

Alfie Evans, and the Value of a Single Human Life

To many who can recall it, the on-going drama and death of Alfie Evans in the hospital in Liverpool recalls Burt Bacharach's plaintive song: "What's It All About, Alfie?" That is exactly the right question here. "What's it all about, when you sort it out. Alfie?" Probably no single reality could bring together so many things that need sorting out. "To sort out" means to put things in order, to distinguish what is important, what relates to what. In sorting it out, Alfie, recalls for us almost the whole moral memory of our peoples.

The most obvious issue is this: "What is the meaning and value of a single human life?" It was a question that Dostoyevsky often asked. Can one kill an utterly useless and obnoxious human being with no consequences to himself. In the case of infants, who is to decide this question of their worth? The parents? The doctors? The health system? The Government? The Courts?

Why was not this question posed differently? A human life is worthy in itself; it already existed in Alfie. Parents, doctors, health systems, judges. and governments are at his service, not vice versa. Governments were established to secure human life.

In Alfie's case, a young Catholic couple of no particular standing simply wanted their child at home or in the hands of other doctors. They even go to the Pope. The Italians were ready to do what they can. We wonder why the English Queen did not visit the child. Petitions were circulated that she should do so. Where was Theresa May?

Europe is famous for leaders who have no children. The Queen has children, grand-children, and great grand-children. She

once visited the ravages of war. Alfie was the victim of another sort of war. The Queen is bound by law. She did not choose to break it. If she had asked her son, "Take me to the hospital in Liverpool", the world would be quite different. The case now has world-wide attention. Alfie's death will keep it so.

What makes this case so riveting? It touches many strands in our civilization's history. There is something of Socrates in it. "It is never right to do wrong." This is the very Socratic foundation of the civilization into which Alfie was born. He was jailed in a hospital because some, with Machiavelli, think at times it is right to do wrong.

Also, something of the death of Christ is here in these scenes. The High Priest said that it is better for one man to die than the nation perish. "We have no king but Caesar." Alfie is kept a prisoner in a hospital to protect a government health system's credibility. Alfie must die there rather than take a chance that he might live. An Italian hospital plane was there to take him away. He should die in the care of his parents. This line of reasoning takes us back to Genesis itself, to a natural law found in our being, in Alfie's being.

With the visit to the Pope, we had something of the controversies of the Reformation. The English king is head of the church. Thomas More died over whether this local primacy was true. The silence of the Queen, herself a mother and a grandmother, implied that she had no independent voice. Parliament is supreme. All law is civil law. The parents in wanting their child home were breaking the law which decides who gets what care. No writ goes against the King. The King is in Parliament. No higher law exists in the land. Mrs May was silent. Alfie was isolated. Police enforced the law, whatever it is.

This case is also about the 1931 Lambeth Conference that justified for the first time contraception, a decision that

led logically to abortion, same-sex marriages, and euthanasia, to a continent that is choosing not to reproduce itself. If it was all right to kill millions of failed contraceptions, Alfie did not have a chance. He was an expense. He had no legal right to live in his land. His life did not have enough “quality”.

When we “sort out” Alfie’s case, we find that it connects almost everything that is wrong and everything that is right in our culture. Alfie had parents who were willing to confront the Leviathan. In Leviathan theory, they are bound to lose. In losing, however, they will win. That was what your life was about Alfie. You did sort things out for many who otherwise pay little attention to the lethal meaning of many of our laws and customs.

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