**Current Bioethics and the Christian Worldview: An Indispensable Nexus**

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**Introduction**

Religious pluralism considers all the “major” religions to be coequal in validity and truthfulness, and this sentiment applies as well to bioethics. I want to suggest that there is none other than a Christocentric worldview under which current bioethics can be theoretically supported and that other faiths and philosophies have teachings that actually undermine bioethics.

The purpose of this paper is, in a sense, to prove the seemingly audacious title. To do this I propose to demonstrate how competing major religions to Christianity are at best on tenuous ground when it comes to supporting let alone informing bioethics. The non-Christian religions we will consider are Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Secular Humanism. These are chosen since these four alone, constitute “major” religions and nearly two thirds of the earth’s inhabitants.

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1 See note 4.

2 A clear example of this is found in *Transcultural Dimensions in Medical Ethics*. This is a compilation of essays from ethicists and doctors from across the spectrum of religious and cultural backgrounds set forth in hopes of discovering “common values which might guide our thinking” in terms of medical ethics throughout the world. The assumption, apparent in the title, is that there is, indeed, a “transcultural” dimension to all bioethics in the various medical traditions represented, i.e. a “metacultural set of moral values to which all may subscribe,” “the middle ground in which some values overlap.” Despite all the complexities of comparing cultures and their bioethical values, these values are summarized as “respect for life,” as well as “beneficence, autonomy, nonmaleficence and justice.”

3 It may be questioned as to why Secular Humanism is considered here a religion, but this designation is quite accurate. Details on this matter can be found at [http://vftonline.org/Patriarchy/definitions/humanism_religion.htm](http://vftonline.org/Patriarchy/definitions/humanism_religion.htm).

4 What constitutes a “major” religion is a complex and highly nuanced discussion. For the purposes of this essay “major” will be judged by estimated adherents. Consequently, the four religions with the largest followings outside of Christianity (2.1 billion) are Islam (1.5 billion), Secular Humanism (non-religious, atheistic-1.1 billion),
The approach is quite simple. First, to identify “current bioethics” and then ask whether there is, within bioethics, a *sine qua non* which makes Christianity, or any other worldview for that matter, theoretically necessary for bioethics. Following this, we will inquire as to why Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Secular Humanism cannot support that *sine qua non*. Finally, we will consider how the biblical Christian worldview provides an exceptional and substantive basis for bioethics insofar as it alone appears to have the presuppositions and principles most supportive of this bioethical *sine qua non*.

**Current Bioethics and Its *Sine Qua Non***

During their last year before disbanding in September 2009, President George W. Bush’s President’s Council on Bioethics wrote a report entitled *Human Dignity and Bioethics*. In his introductory chapter to this report, “Bioethics and the Question of Human Dignity,” Adam Schulman identifies such prospective and developing technologies as exouterinegenesis, mass human cloning, chimeras, neuro-pharmacology and manipulation, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis and germ-line genetic modification as some of the key issues of bioethical concern. These will absolutely require us, in his view, to attend to the fundamental questions of whether there are “features of human nature . . . so essential to our humanity that they are rightly considered as inviolable.”

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More recently, Amy Gutmann, who chairs President Obama’s Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (PCSBI), in response to investigations into unethical research on Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Guatemala from 1946-1948, stated, “Our commitment to identifying the full facts in this case will help to ensure . . . that current rules for research participants protect people from harm or unethical treatment wherever research occurs.”\(^7\) This revelation led to the undertaking of an assessment of research standards and a report entitled “Moral Medicine: Protecting Participants in Human Subjects Research.”\(^8\) This partially reflects the mission of the Commission which, according to Executive Order, may include, “the protection of human research subjects” and “the intersection of science and human rights.”\(^9\)

On the international level, in its 32nd session in October 2003, the General Conference of UNESCO considered that it was “opportune and desirable to set universal standards in the field of bioethics with due regard for human dignity and human rights and freedoms” (32 C/Res. 24).\(^10\) By October, 2005, in its 33\(^{rd}\) session, the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights was unanimously adopted by acclamation.\(^11\)

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\(^7\) “President’s Bioethics Commission Releases Results of its Historical Investigation of the 1940s U.S. Public Health Service STD Studies in Guatemala.” Sept. 13, 2011 Available from: http://bioethics.gov/cms/node/308


Notably the UDBHR aims to “promote respect for human dignity and protect human rights, by ensuring respect for the life of human beings,” and, though scientific progress must ensue, it must do so only while respecting “human dignity.” Article 3 is entitled “Human Dignity and Human Rights” the UDBHR articulates two governing principles; 1) that “Human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms are to be fully respected,” and 2) that “The interests and welfare of the individual should have priority over the sole interest of science or society.”

Considering both these national and international statements on current bioethics it seems obvious that how embodied human beings should be treated and cared for in the application and advancement of technology is paramount to the discipline. Schulman writes,

In short, the march of scientific progress that now promises to give us manipulative power over human nature itself—a coercive power mostly exercised, as C. S. Lewis presciently noted, by some men over other men, and especially by one generation over future generations—will eventually compel us to take a stand on the meaning of human dignity, understood as the essential and inviolable core of our humanity. If the necessity of taking that stand is today not yet widely appreciated, there will come a time when it surely will be.

Whether considered nationally or internationally, there seems to be an underlying assumption that bioethics concerns itself not just with what is done (technique), but how it is done because it involves, in Schulman’s words, the very “ground and content of human dignity.” It seems safe to say, then, that the sine qua non of all bioethics is an anthropology that particularly upholds human dignity, and a belief that such is the basis of human rights.

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
With its *sine qua non* established, we now inquire as to that anthropology and, more fundamentally that cosmology, which best supports bioethics. Every religion holds a particular cosmology (belief on the origin and nature of the universe as a whole) which inevitably issues in an anthropology (belief about the nature of humanity) so we will briefly analyze the major religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Secular Humanism in terms of their cosmology and derivative anthropology. In so doing we will isolate a key element or elements of these worldviews that seem to make them ineligible to provide adequate grounding for the concept of human dignity and thus bioethics.

**Hinduism**

John Oswalt argues that worldviews outside Judaism are characterized by what he calls “continuity.” In this view there are no real distinctions within the perceived universe, only imaginary ones; with no distinctions, there can be no real human dignity. He writes,

> Continuity is a philosophical principle that asserts that all things are continuous with each other. Thus I am one with the tree, not merely symbolically or spiritually, but actually. The tree is me; I am the tree. . . . Of course this idea exists in many variations, the core

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16One of the claims made by Hinduism is that it is perhaps the world’s oldest religion. From a biblical perspective, of course, this cannot be the case since Yahweh was revealing himself to Adam, Noah and Abraham. The dispersion of nations is recounted in Genesis 11 where the languages are confused and the world is populated by post Deluvians from the valley in Shinar who know the story and hold the basic ideas of creation, sin, atonement through sacrifice, destruction by flood, and such. These humans, who would become the ancestors of the unique ethnic groups(Genesis 10), distorted these ideas as they became further and further removed form the true God and began to “exchange the truth of God for the lie and worship and serve the creature more than the Creator” (Romans 1:21). Thus, false religions, distortions of the truth about God, humans and animals, were born in the surrounding regions of the Jews. Hinduism has a plethora of beasts, humans and chimeras that make up their pantheon of some 300 million gods and goddesses.
idea remains the same, and it is found in all the great religious literatures of the world, except the Israelite one.\footnote{John N. Oswalt. *The Bible among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 43-44. By “Israelite one” Oswalt includes the worldview of Islam along with Judaism and Christianity. Yet, as we will see below, merely having a non-continuity worldview, as defined by Oswalt, is not enough to find a grounding for human dignity and thus human rights and bioethics.}

According to Oswalt, continuity has an inherently and “uniformly low view of humanity.”\footnote{Ibid., 59.} Humans are insignificant as a whole, being merely parts of the world of nature. Oswalt directly connects this idea of continuity and Hinduism. “In Hinduism, the hope of one day getting off the wheel of existence and being absorbed back into the nothingness is a small hope. If you are a low-caste person, there is no way you can better your lot in this life; you are locked in, doomed by something unknown and unremembered.”\footnote{Ibid., 60.} Oswalt brings up two important elements here; the “wheel of existence” and “caste.” Both of these core doctrines of Hinduism, as we will presently see, offer poor supports for bioethics.

Hinduism’s highest goal is found in the phrase *Tat Tvam Asi.*\footnote{A key phrase in a series of lessons found in the Khandogya Upanishad (6.8-16). These lessons entail the teaching that everything is rooted in the True or Self, that is *Brahman*; the supreme, impersonal Self. The purpose of human existence is to achieve liberation (*moksha*), by coming to this consciousness, or that the *atman* (individual self) is really *Brahman* (the Supreme Self). We are in the bondage of our illusory perceptions (*maya*) and the goal of life is to free ourselves from this self, which includes our embodiment, which is illusory to begin with. A. S. Wensinck and C. Markandeya, *Khandogya Upanishad* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1966), 86.} This means that the highest consciousness is to recognize the unity of the entire universe with *Brahman* (the supreme, impersonal Self). The purpose of human existence is to achieve liberation (*moksha*), by coming to this consciousness, or that the *atman* (individual self) is really *Brahman* (the Supreme Self). We are in the bondage of our illusory perceptions (*maya*) and the goal of life is to free ourselves from this self, which includes our embodiment, which is illusory to begin with.
It is important to observe here that this makes the highest value and goal in Hinduism the loss of personal identity much like a drop of water loses its structure and individual significance in the ocean. Human individuality and embodiment do not fare very well in this perspective.

This comes into clear focus when one examines the Bhagavad Gita, a key Hindu text, in which Krishna seeks to convince the human warrior, Arjuna, to set out and kill not only fellow humans, but family members, and not give it a second thought because of the fact they possess an eternal soul (atman) which cannot be destroyed. His dilemma is what Krishna calls a “trivial weakness of . . . heart” (Gita 2:03), which comes as a result of a misunderstanding of the relationship of the atman to the universe as a whole. The temporal body is hardly important because the soul, which is the essence of what we are, is eternal and will just go on and acquire another temporal body after the destruction of this present one. Krishna tells Arjuna, in essence, do not worry about the body, it is insignificant, and altogether expendable.

Oswalt also mentions caste, the most obvious anti-dignity doctrine in Hinduism. Some Hindu reformers, like Gandhi, embarrassed by it, have tried to get rid of this deplorable concept. Yet, despite efforts to overturn the caste system it will be difficult if not impossible to rid it from the general Hindu consciousness. The outright inequality in the caste system is divinely built

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21 The Bhagavad Gita, or “song of god” is a small but significant section of the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. In this 18 chapter section, Krishna reveals to humanity the essence of the Upanishads which is to recognize, as the highest possible, or Supreme Knowledge, “tat tvam asi.” The Bhagavad Gita, in a sense, is the distillation of the core teachings of the Upanishads, which is the oneness of atman (self) with Brahman (Self). Krishna makes this clear when he pronounces, “An enlightened person looks at a learned person, an outcast, even a cow, an elephant, or a dog with an equal eye . . . One who finds happiness with the Supreme Being, who rejoices in the Supreme Being within, and who is illuminated by Self-knowledge; such a yogi (one in union with the Ultimate Reality) attains Nirvana, and goes to the Supreme Being . . . when a sensible man ceases to see different identities due to different material bodies and he sees how beings are expanded everywhere, he attains to the Brahman conception” (Gita, 5.18, 2413.31). One can see how this clearly reflects the words of Khandogya Upanishad 3.14.1, which states, “Indeed, this whole world is Brahman. Tranquil let one worship It as that from which he came forth, as that in which he will be dissolved, as that in which he breathes.”

22 Interestingly, this author actually had a conversation with a long-term missionary in India during the plane ride to where this paper was first to be read in a conference who affirmed this very point.
in as indicated in the *Rg Veda*, Laws of Manu and the *Bhagavad Gita*. In the latter, for example, Krishna tells Arjuna explicitly, “I created the four divisions (*Brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras*) of human society. . . I am the author of this system . . .” (Gita, 4.13, 18.41).

How this relates to the matter of dignity is important. Lower castes are believed to be in a reincarnated state in which they are paying for sins committed in a previous life according to the inexorable law of cause and effect (*karma*). Because of this, people in lower castes are generally considered to have less dignity than upper castes, and are counted unworthy of the advances of medicine, and I would even say compassion, to treat their illnesses. Their diseased conditions are considered to be their just plight due to the negative *karma* accumulated in their previous existence. It seems that given the cosmology and anthropology of Hinduism, the body; the object of medicine and thus the bioethics that guides it, is insignificant.

**Buddhism**

Does Buddhism fare any better as a basis for supporting the *sine qua non* of bioethics? One might argue that Siddhartha Gautama welcomed everyone to the quest for *nirvana* and that his *Sangha*, or community, was an inclusive community where all were equals, we find in Buddhism a strong basis for human dignity. It is true that he rejected the very concept of *caste* as well as other core Hindu doctrines, including the idea that the *atman* must reunite with *Brahman* to achieve *Nirvana*. Gautama denounced the *atman* altogether, teaching the non-self or *anatman*.

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23 Of course, at this point, the question is raised as to why there are Hindu medical professionals who attend to the needs of the sick, even the poor sick, and those of lower castes. It must be said that these people are acting not in accordance with their cosmology and anthropology but in spite of it. There are many in India who are adopting a more modern, progressive even more secular approach, loosely identifying with the cultural aspects of their traditional religious roots, but not following them full swing; especially the caste system. This is a good thing. Another point that could be made is that medical professionals are acting according to “the law of God written on (built into) their hearts” (Romans 2:14-15), which compels even pagan humanity to a sense of true justice and human dignity in their morality (Acts 28:1-4).
Related to this, Gautama taught the very difficult concept of the five Aggregates (skandhas) which has to do with five main parts that make up every person; body (matter), sensations, perceptions, mental formations/thoughts and consciousness. As humans, we exist as we are only once, and when this present body dies, the five aggregates disassemble and reassemble in other combinations, never to reassemble to form the same person as ever before. We have no continuing self or soul (atman) but rather we are a non-self (anatman). Of particular interest with relation to bioethics is the Buddhist teaching that the body/form (rupa) that we take is just one of these five aggregates, and to cling to the body or any of the aggregates as one’s “self” is not the path to Nirvana.

Does not this kind of uniqueness lend itself to a real basis for affirming dignity and worth? Along with Hinduism, or more broadly, any other continuity system, individual personhood matters very little in the grand scheme. In Buddhism there is a life force that animates all living things, including all plants and animals, making humans in the end non-distinct from all other entities. This degrades the concepts of the uniqueness and significance of the individual human person, because there is no such thing, and the sooner we realize this and detach ourselves from this delusion, the better. The overall cosmology and anthropology of Buddhism does not lend itself to a strong framework for human dignity.

Later schools of Buddhism further speak of emptiness (sunyata), saying that all things are equally empty, which, ultimately means, non-existent. In direct relation to the body, emptiness means there really is no body. In this regard Tibetan Buddhist scholar Gashe Gyatso explicitly

24 An accessible explanation of the concept of the anatman or anatta is one by the Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda Maha Thera at [http://www.budsas.org/ebud/whatbudbeliev/115.htm](http://www.budsas.org/ebud/whatbudbeliev/115.htm).
claims “the body that we normally perceive, grasp at and cherish does not exist at all.” 25 Nonexistence, or emptiness, is the true nature of our body. Apart from the mere absence of a truly existent body . . . every part of the body is just part of its deceptive nature.” He then asks, “Since this is the case, why do we spend so much time focusing on the deceptive nature of our body?” As we focus on our body, which is ultimately a deception, “our mind becomes disturbed and we remain in the miserable life of samsara.” In this school of thought, because all is empty, we must rid dualist notions from our mind so that we can more quickly achieve nirvana. 26 This emptiness permeates the universe, and means we have no distinctiveness from other entities in the universe.

In Buddhism attachment to and desire for life, life as embodied individuals, is a delusion which leads only to further suffering (dukkha) keeping us locked in samsara. In contrast, Leon Kass identifies how our human dignity actually embraces “the worthiness of embodied human life and therewith of our natural desires and passions, our natural origins and attachments, our sentiments and aversions, our loves and longings.” 27 It seems that in matters of human dignity Buddhism falls short of an adequate support. If the goal of Buddhism, to escape the rounds of samsara and our embodied existence, along with the doctrines of non-self and emptiness are taken seriously, individual human dignity dies; but really, that seems to be the point anyway.


26 Stephen Prothero, God is not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 195.

Islam

It is common knowledge that both Islam and Christianity posit the special creation of humankind by God,\textsuperscript{28} but is this commonality enough for asserting that Islam holds a position of universal and unconditional human dignity, the necessary foundation for a bioethics that seeks to respect all human lives equally? Islamic Scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, believes so because, “Man in the Islamic perspective is at once the vice regent, the 
\textit{khalifah}, of Allah on earth and his servant . . . The two together constitute the fundamental nature of man.”\textsuperscript{29} This makes man, “the most noble of creatures.”\textsuperscript{30}

While Islam believes that humankind was created, nowhere does it pick up on the theme, or the ethical significance of it, explicitly taught in the Hebrew-Christian Bible that humans are created \textit{in God’s image}. In fact, the Qur’an, in a reference to humanity’s creation, seems to explicitly deny this fact. “The Creator of the heavens and the earth. He hath made for you pairs of yourselves, and of the cattle also pairs, whereby He multiplied you. \textit{Naught is as His likeness}” (Q42: 11).\textsuperscript{31} If anything, this puts humans on a level closer to the animals (cattle), having been created in pairs, than it does God, in whose likeness we \textit{cannot} be.

\textsuperscript{28} Seyyed Hossein Nasr, \textit{A Young Muslim’s Guide to the Modern World} (Chicago IL: KAZI Publications, 1994), 30. According to Nasr, “Allah created man from clay and then breathed into him His Spirit . . . Man does not ascend from apes, not man as man. He descends from the world of the spirit. Our spirit belongs to Allah and to Him it shall return.”

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 29. If this is, as Nasr says, the “fundamental nature” of man, it here differs from the Judeo-Christian anthropology. Being the viceregent of Allah is similar to the idea that humans are created to have dominion and subdue the creation (Genesis 1:26-18), but the constitution of man is different from his function. The Bible focuses first on man in the “image of God” not his function. It appears that Islam’s depiction of man as man is his responsibility first, not his relationship with his creator.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} This could be an explicit attack on the Judeo-Christian affirmation that humanity is created in God’s image because it is thought to constitute \textit{shirk}, or attributing partners to Allah; the grossest sin that anyone could commit from the Islamic perspective.
There is a perspective on human rights as articulated by Islam which makes it seem not only incommensurate with but inimical to, the *sine qua non* of bioethics. According to Nasr, in Islam human rights are *contingent* upon fulfillment of our obligations as humans. This is very clear when he asserts, “We have no *innate* rights unless we accept our obligations towards Allah, for we have not given existence to ourselves.”

In a later essay, Nasr reiterates, “From the Islamic point of view . . . all human rights issue from human responsibilities. Responsibilities come *before* rights. The idea that we have inalienable rights . . . is only half the equation.”

Renowned eighth century Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyyah sheds further light on this concept of conditional rights and it is rooted in the human constitution. He writes, “Nothing in the law of Islam states that the blood of the disbeliever is equal to the blood of the Muslim because *faith is necessary for equality*. The people of the Covenant (Jews or Christians) do not believe in Muhammad and Islam, thus their blood and the Muslim’s blood cannot be equal.”

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 32-33.
It seems quite clear that human dignity and the rights that derive from it do not obtain to those outside the Muslim faith. The universal and inherent dignity and worth of humanity, necessary for grounding bioethics both nationally and internationally, seems alien to Islam. In Islam, human dignity is ambiguous, rights are conditional and neither seems to be universal.

Secular Humanism

Greg Epstein, Harvard University’s secular Humanist chaplain, repeatedly defines humanism as “goodness without God.” Like most naturalists and atheists, he subscribes to the cosmological narrative which begins 15 billion years ago and through unguided evolutionary processes results in an orderly universe with a planet conducive for life and filled with self-conscious human beings who happen to invent morality out of necessity. He states, “Humanists accept that the scientific evidence for evolution is overwhelming; we build our worldview around it because we want to look reality squarely in the face, unblinking, unflinching, unafraid of the truth.”

What is that “truth?” According to Epstein it is that this was a thoroughly

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36 Greg A. Epstein. Good without God: What a Billion Non-religious People Do Believe. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009), various pages. Consistent with this optimistic anthropology, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights is fully endorsed by Secular Humanists, as is the afore-mentioned and more recent UDBHR. Both of these are thoroughly secular documents that root their moral principles in the foundational idea that, “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/ (Internet).

37 Ibid, 8

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The value of this particular book is that Shafi has cited only Mohammed and Muslim scholars and their views on human dignity and human rights throughout the volume. The reader is especially referred to Chapter Four in Shafi’s book, “Discrimination between a Muslim and Non-Muslim.”
“unguided” process in an uncaring universe.\textsuperscript{39} From this “truth” comes another “truth” according to humanism; “the inherent dignity and worth of the individual person;” which is “a central humanist value.”\textsuperscript{40} Is it possible to derive inherent dignity and worth from an impersonal and uncaring universe? Late secularist, Robert Haynes, president of the 16th International Congress of Genetics, unequivocally negates the possibility of the inherent sacredness of life.

For three thousand years at least, a majority of people have considered that human beings were special . . . it’s the Judeo-Christian view of man. What the ability to manipulate genes should indicate to people is the very deep extent to which we are biological machines. The traditional view is built on the foundation that life is sacred . . . Well, not anymore. It's no longer possible to live by the idea that there is something special, unique, even sacred about living organisms.\textsuperscript{41}

In direct contrast to Epstein, Secular Humanist Herbert Tonne says, “We need to mitigate the truth if we are to remain reasonably sane . . . Functionally, sanity means being deluded enough to believe that life is worth living and that the human race is worth preserving.”\textsuperscript{42}

Epstein says we need to be unafraid of the truth, and embrace it, while Tonne, on the other hand, says the truth is so frightening that we need to reduce its severity to maintain our sanity. The humanistic delusion per Tonne is that “human life is important and worth preserving,” while the “truth” is, human life is not. Humanism’s anthropology cannot be sustained by its cosmology. Consequently, its morality, which is based on its anthropology, is on tenuous ground at best.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 9-10

\textsuperscript{40} Humanist Manifesto II The Humanist Manifesto was first published in 1933. A second edition came out in 1973. In 2003 the present version, “Humanism and Its Aspirations,” was developed. All three are available from: http://www.americanhumanist.org/Who_We_Are/About_Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I

\textsuperscript{41} Robert Haynes. Cited by C. Ben Mitchell in Biotechnology and the Human Good. By C. Ben Mitchell Edmund D. Pellegrino, Jean Bethke, Elshtain, John F. Kilner, and Scott B. Rae. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press 2007), 41. In a sense, Haynes’, and thus all naturalism, is a continuity worldview, not unlike like Hinduism and Buddhism, because ultimately all is one, and in this case, all is admittedly non-sacred, and not special; just meaningless, biological machinery.

\textsuperscript{42} Herbert Tonne, Scribblings of a Concerned Secular Humanist. (Northvale, NJ: 1988), 39. (Emphasis Added)
Humanists of course will not necessarily accept these nascent nihilistic conclusions, except honest ones like Herbert Tonne, and turn for their moral values to humanity itself. Epstein, for example, when discussing the issue of where our ethics comes from if not from God states, “the simplest way to put this is: our ethics come from human needs and interests.” But why do human needs and interests matter? This is where Epstein holds on to his delusion. He cites for justification the third permutation of the Humanist Manifesto, “Humanism and its Aspirations,” which is “committed to treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity.” Epstein, however, is very careful to explain that Humanism is not based on anything that is “eternally objective.”

We do not need objective values to condemn heinous crimes and uphold ethical standards. We cannot ever be confident that objective values exist. We can postulate them, but there is no way to prove them right or wrong, existent or non-existent. What proof would suffice? You’d have to have divine revelation, in which case, if it comes, we humanists are perfectly willing to change our minds.

If no objective values exist one wonders how human dignity and worth can be “inherent.” Inherent, the recurring term that characterizes human dignity in the secular bioethics statements considered above, means, “involved in the constitution or essential character of something: belonging by nature or habit.” As Ravi Zacharias has said, “Where does human dignity come from? You cannot contrive it, it must be essential.”

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43 Epstein, *Good without God*, 34.

44 See note 40.

45 Epstein, *Good without God*, 224.

46 Ibid, 35


If worth and dignity is the essence of being human, if it is constitutive of our nature, then it must be objective. It cannot be based on a subjective value system, nor could it have evolved over time to be conjured up by human imagination. Postmodernist Richard Rorty explains that any belief in intrinsic value to anything at all, including human life, “is a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation, the work of someone who had something in mind . . . Only if we have some such picture . . . can we make sense of the idea that the world has an ‘intrinsic nature’.”

Although rejecting the idea of a divine creation of anything, Rorty understands, unlike humanism as a whole with its repeated declarations of “inherent human worth,” that naturalism is no basis whatsoever for establishing the concept. Humanism’s anthropology of human dignity and individual worth cannot be sustained by its cosmology. Consequently, its morality and bioethics, based on that anthropology, is on tenuous ground at best.

To his credit, a very important realization to which Epstein comes is that there is no certainty regarding the source of inherent human dignity and worth, foundational to the humanist cause. As a humanist at least he knows he has to say this to remain consistent. He muses, “But where do this inherent worth and dignity come from? It’s an important and fair question – one that neither the average religious or nonreligious person has thought a lot about.”

It is time that we “religious” people think “a lot” about this, and in fact make this a regular point for arguing the necessity of a theistic basis for morality, human dignity and bioethics.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to see how mere matter in motion (which is all that anything is if the cosmology of the Secular Humanists is right) could give rise to such personal

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51 Epstein, *Good without God*, 34.
beings as us, and to such a unique and personal human reality such as morality. Baggett and Walls critique this world picture saying that “It remains a leap of blind faith to affirm that anything like objective obligation would emerge from [mere matter]. . . . persons themselves, especially persons with intrinsic value and dignity, seem much less likely to emerge from valueless impersonal stuff than from the intentional hand of a personal creator.”\(^{52}\) Michael Perry distinguished professor of law at Emory University, effectively argues that human rights derive from human dignity, but such dignity cannot be supported from a secular (naturalistic) view. Not only are human dignity and rights “ineliminably religious,” argues Perry, they are most adequately rooted in a Christian view.\(^{53}\) It is to this worldview that we now turn.

The uniqueness of the Christian Worldview as a support to bioethics

If, as we have stated above, the \textit{sine qua non} of bioethics is human dignity, Christianity provides the most substantial account of the source and substance of it. Human dignity applies to the whole of humanity, and to the whole person. This is inherent in the biblical concept of humanity created in the image of God. Hamilton tells us how Genesis 1 can be seen as an alternative creation narrative which depicts creation “in a way radically different from the creation accounts of neighboring countries”.\(^{54}\) He writes, “It is well known that in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian society the king, or some high-ranking official, might be called ‘image of


\(^{53}\) Michael Perry, \textit{The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11, 16. Perry’s entire first chapter, “Are Human Rights Ineliminably Religious?” is a thorough inquiry into the inability of secularism to sustain any concept of human dignity, upon which rights are based, and a cogent argument that the religious, and especially Christian, worldview is the only cosmology in which human rights, and the human dignity from which they derive, can be grounded.

\(^{54}\) Victor P. Hamilton, \textit{The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17, for the New International Commentary on the Old Testament} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 135.
god.’ Such a designation, however, was not applied to [the commoner]. Gen. 1 may be using royal language to describe simply ‘man.’ In God’s eyes all of mankind is royal. All of mankind is related to God, not just the king.”

This certainly has enormous implications for our understanding of human dignity. Humans, qua humans, are, as David himself said in Psalm 8, which is very likely an echo of Genesis 1, “you have crowned him [adam, i.e. humanity in general] with majesty and honor.” Allen concludes, “The audacity of this text will not go away. In response to the question ‘What is man?’ comes an answer of majesty.” This dignity and honor applies to adam, man qua man, not just the king, and David, the king, is clearly making this universal anthropological point in Psalm 8. Nigel Cameron affirms this biblical perspective exceptionally when he writes, “the image of God is borne by all, however irreligious or immoral they may be; or however deficient, disabled, sick, young or old.” This concept not only completely undermines the caste system in Hindu anthropology; it also militates against making dignity and equality contingent on faithfulness to Allah as we find in Islam.

Hamilton further reflects on Gen. 1:26 as it relates to the biblical anthropology when he writes, “v. 26 is not interested in defining what is the image of God in man. The verse simply states the fact.” Hamilton gives a nod to the numerous historical attempts to locate the image of God in some aspect of humanity such as reason, morality, consciousness, etc, and then criticizes this as “based on subjective inferences rather than objective exegesis.” He then categorically states, “Any approach that focuses on one aspect of man – be that physical, spiritual, or

55 Ibid.
intellectual – to the neglect of the rest of man’s constituent features, seems doomed to failure. Gen. 1:26 is simply saying that to be human is to bear the image of God. This understanding emphasizes man as a unity. No part of man, no function of man is subordinated to some other, higher part or activity” This insight from the biblical account of humanity’s creation and constitution is supportive of the dignity of humanity *qua* humanity, and is unconcerned with some “higher” aspect of man like the soul, or even the non-soul, or the attainment of liberation from physical/bodily existence.

In contrast to the de-emphasis, if not devaluation, of the body which we tend to find in Eastern philosophies such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and, in even Secular Humanism on account of its cosmology that humanity is of the same non-sacred stuff as the rest of the universe, in the Bible we find a tradition in which the body is important to God and God takes pleasure in the human body. The Christian worldview explicitly affirms the value of the body insofar as it is God’s deliberate creation as both male and female (thus embodied sexuality - Gen 1:27, 2:7, 22). He declared embodied humanity “very good” (Gen. 1:31), and provided food to nourish and sustain the human body (Gen. 1:29, 9:3). He also designed procreation to generate more embodied image bearers (Gen. 1:26, 4:1, 5:3). Scripture refers to the prenatal development of our bodies, drawing attention to God’s definite involvement in the body’s development, mentioning such things as substance, members, bones and sinews (Ps. 139:13-16, Eccl. 11:5, Job 10:8-11). God calls his people (Israel) not to defile their bodies as do pagans (Lev. 19:28), and to glorify Him in our bodies which He identifies now as His temple (1 Cor. 3:16 and 6:19). God urges and accepts the presentation of the members of our body as instruments of holiness and our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 6:13, 12:1). God uses the human body to illustrate deep spiritual truths about His called out people, the church (1 Cor. 12:12-21). All of these things
counter the “neglect of the body” cult, perhaps a nascent Gnosticism, which Paul was
confronting in some churches in Asia Minor in the first half of the first century (Col 2:20-23). It
is obvious that any philosophy that does not see the body as central to human existence and
dignity is not one that can sincerely inform medicine and bioethics.

Perhaps the greatest affirmation of human embodiment is discovered in the great
Christian mystery of the Incarnation. Here, God Himself assumed a body of human form and
flesh, beginning in the womb just like all of us, sanctifying human embodiment from the moment
of its conception to its cessation at its death. Further, while embodied Himself God in Christ
healed diseased and raised dead human bodies, setting solid precedent for valuing and healing
the human body; the whole enterprise of medicine and bioethics. Jesus’ body was broken and
bled, and, after death, was raised up from the dead in a recognizable body. Jesus promised His
followers that “as I live, you will also live” (John 14:19), leading to the common Christian hope
of the resurrection of the body (1 Thess. 4:15-17, 1 Corinthians 15:42-44), which includes the
identifiable bodily attributes such as ethnicity when in heaven (Rev. 7:9). All of these further
affirm the value of human embodiment, the goodness of medicine that seeks to restore embodied
people to personal health and community life, and the bioethics that stands watch over medicine
ensuring it does its job.

Conclusion

Medicine and bioethics operate on the assumption that human dignity is real; not illusory,
imagined or contrived, and that this dignity is part and parcel of what it means to be human.
Further, the concept of human dignity has to be a reality that applies equally and universally to
all members of humanity regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, religious
belief and practice or any other distinguishing factor in order to support the mission of bioethics, an assumption clearly asserted even in the secular bioethics declarations and missions. Finally, human dignity upholds the significance of the human body and takes our embodiment seriously.

Christianity, as opposed to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Secular Humanism, dignifies our embodiment as a very good creation of God and as integral to our unique individuality, asserts unequivocally the universality of the equal dignity of all human life and overall provides a certain and secure foundation upon which to build the idea of human dignity. The biblical Christian worldview celebrates each individual embodied human as a being worthy of respect which is the focus of medicine and the bioethics which guides it. As Schulman observes,

Man “made in God’s image” has the implication that all human beings, not only those healthy and upright but also those broken in body or soul, have a share in this God-given dignity. Dignity in this sense would give ethical guidance to us in answering the question of what we owe to those at the very beginning of life, to those at the end, to those with severe disability or dementia, and even to tiny embryos. Seeing human beings as created in the image of God means, in some sense, valuing other human beings in the way a loving God would value them. It means seeing dignity where some might see only disability, and perhaps seeing human life where others might see only a clump of cells.

While these other communities no doubt desire to be, and will be, a part of the important and incumbent dialogue concerning human dignity and human rights in this progressing age of technological advances that potentially put these very concepts in jeopardy, they lack the cosmology, ontology and anthropology necessary to undergird the sine qua non of bioethics. This is not to say that they will not continue to inform bioethics, and even most likely, especially in the case of secularism, monopolize and frame the bioethical dialogue, but their cosmology and anthropology will not be the basis of the dialogue. The dialogue will ultimately be governed, as has already been seen, by ideas, intuitive to humanity, that are far more commensurate with a biblical view of human dignity.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


