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Principles of Bioethics from an Orthodox Perspective

Abstract

In this article, we try to define the profile of Christian bioethics. First, we argue that Christian bioethics is a bioethics of transcendence. Second, Christian bioethics is a personalist, i.e., founded on unique personalism, different from the modern one. The measure of the human person and his life is to be seen in the Person and Life of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. In this sense, the personalism that grounds Christian bioethics can be called ontological and iconic personalism. Third, the method of ethical decision-making



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in Christian bioethics, beyond rational-discursive analysis, is rooted in experience as participation in Life.

Keywords

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1 Introduction

Orthodox ethics is the expression of man's responsibility before God for his life and for the gifts God has bestowed upon him to fully and authentically fulfill his life that transcends time and space towards eternal communion with God in grace. By virtue of the freedom which, through the modern "disenchantment" of the world, man perceives above all as emancipation, he has returned in a great measure against the gifts he has received and, ultimately, against his own life, producing an imbalance in the relationships which his responsibility places before him.

Beginning with the postmodern period, man becomes aware of the adverse effects that his irresponsible actions have produced and continue to produce in his life and the world. Therefore, contemporary culture has formed an awareness of responsibility towards life in general and human life in special.

Thus was born, in the early 1970s, the new discipline of bioethics, which is the response of contemporary culture to moral problems concerning life, problems considered so serious that the American oncologist Van Potter had called the new discipline of bioethics "the science of survival" and "a bridge to the future."

The fundamental question of bioethics is the question of the "why" of life, that is, a question of the meaning of life. According to orthodox ethics, which is the basis of bioethics, the essential elements that give meaning to existence are person, love, immortality, and union in love between persons, which is constantly progressing. The meaning of existence is therefore

known not by reason but by the experience that people have by uniting in love for eternity. These four elements that illuminate the meaning of existence are interdependent. None of them can be defined for itself and can be distinctly affirmed without losing its proper sense. Each of these elements is authentically defined and fulfilled in the others and not in itself. Existence has, therefore, a relational character. Existence is not a static monad, closed in on itself, but a mutual opening of complementary elements that exist simultaneously and determine each other. This means, first of all, that the person has an ecstatic-relational character in its very constitution and that it is not fulfilled in the immanent. It requires eternity. The immanent, time and space, finitude, are not able to satisfy the internal tension of the person towards the eternalization of love together with other persons. Therefore, the truth of the person is an ecstatic, relational, and eternal truth.

All these considerations lead us to some conclusions that define the profile of Christian bioethics. First, Christian bioethics is a bioethics of transcendence. Second, Christian bioethics is a personalist bioethics, founded on a unique personalism, different from modern personalisms, for the fact that the measure of the human person and his life is the Person and Life of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. The personalism that grounds Christian bioethics can be called in this sense, an ontological and iconic personalism. And third, the method of ethical decision-making in Christian bioethics, beyond rational-discursive analysis, is rooted in experience as participation in Life.

2 A bioethics of transcendence

All bioethics questions are developed and resolved ultimately in the great question that is man".¹ Therefore, the specificity of

¹ Giovanni Russo, *Bioethics. Manual for theologians*. LAS, Rome 2005, p. 57.

bioethics lies mainly in the anthropological horizon in which its concrete problems are analyzed.

The concept of quality of life is central to our advanced societies. The most important criterion of human life is that of quality, understood in terms of psycho-physical well-being. In this case, the justification of the ethical norm is based on the maximization of well-being and minimization of evil, usually understood in a utilitarian-hedonist key as pleasure and pain. Pleasure is sought, and pain is escaped.

From the perspective of Christian bioethics, human existence is not reduced to the immanent. The personal dimension of human existence is not reduced only to its physical-biological or psychological attributes. It is also an opening to eternal communion with other persons and God. Therefore, Christian bioethics does not accentuate, while not denying, the material components of human life.

Not the material quality of an immanent life means to conform to human truth, but the acquisition for the eternity of immortality experienced dynamically as a state of divinization. The truth of man is not only human but divine-human and is fulfilled through life in Christ as the attainment of eternal life. In this regard, the words of St. John the Theologian are eloquent: *"For this is the testimony of God, which he has borne of his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God bears this testimony, and whoever does not believe in God is a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has borne of his Son. And the testimony is this: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever possesses the Son possesses life, and whoever does not possess the Son of God does not possess life"* (1John 5,10-12).

The artificial opposition between the quality of life and the sacredness of life originates in the explanation given to the original life of man as a "natural" state before the fall and its relation to the state after the fall. Therefore, for Orthodox theology, the original state of man is not an autonomous state. Starting from the inseparability between nature and grace, understood as uncreated divine energy flowing from divine nature, the natural state of man, the divine image, is a state of grace.

Man's life was not a life that was defined for itself and in itself but was a participatory life. Man lived in God and through God. He lived through grace rather than through his own nature. Participation in the divine life constituted human life. What stood out was not his psycho-somatic nature to which God had added a created grace, but the divine Archetype as the model of man. Here is what Jean Danielou says, studying St. Gregory of Nyssa:

"Thus we arrive at an idea of man very different from Western theology. In it, we are presented with a 'natural' man, to whom grace has come; the risk of this conception is a closed humanism, which rejects the supernatural. In Gregory's perspective, on the contrary, primordial is 'the image of God' and the 'natural' man has come into being"². ("Proper and conforming to nature is for men the life resembling the divine nature"³.)

This has remarkable consequences for bioethics based on human truth. The true life of man is not reduced to the mere biological dimension, but means participation in the divine life. Without this participation of man in the divine life, he is no longer a living being. Still, he possesses, according to the antinomian expression of St. Nicholas Cabasilas, "a dead life (nekra zōē)", which takes place even at the biological level towards death. This is what Christ speaks of in the Apocalypse, admonishing the Church of Sardis: "I know your works; you are thought to be alive, but you are dead" (Revelation 3,1).

The fall, which consisted in autonomy, deprived man of the divine life and made him live through his own nature. Living by his own nature, through eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, man wrapped himself in the immanent, worrying exclusively about his biological dimension for which good means pleasure and evil means pain.

² Jean DANIELOU, *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse*. Aubier, Paris 1953, pp. 58-59.

³ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Ecclesiasten Homilia I*, P.G. 44, 624B.

Being for death and being in Life are the two existential possibilities of man. *Tertium non datur.*

This does not mean, however, that even in the state of fallen being, where life is confused with mere biological survival, there is no possibility of restoring life as a participation in the eternity of God. Christian bioethics is a bioethics of transcendence also because the immanent space-time is imbued with an eschatological tension that makes possible the transfiguration of time into eternity and of creation into New Heaven and New Earth.

Therefore, the eschatological sense of human life does not mean a rejection of its biological or historical dimension. On the contrary, the body itself is created for immortality, and its acquisition depends on man's spatio-temporal existence. Christian bioethics does not look at the person only in its biological dimension as secular bioethics does. For Christian bioethics, biological identity and eschatological identity are identified. The biological identity carries within itself the seeds to transcend towards immortality. The body of death itself becomes, in eschatological transfiguration, the body of glory.

Christian bioethics, as bioethics of transcendence, offers, compared to secular bioethics, a different perspective of the human condition. The human condition as a reference point of secular bioethics is that described by Heidegger as "being for death", a being stretched towards death, a condition in which the world is the pole of reference for which he feels made. The human condition that Christian bioethics indicates as the authentic truth of man and his life is that presented by John the Theologian as *being for and in Life*.

3 Christian bioethics is a personalist bioethics

The concept of person, which is now in the center of bioethics, has been subjected to different interpretations. Those who identify the concept of person with the human subject, highlighting the inseparability of the personal being from the human being, and those, on the other hand, who attribute the concept of per-

son to subjects who demonstrate certain characteristics of personal life, *signa personae*, rejecting the quality of person to those beings who do not manifest or have never manifested the signs of personal life, separating the concept of the person from the human being and human life.

Bearing in mind that the concept of person was born in the context of Christian theology, Christian bioethics has taken as its "point of reference and measure between the lawful and the unlawful", the human person.⁴ the human person. "

Taken from Christian theology, the concept of the person has undergone humanist reinterpretations that have left out its primordial content, especially in the attempt to define it and to establish its attributes with mathematical precision, thus losing sight of the mysterious character of the person as an opening to God.

3.1 The personalism of Christian bioethics is ontological and iconic

The personalism that grounds Christian bioethics is ontologically grounded personalism. It is thus intended to emphasize that "at the foundation of subjectivity itself lies an existence and essence constituted in the body-spirit unity."⁵ When speaking of the ontology of the person, Orthodox theology accentuates that this ontology must be explained in an iconic key. That is, the value of the human person does not lie in his or her autonomous ontology, closed in on itself and within the narrow limits of creation, but in being a person in the image (*eikon*) of God.

"The ontological truth of man does not rest in himself, considered independently (i.e., in his natural endowments, as materialist theories claim; in the soul or in the higher part of the soul, the mind, as many ancient philosophers claim; or exclusively in the person of man, as some contemporary philosophical systems admit), *but in the Archetype*. Since

⁴ Elio Sgreccia, *Handbook of Bioethics*, vol.1, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 1999³, 61.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 60.

man is image, and despite the iconic character that the created material itself possesses, his real being is not determined by the created element through which the image is materialized, but by his uncreated Archetype. Biological existence does not exhaust the entity of man. Man is conceived by the Fathers ontologically only as '*hón theologikón*,' a theological being. *His ontology is iconic*"⁶.

This iconic foundation of the ontology of the person, understood only in terms of a virtual dependence of the human person on his or her divine Archetype, would diminish the value of the person himself or herself since the image represented has more value than the representative. Orthodox theology, however, also gives another, more important dimension to the image - eikon.

The *eikon* is not conceived simply as the sign of an absent reality, pointing to the reality it replaces, but this reality becomes present in some way in the *eikon*. The *eikon* is what it represents, and what it represents is somehow found in the *eikon* in a real way. This close connection between the icon-image and what it represents means that the image does not represent an absent original but makes it truly present. "The image has an inner communion with its Archetype. And vivified by it, it relates to it by being inwardly attracted to Him and, at the same time reveals Him"⁷.

"*Being we, therefore, of the seed of God*" (Acts 17:29), the truth of man cannot be separated from the Truth of God, or rather, the truth of man is determined by the Truth of God. He cannot be, as such, autonomized without losing the authentic sense and dynamism of the foundational and formative relationship with God. "Christian bioethics, then, must be more a way of life than a collection of principles, rules, ideas, or conclusions to arguments.

⁶ Panayotis NELLAS, *You are Gods. Anthropology of the Fathers of the Church*, Città Nuova, Rome 1993, p. 47.

⁷ Panayotis NELLAS, *Hē peri dikaiōseōs didascalía Nikolau tou Kabasila. Simbolē eis tēn orthodoxon sōtēriologian*, Ekdoseis St. Karamperopoulos, Peiraieus 1975. (Romanian translation in *Dreptatea lui Dumnezeu și îndreptatea noastră*, Editura Deisis), p. 82.

Christian bioethics conceived in this way relates rather to holiness than to social justice"⁸.

3.2 A bioethics of being-for-life

In the entire patristic tradition, human ontology is dynamic, iconic, and consists in the impulse towards true life, as existence in God and towards God, or rather, existence in Christ and towards Christ, the Archetype of man. "And when it is not oriented toward Christ, more precisely when it determines itself freely and consciously separated from Christ, its existence is a being-for-death, as Heidegger called it, from his perspective. United to Christ, man's iconic existence becomes a real existence-in-Christ. In Christ, man finds his real ontological content."⁹

The social reality that has generated bioethics as a "science of survival"¹⁰ in the face of the necrophilic tendencies of man who seems to tend to self-destruct, and along with him the world in which he lives, indicates the fact that man is a being-for-death.

Secular bioethics, considering the worrying harmful action of man towards life, as existence-for-death and relating only to the principle of welfare of the quality of life, the same principle that had led to the degradation of life, thinks to solve the problems from within the very condition of being-for-death, maintaining the paradigms that define it. Therefore, it defines bioethics as the science of survival, understood only in biological terms. The problems, however, cannot be solved from within the same paradigm that generated them, but only postpone and prolong life in the agony towards death.

Christian bioethics can not be proposed as a simple science of survival because it is based on Christian theology as an experience of God, a life-giving experience that transfigures human life from glory to glory to the extent of the perfect man in Christ. It proposes the radical change of this paradigm in existence-for-life

⁸ H. Tristram ENGELHARDT, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, Swets & Zeitligner Publishers 2000, p. 163.

⁹ Panayotis NELLAS, *Hē peri dikaiōseōs didascalia...*, p. 267.

¹⁰ V. R. POTTER, "Bioethics: The Science of Survival," in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 14(1970), pp. 120-153.

as a solution to the problems generated by existence-for-death. The paradigm of Christian bioethics is therefore, the being-for-life, as a participation in the Life-Christ in the Holy Spirit, in which the integral human existence, body, and soul, becomes imbued with eternity.

By unknowingly assuming existence for death as a paradigm, humanist culture has changed the *drive for eternally good existence* into a *struggle for survival* in the *nekrà zōē* of which the Fathers speak, that is, in life without Life. This struggle has spawned in the last century the culture of death, and the "dead life" has become the normative model for all existence through man-centered in himself as the "measure of all things." Existence for death has sown death and corruption throughout creation, understood only as a "natural" world, "disenchanted" with "religious superstitions." Sowing death reaps death unless the seed changes. For bioethics, the seed is the paradigm of existence that must change from being-for-death into being-for-life.

The researches of humanist culture have ended up in the babelic nonsense of pluralism of all kinds that characterize it today, pluralism that confuses bioethics in its desire to found within a culture of "moral strangers", a universal normative bioethics, since the starting point was wrong from the beginning.

"Experience shows that mankind is having difficulty in finding what it is looking for today because its search starts from a wrong presupposition and moves in the wrong direction. The wrong start consists in not having become aware of the condition contrary to the nature of man in which we find ourselves; as for the wrong direction, it consists in wanting to look for something that conforms to our nature in what in truth is contrary to it"¹¹.

Essential to Christian bioethics is that the post-fall state is not a natural state in which man retains unaltered all the characteristics of his autonomous nature but is a paranatural state, which

¹¹ Panayotis NELLAS, *You are gods...*, pp. 56-57.

has become such through the autonomy of nature. It is a state against nature.

For Orthodox theology, in the Fall, man declines the iconic relationship and natural movement toward God. He becomes autonomous, self-limiting to created space and time, to his created nature. Man, dead before God, no longer lives the life of God but lives through "his own nature¹²." Consequently, he is led toward death. The essence of man's fall into sin lies precisely in his assumption of his human nature. In a natural form (in the patristic sense, the natural form is the form before the fall) man received the divine life from God, life that he communicated through the soul also to his body and the cosmos below. Becoming autonomous, man rises against his own nature since he has an iconic ontology in which it is not the matter from which the icon is made that has priority, but the Archetype.

For Orthodox theology, man's natural state is deiform in grace, as his nature is added to divine grace. Now, the fall expresses man's turning back against his own nature as a paranatural state. Renewal means to remake his original nature by the imprinting in him of the Face of Jesus Christ, which is brought about by virtue of the union of the divine and human natures in the one Hypostasis of the Son. This conception recognizes the maximum dynamism of the human being as a being-for-life.

3.3 Leather tunics

Now, the problem that arises at this point in our analysis is how is the renewal of our nature possible from within the human condition as being-for-death? By understanding the present state of man as a fallen, autonomized nature, contrary to its own potentially divine-human iconic nature, the attitude of orthodox theology would seem to situate itself in an irreconcilable position concerning the world and the man who represents it. If we were to remain with the one-sided conception of the exclusively negative aspect of the fall, with its disastrous effects on human nature and

¹² St. Macarius of Egypt, *Homilies, XII*, P.G. 34, 557B.

on the world involved in its fall, the conclusions of Christian bioethics concerning the action of such a man in the sphere of life would almost always be catastrophic in nature.

This conception about a fallen man and the negative effects of sin is supported, however, in the Orthodox tradition, by the theology of leather tunics with their positive meaning. This theory has been analyzed in depth by the Greek Orthodox theologian Panayotis Nellas in his work *Zōon theōumenon* of 1979¹³. Here is what he writes about it:

"The patristic teaching concerning the image and the leather tunics can be transformed into a *conduit of orthodoxy with the contemporary world*, because it allows, or rather, obliges theological thought to assume a positive attitude towards man and civilization. The acquisitions of contemporary science, the discoveries of psychology, the achievements of technology and the researches of philosophy are not bad things nor simply tolerable, but positively good and estimable. The vain glory, however, of sinful autonomy alters their character almost incessantly, sells them off to corruption and the devil in exchange for a plate of lentils"¹⁴.

For Orthodox theology, the leather tunics represent the general conjunction of man with materiality. The main content of the skin tunics is biological mortality, instinctiveness, the transformation of life (zoē) into survival (bios), as natural consequences of sin.

¹³ The most important study on the subject of leather tunics in the literature of the early Christian centuries belongs to Pier Franco BEATRICE, "Leather Tunics. Ancient Readings of Gen. 3:21," in *The Tradition of Enkrateia. Ontological and protological motivations*, ed. edited by U. BIANCHI, Rome 1985, pp. 435-482. Panayotis Nellas's view of skin tunics has been examined by Basil PETRA, "The Duplicity of World and History. The 'tunics of skin' in the thought of P. Nellas," in *Rivista di Ascetica e Mistica*, 16 (1991), pp. 77-99.

¹⁴ Panayotis NELLAS, *You are gods...*, p. 102.

Leather robes are an ambivalent reality with a double character. They are a consequence of falling into sin and a punishment for disobedience.

God "offers this partially positive state of the skin tunics as a second blessing to the self-exiled man, adds it as a second nature to his nature so that he may, in its proper use, survive and fulfill his destiny in Christ."¹⁵ "God did not allow the attributes of the image of God in man to disappear or be entirely corrupted. Intervening in the process of the fall, He transformed them into the robes of skin and caused them to offer man survival."¹⁶

Christian bioethics takes as its paradigm the condition of being as being-for-life. In this condition, man, dressed in the skin tunics of dead animals, as being-for-death, can renew himself through the exercise of freedom.

4 Conclusions

The meaning of Christian bioethics is not to consent without discernment to any scientific research and its application in human life, nor to reject indiscriminately the results of scientific and biomedical research based on a supposedly evangelical and patristic doctrine, but to acquire *discernment*. The purpose of this discernment is to liberate what is good in scientific, biomedical, and technological results from autonomy, which means submission to transience, corruption, and the devil, in order to direct them towards the Truth.

The philosophical ethics of the last decades that have founded different bioethical approaches are lacking in the fundamental dimension of human life: its eternal dimension that transcends its only horizontal and temporal purpose. "Well, our time no

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

longer has either the desire or the fear of transcendence. It does not desire eternity, it does not really seek the holy Grail; beyond the threshold it hopes for nothing."¹⁷

The contemporary person must rediscover the integrity, the fullness and the value of his truly human life in all its dimensions, immanent and transcendent at the same time. To do this he needs prophets who will not slavishly conform to the spirit of this unclean world. "*Do not conform to the mentality of this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*" (Romans 12:2) St. Paul teaches us. Today, the fundamental locus of prophetic action is ethics, and with it, increasingly bioethics. The Christian ethic of prophetic resistance developed in opposition to totalitarian regimes tends to be replaced today, in our disoriented Europe, by the ethic of life threatened more and more by the same unilateral, horizontal and immanent "progress" of man. This ethics of life is called to watch prophetically over the eternal value of the person and the lives of the weakest who are most often the innocent victims of the pride of today's "culture of death." The prophetic dimension of Christian ethics means first and foremost not conforming to transient worldliness but conforming to the eternal Word. Bioethics can lose the prophetic power of the Word if anything, it has not already in some ways. Although it is a frontier discipline, architectural and with multidisciplinary connotations, Christian bioethics is rooted in the ethics of life according to Christ. Consequently, it must not lose its prophetic force in the endless rational digressions just to be conformed to or acceptable in today's pluralistic culture. In distinguishing good from evil so confused in their boundaries for ethics closed in front of the transcendent, Christian bioethics must claim the need to change prophetically the very paradigm of human existence taking into account its integral truth, divine-human.

Ethics without eternal life is a weak ethics, without truth, value, and substance that cannot cross the threshold of immanence. "And when ethics loses strength and value, the earth becomes

¹⁷ Basilio PETRÀ, "The Challenges of the Moralistic Theologian Today," in *Studia Moralia*, 33(1995), p. 11.

the hell of the weak"¹⁸. I believe that this hell does not become paradise simply through the rules and ethical principles oriented to safeguard human life in its biological dimension, rules, and principles that maintain in man his presumptuous autonomy. The world of man is not a neutral space between hell and paradise but is either hell or paradise, and sometimes both together. The world becomes paradise only in the Spirit of Life and Truth. And suppose sometimes the world becomes hell for the very man who generates it. In that case, the way out is the one that God revealed at the beginning of the last century to his servant Silvanus of Mount Athos: *keep your mind in hell and do not despair*¹⁹; and you will feel the sweetness and fullness of God's love, for there is no paradise for man except in God's love.

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¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁹ ARCHIMANDRITE SOPHRONY, *Starets Silouane, Moine du Mont Athos, Vie-Doctrine-Ecrits*, Edition Présence, Paris 1996, p. 390: "Tiens ton esprit en enfer et ne désespère pas."

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