

IS LIFE SACRED? by Geoffrey G. Drutchas (bio below) Cleveland, Pilgrim, 1999. 209 pp.

reviewed by medical ethicist Thomas A. Shannon (bio below)

Drutchas, senior pastor of a Detroit area congregation, has written a book sure to draw the wrath of the sanctity of life movement. Consider only these two statements. First, early in the book: "a fair and balanced scrutiny of the historical record suggests that the sanctity of human life is not a historic Christian doctrine at all. As a principle, it is certainly not consistent with other teachings of most Christian Churches." Second, by way of conclusion:

all signs point to one unassailable fact: the sanctity of life is a principle that can only hobble the Christian churches in their gospel mission. Largely born for the Christian churches out of a late-nineteenth-century accommodation with liberal secular culture, the Christian concept of sanctify of life has never cohered with other eschatological or anthropological traditions of Christianity, which traditionally relativized the value of embodied human life by means of a larger view of each individual's eternal destiny.

One can hardly think of a more direct attack on the theological basis of the sanctity of life movement.

The problem is that the author makes a very good case for his claims. The book proceeds through seven chapters by reviewing biblical, theological, and practical claims about the sanctity of life, to an examination of the secular origins of the concept, from which Drutchas reviews the politics of the sanctity of life and then proposes the concept of reverence for life as an alternative.

The author's conclusion, based on a review of Christian sources, is that the concept of the sanctity of life has very little support as a core theme in biblical, Catholic, or Protestant sources. The emphasis is on the word core for, as the author notes, while some mention the idea and some ground it in the imago Dei doctrine, this concept is one idea of many and hardly dominant. The more interesting and moderately controversial claim is that: "Scrutiny of Western civilization suggests that sanctity of life doctrine actually emerged from a paganism antecedent to Christianity and later enjoyed a subsequent revival thanks to the European Renaissance and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment." In essence, the concept derives from Stoicism, via the Kantian position that humans are ends and not means. Drutchas also shows this concept's relation to the thought of Schweitzer, D. Callahan, E. Shils, and W. Frankena.

The primary reason for Christianity's taking over this term is rooted in post-World War II disillusionment and the growing possibility of mass destruction as well as other technical developments such as genetic engineering. Drutchas argues that the Christian churches tried to save the liberal society-out of which all these problems emerged-by using the secular concept of sanctity of life as a theological tool to protect humanity from itself.

Finally, the author criticizes the sanctity of life concept by arguing that it is a form of idolatry of biological life and that it absolutizes this life by forgetting that there is a life to come. Drutchas approvingly quotes Howard Moody: "If Christians really believed in life after death, we could save the billions of dollars in health care spent in the last six months of life, trying to rob death of a few more days, weeks, or months." While this quote is open to gross misinterpretation, its point is absolutely correct.

Drutchas suggests the term reverence for life as a way of honoring the finitude of human life, its relative nature, and the intimacy of God. He also hopes that this phrasing of the idea is less open to the ideological manipulation that he sees with the concept of the sanctity of life. His sources for this section are interesting: J. H. Yoder, S. Hauerwas, B. Haering, and R. McCormick.

I think this is a must read book for anyone in ethics but also for anyone interested in the theological basis of the churches' social teaching and political action. The review of biblical and theological sources as well as the practice of Christianity is sound. The argument that the concept of sanctify of life comes from secular sources is going to be controversial but the argument is well made. His critique of the sanctity of life concept as used in papal and other theological sources is strong, but fair. His conclusions about this very popular term are absolutely correct. His proposal for using the term reverence for life is most helpful and may provide a way out of some of our moral and political conundrums.

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Worcester, MA

from *Theology Today* Apr 2000

Geoffrey Gilbert Drutchas

BIO # 1

The Reverend Dr. Geoffrey Drutchas is the fourteenth Senior Pastor in the history of St. Paul United Church of Christ. He was formally installed by the congregation in September 1988. He has previously held pastorates in Bel Air, Maryland and York, Pennsylvania. He has also served as a full-time campus chaplain at both Tufts and Syracuse Universities. In addition to academic degrees received from Michigan State University, Harvard University, and the Lancaster Theological Seminary, Pastor Drutchas has also studied at Syracuse University and the Wayne State University Law School. Pastor Drutchas is the author of a book, *Is Life Sacred?* (Pilgrim Press), and numerous articles in the fields of Christian ethics, history, and historic art and architecture. At St. Paul United Church, Pastor Drutchas leads worship, visits parishioners in need of special pastoral help, oversees day-to-day church administration, and offers bible study, confirmation classes and other adult education programs. He is married to Eileen Vernor Drutchas. They have a college age son, Griffin.

BIO # 2

Born: Detroit, September 18, 1952

EDUCATION

BA with high honors, Michigan State University, 1974

MDiv, Harvard University, 1982

Doctor in Ministry in Christian Ethics, Lancaster Theological Seminary, 1996

CERTIFICATION

Ordained Unitarian-Universalist Association, 1982, ordained ministerial standing United Church of Christ, 1988, basic cert. clinical pastoral education Andover-Newton Theological School, 1980, Andover-Newton Theological School, 1982; cert. medical ethics Michigan State University, 1991

CAREER

Director chaplaincy Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, 1981—1984; extension minister Harford-York (Pennsylvania) Ministerial Committee, 1984—1988; senior pastor St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, 1988—; executive director ChristNet Emergency Shelter, 2000—2001

CAREER RELATED

Co-convener econs. and clergy conference Lincoln Filene Center for Citizenship, Tufts University, Medford, 1983; co-convener continental campus ministry conference Unitarian-Universalist Association, Boston, 1984; founder, president, consultant ChristNet Emergency Shelter, Taylor, 1993—; chair Rotating Shelter Roundtable Southeastern Michigan, Detroit, 2000—

CREATIVE WORKS

Author: (book) *Is Life Sacred?*, 1998 (Reinhold Niebuhr Minister and Scholar award, 1998); contributor articles to professional journals.

MEMBERSHIPS

Mem.: Society Christian Ethics (associate), Harvard Club Eastern Michigan (vice president 1997—2001, president 2001—03), Phi Beta Kappa

RELIGION

United Church Of Christ

Thomas A. Shannon



St. John's University Department of Theology and Religious Studies Appoints Thomas A. Shannon, Ph.D. to the Paul E. McKeever Chair in Moral Theology

February 06, 2007

St. John's University's Department of Theology and Religious Studies has announced the appointment of Thomas A. Shannon, Ph.D., to the Paul E. McKeever Chair in Moral Theology. Shannon's appointment will be made formal with a welcoming ceremony on February 8 at 3 p.m. in Belson Hall on the Queens campus. Shannon replaces Dr. Paul Lauritzen, who served as chair from 2005-2006.

Professor *Emeritus*, Religion and Social Ethics at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Shannon specializes in the areas of social justice and bioethics. His interest in social justice surrounds the topic of conscientious objection and the social encyclical tradition within Roman Catholicism. He has also focused on the moral standing of developments in the field of genetic engineering.

Author of several books, Shannon has focused his attention on care-based reasoning and genetic engineering. Included in his works are: *The Context of Casuistry*; *Genetic Engineering: A Documentary History*; *Made in Whose Image? Genetic Engineering and Christian Ethics*; *American Catholic Social Teaching and A Call to Fidelity*. *On The Moral Theology of Charles Curran*.

He earned his Master's Degree in Sacred Theology from Boston University School of Theology and a Ph.D. from the Division of Theological and Religious Studies in 1973. Shannon holds two Bachelor's degrees, a Bachelor of Sacred Theology from St. Joseph Seminary, Teutopolis, IL and a Bachelor of Arts from Quincy University.

In the 1991-1992 Academic Year, the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at St. John's University inaugurated the Paul E. McKeever Chair in Moral Theology. Established as a living memorial to an esteemed colleague whose breadth and depth of theological vision embraced service as a *peritus* at Vatican Council II, presidency of the Catholic Theological Society of America and editorship of *The Long Island Catholic* newspaper and *The Priest* magazine, this Chair continues Paul E. McKeever's commitment to rigorous theological studies and priestly ministry.