Bioethics and religion: a necessary dialogue

Pluralism of values in our society is the hallmark of the current time called “postmodern”. The long awaited union among peoples and cultures cannot be achieved by forced uniformity, but by the not simple learning of respecting people who are diverse and different from us. Diversity can no longer mean “adversity” and, beyond being merely tolerant, we must learn how to be respectful and able to dialogue with the “different” people. Beyond what was inherited by us though the “tradition”, we need to construct our lives and projects based on “deep convictions”, to be able to “explain the reasons of our hope”. Within this context, without mutual anathemas, bioethics must deepen the dialogue with religion and vice versa, even because as Mieth says, “the ones who fight for the good and the right often live in endless dialogues” (p. 13)1.

William E. Stempsey, in the article Religion and Bioethics: Can We Talk? published in the Journal of Bioethical Inquiry, when examining the historical process of “secularization of bioethics and the loss of the influence of religion”, says that “The contemporary world of bioethics searches for a lingua franca in its role as mediator of disputes in public discourse. Everyone knows that religion can be divisive and so it makes sense that bioethics should look elsewhere to find mediation. It is not that bioethics ignores religion altogether or deems it unimportant; it is just that bioethics has turned to other sources, especially to analytic philosophy, law, and even disciplines like literature and the so-called ‘medical humanities’, in its attempts to foster dialogue” (p. 339)2.

This author argues that the “public discourse about bioethical issues and policy has lost something essential when it ignores the religion dimension. (...) Bioethics has lost sight of the fact that surrogates for religious language fail to capture the importance of what religion brings to bioethical discourse” (p. 339)2. “I argue for the need for a renewed role for theologians and other religious thinkers in articulating the importance of religious faith for public discourse about bioethics” (p. 340)2.

The rejection of theological reflection impoverishes bioethics since bioethics’ core issues – related to death and dying, the beginning of life, researches using embryonic stem cells, abortion, genetic issues that deal with the nature of us humans – are essentially religious issues. The ideas which are the base of these topics are those which religion is fundamentally concerned about. Ignoring the thousands of years of this religious insight in these issues would mean impoverishing the discussion.

The challenge of bioethics’ future, according to Stempsey, “is to find ways to articulate the transcendent elements of our experience of human suffering and death, the very stuff of bioethics, in ways that can be understandable in today’s pluralistic society. The goal must be to enable conversation and mutual understanding. (...) What bioethics needs is a new influx of theologians, and even religious thinkers who might reject being characterized as ‘theologians’, with new visions that can help us to understand the various viewpoints that make up the pluralistic religious experience of the twenty-first century and to facilitate the conversation” (p. 350)2.

To Lipovetski, the interrelationship between religion and morality is so classic that it even leads the author to state that in the “principle of morality there was God. God is moral’s alpha and omega”3.

Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that one of the most important branches of theology is moral theology.

It is worthy clarifying that we understand as moral values those established by the habits and customs of a particular society (they might, therefore, vary from one society to another and over time within the same society), whereas we understand ethics as critical reflection and judgment of values, leading to an option deliberation of these values.

We believe that such deliberation can be better balanced by using the referential theory 4. As bioethics consolidates its paradigmatic phase (symbolically achieved, according to Fourez5, when a graduate course in the
new area of knowledge is established), other references can be remembered and considered.

Progressively, it is observed an increasing attention paid to the relationship between bioethics and religion, or rather, between bioethics and spirituality.

According to data source (PubMed, Lilacs, Philosopher’s Index), there are 2,319 registered publications presenting the word “spirituality” in the title. When putting spirituality and ethics and bioethics together, there are 35 publications (1.5% of all publications). When analyzing the association between religion and ethics or bioethics, there are 228 publications (10%).

We believe that the dialogue between bioethics and spirituality (including religiosity) must happen in order to indicate the need to assess whether spirituality should be considered as another referential of bioethics, while deliberation for option values.

We intend to return to this question in the future.

Taking care not to be intolerant fundamentalists, our path needs to be nurtured by respect, dialogue and understanding among different things without giving up our deep convictions of values that explain “the reasons of our hope”! Finally, we have to accept our condition of being lifelong learners!

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REFERENCES

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