

## ACADEMY OF FELLOWS

### LONDON CONFERENCE ON HUMAN DIGNITY

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The conference “Human Dignity in Bioethics: Universal or Useless?” brought over 50 delegates from all over Europe to London in September 2011. The topic was prompted by Ruth Macklin’s 2003 editorial, “Dignity is a Useless Concept.”<sup>1</sup> Macklin has called for discussion and debate on dignity to ensure the concept is more than a slogan.<sup>2</sup> The London conference

aimed to contribute to this discussion.

The conference was hosted by the Centre for Bioethics and Emerging Technology (CBET) at St. Mary’s University College, a Catholic university in London. CBET’s mission is to examine the ethical and social dimensions of emerging technologies, particularly nanotechnology ([www.smuc.ac.uk/cbet/](http://www.smuc.ac.uk/cbet/)). The conference was organized in conjunction with the Anscombe Bioethics Centre (previously called the Linacre Centre for Healthcare Ethics), the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, and the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics. The latter’s director, Calum MacKellar, is a Fellow in CBHD’s Academy of Fellows, which was also represented by Dónal O’Mathúna and Agneta Sutton.

The conference opened on Friday evening in the stately rooms of St. Mary’s University College. After official welcomes, Prof. Raymond Hide, an eminent British physicist and cosmologist, discussed the importance of dialogue between scientists and theologians, especially around bioethics. He shared intriguing insights from his membership in the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. In the keynote address that followed, Dr. David Kirchhoffer from the Australian Catholic University noted how the critique of human dignity can strengthen our understanding of the concept. Human dignity, he believes, is too often used as a trump card to end discussions, rather than as a means to explore deeper issues. He finds Stephen Toulmin’s approach helpful in challenging bioethics to become more than a moral calculus.<sup>3</sup> Kirchhoffer uses a hermeneutical interpretative account to address broader issues of meaning and interpretation.

Saturday began with Prof. Geoff Hunt, director of CBET, who explained why the conference was also addressing biodiversity. Dignity often focuses on the status and treatment of humans, but has implications for creation theology. Both ‘having dignity’ and ‘being dignified’ are important, and the latter needs more attention. Human flourishing depends on the complex web of life, and there is nothing dignified about exterminating other creatures. This led into a fascinating lecture on biodiversity by Dr. David Plackett from Denmark’s Risa National Laboratory for Sustainable Energy. The beauty and diversity of nature were shown, along with examples of the devastating consequences of human choices. He recalled the words of Theodore Roosevelt: “When I hear of the destruction of a species, I feel just as if all the works of some great writer have perished.” Christians then should be helping protect the works of the Author of creation.

The next plenary analyzed dignity in the context of law and public policy. Dr. Roberto Andorno, from the Ethics Centre at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, noted that dignity is not defined in law, but neither are other fundamental concepts like justice or freedom. Sometimes its guidance is clearer in what it prohibits than in what it promotes. In patient care, weakness and vulnerability helps us see dignity’s importance.

The afternoon lectures started with Rev. Prof. Emmanuel Agius, Dean of Theology at the University of Malta and a member of the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies. This body provides independent advice on bioethics to the European Commission (<http://ec.europa.eu/bepa/european-group-ethics/>). His lecture examined the challenges of embedding human dignity in E.U. policies on biotechnologies. Switching to clinical issues, Dr. Carlo Leget of Tilburg University, the Netherlands, discussed the place of dignity in care of the dying. His historical overview of dignity was helpful, and he used the work of Paul Ricoeur to provide a hermeneutical phenomenological analysis of dignity.

Sunday morning began with either Mass or a viewing of the Japanese film, *Departures* (2008). This moving and beautiful movie shows the dignity that an undertaker can bring to death. The care he expressed contrasts sharply with the

undignified ways he is treated because he is an undertaker. Even in death, dignity can be promoted.

The conference ended with a lecture from one of the organizers, Prof. David A. Jones, director of the Anscombe Bioethics Centre. He explored the ancient idea of dignity as status and being worthy of honor. The idea of all humans having dignity owes much to Christianity. Even if this was not in the original concept, it is more fundamental. Christian notions of dignity are paired with dependence and wretchedness, which provide a response to claims that human dignity is “speciesist.” Dignity reminds us of our common value and vulnerability, and the importance of including all humans in the human family.

Delegates were divided into four groups for small-group discussions between lectures. These provided time to address questions in more depth, and to get to know other delegates. This revealed wide diversity in discussions of dignity around Europe. The role of religion in European bioethics was discussed regularly. Christians are actively involved in European bioethics, yet uncertainty remains about the best way this can be done. Even at the conference, diverse approaches were taken in lectures, some using explicitly Christian language, while

others not. This topic requires much further reflection and discussion, which CBET may be able to facilitate.

The conference lectures are available to download (<http://extranet.smuc.ac.uk/events-conferences/human-dignity-in-bioethics/Pages/default.aspx>). Conference proceedings will be published in a themed issue of *The New Bioethics*, an international peer-reviewed journal acquired by CBET. A follow-up conference is planned for 2013 to continue the development of fresh ideas and rigorous thinking in bioethics. Through the contacts made and renewed at the conference, collaboration is planned on research projects. Scope exists for members of the CBHD Academy of Fellows to contribute to such projects and work together to affirm the dignity of all human life. ●●●

- 1 Ruth Macklin, “Dignity is a Useless Concept,” *British Medical Journal* 327, no. 7429 (2003): 1419-20.
- 2 Ruth Macklin, “Reflections on the Human Dignity Symposium: Is Dignity a Useless Concept?” *Journal of Palliative Care* 20, no. 3 (2004): 212-6.
- 3 Stephen Toulmin, “How Medicine Saved the Life of Ethics,” *Perspectives in Biology & Medicine* 25, no.4 (1982): 736-50.

## CBHD CALL FOR PAPERS AND POSTERS

Paper and poster proposals are now being accepted for our upcoming  
19th Annual Summer Conference,  
*Reclaiming Dignity in a Culture of Commodification*,  
to be held on July 12-14, 2012, on the Deerfield campus.

Join us as we explore important ethical considerations surrounding developments in reproductive practices and global women's health through the lens of reclaiming dignity in a culture of commodification.

All serious proposals relevant to the study of bioethics are welcome, particularly those in the area of biology, nursing ethics, clinical ethics, and theological engagement.

To be considered for presentation, contributed papers and posters must be submitted as abstracts (250-300 words) along with a CV/resume by Thursday, March 15, 2012. For requirements, guidelines and deadlines of abstracts, contributed papers and posters, as well as conference details, please visit <http://www.cbhd.org/call-for-proposals>.

For more information visit:  
[www.cbhd.org/call-for-proposals](http://www.cbhd.org/call-for-proposals)

Please direct all inquiries and submissions to:  
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