

The Possible Role of Religion in Secular Bioethics: Reflections on the Case of China

by
Ole Döring

I The Tension of Religion, Medicine, and Ethics

The relationship between religion and medicine has never been a simple one, nor has it been easy. Both realms relate to meanings of a “good life.” They attempt to understand human well-being, conceptualizing the limitations and dependency that we encounter in the human condition. Historically, they often overlap in the persons of healers, researchers, and scholars, such as Sun Simiao, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), or Johann Gregor Mendel, indicating that human nature, curiosity, courage, and piety are jointly at stake.

In Albert Camus’ famous novel, *The Plague*, Father Paneloux delivers sermons to the suffering population of the town infected with the plague. He suggests that the disease is a punishment for the people’s sins and death an expression of God’s will. In such a view, even a child’s suffering and death can make sense, as a “test” for Christians who have to choose between following God wholly or not at all, either accepting the fatal whims of infection or falling out of HIS grace. Intrinsically, medicine inspires the conflicts of theodicy and Promethean hubris.

Following the advances of the life sciences, medicine is dominated by scientific rationality. Hence, another potential quarrel line is recently raising ethical concern. Curiosity competes with traditional medical virtues such as commiseration and the protection of life. Bioethics—in the sense of bio-medical ethics, which deals with the meaning of best practice in medicine under circumstances of 21st century’s science and technology—is challenged to respond to unprecedented invasive powers and the economization of science and medicine, mindful of the farther reaching consequences for the understanding of human life and the meaning of being human.

Fundamentally, the tension between faith and science never fully subsides (Reichardt et al. 2004). For three decades now, since the debates about in vitro fertilization, it has been stated that the fundamental belief in the sanctity of human life, even at the stage of an embryo, clashes with another fundamental human desire: to alleviate suffering and cure disease. Most religious traditions expressly value medicine as well as science and make a serious effort to reconcile scientific thinking with doctrine. Upon closer inspection, however, the major claims about breakthroughs that have become reference points in the global bioethics debates (such as in the case of alleged human embryo cloning by Hwang Woo-suk) have been revealed as zealous science-fiction imagination. It seems reasonable to assume that dogmatism on both sides can be overcome by a sober-minded review of the facts and, in particular, by a culture that does not try to sell science but make it a wholesome human aspiration. Whereas the moral and political stakes might be reconsidered, the fundamental ethical questions concerning human nature and the value of human life remain.

II The Uncertain Situation of Religion in China

When it comes to contemporary China and religion, the situation seems to be quite straightforward. The Chinese constitution formally acknowledges religious freedom, but the ruling Chinese Communist Party regards folk religion as superstition, the public practice of which is in many instances illegal. However, in the wake of the opening policies since 1979, China's authorities have eased their grip and cautiously taken to tolerate a diversity of "superstitious" activities as long as they are not (like the Falun Gong) considered a political threat. The *Economist* recently accounted for "a resurgence of religious or quasi-religious activity across China that, notwithstanding occasional crackdowns, is transforming the social and political landscape of many parts of the countryside. Religion is also attracting many people in the cities, where the party's atheist ideology has traditionally held stronger sway" (*Economist* 2007). In traditional or alternative healing-related activities as well as in practices of charity and in "wellness" lifestyles, medicine and health care compose a breeding ground for religious ventures that wish to remain on the safe side of socially accepted mission. They can take advantage out of the corrupted, inefficient, or price-inflated state of many privately and state-owned medical institutions. For example, Catholic

nuns run clinics where they offer much-needed low-cost services of advanced basic care. Christian and Buddhist medical or health centers also cater to a growing market for elderly and ailing patients, especially hospices, such as they have been operating for decades already in Taiwan. Traditional Chinese religions also benefit from this development. Buddhist charities, Daoist ceremonies, and Confucian rituals are mushrooming. Similarly, religious institutions, such as temples, have taken to sponsor education.

Considering the efforts it takes to sustain religious activities in an adverse political and confused social environment, and acknowledging that newly established religious institutions such as churches or temples can only represent tips of an iceberg of religious life, it would obviously be wrong to call the People's Republic of China today a society wherein religion does not play a significant role with huge potential for future development. The current surge could connect to a deeply rooted religious heritage. In a broader perspective, for example, Chinese civilization is described as having been fundamentally shaped by two enduring structures, the Chinese family system and the Chinese form of bureaucracy. The bureaucratic model—that is: viewing gods as symbolic holders of office-posts, with all the duties and rights appropriate to the specific rank—is probably the most common but by no means the only one. “Spirits are also addressed as stern fathers or compassionate mothers. Some are thought to be more pure than others, because they are manifestations of astral bodies or because they willingly dirty themselves with birth and death in order to bring people salvation. Others are held up as paragons of the common values thought to define social life, like obedience to parents, loyalty to superiors, sincerity, or trustworthiness. Still others possess power, and sometimes entertainment value, because they flaunt standard mores and conventional distinctions” (Lopez 1996).

Such conceptions allow people to ritually associate transcendent explanations of meaning and order of the world with the societal and political rationales of the day. Notwithstanding the extraordinary progress in the very fact that such symbolic systems flourish and are even supported by the government in the name of preserving China's “cultural heritage,” burning incense or performing the sacrifice for the ancestors, etc., are mere formal symptoms of religious life, more or less ornamental edifices. They may hide more than they reveal and actually express about the substance of religious life and meaning in contemporary China. Particular concern seems appropriate with regard to the state's recent strategy to revive “Confucian” values, such as “harmony” and a “harmonious society,” in an obvious attempt to

access the new spiritual growth, benefit from the people's vulnerability, and exploit religion as a collaborator for political interests. Therefore, worries about ideological state intervention, which had been receding in the medical field of eugenics after the government changed policies in 1998 (Döring 2003), may now have to be redirected towards the area of religion, where an orchestrated effort can be suspected to manipulate the people through social engineering, i.e., through the people's minds and moral sense.

III The Role of the Religious

For the purposes of this discussion, I would like to distinguish *religion* from the *religious*. Religion is the general term for religious culture. The religious, specifically, is the intuition that alerts a human heart-and-mind about our existential dependency on something we are not, and instils in us the urge to reconcile this most fundamental alienation, preceding any deliberation: this definition leans on the Latin term *re-ligare*, i.e., "to reconnect."

The relation of religion in the latter sense to science and ethics can be tentatively explained as Albert Einstein put it: "Science can only ascertain what is, but not what should be, and outside of its domain, value judgments of all kinds remain necessary. Religion, on the other hand, deals only with evaluations of human thought and action: it cannot justifiably speak of facts and relationships between facts" (Einstein 1941/1970). Accordingly, the religious opens the pathways to meaning within and beyond rationality; it can connect with any form of meaningful human practice, and namely generate interpretative contexts for science and modern society. Ethics then attempts to consolidate the reasonable claims that derive from religiously inspired deliberation and reminds science of its perspective, purpose, and limitations. It tries to clarify how *Ought* can relate to *Is* in the context of biomedicine and it ponders the limits of normative religious claims. To use Einstein's words once more: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind" (Frazzetto 2004: 555). Then again, ethics helps us walk upright, suited with a general orientation (*telos*).

Actually, however, the ongoing bioethical debates are often rhetorically framed as a conflict between science and religion, as if both were representing antagonistic world views. But, as a contributor to *Nature* observes somewhat optimistically, "At least one thing has changed in this debate since Galileo's day, for better or for worse: now, science is the orthodox

world view, in the industrialized world at least, and religion stands outside, raising objections. [...] One thing is certain. Everyone agrees that fundamental ethical questions underlying stem-cell research, many of which transcend religion, need to be addressed” (Reichhardt et al 2004).

I believe that the perspective expressed in these lines is fundamentally mistaken, concerning both religion and science. Certainly, researchers’ hype and religious alarmism make poor advisors. It is true that positivistic scientific attitudes and faithful optimism about progress have acquired quasi-religious (or, at least, dogmatic) status in the orthodox frame of globalized modernity. However, the main reason for this modern faith, ironically, is rooted in pragmatism. In secular societies, functional rationales illuminating and explaining things in relativistic discourses that consider usefulness, aptness, efficiency, and design seem to be the smallest denominators for common sense, covering widespread religious views of life and death, or refurbishing them with a “rational” appearance on the surface. For example, there is talk about “advancing” bodily functions instead of addressing the fear of death, “improving” our traits instead of learning to live contentedly with the wealth we have, or “overcoming” nature’s boundaries instead of appreciating the wisdom of constraint.

There is nothing wrong with aspirations towards perfection. However, they require context and proportion. Notably, there is no prospect for humane orientation, meaning, and development intrinsic in pragmatism, neither for science nor for spirituality. Humanity cannot survive within the restricted domain of technical rationality, such as the R&D mantra. The noise over “Research and Development” overrides the fact that we have become speechless regarding the basic questions about the meaning of life (cf. e.g. Harris 2007 or Stock 2003). On the other hand, it is unreasonable to pretend that humanity can be based on ethical relativism (as distinct from moral relativism, which is in fact the appropriate category to describe the structure of religion) (Engelhardt 2000).

I would like to propose a strategy that starts with the very few but fundamental ethical preconditions constituting modern, democratic, and secular societies and which Engelhardt misleadingly labels as “contentless.” The global bioethics discourses should be better aware of their intrinsic, fundamental, and normative preconditions, especially because they are so sparse and, by definition, make universally binding axioms (Döring 2001).

Philosopher Chen Rongxia from Shanghai has suggested that it makes sense to

distinguish the general religious emotion from specific religious doctrines. There are various religious doctrines in Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. There are different contents in their specific tenets. For example, “Not to kill life” in Buddhism is very different from “Not to kill a human” in Judeo-Christianity. On the other hand, however, we must realize that there is a common core in various religions. This core embodies a religious emotion. It is involved in the origins of religions in human civilization. Religion is one of the oldest cultural phenomena as it originates from the deepest essential needs of humans (Chen 2002).

Sadly, it seems timely to re-ascertain that there is no need to proclaim super-human achievements or apocalyptic visions when we describe achievements of medical science. Strangely enough, we apparently need to be reminded that neither can any human overcome humanity and act as a creator in the proper sense, nor do we fully understand the negative consequences that we fear. We cannot “play God” because, by definition, we do not know the rules of this game, we have no control over this impersonation, and any attempt to defend or to criticize an act as “playing God” is self-defeating. It is just fair and safe to remain consciously within the humble limits of the little we can and the much more we cannot do. This will release us from totalitarian temptations and regenerate an unperturbed mind.

The point of concern is to remind ourselves about the practical guidance we forfeit once we decide to ignore the religious as a driving force in science and ethics. Bioethics can benefit, globally and locally, when we employ the constructive elements of religion and particularly the religious as a resource for science and ethics. It can be the skeptical message, such as taking repugnance seriously but not following it blindly (de Castro 2002, Kass 1997); it can mean embracing science as a gift for responsible, humble, and rational humanity, or as a source of diverse options for a good life and metaphysical perspective. Ethics should not submit her imagination and range of vision to the reductionist narratives and particular metaphysics of the contemporary life sciences, or to those of a positivistic or rights-biased version of law. Accordingly, we can re-ascertain the legitimate avenues of medicine and biomedical research and sort out what is illegitimate. A healthy portion of skepticism and a humble attitude towards human capabilities, in terms of control beyond the successful manipulation of the biotic substance, can contribute to the re-adjustment of biomedicine and bioethics, as a counterforce to outbalance the narrow, aggressive, and fundamentally irrational powers of the market.

IV The Meaning of Religion

“Religion is a human activity that can be easily accepted only within the framework of reality that it creates for itself” (Dow 2007). Notably, Dow warns us against confusing religion, in a scientifically meaningful sense, with a “folk category of religion,” be it in a Christian, Western European, or any other historical form, as he sees the term distorted in the literature by authors from different schools such as Geertz and Malinowski. Still, Dow’s appraisal does not seem to be clear enough. In this behavioristic assessment, Dow appreciates the subjective nature of the genesis of religion and calls for an “evolutionary” approach. However, this should not suggest volatile or relativistic interpretations. Religion described as a product of cultural evolution need not be biologically reduced to a mechanism of processing and responding to “different selective pressures on the central nervous system.” The challenge rather lies in the limitation and self-criticism of general moral claims that follow religion. To acknowledge this challenge means to account for the fact that the religious can be only tentatively and indirectly expressed in rites and mores, institutions and doctrines. We can improve our understanding of the religious so that it accounts for the diversity of religious forms and roots and at the same time implies neither one totalitarian church or religion nor a hierarchy of religions. However, this interpretation leaves open the possibility of a meta-religion. The latter, which might appear to be a contradiction in terms, is conceivable if it merely integrates the forms, functions, and contents of any religious kind in the most abstract sense without superimposing a certain morality. In order to accomplish this kind of morality, we cannot simply adopt a social scientific outlook, that is, in the sense of ethical meaningfulness, to consider the shadows of shadows; hoping that we “should eventually be able to explain how and why human beings develop and maintain a panoply of complex irrational behaviors that are very influential in their lives” (Dow 2007). It is the intrinsic reasonability of the religious that should be of interest for us.

An example for such an approach is offered by Georg Simmel. Although his writings may seem to suggest anthropological and sociomorphic denominators and have inspired sociology in this sense, he clearly distinguishes between the genesis of religion and its meaning. Simmel indicates the basic distinction between the religious and religion when he observes that “I do not believe that religious feeling and impulse are expressed in religion only; rather they can be found in plentiful connections, as an element involved in many affairs. Religion only exists as an independent, uniquely and distinctly

circumscribed content of religious life” (Simmel 1898). He also speaks of “fragments of religious essence that originate from within human inter-relations, so to speak: religion before it comes to be religion.” Moreover, Simmel accounts for the intrinsic “tension-field” of the religious, which resembles medicine in many ways. “All religiosity entails a composition of selfless devotion and eudamonic desire, of humility and arrogance, immediate sensitivity and abstraction.” And he acknowledges the “feeling of dependence as the essence of all religions” (Simmel 1898).

Without any intended allusion to China, Simmel continues in what amounts to an accurate description of basic structures of religion in China:

All these sentiments, which culminate in the focus of the concept of God, can be traced to the relationship between the individual and the species, including past generations that have transmitted the main forms and contents of its essence and, at the same time, present generations that determine the range of its transformation. It is quite telling for the understanding of social-ethical and religious relationship that God is directly perceived as a personal manifestation of the very virtues required from humans. It is more like that he *is* [in the sense of substance] than that he *has* [in the sense of the accidental] the characteristic of gentleness, righteousness, tranquility, etc. That is, he is the substantiated perfection of “gentleness itself,” “love itself,” etc. (Simmel 1898).

According to Simmel, here lies the gravest point of misunderstanding in all theories that derive ideal values from historical-psychological factors. Sociomorphic or psychological explanations confuse the contingent expression of moral forms, rites, and ethos with the originally encountered substance of virtue. Thus religion is exactly not “a body of behavior unified by our failure to find a simple rational explanation for it when seen from the perspective of the individual,” as Dow puts it. We need not postulate a certain evolutionary teleology in order to appreciate its “adaptive rationality.” Rather, we can build upon the moral message and basic sense of orientation, draw from its reason and make it fruitful for the encounter of challenges in any field of human practice.

As a consequence of the anarchic character of its spontaneous impulse, the religious has to be molded, but it then can be powerfully supportive of a humane and reasonable bioethics. The ordeal of cultivation starts with the individual. When we discipline ourselves and go beyond the partisan interests and limitations of extremes in our expressions of existential sentiment, it is easier to pinpoint and rigorously criticize the religious’ theological or

anthropological assumptions, or any of its content matter. Religious cultivation as a practical process can provide the raw material and structures of cultural-hermeneutic understanding and inform philosophical ethics about the texture and relations of being human. Moreover, when we focus on the formative stage of religious life, that is, on the religious, we relate to the integrating concept of humanity, before the Babylonian Confusion of cultural forms and languages.

Religion, in an integrating, culturally open sense that is constructive for bioethics, should be defined in a manner that foregoes substantive metaphysical or theoretical presuppositions as far as possible. In this, it accommodates a “thin theory” for bioethics and at the same times encourages cultural integration and development towards a type of ethics that primarily cares for the needs of the vulnerable, within and beyond the tools of medicine.

V Ethical Challenges for Religion

Considering the responsibility and commitment of bioethics, the potential of the religious as an asset is poorly developed. In particular there is a need for greater maturity in dealing with the aforementioned constructive elements of the religious properly. Religions in their institutionalized forms, especially the churches with their bias towards traditional and cultured communities even in secular pluralistic societies, do not display huge enthusiasm towards individual existential matters in bioethical questions, that is, in a manner that would not imply the superiority of their own form over the diversity of content. For example, they have engaged themselves much more in sophisticated elaborations of metaphysical fundamentals or in general verdicts (as in the debates over human cloning) than in basic issues of justice, charity, or, in providing a credible non-materialistic vision of medicine that could not be reduced to market rationalities or the techno-metaphysics of science. The emphasis here is on being in the right, rather than on the good life. Most importantly, religions are not supporting critical self-reflection about the purpose and institutionalized system of bioethics in common terms, or the role that religions should play. Thereby, religions’ representatives performatively accept and support the dominant *Zeitgeist* and forfeit legitimacy as an independent authority for providing meaning. Hence, while religions largely operate in the mode of power struggles, the discourse takes place among legal, political, professional, or

stakeholder's views. The religious finds itself marginalized, in the corner of relativistic or idiosyncratic opinions, of emotions and irrational assumptions of the scantily intelligible kind.

How to approach the realm of the religious in bioethics in categorical terms? Elsewhere, I have described the metaphoric descriptive heuristics of the Limes and the Rubicon with reference to China's bioethics. (Döring 2004 and 2007) The Rubicon can express strong substantial value assumptions of the religious and metaphysical metaphors of moral orientation that frequently associate with natural law. It expresses the sense of a moral line that cannot be crossed, such as a practical taboo that explains itself. Whereas a shared sense of such a Rubicon bears strong intuitive and rhetoric appeal and can endow a spokesperson with the power of moral definition or legitimacy, the question of cultural representation and trans-cultural communication remains.

The Rubicon is thus distinguished from the external frontier delineated by the Limes, the outgrowth of a political process. In a direct democracy, the results generally have a greater probability to be politically legitimate or culturally representative; while in a dictatorship, the Limes is a culturally random manifestation of the decisions made by the powerful. Germany, for example, being a representative democracy with a highly diversified and publicly organized pluralistic society, at the same time suited with a strong and transparent state of law and a historically grown legal culture, can claim a rather high degree of cultural authenticity and legitimacy. Regarding the Limes, as in any positive legal order, however, the law owes itself to historical contingencies and must hence remain relative; yet inasmuch as it expresses, at the same time, the Rubicon, the grounds for its claims to more general validity are relatively strong.

At present, it is much more difficult to provide a fair description of China's normative culture. The legal state is obviously just emerging and political decisions are neither transparently fair nor representative; the Chinese Limes, drawing quite libertarian lines with the prudential observation of risk reduction, doesn't tell us much about the moral sense in society. Codes for a Rubicon in China, such as the imperative of natural purity and the condemnation of any sexual act not geared toward procreation as a violation of cosmic order, is even less suitable to represent morality for individuals or small groups of people, given the absence of religious freedom and communal life.

Ideally, legislation should respect the overarching moral culture, such as it is symbolized by the (common) Rubicon. In all countries today, however,

legislation is forced to respond to the pressures from scientific advances and market powers; with a significant impact on the ways that discourse and law are being orchestrated, framed, and politically organized. Under such circumstances, it is clear that societies with an already established moral culture have a relative developmental advantage, as compared to those that are just beginning to re-invent their cultural identity, as it is clearly the case in China. Thereby, the impact of culture and the religious in particular is weakened again because of the increased influence of pragmatism and technical rationality. The urge for fast regulations and the biased selection of highly specialized areas and topics of regulation challenge the legitimacy of the outcome, either in terms of due procedure, for lack of time, or outcome substance, in terms of reliability and compliance.

Internationally, the contributions from religious activists to the debates on bioethics have not always been helpful. In many cases, they were hastily and superficially concocted from whatever a particular tradition or theology seemed to offer and according to particular views, in the absence of international standards and experiences of cultural dialogues in bioethics that would help to clarify the relationship between religions, cultures, stake holders, politics, and laws in the respective cases, individual opinions or political interests (Roetz 2006). Thus there have been numerous attempts to find answers to the question of “the moral status of the embryo,” for example, from the Talmud, the Koran, the Bible, as well as from Confucian and other writings. No time was afforded to consider whether the “embryo” is a concept that can make sense in religious moral terms and can be assessed in non-empirical language in the first place. The fact that most scientists are clearly aware that “gene” or “embryo” are fuzzy biological concepts did not inspire systematic conceptual frame-working or encourage religious scholars in bioethics to elaborate advanced approaches to integrate state-of-the-art natural-sciences knowledge within a practically instructive explanatory frame (e.g., in response to Sebeok and Danesi 2000, Döring 2006c). More often than not, consequentially, the respective arguments have taken the form of pseudo-ontology, proto-science, or bogus ethics, with pre-critical anthropology and philosophy. The crucial area of cross- and trans-cultural moral discourse has been paralyzed under a wave of propagated cultural myths and stereotypes, creating obstacles for dialogue and understanding (Nie 1999, 2000, Döring 2006a). The practically adequate and theoretically sound characterization of Culture (Eagleton 2000) is one major victim of this unsystematic debate in bioethics, the negligent waste of the religious genie another.

Considering the fate of religious life in China during the last two centuries, the Chinese society today is in an extremely vulnerable position. Support for religious education and the building of sustainable spirituality is much needed while at the same requiring huge responsibility and delicacy. Exposure to modern or anti-modern ideas and life styles could be spiritually rejuvenating, strengthening society with fresh impulses for China's cultural life. But the unleashed powers of the market are sweeping over a largely unprotected and unprepared society. The population finds itself squeezed between political constraints and the fascinating hotbed of new and old ideas, struggling with barely digested disillusionment about Mao's ideological campaigns, with ailing wounds from the culturally suicidal wars, and with current promises of deliverance. In such a situation, it is hard to breathe, that is, to allow the sprouts of the religious to unfold. How can China develop her own pace, how can people begin to distinguish between serious and idle, substance and noise, the healthy and the unwholesome? This echoes the troubles on the health market, where a cacophony of players compete, seemingly, more often for profit than for wholesome delivery.

Thus, considering China and religious contributions to bioethics, there are worries and open questions, most of which Europeans can share or understand with sympathy. How does biomedicine affect the family or community life? How should traditional societal institutions such as marriage and inter-generational support systems be re-considered? What is the meaning of the human being and personhood, beyond the rationally limited explanatory range of biology or the law? What is the moral status of nature and the human relation to nature? Is it the Confucian sense of stewardship, a Daoistic holism, or a Buddhist notion of an intrinsic value of life as such? Is it the neglect of any value, or the assumption of a human sovereignty to ascribe value? What is the relative meaning of technology versus practice? Can we ascertain what the Confucian "trinity" of "Heaven, Earth and the Gentleman" (Lee 1999: 192) implies? Can the implicit understanding of "naturalness" be elaborated, that is, expressed in arguments against interfering with nature's course? In cross-cultural discussions, how to compare different metaphysical metaphors, such as the *imago dei* or the *junzi* (Döring 2006b), as ways to apply the principle of responsibility? When the charge of "playing God" makes no sense, how to phrase the problem of hubris?

In the face of the urgency of such questions, it is tempting to rely on the few voices that claim to represent China's cultural, philosophical, moral, or religious import. However, uncritical concession to such "experts" is

premature, even where these are honored with highest distinction. We are still waiting for a discourse that would be prepared to tackle questions, broadly and seriously, from the religious angle. Hence we cannot, at present, positively refer to China's religious position in bioethics. But we may encourage the Chinese debate and support areas wherein the religious is free to sustain and materialize itself.

VI Sustaining the Strain

To summarize, religion is not a suitable guide in bioethics because it is not the purpose of religion to install positive law-like norms. More importantly, religion is radically subjective in her moral meaningfulness: when it comes to sensitive bioethical matters, such as human cloning, termination of end-of-life care, the morality of pre-natal human life, or abortion, to mention only a few, no religion has ever spoken with one tongue. Religious arguments do not need to be rational, the priority order of values varies, as does the outcome of moral judgement. Contemporary topics in bioethics sometimes take religions by surprise, enticing premature answers to problems that require more time to stimulate a due moral response from the religious. Buddhism, for example, with her core value of cherishing life and the living, has not stopped scholars in the name of Buddhism to accept the strategically biased term of "therapeutic cloning" and vouch for a "balanced approach"; when "balancing" presupposes the principal acceptability of deliberately "sacrificing" life for any purpose in the first place (Promta 2005). This is not only a clear self-contradiction, it also accepts that utilitarian calculus is admissible as an ethical guide. The major flaw here, however, is not necessarily the moral conclusion but the foregoing acceptance of a kind of conceptual rationality that contradicts the obvious core of the respective faith—here: Buddhism. There are matters that cannot be debated or bargained, which indicates the very difference between religious moral beliefs and ethical discourse.

Reaching beyond sophisticated scholarship, the religious, with its foregoing acknowledgment of human limitation and dependency, has a constructive perspective to offer. It is not cynical or reminiscent of Pater Paneloux to encourage a culture that approaches disease and suffering not merely as opponents in a battle. At least they are part of our human nature; even in utopia, where all medical conditions will be curable, suffering will remain part of the realm of human experience. It is essentially subjective

and occasionally inspires spiritual advancement. Bioethics invites religion to play a charitable and very practical role: to act according to fundamental human obligations and help create proper living conditions! Meanwhile, last and most fundamental matters of faith will be left to private and communal lives. They cannot be allowed to meddle with the politics of bioethics. This division of labor would benefit both sides, religion and ethics. It would release the religious from the temptation to cross over into the realm of the worldly powers, fostering humanity without oppression, while providing ethics with fresh resources of meaning and inspiration.

Of course, inasmuch as China is concerned, such a religious approach can have a subversive impact. It encourages individuals to seek orientation from different sources and accept authority outside the realm of the Party. This might be a worthy price to pay for the overall prospering of healthy people in a healthy society.

References

- Chen, Rongxia, "Religious Emotions and Bioethics," in Ole Döring and Renbiao Chen, eds., *Advances in Chinese Medical Ethics: Chinese and International Perspectives*, Hamburg: Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde No.355 (2002): 214–222.
- de Castro, Leonardo, "Reproductive Cloning: Moral Repugnance and Knee-jerk Reactions," in Lee Shui-chuen, ed., *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Bioethics: Ethics, Legal and Social Issues in Human Pluri-Potent Stem Cell Experimentation*, Chungli (Taiwan), 2002.
- Döring, Ole, "Introducing a 'Thin Theory' for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics in Medical Ethics: Reflections from the Research Project 'Biomedicine and Ethics in China'," *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 11 (Sept 2001): 146-152.
- [2003] "China's struggle for practical regulations in medical ethics," *Nature Reviews Genetics* 4 (2003): 233-239.
- [2004] "Zwischen moralischem Rubikon und rechtlichem Limes: Chinas bioethisches Selbstverständnis nimmt Gestalt an," *China aktuell* 7/04 (2004): 750-761.
- [2006a]: "A Confucian Asian Ethos? Essentials of the Culture of East Asian Bioethics," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 25: 127-149.
- [2006b] "A Cultural Comparison of the Developmental Ethics in the Daxue and Christian Ideas of Moral Learning," *Sino-Christian Studies* 2 (Dec. 2006): 77-103.

- [2006c] “Social Darwinism, Liberal Eugenics, and the Example of Bioethics in China,” in Thorsten Botz-Bornstein and Jürgen Hengelbrock, eds., *Re-ethnicizing the Minds? Cultural Revival in Contemporary Thought*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006), 137-148.
- [2007] “Limits of Human Existence According to China’s Bioethics,” in Marcus Düwell, Christoph Rehmann-Sutter and Diethmar Mieth, eds., *The Contingent Nature of Life. Bioethics and Limits of Human Existence*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2007, 289-303.
- Dow, James W., *A Scientific Definition of Religion*, anpere.net, 2007-02-19.
- Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
- Economist, “When Opium can be benign,” February 1, 2007 (http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=8625817, last access on Dec. 22, 2007).
- Einstein, Albert, *The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, Inc.*, New York, 1941. English in *Out of My Later Years*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970, 29-30.
- Engelhardt, H. Tristram, Jr., *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, Lisse (Netherlands); Exton, PA: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2000.
- Frazzetto, Giovanni: “Embryos, cells and God. Different religious beliefs have little consensus on controversial issues such as cloning and stem-cell research.” *EMBO reports* 5, 6 (2004): 553-555.
- Harris, John, *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People*, Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Kass, Leo, “The wisdom of repugnance: Why we should ban the cloning of humans,” *The New Republic*, 216(22), 1997: 17-26.
- Lee Shui-chuen, “A Confucian Perspective on Human Genetics,” in *Chinese Scientists and Responsibility*, Ole Döring, ed., Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde, 1999: 187-198.
- Lopez, Donald S., *Religions of China in Practice*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Nie Jing-bao, “The Myth of the Chinese Culture, the Myth of the Chinese Medical Ethics,” *Bioethics Examiner* 3(2) 1999: 1, 2, 5.
- , “The Plurality of Chinese and American Medical Moralities: Toward an Interpretative Cross-Cultural Bioethics,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 10/3 (2000): 239-260.
- Promta, Somparn, “Buddhism and Human Genetic Research,” *polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy* 6 (2005). (Online: <http://them.polylog.org/6/fps-en.htm>, last access on December 10, 2007.)

- Reichhardt, Tony with David Cyranoski and Quirin Schiermeier, "Religion and science: Studies of faith"; *Nature* 432 (9 December 2004): 666-669.
- Roetz, Heiner, ed., *Cross-Cultural Issues in Bioethics. The Example of Human Cloning*, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2006.
- Sebeok, Thomas A. and Marcel Danesi, *The Forms of Meaning. Modelling Systems Theory and Semiotic Analysis*, Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000.
- Simmel, Georg, "Zur Soziologie der Religion"; in *Neue Deutsche Rundschau (Freie Bühne)* 9 (1898): 111-123 (Berlin), (<http://socio.ch/sim/rel98.htm>, last access on Dec. 12, 2007).
- Stock, Gregory, *Redesigning Humans: Choosing our Children's Genes*, London : Profile, 2003.