

Orthodox Christian Bioethics in the age of crisis and change

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ABSTRACT: *Orthodox Christian Bioethics examines the moral issues arising from the applications of biotechnology and genetic engineering at the beginning, maintenance, and prolongation of human life through the lens of Orthodox Christian theology. It also considers matters related to the natural environment and the living beings that inhabit it. Unlike inter-Christian and interreligious bioethics, which seek points of convergence and possible compromises among diverse religious traditions on various bioethical matters -or aim to address emerging issues through the shared tradition of the first millennium of Christianity- Orthodox Christian Bioethics approaches topics such as abortion, artificial fertilization, surrogacy, experimentation on humans and animals, environmental protection, and cremation in light of the Holy Scriptures, sacred tradition, and the writings of the Church Fathers. Its significance has grown in response to the rapid developments in medicine and biotechnology, which give rise to new ethical questions and various pastoral challenges for the local Orthodox Autocephalous Churches. Based on the above, the present article addresses both the value of Orthodox Christian Bioethics and the challenges and prospects it faces in the 21st century, particularly in the age of crisis and change.*

KEYWORDS: *Orthodox Christian Bioethics, Bioethical Issues, Inter-Orthodox Dialogue*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Orthodox Christian theology and its bioethics are rooted in the mystical unity of the experience of the transcendent, which grants the Church its enduring cohesion.¹ A central concern of Orthodox Christian Bioethics is the pursuit of the Kingdom of God, which is not of this world. Fundamentally, the Orthodox Christian Church and its bioethical vision constitute a matter of faith, repentance, and divine grace (Engelhardt, 2009). As faith, love, ascetic practice, worship, and participation in the Sacraments of the Church increase, so too does access to the content and meaning of Orthodox bioethics. For this reason, H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. (1941–2018) argues that when metaphysical and normative ethical knowledge cannot be attained through analysis and cold logic alone, a lived, experiential relationship with God becomes essential (Engelhardt, 2000).

The ultimate goal of human life is holiness and union with God; thus, the formulation of a Christian bioethics is not an end in itself. The method of such an epistemology is inextricably linked to living as an Orthodox Christian (Engelhardt, 2000). Consequently, an Orthodox Christian bioethic cannot be fully understood apart from Orthodox Christian life, as this life is fundamentally Eucharistic (Engelhardt, 2005). Within this spirit, Orthodox Christian Bioethics addresses the ethical questions that emerge from the applications of biotechnology and genetic engineering at the beginning, the sustaining, and the prolongation of human life, interpreting them through the lens of Orthodox theology. It likewise considers, in the same way, issues concerning the natural environment and the living beings that dwell within it. Specifically, unlike inter-Christian and interreligious bioethics—which attempt to identify common ground and possible compromises among different religious traditions on various bioethical matters, or to explore such issues through the shared tradition of the undivided Christian Church of the first millennium—Orthodox Christian Bioethics approaches topics such as abortion, artificial fertilization, surrogacy, experimentation on humans and animals, environmental protection, and cremation in light of Holy Scripture, sacred tradition, and the writings of the

¹ Engelhardt notes that the concept of the mystical "refers to an experience of the divine, particularly of the divine energies, which transform both body and soul. In this sense, the mystical does not denote an experience of a pseudo-Platonic realm that transcends the material world, nor a world of ideas existing in the mind of God to be passively contemplated. Rather, it concerns the illumination of the nous, which directly receives the experience of God." For a detailed study of the roots of Orthodox Christian Bioethics, see (in Greek): I. Ladas, *The Problem of the Philosophical Foundation of Bioethics and the Bioethical Thoughts of H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr.* (Athens: Papazisis Publications, 2023).

Church Fathers. Its relevance has grown in response to rapid advances in medicine and biotechnology, which continue to raise new ethical questions and various pastoral challenges for the local Orthodox Autocephalous Churches.

II. THE CHARACTER OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN BIOETHICS

The nature of Orthodox Christian theology—and by extension, its bioethics—is experiential. It neither seeks to construct the most persuasive arguments to prove the existence of God, nor does it attempt to discover, through rational analysis alone, the character of divine commandments, including those pertaining to medical care. Thus, in order to meaningfully engage with Orthodox Christian bioethical reflection, spiritual preparation becomes indispensable (Engelhardt, 2000).

This approach may appear unfamiliar to those who have not studied the works of the Church Fathers, as they are often unaware of the homiletic form and pastoral character of their writings. However, for those who, along with the Fathers, recognize truth in the Persons of the Holy Trinity, it becomes evident that their manner of writing was the most appropriate. To reach this realization, one must acknowledge that attaining moral knowledge requires personal transformation—a turning toward God and a union with the object of one's knowledge—rather than the construction of persuasive arguments to comprehend Him (Engelhardt, 2000). This reorientation brings about a moral and spiritual interior change, which enables illumination and redefines the content of bioethics (Engelhardt, 2000). Within this framework, Orthodox Bioethics is not a system of ethical rules but a form of life directed toward communion with the Persons of the Holy Trinity. It is the expression of a soteriological path through faith, prayer, and theosis (Engelhardt, 2011). As John Breck also emphasizes, Orthodox Bioethics must rest explicitly on theological foundations, for its subject—life—is a sacred gift from God. Orthodox theology is built upon the understanding of God as Trinity and of the human being as *imago Dei*, destined for communion with Him. Ethical conduct is made possible only through continuous ecclesial and sacramental participation in the life of God, since "conscience," though foundational, must be nurtured by the cultivation of the virtues—especially that of discernment—within the community of the Church (Breck, 1998).

When understood in this way, Orthodox Christian Bioethics is concerned more with holiness than with social justice. When the search for God arises from the heart, Orthodoxy presupposes that there will be a response, as God answers the free will of the person who turns toward Him. Faith plays a key role, providing a form of knowledge that cold logic and philosophy alone cannot access—though this does not exclude the existence of some form of guidance (Engelhardt, 2000).

The prayerful exploration of nature reveals God, and in this sense, it guides Christian bioethics—though this does not imply a theoretical, scientific, or scholastic inquiry aimed at constructing a natural theology. It must be emphasized that excessive expectations from natural theology may lead to similarly exaggerated expectations from moral philosophy, risking the assumption that the nature of the moral life and the content of Christian bioethics can be secured solely through rational argumentation (Engelhardt, 2000).

The foundations of Christian bioethics, to be sure, cannot rest solely on Scripture, since Christianity is grounded in the transcendent—beyond all earthly experience or textual formulation. The Scriptures themselves cannot serve as a source of moral content if detached from the liturgical life of Christians. For this reason, Christian bioethics is more liturgical than merely scriptural (Engelhardt, 2000). The only sufficient condition for the establishment of a Christian bioethic is the noetic experience. Only through the noetic experience can human knowledge transcend the limitations of earthly existence and acquire normative ethical meaning. Without a primary and properly ordered orientation toward God, every orientation toward fellow human beings becomes erroneous or distorted, since God is the center of all things (Engelhardt, 2005). In this framework, the concept of synergy, as articulated in Orthodox anthropology, emphasizes that human creativity—including medical research—is not autonomous, but functions within a relationship with God; that is, the human being is a "co-worker" (*synergos*) with God in the work of creation and healing (Scouteris, 2016).

The question of the noetic foundation of ethics is critical, for only through true participation in truth can the horizon of worldliness be transcended. Only those who partake of noetic knowledge can also experience the normative character of Christian ethics (Engelhardt, 2000). In the absence of such knowledge, religious understanding remains confined to the worldly realm, since Orthodox bioethics rejects the existence of an "independent third thing" between God and humanity—that is, an autonomous moral philosophical system. Christ is the only true Mediator, and moral knowledge is possible only through liturgical experience and participation in the divine energies (Engelhardt, 2011). Consequently, those who turn their hearts toward God will be granted an inner sense of right and wrong, inscribed within them and cultivated through prayer and worship. By virtue of this divine gift, they are able to apprehend morality without the need for instruction or philosophical mediation (Engelhardt, 2000).

To support this position, Engelhardt invokes Saint John Chrysostom, who emphasizes that a natural law concerning good and evil is implanted within every human being (John Chrysostom, Homily XIII.7). This law dwells in the conscience of all people, and no teacher is needed to instruct them in such matters (John

Chrysostom, Homily XIII.9). This natural knowledge—planted within us by God Himself—is the foundation of conscience, which allows us to know in our hearts what we ought to do. Through it, we advance in our understanding of the moral law and cultivate a relationship of intimacy with God (Engelhardt, 2000).

Given, however, the reality of human passions, a person cannot always fully trust the guidance of the heart and must seek the counsel of someone who is a true theologian—one endowed with both spiritual discernment and moral experience concerning bioethical matters. In this way, issues can be examined carefully, but the substance of such analysis will not be derived from logical arguments alone; rather, it will emerge from a heart oriented toward God. For this reason, Engelhardt emphasizes that those with ethical competence in bioethical matters are those who have attained discernment through ascetic struggle and liturgical experience—even if they are not necessarily formally educated (Engelhardt, 2000).

III. PATRISTIC EPISTEMOLOGY AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN BIOETHICS

Patristic epistemology presupposes a tripartite distinction between body, soul, and spirit, each of which functions differently and has its own epistemological aim (Engelhardt, 2000). First, through the body, sensory knowledge is acquired—knowledge that requires both experience and study, and which pertains to material reality. Second, the soul, through the intellect (nous), perceives the inner essence of the principles of created beings, thereby leading to spiritual knowledge. This form of knowledge is not attained through study, but through a life oriented toward God—through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The third form of knowledge transcends human nature and consists in union with God, involving an immaterial object and a supernatural goal, granted through the Holy Spirit. At this point, Engelhardt embraces the teaching of Saint Isaac the Syrian, emphasizing that Orthodox epistemology is not static: the human being first repents, then is illumined by God, and finally enters into union with Him (Isaac the Syrian, Homily XVIII; Engelhardt, 2000). Conversely, when knowledge remains captive to the desires of the flesh, it is no longer directed toward God and cannot lead to divine illumination (Engelhardt, 2000).

Religious knowledge originates from the choice to follow one's true conscience, by keeping God's commandments and worshipping Him. For this reason, theological knowledge does not necessarily require the possession of logical or analytical skills (Engelhardt, 2000). Engelhardt does not deny, however, that a form of moral theological knowledge can be attained through rational examination and analysis. He thus maintains that Christian bioethics should not avoid clarity of expression, analytical explanation, or systematic reflection, especially in cases of contradictory statements or ambiguous claims. The Texan philosopher concludes that these tools not only can but must contribute, even when they inadequately and rationally express certain realities that ultimately transcend reason (Engelhardt, 2000).

To illustrate more clearly the distinction between experiential theological knowledge and that which is acquired through rational examination and analysis, Engelhardt compares those who speak theoretically about wine without ever having tasted it to those who have truly tasted it and can then offer a careful description of their experience (Engelhardt, 2000). As he aptly observes, Western moral analysis resembles the one who describes wine without ever tasting it, while the Orthodox approach is grounded in the personal tasting of the divine experience (Engelhardt, 2011). In the same spirit, he emphasizes that theologians who have truly experienced God teach us that this is an undeniable encounter between the finite creature and its infinite Creator. At this point, he recalls the words of Saint Isaac the Syrian, who notes that those who have acquired the experience of God "can soar into the realms of the angels on the wings of faith, and explore the unsearchable... and examine the spiritual mysteries, which are grasped by a mind that is simple and refined (Isaac the Syrian, Homily 52; Engelhardt, 2000)".

Given the confinement of human beings to worldliness and the limitations of their cognition, the experience of God constitutes both a necessary and sufficient condition for the possibility of a Christian bioethic. Without divine grace, philosophy, moral theology, and bioethics are exposed as one-sided, incomplete, inadequate, and ultimately misleading (Engelhardt, 2000). This critique of "neutral" forms of bioethics is further supported by Breck's observation that the seemingly shared language of contemporary bioethics is, in fact, corrosive to theological truth (Breck, 1998). Consequently, if philosophers, theologians, and bioethicists are unable to purify their hearts from the passions, they will not attain true knowledge, and whatever they teach will be distorted (Engelhardt, 2000). As Mark Cherry insightfully points out, Christian bioethics cannot be adequately constructed without God. Ethics without God becomes relativistic, unstable, and disconnected from truth. Reference to God is the necessary and sufficient condition for bioethics to acquire an ontologically valid

foundation—one oriented toward the salvation of the human person (Cherry, 2023). A theology and a bioethic, therefore, that are not bound to a "holy life" are, in fact, anti-theology and anti-bioethics, for the theology that grounds an Orthodox Christian bioethic is established upon the experience of God (Engelhardt, 2000).

IV. THE ABSENCE OF A UNIFIED POSITION ON BIOETHICAL ISSUES

Although Orthodox Christian bioethics, as outlined above, appears to possess comprehensive answers to a wide range of bioethical issues, the Orthodox Churches today do not present unified positions on many of the most pressing bioethical matters. The reasons for this unfortunate reality are diverse, yet they may be broadly classified into four main categories. First, the engagement of Orthodox Churches with bioethical challenges is relatively recent, meaning they have not had the necessary time to organize, study new developments, and offer the required responses. Second, the rapid pace of medical and technological advancement often leaves little opportunity for Orthodox Churches to immediately evaluate and respond to emerging data. Third, the pastoral challenges facing each Church differ significantly; thus, an issue that is pressing in one ecclesial context may not even exist in another. Fourth, while the Orthodox Church is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic—as affirmed in the Nicene Creed—it is administratively divided into various local autocephalous Churches, a fact that complicates unified decision-making. Additionally, various historical circumstances have led to the isolation of certain Orthodox Churches, resulting in a lack of mutual communication and cooperation. As Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos notes, this is one reason why the contemporary Orthodox Church expresses itself along three distinct cultural-linguistic lines: Greek-speaking, Slavic-speaking, and Arabic-speaking Orthodox Christians. The issue, however, is not one of language but of ethnophyletism—a phenomenon condemned as heresy by the Great Synod of Constantinople in 1872, yet still a persistent wound in the body of the Church (Vlachos, 2014). Nevertheless, the very fact that the Orthodox Church remains one across time and space is itself a historical miracle (Engelhardt, 2017).

Within the Orthodox Christian world today, committees dedicated to the study of bioethical issues have been established by six autocephalous Churches, and there exist six official, synodically approved documents. These include texts from the Patriarchate of Romania addressing abortion, transplantation, and euthanasia, and from the Church of Greece concerning transplantation, euthanasia, and assisted reproduction. These documents are noteworthy both in their own right and in comparison with one another (Koios, 2007). The document of the Church of Greece on organ transplantation has been translated into Bulgarian and published on the official website of the Bulgarian Patriarchate. Additionally, the Russian Orthodox Church issued a comprehensive encyclical in 2000 addressing a range of bioethical topics (Vantsos, 2003). This encyclical contains an introductory paragraph outlining the criteria by which bioethical issues should be evaluated, followed by specific references to abortion, assisted reproduction, prenatal screening, cloning, organ transplantation, euthanasia, and homosexuality. Furthermore, the available literature includes a significant number of studies, pastoral encyclicals, articles, and publications by Orthodox hierarchs, clergy, and lay scholars on bioethical topics.

From the above, it becomes evident that despite the fact that the Orthodox Church has a responsibility—before the world and before history—to offer a word and perspective on emerging issues, it has neither produced unified positions nor shown the capacity to arrive at unanimous decisions, generally or specifically, concerning bioethical matters (Griniezakis, 2015). This reality, however, should not be seen as diminishing the Church's work or mission in the modern world, since, on the one hand, Orthodox theology possesses the criteria and conditions necessary for formulating appropriate responses, and on the other hand, the Divine Eucharist offers a way to overcome the various obstacles that divide Orthodox Christians—including ethnic divisions—because by partaking of the blood of Christ, Orthodox Christians become one nation (Griniezakis, 2015). In this way, the hope arises that all barriers can ultimately be overcome and that a unified voice can be offered on emerging issues. Indeed, the absence of an official position from the Orthodox Church could also be evaluated positively, as it offers the opportunity to begin afresh—without the burden of having to revise prior stances that may otherwise have required re-evaluation in light of new scientific developments (Griniezakis, 2014).

Nevertheless, the absence of an official and unified position from the Orthodox Church on bioethical matters also leads to a more tragic realization: that within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, there sometimes—though fortunately most often only seemingly—exist conflicting views. When such disagreements involve the personal opinions of hierarchs, clergy, or laypeople, they do not necessarily pose a problem. On the contrary, they may foster healthy dialogue and broaden reflection. However, there are instances in which the official decisions of one Church differ from those of another—culminating in situations where a particular Church's decision cannot be accepted by other Orthodox Churches because, on the one hand, it does not adequately reflect Orthodox theology and, on the other hand, it is not grounded in the sacred canons and patristic tradition (Griniezakis, 2015). For example, in December 2013, the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Moscow decided that infants born through surrogacy should not be baptized unless their parents demonstrated sincere and practical repentance for having chosen that practice. This decision was made following a

recommendation by the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission, which examined the issue of surrogacy and concluded that the use of a surrogate womb contradicts Christian principles, since the law allows a woman's body to be used as a kind of incubator, thereby legitimizing what it termed "biological prostitution" (Ladas, 2019).

Another example of seemingly opposing positions within the Orthodox Church—this time not at an official level—is the stance of the Elder Metropolitan of Ephesus, Chrysostomos Konstantinides (1921–2006), who, already in 1958 (!), referring to the issue of artificial fertilization, wrote that "artificial fertilization in its entirety is deemed inapplicable and is forbidden by our Orthodox Church." Forty-four years later, in 2002, when the Church of Cyprus addressed the issue of assisted reproduction, it stated that artificial insemination using the sperm of the living husband and administered to the wife could be deemed acceptable (Papachrysostomou, 2009).

Engelhardt's approach to the issue of organ transplantation is particularly problematic and cannot be accepted by the Orthodox Church, which could only endorse transplantation as a supreme act of love—offered without any form of compensation or exchange. Although the Texan philosopher initially operates within an Orthodox framework, he later argues that as long as the donation of tissues or organs, whether before or after death, is carried out lawfully and motivated by love for others, there is no moral objection to a person receiving or even requesting financial compensation (Engelhardt, 2000). In fact, for Engelhardt, monetary payment seems justified in such cases; he contends that if a poor person is not allowed to be compensated—but only to donate an organ—an excessive burden is placed upon him. Given that wealth and social status are often linked to better health and longevity, a policy that prohibits the sale of organs might, in his view, effectively condemn the poor to remain in poverty (Ladas, 2023).

As evidenced by the foregoing references, the approach to bioethical issues within the Orthodox Church reveals certain variations. Concerning the first example, the decision of the Patriarchate of Moscow must be regarded as erroneous, as it contradicts the tradition of the Orthodox Church, which accepts all human beings as members regardless of the manner of their birth. Clearly, such a decision could not be accepted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate or the other Orthodox Churches. With respect to the second example, the positions of both Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Ephesus and Engelhardt do not represent official ecclesial documents, but rather personal views, which are positively evaluated within the framework of healthy dialogue. Moreover, given the absence of an official position of the Orthodox Church on assisted reproduction and organ transplantation, one cannot speak of a deviation from Orthodox teaching. Indeed, the fact that Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Ephesus addressed the issue of assisted reproduction already in the mid-20th century makes him a pioneer in Orthodox bioethical reflection. It should also be noted that this hierarch held clear views and presented bioethics as a specific way of life grounded in the experience of God (Griniezakis, 2009).

V. CONCLUSION

Before hastening to condemn existing divergences, we have a duty to examine their causes and uncover their roots. It is possible that the attempt to address a given issue begins from a correct and Orthodox starting point, but in the course of its treatment, it receives different interpretations depending on the pastoral needs of each local Church. At this juncture, it must also be taken into account that even the writings of the Fathers and ecclesiastical authors are not part of the infallible truth; consequently, they may contain erroneous views or misinterpretations. Infallible truth resides only in the Holy Scriptures, the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, and Holy Tradition. Therefore, differences among the works of hierarchs, theologians, and scholars are to be considered "normal," whereas divergences in official synodal decisions raise serious concerns and may cause tremors in the unity of the Church. It is encouraging, however, that the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, convened in Crete in 2016 (Ladas, 2025), addressed the subject of contemporary bioethical reflection in light of developments in the natural sciences and biotechnology. The Council emphasized the significance of these issues for the human person, and the positions it articulated—despite being understandably concise—were clear and demonstrated a profound knowledge of the subject matter (Vantsos, 2019).

Following a long period of various confusions and multiple challenges in the functioning of inter-Orthodox relations, a serious and sincere dialogue among the Orthodox Churches—under the guidance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate—is deemed essential, so that shared responses may be offered to every Orthodox Christian and to every person of good will. Communication among Orthodox hierarchs, clergy, and laypeople on a personal level is considered the most effective means for continuing the hopeful steps recently taken and for eliminating whatever continues to keep the Orthodox Church disjointed. Otherwise, the diversity of bioethical positions may shake even Orthodox believers, who may begin to seek reassurance in alternative bioethical frameworks (Griniezakis, 201; Ladas, 2018).

To prevent such an outcome, the Orthodox Church must speak officially and present a unified stance on emerging bioethical issues, as the existence of divergent decisions within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church risks undermining the very coherence and credibility of Orthodox Christian Bioethics. Consequently, the functioning of a Pan-Orthodox Bioethics Committee is imperative—one that must carefully

examine all bioethical questions in order to prevent the distortion of Orthodox anthropology. This Committee should then submit specific proposals to the next anticipated Holy and Great Council, whose decisions would constitute the sole authoritative expression of the Orthodox Church on bioethical matters. In this way, a genuinely Christian Orthodox Bioethics will be shaped—one that is urgently needed in the 21st century, in the age of crisis and change.

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