

The Sanctity of Human Life

A book review by Gary E. Frank, B.A., B.Ed., R.N.

Author: David Novak

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“The term ‘the sanctity of human life’ has a definite religious ring. It seems to denote the fact that human life is related to God.” These are the opening words of David Novak’s study of the idea of the sanctity of human life in Jewish thought. Thus, Novak, Professor of The Study of Religion and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, makes clear from the outset the theological nature of his work. This does not mean, however, that he deals solely with theology. In fact, the book is a detailed examination of the similarities and differences in perspective that theology, philosophy, and politics have in relation to three contemporary problems in health ethics: the use of embryonic stem cells, universal health care, and physician-assisted suicide.

Novak begins by setting the ground rules for such a study and then, not surprisingly given his opening sentence, immediately moves on to a discussion of the idea of the “sacred” or “holy”. He does this primarily by examining the Hebrew term for this idea: *qadosh*. This necessarily leads directly to a discussion of the differences between theology and philosophy:

Philosophy can only allude to a metaphysical dimension of human existence; it cannot constitute that dimension because metaphysics without God as its prime object of interest is uninteresting. Since Kant, moreover, philosophy has been unable to talk about God. When it attempts to do so, the God it conjures up bears little or no resemblance to the God the members of any living historical culture worship... Finally, all the theologians need from the philosophers is that the philosophers not deny the possibility of the revelation from which the theologians receive their basic norms. All the philosophers need from the theologians is that the theologians not argue from the authority of revelation and its tradition when speaking outside the sacred precincts of the Temple. When both sides accept these preconditions, a conversation about the sanctity of human life is possible at the border between theology and philosophy – a conversation in which the very term “sanctity” can have multiple yet not mutually exclusive meanings... I try to show that the theological meaning of the sanctity of human life in the context of the God-human relationship is itself related to the idea of the sanctity of human life in the context of interhuman relationships with which philosophical ethics certainly is concerned... My mode of argumentation is philosophical, even though the texts on which I draw as illustrations in that argument are theological in that they are taken from the Jewish religious tradition, which is my primary locus in this world. Nevertheless, I do not invoke religious texts authoritatively here... any theological claims on a secular society must be

mediated by philosophy... there can be no direct relation between theology and politics in the public discourse of such a society.

Having made clear both the direct relation of philosophy to politics (e.g. through his contention that it is moral philosophy's role to inform law), and the lack of such a direct relation between theology and politics, Novak goes on to explore the relation between theology and moral philosophy –a relation that he sees as crucial to the moral health of society:

The first relation of theology to philosophy is negative in that theology functions as a brake on the metaphysical pretensions of philosophy... Philosophy can only indicate that our quest for justice seems to be a response to a transcendent claim; it cannot tell us who is making that claim upon us... theology reminds morally striving humans that their striving will lead to cynical despair if they think they can create any permanent good in the world, let alone cause justice to be finally accomplished in the world.

But, having articulated these insights into the relations of theology, philosophy, and politics to each other and to society, how does Novak apply them to the practical problems involved in the use of embryonic stem cells, universal health care, and physician-assisted suicide? All that can be said in this short space is that through his willingness to face, both philosophically and theologically, religious claims to a transcendent source for morality, Novak makes a persuasive argument for a political view of the sanctity of life that is committed to life's flourishing and resistant to its termination by human intervention.