

**What's missing in secular bioethics? The false dichotomy between 'the secular' and 'the theological'**

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## What's missing in secular bioethics? The false dichotomy between 'the secular' and 'the theological'

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The scope and role of theological bioethics has become a growing controversial topic. For instance, some bioethicists have adopted a strong stance on the meaning of 'Christian bioethics', as not exchangeable with a secular language and therefore not accessible outside of Christianity (Engelhardt 2014). Against this exclusive concept, one can find a more dialoguing viewpoint, as offered by McCarthy, Homan & Rozier (2020), whose argument's core revolves around a fruitful relationship between the secular and the theological.

These authors propose a Christian anthropology to enrich the bioethical discourse and they provide a reason for including religious contents: certain Christian concepts (dignity, sin, common good) may reinforce the normative understanding of bioethics, thereby helping to face some unresolved problems in three major areas of the discipline: clinical ethics, research ethics and public health. Ultimately, the goal of their approach is to close the gap between what they consider two approaches of bioethical reflection.

At first glance, an attitude that attempts to build bridges between two different perspectives seems appropriate to reach agreements in a polarized context. However, their proposal is based on a misleading assumption, namely that the theological and the secular are equivalent, so the first one can contribute to the second one. Here I argue that such strategy conceals a false dichotomy, one that contrasts secular bioethics with theological bioethics, as if they were two equal normative choices. By doing this, they transform a political debate<sup>1</sup> (the place of religion in the public bioethics' agenda) into a theoretical dilemma where both terms seem correlative, when they are really not.

This remark is not only a matter of theoretical accuracy, as the implications of their approach are normative too. Thus, the fact of considering 'secular bioethics' as an epistemic stance that *needs* to be completed with religious inputs might lead to disregard the structural conditions (publicity, transparency, rationality) which enable the bioethical debate.

### THE FALSE DICHOTOMY

In order to have a conversation, two or more interlocutors are needed. In this regard, 'theological bioethics' can be defined as a set of concepts and beliefs coming from a particular tradition. Christian bioethics, but also Jewish or Islamic bioethics, are illustrative and well recognized examples. They can be more or less coherent and represent a wide spectrum within such traditions, but have something in common: they are tied to a theological corpus whose ultimate core (God or the relationship between

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of the scope of religion in the public sphere, *see*: Lafont 2007

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2  
3 God and human beings) cannot be refuted without destroying its entire metaphysical  
4 structure.  
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6 The *thick conception* of the human person proposed by the authors is tied to this  
7 underlying and indisputable metaphysics, that is to say: one that cannot be, by  
8 definition, publicly debated and rebutted. I do not mean that a Christian view of the  
9 person is unacceptable nor do I mean that it should be excluded from any debate  
10 beforehand. However, I do consider that such thick conception does not work as a  
11 common ground for public bioethical reflection, since it is conceived to be the last word  
12 in conversation.  
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15 By contrast, 'secular bioethics' does not refer to an exclusive corpus or to specific beliefs,  
16 and certainly it does not underlie a substantive metaphysics. It refers to the procedures  
17 and principles that enable to confront multiple perspectives (substantive ones or not)  
18 within an interdisciplinary field. Lastly, the secular is the recognition that a substantive  
19 perspective must not be imposed as a starting point of the debate. Callahan's famous  
20 statement may be read in this manner: "America accepted bioethics because it pushed  
21 religion aside" (Callahan 1993), which does not involve to exclude religious identities,  
22 but to have a ground where both religious and not religious voices will be heard.  
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26 This is the reason why 'secular bioethics' should not be considered as the other  
27 interlocutor in conversation, but the common ground to deal with bioethical issues.  
28 Now, how has this common ground been *articulated*? The very existence of the discipline,  
29 whether in a national or supra-national level, depends on a complex network of  
30 institutions and institutional work that arise from secular structures in most of liberal  
31 states in Western world.  
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34 In this institutional scenario, a common ground requires, at least, three normative  
35 conditions. It has to be public, transparent and rational. This implies that citizens should  
36 know the reasons behind the bioethical decisions and be able to understand them. For  
37 example, Principlism succeeded as a normative framework because it was conceived as  
38 a guideline that fitted well this institutional character (Evans 2000). Needless to say, the  
39 four classical principles are not a panacea; indeed, they are continuously revisited. But  
40 such debate on Principlism is primarily possible because the principles are not tied to a  
41 substantive metaphysics and so can be rebutted with rational arguments. Perhaps, the  
42 "dwindling receptivity of religious arguments" in secular bioethics that authors  
43 complain about should be read in line with the accountability of public bioethical  
44 discourse, and not from an interpretation of the secular as a 'separated silo'.  
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48 In summary, bioethics is (and was developed as) a secular enterprise not because its  
49 contents were aimed to deny God. It is secular because it started to work, as well known  
50 from Grocio's formula, as if God would not exist: *etsi Deus non daretur*, which is the motto  
51 of the secularization process (Roldán Gómez 2016). Yet the heart of this motto is not  
52 'God' but 'as if', which constitutes the key to fully understand the secular: it refers to the  
53 process, not to the result. 'As if' just means the recognition that (whether God exists or  
54 not) human beings are capable of managing their businesses, and respecting each other  
55 by their own means.  
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### IS SECULAR BIOETHICS DIRECTIONLESS?

At this point, one might argue ‘well, human beings should manage their business, this is the secular condition, but many bioethical problems remain unresolved; therefore, if we take some concepts from sacred and influential sources, this might reinforce our shared normativity’. What would be wrong with this approach?

The authors take it for granted that the cause of bioethical problems is an implicit lack of normative force in the secular discourse, and they overlook other causes (economic ones, for instance) which would deserve a careful consideration. At any rate, they build their proposal on a second (and, in my opinion, misleading) assumption: that secular bioethics *misses* some kind of direction from a theological perspective without which injustices are more likely to occur. On this premise, they introduce some theologically grounded concepts as meaningful inputs. Let me briefly analyze one of them, dignity, as it plays a central role in contemporary bioethics.

‘Dignity’ has been named the overarching policy principle of bioethics (Andorno 2011). Indeed, it is the normative core of the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* (2005). So, leaving the debate on its uselessness aside (Macklin 2003), the fact is that the influence of dignity over the discipline cannot be underestimated. However, should such influence be understood and fostered from its theological ground, as the authors suggest?

If ‘dignity’ succeeds in global bioethics (not unproblematically) is precisely because it can be interpreted in different manners, and not exclusively from a theological view. For example, dignity has been considered a *placeholder* in the legal discourse on Human Rights, but only insofar as it has no substantive meaning (McCrudden 2008). In other words, dignity can be a legal framework in spite of its theological baggage, and not because of it.

In bioethics, human dignity accumulates various meanings that cannot be simply overlooked for the sake of a thick conception. For instance, it can be invoked, in the same debate, to support the intrinsic value of human beings or ‘respect for autonomy’ (Schulman 2008). In this regard, McCarthy, Homan & Rozier use a thick conception based on the incarnation belief, meaning an intersubjective dimension whose normative aim is to fight inequalities and injustices in research ethics, clinical ethics and public health. This may sound ethically good also to those ‘unmusical religiously’ (using Weber’s words). Nevertheless, it should not be ignored that similar appeals to a *theologically grounded dignity* dismiss the principle of respect for autonomy in other disputes (abortion, euthanasia, *see*: Cherry 2017), which deserve to be, at least, debatable; leading to the key issue.

If a thick conception cannot be debatable due to its ultimate theological core, then it does not help for a public bioethical discourse. Instead, if it can be debatable it is because its theological burden has been dissolved in such a way that it is not needed anymore. Therefore, there is no contribution *from* theological bioethics. Perhaps, there are religious narrative that may be useful to express some fundamental principles, and I do not disparage this role of theology. But such role is meaningful to the adherents of a particular religion, not to all.

## CONCLUSION

Considered from a normative perspective, secular bioethics does not require anything from a theological discourse. And likewise, it does not require anything from an *atheist* discourse either. It depends rather on a debate whose pluralism has to be grounded in secular conditions. Therefore, it cannot be expected that a substantive approach should be the ground of the public bioethical discourse.

A different question would be the proper place of religion (religions with political valence as Christianity) at legally tackling bioethical issues which touch upon sensitive religious topics. But this is a political matter, not a theoretical gap.

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