

# Does religion deserve a place in secular medicine?

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## ABSTRACT

Biggar (2015) argues that "religion" deserves a place in secular medicine. Against this view, I argue that religion (as most people would understand the term) should not play a role in shaping secular health policy, and I provide some illustrations of the potential dangers of the contrary. However, I also suggest that—upon closer inspection—Biggar seems to be using the term "religion" to refer to obliquely to what most people would call "moral philosophy." On this less controversial interpretation, Biggar's proposal is inoffensive—but also unoriginal.

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent issue of the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Professor Nigel Biggar—an Oxford theologian—argues that 'religion' should have a place in secular medicine.<sup>1</sup>

Some people will feel a shiver go down their spines—and not only the non-religious. After all, different religions require different things, and sometimes they come to opposite conclusions. So whose religion, exactly, does Professor Biggar have in mind, and what kind of 'place' is he trying to make a case for?

When one thinks of a story like the 2012 death of a woman in Ireland due to septicaemia after being denied an abortion ('This is a Catholic country', she was reportedly told by medical staff),<sup>2</sup> one is reminded of the ways in which some people's religious beliefs might have profound (or even fatal) consequences for others who may not share those same beliefs. As *Mother Jones* reported in 2013:

A growing number of patients are finding their health care options governed by [religious] guidelines as Catholic hospitals, long major players in the health care market, have been on a merger streak, acquiring everything from local hospital systems to medical practices, nursing homes, and health insurance plans.<sup>3</sup>

In the US context, at least, Catholic hospitals are required to follow healthcare

directives outlined by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops—a group described as 'celibate older men who have become increasingly conservative over the past few decades' by the author of the *Mother Jones* piece.

What are the implications? What does this mean—in other words—for individuals who, say, reject Catholic doctrine on principle, but do not have feasible alternatives for personal healthcare as a result of the 'merger streak' described above? Stephanie Mencimer<sup>3</sup> lays out some of the potential effects:

1. Abortion services may disappear.
2. Doctors may be prohibited from prescribing birth control (and hospital pharmacies may not sell it).
3. Emergency contraception may be denied to rape victims.
4. Tubal ligations and vasectomies may be prohibited.
5. Patients' requests to be removed from feeding tubes or life support—as expressed in living wills—may be ignored.
6. Hospitals may be permitted to discriminate against gays and lesbians, whether they are employees or patients ... and so on.

So, there seems to be some cause for concern.<sup>i</sup> At least, there is if you do not agree with the moral world view of the 'celibate older men' we have been talking about. But when you actually read the article by Professor Biggar, you may find yourself detecting a certain hint of a bait-and-switch. This is because (or so I will suggest) the word 'religion' in the title of Professor Biggar's piece ends up meaning something not so very different from 'philosophy', which is a lot less controversial.

## DISCUSSION

Here is some evidence for my view:

First, Biggar begins by ruling out the 'irrational' parts of religion (since he does not see irrationality as being uniquely the province of religions, and he thinks we should stay away from it whatever its source, so long as our goal is to make a

convincing argument), as well as all appeals to authority, 'whether to that of the Bible or of the Pope or of the Qur'an' (p.230).<sup>1</sup>

Then, he goes on to suggest that religious people cannot just force their views on others, but instead must attempt to 'persuade' them using, well, all the ordinary tools of philosophical debate. So, to illustrate, he says that:

If I, a religious believer, am going to succeed in persuading you, an agnostic or atheist or different kind of religious believer, of my moral view [about abortion, say, as he discusses in this passage], then I will have to show you that your view has weaknesses or problems, that these cannot be adequately repaired in your terms, but that they can be repaired in mine. (p.230)<sup>1</sup>

Ok ... but so what? How is that different from just doing philosophy? You can imagine a slight adjustment to the phrasing:

If I, a utilitarian, am going to succeed in persuading you, a Kantian, or Rawlsian, or different kind of moral philosopher, of my moral view, then I will have to show you that your view has weaknesses or problems, that these cannot be adequately repaired in your terms, but that they can be repaired in mine.

Other moral frameworks could be slotted in as well. The point is, we *all* have certain meta-ethical commitments (whether implicit or explicit, religious or otherwise) and we *all* have to try to convince those we disagree with that our meta-ethical commitments make more sense than theirs do, or do a better job of explaining a shared moral intuition, or whatever. That's just 'doing philosophy'.

So what does religion, specifically, have to do with Biggar's argument? His answer is this:

Religion has the following to do with it. As a Christian monotheist, I esteem the lives of human individuals very highly: all individuals are equally the creatures of one divine Father, and each has a special vocation in their time and place. As a consequence, even if I believe that it can be morally right for one individual to take another's life, I think that killing is a morally and socially hazardous business and that it should never be done casually and without cogent reason. (p.230)<sup>1</sup>

I am not sure that answers the question. After all, any number of non-religious philosophies or moral world views could end up reaching the (seemingly obvious) conclusion that 'killing ... should never be

<sup>i</sup>Assuming that the reporting by Mencimer is reasonably accurate.

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done casually and without cogent reason' without having to avail themselves of such premises as there being 'a divine Father' (of which we are all 'equally the creatures,' whatever that means), or similar.

In other words, if P entails Q, and Q is true (here, 'Q' means: we shouldn't kill people willy-nilly without good reason), we have little reason to think that P (Christianity?) is true too—simply on account of the fact that A, B, C and D (and all the rest of the alphabet for that matter) could just as well entail Q, and one of *those* might be the one that is correct. Biggar actually concedes this point a little later on.

Accordingly, it is about as persuasive to say 'as a Christian monotheist' before delivering a moral argument as it is to say 'as a Marxist' (or whatever else you please): what matters is whether your premises are reasonable, and whether your conclusions follow from your premises. Whether your premises are reasonable is, yes, the million-dollar question, and to convince me, you will have to do some meta-ethics. But that doesn't have anything specifically to do with religion.

Now, I do think that religious *people* '[deserve] a place at the secular table of negotiation' (p. 233). Who ever said they didn't? However, once they have taken their rightful seat, they shall have to engage in moral debate according to the very same

rules of philosophical discourse as everyone else. Indeed, as far as I can tell, Professor Biggar actually agrees with this. So I have a hard time understanding what he is proposing that is in any way controversial.

## CONCLUSION

To be sure, Biggar does have some additional arguments up his sleeve, and his paper goes on for a while longer. Nevertheless, I still didn't get the sense that 'religion' meant anything different from 'philosophy' by the end of it, although perhaps I missed a crucial point. I must say that I am reminded of Sam Harris's recent attempt<sup>4</sup> to argue that 'science can determine human values'; where by 'science' he apparently means 'moral philosophy plus facts' (as I argue in a forthcoming paper).<sup>5</sup>

When you grab your reader's attention by saying 'religion' (in Biggar's case) or 'science' (in Harris's case), and all you apparently mean is 'moral philosophy', your reader could be forgiven for feeling a little bit misled.

**Competing interests** None declared.

**Provenance and peer review** Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

**To cite** Earp BD. *J Med Ethics* Published Online First: [please include Day Month Year] doi:10.1136/medethics-2015-102917

Received 26 May 2015

Accepted 3 June 2015



► <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2013-101776>

*J Med Ethics* 2015;0:1–2.  
doi:10.1136/medethics-2015-102917

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