

Is it wise to censor the censorable?

Developing World Bioethics' recent editorial decision to “limit exclusively religious contributions”¹ has met with some rebuttals, but is momentous enough to merit more of an upheaval, even if arguments are iterated and unimaginative. Religious proselytism is, so Pope Francis, a “very grave sin against ecumenism”. If sin is an offense against God, the secular world will find the Pope’s choice of words somewhat curious, to say the least. Clearly, there are some unattractive features in whoever believes to be in possession of a truth that stifles tolerance, but this is as much a “sin” in secular-minded beliefs bowing to rationality, positivism, emotivism or Leon Kass’ wisdom of repugnance. Proselytism of any kind is morally wrong for imposing –nudging, convincing, or coercing– a presumed truth that intends to unhinge other cherished truths.

Deliberation relies on epistemic arguments, but logicians accept that ethics is a field where doxastic arguments are also acceptable, provided they are arguable. Even those of us who join Richard Rorty’s lack of musical ear for religion, will acknowledge that dogmatic assertiveness is valid for internal cohesion, but otherwise useless because not arguable outside its zone of influence. Eminent philosopher Harry Frankfurt wrote forcefully on the subject.²

Having agreed on these premises, it helps to recall an article Jürgen Habermas published in the daily *Neue Züricher Zeitung* under the title “Ein Bewusstsein von dem, was fehlt” (An awareness of what is missing)³, where he laments the insufficiencies of purely secular viewpoints and pleads for secular “defeatism” to be replaced by post-secular approaches to religious arguments, in awareness that belief in certain truths must deliberate with competing power-invested beliefs –Glaubensmächten– as well as with the hegemonic monopoly of the sciences. Secular States must maintain “cosmological neutrality”, secure religious freedom, and require its citizens not to reject religion as irrational.

None of all this is being questioned by DWB’s limited censorship of some religious scholars who “uncritically assume the truth of their religion”. The editors move in the right direction by rejecting non-arguable assertions which are at the core of poor deliberation, which should be unacceptable also for secular authors who tout their own truths. It might be wiser and free of even the shadow

of bias, if DWB just pressed for well-argued, plausible and coherent pieces, independent of their roots.

Finally, a counterintuitive idea should not be neglected. In Latin America, religious conservatism has a strong social and political influence, using dogmatic “truths” to restrict deliberation and impose restrictive laws. Euthanasia has mostly been ousted from entering parliamentary debate, abortion continuous to be prohibited or very restrictively accepted leaving unheeded the public health problems of clandestine practices. Secular bioethicists have a hard time, and are to a great extent ineffectual in limiting the nefarious effects of conservative religious politics and legislation. Perhaps by allowing, even furthering, the publication of unacceptable, authoritarian dogma, religious scholars might feel obliged to refine their arguments; opposing bioethicists would gain public presence that in national corridors of power is denied and shoved into non-existence. Contending in the open might avoid the staunch prohibition of abortion in Nicaragua, the limited abortion that was regressed to being unlawful in El Salvador; Mexico allowing elective abortion only in Mexico City’s Federal District. All Latin American countries except Colombia remain unwilling to even present bills on euthanasia for legislative consideration. Chile legalizing divorce as late as 2004, and so it goes.

In sum, academic standards equal for all, not only for irritating religious pieces that believe themselves harbingers of truth. Let poor argumentation that is strong enough to secure restrictive biolaws in the developing world, be subject to academic scrutiny and forceful disputation.

Miguel Kottow 

Faculty of Medicine, School for Public Health, University of
Chile, Santiago, Chile
Email: mkottow@gmail.com

ORCID

Miguel Kottow  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6403-1338>

¹Schuklenk, U. (2018). On the role of religion in articles this journal seeks to publish. *Developing World Bioethics*. 18(3):207.

²Frankfurt, H. (1988). On Bullshit. In Frankfurt, H. *The importance about what we care about*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

³Habermas, J. (2007, Feb 10). Ein Bewusstsein von dem, was fehlt. *Neue Züricher Zeitung*.