ICONS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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Abstract: Historically, Christians have used icons – holy images that depict Saints and important events – in private and corporate prayer. This essay examines the role of icons in disclosing knowledge of God’s commands. I examine the role of icons in communicating knowledge of Christian bioethics.

Keywords: *abortion, icons, euthanasia, physician assisted death, physician assisted suicide*

Introduction

Historically, Christians have used icons – holy images that depict Saints and important events – in private and corporate prayer. Icons play an important role in transmitting Christian moral knowledge, that is, in teaching what God commands. Such knowledge is important in the Christian pursuit of eternal salvation, which is the primary focus of the Christian life. Christians are to love God and pursue holiness, which requires following His commands. I examine the role of icons in communicating knowledge of what God commands regarding two important areas in bioethics, physician assisted death and abortion.

For Christians, ‘morality’ refers to “the canons of deportment given by God”.¹ Moral knowledge, thus, refers to knowledge of what God commands. Christians learn what God commands through “spiritually therapeutic practice[s]” that treat the effects of sin so that Christians may

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¹ H. Tristram ENGELHARDT Jr., “The Euthyphro’s dilemma reconsidered: A variation on a theme from Brody on Halakhic method”, in Mark J. Cherry and Ana S. Iltis (eds.), *Pluralistic Casuistry*, Springer Netherlands, 2007, p. 117.

orient their lives properly to God.² Christians are called not merely to know what God commands but to orient their lives toward God so that they may follow His commands and draw ever closer to Him. Thus, as Mark J. Cherry argues, “True moral knowledge requires a change in the knower, so that the knower can learn to orient himself rightly and experience God. The goal of such a life change is not virtue or goodness as ends in themselves, but holiness.”³

The Church gives Christians numerous means to foster love of God and to shape their lives appropriately so that they may acquire what Cherry calls “true moral knowledge” and pursue holiness. These practices include the veneration of icons. Icons “instruct us in matters pertaining to the Christian faith...remind us of this faith....lift us up to the prototypes which they symbolize, to a higher level of thought and feeling....arouse us to imitate the virtues of the holy personages depicted on them....[and] help to transform us, to sanctify us”.⁴ The Seventh Ecumenical Council, held in 787, affirmed the use of icons in the Church.⁵

In an increasingly secular world whose ethos contrasts so sharply with what God commands, it is ever more important for Christians to recognize the role icons play in disclosing God’s commands and to avail themselves of the gift of insight that these “windows to heaven” provide.

Pain, Suffering, Dignity, and Control near the End of Life: Secular and Christian Perspectives on Physician Assisted Death

Individuals may struggle to follow God’s commands against their desires for comfort or pleasure. This struggle is magnified in a time in which God’s commands are out of fashion or in the face of particularly difficult trials. Christians draw strength from praying with icons, which disclose what God commands and provide examples of Saints who have “purified their hearts from their passions, turned fully to God, and have,

² Mark J. CHERRY, “Why physician-assisted suicide perpetuates the idolatry of medicine”, in *Christian bioethics*, no. 9/2003, p. 262.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 263-264.

⁴ Constantine CAVARNOS, *Orthodox Iconography*, Belmont, MA, Institute for Modern Greek and Byzantine Studies, 1992, p. 142.

⁵ Translated and quoted by CAVARNOS, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

thereby, become holy.”⁶ One area in which we see a stark contrast between what God commands and the secular ethos concerns the response to pain and suffering. Understanding what God commands in the face of pain and suffering is vital to resisting physician assisted death (PAD).

Many people today argue that we must be able to control the manner and timing of our death so as to avoid pointless pain and suffering, out of respect for our autonomy, or to maintain our dignity. In the West this has manifested itself in demands for PAD.⁷ PAD refers to “the practice of a physician providing the means for a person with decision-making capacity to take his or her own life, usually with a prescription for barbiturates that patient takes himself or herself; sometimes also called physician-assisted suicide, physician aid-in-dying, and patient administered hastened death.”⁸ I include voluntary euthanasia, “hastening one’s own death by use of drugs or other means, with a doctor’s direct assistance,” under the term PAD as well.

A dominant secular Western view is that all suffering is bad and people have a right to rid themselves of pain and suffering through any means, including causing their own deaths or asking physicians to kill them. Such suffering often is referred to as “pointless.”⁹

Not only is suffering pointless from a secular point of view, but patient autonomy and the right to make important decisions require PAD.¹⁰ Human “dignity,” many claim, requires the ability to avoid “needless” or “pointless” suffering and to die comfortably in a manner of one’s choosing.¹¹ In some

⁶ CHERRY, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

⁷ Timothy E. QUILL, “Death and dignity: a case of individualized decision making”, in *New England Journal of Medicine*, no. 324/1991, p. 691-94; Dan BROCK, “Voluntary active euthanasia”, in *Hastings center report*, no. 22/1992, p. 10-22; Ronald DWORKIN et alii, “Assisted suicide: the philosophers’ brief”, in *The New York review of books*, 1997, p. 41-47.

⁸ Timothy E. QUILL, / Bernard SUSSMAN, “Physician Assisted Death”, in *Hastings Center Bioethics Briefings For Journalists, Policymakers, and Educators*.

<http://www.thehastingscenter.org/briefingbook/physician-assisted-death/#>.

⁹ Franklin G. MILLER / Howard BRODY /, and Timothy E. QUILL, “Can physician-assisted suicide be regulated effectively?”, in *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, no. 24/1996, p. 225-232; Barbara J. LOGUE, “When hospice fails: the limits of palliative care”, in *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, no. 29/1994, p. 291.

¹⁰ DWORKIN et alii, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹¹ Phillip J. MILLER, “Death with dignity and the right to die: sometimes doctors have a duty to hasten death”, in *Journal of medical ethics*, no. 13/1987, p. 81-85.

cases, scholars have tried to defend PAD in Christian contexts.¹²

Although often people who defend PAD focus on the rights and interests of patients who are terminally ill or experiencing intractable pain, are able to make their own decisions, and voluntarily request PAD, this is not always the case. For instance, forty-five year old Belgian brothers successfully sought to be euthanized together when they learned they would lose their eyesight. Because they were deaf, they relied on their vision more than typical people, and they decided that they did not want to live without their eyesight.¹³ Despite the fact that they did not have a terminal illness and were not experiencing intractable pain, they successfully requested to be put to death. The Groningen Protocol, developed in the Netherlands, describes a process for euthanizing children under the age of 12.¹⁴

This view of suffering is understandable from a secular perspective that lacks any appreciation of the transcendent and the Christian meaning of suffering. But for Christians, these views about the right to control death, to avoid pain and suffering, and to ensure “dignity” and respect for autonomy through PAD conflict with the Christian understanding of what God commands in the face pain and suffering and with respect to end of life decisions.

Christian obligations regarding end of life treatment decisions and the obligation to endure pain and suffering often are misunderstood or misrepresented. They merit clarification. First, Christians do not celebrate suffering as something good in itself, nor are Christians to seek suffering. God does not command that we suffer because suffering itself is good. Yet Christians do not recognize a right to avoid all suffering and to use any means to avoid it. Suffering, together with disease and death, is part of a “cosmic narrative” that always involves repentance, forgiveness, and

¹² See Chris GASTMANS / Fernand VAN NESTE /, and Paul SCHOTSMANS, “Pluralism and ethical dialogue in Christian healthcare institutions: the view of Caritas Catholica Flanders”, in *Christian Bioethics*, no. 12/2006, p. 265-280. For a reply to Gastmans, see Ana S. ILTIS, “On the impermissibility of euthanasia in Catholic health care organizations”, in *Christian bioethics*, no. 12/2006, p. 281-290.

¹³ Annabel ROBERTS, “Faced with blindness, deaf twins choose euthanasia”, in *NBC News*, January 14 (2013).

¹⁴ Eduard VERHAGEN/ Pieter JJ. SAUER, “The Groningen protocol—euthanasia in severely ill newborns”, in *New England journal of medicine*, no. 352/2005, p. 959-962.

salvation.¹⁵ Christians are called to accept unavoidable suffering “humbly and patiently.”¹⁶

Second, Christians do not reject medicine and health care. According to St. Basil, God gave us the medical arts for our benefit, and Christians may avail ourselves of them. But Christians must not.¹⁷

Third, Christians do not idolize life itself. The pursuit of health must not eclipse the overall focus of the Christian life, eternal salvation. Christians may refuse medical interventions that prolong life when doing so is overly burdensome even though refusing such treatment might lead to an earlier death.¹⁸

Fourth, the Church has long taught that physician assisted suicide and euthanasia are special cases of murder, which is strictly forbidden.¹⁹ Such acts deny God’s dominion over the world and through them we treat ourselves or physicians as “masters of life and death.”²⁰

The voluntary acceptance of pain and suffering by Jesus and the Martyrs, which we see depicted in many icons, is particularly instructive for Christians seeking to understand God’s commands regarding end of life decisions. As Christ suffered and died humbly on the cross, not with “dignity,” so too must Christians accept unavoidable suffering and submit humbly to death.²¹ Such suffering provides an opportunity to repent, as did the thief on the cross, which is central to salvation. If Jesus Christ Himself did not control the timing and manner of His death, we should wonder why humans might lay claim to such control. Rather than telling us that suffering is pointless and optional, that we should be able to control the timing and manner of our deaths, and that we have a right to die with

¹⁵ H. Tristram ENGELHARDT Jr., *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*. Lisse, the Netherlands: Swets and Zeitlinger, 2000, p. 314-315.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 315.

¹⁷ ST. BASIL THE GREAT, “Question 55” in “The Long Rules”, *St. Basil: Ascetical Works*, trans. by M. Monica Wagner, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 9. Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1962, p. 330-331.

¹⁸ H. Tristram ENGELHARDT Jr./ Ana S. ILTIS, “End-of-life: the traditional Christian view”, in *Lancet*, no. 366/2005, p. 1045-1049.

¹⁹ Stanley HARAKAS, *Living the Faith: The praxis of eastern orthodox Ethics*, Minneapolis, Light and Life, 1993.

²⁰ CHERRY, *op. cit.*

²¹ ENGELHARDT and ILTIS, *op. cit.*

dignity, icons of the crucifixion disclose to us the obligation to submit humbly to suffering, pain, and death. Christians are called to repentance, to loving patience, to humility, and to faith in God's ultimately victory over death and our broken bodies. In the context of icons that help us to understand and appreciate the extent of Christ's suffering and his humble acceptance of death by crucifixion – a truly undignified death - we can better appreciate the Christian teaching on suffering and PAD.

Unborn Human Life: Secular and Christian Perspectives on Abortion

Abortion is rampant in countries where it is legal and where it is illegal, with an estimated 56 million abortions per year.²² Abortion rights advocates see abortion as an essential right of women on multiple grounds, and many philosophers and legal scholars have defended the ethical and legal permissibility of abortion. Many also defend abortion as an essential public health measure. Aggressive prenatal screening (PNS) and prenatal diagnosis (PND) programs coupled with abortion access can ensure that most children who are born are healthy. Such screening and diagnostic testing has become standard in many high income countries, where there are high rates of abortion following positive findings.²³ Some scholars not only defend the right of women to use PNS and PND and abortion to avoid the birth of unhealthy children, but they argue that women ought to do so.²⁴ Others reject this on the grounds that it discriminates against the disabled.²⁵

Others have argued that not only should abortion be safe and legal but that it must be accepted as a routine medical procedure to which we

²² Guttmacher Institute. 2016. Induced Abortion Worldwide Fact Sheet. <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-worldwide> (Accessed March 1, 2017).

²³ See Ana S. Iltis, "Prenatal screening and prenatal diagnosis: contemporary practices in light of the past", in *Journal of Medical Ethics*, no. 42/2016, p. 334-339.

²⁴ Julian Savulescu, "Procreative beneficence: why we should select the best children", in *Bioethics*, no. 15/2001, p. 413-426. Peter Singer and Helga Kuhse famously have argued that fetuses with disabilities ought to be aborted. Peter SINGER / Helga KUHSE, *Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985.

²⁵ Rebecca Stangl, "Selective terminations and respect for the disabled", in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, no. 35/2010, p. 32-45.

attach no stigma or shame even when women have abortions for reasons unrelated to the health of the fetus or their own health.²⁶

The view that abortion is essential to protecting the interests of women in having children only when they want to and to preventing the birth of children with any kind of disability or illness contrasts sharply with God's commands regarding the unborn. For Christians, the reasons for pursuing an abortion are irrelevant. The destruction of unborn life is regarded as murder, that is, as evil. St. Basil the Great articulated it this way: "A woman who aborts deliberately is liable to trial as a murderess."²⁷ St. John Chrysostom referred to prostitutes who had abortions not only as harlots but as murderesses, and he condemned the married men who suggested such women should have abortions. He also condemned those who perform abortions as "even worse than a murderer."²⁸

God is the source of life and humans must not destroy that which God has created. This has been the teaching of the Church from its early days. We find these instructions in the first Century Didache, or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.²⁹ The 7th Century Sixth Ecumenical Council declared that "Those who give drugs for procuring abortion, and those who receive poisons to kill the foetus, are subjected to the penalty of murder."³⁰ Three major Church feasts celebrate conception: the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25), the Feast of the Conception of the Theotokos (December 9), and the Feast of the Conception of St. John the Forerunner (September 23).

Holy icons help Christians to understand what God commands with

²⁶ Tracy A. WEITZ, "Rethinking the mantra that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare", in *Journal of Women's History*, no. 22/2010, p. 161-172.

²⁷ Canon 2, *The Rudder of the Orthodox Catholic Church* (eds. Sts. Nicodemus and Agapius), in 'The Ninety-two Canons of our Father among the Saints Basil the Great,' New York, Luna Printing, 1983, p. 789.

²⁸ ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies on Romans XXIV*. Translated by J. Walker, J. Sheppard and H. Browne, and revised by George B. Stevens. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 11. Edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2102.htm>.

²⁹ DIDACHE, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>, chapter 2.

³⁰ Sixth Ecumenical Council (680-681). <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3814.htm>, Canon 91.

respect to the unborn by depicting the significance of conception and of pre-born human life. Consider the many icons of Sts. Joachim and Anna embracing, which depict the conception of the Theotokos. Conception matters; it is transforming, significant, and holy. The icons of the Annunciation similarly teach us that life created by God is present at conception. Icons of the Theotokos and St. Anna, the mother of St. John-the-Forerunner, embracing also disclose the significance of pre-born life. In some icons, Jesus and St. John-the-Forerunner are depicted in the womb. These and other icons make it known that to destroy what physicians and others sometimes refer to as “the products of conception” is to destroy a living child of God. In addition to the icons celebrating conception and life before birth, other icons teach Christians about the prohibition of killing children by depicting the tragic loss of young lives. The icon of The Lament of Rachel depicts the horror of the death of infants. This icon refers to slaying of infants by Herod (see Matthew 1: 16-18). The death of infants is to be lamented; it is a source of profound sadness and grief.

Conclusion

When Christians venerate icons in prayer, icons disclose what God commands. In this sense, icons communicate Christian moral knowledge. They help Christians to answer the question, “How do I live a holy life?” I have offered examples of two areas where Christians may learn what God commands. The Christian response to pain and suffering and to the unborn is sharply at odd with much of the secular literature, which typically focuses on control and authority over ourselves and our bodies. Christ’s humble acceptance of pain and suffering followed by an undignified death by crucifixion serves as a model for Christians. Without such a model and without being oriented properly toward God, suffering does seem pointless. Icons that speak of the significance of conception and life in the womb coupled with those that show the tragedy associated with early loss of life disclose the obligation to love the unborn for they already are children of God. The secular approach to PAD and to abortion contrasts sharply with God’s commands. Icons provide Christians with important moral knowledge and insight regarding what God commands. Used in prayer, icons can help Christians draw ever closer to God and the pursuit of holiness.

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