

Editorial

CULTURE OF LIFE

Culture is the sum total of attitudes and perspectives, behaviour patterns and adopted standards, views and ways of life that envelop the entire gamut of reality through the interpretation and involvement of human beings for the sake of an enhanced state of existence at all levels. In order to have a culture, it is essential that life – in all its forms – is accorded respect and reverence. Among various forms of life, because of its uniqueness in terms of self-consciousness and the ability to establish lasting, meaningful, and purposeful relationships, human life has a prime place. In fact, any culture presupposes human existence: only human beings can set off a culture; for devoid of humanity's central role along with its specific emphasis on the enhancement of human life, no culture would be worth the name. Although we can identify a symbiotic relationship between human life and culture, the central role of life, especially human life, cannot be overlooked. The aim of humanity as a whole must be to evolve a culture of life, a situation where all would subscribe to a positive view of life and shape a creative way of life, culminating in the enhancement of both life and culture.

It is true that human beings have been involved both in the acts of destroying and enhancing life in various forms. However, despite the destructive activities initiated by many a member of the human species, nature, by its own ways, and in and through the dynamic, conscious, affirmative, and cooperative involvement of the majority of human beings, has been maintaining various cultures of life all through the human history. In fact, while some consciously tried to disrupt the culture of life that existed and flourished, there were equally – or, say, more effective – powerful attempts on the part of others to defend, safeguard, protect, preserve, and enhance life, especially human life, itself being the foundation of the values we cherish. The primacy enjoyed by human life among all forms of life has not yet been debased, which I consider to be the most optimistic result of a continued human quest for development, permanence, and excellence.

However, in the wake of an emerging exclusive thrust on values such as quality, economy, efficiency, etc., which finally turn out to be counterproductive to a large extent, and the manipulative strategies of the vested interests, including the *almighty* media of the twenty-first century and the remotely controlled, corrupt governments whose legislations and

governance increasingly have nothing to do with the moral foundations of humanity, our age witnesses a growing tendency to enthrone a culture of death in place of life. Although its votaries are comparatively smaller in numbers, the reign of a culture of death tends to be catching up more with the so-called elite and the economically and socially well-paced groups, most of them belonging to the upper strata of the society, to whose standards of behaviour the majority look up and try to emulate. The emphasis on quality of life in every sphere, and the projections of a possible glossy and picturesque quality enhancement thrust (against the more demanding, ever-dragging and -increasing quantity considerations) in private as well as social life create a false aura of goodness and rightness among the naïve and the innocent.

In this context we should distinguish between two groups: the first, endorsing a culture of death as aggressively as possible, of whom at least a minority making economic and career advantage (mostly at the cost of human lives), and the second, adopting a lethargic insensitivity to the life of others. Although the first seems to be dangerous, as this group is more outspoken, the second is debasing the foundations of value of life in an indirect but very subtle way. The utter lack of concern for the lives of many a person in the society – especially those who are ill treated either by neglect in the family or as a result of social ostracism – is absolutely outrageous. There is an unheard cry for attention and openness towards many unbecoming practices meted out to human beings themselves in the neighbourhood of almost all of us. How many of us dare to respond, to take up the challenges, and face the uncertainties? The resulting personal initiatives would definitely make a difference, hopefully resulting in launching a positive transformation both in outlook and action patterns.

There is an alarming tendency, especially among a group of intellectuals – whose presence, penetration, and activity are all pervasive among the national and international media and bureaucracies – who tend to value only those human lives which are qualitatively better placed. In fact, they subscribe to and practice a preferential option for the *best*, based on qualitative utility concerns.

A dangerous line of argument, for example, is initiated by Peter Singer, the most vibrant philosophical exponent of consequentialist approach to ethics in the West, in the following passage:

... the fact that a being is a human being, in the sense of a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, is *not relevant* to the wrongness of killing

it; it is, rather, characteristics like rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness that make a difference. Infants lack these characteristics. Killing them, therefore, cannot be equated with killing normal human beings, or any other self-conscious beings.¹

The slippery slope is obvious in the sentence that follows the quoted passage: “This conclusion is not limited to infants...” The culture of death defended by Singer extends its wings far and wide. After having endorsed the method of “suicide machine” developed and *prescribed* by Dr. Jack Kevorkian, a Michigan Pathologist, Singer narrates the “successful saga” of those proponents of voluntary euthanasia as follows:

There is now one country in which doctors can openly *help* their patients to die in a peaceful and dignified way. In the Netherlands, a series of court cases during the 1980s upheld a doctor's right to assist a patient to die, even if that assistance amounted to giving the patient a lethal injection. Doctors in the Netherlands who comply with certain guidelines ... can now quite openly carry out euthanasia and can report this on the death certificate without fear of prosecution. It has been estimated that about 2,300 deaths each year result from euthanasia carried out in this way.²

A glossy but wrong understanding of peace and dignity at the deathbed is proposed to bypass the moral vacuum resulting from the insensitivity to life and its dynamics, when it concerns the lives of the yet-to-be-born, yet-to-be-self-conscious, dependent and disabled, sick and dying. It is put forth as the only way to enhance the standards of living and the quality of

¹Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 182; emphasis added. In this connection it would be worth turning to some of the assumptions of Singer, which are farfetched and baseless. For example, he categorically asserts in his *Practical Ethics* that “the parents do not want the disabled child to live” (183). If this assertion were true, how come that many disabled children continue to live, mostly with their own biological parents? Later, in the same work he holds that life begins in any “morally significant sense when there is awareness of one’s existence over time. The metaphor of life as a journey also provides a reason for holding that in infancy, life’s voyage has scarcely begun” (189-190). The implied sense of the text is that the unborn and the newly born do not deserve the rights accessible to the grownups; the value of their existence is a concession from the *able* and “rational, autonomous and self-conscious” *in actuality*. What does he refer to as “morally significant”? Can it be based on a mere metaphor – “life as a journey”?

²Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 176-178; emphasis added.

life of those who are already born and grown up, especially in the context of the limited available resources in this world. If at all anybody feels guilty in adopting such an approach, Singer recommends an abandoning of “those doctrines about the sanctity of human life,”³ as such doctrines tend to ‘emotionally’ and ‘intellectually’ curtail the culture of death unleashed by its subscribers. According to Singer, acceptance of any doctrine founded on the inherent value of life and its inviolability is tantamount to “the refusal to accept killing.”⁴

We have no difficulty in accepting death, as it is inherently part of life itself. In fact, acceptance of death should accompany a properly valid moral perspective. Equating death with killing, however, is a farfetched attempt, and a morally unacceptable stand, irrespective of the mode and the need of killing, especially when it comes to taking the life of a human being – in any form.

Life is the central focus of medical science; the very purpose for which medical science exists is to promote, support, and enhance life in all forms, and at all levels of existence. The service rendered by millions of healthcare personnel all over the world is, indeed, a great service rendered to the humanity as a whole. In the context of the development and existence of healthcare, it is a right of every human person to receive appropriate care, and cure as much as feasible, and it cannot be relegated to the level of a convenient privilege extended by the healthcare professionals. However, proponents of a culture of death do not hesitate to drag medical science as well as healthcare personnel into life-denying compromises and controversies around issues of human life. In fact, the very foundation upon which medical science is built, and is thriving on, is life itself; the very purpose of medicine itself – traditionally identified as “cure and care” – is to promote, support, and enhance human life in its multifarious forms.⁵ The recent thrust on quality healthcare, though

³Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 175.

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⁵My personal association with medical professionals has always been very enriching and life-affirming. Their unflinching commitment in catering to human life – even when some of them were at the brink of death or ‘inhumane’ existence according to the standards accepted by the culture of death proponents – is praiseworthy and promising. However, the pressure of an aggressive, quality-oriented, profit-motivated, and business-pro healthcare approach faces colossal losses, which, in turn, tend to de-motivate even those who are assertive of and affirming human life and its inherent value. Isn’t catering to and saving human life in

praiseworthy as far as the effectiveness and efficiency are concerned, has caused the sidetracking of at least one important dimension of healthcare, i.e., the caring dimension (due to an over-emphasis on the curative procedures, which bring about tangible and immediate results).

Moreover, the major interests of a large group of physicians belonging to the modern globalised era lie in lifestyle and livelihood; unfortunately, the radical changes in healthcare delivery system promote the role of the physician as a clinical and economic manager rather than a professionally committed healthcare animator who has to awaken everyone involved to take life-enhancing decisions and to put them into practice, even if it were to personally inconvenience him or her, and thus to be an advocate of life in any patient.⁶ The economic and career advantages scrupulously enjoyed by such tend to jeopardise the prospects of even those who are willing to spend their lives for the sake of promoting human life. Further, this tends to dictate the poor response on the part of

any predicamental situation worth the troubles, even if it were to involve colossal financial losses? Can anybody who is professionally trained to be the caretaker of human life be an agent of death? It cannot be without involving internal contradiction: human life is to be affirmed, protected and promoted in medical care.

⁶The Hippocratic Oath (5th century BC) – both in its classical and many modern versions, taken by the medical professional as they begin their medical practice – obviously expresses the positive affirmation of human life. A pertinent passage in the Oath reads: “I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly, I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy” (Ludwig Edelstein, trans., *The Hippocratic Oath: Text, Translation, and Interpretation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1943). However, in the context of the present day practices upheld by many of these professionals, some tend to sarcastically rename the Oath as “Hypocritical Oath.” The reasons are obvious from the following survey findings: “According to a 1993 survey of 150 US and Canadian medical schools, for example, only 14 percent of modern oaths prohibit euthanasia, 11 percent hold covenant with a deity, 8 percent foreswear abortion, and a mere 3 percent forbid sexual contact with patients – all maxims held sacred in the classical version. The original calls for free tuition for medical students and for doctors never to ‘use the knife’ (that is, conduct surgical procedures) – both obviously out of step with modern-day practice. Perhaps most telling, while the classical oath calls for ‘the opposite’ of pleasure and fame for those who transgress the oath, fewer than half of oaths taken today insist the taker be held accountable for keeping the pledge” (“The Hippocratic Oath Today: Meaningless Relic or Invaluable Moral Guide?” http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/doctors/oath_today.html).

many physicians in availing themselves for life enhancement programmes and procedures in healthcare.

Along with and apart from the healthcare sector, more serious danger lurks in the legislative authorities and judiciary. Although many nations subscribe to democratic form of governance, the actual legislative procedures – and to a great extent, even the functioning of the judiciary – are being manoeuvred by a powerful minority that has access to the inner sanctuaries and strongholds of political clout.

The natural and proclaimed aim of any state being the protection and enhancement of the public welfare or the common good, all members of the legislature and the judiciary have a responsibility to make sure that every adopted step ensures the realization of the same end. Human life is the basic substratum of this common good; in fact, in the absence of human life, there does not arise any consideration for common good at all. Then, naturally, the members of the legislature and judiciary have a bounden responsibility to ensure that life is respected, protected, and augmented through the enactment of laws and judicial activities. Any government and legal system that are accepted by the people should validate itself in terms of sound moral foundations; moreover, exercise of their powers could qualify to be moral only when it ultimately counters life negation in every form, and positively results in life affirmation and total life enhancement of the society. For example, legalisation of abortion, euthanasia, etc. – which has made out to be morally *normal* and legally *acceptable* in many democracies, through the concerted effort of legislative, executive, and judiciary bodies in any given state, with the powerful backup of the vested interests – clearly goes against the demands of a life affirming moral system. Certainly, the moral foundations of the authority of such a state are challengeable. The moral foundations of the society are eroding due to a lack of commitment on the part of the state, the acclaimed custodian and protector of the age-old value systems and foundations of human life. The net result of all these is that the future of humanity appears to be so bleak from the perspective of a culture of life.

Through the powerful backing of the media – enjoying a wider reach in terms of the globalised coverage – this minority is capable of manipulating the majority opinion to such an extent that what is finally legislated by the ruling government is apparently acclaimed to be the choice of the majority! The subtle manner adopted in this game is being sustained by the intelligence and finances lavishly supplied by

multinational companies, whose stakes all over the world continue to determine and change the course of events in human history and cultures.

Many of the recent aggressive international interventions in the Asian and African continents – which are conveniently christened as the “war waged against the ‘terrorist’ forces” by the US and its allies, with a proclaimed aim to make this world a better place to live – are said to be resulting from the hidden agendas of the multinational companies (occasionally, admitted to be the national interests of the US). It is a disquieting as well as a life-threatening situation in which the unilateral decisions of one nation – apparently democratic in governance – turn out to be the criterion and the exclusive controlling factor in deciding the affairs of the world and right and wrong for everyone. It is alarming from our perspective because the only motivating factor in this game – “war against terrorism” – seems to be exclusively economic benefits to the US and its allies, at the outright neglect of the rest of the world. It is a threat to the humanity; it is a continued challenge to the culture of life as well. The number of innocent people who have been killed and the destruction of hard-earned resources in many a country in the name of eliminating terrorism from the face of the earth have gone unnoticed (or, altogether neglected) by the ‘almighties’ among the media and *all-life-patronising* policies of the US. The value of life in the case of non-US persons seems to be quite low – or, even non-existent – according to the policies of various US-controlled agencies engaged in this *war game*. It is obvious that they adopt a double standard in applying the value of life criterion in the case of those who are in favour of and against the US. If we objectively analyse what had been happening before and after 9/11 all over the world, the number of people who have been killed has gone up without any due proportion, the respect and reverence accorded to human life have suffered enormously, especially in dealing with the lives of Afro-Asians, and, finally, the world is gradually becoming the worst place to live in as human life is endangered and uncertainties are building up from all corners.

The strategic manoeuvring employed by the so-called developed world in manipulating a large majority of the human race results in an almost total neglect and denial of life of those humans who are categorised to be of sub-human or even of animal status (for example, consider the treatment meted out to the prisoners of war in the recent Afghan and Iraq conflicts). This distressing situation calls for a positive involvement on the

part of those who, finally, turn out to be the losers of life. While the 'divide and rule' policy will be continuously employed by these forces to get their selfish designs fulfilled by hook or crook, others have to see to it that they do not become self-annihilating preys in the hands of the proponents of a culture of death. The self-alienating and destructive strategies of individuals as well as nations should be replaced by a strong collective will that is capable of binding and holding together the fragile lives of many a human, which, in turn, would become the strongest force on the face of the earth, if groomed properly.

The thriving of human life is possible in the twenty-first century only through the cooperative activity of human beings – although this may seem to be a mirage, an unrealizable fantastic ideal for ever. In fact, the human inventiveness that has characterised the contemporary world in many of its facets has been capable of ushering in a unitary world, a global village with dynamic networking of human as well as technical relationships. Although there are many undesirable and unwelcome attitudes, thoroughly manipulative strategies, and unhealthy practices, that tend to belittle this noble human leap towards a healthy and holistic existence in the globalised world of the present, the healthy trends have proved beyond doubt that interdependence is no more a theory or a sheer ideal, but a fact. In place of independence that had marked the modern times, interdependence has evolved to be the most obvious fact of a meaningful and effective mode of human existence. Thus, interdependence is the condition and quality of human existence in the contemporary world.

This issue of the *Journal of Dharma*, therefore, tries to address various aspects of a culture of life with a view to be instrumental in enhancing human life in its totality. The first entry, "Towards a Self-giving Love: A Biblical Model of Seven-Stage Development of Inter-Personal Dynamics," by Paul Savio Pudussery, delves deep into the biblical sources, and establishes the need for transcending individuality through our interpersonal dynamics. Through a meticulous analysis, the author establishes the transition of a disciple from one stage to the other – i.e., "how humanity is asked to move away from the most primitive form of unlimited revenge to the highest ideal of self-sacrificing love" – culminating in the supreme expression of love, the total self-giving love. It is "a love that spends itself to the extent of sacrificing one's life for the other," which, according to the author, would promote healthy and wholesome interpersonal relationships.

In the second article, “Life and Law,” Cherian Thunduparampil establishes the capacity of law, especially the Canon Law of the Catholic Church, to be life affirmative through “facilitating the social as well as individual life in bringing about common good through the establishment of good order.” The research positively affirms that “penal laws in the Church ... constitute an important section that explicitly tells about the life enhancing dimension of laws.” Further, according to the findings of the author, “laws function as a special instrument that creates order in the Church community where all recognize and accept mutually the rights of others to facilitate the life and smooth functioning of the community.”

A well-researched article on *hathayoga* by Ellen Goldberg analyses the process of self-cultivation resulting from the practice of *hathayoga*. It is contended that the practice of techniques adopted in *hathayoga* “guide or navigate the practitioner systematically through the constitution of the individual human body and the psyche to a direct experience of reality conceived in terms of its own particular cultural orientation as Siva-Sakti, a primordial unity that includes within itself the conjoined masculine and feminine principles.” Such a method of culturing human mind-body unity helps us “to see more clearly the enormous scope and depth of the human psycho-spiritual matrix,” and “to become completely absorbed in the state of *nirbija samadhi*,” a holistic and life affirming state of existence.

Next, we have a set of articles from different religious traditions. James Narithookkil, a Catholic priest, an acclaimed teacher, and an expert in Islamic Studies, holds that “Islam provides a harmonious balance in the life of human beings by putting together the worldly life and spiritual life side by side.” Taking the antagonism experienced by the religion of Islam into account, the author makes “a clarion call to the scholars and religious leaders of Islam to join hands to embark upon a noble venture of reviving the spiritual and moral values of Islam and, thus, to substantiate the fact that Islam is a culture of life and not death.” Addressing the contrast in the life vision of Buddhism and Daoism, Maja Milčinski proposes to explain the phenomenon of death in her article “Transcending Death.” Her contention that our approach towards life-death dynamics and our capacity to integrate them are important, leads Milčinski to establish that “it is enlightened self-interest that enables us to achieve the unity with our inner and outer environment and between mind and body.” Allen S. Maller, an ordained Rabbi from the US, optimistically analysing the text of Torah, holds that “hope and positive outlook” are Jewish religious duties. According to him,

these pertinent values are at the back of “major [Jewish] movements in Europe and America to improve the state of society and advance human improvement.” Yet another article from an African context, by John Ubrurhe, analyses the traditional healthcare practices of Urhobo traditional medicine. After critically deliberating upon the immensely rich practices of African traditional medicine, the author holds that “in order to meet the medical needs and aspirations of the people, the medical system must have a touch of science and technology.” He opines that improvements are essential in the traditional medical practices so as to equip them to effectively contribute “towards the maintenance, preservation, and enhancement of human life.”

In my essay, “Kant on Inclinations: ‘Alien’ or ‘Human’?” I make a philosophical analysis on Immanuel Kant’s transcendental ethics, especially critiquing the status accorded to human inclinations and desires within his moral system. Contending that the disproportionate importance given to reason and will in the critical philosophy sabotages the integrity of human beings, the author calls for an integral outlook within which both the rational and the emotional aspects could be conjoined together without losing the validity of his philosophical conclusions. In fact, this conclusion is arrived at by basing on Kant’s own understanding that “*each part of a person is integrally bound up with the whole.*”

In all, the contributors of this number of the *Journal of Dharma* convincingly establish the need to evolving, supporting and enhancing a culture of life in the human society. The specific role of religions and states in this process is an obvious fact. However, the initiative and insistence should primarily ensue from individual human beings, who have to consciously design and carry out a life that is capable of respecting, supporting and ennobling the life of oneself and others with a view to further strengthen the foundations of human life, culture, and values.

In fact, it is our conviction that human life cannot be lived, and a culture of life cannot be affirmed, promoted, and enhanced in the absence of mutual love and a passionate commitment: a love that is continuously expressed and mutually experienced between persons, and a firm, personal commitment that ensues from a trusting and self-giving person-to-person communion which, I am sure, would last forever as the spring and cradle of a culture of life.

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