

Redefining Bioethics For Today And Tomorrow



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What comes to mind when we hear the word, “bioethics”? Generally, we think of ethical concerns such as consent to medical treatment, withholding or withdrawing certain medical interventions, reproductive technologies, abortion, and stem cell research. Such issues, and the questions that surround them, are important. They have an immediate effect on our lives. They challenge us individually and they call for responses in society and within the context of our various faith traditions. But is our current model of bioethics adequate? In particular, is it adequate in the light of present global circumstances? Theologian Andrew Dutney suggests that it is not. With its dominant focus on medicine and individual patient care, contemporary bioethics, Dutney suggests fails because it ignores entirely the significance of the health of the environment.¹

We might ask, however, why ethical issues concerning the health of the environment are relevant for bioethics? Perhaps such issues are best addressed within the seemingly separate discipline of environmental ethics? Yet, increasingly the separateness of our ethical questions and responses makes little sense. New insights make this clear. There are, for example, clear links between environmental problems and human illnesses such as the correlation between deforestation and the spread of malaria or between ozone depletion and the increasing incidence of skin cancer worldwide. As climate change

occurs infectious diseases are increasing and their patterns changing. Extreme weather events have resulted in a huge death toll in many parts of the world. They have caused injury, disability and social, economic and mental stress for an incalculable number of people. Land degradation that benefits the world’s affluent results in famine and malnutrition for the world’s poor. As environmental degradation accelerates so millions of people are displaced across the world. Living in dire poverty, many in refugee camps, such people become increasingly vulnerable to disease, violence and sexual exploitation.² As we plunder the earth’s resources and destroy its integrity and health so we also plunder the security, health and well-being of many of the world’s poorest people. For, as the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops reminds us, “the cry of the earth is the cry of the poor”.³

In more affluent countries as well, the present environmental crisis impacts health. The rising use and abuse of fossil fuels is associated with increasing rates of respiratory and cardiovascular disease. Inner-city pollution is linked to the dramatic rise in childhood asthma. Excesses of consumerism are connected to cardiac disease and some cancers. Fast-paced lifestyles that partner the consumerist life-style take a toll on mental health and social well-being. The gap between rich and poor, with its associated patterns of disease, is widening in the wealthier nations of the world.

Added to this are the problems connected to the delivery of current medicine in the technologically developed countries. The large-scale, costly health systems

that focus on acute care, often at the expense of health promotion and disease prevention, are responsible for significant environmental damage. Large hospitals are surrounded by massive parking lots and service buildings that interfere with the natural environment. The intensity of their energy consumption for heating, cooling, air filtering and for the running of sophisticated medical equipment is considerable. Hospitals generate hazardous emissions including toxic, allergenic and radioactive wastes. Rapid technological advances inherent in the system result in a “correspondingly rapid and costly obsolescence of equipment” and its related problems of environmentally safe disposal.⁴

In the light of these and numerous other factors that inseparably link medicine, environment, health and illness our current, limited conceptions of bioethics seem inadequate. Indeed, even at the time of bioethics’ emergence in the 1970’s a narrow construct of the discipline appeared to be insufficient. Van Rensselaer Potter, the cancer researcher, who is reputed to have named “bioethics”, stated: “What we must now face up to is the fact that human ethics cannot be separated from a realistic understanding of ecology in the broadest sense. Ethical values cannot be separated from biological facts. We are in need of a Land Ethic, a Wildlife Ethic, a Population Ethic, and a Consumption Ethic and so on. All of these involve Bioethics, and the survival of the total ecosystem is the test of the value system.”⁵ Unfortunately, Potter’s vision of a more integrated bioethics was rapidly eclipsed by an all-consuming pre-occupation with the issues of so-called ‘hard science’, high technology, acute care medicine and individual rights that have come to characterize current models of bioethics. It is, however, to an integrated bioethics, like that described by Potter, that Andrew Dutney calls the Church today. What is necessary, Dutney says, is “that bioethics be oriented toward a field much broader than medicine as it applies itself to its role as an agent of life and healing. And just as it did when bioethics was first taking shape, theology has a useful contribution to make to that service of life and healing.”⁶

What might such a contribution of the Church look like? Perhaps firstly, we can all respond seriously to

the call we have received to address the environmental crisis of our day, seeing it as inseparable from our Christian commitments to health care and bioethics. As John Paul II put it, “the ecological crisis is a moral issue”. It is one that calls Christians and indeed, “the entire human community to take seriously the responsibility that is theirs.” For Christians such a response, he stated, “is not an option.”⁷ The bishops of the Philippines have described the ecological crisis as “the ultimate pro-life issue”, something that must surely resonate with those engaged in Catholic bioethics today.⁸ Recently, Pope Benedict XVI has added his voice to the call for a new awareness of “the intrinsic link between development, human needs and the safeguarding of creation”.⁹ More directly, the Church has expressed the call for the care of creation in terms that seem to form a bridging between what has previously been seen as bioethics and the concerns of environmental ethics.

John Paul II, for example, while reflecting on an ethic of life in the context of traditional topics in Catholic bioethics such as abortion, euthanasia and genetic engineering, sought to establish their essential connection to environmental issues. He stated that respect for life is also about protecting the environment so that future generations of all species might live.¹⁰ In similar vein other Christian denominations have made the connection explicit. In 1999, the Anglican Consultative Council authorized the setting-up of a new office to address ethical issues raised by the global environmental crisis and by the emergence of new technologies, particularly biotechnologies. That office has made clear that, “On reflection it seems that these two areas are linked by a common concern for the impact of technology. Many of our current environmental problems are side-effects of the technologies that we rely on for so many aspects of our daily lives. At the same time, some of the most challenging technological developments are in the new biological and genetic technologies. These new technologies bring the promise of significant benefit but they also involve risks, often environmental risks.”¹¹ The call to Christians then seems clear in terms of the development of a broader and more integrated notion of bioethics.

Support for such a development of the discipline can be found through a recovery of an ecological motif in Scripture, history, theology and worship. The Scriptures are replete with reminders of the goodness of God's Creation, human responsibilities toward and relationship with it. As the biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann points out, "It will no longer do to talk about Yahweh and His people, but we must speak about Yahweh and His people and His Land."¹² This interconnectivity is also clear through the Church's theology and the lives of the saints. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, extols the diversity and unity of creation. It is only through the variety and relationship of all creation, he says, that God's goodness can begin to be reflected. St. Francis, patron saint of ecology, underlines the inseparable relationship between humans and nature when he uses familial terms in his great hymn, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon". The problem has been, however, that another theological trend that forged a division between humanity and the rest of creation, has overshadowed the long ecological tradition in the Church. This trend has created, over time, an anthropocentric or human-centred world-view; one that translated into ethics, has allowed us to separate that which cannot be divided, the health and well-being of the earth and the health and well-being of humans. It has permitted us to become concerned only for the well-being of humans at the expense of the rest of creation without the recognition that in doing so we have, in fact, placed the health of both at risk. Significantly, the newer and emerging currents in theology, such as Liberationist, Feminist and Eco-theological perspectives help to restore the balance and to ground possible ways forward. Each of these theological paradigms reveals the essential connection between the sufferings of the earth and the sufferings of humanity. "Now is the time" says Liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, "to bring these two discourses together."¹³

The bringing together of the discourses is critical for the development of bioethics at this time. As priest and cultural historian Thomas Berry puts it, we simply "cannot have well humans on a sick planet, not even with all our medical science."¹⁴ Berry calls, therefore, for the profession of medicine to reconsider its role,

"not only within the context of human society, but within the context of the earth process."¹⁵ Bioethics likewise must refocus its role if such a necessary transition is to occur. It must challenge its own entrapment in the medical paradigm and in so doing challenge, with its wider questions, the goals of medicine and health-care more generally.

For those working in Catholic bioethics new horizons beckon. In addition to the immediate challenges presented by emerging technologies and new scientific developments in medicine there seems to be a call for deeper, wider questioning. How, for example, are the challenges of medicine, science and technology to be viewed within the global context? How do our developments in healthcare and our systems of delivery impact the environment and how, in turn, does environmental integrity or destruction impact health? What, ultimately, should be the goals of medicine and healthcare in today's world? Where is priority to be given? An integrated bioethics is concerned with the moral dimensions of the determinants of health; access to food, clean water, shelter, immunity from violence, and sexual coercion. An integrated bioethics thus reaches out to address the moral issues relating to preventive medicine, emergency care allocation, care for those with chronic illnesses and disabilities, mental health difficulties, appropriate support in old age and care in dying. As theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill points out, "As we open the twenty-first century, the orientation of Catholic bioethics is different than it was for the greater part of the twentieth. The very term bioethics expands our vision to life and health outside the delimited context of healthcare facilities and 'medical interventions.' Individual life and health now must be seen in the perspective of the common good – not just family, local community, province, nation, region, or continent, but of all human societies and of life on the planet."¹⁶ We are called to a new and richer vision of bioethics for today and tomorrow.

Endnotes

¹ Andrew Dutney, “Bioethics, Ecology, and Theology”, in *Earth Revealing – Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, ed. Denis Edwards (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 213-29

² Anthony J. McMichael and Pim Martens, “Global Environmental Changes: Anticipating and Assessing Risks to Health”, in *Environmental Change, Climate and Health: Issues and Research Methods*, eds. Anthony J. McMichael and Pim Martens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

³ Social Affairs Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Christian Ecological Imperative”, (Ottawa: The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003)

⁴ Jessica Pierce and Andrew Jameton, *The Ethics of Environmentally Responsible Health Care* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

⁵ Van Rensselaer Potter, *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), vii-viii

⁶ Dutney, “Bioethics, Ecology and Theology”, 221

⁷ Pope John Paul II, “Peace With God the Creator, Peace With All of Creation”, in *World Day of Peace Message* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1990)

⁸ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “What is happening to Our Beautiful Land?”, (Manila: Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 1988)

⁹ John L. Allen, “Pope and Patriarch Both Speak Out on Environment”, *National Catholic Reporter*, January 3, 2007

¹⁰ John Paul II, “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation”, #6

¹¹ Anglican Consultative Council, *Ethics and Technology: An Initiative of the Anglican Consultative Council That Strives to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation and Sustain and Renew the Earth* (Anglican Communion Office, 2004), 8-9

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place and Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 6.

¹³ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 104

¹⁴ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (New York, Harper Collins, 1992) 257

¹⁵ Thomas Berry, “A New Era: Healing the Injuries We Have Inflicted on Our Planet”, *Health Progress* 73, no. 2 (1992): 60-63 at 62

¹⁶ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Bioethics and the Common Good: The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology, 2004* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), 8-9

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