

IMPOSING OUR BELIEFS ON OTHERS

A lot of hot-button topics are being debated in our state legislatures these days, topics of great ethical and bioethical importance, ranging from emergency contraception to gay marriage. These debates address important issues for the future of our society.

Lawmakers face the daunting task of making decisions about what should or should not be permitted by law within a reasonable society.

Recently I was asked to speak in Virginia at legislative hearings about embryonic stem-cell research. After I gave my testimony, one of the senators asked a pointed question. “Father Tad, by arguing against embryonic stem-cell research, don’t you see how you are trying to impose your beliefs on others, and shouldn’t we as elected lawmakers avoid imposing a narrow religious view on the rest of society?” The senator’s question was an example of the fuzzy thinking that has become commonplace in recent years within many state legislatures and among many lawmakers.

Two major errors were incorporated into the senator’s question. First, the senator failed to recognize the fact that law is fundamentally about imposing somebody’s views on somebody else. Imposition is the name of the game. It is the very nature of law to impose particular views on people who don’t want to have those views imposed on them. Car thieves don’t want laws imposed on them which prohibit stealing. Drug dealers don’t want laws imposed on them which make it illegal to sell drugs. Yet our lawmakers are elected precisely to craft and impose such laws all the time. So the question is not whether we will impose something on somebody. The question is instead whether whatever is going to be imposed by the force of law is reasonable, just, and good for society and its members.

The second logical mistake the senator made was to suppose that because religion happens to hold a particular viewpoint, that implies that such a viewpoint should never be considered by lawmakers or enacted into law. Religion teaches very clearly that stealing is immoral. Would it follow that if I support laws against stealing, I am imposing my narrow religious viewpoint on society? Clearly not. Rather, the subject of stealing is so

important to the order of society that religion also feels compelled to speak about it. Religion teaches many things that can be understood as true by people who aren't religious at all. Atheists can understand just as well as Catholics how stealing is wrong, and most atheists are just as angry as their Catholic neighbors when their house is broken into and robbed. What is important is not whether a proposed law happens to be taught by religion, but whether that proposal is just, right, and good for society and its members.

To be more coherent, of course, the senator really should have chosen to address the substance of my testimony, rather than talking about the imposition of religious views. The argument I had offered, interestingly, did not depend on religious dogma at all. It depended rather on an important scientific dogma, namely, that all humans come from embryonic humans. The statement that I was once an embryo is a statement about embryology, not theology. Given the fact that we were all once embryonic humans it becomes very clear why destructive embryonic research is an immoral kind of activity. Exploiting the weak and not-yet-born in the interests of the powerful and the well-heeled should not be permitted in a civilized society. This argument, moreover, can be clearly seen by atheists, not just Catholics.

During my testimony, I pointed out how in the United States we have stringent federal laws that protect not only the national bird, the bald eagle, but also that eagle's eggs. If you were to chance upon some of them in a nest out in the wilderness, it would be illegal for you to destroy those eggs. By the force of law, we recognize how the egg of the bald eagle, that is to say, the embryonic eagle inside that egg, is the same creature as the glorious bird that we witness flying high overhead. Therefore we pass laws to safeguard not only the adult but also the very youngest member of that species. Even atheists can see how a bald eagle's eggs should be protected; it's really not a religious question at all. What's so troublesome is how we are able to understand the importance of protecting the earliest stages of animal life but when it comes to our own human life, a kind of mental disconnect takes place. Our moral judgment quickly becomes murky and obtuse when we desire to do certain things that are not good, like having abortions, or destroying embryonic humans for their stem cells.

So anytime we come across a lawmaker who tries to suggest that an argument in defense of sound morals is nothing but imposing a religious viewpoint, we need to look deeper at what may really be taking place. That lawmaker may not be so concerned about avoiding the imposition of a particular view on others — more likely, they are jockeying to simply be able to impose their view, a view which is ultimately much less tenable and defensible in terms of sound moral thinking. Hence they seek to short-circuit the discussion by stressing religious zealotry and imposition without ever confronting the substantive ethical or bioethical argument itself. Once the religious imposition card is played, and Christian lawmakers suddenly become weak-kneed about defending human life and sound morals, the other side then feels free to do the imposing themselves, without having expended too much effort on confronting the essence of the moral debate itself.

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