

## Eastern Christian Ethics: The Orthodox Approach to Life, Health and Death<sup>1</sup>

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### Резюме

Відомий грецький православний мораліст Стенлі С. Гаракас з'ясовує суть східнохристиянської етики, зокрема її підхід до актуальних питань із біоетики. Проф. Гаракас насамперед вичисляє і коротко пояснює десять основних принципів, які становлять „теорію”, або фундамент православного морального мислення. Далі, він дає декілька прикладів практичного застосування цих принципів до т.зв. замінного (біологічного, але не генетичного) материнства, до захисту здоров'я і життя в суспільстві, та до сучасної проблематики стосовно смерті.



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<sup>1</sup> The present paper was prepared as a Glasmacher Lecture and was to have been presented at St. Paul University on 12 January 1995. Unfortunately, the lecture had to be cancelled due to a flight delay. Hopefully its present publication will partially compensate for that unfortunate occurrence. (Ed.).

It is with great pleasure that I have accepted the invitation of St. Paul University, under the sponsorship of the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute and the Centre for Techno-Ethics, to discuss the topic "Eastern Christian Ethics: The Orthodox Approach to Life, Health and Death." I have been asked to begin this presentation with an introduction to the distinctiveness of Orthodox ethical approaches and then proceed to illustrate the Orthodox Christian approach to some specific bioethical issues, and in particular, to the questions of surrogate parenting (dealing with the "life" theme), health care (dealing with the "health" theme) and euthanasia and assisted suicide (dealing with the "death" theme).

### *1. Ethics in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*

The purpose of this part of my presentation is to identify some of the major perspectives in Orthodox Christianity which can and, I believe, do, in fact, provide direction for bioethical decision-making from a clearly Eastern Orthodox perspective. I propose to identify some theological sources in the Eastern Orthodox tradition which have some clear implications for bioethics.

For the sake of clarity, let me preface this treatment with a brief discussion of the meaning of the term ethics and to compare the Eastern Christian approach to other traditions.

I find it useful to approach the definition of the realm of concern called ethics and morality linguistically. Most of our language is in fact or at least purports to be descriptive. It is what Hume and other philosophers have called "is" language which seeks to describe the past, present, or future status of ideas, persons, institutions, historic situations or future states. Its opposite, "ought" language is not descriptive, but normative. It does not necessarily describe things as they have been, are, or will be, but rather, it sets up a "telos" of how things ought to be. When this kind of language is applied to voluntary actions and dispositions, it enters the area of ethics and morals. For my purposes here, "ethics" is the discipline or discourse that seeks to present the good and bad motives, intentions and overt behaviors which are subject to voluntary actions by creatures endowed with the ability to make self-determining

choices. "Morality" refers to the actual behavior of self-determining persons in the realm of ethics. One can, consequently, have a well conceived and articulated approach to the normative issues in the form of an ethic, but not live up to it in practice. In this case, the "ethics" are clear and developed, but the "morals" can be described as inconsistent, wrong, immoral, sinful or evil.

The critical question for ethics is the nature of the good which is at the foundation of all ethical reflection and the addressing of both theoretical and practical issues of ethics. In the philosophical realm and in some religious traditions, the nature of the good is perceived to be "autonomous." G. E. Moore for instance argued that not only can the "ought" not be derived from the "is" – in other words, the descriptive cannot be the source of the "ought," but that the good which the "ought" prescribes and the evil which the "ought" proscribes, is totally autonomous, so that there is no way in which its source and its substance can be described. It is like the color "yellow" which cannot be described in itself in terms of any other existing thing. Others have not been so sharp in discerning the autonomy of the good, about which the "ought" functions. Nevertheless, various traditions have argued for an autonomy of ethics, based on reason, pleasure, evolution, natural law, the "median" (e.g., Aristotle's μεσότης) and the affirmation of "existence" as in Existentialism. The autonomy of ethics means that it can somehow be discerned in and of itself as the normative guide, without reference to a transcendent reality, which for Christians is the Trinitarian God.

From the perspective of Eastern Orthodox ethics, however, there is no understanding of the good which is at the core of ethical reflection without reference to the Trinitarian God. Consequently, there is no autonomous ethic. Essentially, all "ought" language, properly understood and conceived, has its source in God.

## 2. *The "Theoria" of Eastern Orthodox Ethics*

From an Eastern Orthodox theological position, there are ten affirmations which contribute to the forming of the Eastern Christian foundation for ethics. These perspectives form ground for the "ought" dimension for Eastern Christian ethical teaching in general

and on specific questions. Further, in the light of the second part of this paper, these ten affirmations supply perspectives and resources for bioethical decision-making in the areas of life, health and death, without ignoring other factors which must contribute to the decision-making process, but which cannot provide the foundational ethical norms and criteria for ethical decision-making.

Let me begin a bit paradoxically by affirming the appreciation in Orthodox theology for the study of the natural world by rational and scientific means. A long-standing and well-documented patristic view, rational and scientific inquiry is understood as not only legitimate and appropriate, but also as necessary. Nevertheless, its ability to illuminate the non-physical dimensions of human existence is restricted by the nature of its methodology. When it moves into such areas, it is notorious for absorbing world views and perspectives which are not subject to scientific method. Even economic and political views sometimes assume governing roles, providing over-arching perspectives for decision-making. To their credit, especially since the time of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it has been the scientific community which has recognized this fact and in many ways this has led to a search for values which transcend subject matter and method which are proper to science. Some of these perspectives as understood and proclaimed in Eastern Orthodox Christianity are the subject matter of this section of my presentation. Needless to say, this is a survey, which only highlights these resources and in no way develops them, nor draws out all of their ethical implications for bioethics. Time considerations force me to use a propositional format, which is not generally congenial to Orthodox theological discourse.

As we examine briefly the theological sources for ethics, there are two fundamental aspects of Orthodox ethics that need to be kept in mind. The first is that the ethical norms, that is the "ought" affirmations, have no independent reality outside of their faith context. By this I do not mean that ethical norms are subjectively relativistic. What I do mean is that it is the faith affirmations, understood as representative of reality, which determine the "oughts" of ethical discourse. The second point is that the articulation of "oughts" by ethics nearly always creates tensions with what "is." In other words, ethical norms nearly always challenge

and demand change from us. They only rarely confirm the *status quo*. Orthodox theology, then makes claims about ultimate realities and – from the perspective of ethics – describes what is in an ultimate sense, and not what is in the empirical and fallen world. It then affirms what ought to be. As we have noted before, for Orthodox Christianity it is not possible for there to be an authentically autonomous ethic.

What follows is a sort of theological “laundry list” of such affirmations and an all-too-brief suggestion for each as to its bioethical implications. This is based on my article titled “An Eastern Orthodox Approach to Bioethics,” which was published in *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* (Vol. 18, 1993, pp. 531–548).

### 1. *Apophatic/Kataphatic Theology*

One of the most fundamental affirmations of Orthodox theology is a consistently held belief that God and the fundamental truths about God are not subject to all the categories of human reason, or to the laws of nature, which are discoverable by human reason. This transcendence of God to the created world and its logic provides a potential for a normative ground for ethical judgment. This is traditionally referred to as “apophatic” or “negative theology.” God is best described by what He is not. Nevertheless, God not only creates that which is not Himself, i.e. “the world,” but God is in constant touch with it through His energies, supporting and preserving its laws and its existence. This is traditionally referred to as “kataphatic” or “positive theology.” This affirms at once a paradoxical relationship between God and the world, one which is both discontinuous and continuous concurrently. The discontinuity means, among other things, that there is a relative independence and autonomy to the created world which allows for its study and description, as well as its use and development by science and technology. The continuity means that there are appropriate and fitting ways in which this should be done, which when ignored, can become self-destructive. In practice, this means that not all that we are able to do ought to be done. Examples which are almost universally accepted are the employment of nuclear weapons