

Bioethics and the evolution of Philippine Society

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Bioethics in the Philippines may be characterized in terms of (1) the problems and issues that have captured the imagination of the Filipino people; the theoretical perspectives that have been brought to bear on such problems and issues; and (3) the political and religious factors that have played a prominent role in moulding domestic policy.

Public discourse on issues of abortion, euthanasia, contraceptive use, and organ transplantation may be seen to illustrate currents underlying the development of Philippine bioethics and its interplay with the evolution of Philippine society. The alignment of partisans on these issues has often been defined by the views of the local Catholic Church, with slight variation depending on the particular issues under consideration.

For many years, debates concerning population-related policies of government have divided staunch supporters of the official Church position and those who are worried that a continuation of religion-oriented policies have prevented economic and social progress. The present Philippine President is generally recognized to have owed her assumption of the top political position in the country to the highly influential Catholic Church. Thus, it surprised no one when she announced at the beginning of her term that programs dealing with the country's high population growth rate shall be guided by positions espoused by the local Catholic hierarchy. Though it remains to be seen how far the government will go in this expressed commitment to religious fundamentals, the political boast confirms a dominant framework for public debate on issues of bioethics.

The people's revolution of 1986 heralded the rise to power of non-governmental organizations with an increased passion and capacity to influence public opinion, legislation and policy-making. These non-governmental organizations have taken on an advocate's role for vulnerable populations, disadvantaged groups, and for consumers in general. This kind of activism has entailed a focus on public attention and mass media rather than the academic setting as the venue for bioethical disputes. In contrast with the generally sober and subdued atmosphere of discourse among professionals engaged in bioethics, debate among activists has tended to be vociferous and passionate,

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thus serving as a catalyst for healthy interchange between theory and practice, as well as for a close interchange between bioethics and the evolution of Philippine society.

Government's efforts to accelerate food production through biotechnology have proven to be an interesting case study. Research on agricultural applications of genetically modified organisms has been opposed aggressively by non-governmental organizations. Self-proclaimed defenders of the environment have lobbied strongly against field trials of genetically modified corn, citing risks to the environment and consumer safety as reasons. The Supreme Court sided with the government by allowing the trials. Commercial production has now commenced, to the dismay of the activists. This setback has not discouraged the popular opposition and seems to have only strengthened its resolve. The upshot is that one can expect further developments in bioethics awareness to be characterized by this tension between biotechnological growth and precaution.

Socio-economic conditions are particularly definitive of approaches that people have taken in an effort to understand controversial practices such as kidney sales, care for the terminally ill and biomedical research. Many decisions on issues of bioethics have had to give way to considerations of economy and social status. The recruitment of non-related living donors for organ transplantation has digressed from established international guidelines owing to economic and social pressures. Rational decisions concerning the termination and withholding of treatment for the terminally ill have often been preempted by economic realities, rendering bioethics hostage to poverty and economic inequality.

The feminist movement in Philippines bioethics has been truly remarkable. Support groups for women have taken strong positions against the conservative views espoused by Catholic groups on reproductive health issues. There has been a strong lobby to make abortion an increasingly accessible option for women, especially those who are very poor. The development strikes at the very heart of a moral outlook that has hitherto been only slightly challenged.

Bioethics in the Philippines has thus developed in terms of the tensions created by these strong influences. The tensions define the issues as well as the responses arising in public policy deliberations. To this extent, they have also had an impact on the evolution of society on the whole. One can only hope that the impact will be maintained while encouraging greater public involvement in decision-making.