

# Introduction

## 1.1 The origins of the culture of life

It is often said that Western human medicine has a long and illustrious history. Its origins lie in a combination of the pagan Hippocratic oath and the Christian doctrines. For well over 2,000 years, these two grand pillars have underpinned both medical ethics and medical practice. Their influence for good can be demonstrated by, for example, the enduring Hippocratic phrase, ‘Do no patient any harm’, and what has become known as the Christian golden rule as spelled out in Matthew 7:12, but earlier, and more succinctly as, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). These two great maxims, together with other of the Hippocratic and Christian precepts, have provided practitioners of medicine with a powerful restraint, as well as a positive motivation, and it is these which have kept medicine largely safe and wholesome for centuries.

Medicine was, from its earliest times, regarded as the healing art. The doctor’s duty was to care for, and to treat, and, if possible, to cure the patient. In short, good medicine was an integral part of a culture of life. Sickness and disease were regarded as medicine’s constant enemies, although the inevitability of natural death was well understood and accepted. But unnatural death was something else. Any doctor who caused it was a renegade—deliberately killing patients was never a part of proper medicine. Indeed, the Hippocratic oath specifically forbade both euthanasia and abortion: ‘I will give no deadly drug to any, though it be asked of me, nor will I counsel such, and especially I will not aid a woman to procure abortion.’ Such practices were regarded as bad medicine and therefore anathema to the culture of life.

And for two millennia, medicine did, on the whole, uphold this culture of life. The progress of medicine has been spectacular and we have all benefited from its surgery, drugs, vaccinations, and so on. The average life expectancy in Britain at the beginning of the last century was a mere forty-nine years for men and fifty-two for women, now it stands at seventy-five

and eighty, respectively. Today our lives are, in many ways, significantly easier than those of our forefathers, primarily because of the application of good medicine. Its culture of life has undeniably brought health and happiness. For this we should be thankful.

## 1.2 The origins of the culture of death

So we may ask: Where did modern medicine go wrong? How did we lose this wonderful culture of life, and gain this ugly culture of death?

Medicine's own guiding principles, its own 'confessions of faith', demonstrate just how recently it has become corrupted. Initially, as we have seen, the Hippocratic oath took an uncompromising stance against abortion and euthanasia and insisted that doctors, 'Do no patient any harm'. Over the intervening 2,000 years other oaths, or declarations, concerning medical ethics and practice have echoed this Hippocratic oath. For example, the Declaration of Geneva (adopted by the General Assembly of the World Medical Organization in 1948) stated, 'I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception, even under threat I will not use my medical knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity.' That was written just two generations ago.

But more recent revisions have been much weaker affairs. They have reflected the great shift in society as a whole, but in bioethical issues in particular, away from this culture of life. For example, in 1997, the British Medical Association produced a draft revision of the Hippocratic oath. It stated, 'I recognize the special value of human life but I also know that the prolongation of human life is not the only aim of health care. Where abortion is permitted, I agree that it should take place only within an ethical and legal framework.'

Can you see the downgrade? For 2,000 and more years medicine had a high view of human life. Human life was described by adjectives like, special, sacred, and worthy. Within the last fifty or so years medicine has adopted a low view of human life. Now human life is generally considered to be cheap, exploitable, and expendable. This is the culture of death.

These changes, at the very heart of medical ethics and practice, have been alarmingly rapid. Indeed, just about all aspects of our society, be they education, welfare, science, law, economics, whatever, have similarly

changed. In truth, we have become dominated by secular humanism. This worldview can be defined as ‘man, the measure of all things’. Man, and not God, is now the centre of all things. Man, and not God, is now the law-giver and the judge. Ethics are now man-centred and arbitrary, rather than God-centred and absolute. Practice is now utilitarian, rather than principled. This is the prevailing mindset of our society—and in medicine it has encouraged the spread of the culture of death.

Now modern medicine operates firmly within this culture of death. For example, although abortion has been practised throughout the ages, it was never regarded as proper medicine; it was unlawful, it was done in secret, it was performed by quacks and charlatans. Nowadays, it is generally lawful, widely advertised, and openly practised by untold thousands of highly-qualified doctors, world-wide. In England, Wales, and Scotland abortion was legalized in 1967 and its free supply since then has resulted in the deaths of an estimated 5 million unborn children. Abortion now occurs every day, in the hospitals of every health authority and in the private clinics of every city, wherever we live. This is part of the culture of death.

For the last forty or so years our medical services have developed sophisticated programmes of prenatal screening to search out the unborn who are disabled. Once detected, they are commonly destroyed before birth. Can you comprehend it—doctors prescribing death as a treatment? This is the modern-day practice of eugenics, and it is part of the culture of death.

When the low-weight and the ‘unthrifty’ are born there is an increasing tendency to let them die. Some hospitals make no caring efforts with babies born below a certain weight. Disabled neonates often suffer the same regimen. After all, we already kill the disabled in utero, so why not kill the disabled newborn, those who have slipped through the prenatal screening net? This is infanticide, and it is part of the culture of death.

In 1990, the UK Parliament sanctioned the use of human embryos for infertility treatments and for destructive experimentation. As a result, thousands and thousands of human embryos have been, and are still being, routinely destroyed. This is part of the culture of death.

For much of the last century there have been repeated attempts to legalize euthanasia. So far these calls have been resisted in the UK, but for

how much longer? Other countries are already covertly practising euthanasia; thousands of their elderly and senile are deliberately killed each year. In the UK some hospital patients are already dying because they are denied food and drink, a course of action, which, we are assured, is 'in their best interests'. This too is part of the culture of death.

And these are not just issues for the practitioners of medicine and science, something that goes on behind closed hospital and laboratory doors. These bioethical issues have spilled out of the hospital wards, private clinics, and research centres into our homes, workplaces, and churches. They have affected us all.

We live in a culture of death. How else can you explain that a sophisticated, prosperous, and educated society deliberately puts to death its own offspring, its smallest, its weakest, and its most vulnerable members? We really do live in a culture of death.

So, what can we do about it? How can we respond to it? To start with, we need to apply our minds, to grapple with these issues and come to some understanding of them. And so the first stop for the Christian is the Bible. What does it have to say? How can its teachings marshal our thinking, season our speech, and galvanize our actions?