Book Reviews

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Culture of Death: The Age of "Do Harm" Medicine, rev. ed. By Wesley J. Smith. New York/London: Encounter Books, 2016. xxv + 333 pp.

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This revised edition of *Culture of Death* appears fifteen years after its first edition. In that period of time much has happened in the field of bioethics, fully justifying an extensively revised and up-to-date version. The questionable medical trends the author saw that motivated him to write the first edition have accelerated. In his words, "what was once the ceiling has now become the floor." As an example of this radical change in bioethics, in 1988, physician-assisted suicide was illegal in every country in the world. Today it is administered to an ever-widening circle, including the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Canada. In the United States, it is legal in Oregon, Vermont, Washington, and California, and virtually legal in Montana (xx), while some form of physician-assisted suicide is being proposed in many other states. Resistance to dehydrating cognitively disabled patients by removing feeding tubes, according to Wesley Smith, has all but collapsed. Switzerland now welcomes "suicide tourism." We are becoming, in the author's words, a "Kervorkian world" (xi).

The importance of the book's subject matter cannot be over-emphasized. Bioethics deals with matters of ultimate moral significance: the meaning of life, the rights of patients, the responsibilities of the medical profession, the nature of the human being, the principle of equality, the question of the sanctity of life. How we regard bioethics goes a long way in determining how we define ourselves. *Culture of Death*, therefore, is a book pertinent to everyone.

It is precisely because of the wide-ranging importance of bioethics that the author has written *Culture of Death* in a way that is "intellectually digestible"

for the popular audience (xiii). He is encouraging people to think, understand, and act. The content of the book, with its many unsettling cases, is most disturbing. Smith locates his hope in motivated people who will work to restore the dignity of the human being and the sanctity-of-life ethic. "People are beginning to clearly see," he writes, "the jagged shoals toward which our public policies and ethic protocols are streaming." Those "shoals," for Smith represent a "sclerotic technocracy," one that is rigid and not open to corrective change (xvi). Anatole France's maxim comes to mind: "Uniformity is the arteriosclerosis of society."

Culture of Death is far more than a handbook with over seven hundred footnotes. It is a text that is unified by a philosophy that honors the equality of every human being and the sanctity of life, which Smith regards as the true and objective basis of morality. He is justifiably wary, however, of misleading philosophers. He cites one person who asks, "Why should we attach more weight to the pronouncements of philosophers on moral issues than to those of other people?" (32). Or, as Alexander Pope once asked, "Who shall decide when doctors disagree?" We may distinguish between the pronouncements of philosophers and the wisdom of philosophy. A professional philosopher may offer dubious advice, while an ordinary citizen may be philosophically wise. Smith's philosophy, though he does not identify it as such, is one of personalism. Nonetheless, he does not make any reference to the great personalist philosophers of recent vintage such as Maritain, Mounier, Marcel, or Martin Buber. He mentions Pope John Paul II in the index, but, oddly enough, excludes him from the corpus (he cites p. 92 in the index, though John Paul is not mentioned on that page). Personalism understands the human being as a *person*, which is to say, a human being who is a unique individual, and therefore should not be relegated to a category, such as "disabled," "useless," or in a "permanent vegetative state." It also means that a human being is a social being, who has responsible and affectionate ties with others, and therefore is not an *autonomous* being. Personalism is at the core

of Smith's philosophy by virtue, not of his training, but of his reliable human intuition. He has read about the principle of double effect from the writings of Rita Marker while seeming to be unaware that it is a time-honored principle that has been used by Catholic philosophers going back at least as far as to Saint Thomas Aquinas. Smith's personalism is a philosophy that is based on human rights, not on expediency.

Culture of Death includes a wide range of bioethical issues, including, organ donation, physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, transhumanism, a detailed treatment of the Terri Schiavo case, Obamacare, the exploitation of human body parts, surrogacy, the myth of autonomy, and abortion. With regard to abortion, the author has come a long way since his original edition. In the introduction of that first edition he skips over the contentious abortion issue when he states the following:

Indeed, whether one is pro-life or pro-choice, it is my sincere hope that the book's readers will agree with me that, regarding born people, each and every one of us should be treated as an unqualified equal in the health care system. (xxv)

Fifteen years later, Wesley Smith is keenly aware that the political actions of pro-abortion advocates since *Roe v. Wade* have had a negative impact on the whole of society. Thus, he now writes the following:

Allowing an unlimited right to abortion that couldn't be struggled against would unleash a moral tsunami that would sweep away virtually all limits. If we are to have any chance of containing the culture of death in other areas discussed on these pages, the pro-life movement must

continue to prick the consciences of people about the morality of abortion and the intrinsic importance of nascent human life, an important task regardless of the legality of abortion. (264)

If one category of human life—the unborn—can be deemed worthless, so can other categories, such as the severely disabled, the elderly, and those who express a desire to die. Here is one of many examples of failing to treat a human being as a real, personal human being: A daughter asks her mother's doctor why he is refusing to prescribe antibiotics for the ninety-two-year-old woman. The doctor defends his position by stating that "an infection will kill her sooner or later. So it might as well be this infection." In another instance, a doctor remarks, "If anyone so much as whispers cortisone [a palliative agent] or 'uncertain diagnosis,' I'll hit him" (136). This latter comment brings to mind the infamous words Hanns Johst, a Nazi propagandist: "Whenever I hear the word 'culture,' I reach for my revolver."

Culture of Death is strongly recommended. Some reviewers have labeled Smith's thought as "conservative." It is a shame to situate the author's thinking on a political spectrum. It is a well-documented, fair-minded, and true-to-life expose of what is going on today in the field of bioethics that includes a sensible moral corrective based on the dignity of the human being and the sanctity of life. Open the book to any page, and the reader will find something of interest. Smith has done his homework and does not allow his passion for ethical reform to interfere with his good judgment. It will do the reader no harm to read this important work.

Making Gay Okay: How Rationalizing Homosexual Behavior Changes Everything. By Robert Reilly. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014. xvi + 234 pp.

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In January of 1973 some may have assumed that the Supreme Court's decision *Roe v. Wade* settled the issue of abortion; however, four decades later the issue still divides the country. Some believe that Donald Trump's promise to appoint pro-life judges may have tipped the election in his favor. While some may believe or hope that the Supreme Court's

2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision has settled forever of the definition of marriage in favor of those who believe that two persons of the same sex can marry, the conflict has just moved into a new phrase. The law may have changed, but the opinions of many and teaching of religions have not.

Robert Reilly's book *Making Gay Okay: How Rationalizing Homosexual Behavior Changes Everything* meticulously reviews the history of the campaign to normalize homosexual behavior. He offers a comprehensive review of how we arrived at this point and offers suggestions for more effective future strategies. In order to move forward it is necessary to look at where the