



Readings II in Faith & Science

Publication Year: 2003

ID: BK023

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What Kind Of Salvation?

ID: BK023-033

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What Kind Of Salvation?

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Recently, while I was doing a file search for another project, I came across a 1985 article on organ transplants by Malcolm Muggeridge. I admire Muggeridge because he truthfully reported on the famine in Ukraine in the 1930's, when the truth about Stalin was not politically correct in the journalistic fraternity.

In this article Muggeridge does not condemn the whole area of transplants, but it's not difficult to conclude that he is far from enthusiastic about it. His whole approach can be pretty well summed up in this quote:

All these things (this includes abortion and contraception), which will be in the history books, are marking the total decadence, the breakdown, of what is called Western civilization. I believe that the people who are working even in the field of transplantation, in the most respectful way, and believing that what they are doing is good, should think very carefully about what the consequences of that sort of thing can be if it gets out of control.

Although I am not nearly so pessimistic about transplantation and allied medical achievements as Muggeridge seems to be in this article, we ignore his exhortation for thought at our peril.

In a time when everyone is being swept away by environmental concerns (and propaganda), it might be well not to ignore the fact the biological revolution continues, with consequences for human beings far more significant than what happened, for instance, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Even in the Church we have lost interest in the most profound advance in human power in history. Is anybody paying close attention to what is happening, especially in government agencies?

If the Catholic Press is a true indicator of the issues that concern the Church today, with the exception of stem cell research and possible application, environmental interests dominate the Church's attention. That being said, though, I still do not think that the environmental situation, in the worst-case scenario, has or will have anywhere near the impact on Christianity that the biotechnologies are having and will have. In no way can the effects of each of these phenomena on Christian theory and practice be compared.

I don't believe that it is apocalyptic to state that the biotechnologies contain the seeds of a final rejection of God's offer of salvation. That may sound somewhat hysterical, but let me briefly develop what I mean.

The biotechnologies contain the seeds of the idea that we can save ourselves. They do not carry this import in themselves, but in the context of the immanent salvation preached by the Enlightenment they can be turned to that end. I recall reading about the *Johannine crisis*, namely, that the divide between good and evil is getting sharper and deeper. This is a good way to estimate what is going on. As we assume more control over ourselves we must assume more responsibility for our actions. As we take on more technologically sophisticated ways to live and to die, we assume more of an aura of control over ourselves and over our destiny.

People have always striven for a longer life. That may well be the world's oldest occupation, claims for another notwithstanding. With our increasingly technologically sophisticated medicine we are altering our notions of life

and death and in the process we are altering our estimates of who we are and who we are meant to be. This is the point Muggeridge was making in the article mentioned in the beginning of this essay:

We are in danger, it seems to me, of losing the respect for the dead which has prevailed through the centuries, not just of Christendom, but of other civilizations as well. The practice has been to cover dead bodies respectfully, recognizing that with the departure of the soul, the remainder is just a carcass to be disposed of by burial or cremation. Now, however, there is the possibility of financial deals with dead bodies; the cadaver has come to have a market value, leaving no place for requiems, prayers, or mourning with kidneys, hearts, eyeballs and other such items up for sale.

This may be an over-statement, but it carries a message that we Christians cannot ignore: modern science and technology, wedded to Enlightenment thought and promises, is a major concern for those who look to God for salvation. This is not the level on which environmental concerns must be addressed.

Indeed, whatever the details of the end-time may be, they will certainly involve humans choosing between God and some creature or other, be that creature Satan or some other person or thing. This element is present in embryo in the human applications of the biosciences and biotechnologies. I do not believe it is involved, at least to the same extent, in environmental concerns. For example, in the end it seems possible to me that humanity will choose between being created (and so developed) as images of God or as images of human images or desires or fancies. This is a serious possibility starting in our day.

Fifty to one hundred years ago the question “what is a human being?” was answered only on a philosophical level or on a personal day-to-day basis. That is no longer the case. Now that question can legitimately be asked on the basis of what we shall some day do (maybe sooner than later) to alter the basic human physical composite, thus altering the nature of the human person. This is a decidedly critical in the sense of the Johannine crisis. Who are we and, at least equally importantly, who will we be?

As important as that question is, we seemingly have abandoned it in favor of environmental concerns which are inherently less important. Perhaps part of the problem is simply our desire to forget the less immediately serious issues in favor of the more concrete ones. A stagnant pond or a municipal dump is certainly easier to visualize and to cope with than what in vitro fertilization implies in dealing with the nature of Christian matrimony. Yet which question has the more profound Christian meaning?

I suggest that environmental issues should not become a temptation for us to abandon the serious doctrinal work and catechesis we need to face the more serious issues of the nature of the human being and his or her relation to God. These environmental concerns are important in their own right and must be attended to. In some instances they touch closely on issues coming from the life sciences. One example of that is the “population crisis,” especially in view of the United Nations Meetings in Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing and other such meetings. The most recent reports from the United Nations’ demographers talk about underpopulation as of most immediate concern -a message not likely to get much currency from the United Nations’ over-population activists.

Fertility, on the one hand, is seen as an environmental problem and, on the other hand, a domain for a great deal of scientific research. I suspect that both the “environmental problem” and the “research opportunity” look to the same end: management and control of human fertility. They both look at that fertility as “reproductive” rather than “procreative.” What is the difference in attitude? Does such a difference matter to us? Should such a difference matter?

The Human Genome offers opportunities for the development of therapies that may in time practically eliminate some genetic defects. It may, in time, produce significant change in human inheritance. It offers both the opportunity and danger of significant change in human beings --and in human nature. Neurotechnologies are on the same level of importance as the genetic technologies. We must really place our concerns here.

Who are we? Who will we be? These questions must be asked and answered. Why not begin now while there is still time? It will help to have to answer them when they are not neuralgic.

Questions

What difference does it make if we are created “in the image of God” or in the “image of human images or desires”? Does it really matter who we are, who we will be? Fertility (i.e., sex and fertility) are a serious point of disagreement even among Christians. Why do sexual practices and sexual morals matter so much to the Church? Does it have anything to do with Matrimony being a sacrament? Does it have anything to do with the covenantal nature of the relationship between Christ and the Church? If so, what?

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