

Bioethics in the light of orthodox anthropology

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ABSTRACT

English Abstract: *This articles presents the bioethics in the light of orthodox anthpology. Bioethics is called to face the new ethical issues that were and are created by research in the fields of Biology and Medicine. Its subject matter is completely fresh and in the main unexpected. Bioethics has a mission to evaluate this bold progress and to see if, and to what degree, it is compatible with the generally accepted values which govern human life. The Orthodox tradition steadfastly promises that greater value than what it is, has that what human person can become, god by grace.*

Keywords: Bioethics, orthodox, anthpology, human person

1. Some preliminary Remarks.

Beyond the fact that the progress noted in medical science in the past few years, not only in the field of doctoral medicine, but also in the area of genetics and biology is impressive and often outside the limits of the human person's endeavours, it also provokes theology and seems to urge it towards reinterpretation and reconsideration of its traditional views. Nevertheless in theological circles, and elsewhere, the question is put: Does theology have the necessary attributes to answer question which are regularly posed by contemporary scientific research? Are the ethics of theology perhaps old-fashioned and ineffective, incapable of facing the new information and the great bounds of development which refer to the biological existence and function of human person? Is its message perhaps confined to the spiritual sphere of existence and is incompatible with the reality of development, or more precisely the revolution, that is taking place in the field of biology and medicine? Has the doctrine, the faith of the Church, perhaps imposed a typified ethos, which is noted for rigidity, inflexibility and the inability to adapt to the new accomplishments of science?

These are many sided question and one can find many grounds for discussion. It is well-known that Bioethics only appeared in recent years, first in America and then in Europe. It is therefore clear that it is a product of the new material presented by medical advances and research in the field of biology. The term Bioethics was first used in English in 1970 by Potter in environmental ethics and the Hellegers in the medical ethics movement.[1]

Bioethics came about as a consequence of these scientific developments and attempts a critical appraisal of the dilemmas and an evaluation of the consequences of this new knowledge that have emerged within society. This means that Bioethics arose from the need to face the ethical questions linked to the progress of medical science, as well as those that followed from the experiments associated with biological existence of the human being.

Bioethics has appeared today as a new branch of the study of ethics or even as an academic subject in its own right, yet correspondent with ethics. As we have already stressed the study of Bioethics aims at approaching the moral and ethical dilemmas which flow from progress made in the fields of Biology and Medicine. [2]

Whatever, Bioethics is called to face the new ethical issues that were and are created by research in the fields of Biology and Medicine. Its subject matter is completely fresh and in the main unexpected. The accomplishments related to the human person's biological existence are frequently outside the sphere even of our boldest imaginings. Consequently Bioethics has a mission to evaluate this bold progress and to see if, and to what degree, it is compatible with the generally accepted values which govern human life. That is to say, there are ethical consequences which accompany human person's presumably noble attempt to extend his knowledge, to make life easier and to carry out research within the field of biological inquiry.

2. Human Creativity and scientific Research as Gifts of God.

The societies that find themselves before these unbelievable scientific achievements often react with astonishment or mutually invalidating suggestions. There are many who argue that research and science cannot have barriers, others who consider the determination of some legal or moral framework to be absolutely necessary, because, they stress, if the need for controls on biological experiments and medical research is not recognised, the human person is reduced to a "laboratory rat", to an object of experimentation.

At this point it is essential to clarify that, research in general, and specifically the scientific investigation into new methods and new practices concerned with improving human life, fall within the human being's ability to enquire and create given to him by God Himself. Technology, and by extension biotechnology find their theological justification in the capability that God himself gave to the first-formed, to Adam and Eve, to tend and keep paradise (Gen 2:15) Creativity is woven into the nature of human person, who, as an image of God (Gen 1:27) and as a free person has something unique within the created world. "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Gen 2:7)

The human person as a "living soul" is a creative spirit, that is to say he has something of divine creativity within his nature. This is truly a blessing, the importance of which is recognised and noted by theology. Nevertheless the human being, as a free person, is obliged to function discerningly. If his creativity is unchecked and without scrutiny, then he ceases to be authentic and whole. It is necessary for "discernment of the spirits" (1 Cor 12:10) to accompany creativity. Within the Orthodox tradition creativity finds its perfect consummation when it preserves its divine origin. The human person is not an autonomous and free-moving machine, but he can create precisely because he is a living image of God. In essence human person's ability to enquire and to discover has a divine origin. This means that human person's natural calling to create, to enquire, to discover, does not lose, under any circumstances whatsoever, its divine derivation and worth. The Fathers of the Church used the concept of "synergy" to demonstrate that human being, as a creative being, can be a fellow labourer with God.

"Synergy" is a basic and substantial category of Orthodox anthropology. Synergy, i.e. co-operation, with God, particularly in the service and function of medicine is pointed out in the Holy Scriptures. The Wisdom of Sirach records: "Honour a physician with the honour due unto him for the use which you may have of him: for the Lord has created him. For healing comes from the most High, and he shall receive the honour of the king. The skill of the

physician shall lift up his head: and in the sight of great men he shall be in admiration. The Lord has created medicines out of the earth; and he that is wise will not abhor them." (38:1-4) Besides, within the tradition of the Orthodox Church there is a whole host of saintly doctors, who are especially revered by believers, while the establishment of hospitals and medical centres falls within the Church's mission. Therefore, the Church attests to the work of medicine, which it considers to be a sacred undertaking, and even because it recognises that the human body has in itself a form of sanctity as an inseparable part of human personality. The body is the temple of human person's soul. Throughout the history of each human person the body has to execute a unique task, it is the area where life is sanctified and the plane where human person's future immortality is prepared. There is no human person without the body. Thus, Medicine and Biology, sciences whose subject matter is human life, and more particularly the workings of the body, are seen to be effecting a divine task. This, of course, is to the degree that they do not violate the freedom of the person and they do not confront human being as an exclusively biological machine. The point is that the sacred function of the medical profession presupposes the recognition of human personality as a unique psychosomatic whole.

The question of the vocation of medicine and of research concerning biological functions is a delicate one, and it should always be examined in relation to the reality of the human person. Medicine and Biology are not concerned with soulless objects, that is to say they do not correspond to botany or even to zoology. Their subject matter is the unique actuality of human life, which is inseparably bound to the human person, which, being according to the Image of God, has the unique calling and prospect of immortality. This means that Medical Science and Biology are obliged to work in an auxiliary manner, not an authoritarian or domineering one. Absolute respect for the human person, not as a fleeting biological existence, but as an eternal and immortal being is a presupposition for a kind of medicine which will make a beneficial and helpful contribution to life. For example, medical intervention to halt pregnancy militates against the right of the embryo to life, which is equally alive and valid as any mature human being whatsoever. Indeed, the embryo or foetus as a living being, which already has the characteristics of a new human life, has even more need of medical protection. The embryo, the new-born baby, the young, the mature, and the old man or woman are stations in the same human life. The responsibility of Medicine and Biology lies in protecting the priceless gift of life, with their new discoveries and progress, at whatever phase at all that gift is found at. From the viewpoint of Theology this protection does not refer to a biological existence that will die, but to a human person who is destined not to die and who had the opportunity and utmost responsibility to create a unique and unrepeatable history within his biological journey.

3. Developments in the Field of Biotechnology and some Dilemmas produced.

Certain biologists, doctors, legal experts, and even theologians suppose that Bioethics will solve all the problems created by research and discovery in the field of Biotechnology. They view Bioethics like the *deus ex machina* of ancient tragedy. We know that in classical theatre when the tragedy reached a dead-end, some "god" suddenly appeared, by some mechanical support. This "god" gave the solution to the insurmountable problem and was called the *deus ex machina*. Some people imagine that Bioethics role is something like this. This is obviously a groundless hope simply because the biotechnological developments are in the main uncontrolled and they cannot be confronted with moral decrees and exhortations. We should give a few examples to make it clear that the problems and dilemmas that emerge

with the progress of science are complicated and immense. Confronting them demands a radically new attitude and a philosophy of life that spent on rules and regulations.

There are some proposals of Biotechnology which common opinion finds abhorrent and human conscience, quite independently of its moral convictions, reacts against. The debate about male pregnancy is a subject that causes natural repulsion in any normal person whosoever. Moreover, the announcement, some years ago, by the British embryologist Jonathan Slack, of Bath University, that with the manipulation of certain genes he managed to create headless frog embryos, and that with the same method he could create something similar for humans, using cloning, in order to produce human organs for transplantation, [3] is something that causes revulsion in common man. The prospect of the creation of headless humans, for the production of human body parts to order, conceals a cynicism and degradation of human existence and of biological function. This contrived creation of beings, or rather, more precisely monsters, whose only purpose will be to give their tissue and organs to some human master, even if it seems like a prospect that will work for man's "good", is provocative and without a doubt disturbs the ordinary person. The now infamous debate about cloning also causes a negative reaction, in general terms, to the common mind. Cloning could procure the production of a limitless number of completely identical beings, human clones, while with genetic intervention their copies can even be improved. The question is why copies of humans, and who will judge genetic manipulation and its aims? Finally, how is the notorious improvement of cells perceived?

There are many other topics from the biological revolution about which ordinary people express various views and frequently contradictory opinions. Common opinion is, in general, much more sympathetic towards reproductive technology than it is on other matters of Biotechnology. The reason is clear. Reproductive technology, it is said, use scientific means so that a new human being can come into the world. However, the matter extends beyond this very simple position and has its own social side-effects. The preservation of sperm is a many-sided subject. In certain cases it happens when a man has been attacked by illness which demands treatment puts him in danger of becoming sterile. In this case the preservation of sperm is the only way that fertility treatment can occur. Further away from this and certainly morally unacceptable is when sperm is preserved for "gain". Someone has written that some young persons "deposit their sperm in a sperm bank and then undergo sterilisation". Thus they have "easy" sexual relationships, and when they want to have children they refer to their bank. There are cases where the sperm remained in the bank for years after the death of the husband who donated it, and years later the widow requested her husband's sperm in order to have IVF treatment. Thus, the child who was born was an orphan of necessity, the child of a "father" who had died years before. Even more complicated is the resort to donor sperm. Certain parents in their desperation and natural need to produce a child resort to this morally reproachable solution. Frequently these donors who deposit their sperm function on the basis of financial transactions. The intervention of the Ministries of Health are mainly to regulate legal and judicial problems[4]. This begs the crucial question, if resorting to donor sperm is the proven and morally acceptable solution. Another similar question is that usually in the case of infertility treatment an attempt is made to guard the donor's anonymity, in order to assure that the family that was obliged to resort to this resolution is self-contained and coherent. However, this way creates other problems concerning the health of the child about to enter the world. When the origin of the sperm is unknown and any inherited conditions are unknown, with the result that the healthy protection of the child is not assured.

These examples do nothing more than record the crucial problems created by scientific development, and especially the discoveries made in the field of infertility treatment. Similar problems also exist with other questions that have arisen with the progress of Biology and Medicine, progress which covers the whole spectrum of life, from conception or from pre-conceptual procedures, until death. However, the timely question is, can these problems be faced with a "renewed" ethical teaching adapted to the new demands? Many sociologists, doctors, legal experts or theologians believe that yes they can. Their opinion is that an answer can be found to the problems if we renew our ethics, if we adapt our moral views to the latest demand of the time. Yet a serious question still occurs, is ethics a system of values which is modified by the different situations and "needs" that appear from time to time, or perhaps it has a timeless and interpersonal importance and worth?

4. The eschatological Attitude to Life or the Proposal of Orthodox Anthropology.

Orthodox anthropology and tradition has a lot to say on this point. Orthodox anthropology is realistic, but at the same time intensely ascetic and eschatological. What determines human life is not his biological behaviour or his biological extension, but rather is that which human person can reach with his ascetic practice and the indication of it within Christian society. In the Orthodox tradition human person's being is illumined by what is going to happen. Thus, future life bears more weight than this present life. In the conscience of the Church what we are certainly counts, however what we are called to be has immeasurable importance. "For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven." (2 Cor. 5:1-2)

Within this eschatological attitude to life bioethical problems are seen in a different light. The major problem of Bioethics today is that it tries to give answers to questions of the present, for a human person who will die, enclosed within the human dimension and within the limits of worldly material reality. Biotechnology and accordingly Bioethics to a greater degree serve the material, and therefore the corrupt, needs of man. The endeavour to serve the needs of biological existence, frequently ignoring human person's spiritual dimension. It seems that contemporary Bioethics ignores the eternal, i.e. human person's divine potentiality. Consequently, we can talk about secularised Bioethics which serves the needs of a secularised world.

If anyone evaluates biological life solely on the basis of death, he will reach a completely different conclusion from that dictated by an evaluation which is founded on the belief that human person exists in order not to die. This means that human person's biological existence is a unique and priceless value, not because it is brief and ends in death, but because it is a unique opportunity for immortality. If someone sees biological life as a boundless gift from God for the preparation of spiritual life, then his estimation of things in the world will be evaluated differently. "For we who are in this tent groan being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us this very thing is God, who has also given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him." (2 Cor. 5:4-9)

5. The Mind-set of the Church a Foundation for authentic Bioethics.

Bioethics can really work for human person's redemption when it is established upon the Christian mind-set and denotes the ethos of *theosis*. It is a mistake to believe that

Bioethics, as a system of rules and moral commands, will be able to free man from the dilemmas that he is led to by Biotechnology. Each and every human being is a free and unique person, who comes to face situations within his own history that concern him exclusively. No codification of rules and moral dictates can solve the problems of any certain person. The question is for human person who lives within the spectrum of technology and progress, to have the mind (*nous*) of Christ, so that he can discern matters. If we conform and adapt to all that this present age renders without discernment, then our *nous* will lose its lucidity. St. Paul refers to the transfiguration of the mind and we believe that his message is especially timely today: "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) In order to be an authentic human hope and to substantially help solve the problems and to assist in the correct response to the dilemmas raised up by the progress of science, Bioethics must not simply be a handmaid of prosperity. It must see human person within his actual dimension and not exclusively and solely within his biological existence and his material comforts. Human person is not just a material - physical being. The most precious thing he has is not his body but his eternal soul which makes him a free person, an image of God, which can evaluate all that belongs to man and all that surrounds him. St. Basil clarifies the matter exquisitely: "Attend to yourself; that is, not to your own, not to that which is around you, but attend to yourself alone. We are one thing, our own is another, and that which is around us yet another. We are indeed soul and *nous*, since we were made in the image of the creator; the body and its senses are our own; and that which is around us is our money, skills and all the other accoutrements of life. What does the word declare? Do not attend to the flesh, nor pursue all manner of its blessings: health and beauty and the enjoyment of pleasures, and long life; nor marvel at money and glory, and dynasty; nor at all you fulfil within this fleeting life, thinking it to be great, and in pursuing it neglect your life beforehand, but attend to yourself, that is, your soul. Adorn this, and take care of it." [5]

Orthodox anthropology with its ascetic mind-set and hesychastic tradition does not look at human person within the dry limits of his earthly life, but in his final glory. When human person evaluates his biological existence by the criterion of his ecclesiological one, his whole conduct is illumined and each action of his acquires a new meaning. The Orthodox tradition steadfastly promises that greater value than what it is, has that what human person can become, god by grace. If we look at the life of human person within this theological and Church-centred expanse, the consideration of the dilemmas created by biomedical methods takes on a different character. Then we can understand that each new medical method and every advance of biology is blessed, if it regards the whole human person, who lives in the present age but is journeying towards the age to come. Conversely, every discovery in the field of biotechnology that encloses human person within the dry limits of his biological life, however much it makes earthly life easier, conceals something tragic.

The **conclusion** is that the mind-set of the Church is what can overcome any bioethical dilemma whatsoever. I cannot overlook the relevance today of St. Paul the Apostle's words: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you who are not in the flesh but in the spirit if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the spirit of Christ, he is not His." (Rom.8: 5-9)

References:

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