

Orthodox Bioethics and Biotheology

A note about the scope of this investigation

Although, arguably Orthodox bioethics should also be concerned with animal welfare, this study is limited to the consideration of human beings - their biology, health, well being and care.

A note about terminology

Sometimes secular ethics employs euphemisms to make a particular response to a bioethical problem appear more acceptable to the public. A good example would be the reference to “assisted dying.” From an Orthodox Christian point of view this is unacceptable. It should be called what it is, “assisted suicide.” Likewise, instead of “the embryo / foetus was terminated”, I shall refer to this as “the child was aborted / killed.” Debate in the arena of bioethics is not about “not upsetting people” but rather, telling the truth without euphemisms or technical jargon that is only designed to obfuscate what is really happening.

Principles in the Arena of Bioethics from an Orthodox Christian Point of View

1. **Five Basic Principles of Bioethics based on the Orthodox Tradition** were declared by the IAO Scientific Committee¹ at the 9th Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, Bucharest 2002:²

“An ethical assessment of contemporary scientific achievements of biomedicine should always take into consideration the following principles of respect:

- a. **Respect for time.** While our knowledge is very limited, we proceed to decisive steps that bring immediate consequences. We should not move to applications involving human cloning and the in-vivo alteration of the human genetic material, before we acquire all the necessary knowledge regarding these processes.
- b. **Respect for God’s creation.** Knowledge and curiosity are so essentially and deeply bound with the nature of man, that the danger of not limiting ourselves to therapeutic applications but to proceed to the correction of what some may regard as “natural imperfections” is apparent. Consequently, along with gene therapy approaches, we may also provoke disastrous changes in human social conduct and relationships leading, perhaps, to genetic discrimination. Scientists must use their knowledge with discretion and prudence without preconception and short-sighted vision. In addition, they must not forget that they are part of nature and not its ruler.
- c. **Respect for human variability, “imperfections” and disabilities.** The possibility to intervene in the quality and shape of our characteristics for reasons other than diagnostic, preventive or therapeutic, opens the way to a society characterized by genetic discriminations, racism

¹ Chairperson: Ms. I. Kiriari (Greece) with the members: Father Nikolaos Hatzinikolaou (Greece), Mr. Algimantas Paulaskas (Lithuania), Mr. Emanuil Stoicescu (Romania), Mr. Marios Cariolou (Cyprus) and father Dmitry Smirnov (Russia), under the responsibility of the Committee on Bioethics of the I.A.O Secretariat , which includes the Chairman of the Committee: Mr. James Samios, MP (Australia), and the members, Mr. Dimitrios Alabanos, MP (Greece), Mr. Eleftherios Papanikolaou, MP (Greece) and Ms. Nina Stepanova Markovska, MP (Ukraine).

² <https://eiao.org/archives/1683>

and eugenics; a society in which there will be room only for healthy and strong people, people with predetermined specifications. Societies should consider among their priorities not only research but also the protection of human variability and the amelioration of the conditions of the disabled.

It is the responsibility of every religious, political, scientific and social carrier towards future generations to take all measures, so that man is not downgraded to a financial figure, a genetic parameter or a deterministic unit, and to avoid every form of racist discrimination of a eugenic character. At the same time, we will all work together so that priority be given to preserving human dignity over any kind of research goals and achievements as well as for the confidentiality of genetic and personal information.

The potential provided by biomedical progress and, more specifically, by genetic engineering and new reproductive approaches requires that the human genome and technological advancements in assisted reproduction be protected by all means from any form of self-interest, financial exploitation, eugenic orientation and arrogant domination.

- d. **Respect for human life from its conception until the moment of death.** Every political resolution or legislative adjustment which refers to matters of biomedicine, medical technology, biotechnology and genetic engineering should necessarily respect the fact that every human being from his/her conception until his/her last breath constitutes a unique irreplaceable and unrepeatable being, that has by nature free will, is sacred and transcendental in his/her essence and perspective, and forms a social entity with rights and obligations.
- e. **[Respect] Responsibility towards future generations** requires special attention with regard to the approval of germ-line therapy methods that will be passing on their effect to the descendants of the persons undergoing the therapy. At the same time, all forms of discriminatory treatment of individuals suffering from any kind of health problems should be excluded. Finally, the genetic identity of the individual should be protected with regards to interventions that do not have a diagnostic or therapeutic character or do not aim to prevent a disease.”

2. The Theological Principles informing all considerations of Bioethics are as follows:

- a. **The Image: Humans beings are created “in the image of God.” (Genesis 1:27)**

As such they have an intrinsic, that is, according to nature, imprint of divinity. The respect due to God Himself is also reflected in the respect for human life as God-bearing, from conception to the grave and indeed beyond in the care for the bodily remains of the deceased. The Orthodox do not accept a purely secular humanistic account of humanity, nor any ethic based on that understanding.

In the following (2b and 2c) I shall quote from and summarise Dr Samuel Harakas ...

b. **The Likeness / Theosis. Theological Anthropology** ³

“The humanum of our existence is both 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 "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, to achieve an ever expanding, never completed perfection. This fulfilment of our humanity is traditionally referred to as theosis or "divinisation." 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" prohibits the absolutizing of any rule, law, or formulation.” (Dr Stanley Harakas)

c. **Implications from Theology for Orthodox Christian Bioethics (summarised from Harakas)**

Synergy and the Two Wills: Coerced conformity to God’s will is dehumanising. A divinised humanity achieving its full God given potential must always remain free as God is free. The transformation of human life is only possible through a cooperative harmony or synergy of human and divine wills. This reflects the Christological foundation of their being two natures in Christ in one Person of the Logos. As Christ is, so humans are also called to become. The ethical implications are bound up in the conviction that God’s free action and our free action are both necessary to His purpose for us in our being and lives personally, in community and in society.

Body and Spirit: Creation has material and spiritual dimensions bound as one. Neither is to be traded, set off or prioritised over the other. In Orthodoxy this is reflected in every aspect of our faith, worship and life. Bioethics is, therefore, based on this “psychosomatic unity of human life.” The paschal telos (goal) of humanity is a resurrection which retains this psychosomatic character and unity. Moreover, creation itself is to participate in this redemption.⁴

Law, Motive and Intent: There is a natural law by virtue of humanity’s creation in the image of God and there is a revealed Law summed up in love of God (who is Love) and our neighbours as ourselves. Legalism and moralism is alien to the Orthodox mind. Human flourishing, both personal and social, informs all ethical concerns but, nonetheless with both positive (thou shalt) and negative (thou shalt not) dimensions. In all aspects of human care and ethical decisions there is both the gold standard of the strict application of the rule (ascribeia) and the adaptation, case by case, of economy (economia) to keep the person advancing spiritually.

³ <https://www.goarch.org/-/for-the-health-of-body-and-soul-an-eastern-orthodox-introduction-to-bioethics>

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“For the Health of Body and Soul: An Eastern Orthodox Introduction to Bioethics” by Dr Stanley S Harakas, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

⁴ Romans 8:21

A Summary of the Application of Theological Principles to Practical Issues and Developments in the field of Bioethics

Issues and Technologies	Principles and Responses	Conditions, References, Definitions and Reflections
<p>Genetic Engineering / Eugenics / Therapeutics / Cloning / Biowarfare</p>	<p>The therapeutic use of genetic engineering is well within existing Orthodox ethical parameters whether to avoid or correct disease.</p> <p>However, when eugenics is linked to the abortion of those considered to be imperfect, or where techniques are used to augment or improve human function at the genetic level or through the development of human-machine hybrids, then this is categorically ruled out by Orthodoxy.</p> <p>Cloning as a means of asexual reproduction or the development of genetic enhancements in clones is forbidden. Even when there is a possible therapeutic element to the procedure, cloning undermines the integrity of human life on just about every single level psychological and social.</p> <p>It should go without saying that the weaponising of viruses and other biological agents is contrary to every conceivable Christian principle.</p>	<p>Imperfection is fundamental and universal to the human experience after the Fall. The attempt to remove imperfection and augment so called “desirable traits” (non-therapeutic eugenics) has created many evils since fascism systematically embraced these principles in Nazi Germany.</p> <p>In Orthodox Christian teaching, imperfection, even of the severe kind, can become a source of great blessing, (together with all other sorts of diversity) enriching our humanity. St Paul’s injunction:- “in everything give thanks” (1 Thessalonians 5:8) is made possible by receiving the cross as a place of divine transformation of even the most bitter suffering in self-sacrificing love.</p> <p>St Paul knew this from his own experience – the so called “thorn in the flesh”. God revealed to him that His grace was sufficient, and that strength was perfected in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)</p>
<p>Volunteer Drug Testing</p>	<p>Allowed when there is due concern for the safety of the individual and they consent.</p>	
<p>Organ Donation / Giving the body post mortem for Research</p>	<p>Allowed so long as the health of the donor will not be adversely affected and the recipient will benefit from the gift with a high degree of probability. Individual (i.e. not whole body) organ donation after death is similarly allowed but the mortal</p>	<p>In some countries the State assumes that a person consents to organ donation after death unless they “opt out” in life and this is recorded.</p> <p>Provided that there is transparency in the system and the wishes of the</p>

	remains must then be buried without undue delay. This is why the Orthodox do not allow donation of the body post-mortem for research purposes. Burial must always take place unless of course the remains are unrecoverable.	deceased are absolutely respected, this should not be a problem for the Orthodox. However, a person should not be deemed to know about the “opt out” provision. This should be made clear to all by consistent and universal public education and information.
Transplants, Tissue Grafts and Transfusions	Allowed provided that the donor has given informed consent before death and had the capacity to do so.	
Cyber Assistance	The use of advanced technology in the developing field of cyber prosthetics and assists (for example brain implants that restore movement to paralysed persons) is allowed. Such therapeutic uses fall within existing goals of healing and restoration of function. However, into the future technology might become available to create human-machine hybrids where functions are enormously enhanced. Such developments would not be allowed (see section here on ‘Eugenics’).	
Contraception	Contraception, when practised continually by a married couple to exclude any possibility of children, is a sin, unless the medical advice is that any child born would be certainly severely disabled. Contraception employed for the purpose of fornication is also a sin. Most (but not all) contemporary bishops and priests allow contraception for the purpose of a married couple planning a family based on the role of sexual intimacy in marital bonding, mutual pleasure and love. However, means of contraception that abort the conceptus are forbidden, (the so called “morning after pill.”)	See the Song of Songs and 1 Corinthians 7:1-7 for a strong argument in favour of the holiness of sexual activity in marriage, whether or not children are in mind. Contraception as a <i>voluntary</i> and qualified means of population control is also not ruled out by the Fathers. This is from St John Chrysostom: <i>“It was for two reasons that marriage was introduced so that we may live in chastity [sophrosyne] and so that we might become parents. Of these the most important reason is chastity . . . especially today when the</i>

	<p>Those who oppose contraception in the Orthodox Church do so on the grounds that the only legitimacy attached to sex is procreation. To this author, this seems rather myopic if not disparaging of the body and the value of the sexual life per se.</p>	<p><i>whole inhabited world [the oikoumene] is full of our race."</i></p>
<p>Assisted Reproduction and the problem of "excess" IVF foetuses ...</p> <p>... includes an excursus on the issue of SOME forms of Vaccination involving the use of foetal tissue / organics.</p>	<p>Artificial insemination (AI) outside of marriage or inside marriage without mutual consent is respectively a form of fornication or a form of adultery.</p> <p>AI to assist a married couple to conceive where sexual penetration of the husband is not medically possible or desirable (e.g. impotence, HIV positive status) is generally allowed.</p> <p>In vitro fertilisation and the artificial release of ova are allowed on the same basis ... namely that a husband and wife are being assisted to have children. However, there are problematic aspects to these procedures in the selection of one viable fertilised conceptus and the "discarding" of others.</p> <p>Surrogacy, both where the child is fostered and where it is not, is not allowed since it breaks the mother-child bond. The womb is not a 'transit station'. This is still the case even when for medical reasons the woman cannot bear her own child.</p> <p>The same ethical issues are raised by SOME forms of vaccination which rely on tissue from aborted or "excess" IVF foetuses. The Orthodox Church's position on this issue is not dissimilar to that of the Roman Catholic Church⁵ where (to simplify) a greater immediate good should not be prevented by an antecedent evil where there was no willed</p>	<p>With AI and other forms of assisted reproduction, the undergirding principles are the sanctity and exclusivity of marriage as the environment for the birth and raising of children.</p> <p>The heretical Monophysites often referred to Christ's birth from the Virgin Mary "as through a pipe."</p>

⁵ <https://immunize.org/talking-about-vaccines/vaticandocument.htm>

	<p>instrumentality between them across time.</p>	
<p>Irreversible and Reversible forms of Sterilisation</p>	<p>Irreversible sterilisation is forbidden for the same reasons that continual use of contraception is not allowed (ante).</p> <p>However, in one circumstance irreversible sterilisation may be preferred to contraception, mindful of the fact that no contraceptive is perfect. In this exception and in order to avoid an abortion in the case of an almost certain threat to the life of the mother by pregnancy, irreversible sterilisation would be justified. This threat to life would have to be well established by a medical assessment.</p> <p>Any form of sterilisation to accommodate promiscuous sexual behaviour is, of course, rejected.</p>	
<p>Pre-natal Genetic Screening and in utero Screening for defects</p>	<p>Genetic screening is approved to reduce the risk of inbreeding in tight knit communities. Pre-natal screening is also appropriate for prospective parents to discern instances where child rearing might be ill advised (see the section here on 'Contraception.')</p> <p>In utero screening is approved to prepare for any sub optimal condition of a child after birth, but not so as to facilitate an abortion, unless the child is so grossly deformed as to be unlikely to survive after birth (see the section here on 'Abortion').</p> <p>Vigilance should be undertaken that such sub optimal conditions as Downs Syndrome or Spina Bifida are not classified by rogue medics as abnormalities qualifying for an abortion, putting (illegal) pressure on</p>	

	vulnerable parents (see section here on 'Eugenics').	
Abortion	<p>Abortion is forbidden whatever the circumstances of conception (including rape) and this includes the socio-economic or psychological condition and situation of the mother.</p> <p>The only possible exceptions are: -</p> <p>(1) where it is known beyond reasonable doubt that birth will kill the mother. Abortion is then an "involuntary sin" with a mitigation of personal guilt. (Harakas).</p> <p>(2) where through genetic screening and scans, the child in utero is so grossly deformed as to make it highly unlikely that it would survive beyond birth (see the section here on 'Genetic Screening' in relation to pitfalls to be avoided).</p>	<p>Human life begins at conception. St Basil in his second canon rules out any artificial distinction between a formed and an unformed conceptus.</p> <p>Abortion is a form of murder and the unborn child absolutely has the right to be protected and nurtured in utero, not killed.</p> <p>In Orthodox anthropology and canon law the unborn child is a full human person and not merely a tissue appendage of the mother. (See Luke 1:41)</p> <p>Abortion is now widespread in the west and was also (and still is) widely practised in Soviet / post-Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe. It will take a long time before this holocaust of the innocent is halted and reversed. The Church achieved this in the Roman Empire (along with infanticide) and doubtless with God's help and grace she can do it again.</p>
Dying and Death	<p>Medical intervention to prevent death should only be withdrawn if the collective medical opinion is that such attempts will almost certainly fail. Doctors should err on the side of caution and do all that is necessary to preserve life. Provisions in living wills such as "do not resuscitate" should be understood conservatively and in exactly the same way.</p>	<p><i>"Physical death begins when interrelated systems of the body begin to break down. Death occurs when the systemic breakdown becomes irreversible."</i> (Harakas)</p>
Euthanasia / Assisted Suicide	<p>Orthodox Christian ethics rejects the the wilful termination of dying patients as a form of murder, even at the patient's own request when in great suffering, and a form of suicide by the patient himself.</p> <p>One of the most serious criticisms of euthanasia is the grave difficulty in</p>	<p><i>"Euthanasia is the active intervention to terminate the life of another."</i> (Harakas)</p> <p>In the west, voluntary euthanasia is already practised in some countries (Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Canada, Colombia, Australia, New Zealand,</p>

	<p>drawing the line between "bearable suffering" and "unbearable suffering," especially from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, which has taken seriously the spiritual growth that may take place through suffering (Romans 8:17-39). (Harakas)</p>	<p>and some US States ... Oregon, Washington, Vermont, California, Colorado, Washington DC, Hawaii, New Jersey, Maine and Montana).</p>
<p>Funerals</p>	<p>Since the physical realm is good and holy, utmost respect is given to the remains of the reposed person. The Orthodox Church does not approve of cremation as this does violence to the body.</p> <p>The common modern secular views in the west that the body is a only a shell for the soul (spiritualism), or that the body is only dust with no soul (materialism), are both deeply heretical, undermining as they do the necessary psychosomatic unity of our individual personhood. These false ideas are but one step away from the equally heretical teaching of reincarnation when, after death, souls are supposed to "migrate" into a "new shell".</p> <p>Christian hope in Christ for eternal life includes, indivisibly, the raising of BODY with the soul. Only in this way may humans have the possibility of a full human life in the New Creation to come.</p>	<p>Soviet Russia saw a significant increase in the practice of cremation, particularly among the atheist intelligentsia. Cremation started as an explicitly anti-Christian movement in the 19th century in Europe. The legacy in Russia today is difficult for the Church to roll back and is a long-term endeavour.</p> <p>There are some countries (e.g. Japan) where burial is illegal. Clearly, in such circumstances the Orthodox have to adapt to local conditions but "the exception never becomes the rule" (Orthodox ethical principle).</p> <p>Note: The double heresies of spiritualism and materialism, breaking the psychosomatic integrity of both body and soul, attack the very essence of the dignity and worth of each unrepeatable individual in his or her fullness.</p> <p>God has no need of Incarnation to save us in such circumstances AND we also cannot be saved in either case. In spiritualism we do not have the unrepeatable uniqueness of our embodied personhood. In materialism we are no more significant than our constituent physical elements.</p>

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(from Dr Harakas' Article and others)

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