

THE ‘MAGIS’ AND JESUITS WORKING IN BIOETHICS

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A *Majorem Dei Gloriam*—to the greater glory of God! This motto of the Society of Jesus undergirds our pursuit of the greater good (the “magis”) in the efforts and undertakings of each and every Jesuit. However, discerning the greater good is a particular challenge for those of us engaged in the field of bioethics. The reason for this particular challenge in bioethics is that it is often not clear what the “good” is that is to be pursued. A lack of clarity regarding the good can certainly add to the challenge of discerning the greater good. Yet, it may well be that currently the greater good to be pursued in bioethics is in bringing the insights of Ignatian discernment to this often confused and highly contentious arena.

Bioethics, itself, is not always clearly delineated. Some see the field as primarily related to the ethical issues raised by our rapid advances in biomedical research and technology. These issues include the uses of medical technology in caring for individuals both at the end and the beginning of life, the uses of high-tech/high cost medical technology overall, the protection of human subjects in research, and the highly publicized debates surrounding human cloning and embryonic stem cell research. Others define bioethics more broadly, including anything that has to do with biology and biotechnology—such as crop management, species diversity, and even climate change effects on the biosphere.

However one draws the lines around bioethics, the question of the goods to be pursued by humankind in applying our rapidly expanding knowledge and technology is certain to be challenging, if not downright contentious. Two examples may help to demonstrate this point.

Currently there is worldwide discussion and debate regarding the use of genetic engineering technology in food crops. A number of Jesuits have already been engaged on both sides of this international issue. This debate is likely to become even more intense in the near future because climate changes may cause traditional crops and growing methods to fail in many regions already experiencing difficulties in meeting the nutritional needs of people. In addition, certain staple crops, such as corn in the United States, may be tailored to be more applicable to energy needs (e.g. biofuels)

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than to human consumption. As we move into a time where current production levels of food may not be sufficient to meet the nutritional needs of people around the globe, how do we balance the food and energy needs of our populations with the risks of employing more and more cutting edge genetic technologies to our crops? Which

goods are greater—adequate food and energy or environmental and cultural protection? And since this juxtaposition is actually too simplistic, who will decide how we will go forward in a world of rapidly changing technology, climate, and human need?

On the medical front, equally difficult challenges await. Again, Jesuits from around the world have long been involved in addressing these concerns. This involvement is not likely to abate anytime soon since new research in molecular biology indicates that the stem cell and cloning debate may well be only the tip of the iceberg. After all, the goods often proclaimed by those in favor of pursuing human cloning and embryonic stem cell research are tissues and organs for repair and replacement of those we lose or that are defective or damaged. Research indicates that we could soon move beyond the embryo-destructive research to research that involves the creation of chimeric creatures that are part human and part another mammalian species. Pigs, sheep, goats, etc., could be grown with one's own stem cells creating an animal that has organs made up mostly of the

one's own tissue. Hence, kidneys, hearts, livers, lungs, and even brain tissue could reside in a chimeric animal until the time when one requires the replacement parts. Does the health benefit of herds of chimeric animals with replacement parts justify this blurring of species boundaries? This crossing of species boundaries is not merely a metaphysical or aesthetic concern. Several current health problems—such as HIV, SARS, and bird flu—are the consequence of viral particles jumping across species boundaries. So will we have to balance somehow the risk of future plagues with the benefit of replacement parts by creating these interspecies animals?

In the face of challenges such as these, and those that are to come which may make these look relatively straightforward, what can a Jesuit bioethicist contribute to complex international and intercultural discussions? First of all, and perhaps primarily, true hope. Not the age-old, ephemeral illusion that humankind and its technological prowess will someday be the source of its own salvation. Nor the thin, unsatisfying compromise that allows for a few to thrive while the many are left behind. Instead, we can offer a vision of a world where each and all both have inestimable value and much to give. We can offer this vision because this Easter world already exists, though not yet in its fullness. Our mission is to cooperate in the unfolding of this fullness.

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Our tradition and formation call us to not only find God in all things, but to develop the tools to do so. So, science, economics, ethics, and public policy are all implements to be employed along with the insights of Christian discernment and love. With this approach, Jesuits can engage anyone on some terrain of common ground, even if that person accepts only a specific academic area or given value system as legitimate. Once there, the discussion of individual and shared goods can begin. Though conflict and contention are inevitable, as is currently the case in much of bioethics, there is always the possibility of identifying both interim and eventual goods that may be pursued to the benefit of all. This process is particularly achievable if the initial goods can be oriented toward those who are most in need, especially with regard to basic nutrition and healthcare.

What, then, is the magis for Jesuits in bioethics? Currently, I believe it is to provide a group of individuals who can speak competently on many

levels or in many arenas, and thus provide an opportunity for constructive conversation among various groups of stakeholders, all with their own interests and ends. In addition, I believe it is also to speak passionately about the true hope for each and all that is there for us to receive, to become, and to share with one another.