Secular Bioethics in Relation to Judaism and Christianity

Implications for Interfaith Work

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Important Question for Health Care Providers

Is there a conflict between Jewish and Christian perspectives in relation to secular bioethics?
Purpose

During this lecture we will compare the differences between secular and religious bioethics and investigate the approaches taken by religious communities and secular institutions to work together.
Differences

- Religious humanism is guided by the assumption that life is sacred. This concept comes from a particular divine revelatory source.

- On the other hand, a secular methodology of bioethics could be defined as communal framework to navigate medical decisions.
Definition

Tristram H. Engelhardt Jr, in his book *The Foundations of Bioethics* defines “religious bioethics” as: *the paradigm case of clear distinct perceptions. Such viewpoints presume a world of facts, and often the world of values... (having) a unique pattern of rational coherence.*” (Oxford University Press, USA; 2 edition, January 4, 1996. pg. 18)
Definition

Secular ethics focuses on the evaluations of facts, as it interested in testing empirical theories against facts. At the same time, "a theoretical account of secular bioethics… cannot produce canonical content (as it) deconstructs the secular bioethics aspiration to authorize a particular canonical morality." (Engelhardt Jr, H. Tristram

Origins

Both western monotheistic religious traditions, Judaism and Christianity, derive their religious humanism from G-d’s anthropomorphic title in the Torah, “Adonai Rapha” (Thy L-rd thy physician) Exodus 15:26; this concept has been developed into a divine mandate for caring for the sick.
Medical Ethics in the Bible

Although the field of bioethics is only fifty years old within Jewish philosophical circles, it could be argued that the concept of the sanctity of human life was invented by Ancient Judaism.
In contrast secular bioethics focuses on how "scientific truth, as all human truth, is historically and culturally shaped," (Engelhardt Jr, H. Tristram *The Foundations of Bioethics* Oxford University Press, USA; 2 edition, January 4, 1996. pg. 27)
With this in mind “…it is difficult to propose universal standards of good and ill, or to critique hierarchies of values from any standard perspective.” (Pellegrino, Edmundo D. & David C. Thomasma *For the Patient's Good The Restoration of Beneficence in Health Care* Oxford University Press, USA; 1 edition, February 4, 1988. pg. 129)
Secular and religious perspectives of bioethics are able to collaborate well when the following issues are considered:

1. Hospital ethics committees and pluralism,
2. The value of human life in faith traditions and from a secular worldview,
3. Religious and medical boundaries,
4. Authoritative sources.
The following are five reasons why medical ethics should incorporate religious perspectives:

1. Many patients are religious and religious beliefs help them to cope.

2. Religious beliefs influence medical decisions, especially when patients are seriously ill.
3. Religious beliefs and activities are related to better health and quality of life.

4. Many patients would like physicians to address spiritual needs.