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# Life, Death and Technology

## The Role of Religion in the Acceptance of New Biomedical Technologies

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### Introduction

I would like to start by defining my topic.

It is often the case that those who have something to do with a religion are chosen as members of a formal committee concerning bioethical issues. Since they usually take conservative stances toward new technologies, choosing these kinds of members might have implicit motive of trying to gain a certain legitimacy, namely that the issue has received

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The new technologies that bioscience and medical science can theoretically realize are not all incorporated into real human life. Some are introduced enthusiastically, some suspiciously, and others harshly rejected. Furthermore, the attitudes towards new technologies are different from society to society and from culture to culture. Even if there is a common attitude towards a certain new technology throughout the world at one particular point in time, it can be changed with time. Can the evaluation of new technologies be made from some a priori viewpoint? Or it is relative to every society and culture? And what factors are present in the standards by which new technologies are accepted or rejected? These kinds of questions require investigations and considerations from a variety of research fields. Four researchers of religious studies, ethics, and medical science (T. Utsunomiya, N. Kurata, K. Ishihara, and M. Daiguji) shared the same interest in these questions and have worked together for some years. The followings are the products of this collaboration.

a wide and fair hearing. However, asking for the opinions of those involved with a religion might not be solely the result of such strategic calculation. No doubt it is generally assumed that religions have a deep relation to issues concerning life and death. This is because while religions are on one hand merely an accumulation of fragmentary beliefs, they also usually present a total view of the world and human beings. The topics dealt with here are the following:

1. To what extent does a religion affect the acceptance of death?
2. How and to what extent does a religion sway the decision to accept or reject new biomedical technologies?

The reason that these questions are taken up is that a number of people have recognized the recent resurgence of religions on a global scale, and appreciate anew the great and deep influence of religions. But here I would like to examine the possibility that the impact and influence of religions may be overestimated.

## 1. The relation between religion and the acceptance of death

It is often asserted that it is much more difficult today than before to accept one's own death and that of others because people do not have religious faith anymore and the traditional deathbed and mourning rituals offered by religions have collapsed. This assertion is found in a variety of books concerning death and bereavement. Gorer and Kübler-Ross drew sharp contrasts between contemporary deaths and deaths in the memories of their childhoods. Their autobiographic accounts were the necessary preambles to their sensational books. They served two purposes: to indicate what is problematic in today's secular way of dying, solely with the help of medicine. And secondly to point out that hope might lie in a more natural death than that of dying as a patient in a

hospital connected to a lot of tubes. They also call for a return of a more natural form of grief, rather than the modern, secretive kind of grief often seen. According to advocates of these and other innovative ideas, there are more natural and comforting ways of dying and dealing with grief, but these have been destroyed by modernity and secular nature of today's society.

This thesis certainly seems plausible at first glance. In reality, however, it is quite difficult to verify the assumption that religious beliefs and rituals make it easy to accept death and to overcome grief.

We must deal cautiously with historical sources. They are written for particular purposes. For example, when the bereaved often wrote about the peaceful death of a pious family member, it was often to testify to how faithful and virtuous they were, and to praise the great support their religion gives to people in suffering. There are also materials to the contrary that assert that because priests spoke of the horrible punishment awaiting them in hell, their loved ones died in states of terrifying anxiety. It is highly likely that these sources as well were written with a certain anticlerical or antireligious agenda. Even the folklorists of the 19th century, who tried to give an objective account of beliefs and customs, had their own agendas in that they sought out interesting rather than mundane matter within their subject matter. For example, they looked for the curious, novel and nostalgic in an increasingly urban, industrial, and utilitarian society.

I would like now to briefly consider the influence and effect of religious beliefs and rituals.

First, we have to consider the assumption that religious belief makes it easy to accept death. As far as the past is concerned, we cannot know to what extent people believed in the view of the afterlife presented by religions, so we should refrain from judging the effect of systematic

religious faith. A great deal of research has made it clear that both those who have a strong religious beliefs and ardent atheists fear death the least. This is probably because both have a firm and stable belief system. The actual content of that system has little relevance.

It is necessary to reserve judgment on several points concerning the thesis that the bereaved are left in an emotionally miserable condition because of the loss of the religious funeral and mourning rituals. It is assumed in this thesis that almost all people received such a ritual in the past. But this is not true. Generally, only the rich received elaborate funerals and *mourning rituals*. Furthermore, though the positive effects of rituals must be recognized, it is not easy to distinguish between secular rituals based on a community and religious rituals, and to measure the different effects of both.

Ariès speaks highly of dying in a highly public manner in the catholic culture of the past, but is that really correct? Attending a deathbed was considered a virtuous deed in that culture, so it was not a rare case that people died surrounded by a crowd, including those just passing by the dying's house. We have no idea whether this kind of public death gives more comfort and satisfaction, or has the opposite effect, than dying quietly in the contemporary hospital.

## 2. To what extent does a religion regulate moral life?

Next I would like to examine the question of to what extent religion has to do with the acceptance or rejection of new technologies concerning life and death.

The oral contraceptive pill invented by Gregory Pincus in 1960s was revolutionary not just as an academic achievement, but more importantly in terms of its impact on the lifestyles of people. He thought that by his

invention humankind could enjoy sex-life without the fear of conception, but he was mistaken in thinking that the Vatican would accept the use of such pills. The Vatican has not allowed the use of the pill even today. However, there are grounds for concluding that the regulations of the Catholic Church regarding contraceptive methods have actually almost no effect. I have not accumulated the data yet, but we can safely assume that there is little difference in the total amount and dissemination of contraceptive means such as the pill, the condom, the IUD and so on between the Catholic countries and the Protestant ones. In comparing the birthrates and the total fertility rates between countries such as Ireland, Italy and Spain on the one hand and countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden on the other, no difference is to be found. In light of these statistics, it is natural to assume the same degree of use of contraceptive measures, assuming the same degree of sexual desire among people of these countries.

The following two tables show the abortion rate per 100 pregnancies by country; the first one is in J. E. Brockopp(ed.), *Islamic Ethics of Life*, 2003, and the second by The Alan Guttmacher Institute.

**Table 1**

Bangladesh	3.1
Uzbekistan	9.5
Ireland	9.9
Israel	12.9
France	17.7
Azerbaijan	18
Japan	22.4
Kazakhstan	41.3
Russia	64.2

**Table 2**

**The Highest 7**

Belarus	61.9
Cuba	58.6
Estonia	56.0
Bulgaria	55.2
Latvia	53.9
Hungary	42.1
Kazakhstan	41.3

**The Lowest 7**

Tunisia	7.8
Netherlands	10.6
Belgium	11.2
Israel	13.1
Switzerland	13.3
Germany	14.1
Finland	14.7

In both tables we cannot discern any influence or effect of religions in the order of countries. No consistent correspondence can be recognized between the high or low rates of abortion and the religiosity of the countries (which, of course, cannot be measured accurately). There is no doubt that the abortion rate is not determined by the Islamic or Christian view of human beings that states that they are objects of divine creation. Rather other factors seem to be more significant: those may include whether the country in question is a stable one or one in conflict, or whether it is an advanced country, a developing one, or a less-developed one, et cetera.

When a society becomes more modernized, the death rate goes down first and immediately after that the birthrate goes down. This has proven to be an iron law with no exception. The causal relation controlling this phenomenon has a stronger effect than religious regulations prohibiting contraception.

It is impossible to ascertain whether the facts above stem from secularization or not. At any rate, it is impossible in principle that a religion could so thoroughly control and regulate the entirety of human life. I would like to go over this point briefly.

Some religions such as Islam, Judaism and Hinduism are said to regulate the minutia of human life. In reality, however, a religion can logically no more regulate human life to the finest detail than a culture can prescribe or rule all the details of life. It may be true that some religions are not so much philosophies or ideas as they are a way of life itself regulated by the laws or rules of living. But it is impossible for religious law to perfectly regulate the finest and extensive details of life. For instance, no religions prescribe how many times we may breathe a day, how many chews we should give to food before we swallow it and the like. Furthermore, all human acts are indefinite and open to infinite

possibilities of linguistic expression. Language defines and articulates a definite and meaningful act from an indefinite continuity of human movement or motion in space and time. While that may be an overstatement or subject to an altogether different debate, a religion cannot regulate by language all the realities in human life in contemporary society where everything is fluid and unfixe.

So the following question should be asked: According to what standard or on what grounds do we decide whether to accept or to reject new biomedical technologies, which are things alien to the present society? To what degree do religions participate in this process? These questions eventually lead to discovering how social ethics are formed, and how religions function in this formation.

First I would like to comment on what roles morals play in a society. Social life is the whole system in which people positioned in a particular relation to one another interact through specific actions. At the same time, within that society, people have a mutual understanding as to who others are and how others should or might behave. They know what they will do, and who they are. This practical manner of living and socially shared mutual understanding of each other forms the identities of people living in a society. The social norm fundamentally functions to maintain the existing style of life in society and also thereby members' identities corresponding to that lifestyle. Conversely, the social norm rejects acts and ideas which might deny or destroy the existing lifestyles and identities. The moral norm as it practically functions in society prescribes how to live and what human beings should be.

These identities are the notion in any society of the life-course, or how to spend a life, and religion is the partial and symbolic product of that notion. The social notion of the life-course and the religious view of human beings do not perfectly overlap. Both society and religion are

always changing, and the direction and rapidity of the change of both do not necessarily coincide with each other. In the case that both more or less overlap, religion functions as a legitimizing force that maintains a particular social reality, and is a living mechanism in society. Conversely, when a religion as a force of the past does not catch up with the social change and leaves a great gap between itself and the social reality, it becomes a fossil or is limited to surviving only in a group of minorities outside of the norm. Or third, in a rapidly changing society there occurs a kind of normative state of anomie, and in order to create new norms, an old religiosity can be, so to speak, taken off the shelf, dusted off, endowed with new meaning, and put to use. In this last case, religion is a challenge to a status quo, a driving force for innovation in a society, and religion becomes a living force in shaping the society to come.

In reality, of course, these three modes of a religion usually co-exist to varying degrees in society. However, relatively speaking, it seems the living force of a religion is becoming weaker and weaker in today's societies, including Islamic ones. Therefore, certainly the influence and prescriptions of a religion are not dismissible when making decisions concerning whether to accept or to reject new biomedical technologies. But other factors are in no way inferior to religions in terms of importance when making those decisions. I would like to consider some evidence for this.

With regard to the field of contemporary bioethics, principles that have currency now in terms of generally recognized basic values, for example ethical principles such as informed consent and anti-paternalism, are all corollaries of modernism. Historically these may have emerged in the "Western world", if I may use that term. However, principles such as these are not specific to a certain geographical region, but specific to a particular type of society. For that reason, when a certain society

gains a certain typological similarity to Western society, the probability is very high that the society will accept the same standards. As societies differentiate and the individuals within those societies become more diverse, and as individuality of each member becomes clearer, mutual respect with regard to this individuality will naturally emerge. As an extension of this, the principle of independence, whereby one decides one's own fate, develops as normative value. Moral standards such as informed consent and anti-paternalism also were established through this historical process. That is to say, in any society or culture where social differentiation progresses, these values become inviolable moral principles.

Logically speaking, when social differentiation progresses in a society, though the society may remain religious as a whole, religious and moral diversity within it increases. If one religion or one sect of a religion claims primacy, all other opposing powers will immediately dispute that claim. And empirically, if one looks at the long history of mankind, when a society tries to preserve a social norm with forceful or legal sanctions, the weight that religion has in those sanctions is steadily decreasing.

Therefore in general, logically, historically, and empirically, in societies that can be called in typological terms multidimensional modern societies, the values of modernism gain force. The idea of progress in enlightenment philosophy which thought that religions would disappear sooner or later asserted this kind of secularization theory having looked only at their contemporary and somewhat short-ranged histories: one or two centuries at most. They were not able to distinguish between pluralization and diversity of a society and the disappearance of religions. Those who advocate the recent resurgence of religions also look at religious history with a rather limited perspective of the past: a few

decades in most cases. A longer scope, of hundreds or thousands years, is desirable to grasp such trends in the history of mankind.

The respect of the individual is one phenomenon concomitant with modernism. In the modern era all the human beings are supposed to be respected just because they are human beings. But there were many who were not socially accepted before modern times, i.e. those of foreign races and nations, the physically or mentally handicapped, various so-called “deviants” such as homosexuals, and so on. These people did not become accepted at the same pace in history. The probability that a particular group of people will be accepted and respected in a society depends upon its logical consistency with the existing culture on the one hand, and upon the degree to which they can unite themselves as a social power on the other.

I would like to point out another trend in history. In human history there have been few people so morally heroic as to give up their own happiness for the sake of ethical values, whatever that happiness might consist of. But today the pursuit of one’s own happiness has been approved of explicitly or implicitly as one element of human rights. It is, of course, one expression of modernism. I think the impact of this element on bioethics issues, such as problems of abortion, is far from small. We may find an analogy in environmental ethics. Today, deforestation is a serious problem in many developing countries. People of these countries themselves recognize how severe and dangerous an environment they are leaving for later generations to face. Nevertheless they cannot stop it. For as a matter of fact they are living and have to live at this moment without lowering their standard of living beyond a minimum level. One reason why new technologies that are rather problematic from the viewpoint of the traditional moral standards are accepted one after another may be that the demand of happiness of people

living at this moment becomes stronger and stronger, and manifests itself as a claim of human rights.

When new technologies of bioscience, which are alien to the society to begin with, are about to enter a society, naturally the traditional views of human beings and their life-course participate and interfere to a large degree. This view itself is not so much a product of religion, not so much a conception which solely and directly stems from a religion, as it is a crystallization of the socially shared view of how one should spend one's life. Nonetheless, the social view of the life-course is molded by adopting its main elements from the stock of ideas of religion. However, as societies are increasingly modernized and differentiated, with the results of pluralization and relativization of values, the values of modernism continue to more or less prevail in a society of any religious tradition.

The values of modernism by and large take shape using various factors from each existing religion in each culture. On the other hand religion takes in many factors of values of modernism and transforms to adapt itself to new phases of a society. It is true that religious traditions are different in each culture and will survive as such, but they are driven to absorb the common values of modernism. Perhaps these common values will gradually prevail in all cultures. This can be thought to be the cultural basis on which a universal bioethics will possibly or probably come into existence.

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