

## Editorial

# What Does “Life is Sacred” Mean?

For the last generation, abortion has been a definitive issue in the left-right political and moral divide, having led the vast majority of evangelicals to support Donald Trump despite his myriad, manifest, moral shortcomings. Ironically, conservative Christians have not always opposed abortion. As recently as the early 1970s, *Christianity Today*, the Christian Medical Society, and the Southern Baptist Convention each made strong statements supporting abortion before it was politicized (Balmer 2014). More recently, medical assistance in dying (MAiD) has become an equally contentious and divisive issue, with Christians aligning on both sides of the same political and moral cleavage. After all, most people of religious faith maintain that life is sacred. But what does that mean?

First, to which forms of life does it refer? Is all life sacred, including plants and fungi? Or are only sentient beings sacred, those beings who are conscious of and responsive to sense impressions, including even invertebrate animals? Was the “fear and dread” that wildlife would suffer (Genesis 9) due to recognizing that their lives were no longer deemed sacred by post-fall humans, in contrast to Adam’s peaceful coexistence with them in pre-fall Eden (Genesis 2), and Jesus’ peaceful coexistence with them in the wilderness (Mark 1)?

So is only human life sacred, because only we bear the image of God? This is the anthropocentric (centered on humans), mainstream Christian interpretation of the creation story, as derived in part from the mandate for humans to “subdue” the earth and “have dominion” over all other forms of life in the first creation account of Genesis 1:26-28. If read accordingly, then why do not all Christians eschew taking the lives of other sentient beings and remain vegetarian, as mandated in the very next two verses? The conventional reading is also the human exceptionalism that, as practiced since the Industrial Revolution, has contributed so catastrophically to the loss of biodiversity, environmental degradation, and anthropogenic (caused by humans) climate change.

Or is all life truly sacred? Are humans masters or merely members of all life on earth? The alternate, millennia-old, biocentric Christian interpretation advocates a deep egalitarianism, the view that humans are one form of life among many with no special rights or privileges. As part of creation, humans then have more in common with other forms of life than differences from them. Biocentrism views creation as the first incarnation, Jesus as the second (McMinn 2020), and humans as called to “serve and guard” the first incarnation as mandated in the second creation account (Genesis 2:15).

What parts or kinds of human life are sacred? Are ovarian eggs that get flushed in female menstruation sacred, as well as the male sperm that get flushed in nocturnal emissions? Or is only the fertilized egg sacred because it is at that moment that the image of God is

imprinted on the zygote and a unique soul implanted in the zygote? Do the 20% of known fertilized eggs that are miscarried, plus likely an additional 20% of unknown fertilized eggs, constitute deaths of sacred life?

Is a zygote then sacred because it is a totipotent stem cell capable of becoming an entire human body? Are adult stem cells with fewer potencies therefore not sacred? The single cell zygote is indeed a potentially self-sustaining human body, though it is still far from the consciousness, volition, emotion, reason, identity, and other capacities that emerge developmentally into personhood (Smith 2010).

But assuming independent personhood is realized, what about the blood the person's body may shed in lacerations, surrender to medical tests, or donate to other bodies? Like the zygote, a blood cell is also human life, one which we handle and discard rather freely. So is it only human cells and organs which are or have the potential to be self-sustaining and independent that are sacred? But no cells actually are, by themselves.

What then of human bodies which are no longer self-sustaining or independent, such as those dependent on vital organ transplant or other medical interventions to prolong their life? At what exact point does the body return to the earth whence it came? Many political jurisdictions have no legal definition of death, and when they do it is almost always based on medical definitions such as irreversible cessation of brain function, in contrast to religious definitions based on heart function.

Moreover, has the person with a "do not resuscitate" (DNR) clause in their will already desecrated the sacredness of human life by mandating that medical intervention to prolong their life be withheld? Has DNR simply been a precursor, albeit in reverse, to MAiD in which medical intervention instead of non-intervention hastens death, and which 74% of Americans and 86% of Canadians favored in 2020 national surveys ("Polling" 2020; Dalt 2020)?

At the other end of the axiom, what does sacred mean? Does it refer to things set apart from the ordinary, mundane, and profane (Durkheim 1912), things that are an end in themselves, not merely an instrumental, utilitarian means to an end, things deserving veneration and reverence? If so, then in what sense is life set apart from life? Moreover, regarding rites held to be a means of divine grace or a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality, are there seven Christian sacraments (Roman Catholic) or only two (Protestant)?

How does the variety of human entities deemed sacred—from family to sport to nation (Hiebert 2014)—help us understand the complex character or quality of sacredness? Do similarities and differences between sacred places, buildings, occasions, texts, rituals, objects, symbols, relationships, and social positions clarify or complicate our understanding of the sacredness of human life? For example, on what basis do we decline, enter, practice, or exit sacred relationships like marriage, or sacred callings like priest or prophet? Are there degrees of the sacred, such as the holiest of holies?

And how then should we act toward the various types of the sacred? What does reverence do? Does it take a strictly hands-off, passive posture, or does it actively engage the sacred in diverse ways, such as visiting and leaving sacred places, erecting and dismantling sacred buildings, planning and conducting sacred occasions, interpreting and translating sacred texts, reviewing and revising sacred rites/rituals, or assembling and positioning sacred objects?

How did some Christians become willing to kill or die for sacred symbols, such as doing baptism the right or wrong way? Historically and cross-culturally, how have people in different times and places constructed and deconstructed what they deemed to be sacred? In other words, how have they sacralized and de-sacralized particular entities, whether consciously or subconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, consistently or inconsistently? Invariably, human fingerprints are clearly visible all over what is deemed sacred. Throughout Christian history, the sacred has not been regarded as untouchable.

For those of us who do indeed believe that life is sacred, saying so is the beginning, not the end, of a necessarily nuanced discussion, because for some Christians, choosing to end the life of an embryo, or their own, is not sacrilege.

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