

# The Sanctity of Life: An Evangelical Exploration

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## *I. Background and Statement of Purpose*

The “sanctity of life” (or “sanctity of human life”) is a phrase that has become commonplace in contemporary moral and political debates concerning a wide range of bioethical issues: abortion, embryo research, cloning, genetic engineering, euthanasia, and others. Generally it is used by those who oppose technologies or practices that they believe violate the intrinsic value of human life. Some who use the term employ it more broadly to denote an ethical approach concerned not just with a handful of bioethical issues but the entire range of moral problems that human beings face, from abortion to poverty, from war to the death penalty, from child abuse to the environment. Here the sanctity of life is used as a rallying cry for a moral vision that seeks to value, protect, and enhance human life in every context and condition. This resonant concept was called a “consistent ethic of life” by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago.

While the concept of the sanctity of life has a long intellectual history, and many cognate terms have long been in circulation (human dignity, sacredness of life, reverence for life, etc.), it can be shown that the widespread contemporary use of the concept emerged in the 1970s. Its immediate intellectual provenance can be traced to the Catholic moral tradition, and its recent emergence is tied to Catholic opposition to legalized abortion.

After the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision which overturned all state abortion laws to institute what amounted to abortion on demand, it took three years or so for conservative Protestants to become politically and intellectually organized enough to articulate a response. As early as Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority in the mid-70s, such groups have universally opposed the *Roe v. Wade* decision and have sought unsuccessfully to get it reversed. In doing so, they have tended to employ the vocabulary of the sanctity of life. It can be found anywhere you look in evangelical life, as a brief Google search with its 340,000 references reveals.

It is not insignificant that conservative evangelical Protestants, embedded in denominational groups which have historically looked with deep suspicion upon Roman Catholicism, broke through that suspicion in what they believed was a time of moral crisis and borrowed from Catholicism the concept of the sanctity of life. This development was the first step in what has become a fairly substantial rapprochement between conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics as cobelligerents on a wide range of contemporary moral issues.

*It is my contention that, having borrowed the concept from Roman Catholics in a time of need, evangelical Protestants never have undertaken a full-blown intellectual analysis and exposition, from within our own tradition, of the concept of the sanctity of life. That is the project I wish to pursue: an evangelical exploration of the concept of the sanctity of life. My review of the literature finds that no comparable project has been undertaken by someone else.*

Another recent development complicates this exploration. With the rise in the use of the concept of the sanctity of life in contemporary cultural/political battles, there has come an aggressive counterattack in certain intellectual circles. Especially because the concept has been employed primarily to oppose contemporary biotechnology and practices such as abortion, intellectuals who favor such technologies and practices have sought to undercut the validity of the concept of the sanctity of life. Peter Singer, the Princeton philosopher, is one thinker who has quite directly sought to dismantle the credibility of this concept and replace it with a very different moral vision.

I would argue that such contemporary arguments for/against the sanctity of life are best understood within a longer historical trajectory. My claim—and I will seek to demonstrate this in the longer project of which this proposal is a part—is that largely due to the influence of biblical faith some version of the concept of the sanctity of life has been deeply embedded in western culture for centuries. Whether we speak of the intrinsic value of human life, the natural rights of the human person, the inalienable rights of the individual, or of the sacredness of human life, a legacy of historic western culture is some concept of the inherent dignity of every human life. It is embedded in our religion, morality, language, and law.

However, challenges to this concept are also not new. I will show in this project that the concept of the sanctity of life has been under threat for centuries. In philosophical circles, I would argue that the threat began with utilitarianism, deepened profoundly with Nietzsche, and became chronic with the emergence of full-blown moral subjectivism and relativism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In politics, both Communism and Nazism were political religions that explicitly rejected the concept of life's sacredness in the name of an alternative ideology, with tens of millions dead as a result. In theology, the rise (or reappearance) of religiously motivated terror, especially but not exclusively in Islam, marks a recent rejection of the sanctity of life, in the name of God.

When viewed against this historical backdrop, the fight to preserve some notion of the sanctity of life takes on an even graver significance. This is a civilizational struggle—an effort to preserve one of the very best legacies of the western religio-moral intellectual tradition against a host of determined adversaries. More than ideas are at stake.

In terms of the theoretical framework of this project, it is best understood as a work in Christian theological ethics. As such it is interdisciplinary: it will involve biblical research, theological analysis, intellectual and cultural history, engagement with Christian and secular philosophical beliefs, discussion of the contemporary cultural, political, and ethical landscape, and at least brief analysis of a number of key bioethical problems of our time. If successful, the result will be an authoritative Protestant (evangelical, orthodox) analysis of a major moral concept and perhaps some revision of the articulation of that concept for 21<sup>st</sup> century application.

Summary of Full Project: An evangelical exploration of the concept of the sanctity of life, examining its biblical origins, its contemporary theological, philosophical, ethical, and political articulations and applications, and the arguments of those most vehemently opposed to it.

Summary of Pew Project: In the summer of 2005, I will attempt to get as far as chapter 2 in this book project, as outlined below.

## *II. Annotated Chapter Outline/Major Goals/Literature to be Explored*

### **Part I: The Sanctity of Life: The Fight Over a Contested Concept (30 pages)**

#### Introduction: The Sanctity of Life: Disputed Territory in the Culture Wars (15 pages)

Introduces the subject pretty much as undertaken above, at more length: the constant invocation of the concept of the sanctity of life in contemporary political-ethical debate; rejections of that concept; attempts to co-opt the concept; the long history of the concept in various forms; what is at stake for evangelicals, etc. Sets up the rest of the book.

#### Ch. 1: The Vocabulary of Sanctity (15 pages)

We can't talk about something until we know what to call it. So this prologue will consider the vocabulary that is used when speaking about life's worth: sacredness, sanctity, dignity, etc., exploring both etymology and intellectual history. Contemporary reformulations of the language will be analyzed, for example, the challenge offered by ecologically sensitive theologies concerned about a lack of moral concern for non-human life. I will end with a decision to use "the sanctity of life" as my working terminology and indicate what this is meant to include and leave out. *Sources*: Bioethics dictionaries and encyclopedias, leading works in bioethics and political ethics.

### **Part II: The Historic Case for the Sanctity of Life (120 pages)**

#### Ch. 2: Biblical Foundations (30 pages)

Here I will trace the biblical texts, themes, and motifs that are fundamental to the concept of the sanctity of life, working through the canon from imago dei to eschatology. I will also explore counter-motifs, such as the holy war tradition, that have been cited in opposition to the sanctity of life concept. *Sources*: A number of works in biblical ethics as well as standard biblical studies reference tools.

#### Ch. 3: Theological Elaborations (30 pages)

I will work briskly through the church's history to see how the concept of the sanctity of life has made its way through that history. The early church's rejection of participation in violence is key; the fateful turn away from that tradition in the Middle Ages, though it does survive; the secularization of much of this vocabulary during the Enlightenment period; and the revival of the sanctity of life concept in contemporary Roman Catholic (borrowed by evangelical Protestant) thought will receive consideration. *Sources*: History of Christian ethics texts, standard intellectual histories, Roman Catholic social teaching, writings of Pope John Paul II, evangelical Protestant thinkers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

[Note: This will be the end of the summer 2005 part of this research. The rest is simply included for your information, to get a sense of the broader project.]

#### Ch. 4: Philosophical Meditations (30 pages)

The slow but steady decline of Christian influence in the West has not meant the end of the concept of the sanctity of life, but it has often meant its secularization. In this chapter we will consider several ways in which life's intrinsic value has been reaffirmed: Kantian ethics and its successors (Rawls, etc.), natural rights ethics in the American liberal tradition (both revolutionary-era and today), and the cosmopolitan humanism of European thinkers such as

Vaclav Havel will be considered here. *Sources*: Kant, Rawls, Havel, Kass, Arkes, Federalist Papers, US founding documents, etc.

### Ch. 5: Political Applications (30 pages)

Here I will show how the concept of the sanctity of life is embedded in western law, American law, and international law, with special attention to the resurgence of human rights covenants and guarantees since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and its abundant horrors. *Sources*: law texts, US and UN documents, etc.

## Part III: Rejections of the Sanctity of Life (90 pages)

### Ch. 6: Political Rejections (30 pages)

I will discuss Communism and Nazism as political religions that sought explicitly to replace the legal and cultural concept of the rights of the individual with statist and totalitarian visions that disregarded the value of individual life. Plenty of examples of the tragic policy applications of these values can be named, and will be. I will also allude in the latter part of this chapter to contemporary genocidal ethnic tribalism as a political rejection of the sanctity of life. *Sources*: Abundant sources on Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler and their respective regimes, as well as contemporary tribalism in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sudan, and so on.

### Ch. 7: Philosophical Rejections (30 pages)

I will examine the subtle but significant shift intrinsic in Mill's utilitarianism, which evaluates acts on a cost/benefit basis rather than their intrinsic morality; then look at Nietzsche's explicit rejection of life's worth and elevation of the will to power and brute violence; then the dry but morally disastrous subjectivism and relativism of the British analytic philosophers. Finally I will consider the work of Peter Singer, with its explicit rejection of the sacredness of human life. *Sources*: Mill, Bentham, Nietzsche, Ayer, Moore, Rorty, Singer, and secondary sources.

### Ch. 8: Theological Rejections (30 pages)

Picking up the thread from chapter 1, I will discuss ways in which a certain rendering of the Bible has proved fertile for worldviews rejecting the sanctity of life from within extremist Christian and Jewish communities historically and today. Then I will analyze the most pressing current example of holy terror, the Islamist ideology of the Al Qaeda network. *Sources*: biblical scholarship, contemporary Jewish sources, the growing literature on Islamist terrorism.

## Part IV: Defending the Sanctity of Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (70 pages)

### Ch. 9: Framing the Sanctity of Life Argument (30 pages)

I will offer a crisp summary articulation of the concept of the sanctity of life from within an evangelical framework, informed by the wide range of sources thus far considered.

### Ch. 10: Test Cases: Some Sketches (30 pages)

Though this book is not primarily application- or policy-oriented, I will here try to show how the evangelical vision thus articulated "cashes out" when applied to such issues as abortion, embryonic stem cells, cloning, reproductive technologies, access to health care, and assisted suicide. *Sources*: The numerous books and articles having to do with these bioethical issues.

### Conclusion: Bearing Witness for Life (10 pages)

In this concluding chapter, I will review some of the very challenging obstacles to the preservation of a sanctity of life vision in western culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will reflect on the call to be faithful, to bear witness for life, even if victory, as we understand it, proves elusive.

### *III. Time Frame*

For Pew Project: Through chapter 2 by August 31, 2005

For Completion of full manuscript (315 pages): August 31, 2007

Dissemination Plan: This proposal is being submitted simultaneously to John Kilner, Director of the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity in Deerfield, Illinois. He asked me to submit a proposal for a book in a series they are doing called Critical Issues in Bioethics. In response to this offer, I suggested this topic. He was enthusiastic. Eerdmans Publishing Company, one of the most highly respected publishers in the industry, publishes all books in this series. Therefore it is highly probable that this solicited proposal will be approved by Kilner, the series editors, and Eerdmans sometime in the next few months. Therefore dissemination is more or less assured. I will also, of course, seek to present and publish chapters and sections of the book as they are ready.

### *IV: Budget*

The primary resource that I will need is time. Certainly I will buy some books, and the library will acquire other books and articles for me. There may be trips to Memphis for specialized resources there. But this is simply a major research undertaking. I will need time. The Pew funding will enable this time to be available, as it will free me up from other moneymaking teaching and writing projects to some extent.

### *V: Integration Essay*

It is hard to know how to find any way in which the research I do as a Christian ethicist is NOT related to Christian faith.

Christian ethics seeks to aid the church in discerning the moral will of God, in shaping the character and values of the people of God, and in articulating the public moral vision of the Christian community. The work of Christian ethics is a perennial task of the Christian community, and has been undertaken by a wide range of scholars, teachers, pastors, and lay leaders through the church's many centuries.

In a sadly divided Christian context, the Christian ethicist who is rooted in a living faith community usually offers his or her services predominantly to the people of that community. That is what I do, in the sense that I am a Southern Baptist ethicist serving at a Tennessee Baptist university. However, the circles of affiliation ripple out more widely in that I also identify myself as an evangelical Protestant Christian, and my work in Christian ethics is read quite broadly in

the evangelical Christian world. More broadly still, I view myself as part of the ancient, orthodox Christian faith, “once for all delivered to the saints,” and so I affiliate with and seek to serve all who still remain a part of this classic Christian tradition: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant.

In offering this analysis of the sanctity of life, I do so in my capacity as a Christian ethicist who seeks to serve the church in these various circles of affiliation. My goal is to sharpen Christian thinking on this pivotal concept. In this particular project, I am highlighting my identity as an evangelical Protestant, because of a sense (widely shared among close observers of the religious and political scene) that evangelicals have not adequately thought through a moral concept that they are constantly employing and defending. This is an intellectually dubious place to stand and it must be corrected if possible.

In my capacity as a Christian social ethicist, seeking to articulate the public moral vision of the Christian faith, I am undertaking this project not solely for the church’s sake but also for the nation’s sake. I believe that some concept that recognizes the inherent dignity and sacredness of human life is foundational for life in any civilized society, including our own. I believe that threats to such a valuation of human life need to be beaten back, not just with rhetoric but with probing analysis and argumentation. If I can contribute to that work, I will be grateful to God.

It should be noted that my approach to research, as evidenced by the very design of this project, involves in-depth exploration not just of the riches of the Christian tradition but also of morally significant resources outside the faith. The reader will notice that I quote not just Augustine but Kant, not just John Paul but Vaclav Havel. Moreover, I think that integrative Christian scholarship must engage very seriously the ideas that are most gravely in contradiction to Christian convictions—in this study, these include the ideologies of Communism, Nazism, tribalism, and various secularist philosophical approaches. The Christian scholar must not bracket himself or herself off from those ideas, but instead must address them directly and forthrightly from the perspective of a robust Christian worldview. That is what I will do in this project.

## *VI. Current Vita*

Attached.