The Sacredness of Human Life In a Desacralized World

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by

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Let me begin with a personal anecdote. Some time ago, one of my students invited me to speak to his Bible study group. He had been enjoying my philosophy course and was confident that I would be able to elicit similar agreeable sentiments from his colleagues. I was particularly grateful for the invitation. Teaching philosophy can be frustrating for a Christian who would, on occasion, welcome the opportunity to move beyond philosophy and discuss some of the insights that are found in Revelation.

We met in a private home. I began by commending the students for studying scripture and telling them how supremely important it is in life to be able to know how to distinguish what is sacred from what is not. Obviously Sacred Scripture is sacred, I pointed out. At that moment, and in need of offering an incontrovertible example of a book that is not sacred, my eyes fell on a nearby Sears catalogue. I proffered that the catalogue is an example of something that is not sacred.

My benign assumption proved false. The Bible students had not reached a level of intellectual sophistication wherein the distinction between the sacred and the profane meant anything to them. My relegation of the Sears catalogue to the realm of the profane offended one of the students. "It's sacred to my father!" he snapped, rather indignantly.

What I hoped was going to be a learning experience for the students turned out to be more of a learning experience for me. My

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offended student had effectively derailed my presentation. Others in the
group supported him. All values are relative. It was impossible to get back
on track.

Why were these students studying scripture, I wondered? Was it
because they happened to like it, the way my complaining student’s father
happened to like his Sears catalogue? It did not seem that they were
cognizant of its sacred quality, that it represented the word of God. Does
not Heaven speak with a more compelling voice than Madison Avenue?
They did not convey the sense that when one is in the presence of the
sacred, one should have feelings of awe, gratitude, humility, and
dedication.

In our secularized society, the processes of desacralization are so
advanced that they easily capture the minds and hearts of students who are,
ostensibly, committed to its very resistance. An informal study group is a
weak defense against the penetrating power of secularization. To say that
something is sacred primarily because I like it is to obliterate any objective
basis for distinguishing between the sacred and the profane. It is to make
me the source of sacredness and not God. It is, effectively, to desacralize
the sacred. It is to make equality of feeling sacred and to make real
sacredness unsacred.

If the sacredness of Sacred Scripture can be so easily desacralized,
as in the case of the Bible study group, how much more easily can the
sacredness of human life be similarly affected in the secular world! The
prospect for the possibility is most disconcerting.

There are psychological reasons for desacralizing the sacred. The
more valuable something is, even on a purely commercial level, the more
we are obliged to care for it. We go to great lengths to safeguard our
valuables. We insure them, hide them, guard them, and use them sparingly.
The more valuable our possession, the more nervous it makes us.
Prudential’s “Rock of Gibralter” is an image designed to ease our worries
at the thought of losing something valuable without receiving fair
compensation in return. But if commercial valuables make us nervous, the
sacred should make us tremble. Our knowledge of the sacred causes no
end of anxiety, though fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. If we
profane what is sacred, we experience deep guilt; if we turn our back on it,
we are threatened with condemnation.

Psychologically, it is easier to function in a world of trivialities,
though only for a short time. A problem of immense proportions exists. A
world of trivialities quickly becomes boring. Ultimately it becomes
meaningless. And since we are creatures for whom meaning is far more
important than convenience, the anxiety we experience in the presence of
the sacred is infinitely more preferable than the devastating void we
experience in its continuing absence. Our dilemma is this: in the presence of the sacred, we tremble; but without any discernible relationship with the sacred, we descend from boredom to despair.

Plato's great dialogue, *Euthyphro*, is about two opposite tendencies: one that is centripetal, seeking the heart of the sacred; the other, centrifugal, that avoids it, seeking instead refuge in the ego. Socrates asks Euthyphro whether things that are holy are holy (sacred) because the gods love them, or do the gods love them because they are holy. Socrates, himself, is a seeker of wisdom and believes that holiness is intrinsic to that which is holy. He wants to know more about what is holy so that he can be guided by it. He judges himself to be unwise. But he believes that through association with that which is holy, we may begin to move in the direction of wisdom. Euthyphro, on the other hand, is not interested in objective reality. He wants the power to confer holiness on things by virtue of saying that they are holy. He is infatuated with his own imagined powers. Socrates is ontocentric, Euthyphro is egocentric. The objective reality of holiness is the topic of their debate.

The current debate about whether human life is sacred in itself or is sacred only because someone says it is sacred — sacred in essence or by attribution — is a reiteration of the dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro. But the new context for the debate is the issue of active euthanasia. Those who want to take matters of life and death into their own hands find it convenient for their purposes to hold that concepts such as sacredness, sanctity, dignity, and so on, are not descriptions but ascriptions. On the other hand, those who recognize that human life is ineradicably sacred are content to serve life, and therefore have no desire to destroy it. For them, sacredness describes human life.

The Socrates-Euthyphro debate also parallels the Medieval-Modern debate concerning the meaning of things. Thomas Howard, in his critique of modern secularism, *Chance or the Dance?*, states that, "the myth in the old age was that everything means everything. The myth sovereign in the new is that nothing means anything." To the medieval mind, the lion was the king of the jungle and his kinglyness reminded us of the ruler of a kingdom who, in turn, reminded us of Christ the King. All things were linked together analogically and everything was rich in meaning. Man was made in the image of God and his life was sacred. From a moral point of view, one could not strike against anything sacred. To do so constituted a sacrilege. By contrast, the modern view is a perspective of dislocation. Nothing means anything broader or richer than itself. A lion is simply a beast, a zoological classification, and any relationship he bears with royalty is the result of wild and misguided imagination. The modern world sees things in their naked individuality, which is to say, without any particular
meaning that goes beyond themselves.

The old myth was proclaimed in scripture, amplified and sustained in philosophy and literature. In Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s 15th century *Oration of the Dignity of Man* we read a description of man that abounds in transcendent implication: “man is the intermediary between creatures, that he is the familiar of the gods above him as he is lord of the beings beneath him; that, by the acuteness of his senses, the inquiry of his reason and the light of his intelligence, he is the interpreter of nature, set midway between the timeless unchanging and the flux of time; the living union (as the Persians say), the very marriage hymn of the world, and, by David’s testimony but little lower than the angels.”

We find a similar experience of how the meaning of man reverberates with God and the whole order of His creation in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! ... this quintessence of dust...”

The process of secularization in the modern world is at the same time a process of fragmentation. As things become disrelated from any web of meaning, they also become isolated. In this new perspective, it becomes difficult for people to believe that anything could be truly sacred, for the concept of sacredness presupposes an intimacy with the transcendent source of sacredness, which is God. Metaphysics has been fractured, so to speak, and man is entirely on his own. Nietzsche’s dictum that without God, everything is permissible, conveys the haunting corollary that nothing has meaning (or that meaning is entirely arbitrary).

If the old view of reality that includes the sacred is frightening, then the new view that excludes it is terrifying. No matter how advanced the processes of secularization are, we cannot function without meaning. And if we deny that human life is sacred, then we ascribe new and arbitrary meanings to it. We cannot fully emancipate ourselves from the old view that human life has meaning. We retain an und dismissable need to justify our tenuous tenancy in the universe by replacing the notion of the sacred with virtually anything we can think of. Unfortunately, each novel replacement introduces a deadly form of discrimination. We do not want to expel everyone from the universe. But if we extend the right to live only for the useful, the healthy, the mentally sound, and the financially solvent, we withdraw it from the “useless eaters”, the infirm, the mentally unbalanced, and the poor. The new order believes it has liberated itself from religious shackles, whereas it is denying more and more classes of human beings their fundamental right to be.

The notion of “quality of life” is an arbitrary way of dividing the
human race into those whose lives are worth preserving and those whose lives are not. This division, in some cases, is so clean and clear that it conforms to a mathematical equation. Dr. Anthony Shaw, for example, a professor of pediatric surgery and Chairman of the Ethics Committee of the American Pediatric Association, has formulated a mathematical equation to differentiate those children who should continue to live from those who should not. In his equation $QL = NE(H+S)$, $QL$ stands for Quality of Life; $NE$ for the Natural Endowment of the child (both physical and intellectual); $H$ for support that could be expected from the Home environment; and $S$ for help that could be expected from Society in the form of money, education, and treatment.

The fact that $NE$ and the sum of $H+S$ are multiplied by each other (and not added) insures that $QL$ will be zero if either $NE$ or $(H+S)$ is zero. Thus, the line of discrimination can be made clean and clear. As Shaw himself explains, it does not matter how much $(H+S)$ one might offer a microcephalic child, $(H+S) \times 0 = 0$. Conversely, a perfectly healthy child born to an unwed, drug addicted mother who lives in a ghetto will yield the same zero Quality of Life, for $NE(0) = 0$.

Manner, et al., in an article in the New England Journal of Medicine, have suggested that in addition to the “brain dead”, the “irreversibly demented”, and those in a “persistent vegetative state”, we might also offer active euthanasia to the “pleasantly senile”.

As the notion of the sacredness of human life falls into disrepute and is replaced by various biological and sociological categories, it becomes increasingly difficult for people to recognize man as a distinctive member of the animal kingdom. In some circles, far from being “the paragon of animals”, man is thought to be inferior in certain instances to fitter members of the world of nonhuman animals. Building on Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation, Evelyn Pluhar has authored a lengthy work in search of reasons for favoring the “rights” of nonhuman animals over those of “marginal human beings” (Beyond Prejudice: The Moral Significance of Human and Nonhuman Animals, Duke University Press). Reviewer Colin McGinn finds her book “exceptionally thorough, expertly reasoned, and entirely convincing”. There is nothing morally distinctive (let alone sacred) about the class of human beings for McGinn. He writes: “Compare a normal chimpanzee to a severely retarded human child unable to take care of itself or to speak or to reason. Given that neither qualifies as a rational moral being, capable of asserting its rights, why do we allow vivisection of the chimp but not of the child? Surely, if moral significance attaches only to full persons, then the child should be granted no more protection than the chimp, or the pig awaiting slaughter.” He adds: “Would you shoot retarded people because they are encroaching on your food supply or messing up

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your back yard? Would you kill and eat them because of the culinary pleasure to be derived? If your answer is no, then you should return a similar answer in respect of animals.”

Pluhar and McGinn argue that rights for human and nonhuman animals are grounded not in personhood or rationality, but in “conation”. By “conation”, they refer to a power of striving (from the Latin conatio, meaning “attempt”), whether consciously or not, toward an end. It is “conation” and not sacredness that is presumed to warrant continued life. And all conations apparently are equal: “A dog’s desire to run free does not matter less to it than my desire to enjoy a ballet performance matters to me.” Nonetheless, bestowing “rights” on animals and “liberating” them from their inferior status to humans is not so much a bold strike for broadmindedness and equality, but an insidious way of depriving some human beings of their right to life, and an invidious form of discrimination that accords superiority of some humans and nonhuman animals over other humans.

The one word that most often appears in pro-euthanasia rhetoric is “dignity”. According to the old myth, a human being has dignity because human life is sacred. In other words, dignity results when the sacredness of life is concretized or existentialized in the individual person. All human life is sacred, but the human being has dignity. Moreover, dignity is an irremovable characteristic of the person. According to the new myth, which can hardly dispense with the word, “dignity” is both a transitory and external feature of the individual. Marya Mannes, in her book *Last rights: A Case for the Good Death*, for example, states that euthanasia “is simply to be able to die with dignity at a moment when life is devoid of it.” Thus, for euthanasia advocates, dignity is something we can lose. This means that it is possible to be a human being and not have dignity. Presumably, the basis on which human life is inviolable is not the fact that it is human life, but because it has lost or is in danger of losing dignity. But “dignity” is merely an ascription that is arbitrarily bestowed upon or withdrawn from a person. And, given the pressure for euthanasia, the withdrawal of “dignity” can easily be a verbal ploy to serve the ideology of the euthanasia movement. In addition, the fact that people can confer and retract “dignity” by fiat reintroduces a most pernicious form of discrimination that divides the human race into those who have dignity and those who do not.

According to the new view, dignity is superficial. It is not a characteristic of the person. It has no depth. Once sacredness was banished, it was inevitable that interior dignity would also go. The picture of modern man shows him to be without a soul. As T.S. Eliot describes him in his poem “The Hollow Men”, he is:
Shape without form, shade without colour;  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

For similar reasons, William Butler Yeats made his passionate cry that “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

The truth about man, writes Pope John Paul II, is that man has dignity. Furthermore, that dignity commands respect. And it is precisely the mutual respect that human beings give each other on the basis of their respective dignities that the foundation is established for respecting human rights and experiencing human freedom. By harmonizing truth, dignity, and freedom, according to the Holy Father, we secure the proper ground for morality.

We cannot live without meaning. The fact that human life is sacred and that each human being has dignity provides a basis for meaning. The modern world has sought to deny the sacredness of human life. But it has not denied it absolutely. Rather, it has distorted it. It has not done away with the notion of sacredness altogether. It has merely replaced it with relatively superficial notions such as the “quality of life”. It has not abandoned the notion of dignity, but has enfeebled it by making it external and transitory.

The modern world is not at peace, however, with its new ethics. Though the old view that acknowledged the sacredness of human life and the awesome responsibilities that it implied was frightening, the new view which empties man of his interior dignity and thereby deprives him of a life that has transcendent meaning is terrifying.

The euthanasia debate will not be satisfactorily resolved without a recovery of the sacredness of human life as well as the exercise of love and courage which are needed to live responsibly as human beings who are made in the image of God. The reality that challenges us to be authentic human beings will always prove more satisfactory in the end than the fantasy which, in promising us ease and comfort, robs us of our soul.