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The Giver

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Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are all works that envisage what society will look like in the not-too-distant future if we continue to follow certain ways of viewing human beings. All of them are negative and cautionary—each one a morality play for adults, sounding warnings that we should heed.

On the other hand, Christians who believe in redemption, absolute redemption through Christ, envisage a different reality, one where goodness will triumph over evil. The adult response to these tales is that while we place our trust in the reality of Christ, we also have to strive to achieve that goodness, which Jesus named “the Kingdom now.” The kingdom of heaven is not simply a reward for fidelity, endurance and piety on earth, but something that Jesus tells us is NOW. The challenge is to work towards what we know the Kingdom should look like NOW. Jesus was clear: love our enemies, forgive those who trespass against us, give of our essentials and not just of our surplus, care for the widows and orphans (not just those, but the vulnerable and marginalized in general), do not focus on food and clothing (the lilies of the fields, the birds of the air) and any other externals, pray to the Father that His will be done. St Paul adds: pray without ceasing, and rejoice. Jesus explained what

true happiness is in the Beatitudes, and we begin to see that our ideas and his ideas don't quite match.

Does this have anything to do with bioethics? Of course! The foundations of bioethics are the same as any other ethics viewed from a Catholic perspective. What matters most to our ethical responses are our Christian values which must infuse our responses to, analysis of, and solutions to moral questions and disputes that arise. Human reasoning is not always that prescient or precise when it comes to observing practices and policies that best preserve human flourishing, or do no harm to the individual or the common good of society.

I recently saw an interesting movie, “The Giver,” which looks at the latter points. My first acquaintance with this work was in book form, when some of my children were in high school and studied this book as part of their curriculum. I had not read it, but they told me I would like it, and I did. Its basic premise is fallen human nature, trapped by sin (although the protagonists would not have known that concept or used that language, instead calling for, in their godless world, “precision of language!”). Goodness does triumph and redemption comes, mainly through one person, with assistance from a small circle of friends. The parallels with the Christian story are pretty obvious.

When I saw the movie version it made a huge impression on me, and I have only two words to say: see it! See it, if you have ever wondered why civilized people resort to abortion and euthanasia, or why they attempt to justify them as compassionate and necessary actions, or why they don't seem to question if they could be in any way harmful to individuals or to society.

We are becoming used to these and other actions being proclaimed as legal rights, and individual rights at that. Paradoxically, in this view, the individual is all, while the common good is apparently irrelevant or at best secondary. Why does society not question these developments more, instead going with the current tide of politically correct movements? Is it easier than taking time to think things through and taking into account long-term or wider problems, such as the likelihood of involuntary euthanasia if voluntary euthanasia is enshrined?

“The Giver” struck me as an almost mirror-image of western society, and it foretells some problems for our society if we move towards legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide. The story tells us that a community has decided to forego what it considers to be extreme human passions such as love and emotion in order to be rid of the dark side of human nature—violence, hatred, competition, strife, etc. Every citizen takes daily injections which prevent the history of the outside world entering their brain. This breeds an essentially passionless society which insists on uniformity: they dress the same, eat the same, live in similar housing units. They are almost automatons. Careers are pre-decided for the young and all levels of society are stratified. The aim could seem

to be laudable, since they are trying to uphold the common good of a peaceful society, but the means of doing so are wrong. In the name of preventing what they consider to be evil, they cause other evils in suppressing individuality and preventing the development of positive human emotions (especially love) and talents.

Jonas, a young man in the community, is chosen to be the “receiver of memories.” An older man, the Giver, had been chosen by the community to be the only one who could recall the past, and his task is to train the young receiver to take over this role. In time, the Giver imparts some history, legends, facts and scenarios completely unknown to the receiver. The Giver begins gently, introducing Jonas to experiencing colour, play, sensory experiences such as walking in snow, happy emotions in family life, music and so on. He then lets Jonas experience more disturbing and evil scenarios such as cruelty, poverty and neglect, finally moving to dangerous experiences, like war and extreme violence. Jonas is overwhelmed and wants to give up. The turning point of the movie occurs when Jonas' father, who works with newborns, brings home an underweight baby from the nursery in order to help him thrive. The young man begins to become attached to the baby, who bears the mark that shows he may be the next Giver, succeeding Jonas. Jonas decides to stop taking the daily injection and begins to experience deep feelings of love and compassion. The baby does not thrive as he should, and there is no place in the community for those who do not make the grade.

Jonas is horrified to learn that it will be his father's duty to euthanize the baby, for the

baby's own good. The young man rescues the baby and speeds away from the nursery towards the country's boundaries. Hotly pursued, he takes a leap into the unknown, known as "Elsewhere," the place to which such infants and the elderly who no longer measure up are "released," the term for being euthanized.

Jonas survives the leap and struggles with the baby through desperate situations until reaching the safety of a human home, one which he had seen in his mind through the gift of the Giver. People are singing Christmas carols as they approach. It is no coincidence that the baby Jonas has rescued is called Gabriel—in Scripture the angel of revelation, who announced the good news to Mary. In reaching true human life, Jonas breaches some sort of psychic bond that had kept his community imprisoned. The community is "released," this time from their chains, and the people are set free.

Some of the themes that arise from this morality tale are:

1. SOCIAL UNIFORMITY

The community is striving for a society where the negative side of human nature (what we might call sinfulness) is suppressed. Not only is everyone expected to behave in the same way, but there are community standards regulating one's usefulness to society, as we see in the decision to euthanize Gabriel and others like him, as well as the elderly.

It is all based on a misperception of reality and stifling of the real self, especially of those things that we would say "feed the soul." This misperception, even if begun for

apparently good and compassionate ends, is so skewed that the few leaders in the community who do have power inevitably abuse it, contradicting the community's basis. The leader is merciless in pursuing Jonas, now a traitor, in the name of following what she believes to be right. We, with our knowledge of history, have heard all this before. Is the same approach at work in any way in today's society?

2. CONSCIENCE RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND SPEECH

Since the community in the movie is trained to conformity, there is no such thing as individual conscience. Such individual freedom could destroy their society. Recently, some powers-that-be in some societies have been trying to impose a certain uniformity in various areas, forbidding the teaching of certain beliefs and trying to impose a uniform, moral standard to which many are opposed. It is fascinating to see parallels in movies such as "The Giver," which illustrate the dangers of succumbing to other people's imposed standards of moral behavior instead of exercising conscience and thinking for ourselves.

3. INFANTICIDE

The movie shows how easily the concept of infanticide could be adopted, once the idea takes root that some individuals do not contribute to our view of a healthy community. In our society, which proclaims "discrimination!" at every turn, we could easily proceed to discriminate against these most vulnerable young people, who have no choice in the matter. Unfortunately, infanticide is already legal in some countries,

while some ethicists and philosophers are currently calling for it.¹

It is hard to imagine a society that could lose its sense of responsibility towards caring for, protecting and aiding those in need. Apart from anything else, all of us need help at some point, so as well as being altruistic, it is also eminently practical and pragmatic for us to do so. When we see parents with their newborns, it is clear how they respond to their completely dependent infants. They put their own lives on hold for a while, since that child becomes the most important thing in the world for a time, and they will do anything to protect and nurture it. Human beings seem to be “hardwired” to do this. Society still thinks there is something wrong with a parent who does not respond to a baby's basic needs, even although it is sometimes at great personal cost. We should foster that thought.

Jonas' disbelief at his father's apparent lack of qualms at having to euthanize Gabriel is arresting. He begins to see that his father does not truly understand, but, as a victim of their memory-deleted society, is more or less programmed to obey. This is chilling: the individual can be sacrificed for the good of society, and society *demand*s this. Again, recent statements show that this is not so farfetched. Richard Dawkins' recent statement about its being a duty to euthanize Down Syndrome children is a manifestation of this approach to human beings.² Jonas' community is fictional, but Dawkins is talking about real life infants.

4. EUTHANASIA AND EUTHANASIA TERMINOLOGY

When dealing with older adults and their “release,” the parallels in “The Giver” with our times are striking. First, there is the expectation that the elderly should realize their time has come to an end. They are clearly no longer useful and no longer productive (although there is no standard by which this is shown to be measured). In the name of community values, they are to be “released.” That is an interesting choice of words—“released”—free from trials and tribulation, free from work and all concerns. Although it then sounds as if this is being done for *them*, to help *them*, to give *them* relief, it is really being done for the good of the community: they are to be sacrificed for the good of the others.

In recent times, Baroness Warnock, a famous English philosopher and euthanasia supporter, espoused this sentiment. She was quoted as saying: "If you're demented, you're wasting people's lives—your family's lives—and you're wasting the resources of the National Health Service.”³

How does our society perceive its aging parents and family members? Is there an attitude of thinking they are “past it,” that to us their daily life looks not very worthwhile, that we are no longer that interested in them because they are no longer useful...to us? It is easy to make people feel useless, that they are a burden (and not just financially). How easily we forget that these are the same people who gave us of their time, love, patience—all the things that parents and family do. Why do we forget? Is Baroness Warnock expressing a common sentiment?

5. POPE JOHN PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ELDERLY

This letter comes to mind here, where the Pope expressed encouragement and moral strength to the elderly, recognizing that he himself was one.⁴ He praises Anna, named a prophetess in Luke's Gospel, as an elderly evangelist: "...Anna, a widow of eighty-four, a frequent visitor to the Temple, who now has the joy of seeing Jesus. The Evangelist tells us that "she began to praise God and spoke of the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem..." (Lk 2:38)."⁵

Likewise the elderly Nicodemus "... appears again at the burial of Jesus, when, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, he overcomes his fear and shows himself a disciple of the Crucified Lord (cf. Jn 19:38-40)." The Pope emphasizes that "...*The service of the Gospel has nothing to do with age!*" This is a truly brilliant insight that needs to be proclaimed and remembered. He continues:

They are the guardians of our collective memory, and thus the privileged interpreters of that body of ideals and common values which support and guide life in society.

To exclude the elderly is in a sense to deny the past, in which the present is firmly rooted, in the name of a modernity without memory. Precisely because of their mature experience, the elderly are able to offer young people precious advice and guidance.⁶

In Section 18 of the Letter, the Pope prays, "*Iube me venire ad te!*" "Call me and bid me come to You!" He reminds us that this is the

deepest yearning of the human heart, even in those who are not conscious of it. In Catholic teaching, death is not being "released" *from* negatives, but a personal invitation to new life. Our teaching on resurrection and redemption, while still mysterious, is powerful, meaning that those who simply cut off life also cut off the mystery. When the soul-less human person is the measure, the meaning is limited.

6. CONCLUSION

In the movie, older people are expected to conform. This is their law: they have no say in the matter. They are passive, and do not seem to object to being released, nor they do give voice to any objection. This surely goes counter to much that is known about human nature. Not everyone simply accepts death, at least not without resistance. So many put up a really determined fight! Some eulogies and obituaries are extremely moving in their deep appreciation of those who have died, people who have lived life well, sometimes under the most desperate conditions. The language used to describe them is often telling: So-and-so fought a good fight, fought with dignity, endured illness, her illness was bravely borne, and so on. There is something noble about that! We think it a pity when someone just "gives up."

In the story, Jonas begins to realize there could be other approaches to life and death. He is impelled by what we might call in non-religious terms "the life force." (I could easily slip into Star Wars terminology here, since that, too, is based on the usual archetypes of good and evil, and who are the heroes there: Luke? Yoda? Darth Vader? Lucas knows his archetypes, and we do too, and respond accordingly!) "The Giver" is in

a similar vein, indicating universal truths about the nature of life and death, about the trials and weaknesses we encounter—physical, mentally, psychically—about the power of law and the dictates of society, about human fears and human courage, about repression and discrimination, about those who give in and about those who continue to stand for what is right. Ultimately, about the power of one! And again...the message of the Gospel: Jonas is saved by risking everything to save himself, but really to save the baby, the representative of all that is good, innocent and new. Jonas wants Gabriel to LIVE, to ensure that the baby is brought up in a truly human world, where human beings experience intimacy, friendship, love, family life, relationships and freedom of conscience and action within the bounds of the common good. In other words: he wants “ordinary” human life, that gift of God which we can easily take for granted, and he rejects a stunted world where people are not allowed to be truly free (saved).

I found the movie and story inspiring because it took only one young person to effect change, attracting a few followers who

are not quite so brave but still support him. That certainly resonates! Jesus’ message to us of dying to save our lives is vividly represented here, while exposing the wrongs of infanticide, euthanasia, removal of freedom and conscience, and illustrating the dangers of imposed actions and duties.

When I talk about euthanasia from now on I will recommend that people watch “The Giver.” Both faith-filled and secular people can see a message in it. It is a powerful example of Catholic teaching, capturing the essential dignity of every individual person and that every person, in possession of that dignity, has been judged worthy of being saved. ■

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In September 2014 Pope Francis appointed Dr McQueen as a new member to the International Theological Commission for a five-year term.

¹ *The Groningen Protocol — Euthanasia in Severely Ill Newborns*. Eduard Verhagen, M.D., J.D., and Pieter J.J. Sauer, M.D., Ph.D. *N Engl J Med* 2005; 352:959-962 March 10, 2005 DOI: 10.1056/NEJMp058026; Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 122–23

² Richard Dawkins, the atheist writer, has claimed it is “immoral” to allow unborn babies with Down syndrome to live. The Oxford professor posted a message on Twitter saying would-be parents who learn their child has the condition have an ethical

responsibility to “abort it and try again”.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/11047072/Richard-Dawkins-immoral-to-allow-Downs-syndrome-babies-to-be-born.html>

³ See Mary Warnock’s views on duty to die:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2983652/Baroness-Warnock-Dementia-sufferers-may-have-a-duty-to-die.html>

⁴ Pope John Paul II. *Letter to the Elderly*, 1999.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*