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The Orthodox Church and problems of bioethics and ecology

The Orthodox Church and bioethics

Although the Orthodox Church is constantly engaged in dialogue, debate and discussion in response to contemporary and controversial issues, she is actually unprepared to express a well-grounded and credible proposal of its own on a panorthodox level to elaborate "*the prospects and dangers arising in the impressive achievements of modern genetics and biotechnology, and in particular to issues of bioethics implied in the application of these scientific interventions on a) the beginning of life, b) the duration of life, and c) the end of human life.*" For this reason, at the request of many local Orthodox Churches, the Ecumenical Patriarchate convened for the first time an international scientific congress in September 2002 at its Orthodox Center at Chambésy-Geneva on the timely and complex theme: "The Church and Bioethics: The Word of Science and the World of Religion."¹

This congress has provided the necessary background for constructive dialogue in the search for a common meeting ground, without implying in principle any opposition or contradiction between religion and science. It also aimed "*to resolve the great confusion that exists in terms of the possible negative repercussions arising from the decoding of the human genome, in particular by the extreme and arbitrary interventions of science in human genetic material.*" The proceedings of the congress launched a new process on a panorthodox level using an interdisciplinary approach to continue this important dialogue about the *sanctity of life, the freedom of scientific research and the fundamental principles of human rights* in order to arrive at some minimum common code of bioethical principles.

On the occasion of the Synaxis-Assembly of the Primates of the Orthodox Church in December 2000, at the Phanar, it was decided to create an interorthodox Committee on bioethical issues. In the meantime, the Churches of Greece and Moscow have created Synodal Commissions to formulate a series of statements related to bioethics. The Church of Greece has also established a Center for Biomedical Ethics and Deontology, a forum for research. The Theological Institute of Saint Sergius in Paris organizes an annual colloquium on bioethics since 1997. Orthodox theologians of Member Churches of the Conference of European Churches are also members of the Working Group on Bioethics and Biotechnology of the Church and Society Commission which follow developments within the Council of Europe and the European Union. The

results of these initiatives will indeed contribute to formulating position on bioethics issues and developing an appropriate language on the subject.

However how does the Orthodox Church do bioethics? Orthodox bioethics draws from the experience grounded in Holy Scripture and Tradition which refer to the very existence of human beings in all its dimensions, material and spiritual. Orthodox theology is expressed in its dogma, worship and sacramental life. This has ethical implications for life issues. Our theology therefore cannot be marginalized in the ethical decision making process. It is the very essence of ethics. *Ethics is applied theology, theology in action* - the Christian way of life. Our theology must be interpreted in existential terms and made relevant to the existential needs and demands of humankind with all their aspirations and hopes as they confront the mystery of life and death. Orthodox bioethics is the word of God, theology, to address the results of progress in medicine and biology.

Therefore, we the faithful, both clergy and laity, cannot simply remain indifferent or blind *consumers* of the medical and technological options. Neither can we allow ourselves to be subjected to medical experimentation for the sake of scientific progress or economic and political interests that jeopardize the destination of man in relation to God and his creation. This can also pose a threat both to a nation's internal social cohesion, and to the peaceful co-existence between peoples and nations.

To avert this process, the Orthodox Church has the duty and responsibility in terms of both human reality and divine purpose, to devote all its efforts to emphasise the importance of man as a *person* and help provide clear guidelines, through formation and education, for clergy and laity alike. The will of God, while preserving our freedom, guides us to discover the "mind of the Church" from Tradition on these crucial issues, thereby to preserve our salvation in Christ and to reflect the truths of the Faith. The *ethos* (from which etymologically the word ethics is derived) of the Orthodox Church can be summarized in the words of Saint Paul: "*And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God*" (Rom 12:2)

Mystery of Life: sanctity of life, Freedom and human rights

The center of the dialogue in the area of bioethics therefore is the human *person* who for the Orthodox Church is the real object of its mission in the world and in the history of salvation. Man is created in the image and likeness of God. The ontology of man is founded in the person of Christ, God's incarnate Logos. Christ assumes human nature and of all creation restoring man to his holiness by eliminating evil and death. The relationship between God and man is restored. Any betrayal of the true nature of man is a betrayal to the truth. Thus a key theological principle in Orthodox theology is the following: the degree of being of the individual person depends on the degree of participation in God. The transcendence of death can only be achieved in the unique calling for humanity who is created in the image of God (the only absolute good) to become "like God", Who is Immortal, thereby achieving theosis. This is the mystery of

life. Endowed with sacredness from its conception, human life thus finds its ultimate sense, its deeply spiritual meaning in the quest for sanctity or holiness.

"The divine gift of freedom is the fulfillment of the human person, and is so to the extent that on the one hand the individual carries within himself or herself the image of the personal God and on the other hand personal community on the basis of the unity of the human race mirrors the life of the Holy Trinity and the community of the three divine persons." The dignity of the human person and the value of human freedom are mutually dependent. When man is free independent of his Creator he becomes autonomous self-determined in relation to God and thus falls away from Him. If human freedom is abused and human rights are not applied affirming the inviolate dignity as a human person, this will give rise for more evil in life and in the world. Furthermore, only in community can individuals achieve personhood.

Two dimensions of the sanctity of life include the care for life,² since life is a gift of God, and the transmission of life. To alleviate disease, fear, misfortune, pain and suffering, God has entrusted us with the responsibility to use all available methods to restore both spiritual and medical health of the faithful from their conception until death. Pain and suffering in the Christian life possess *redemptive value*. Concern for the sick manifests itself in the ethical teachings of Christ who is the Great Physician of body and soul without down grading human efforts through science and medicine in cooperation with God's will in the healing of human illnesses. Faith and medicine were integrated into the healing process as many priests, monks and theologians studied researched and practised medicine.

The transmission of life is taken up and sanctified in the sacrament of marriage, which determines the nature, and identity of the Christian family. Marriage is a fundamental relation in which the two persons are united into a communion of love *reflecting the union between Christ and the Church*. Resorting to medically assisted procreation by donors, for example, attacks the integrity of the marriage, the mother-child and/or father-child relationship and each person. The decomposition of the family, the very cellule of society, affects in turn the social cohesion of society.

Man is not an autonomous being. He is created in the image and likeness of God that bears responsibilities on his destination and transfiguration of the world. *Therefore, the Church, insisting on Christian anthropology, declares the sacredness of the human person and the inviolability of divine creation for any scientific research, which sometimes violates the natural law in order to improve the quality of duration of human life. The Church sincerely respects the fundamental principle of freedom of scientific research and progress, particularly in the human sciences. But at the same time, it defends its special spiritual relationship with man, as this is defined through faith regarding the relationship between man and God and man and the world.*

The following conclusions were made on the question of the method of therapeutic cloning of genetic material from the embryo: science and religion perhaps could find and seek possible convergence on this method *in order to correct any genetic abnormalities observed during pre-natal testing or to improve the quality and duration of human life*. This would be based on the presupposition that this method not affect the sacredness of the human person and the *genuine continuity of the mystery of life in accordance with the reason of divine creation*. *The Church however has legitimate reservations not only with respect to the extreme methods used but also to the predicted results for human life*. In addition, this method *forces nature to take part in something which nature cannot do alone*. The participants, scientists and theologians also *unanimously rejected the use by science of the genetic material of the embryo, and of man more generally, for reproductive cloning, an effort that was deplored unanimously as lacking any moral base and should be prohibited by strict sanctions*.

Foundation (or Parameters) for Orthodox Bioethical Principles

The model of the compatibility of faith and medicine during the Byzantine Empire and the creation of the hospital by the Church cannot but only reinforce the relation between the Church and medicine and biotechnology. They have the possibility to determine separately and/or together the fate of each human being. The act of death can either be averted (or suspended), accelerated, or leaving it to its natural process. On one hand the Church affirms the reality of death and transcends it in the person of Christ through her sacramental life. However on the other hand the affirmation of the reality of death challenges medicine and biotechnology to transcend death within the limits of created existence: place, time, change etc. the innate characteristics and attributes of the cosmos with the purpose to counteract death with the cost of another act of death or to conquer death by death. The word of knowledge and the word of religion must be fused with the motivation of the virtue of charity, philanthropy, in all its dimensions.

Based on the key theological principle of the absolute and universal value of human dignity and the restoration of the image and likeness of God, the following so-called parameters can be applied in the area of bioethics to reach bioethical principles:

1. The philanthropy of God is expressed in His Incarnation, death and resurrection. The *Economy* (dispensation) of death is the Economy of Christ and not the economy or saving work of man of man. The economy of death cannot be used by man. Christ "manipulated" death by dying Himself. However, because of the incarnate God, death is annihilated by death. Man of course manipulates death for various reasons however cannot annihilate death from created existence. It is the mortal nature of creation and the state of mortality of humanity due to its Fall.

2. Life and death must be seen from the perspective from the divine plan of God through the Incarnation and the transcendence of death in the life of the Church. Therefore the act of death must be left to the natural process of man in the same way there birth is. Rev.

Nikolaos Hatzinikolaou vividly describes the psychology of the human being with respect to the mystery of life and death: *"The more we try to forget the laws of disintegration biologically, the more nature reminds us of them mechanically. In addition, the closer we come to mystery of life, the more we lose the elixir of soul's immortality. Whatever biologically eternalises man, it spiritually deprives him of the sense and essence of his immortality. Refusing to accept the reality of death transforms it from a momentary event to a predominant condition. Death only eternalises and immortalises..."*³

3. Bioethics must affect the entire human being, body and soul and not only the body. The Orthodox Church believes in the unity of the psychosomatic constitution of the human person even after death. *"The whole man consists of both body and soul. Man lives with a body, and even with the body he will be judged for whatever good or evil he has done"* (2 Cor. 5:10). We, theologians, need to make an appeal to those who affect the separation of the body and the soul because paradoxically it sets the stage for the ultimate eradication of the separation of the soul from unity with God.

4. Science does not have the moral prerogative to use death as a tool to grant life or to interrupt life for a higher goal. Death for science cannot be an instrument to serve higher ideals for the prestige of medicine and/or to fulfil the desires of individual human beings. There is no beneficial role of death in science. Science unfortunately cannot create a new world free from the act of death. Death is inevitable and cannot be defeated. Death may be averted but not for an indefinite period of time. The *act of death* is irreversible in the limits of created existence, thereby restricting the word of science. God is the One who reverses this condition to a state of blessedness of immortality

5. The freedom for scientific research is limited when dependent upon God the Creator since creation and man is respected. Freedom of scientific research is preserved in the image of God in man who is a creative being. The freedom of the human person to create however must be accompanied with discernment. The freedom of scientific research is preserved only in divine origin. Science and technology devoid of divine origin leads to other forms of evil. This existential outlook on the scientist's being will not betray the true nature of the psychosomatic unity of the human person. Science has the sacred function to respect the human being and not treat it simply as a biological entity.

The Orthodox Church and the protection of the natural environment

The criteria for evaluating the sanctity of human life are valid analogously for the life of the world as well, since man is a microcosm of the universe, while the world is a natural extension of the human being. The physical interdependence of the life of man and of the world determines not only their deeper existential relationship, but also the validity of ethical values with respect to protecting the human environment. In this way, the providence of God covers all of divine creation, with its fundamental principles of natural law and also the personal responsibility of the human

being to function as a steward (*oikonomos*) of divine creation. With this understanding, the sanctity of human life and its protection from any arbitrary or inappropriate usage constitute the highest duty of every human being before God, his fellow man and the world.

For this reason the Ecumenical Patriarchate⁴ has foreseen in a timely manner the contemporary ecological dangers of humanity as a whole, and has undertaken initiatives, drawing from its spiritual mission, that aim at promoting a responsible human attitude and behavior towards divine Creation.

For this purpose the Ecumenical Patriarchate:

1) In light of the crucial state of the ecological problem, in 1989, His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, by decision of the Holy Synod, named September 1st of each year as the Day for the Protection of the Natural Environment, something that been accepted by the Orthodox and some other Christian Churches. This day in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church is the Feast of the Indiction and the first day of the ecclesiastical year. In his message the Ecumenical Patriarch stressed the importance of Orthodox tradition to the contribution in overcoming the ecological problem and called upon the Orthodox faithful and every person of good will to be aware of their responsibility and to take necessary action to help change our behavior and attitude so that we can protect our natural environment and restrict its destruction. It was especially emphasized the need for all of us to display a "Eucharistic and ascetic spirit": *"the Eucharistic spirit reminding us,"* in the words of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in the Closing Address at the Fourth International International Scientific Symposium "Religion-Science-Environment" on the The Adriatic Sea "A Sea at Risk, A Unity of Purpose" held in June 2002, *that the created world is not simply our possession but it is a gift - a gift from God the Creator, a healing gift, a gift of wonder and beauty - and that our proper response, on receiving such a gift, is to accept it with gratitude and thanksgiving. The ascetic spirit in relation to the environment, we are to display enkrateia, "self-restraint", that is to say we are to practice a voluntary self-limitation in our consumption of food and natural resources. Each us of us is called to make a crucial distinction between what we want and what we need. The missing dimension in our environmental ethos and ecological action is **sacrifice**: to move from theory to action, from words to deeds. It is an ethical issue. The fundamental problem of the ecological crisis lies not in the environment but in the human heart, inside ourselves and in the way we think about own selves, about our relationship with the world and with God. It is a question of metanoia a revolutionary change of mind."* This attitude to nature involved in the Eucharist and the ascetic tradition of the Church had been previously emphasized in the Message of the Primate of the Orthodox Church at the Phanar on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, the 15th of March 1992.

2. It promoted inter-disciplinary dialogue on ecological issues on the local and the international levels and at the same time engaged in warning, as far as possible, the sensitivities of the religious, political, and academic leadership and also that of public opinion in this regard. The Patriarchate's

related initiatives are directed to this end and not to any transient or sensational purpose. These initiatives include: international conferences; group activities on land, rivers, and seas, which are exposed to special ecological violations; messages, appeals, paternal admonitions, and declarations, such as the recent one that was jointly signed by both the Pope of Rome and the Ecumenical Patriarch.

3. It encouraged approaching and investigating ecological issues not only from the narrow spectrum of economics and technology, but also under the broader prism of spiritual and related parameters.

4. It prompted ecclesiastical institutions of the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch to develop special activities (The Orthodox Center of Chambésy/Geneva, The Orthodox Academy of Crete/The Institute of Theology and Ecology, etc.)

It advances the cooperation of the church with political, social, academic, and other agencies of environmental interest and took steps to introduce the ecological problem in the Agenda of inter-church and interreligious dialogues and activities.

The broad acceptance of the initiatives and activities of the Ecumenical Patriarchate constitutes a clear indication that society expects and receives the responsible word of the Church on the environment, and hence the Church must intensify her efforts in this direction, given of course the deterioration of the ecological, biotechnical and other related difficulties.

Conclusions

The above theological foundation affirms the sanctity of life, freedom of scientific research, human rights. Our theology provides the parameters for reflection and dialogue to reach at Orthodox bioethical principles, acknowledging that the world in itself does not have the divine means to affect ontologically the destiny of human nature. The fields of bioethics, technology, medicine and science must be developed in such a manner that they will *"keep our relationship with the other pole of our existence – with our Creator and our archetype."*⁵

The debate remains open with respect to the existential question related to bioethical issues: what are the criteria to affect the natural process of life and death with its positive and/or negative repercussions directly affecting the destiny of man, biologically and spiritually? The wider context of this question entails also the social, political, economic and cultural consequences. A most profound and important text which will enable to evaluate the implications of bioethical issues are the decisions of the IIIrd Preconciliar Panorthodox Conference in 1986 on the subject of *"the contribution of the Orthodox Church to the realization of peace, justice, freedom, fraternity and love between the nations as well as to the elimination of racial and other forms of discrimination."*⁶

The concluding paragraph of the decisions of the IIIrd Preconciliar Conference which defines the mission and task of Orthodoxy in the world today: *"Because we Orthodox Christians have access to the significance of salvation we must devote ourselves for the alleviation of disease, fear and misfortune; because we have access to the experience of peace the lack of peace in contemporary society must not leave us indifferent; because we have experience the benefits of God's justice we commit ourselves to greater justice in the world and the overcoming of all oppression; because every day we experience God's grace we commit ourselves to the fight against every kind of fanaticism and intolerance among people and nations; because we tirelessly proclaim God's becoming and man's being raised to the level of God we commit ourselves to the defense of human rights for all people and nations; because thanks to Christ's act of redemption we experience the freedom bestowed by God we can better proclaim its universal value for all people and nations; because in the holy Eucharist we are nourished with the body and blood of the Lord we experience the necessity of sharing God's gifts with our brethren, we understand better what hunger and deprivation mean and fight for them to be overcome; because we await a new heaven and a new earth when absolute justice will reign we commit ourselves here and now to the rebirth and renewal of man society."*

It has been therefore the mission and task of Orthodoxy to accelerate the process of study and reflection on the issues of bioethics and ecology, on an interorthodox, ecumenical and interreligious level.

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Notes:

1. See conclusions of the International Scientific Congress, *Episkepsis* 614 (31.10.2002) p. 3-10
2. See presentation on *Caring for Life* to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches on 28 August 2003 in Geneva.
3. Archimandrite Nikolaos Hatzinikolaou, "Transmitting Bioethics on Spiritual Wavelength", in: *2-3 Annals: Theological Perspectives in Bioethics and Orthodoxy and the Third Millennium*, St. John of Damascus Institute of Theology, University of Balamand, 2001.
4. See Memorandum on the efforts undertaken by the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the Protection of the Natural Environment, 3 October 2002; Paps, Metropolitan Athanasios of Heliopolis and Theira, *The Ecological Activities of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Kleronomia* 32, Issues I-II, June-December 2000, 131-145 (in Greek)
5. Paulus Mar Gregorius, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence*, Paragon House, New York, 1988, p.225
6. Decisions of the IIIrd Preconciliar Conference (1986), *Episkepsis* 369 (15.12.1986) p.27-28