

And the problem is ...

Joan Chittister | Aug. 4, 2006 From Where I Stand

What a couple of weeks this has been!

First we got a presidential veto of legislation designed to enlarge embryonic stem cell research capabilities which begins a major moral discussion for us all.

Then we got the continued pummeling of Lebanon -- men, women and children -- in retaliation for the kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers and with the tacit blessing of the United States for the doing of it.

Finally, we're getting signals that Syria might be next in line for U.S. chastisement, no questions asked, no excuses acceptable, no holds barred. Whatever that implies.

And, on top of all of that, British officials and U.S. Pentagon generals warned of the rising threat of civil war in Iraq. British commanders called the next six months "crucial" to the outcome of the war we started there. Which translated means that more lives will be lost.

So what are we to make of all of that? What has happened to the world as we knew it? Has the United States lost its way in the world? And if so, why?

For years we've been saying, "It's the economy, Stupid." And I figured they must be right. Living immersed in the urban poverty around me, I never even thought to look any further for an answer. After all, it's world poverty that so often leads to wars. Give people financial security and we'll all be more secure, right?

But it didn't happen. Instead, things got financially worse and they got militarily worse, as well.

Obviously, the answer to today's social struggles was even bigger than poverty. So, someone else analyzed it differently for us: "It's the American Dream, Stupid," they said. And that seemed to make sense, too. If we could just get to the point again where we all concentrated on living out the dream that had guided U.S. policy for so long, life would be normal again, right?

But, though we have talked about the American Dream in every election for years, society simply goes on deteriorating -- here as well as everywhere else. The poor get poorer. The middle class has stalled. Patriotism has become militarism. Economic success has become corporate greed. And, most troubling of all, morality has become particularized -- which means that some of the Ten Commandments are being taken seriously, but some are not. Some morality is being politicized; most is not.

Evolution and cloning and same-sex marriage and abortion have become legislative hallmarks of U.S. morality. Torture and preemptive war, lack of universal health insurance, disregard for the care of the elderly and the

welfare fraud of the wealthy (called tax breaks) are called "social issues," not moral problems. Yet all of those things have to do with the quality of life, the dignity of life and the sacredness of life.

Obviously, the "dream" is getting muddled.

Obviously, the problem is not simply the economy now, not only the diminishment of the dream. The problem now is that "It's inconsistency, Stupid."

We are living with two different moral systems. As a result, we are confused as a nation about who we are and what we do and why.

For instance, the White House announced recently that the president vetoed the bill that would have allowed embryonic stem cell research because "he thinks murder is wrong."

True, the next day, White House Press Secretary Tony Snow changed the language to say that what the President really meant to say was that stem cell research "involves a destruction of human life."

But the situation only proves the point. We are into terminal inconsistency here.

The administration presents itself as moral -- as "pro-life" -- but what does that mean?

The words change from day to day.

The ideas change from day to day.

The policies change from day to day.

The explanations change from day to day.

Inconsistency reigns.

Embryonic cells are called "innocent life." The 25,000 Americans they stranded for days in Lebanon under siege are not, it seems.

Innocent or mentally challenged prisoners on death row are not considered defensible at all.

The 14,000 Iraqi citizens killed since January -- by us, because of us -- in this great war of liberation, are, apparently, not lives worth saving.

The people who die from the weapons we so blithely provide to countries around the world under the guise of "foreign aid" and "security" are not.

The babies in the United States that are dying from lack of proper medical care because of lack of universal US medical insurance are not.

The adults whose lives will be shortened because they can't eat well, live well or die well on the present minimum wage are not.

There is something inconsistent about all of this, something so skewed at its moral base that we can't even begin to talk about it rationally.

It's not that embryonic stem cell research is itself a clear-cut moral issue and should automatically be acceptable. In fact, there are lots of reasons to question it -- both one way and another.

Can it add to the quality of life of those innocents who are already living in great pain or disability? It certainly seems so.

But, on the other hand, will it also lead to "laboratory pregnancies" for the sole purpose of harvesting embryos for research? Surely it could.

Will it lead to pregnancy for hire? It's naive to say it won't.

Could it lead to petrie dish experimentation designed to produce monsters as well as healthy life? Of course it could.

Will it lead to black market activities for cells -- as is now the case with organ transplants? More than likely.

But that's not the point. The point is that when you are making life and death decisions on the basis of what life is "innocent life" and what is not, you are treading a very fine line. In fact, you are stretching what has now become an extremely tenuous concept, the very definition of life itself.

From where I stand, it seems that it is time to stop the glib answers and face the real question: What exactly is 'life?' Is it only "potential" life that must be absolutely protected, that is the only really 'innocent' life, or must the same standards apply to the living? And if so, what does that mean to our economic policies, our foreign policies, our social policies and "The American Dream" of life and liberty for all?

Until we answer these questions, how can we ever possibly arrive again at any kind of stable and universal moral standards -- no matter what we call ourselves?

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