

Handbook of Bioethics and Religion

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This ground breaking and comprehensive academic text provides an exploration into the role of religion in a liberal and religiously pluralistic society and reviews what its role should be in the formation and development of public policies and practices regarding health care. Using a compilation of essays from leaders in the fields of theology, political science, biotechnology, medicine, research, philosophy, sociology, and health law; the editor provides readers with thought provoking arguments for the inclusion of religion in public policy and bioethics. In addition, a wide variety of religious views such as Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Protestantism and Catholicism provide context for further discussion/exploration in the areas of stem cell research, cloning, organ transplant, end of life care, AIDS, and reproductive health.

The influences of religion and theological thought commenced well before the emerging of bioethics in the late 60's or early 70's, when medical ethics became a public act (use of public policy and government regulation) rather than a private act (individual clinical intervention). The shift from private to public resulted in people questioning how faith should participate in the formation of public policy. Options for adopting continued religious participation varied from utilizing a neutral secular language to total rejection of secular language in favor of a strict religious perspective. As bioethics evolved, various public reports emphasized a set of secular and philosophical principles as standards to analyze research standards. Although the shift to secular bioethics may have been in an effort to gain creditability, many wonder whether it was at a cost of de-legitimizing religious discourse.

The editor states discussions on the role/involvement of religion in public bioethics often falls prey to confusion created by misunderstandings over the nature and character of religion. Arguments against religious participation in the public domain assume religion is a "conservative" and unique form of discourse; using sacred texts which abolish ethical questions. On the contrary, theologians experience the same divisions in political beliefs as secular society and use ethical questioning and decision making in response to ethical dilemmas found within the sacred texts. Consequently, greater inclusion of religion in bioethics in the short term would have limited impact given the similarity with secular political beliefs. However, over an extended period religion would greatly contribute to public bioethics through enhancement of the principle of justice.

The principle of justice is prioritized as the leading principle in religious ethical decision making; in contrast to secular bioethics preferring autonomy. Inclusion of religion would extend the scope by making oppression and liberation primary categories for understanding justice. From a philosophical tradition (secular), justice is understood as

the distribution or allocation of resources. In contrast, religious discourse favors distributive justice; referring to fair, equitable, and appropriate distribution on policies which allot diverse benefits and burdens. In order to expand the scope of the principle of justice two actions are suggested: character/virtue awareness and/or training and liberation through social action.

Character and virtue awareness have relatively been ignored in current bioethical discussions regarding justice. In contrast, the Roman Catholic tradition has stressed justice as one of the four cardinal values; “To be a good person, one must be above all a just person, and hence justice is the highest of the moral virtues”. Developing virtues assists in the challenging of social structures and achieving liberation through social action.

Theologians focus on oppression as a primary category of injustice. Theologians argue for epistemological privilege of the oppressed; meaning experiences, perspectives, and views of oppressed people should be given priority in determining what is fair and just. In focusing on liberation, rather than addressing patients’ rights for example, one may attend to the structures oppressing patients and explore how to liberate them from such oppression. Assessing systems and structures on how they impact the poorest of the poor and creating opportunities to liberate the oppressed are the goals religion would bring to the principle of justice and secular bioethics.

To date, there continues to be a lack of consensus regarding should and how religion be re-introduced into public policy and bioethics. A question such as; how a pluralistic state (acting on behalf of the majority) incorporates religion into public policy and legal frameworks so that discrimination does not occur (for people of religious belief and non-religious believers), represents a starting ground for provoking creative discussions on the challenges of evolving national beliefs.

This text offers a significant contribution to the field of religion and public bioethics, an area which has been largely neglected in the literature. Overall it does an excellent job in including various perspectives; thereby adding to the credibility and leaving the reader with many “ah-ha” moments. Although the book is geared to the US reader, the underlying themes provide a context for use in Canada. This academic text should be mandatory for all bioethics students and enthusiasts.