

To Shana Ashar

From: Prof. J. Bryan Hehir

Re: Addressing the “Religious Public”

To address “The Religious Public” on a topic bearing upon “Human Integrity at the Frontiers of Biology” it is wise to highlight how broad that public is in the United States and globally. The pluralism of the Religious Public embraces the major historic religious traditions as well as spiritual/religious communities with much more recent origins. The latter include individuals and/or communities which often describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious”. This usually means there is neither an identifiable intellectual tradition which grounds its members nor is there any structure which holds the group together.

The historic religious communities exhibit both tradition and structure. Moreover, they all see the interpretation of what is authentically human and how human nature is interpreted, as part of their teaching and belief system. In other words, for these religious communities the topic of this symposium touches directly upon their basic meaning and purpose. The centrality of the topic, the human, does not, however, yield unanimity. Even within the ambit of the Western Christian tradition the interpretation of human nature and the ways in which it can be touched and treated by the resources of science and medicine, yields multiple answers. Classical debates about whether human nature is flawed or perfectible, whether various forms of treatment, efforts to enhance human nature, to care for it and/or cure it, date back centuries and are much with us today. The advances of modern science have opened questions regarding genetics, human experience, extending life through “artificial means” or ending life by human decision engage the religious traditions with individuals, communities and with public debates about these questions.

The way in which these broad questions, bearing upon the human, are addressed depend upon at least three factors. First, how the tradition of faith relates to an understanding of human reason and freedom. Second, how the religious tradition's statements, teaching and guidance is received by its membership. Third, how the voice of any religious tradition is weighed, understood, accepted or criticized in the broader civil community - local, national and international.