Book Reviews

Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization

by C. C. Camosy New York: Cambridge University Press; 2012. viii + 277 pp.

It is generally agreed upon that Peter Singer and Christian ethics are poles apart. Professor Singer sees himself as a leading proponent of a “Copernican revolution” against the sanctity-of-life ethic, while Christian thinkers commonly associate his work with the Culture of Death. Singer’s acceptance of infanticide until 28 days after birth, active euthanasia, and bestiality seem to rule out completely any fruitful working relationship between himself and his Christian opponents.

Nonetheless, Charles C. Camosy, an Associate Professor of Theology at Fordham University, argues that these polarities are far closer to each other than almost anyone has imagined. He contends that Christians and Singer can find common ground on issues such as global poverty and the dignity of non-human animals.

Camosy agrees that Singer does resort to “sloppy caricature” when critiquing Scripture and important thinkers of the Christian tradition, such as St. Thomas Aquinas (3), and finds “astounding” his omission of sexual morality in his book, *Practical Ethics* because “there are more important issues to be considered” (248). Despite this, together with Singer’s sweeping rejection of Christian ethics, Camosy believes that the disagreements between the two are “quite narrow” and that both sides “can work together on many important issues of ethics and public policy” (7).

Chapter 1 concerns abortion and is a paradigm for all the subsequent chapters. Although Singer maintains that abortion is almost always justified because a

woman’s interest almost always outweighs the interests of the fetus, Camosy sees a common ground Singer shares with Christians who are pro-life, namely an objection to both “hyper-autonomy” and “consumerism which drives the broad support for abortion rights.” Yet this common ground has little or no practical implication for the unborn. This kind of commonality, which we find throughout the book, is the result of extensive reading and careful analysis, and serves to build Camosy’s thesis. But the larger question remains: what is to be accomplished by finding insignificant commonalities between two sides that, given their first principles, will remain radically incompatible with each other? No matter how far apart any two people are, they inevitably share some commonality. Yet this commonality should not be construed as an avenue to unity. Pope Benedict XVI speaks of promoting “fruitful collaboration between believers and non-believers,” but sees value in such collaboration insofar as it facilitates expressions of charity. If charity is not part of the common ground, collaboration will remain essentially fruitless.

Christianity is apostolic. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that certain Christian intellectuals have sought to engage Peter Singer in ethical discourse. On the other hand, does Singer, himself, exhibit this same kind of interest in dialoguing with Christians? He has stated (June 2012) that if Catholics do not like the Human Health Services contraception mandate, they can just close their universities and hospitals and hand them over to secular

interests. "Catholicism," he contends, "does not oblige its adherents to run hospitals and universities." Singer does not accept the Christian apostolic mandate, only those which are secular. As a member of the Princeton University faculty, he is being inconsistent inasmuch as Princeton was founded on Christian principles.

In addition to being inconsistent, Singer is often historically incorrect. He chides Christians for finding his approval of infanticide "shocking" by telling them that the present laws that protect infants are distinctively Christian. Jews and other ancient peoples also opposed infanticide. Being of Jewish heritage, Singer should know better.

In a 1995 article in the London Spectator entitled, "Killing Babies Isn't Always Wrong" (not mentioned in Camosy's book), Singer made a thought-provoking comparison between himself and Pope John Paul II: "I sometimes think that he and I at least share the virtue of seeing clearly what is at stake." But what they see are poles apart. For Blessed John Paul, each life is *inviolable*, *unrepeatable*, and *irreplaceable*. What he sees is real, concrete, and alive. For Singer, "When the death of the disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed." What Singer sees is doubly hypothetical. He envisions the possible conception of a replacement child who may become happier than the one who was killed. The child, of course, might not be conceived, and if conceived, might not

be sufficiently happy. He "sees," if one can call it that, a possibility that is a pure abstraction. It is commendable that Singer wants to promote happiness and reduce suffering, but he is willing to do so by eliminating certain people and betting on better prospects for others. Christian ethics, by contrast, affirms the life of the living.

It is difficult to reconcile the stated views of Professor Singer with Camosy's contention that "Christian ethics, then, like Peter Singer, strongly and mutually connect the flourishing of others with the flourishing of the moral agent" (234).

Morality, if it is consistent, is *organic*. An essential difference at the core of any organic system affects, in one way or another, every aspect of that system. Christian ethics and the ethics of Peter Singer, like Catholicism and Marxism, are radically disjunctive organic systems. Their fundamental differences are irreconcilable; their similarities are peripheral. No amount of nibbling at the edges can alter the core.

The curious feature of this work is that while its central thesis may seem both unconvincing and unimportant, it does contain a great deal of worthwhile discussion (quite apart from Singer) on a variety of critical moral issues.

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