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Civilization at the Brink—New Assaults on Human Dignity

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All this is important to keep in mind as a flood of recent news reports indicates the extent to which civilization is now imperiled by an insidious array of assaults on human dignity, human life, and the most vulnerable among us.

The first reminder comes from the Netherlands where a hospital has now applied to be that nation's first to perform euthanasia for the youngest of its citizens. The Groningen Academic Hospital has applied for permission to adopt guidelines for mercy killings of newborns identified as terminally ill. But here is the shocking reality—the hospital concedes that it is already performing such procedures and killing newborn infants with medication.

This past summer, the Dutch Medical Society of Physicians appealed to the government to create a structure for the application of euthanasia to persons “with no free will” who are unable to make this decision for themselves. In addition, officials at this same hospital decided in recent months that its physicians will be allowed to euthanize children under the age of twelve, “if doctors believe their suffering is intolerable or if they have an incurable illness.”

The Dutch slide towards the Culture of Death began many years ago, but developments accelerated in recent years as the Dutch moved towards granting explicit permission for “assisted suicide” and euthanasia, first for adults who were diagnosed with terminal illnesses, later for children said to be sick and dying, and later for virtually anyone who would make a request. Furthermore, there is solid evidence to back the assertion that the Dutch have already moved from “passive” to “active” euthanasia and from voluntary to involuntary death.

According to authoritative press reports, the hospital's guidelines, known as “The Groningen Protocol,” would allow doctors to kill newborn infants thought to be unsuitable for life, suffering from an incurable disease, or exhibiting extreme deformities. The protocol would also give these physicians a legal framework that would protect them from claims of murder or medical malpractice.

Reports indicate that the Groningen Hospital carried out at least four killings of infants in 2003 and reported these cases to the government. As of yet, there have been no legal proceedings taken against the hospital or its physicians.

Wesley J. Smith, one of this nation's keenest observers and authorities on issues of biomedical ethics, responded to the Groningen developments by declaring, “The slippery slope in the Netherlands has descended already into a vertical cliff.”

These developments in the Netherlands could seem distant and far removed from American medical practice, but we should be forewarned that the logic applied in “The Groningen Protocol” is the very same logic now being promoted by assisted suicide and euthanasia advocates in the United States. Once human life is devalued and a society begins to see euthanasia as normalized and legitimate, the Culture of Death then marches on to claim newer, younger, and even more vulnerable victims.

All this comes to mind in the aftermath of the Scott Peterson trial in California and his recent conviction on two counts of homicide. Even as his trial now moves into a penalty phase, a fascinating article in the Chicago Tribune offers a revealing insight into how the secular media is struggling to keep up with transformations in the nation's moral conscience. Just a few weeks ago, the Chicago Tribune trumpeted a headline declaring Peterson's conviction of two counts of murder in these words: "Scott Peterson Guilty of Killing Wife, Fetus." In response, Eileen Dolehide of Darien, Illinois, one of the paper's readers, wrote the editors to ask whether the Tribune had an official policy of referring to an unborn child as a "fetus" until its birth. Mrs. Dolehide told the paper, "Now Connor [the name Laci Peterson is said to have decided on for her child] is eight months along in pregnancy. He should at least be termed an unborn child rather than a medical term called a fetus."

Don Wycliff, the newspaper's Public Editor, researched the situation and reported that The Washington Post used the term "unborn child," even as the New York Times used both "unborn child" and "fetus." The Associated Press referred to Connor Peterson as "the son she was carrying" and, in another sentence, to the "fetus." The Chicago Tribune consistently used "fetus" throughout its reportage.

Wycliff reported that Randy Weissman, the paper's Deputy Managing Editor for Operations, explained that the use of "fetus" is "consistent with the guideline in the Tribune's current stylebook." Nevertheless, Wycliff reported that a new edition of the paper's official stylebook, soon to be released, will allow for the use of "unborn child" when the fetus is in the third trimester of gestation.

This is a very significant development, and it offers further proof of the fact that America's moral conscience continues to be troubled by the scourge of abortion. The Scott Peterson trial forced the nation—as well as police officials and the prosecution—to face the fact that Connor Peterson, though unborn, was indeed a victim of homicide. The nation's outrage over this incident led to the adoption of the Unborn Victims of Violence Act of 2003, signed into law by President George W. Bush.

We know we are making some kind of progress when one of the nation's leading newspapers decides to change its stylebook to allow for the fact that its readers are fully aware that unborn infants are more than "fetuses." Responding to the paper's use of the term fetus, Mrs. Dolehide offered a clear complaint: "It's almost like there's a concerted effort to dehumanize the child." Exactly, Mrs. Dolehide, and God bless you for making that point so clearly.

Issues of infanticide, abortion, and euthanasia are joined by new concerns over the commodification of human life and the complexities of the reproductive revolution. Press reports out of Australia indicate that hundreds of Australians are now going around that country's laws by buying designer babies in the United States. That's right—even as British citizens are advised to go to the United States for late-term abortions, Australians are now spreading the word that designer babies are freely, if expensively, available in the United States.

The Australian reports were based on an investigation in The Sunday Telegraph that revealed that infertile couples and single women from Australia are turning to American surrogates and paying as much as \$170,000 for healthy babies.

Other women are paying \$40,000 for fertilized eggs that will later be implanted in their own wombs. Beyond this, female college students in Australia are now being recruited to travel to the United States in order to sell their eggs at a fee of up to \$20,000 per "harvest."

While all this is presented as a way of "helping" infertile couples, the use of this technology with an intent to create designer babies and the commodification of human life down to bounties for human eggs is an offense to human dignity, human nature, and the sanctity of human life.

Before long, we are likely to see women routinely paid for their eggs even as men are routinely paid for sperm donation. In Britain, the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority [HFEA] has proposed paying women up to \$2000 for their eggs. The document prepared by the agency indicates that egg donation "can be physically demanding, painful and stressful," and thus the women ought to be compensated in this matter.

At present, donors—both male and female—can be paid only about thirty dollars per donation at fertility clinics.

Interestingly, the government agency appealed to the public for a response on specific questions. “Should the physical characteristics of egg and sperm donors, such as skin and hair color and ethnic origin, be matched to those of the couple who will have the baby, as now?” Further, “should the HFEA give permission for sperm to be brought in from abroad on a case by case basis, as now, which leads to delays? Or should it authorize clinics to bring in sperm at their discretion?”

The Culture of Death advances on questions such as these. Once such considerations are granted a veneer of plausibility, human life becomes just one more commodity to be bought and sold, given and taken, depending on circumstances, personal needs, and the demands of the market.

Civilization cannot endure once the basic dignity of human life is denied. Developments such as “The Groningen Protocol” are a reminder that we have learned so very little over the last century. How could a nation, itself victimized by the tyranny and murderous ambitions of the Third Reich, now move towards accepting and institutionalizing ethical guidelines that are virtually the same as those of the infamous Nazi doctors? How can we allow human life, human eggs, and human dignity to become mere products for sale and services for hire? Very soon, these questions will be answered one way or another. Unless current directions are reset, we will see the killing of infants become routine and the selling of human dignity transformed into big business. If this is civilization, what is barbarism?

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