

**BIOETHICS FROM THE POINT OF
VIEW OF THE ORTHODOX (RUSSIAN)
CHURCH**

Luka Tomašević

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University of Split

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Summary

The need to create bioethics emerged in the Russian post-communist society. A medically related profound ethical question of abortion or that of justified distribution of sanitary resources arose. Thus, bioethics in Russia found its roots in medical ethics and clinical bioethics.

Its background involves theological reflections based on Orthodox ethics and ethics of the Russian Orthodox Church which has interceded with the Government several times and published its *Document on social issues*, one dealing with bioethics.

The author tries to trace the beginning of bioethics in the Orthodox theology, moreover the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church, but also attempts to offer theological-ethical background of the Orthodox thought based on the Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition.

Key words: bioethics, Russia, Christianity, Orthodoxy, medicine, theology, tradition, ethics.

Introduction

Present 21st century is marked by a new and *great revolution* supported by science which is merited for a great progress in the past thirty years or more. It is called *biothechnological revolution* and our century *biotechnological*¹ one. Enormous advances in biology, especially in genetics have imposed questions referring to *homological and heterological procreation* in laboratory, human genome and its manipulation, genetic engineering, animal but also human cloning, and scientific research of human embryos for therapeutic or eugenic purposes.

Philosophy of life have changed: life is no more taken as a *self-value* but rather as a *quality* of living i.e. *living life*. It is the point of transition from *holiness of life* to its quality which consequently implies quality of human relationships. Furtherly, it leads to a consequence that life is not exclusively in God's hands, but in ours as well, because its quality depends on us i.e humans. Therefore, it can be said that the present comprehension of life is rather *subjective*.

From the point of view of Christianity, life is a precious gift of God. This gift has to be developped, kept and cared by human who has never been master of life but rather its servant, as its master being God. Consequently, any Christian-theological view of life is quite *life-giving*. The author of this paper tries to present one of such Christian view, Orthodox and Russian Orthodox.

1 Theological bioethics

The emergence and development of general bioethics or lately global or integrative bioethics in Croatia² coincides with the development of theological

¹ Rifkin J. J., The biotech century. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.; 1998. (Hrv. Prijevod *Biotehnološko stoljeće. Trgovina genima u osvit vrllog novog svijeta*. Zagreb: Hrvatsko sociološko društvo; 1999.)

² Tomašević L., From Medical Ethics to Bioethics: The Development in Catholic Theology, as well as in American and European Cultures, in: Čović A., Intregative Bioethik und Pluriperspektivismus – Integorative Bioethics and Pluri-Perspectivism.

bioethics which can be defined as quoted: „ Bioethics is a part of moral philosophy dealing with permissibility or unpermissibility of interventions or manipulations with human life, especially these related to the practice and the progress of medical and biological science“.³

From the historical point of view, bioethics is generated in Christian cultural context and it is easy to perceive historically, the close connection between medical ethics and Christian tradition and principles influencing it substantially. Healing of the sick is immanent to Christianity through proclaiming of the Gospel and its missionary duty. Jesus told his disciples: “ As ye go, preach , saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand! Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils!” (Mt 10, 7:8). The gift of healing was emphasized by St. Paul as one of the charismas of the first church (1Kor 12, 9) and St. Irenaeus, St. Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Hippolytus of Rome testified a therapeutical dimension of salvation. From the 4th century on monastery staff were to take the role of healing not only for their members but also for pilgrims and travellers.⁴

Western Christian theologians (especially those in USA) actually took part and followed up the emergence and development of bioethics. Furthermore, Christianity has inexhaustible sources on life, human being and his activity which, included in the Bible and tradition, always favour the affirmation of man and life. Man is not any being but rather human being God created for Himself, in His own image, as His interlocutor and sucreator (God likeness in the Eastern theology). Though created, dependent and limited being, man has his immense dignity. In the Bible man perceives himself as an active, creative and responsible being. He is not an absolute master, neither of himself nor of the worldly life but merely responsible manager. So, the Christian teaching points out that God created the world and man and all He created has been left to man's governance.

Proceedings of the 4th Southeast European Bioethics Forum 2008, Opatija: Academia Verlag – Sankt Augustin; 2010. p.265-277.

³ Tettamanzi D., Bioetica, nuove frontiere per l'uomo, Casale Monferrat: 1991.

⁴ Langella, A., La funzione terapeutica della Salvezza, in: AA.VV, Liturgia e terapia. Padova: Ed. Messaggero; 1994. in: Pastorale sanitaria, Cina G.- Locci E.- Rocchetta C.- Sandrin L. (a cura di), Dizionario di teologia pastorale sanitaria. Torino: Ed. Camilliane; 1997., p. 831.

It is interesting that God didn't give man any *working* programme, but rather reason and freedom to find out and follow the laws and way of life. Man is therefore an integrated part of nature, he is immersed into it.

The Christianity has additionally introduced into bioethics one of its specific concept of *love*. Love is namely, the source of moral Christian life and the essence of the very Christian proclamation of Christ. Actually, God was first to love us freely, so we are to love each other (1 John 4, 10), and the culmination of such love was shown by Christ Himself when He laid down his life for others (John 15, 13). Therefore, He is real „measure“ of love for any Christian. According to such law of love Christians have to recognise each other (John 13, 35) and deeds of love should be their truly Christian preoccupation. Thus, Christian love is taken as a form of all virtues.

1.1. The emergence of Christian Catholic Bioethics

Western or Catholic Christianity develops so called *metaethical* reflection, typical for the Catholic Church, which properly differs the value of life from any other anthropological attitude. The Catholic Church elaborates the relationship between personal life and sexuality within the framework of axiological science but it also encompasses ambryo-political and technical science issues as they include possible manipulation with the sources of life. Obviously, such bioethics hasn't merely kept on with its traditional deontological Catholic views but also searched for new ways of „bioethic interference“ among religion, science and humanistic culture. Its „bioethic interference“ was nothing more than Potter's „bridge“. A papal encyclical *Evangelium vitae*⁵ is especially important for *Catholic Bioethics*. Life is hermeneutic key of Catholic bioethics.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, „Euangelium vitae“. *Evangelium vitae* is the eleventh encyclical of Pope John Paul II., it has IV chapters and it is devoted to values and inviolability of human life. It is completely dedicated to bioethics and it is Pope's response to the demand of cardinals gathered on Consortium on 4th to 7th April 1991 for Pope to give his judgement on some burning questions of new medical ethics. Official Italian edition is: Lettera Enciclica *Evangelium vitae* del Sommo PonteTce Giovanni Paolo II ai Vescovi, ai Presbiteri e ai Diaconi, ai religiosi e alle religiose, ai fedeli laici e a tutte le persone di buona volonta' sul valore e l'invilabilita' della vita umana, 25th March 1995, Supplement in L'Osservatore Romano no. 76 on 31st March 1995.

Life should always be reflected through its historical context, and it is directed forward both by man and God. Thus, on the one hand, it is man's history and on the other hand, God's mission to that very man.

Moreover, man's dignity is based on it, actually on his *freedom*. „God gives freedom to each individual. Freedom as a such includes *essential relational dimension*. It is a great gift of God, the Creator, put in the service of a person and his/her accomplishment through self-giving and accepting of others".⁶ Such freedom is justified through the fact that any individual has his/her personal orientation and responsibility to his/her mission.

Catholic bioethics implies *Agape structure* of love i.e. receiving and giving love according to which medicine rather converts from profession to a *mission*, favouring that way a patient who becomes brother. Only through received and given love individuals are able to come closer to each other and to create dimensions of the meaning of life and illness. It is a matter of love deprived of any interest which is given and transformed in *love serving* if it is a case of person God trusted to our responsibility. Such love would never cause any discrimination among patients, but would rather care for whole life and life of all.

In a nutshell, it is to conclude: *our biological nature mustn't be observed apart from the sense it has for us*. It implies the fact that man, due to his reason, has to find the sense of his structures but also to accept and integrate his biological nature for the sake of humanity. Otherwise, biological process itself doesn't create moral demand, it is rather created by his attachment to human person i.e. his sense in belonging to interpersonal relationship, his dignity of an agent in God's plan and his possibility of bearing future life.

1.2. Emergence and development of Orthodox bioethics

Orthodox bioethics bases its ethical judgements somehow differently. Orthodox Christianity is deeply conscious that it itself is exclusively the source of Christ Church and that it has to serve, in its own way, to its people as a spiritual

⁶ Harakas C.C., Radi zdravlja tela i duše – pravoslavni uvod u bioetiku, in: www.pravoslovo.net. Translation from English original www.goarch.org

and moral directing post through life (the soteriological mission). The serving is realised through teaching of proper effort of man to realise himself as an image of God (god likeness). Orthodoxy points to the fact that people are given guidelines by an existing God. However, these guidelines shouldn't be taken arbitrarily or easily. They have to reflect the *faith confessed* by the Church and should be *based on the fundamental truths of the Orthodox teaching which as the proclamation of God is found in Christ Church*. Based on such reflections Orthodox ethics gives fundamental guidelines and answers to contemporary questions and issues referring to bioethics. ⁷

Though, Orthodox ethics has only few normative regulations. Its ethical judgements are based on Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition. Holy tradition consists of the "*mind of the Church*" and is discerned in the decisions of ecumenical and local councils, the writings of the Holy Fathers of the Church, canon law and the penitentials. Modern issues are elaborated in accordance with the "*mind of the Church*" through the past, and any doctrine is subjected to episcopal, synodical or general Church criticism.

Orthodox ethicists are unanimous and maintain a common ethic attitude in response to modern issues in bioethics which often expect from ethicists to find parallels in the tradition due to which they can make new ethical guidelines. The most distinguished Orthodox ethicists of the present are as follows: O. Clement (1921-2009) from France; D. Stanloe and N. Mladin from Romania; Ch. Yannaris, G. Mantzaridis and I. Zizioulos from Greece; S.S. Harakas (1932) and V. Guroian from USA, all of them present their anthropological and spiritual aspects of Christian life in their handbooks, and just some of them highlight a moral feature of Christianity. ⁸

Orthodox theological anthropology is based on the fact of human *God likeness* as a given and a potential. Some of the patristic authorities distinguish between the creation of human beings in the "*image*" of God, and in his

⁷ See a great survey on Orthodox bioethics in: Petra' B., *L'etica ortodossa. Storia, fonti, identità*. Assisi: Citadella Editrice; 2010. p. 49.

⁸ Petra', B., *Ortodossia (chiese ortodosse) e Bioetica*, in: *Nuovo Dizionario di Bioetica*. Roma: Salvino-Leone-Salvatore Privitera ed.; 2004., p.794-798.

"likeness." "Image" is the *donatum* of intellect, emotion, ethical judgment, and self-determination. In fallen humanity these remain part of human nature, albeit darkened, wounded, and weakened. The "likeness" is the human *potential* to become *like God*, i.e. Godlike, to achieve an ever expanding, never completed perfection. This fulfillment of our humanity is traditionally referred to as *theosis* or (*divinization*). Human beings are in fact "less than fully human." To achieve *theosis* means to realize our full human potential. Ethically, this teaching leads to the acceptance, on the one hand, of the existence of a *human nature*, but, on the other, it clearly does not restrict our *humanum* to conformity to that nature. The "image" provides a firm foundation for ethical reasoning. The *likeness* offers the basis for ethical reasoning.

Orthodox Christianity teaches that, though God is Lord of history, he does not coerce or force obedience and conformity to his will. Forced conformity would be *dehumanization*, whereas fulfilled humanity - which is the divinization of human life - must be free, since God is free. This raises the question of Divine Providence and Human Responsibility.

Moreover, the principle of love not only keeps ethics from legality but also presents a light-motiv of any activity. In this sense, love is very important for any action as the Holy Trinity is united in love, so the Church teaches that being Godlike means being filled with love. According to this, any love-based action is in harmony with all God gave us in his Commandments.

The first efforts aimed at providing a comprehensive Orthodox ethical teaching on bioethical questions are presented in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* (1978), by Samuel Stanley Harakas, professor of moral theology in Holy Cross Theological School (Brookline, Boston). Presented article shouldn't be taken as an *official attitude* of all Orthodox Church, but as an important theological contribution to Orthodox bioethics. In any case, it has been used to initiate informed intra-Orthodox reflection, discussion and decision.⁹ Until its publication, Orthodoxy hasn't discuss bioethical issues, whereas the problems of life, health, death and birth were

⁹ Breck, J., *The Sacred Gift of Life. Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics*. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press; 1998.

treated due to the documents of special moral theology, according to the God's Commandments or Christian duties.

The work of Harakas has been the unique one about Orthodox ethics for twenty years, until the publication of the first manual of Orthodox bioethics ¹⁰ by John Breck, S. Vladimir's seminary professor (New York), in 1998. Two years later, in 2000, Tristram Engelhardt, convert to Orthodoxy, published a manual titled the *Foundations of Christian Bioethics*. ¹¹

Although, West European Orthodox Church are not specially interested in bioethics, as it condemns any genetic manipulation in advance and regards bioethics as the last Western heresy, O. Clermont (1990) ¹² supervised by theologian and bioethicist Harakas (Boston) and John Breck, has developed orthodox aspect of bioethics in USA, which particularly progressed in 1991, due to the conversion of H.T. Engelhardt. An interest for bioethics in the Greek Orthodox Church has been shown by: G. Mantzouneas, N. Mitsopoulos, K. Scouteris, N. Hatzinicholaou and others, so that it has its own *Bioethic Commission* within its Holy Synod and bioethic issues have been discussed several times by Christodoulos, the archbishop of Athens.

Bioethic swings were felt in Orthodox churches under Communism. At its Holy Synod held in August 13-16, 2000 (Moscow), the Russian Orthodox Church made a regulation titled *The Basic Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, which deals with the concept of bioethics and its issues in the chapter 12. The mentioned document actually initiated the writing of this article.

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2. Emergence and issues of the Russian Orthodox Bioethics

Two years before the publication of the above mentioned document, in 1998, a group of philosophers and doctors close to the Russian Orthodox Church

¹⁰ Engelhardt, H.T., *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*. Tokyo: Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers, Lisse - Abingdon-Exton (PA);2000.

¹¹ Petra', B., *Ortodossia (chiese ortodosse) e Bioetica*, u: *Nuovo Dizionario di Bioetica*. Roma: Salvino-Leone-Salvatore Privitera edd.; 2004. p. 795.

¹² Ibid

¹³ P.D. Tishchenko, *Bioethics in Russia*, in: „*Journal international de Bioethique*, 2005; vol.16,:3-4:67-70.,

published an article “Declaration on protection from Bioethics” in which bioethics is regarded as “a set of traditional Russian values in relation to health problems”.¹⁴ The values refer to the *prohibition of abortion and a great part of the present reproductive technologies*, and misconceptions refer to the *consent information and organ transplants donation*.

Then, in 2000 the *Russian Orthodox Church* published its “Social Catechism”, pastoral-programming document of its ministry and integration into the Russian society, whereas Chapter 12 is devoted to “bioethics issues”. It deals with the basic postulations of the Russian Orthodox Church on the main bioethical issues elaborated in nine points.

2.1. Basic bioethical principles

As in ethics, the basic Orthodox bioethical principle emerges from its anthropology: *creation of human being in Christ and in the image of God is invited to Godlikeness through his taking part in trinity partnership in Son through Holy Spirit advocacy*. Furthermore, a man is destined for eternal life as a body and soul because he owns genuine dignity of a person. It means he is rational and free entity in regard to his capacity for partnership and love. Due to his sin, man is weak, the divided self and hopelessly subjected to death. Salvation or recovery in Christ gives man back his integrity of person and opens him to the partnership of love with his brothers granting him paschal transformation of death. All of this happen in the Church which presents Christ’s Body and on the basis of its liturgical life anticipates the eschaton that has already been a realized truth. It leads to a conclusion that *man has unconditional and intrinsic dignity of the image of God and that he is enriched by freedom and destined by an invitation to the eternal life*. This fact gives ground to the principle of the *holiness of life and death* on one hand, and on the other *his freedom and responsibility to God*.

¹⁴ Harakas, S.S., Eastern Orthodox Christianity, in: S. SPINSANTI (Ed.), *Bioetica e grandi religioni*. Cinisello Balsamo (MI): San Paolo; 1987: 51-70: 145-146.

It is to point out that Orthodox rules are very abstract and hardly applicable in practice which has been recognized by certain Orthodox ethicists who proposed some operative criteria not presenting however, an official attitude of Church. The criteria based on the Council's canons and the teaching of the Holy Fathers have been particularly elaborated by S.S. Harakas who presented eight of them: the assessment of good and bad consequences; quality and dimension of a subjective intention; authenticity of motivation; conformity of resources; circumstances and the hierarchy of values, one of which being the first love; the importance of a concrete situation that should be always taken in accordance with God's invitation in time; respect to the ecclesiastical process of reasoning about particular issue.¹⁵

When it comes to the Russian Orthodox bioethics, it should be regarded through two separate aspects:

- a) aspect of the protection of life
- b) aspect of the transmission of life
- a) The protection of life

Orthodox Christian ethical thought universally claims that life is a gift of God and as such is the necessary prerequisite of all other physical, spiritual, and moral values. As a gift of God it is a moral good held by the individual and by society in trust, and over which they do not have absolute control. Both the individual and society, however, are charged with the moral responsibility of protecting, transmitting, and enhancing life. This aspect of life implies the talk about health care, rights of patients, human experimentation, abortion issue, drug addiction, aging and dying.

- b) The transmission of life

Orthodox Christian ethical thought considers that the transmission of human life is no less a fundamental responsibility of mankind than its protection, and it is a generally human. The Church concerns this aspect

¹⁵ Russian Orthodox Church, Basic social concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, Chapter. 12: www.Mospat.ru/documents/social-concepts.

as a mean by which human beings contribute cooperatively in God's creative work. The transmission of human life is thus a holy and sacred moral responsibility. This responsibility is sanctified through the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. According to the teaching of the Orthodox Christian Church the divine injunction "to be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) is a fundamental moral imperative. Therefore, Orthodox Church condemns any kind of fertility control or contraception (methods or devices used to prevent pregnancy) either before or after sexual intercourse.

Orthodox authorities have a common view about the following two issues:

1. As at least one of the goals of marriage is the birth of children, married couple behave immorally if they use contraception in order to avoid pregnancy or making birth of at least one child;

2. Contraception is considered immoral when it is used for the purpose of promotion and encouragement of life based on prostitution and adultery. Assisted reproductive technology and genetic engineering are also rejected by Orthodox believers.

2.2. Document of the Russian Orthodox Church

Document of the Russian Orthodox Church primarily deals with the emergence of bioethics and its issues in the society. The problem of abortion taken for one of the greatest evil of the contemporary Russian society is also presented. For the Russian Church it is a „sign of moral degradation“. The judgement on contraception is presented as a sign of „ marriage egoism“ and a „sin“. The attitude of the Russian Church relating to the assisted reproductive technology is explained through condemnation as “it is not in harmony with God’s plan” and it can not justified “maternity sake” as maternity is not the only purpose of marriage. Married couples have to accept "infertility as their special endeavour in life”. Moreover, the manipulations referring to the donation of gametes “brakes personal integrity and uniqueness of marriage”. Besides,

“in-vitro fertilization is unnatural and immoral” as well. The Church accepts medical efforts concerning the cure of genetic based disease, but it highlights that an "artificial improvement of humans" is not accepted considering that "genetic disorder is often influenced by disrespect of moral principles". It is stated as well that “prenatal diagnosis” can pose “a danger for life and integrity of the tested embryo or a fetus”. The mentioned diagnosis can be justified only for the purpose of a fetus medical treatment. The issue of cloning of animals and people for therapeutic purposes has been highlighted as well.

In the case of organ transplants the only problem for the Orthodox Church presents organ taking from a dead person. Namely, it should be observed through death phenomena issue. The permanent “cessation of breathing and cardiac arrest” have been considered as a reliable criteria of death, until present, but modern medicine imposes different criteria. Closely connected issue is that of euthanasia, dysthanasia and “physical pain” of a man in coma.

On the basis of the Holy Scripture, the Church is „undoubtedly opposed to homosexual relationships“ as they present „ deformation of human nature created by God“. ¹⁶

Certainly, the Russian Orthodox Church is challenged by the hardest problem of contemporary desintegration of family and a great number of abortions in Russia. Therefore, its patriarch interceded before the Russian state authority when the *family politics* was discussed. In January 17, 2011 Patriarch Kyril submitted the list of the Church requirements ¹⁷. to the State council i.e. (an advisory body to the Russian head of state dealing with the issue of the highest importance to Russia). It was absolutely new initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church to present its official attitude and the concrete claims to the state authority regarding restriction of abortion. Patriarchyate officially claimed that the costs of abortions shouldn't be furtherly funded from the health security budget (except in the case in which the life of a mother is endangered). Patriarchyate also claims that women should be informed of all negative consequences of the termination of pregnancy; that doctors should be given their

¹⁶ ZENIT.org., La Chiesa ortodossa propone misure per ridurre gli aborti, mercoledì, 19 . gennaio 2011.

¹⁷ Comp. Melchiorre V., Il corpo, La Scuola, Brescia 1984.

consent informations and that women should have some time to think about it. One of the requirements refers to the establishing of a „Crisis Center“ in each Gynecology Clinic such as „Sova“, the center for human rights that „offers moderate suggestions, even the religious ones“. Consequently, it is obvious that the Russian Orthodox Church is determinative in rejecting abortion as it is the Catholic Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church showed in this way the care for a great natality decrease in Russia as it was already expressed by the Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, who is very close to Patriarch Kyril and who stated: „during the time of the Soviet Union we were used to abortion and a view that it was our inevitable legal practice, as well as there would be no way to turn back. However, we clearly realise at present that comeback is absolutely needed and requisite.“¹⁸

It is to point out that abortion was legalised in Russia soon after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The Soviet Union was the first state that legalised abortion in 1920. It was restricted in 1936 (except in some specific cases) and legalised again in 1955, two years after Stalin's death. In 1964, the number of abortion tremendously grew up to 5,6 millions. Although the number of abortion in today's Russia is significantly lower it is still the main reason of lower natality. There were 72 abortions per 100 live births in 2008, in Russia. This was the reason why the Russian Orthodox Church intervened and pleaded for pro-natality politics to be kept on by state authorities. As early as in 1993, counselling center called „Zhizn“ (life) was founded in Moscow and was headed by Orthodox priest Maxim Obukhov who stated: „ Abortion became quite normal practice in our country that there are women who had five or six abortions without any remorse.“

¹⁸ The New York Times, March 29, 1999.

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