is a human being? What makes a human being valuable, and do all human beings deserve to be respected? Only for empirical questions can empirical answers be given, but the deepest questions of philosophy and theology, from which bioethics must take its start, cannot be answered by empirical investigation alone. Indeed, "within every question about health and healing a more radical question is always contained as well which at bottom concerns one's ultimate destiny."

Precisely on such questions of meaning, purpose, value, and ultimate human destiny, the insights of Augustine, Bonaventure, and their contemporaries, not to mention most importantly the story of Salvation itself, can make not just a meaningful but also an indispensable contribution to questions in bioethics. Bio-ethics, after all, is a subset of ethics, and ethics per-

tains to the actions and strivings of human beings whose nature and purpose was explored fruitfully and deeply precisely by patristic and medieval authors reflecting on Scripture and incorporating the best of ancient philosophical wisdom. In years of reflecting deeply on questions of the nature of man, the purpose of human existence, and the weakness to which human beings are prone, Pope Benedict is well prepared to face the bioethical issues of great importance subtly facing the world today.

Without venturing to predict how, when, or what Pope Benedict will say about these matters (it was reported, shortly before Benedict's election that a Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was drafting a document on this topic), his writings previous to accepting the office of Peter do indicate fundamental "directions of travel" that shape his thinking on ethical issues, and bioethics in particular. Although Joseph Ratzinger's scholarly production is by any measure prolific, especially given his many administrative duties in his former position as Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he has written relatively little on bioethics *per se* under his own name. As Prefect, he oversaw and approved the publication of a number of documents that pertain to bioethics, most importantly *Donum Vitae* (1987), the Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation: Replies to Certain Questions of the Day. This document, as well as other important interventions in bioethics, such as that of the International Theological Commission, *Communion and Fellowship: The Human Person Created in the Image of God*, reflect more the consensus of the working groups overseen by Ratzinger than his personal considerations. In terms of articles or books written in his own voice, Ratzinger was much more interested in ecclesiology, eschatology, liturgy, and the

nature of theology than in moral matters in general. He wrote even less about issues in applied ethics in particular.

Nevertheless, there are various *obiter dicta* remarks in assorted books and interviews that inform us to a degree about his positions. Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger alike began their reflection on particular moral questions with an affirmation of the intrinsic value of the human person as a creature made by God and called to communion with God. Ratzinger grounds the value of every human being in the Genesis account of creation, "Man is characterized by an immediacy with God that is proper to his being; man is *capax Dei* and because he lives under the personal protection of God, he is 'sacred.'" The human race shares a unity as coming from a single origin, "All human beings are one because they come from a single father, Adam, and a single mother, Eve, 'the mother of all the living' (Gn 3:20). This oneness of the human race... implies equality and the same basic rights for men.... When our understanding of the human person is torn from this context of salvation history, indeed often defined in opposition to this narrative, there is an impoverishment and reductionism that diminishes the full value of human beings. As Ratzinger notes, "when man is no longer seen as the image of God, distortions of the truth about the human person take root: Where man is no longer seen as one who is under the particular protection of God, there begins the barbarism which tramples on humanity. Where the sense of the singular dignity of each person, in the light of God's design, is lost, there the project of mankind is horribly deformed, and his freedom, devoid of rule, becomes monstrous." Indeed, some people do not view the human person as "very good," the crown of creation. On the contrary, "many today see him as the destroyer of the world, an unhappy product of evolution. In reality, man, who no longer has access to the infinite, to God, is a contradictory being, a failed product. Thus, we see the logic of sin: by wanting to be like

God, man seeks absolute independence. To be self-sufficient, he must become independent, he must be emancipated even from love, which is always a free grace, not something that can be produced or made. However by making himself independent of love, man is separated from the true richness of his being and becomes empty... The logic of death belongs to the logic of sin. The road to abortion, to euthanasia and the exploitation of the weakest lies open." The 'death of God' leads to the death of human beings.

Although every single human being is a person with dignity and worth, should all "life" issues be regarded as equally important? In contrast to those who would advocate an understanding of the "consistent ethic of life" or "seamless garment" in which all "life" issues have equal importance, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: "Not all moral issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia. For example, if a Catholic were to be at odds with the Holy Father on the application of capital punishment or on the decision to wage war, he would not for that reason be considered unworthy to present himself to receive Holy Communion." Indeed since waging war and capital punishment are not in themselves intrinsically evil, "There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia." The Cardinal is concerned not just with matters of taking human life such as take place in abortion and war, but also matters of producing human life in which the child as product replaces the child as gift: "Man is capable of producing another man in the laboratory who, therefore, is no longer a gift of God or of nature. He can be fabricated and, just as he can be fabricated, he can be destroyed. ... The arrogance that makes us think that we ourselves can create human beings has turned man into a kind of merchandise, to be bought and sold, or stored to provide parts for experimentation. In doing this, we hope to conquer death by

our own efforts, yet in reality we are profoundly debasing human dignity." It is a safe bet that the Church's position on abortion, euthanasia, cloning, and reproductive technologies will continue to be forcefully articulated during the papacy of Benedict.

Although the Church's position on abortion, euthanasia, and such issues is clear, it is of course possible that the Vatican will take stands on some questions about which it has to this point been silent. Cardinal Ratzinger himself has noted a number of such questions: "How much legitimate space can be accorded the physician's artificial intervention in the sphere of procreation in order to remedy a couple's sterility? What are the ethical limits to intervention in human genetics seeking not only 'radical' therapy for certain illnesses, but also having the chance to improve or, in any case, modify certain specific or individual characteristics? What are the criteria on the basis of which we can judge the application of the special treatments to patients in particular critical or terminal conditions?" To these questions others might be added including, is it morally permissible to "rescue frozen embryos" by implantation in a woman's uterus? Is the use of embryonic stem cell lines created through altered nuclear transfer by oocyte assisted reprogramming (ANT-OAR) ethically problematic? However, it is likely that Pope Benedict will hesitate before speaking about new technologies and questions of ongoing dispute among experts in the field: "The teaching office [magisterium] depends on the specialized knowledge of the experts and must let itself be thoroughly informed by them about the content of the matter in question before making an utterance regarding new problems. The teaching office must therefore not be too hasty in taking up a position regarding questions that are not yet clarified nor must it apply its binding statements beyond what the principles of tradition permit."

It is perhaps more likely, given the Cardinal's longstanding emphasis on the Church as a communion formed by baptism

and the reception of the Holy Eucharist, that the response of Catholics in public life to Church teachings that are well established, such as abortion and physician assisted suicide, will be highlighted. In a letter about this very issue, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: "Regarding the grave sin of abortion or euthanasia, when a person's formal cooperation becomes manifest (understood in the case of a Catholic politician, as his consistently campaigning and voting for permissive abortion and euthanasia laws), his pastor should meet with him, instructing him about the Church's teaching, informing him that he is not to present himself for Holy Communion until he brings to an end the objective situation of sin, and warning him he will otherwise be denied the Eucharist". The viewpoint expressed in the letter may find authoritative expression in the papal magisterium of Pope Benedict XVI. He may

also explore in his teaching as the Vicar of Christ a subject touching not just bioethics but human conduct in every arena, namely conscience. He has written that conscience is not a divine, infallible oracle but an organ that must be developed and properly formed. "If I believe that the Church has its origins in the Lord," writes Ratzinger, "then the teaching office of the Church has a right to expect that it, as it authentically develops, will be accepted as a priority factor in the formation of conscience."

Indeed, in order to more effectively address questions in bioethics, it is likely that Pope Benedict will focus on the larger "story" of humanity—creation, fall, redemption—in light of which the proper understanding of the value of the human person, and therefore the proper answer to various questions in applied ethics, becomes more clear. In this, as in so many things, Pope

Benedict carries on the legacy of the great John Paul II who said: "Jesus Christ is the answer to the question posed by every human life, and the love of Christ compels us to share that great good news with everyone. We believe that the Death and Resurrection of Christ reveal the true meaning of human existence; therefore nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in our hearts." The Christocentric humanism articulated by John Paul no doubt will find continued resonances in the papacy of Benedict XVI.

Dr. Christopher Kaczor, associate professor of philosophy at Loyola Marymount University, is the author of The Edge of Life: Human Dignity and Contemporary Bioethics and Proportionalism and the Natural Law Tradition.

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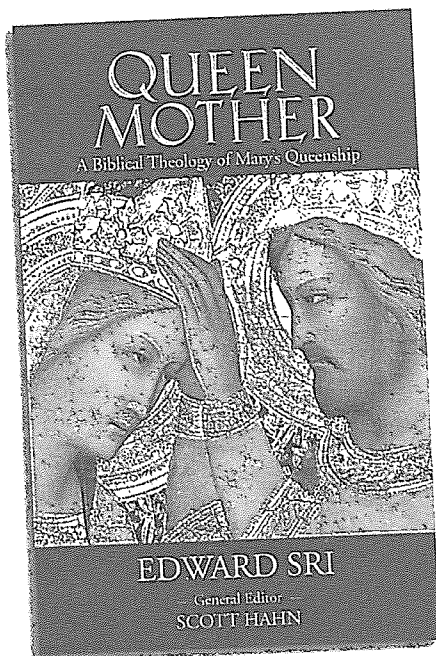
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