

New College Lectures 2009

Lecture 2 – Bioethics and Redemption

Christian thinking about the human embryo

We must hold together the physical and the immaterial

- human beings are at one and the same time fully physical and fully immaterial
- the existence of a physical body is a sign that an immaterial person is present

We must hold together the already and the not-yet

- all human beings are in the process of becoming, we are all locked in a narrative which we did not create.
- the human embryo is in the process of becoming what it already is

'It is God's grace which confers on the unborn child, from the moment of its conception, both the unique status which it already enjoys and the unique destiny which it will later inherit. It is grace which holds together the duality of the actual and the potential, the already and the not-yet.' John Stott

The creation and destruction of embryonic humans in order to create stem cells for other humans is not an appropriate use of biotechnology. 'Adult' stem cells provide wide-ranging, effective and extremely promising ethical alternatives to the use of embryonic stem cells.

'We discern persons only by love, by discovering through interaction and commitment that this human being is irreplaceable.... We must approach new human beings, including those whose humanity is ambiguous and uncertain to us, with the expectancy and hope that we shall discern how God has called them out of nothing into personal being.' Oliver O'Donovan

Conflicting perspectives on evil, suffering and death

'What a book a devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horridly cruel works of nature.' Charles Darwin

To the consistent materialist all apparent evil is simply a consequence of meaningless molecular interactions. Since suffering is unavoidable but meaningless, the minimisation of suffering has become a supreme moral good in the ethical thinking of most materialists.

The contemporary debate about euthanasia and suicide is driven by fear, fear of pain, fear of indignity and fear of dependence.

'An individual's way of death should fit with how that person has lived the rest of their life. Otherwise a bad death might mar the whole story of life, just as a bad ending can ruin a beautiful novel.' Ronald Dworkin

'If you're demented, you're wasting people's lives – your family's lives – and you're wasting the resources of the National Health Service. I'm absolutely, fully, in agreement with the argument that if pain is insufferable, then someone should be given help to die, but I feel there's a wider argument that if somebody absolutely, desperately, wants to die because they're a burden to their family, or the state, then I think they too should be allowed to die.' Mary Warnock

Christian perspectives on death and suffering

Death is not a 'natural' part of the creation order. It is an outrage, an alien interruption in the nature of being. And yet in a fallen world, human beings are not meant to live for ever. Death can become, in God's providential care, a 'severe mercy', a gateway to a new reality, and even a strange form of healing.

Christian healthcare professionals are called to struggle against death whilst seeking to recognise the the point at which death becomes a severe mercy.

Doctors are not able to make *quality of life* decisions, but they can and must make *quality of treatment* decisions

Suicide is ultimately a pagan way to die. It has never been supported or encouraged in cultures influenced by Judaeo-Christian thinking.

'Within the story of my life I have the relative freedom of a creature, but it is not simply my life to do with it as I please . . . Suicide expresses a desire to be free and not also finite – a desire to be more like the Creator than creature'. Gilbert Meilaender

To sacrifice your life because there is nothing worth living for is suicide, to sacrifice your life because there is something worth dying for is martyrdom.

The significance of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ

'Jesus has been with us in the darkness of the womb as he will be with us in the darkness of the tomb.' Gilbert Meilaender

When Christ is born and raised as a physical human being, God proclaims his vote of confidence in the created order, in the mark I model human being.

The process of dying need not be an entirely negative experience. Dying well can be an opportunity for personal growth, for reconciliation of painful and damaged relationships, for fulfilling dreams, for letting go.

Behind the blessings, richness and joy of the natural order of creation, in which our human bodies and lives are embedded, there lies an even greater and more wonderful story. It is the story of inexplicable and all-pervasive evil which is overcome and transmuted into blessing, but only through profound suffering, the self-sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

It seems that God's plan is to write into our lives small cameos, reflections of the big story. It is as though our own little story can become penetrated, interwoven, and caught up into the big story. Our experience can reflect and become interwoven with the suffering and redeeming power of the Lamb of God.

This is our story. The uniquely Christian understanding of redemption.

John Wyatt

Further reading

Matters of Life and Death, John Wyatt, InterVarsity Press (revised edition to be published Nov 2009)

A Primer in Bioethics, Gilbert Meilaender, Eerdmans

Resurrection and Moral Order, Oliver O'Donovan, InterVarsity Press