

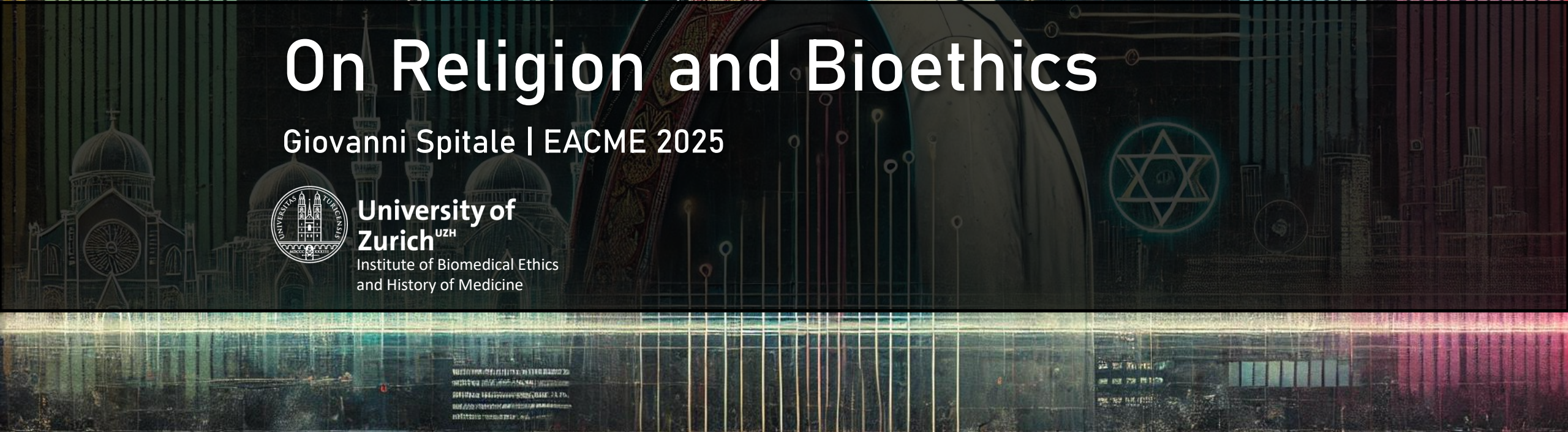


On Religion and Bioethics

Giovanni Spitale | EACME 2025



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Introduction

Introduction | Call for religious bioethics | Pluriversalism | Conclusion



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Received: 30 September 2024 | Revised: 21 February 2025 | Accepted: 18 March 2025

DOI: 10.1111/bioe.13419

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

bioethics WILEY

On Religious Influence in Bioethics: The Limits of Pluriversalism

Giovanni Spitale¹  | Federico Germani¹  | Brian D. Earp^{2,3}  |
Sebastian Porsdam Mann^{4,5}  | Maide Barış⁶  | Marco Annoni⁷  |
Kiarash Aramesh⁸  | Zohar Lederman⁹  | Calvin W. L. Ho^{10,11,12}  |
Karel Caals¹³  | Ambra D'Imperio^{14,15,16}  | Marcello Ienca^{17,18}  |
Shenuka Singh¹⁹  | Debora Spagnolo²⁰  | Nikola Biller-Andorno¹ 

¹Institute of Biomedical Ethics and History of Medicine, University of Zurich, Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

²Centre for Biomedical Ethics, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore, Singapore

³Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

⁴Center for Advanced Studies in Bioscience Innovation Law (CeBIL), Faculty of Law, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

⁵Faculty of Law, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

⁶Department of Medical History & Ethics, Marmara University, School of Medicine, Istanbul, Türkiye

⁷Interdepartmental Center for Research Ethics and Integrity (CID Ethics), CNR, Rome, Italy

⁸The James F. Drane Bioethics Institute, PennWest University, Edinboro, PA, USA

⁹Department of Emergency Medicine, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

¹⁰Faculty of Law, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

¹¹Centre for Medical Ethics and Law, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

¹²PHG Foundation, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

¹³Asian Bioethics Review, Singapore, Singapore

¹⁴Institut für Geschichte und Ethik der Medizin, Technische Universität München, München, Germany

¹⁵Universitäre Psychiatrische Dienste Bern (UPD), Bern, Switzerland

¹⁶Universitätsklinik für Forensische Psychiatrie und Psychologie (FPP), Bern, Switzerland

¹⁷Laboratory of Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience, Institut für Geschichte und Ethik der Medizin, Technische Universität München, München, Germany

¹⁸College of Humanities, EPFL, Lausanne, Switzerland

¹⁹Discipline of Dentistry, School of Health Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

²⁰Center for Mind and Brain Sciences, University of Trento, Rovereto, Italy



Disclaimer

- This presentation is not against religion *per se*.
- We acknowledge the value of religious perspectives in ethical discussions.
- We emphasize that religious traditions provide important moral insights and cultural perspectives.
- We advocate for religious contributions that align with publicly justifiable, universal ethical principles.
- Some of us authors describe themselves as religious / spiritual persons.


WCB 2024 – Why This Matters

- Venue: Qatar → controversy over LGBTQ+ rights and inclusivity.
- Theme: 'Religion, Culture, and Global Bioethics'.
- Strong push for religious frameworks in bioethics → raises question:

Can religious values shape bioethics without undermining universal human rights?

Magnus 2024; Klugman 2024; Schuklenk 2024; Jecker et al. 2023; Jecker et al. 2024 a; Jecker et al. 2024 b





Pluriversalism

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Jecker's Pluriversalism – Overview

- Proposed as alternative to Western universalism.
- Five principles:
 1. Civility
 2. Respect for law (later renamed 'Change from within')
 3. Justice
 4. Non-domination
 5. Toleration
- Aim: embrace cultural/religious diversity beyond pluralism.



Nancy Jecker, Professor of Bioethics & Humanities @ University of Washington School of Medicine, Department of Bioethics & Humanities; Adjunct Professor @ University of Washington Department of Philosophy and the School of Law; former IAB president

Jecker 2024; Jecker et al. 2024 c

Critique of Principles – Practical Flaws

- Civility: can silence dissent against domination.
- Respect for law: risks legitimizing oppressive laws (e.g., anti-LGBTQ laws).
- Justice: can clash with religious doctrines restricting autonomy (e.g. female leadership, modesty standards, abortion, ...).
- Non-domination: multiple internal inconsistencies (justice, tolerance, ...)
- Toleration: paradox of tolerating intolerance.

Spitale et al. 2025



Critique – Deeper Problem (1)

- If all worldviews are equally valid, even anti-pluralistic ones → relativism.
- Hard (if not impossible) to make ethical evaluations in an interconnected world.
- Risk of ethical incoherence: validates incompatible ethical perspectives simultaneously.
- Which values or religious perspectives qualify as legitimate stakeholders is undefined → basis of authority for these principles
- Framework collapses: no baseline to prevent oppression or protect rights.

Spitale et al. 2025



Critique – Deeper Problem (2)

- Three possible foundations—each problematic:
 - A single foundational principle would conflict with the pluralistic essence of pluriversalism.
 - Integrating “common” values could lead to parochial or biased results (is/ought).
 - Negotiation of principles: this aligns with secular bioethics, which emphasizes public reason and minimal principles.
- If Jecker's principles are meant to apply universally, they resemble (*a broken version of*) secular pluralism more than true pluriversalism.
- If the principles are not universal, they fail as a foundation for global bioethics, limiting their applicability across diverse cultural contexts.

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Conclusion

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Human Rights as Shared Baseline

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights = globally negotiated foundation.
- Compatible with diverse religions/cultures.
- Provides common ground for dialogue and critique.
- Avoids fragmentation into isolated 'ethical islands'.

Spitale et al. 2025; Cohen 1996; Morsink 1999; Forsdam Mann et al 2020



Including Religion – What It Means

- Translate religious insights into universally accessible arguments.
- Respect diversity without imposing doctrines.
- Support patients and communities while protecting universal rights.

Spitale et al. 2025



Conclusion (1)

- Religion can enrich bioethics – *when translated through public reason.*
- Human rights provide a stable, shared foundation.
- Bioethics must remain inclusive, rational, and globally relevant.

Spitale et al. 2025



Conclusion (2)

- Bioethics requires *some* degree of universality, at least to the extent that it has to engage with problems that cross borders, or which have global significance.
- Some common language is required (Appiah 2007) to support the cooperation required to tackle complex global challenges (Biller-Andorno 2011).
- Pluriversality allows each culture and religion to prioritize its own ethical standards, which challenges the possibility of a shared set of values that facilitate dialogue in bioethics.
- True pluralism stands in antithesis to pluriversalism.

Spitale et al. 2025; Appiah 2007; Biller-Andorno 2011



In the past century, many authoritarian regimes, including both religious and ostensibly non-religious (e.g., cult-of-personality) dictatorships, tried to justify the violation of human rights by calling those rights Western and alien concepts and by appealing to what they call local principles and values.

By grounding bioethical discourse in universally acceptable human rights and reasons, we can ensure that ethical discussions are inclusive, rational, and respectful of diverse perspectives (including religious perspectives) while maintaining clear ethical standards.

This approach allows for the accommodation of pluralistic views without compromising the possibility of a meaningful dialogue.

The pluriversal alternative, we contend, is not applicable. Even if it were, it would fragment humanity into an archipelago of morally isolated atolls, leaving us adrift in a sea of unreachable islands à la “*cuius regio, eius religio.*”

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“The relevant difference for me is not between believers and non-believers, but between thinkers and non-thinkers; that is, between those who reflect on various questions, and the indifferent who do not reflect.”

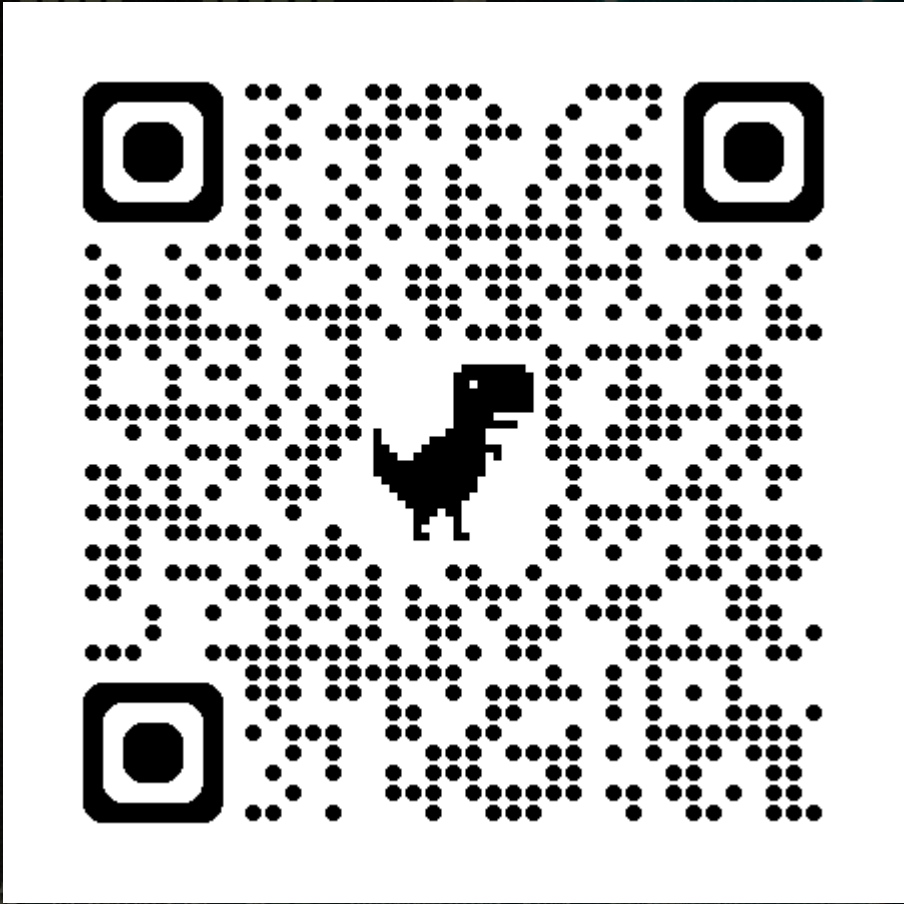
- Norberto Bobbio, atheist philosopher
(quote popularized by Carlo Maria Martini, a catholic cardinal and archbishop)



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So long,
and thanks for all the fish.



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