

## FROM ETHICS OF DILEMMAS TO THEOLOGY OF TRANSCENDENCE

Metropolitan Nikolaos [Chatzinikolaou]

### Introduction

I wish to begin my talk by making a direct reference to the great theologian of the past century, Father Georges Florovsky, to the honor of whom the present event is dedicated.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, what is considered impressive and is presented as an aim and value, even according to the common Orthodox Christian perception, is the glamour of science, the need for psychological balance, the prudence in using technology, the quality of social services, knowledge as collection and synthesis of information, the ethical integrity of the personhood and so on.

Yet, what is missing is true theology. Whenever we speak of theology, we usually refer to its dry rationalized word. This kind of theology resembles more an intellectual philosophical exercise rather than God's manifestation within an atmosphere of inner stillness and humility; more knowledge of historical and interpretive information, which is undoubtedly useful, rather than inner experiences and divine revelation; more a cultural phenomenon rather than a confirmation of faith through godly signs; more a recital of patristic quotations or a description of its tradition's wealth rather than an eternal enlightening word; more an implementation of proper answers and convincing arguments rather than transcendence of human logic and nature; more being lost in the ambiguity of God rather than finding the way of "*seeing Him as He is*";<sup>2</sup> more an inapprehensible notion rather than an inscrutable

1 Text of the 2007 Florovsky Lecture delivered at the annual meeting of the Orthodox Theological Society, held at St Vladimir's Seminary in June 2007.

2 1 Jn 3:2.

mystery. Anthropocentrism and the transience of the social, philosophical and psychological element of our era's spirituality have radically eliminated the theocentric character of truth.

In our times, true theology is either absent, or is expressed with a falsified spirit; however, at times, it may suddenly emerge from isolated persons as an authentic word that is compatible with our tradition as well as their life and *phronema*. Father Georges Florovsky, along with others—unfortunately not too many others—form a radiant galaxy of the past century that moves eternally in the infinite universe of theological truth of the age to come.

The purpose of this talk is to make an effort to explore such a galaxy with a telescope called Orthodox Bioethical Theology, which transforms basically anthropocentric theology to theocentric anthropology. Consequently, it will not focus on observing the galaxy, but rather on discovering its inner binding forces. It will not give replies to the numerous and significant questions of bioethics, for this is neither feasible nor is it my own responsibility or a task of the present moment. Besides, if we hurry to speak, we will deprive ourselves of the right to learn. Our learning period is not over yet as far as bioethics is concerned.

My presentation will specifically concentrate on certain distinctive characteristics of what we call spiritual bioethics, solely within the light of Orthodox Christian Theology and Tradition.

### *Meaning and Identity of Bioethics*

The term *bioethics* has been used more and more often during the past years, demonstrating thus the struggle of societies against their achievements.

The truly impressive scientific achievements of genetics and medical technology generated enthusiasm for man's capabilities and great optimism for the improvement of health and the quality of life. At the same time, however, problems emerge from scientific progress, because science is very creative and invasive.

It is creative for it gives birth to unprecedented conditions of living. Terms such as stem cells, cloning, prenatal and pre-implantation

diagnosis, genome, proteome or brain death are relatively novel, yet they have acquired an unpredictably wide meaning and significance. The attempt to determine the exact moment of the beginning and the end of human life seems to generate a great deal of speculation; although it is practically necessary, it appears to be quite arbitrary. Similarly, the effort to control the vast range of innovative medical applications and keep them unaffected by any kind of unethical exploitation leads to the need to establish undisputable criteria.

Moreover, modern technology is invasive; it has changed our nutrition; it has affected the environment, the biosphere, the ecosystem, and the air we breathe. In the form of technology, science has also intervened in the human body by replacing our organs. It reforms genes, modifies functions, changes human physiology, controls behaviour. Medical diagnosis and therapy have become extremely technological and are guided by financial motives. We observe all this with awe and admiration, but also with caution and reservation.

Through the science of bioethics, modern man tries to find safe ways of survival as biological species, forms of harmonious social co-existence, conditions of ecological and environmental protection and, naturally, legal formulations that will safeguard the balances between the various—mainly financial—interests.

All these achievements have brought to surface questions such as: when does life begin? What really is life? What exactly is death? When does it occur? What are the related rights over our life, death and our bodies? How does modern biomedicine affect human relations? etc.

In studying these emerging bioethical issues, one would mention four major approaches:

The first views man as a patient-client and its focal point is money and self-interest. This is usually expressed by professional physicians, who successfully cover their intentions behind arguments that seem reasonable but are not convincing.

Another approach sees man as a very interesting, complicated machine and is based on human achievements. The scientific

pioneering discovery that constitutes the highest ethical goal is camouflaged by the presumable service to man and is presented as a unique achievement of the entire humanity.

A third approach of bioethics regards man as an ephemeral biological entity and is based upon the provision of health, for it considers it to be the utmost good. Whatever promotes physical health and prolongs human life is considered ethical.

Finally, there is a fourth approach that perceives man as an independent value. Its central axis is love as an offering, as sentiment, as solidarity as well as a precondition for harmonious social coexistence. Love and respect for life are considered to be the highest ethical values. This form of bioethics, which is basically supported by religions and humanistic organizations, tries to balance the individual's good with the interest of society.

### *The Need for Another Bioethics*

All of the aforementioned approaches may be necessary, legitimate, and interesting; however, they constitute forms of a one-dimensional speculation with an ephemeral and earthly character. Their focal point is not man as a person with a unique spiritual perspective, but rather as an individual with legal rights; it is not society as a community where people share love, discover their inner value, and experience truth, but rather as civil groups and legal entities, guided by self-interest. For this reason, they do not look for the truth and values that can inspire us, but rather for legislative adjustments and consensus that may protect us.

According to Christian tradition, man has been created "in the image of God," and therefore the kind of bioethics we refer to emphasizes the godlikeness of man more than his humanness. For instance, we speak about love, not just as a sentiment but mainly as a reflection of God's love upon us. According to such a bioethical approach, love—not as a mere offering to our neighbor, but as a real communion with one another, as sharing between persons—is of utmost importance; it is considered even more important than the gift of biological life itself.

Secular society tries to prove human omnipotence through the biological perfection of man, while the Orthodox Church faces the grandeur and sacredness of man through his capacity to commune with God and reflect His glory.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while science tries to improve human life, limited by time and space, our Church is working on the eternal person of man, who is made “for a little while lower than the angels,”<sup>4</sup> who has the seal of immortality since his very beginning, and thus his value is expanded beyond space and time.

If answers emerge within this perspective to problems such as respect for free will and self-determination, the very essence of life and death, the coalescence of soul and body, the spiritual and deterministic expression of the soul, the sacredness of the body, of life and of creation, the balance between truth and philanthropy, these indirectly will enlighten the dilemmas related to transplants, reproductive technologies, gene therapy, cloning, research on human genome, etc.

### *Principles or Limits?*

Advisory groups and bioethics committees, namely official bodies that try to set limits and conditions upon scientific research and technology within society, often request the word of religions and churches, given that biomedical research has touched upon the abovementioned very sensitive aspects of human existence.

At the same time, the faithful resort to the clergy to discuss specific dilemmas and problems of everyday life that are persistent and often unsolvable. The religions and churches that embrace every aspect of life cannot remain silent. Within the context of Orthodox Christian faith, the Church is obliged to provide some answers or point in certain directions, and thus to elaborate her anthropological teachings projected on modern scientific reality, yet based on solid theological grounds. Usually, people expect the Church to set certain limits between what is permitted and what is prohibited, and impose protective restrictions; in other words, to

3 2 Cor 3:18.

4 Heb 2:7.

act as a brake to the uncontrollable development of science. On the contrary, we feel that the Church's role is that of a steering wheel.

As the Bioethics Committee of the Church of Greece, we display our viewpoint after processing it thoroughly and try in every decent way to present our way of thinking to the faithful and demand from the state to enact laws that promote human values. Moreover, as Church, we try to convey to Christians the following message: despite the eventual illicit "facilitations" of the laws, believers can make decisions that promote the human person even though these are viewed by contemporary society as the most difficult to put to practice and hard to understand. The course toward the truth does not need the approval of the majority or any legislative adjustments.

As we try to study the influence of contemporary medical technology on the human body and its reference to human beings, to the body and soul, the perishable and imperishable element of human entity, it is natural to be looking for certain limits. Up to what point can technology intervene in the human body? What is logically and ethically permissible and what is prohibited?

However, before setting the limits, we ought to study the principles that rule contemporary research, for limits are not always distinct within the context of values. Nor is it right to appraise institutions and sciences on the basis of barriers and limits, but rather on the basis of principles and freedom. The essence of bioethical speculation is not found behind the limits—namely, what is permitted or prohibited—but behind the principles—namely, how and why we act. The principles determine the correct directions and the necessary limits. The role of bioethics is to reveal the truth, not to replace freedom.

Although a great deal is being heard about threats, dangers, apocalyptic consequences and destructions, we believe that the emergence and progress of genetics, biotechnology and, generally, of medical technology may prove to be more of a blessing than a nightmare. The bioethical challenge does not lead only to the emergence of unprecedented social problems, fears, dilemmas or impasses; when the achievements along with the problems are

interpreted on the abovementioned basis, one comes face to face with human grandeur—what man can achieve—the sacredness of the person as the image of God—what man can reveal—and the projection of the eternal perspective on time—how man can transcend his earthliness; his logic and nature.

Nevertheless, the wide spectrum of our biomedical capabilities along with the scarcity of principles, the crisis of values and the more general disorientation of modern societies, justify the necessity for caution, prudence, and explicit deontological formulations that are not based on unhealthy fears but on refined spiritual values.

### ***Orthodox Bioethics***

The rapid development along with the impressive applications of biomedical research and technology and the consequent metaphysical hopes that they occasionally raise, generate arrogance and bring man as close as ever to the role of God, but as far away as ever from His resemblance.<sup>5</sup> If the spirit of the materialism, eudemonism, and selfish love for one's life that prevails in our societies is placed next to man's spiritual potential and eternal perspective, one can realize the inadequacy of conventional bioethics. The fluctuation between the blessing of God and disrespect for His holy person, between the discovery of man's sacredness and his desecration, between the improvement of biological life and the degrading of its social expression creates the need for non-conventional spiritual bioethics.

Please, allow me to elaborate on some of its basic characteristics:

- 5 At a conference in Lyon, France, James Watson, "the father of DNA," stated: "We are the products of our genes. No one else is going to take care of us or give us rules for how to behave, except ourselves ... I am against society imposing rules on individuals for how they want to use genetic knowledge. Just let people decide what they want to do" (James Watson, "What is life? Fifty years after the double helix discovery," Nobel Day, Bio Vision 2003, Palais des Congrès, Lyon, France, April 8, 2003).

Furthermore, a few years ago, his partner, Francis Crick, said: "No newborn infant should be declared human until it has passed certain tests regarding its genetic endowment; if it fails, it forfeits the right to live" (Francis Crick, "News and Views," *Nature* 220 [1968]: 429–30).

*1. Protecting the sacredness of the human person*

The basic purpose of spiritual bioethics is to protect the human person. By protection of the human person we mean to maintain lively and active in man four main elements: the need for God, namely, the sense of being related to Him, free will, the perspective of eternity, and the harmonious balance between soul and body.

So, if some cause or stimulus destroys the godly need or blurs the eternal perspective, it could be considered non-ethical from the spiritual point of view. Similarly, whatever regards man as a machine and subdues him to determinism becomes ethically suspicious, for it inactivates human free will. The reduction of man to a mere biological machine and the priority of the body and, in general, of man's biological dimension over his soul, when accompanied by arrogant declarations—a frequent phenomenon nowadays—may result in resolutions and applications causing the devaluation and desacralization of man.

Moreover, Orthodoxy does not focus on the individual; it does not view man as an independent individual with specific actions, rights and obligations. It focuses on personhood: namely, each human being is understood as a relationship and communion, for the person is not autonomous but is tied to his family, his fellowmen, God, and the wider society within the Church.

I will mention an example from the field of transplantations. Secular transplantation ethics is based on human rights, on the right for life and death, or on the right of a person to donate the organs of his body as he himself judges. Laws do not include the possibility of the relatives' disagreement regarding such an act. It is practically impossible to apply these laws in Orthodox countries. Feelings and personal judgment, at these difficult moments, transcend all laws. For this reason, we say that consent should also be granted by the family.<sup>6</sup> We believe that the relatives' consent is stronger

6 How is it possible for the relatives to accept the sudden loss of all hopes just because the law says so? They are the ones who pay the bills and are called to admit the death of their loved one through the doctor's confirmation and not by personally ascertaining it (the patient seems to be breathing, or to be in coma, or in a vegetative state, he



than personal volition, for the first one confirms the relationship of persons, while the second one is based on a right.

## *2. Discerning the will of God*

The teaching of the Church is expressed through the commandments and God's will in our life. We often consider that there is a specific reply to every question—namely God's will—which the Church knows; it applies to everyone and thus she demands it from her faithful. According to our tradition and experience, "the will of God" is not something irrelevant to our personhood. Therefore, the aim of the Church is to help us detect it within us, and then apply it in our own life. God offers to every person, at each specific moment, under every circumstance, a variety of possibilities that all may express His volition and form the so-called will of God, which is different from our own egotistical and myopic will. It does not exist so as to limit our freedom, but rather to activate and enliven it. Our own selfish will abolishes our freedom and subdues it to our egoism; however, the various expressions of God's will assist us in discovering our free will as the utmost endowment.

It is true that our age does injustice to the great blessing of the divine commandments. Oftentimes, emphasis on the keeping of the commandments is viewed as an expression of pietism, of a superficial morality. But it is not so. If we pay attention, we will see that both the Scriptures and the patristic writings, as well as the experience of the Church, are full of exhortations to keep the commandments, as an indication of holy life and an expression of love for God: "If ye love me, keep my commandments,"<sup>7</sup> says the Lord himself.

The commandments exist for two reasons: firstly, in order to humble us and secondly, in order to show us our course. As we try to keep them, we sense our weakness and thus we humble ourselves.

Moreover, they function as signposts on our path. On mountain roads one often sees fluorescent poles to the left and right, in order to show the road when it is covered in snow. The commandments

is still warm etc.).

7 Jn 14:15.

serve the same purpose: they show us where we are heading. Standing before the commandments, one is continually instructed in his specific struggle. He does not delude himself, but he stands before the truth with honesty. In the spiritual life, keeping the commandments is not a personal achievement, but a gift from God and a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Assent and trust in His grace belong to us.

God's commandments define His holy will; and keeping them, or at least desiring to live in their spirit, grants the required illumination to experience His truth. God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."<sup>8</sup>

Our life unfolds through dilemmas, opportunities, and possibilities, which especially challenge our freedom. His volition does not exist in order to bind our freedom, but in order to call it into play and bring it to life. Our one will abolishes our freedom and enslaves it to our pride. God's will helps us discover freedom as the supreme gift.

The subjection of one's volition to God's will illumines the mind, liberates the person, brings forth grace, and helps man become a "partaker of the divine nature"<sup>9</sup> and "known by God."<sup>10</sup> This spirit is expressed by a wonderful monologic prayer: "Lord, make me whomever You want and as You want, whether I want it or whether I do not."<sup>11</sup> Such a prayerful subjection to His volition makes us discern—amongst His many opportunities and possibilities—the one which best expresses the godlikeness of our own person. This is His will at the moment.

Consequently, Orthodox bioethics does not provide ethical guidelines, answers to all dilemmas or solutions to all problems; it offers theological truth. It is not bioethics of limitations but bioethics of principles. It is not bioethics that sets up rules and provisions, but rather bioethics that nurtures our conscience. Finally, the decisions concerning the various dilemmas are not made

8 1Tim 2:4.

9 2 Pet 1:4.

10 Gal 4:9.

11 Prayer of an unknown ascetic.

by “wise” committees or invisible outsiders, but by our conscience that has been liberated from the misery of human earthliness. The role of the Church is not to provide answers or usurp the right of making decisions, but to show the way toward responsibility, spiritual freedom, and the truth.

### *3. The value of life and the respect for death*

We could say that life is the greatest gift man has and death his greatest enemy, yet his most certain companion. Moreover, life and death are the most sacred mysteries. It is through biological life that the human person comes into being and is expressed. The countenance of a human being is what remains engraved in our memory. His words and thoughts are not foreign to the characteristics of his brain and person. The way he moves, his strength or weakness, also have biological grounds.

Nevertheless, it seems that a human being is much more than a biological cell system. The variety of choices every man makes, his characteristic otherness, the uniqueness of his psychology, the creativity of his intellect and the formation of his personhood are much more than just anatomic features and detectable biochemical processes. His biological nature bestows upon him the beauty of a well-organized determinism, while his spiritual identity the grandeur of a free will that is unique.

The biological beginning bears the weight of the onset of personhood, while the end refers to an unknown continuation in a higher state of being. The realization of the grandeur and uniqueness of each human being hints at his unending life and the sense of his eternal perspective.

In that respect, the “if,” “how,” and “when” of the beginning and end of the life of every person are also of utmost importance for the Orthodox Church. In our modern age, we have the technology for preventing and terminating a pregnancy, and therefore we can determine whether someone will be conceived—that is if he will come into being, and whether in the end he will be born—that is, if he will live. Our age can alter at will the form and the characteristics

of life. It can also delay death, relieve pain, and be invasive by using advanced technology and thus create new forms of life and novel conditions of death. It can create the possibility of a vast number of choices. Ultimately, it poses unprecedented questions, to which it gives no replies and provokes serious dilemmas that unfortunately are underestimated.

It has created bio-banks so as to cryo-preserve millions of embryos in vitro—such embryos have not existed until now. In naming these embryos it uses misleading terms and questions their value as human beings, but it overestimates their value for the sake of experimentation. It claims that they are not human beings, but its arguments about when and how life begins are not persuasive. Symposia, committees, and parliamentary bodies give their own versions of what constitutes the beginning of life, all of which are different. Thus, in several states of America, or in Italy and Germany, these embryos might be considered human beings, but in other states, in the United Kingdom and Greece, they might not. Although they might until now have been called embryos with specific rights, all of a sudden a special resolution refers to them using the awkward term “natal material” that has an uncertain future, yet is legally protected.

Life and health do not constitute a commodity or simply a human right, but a priceless divine gift. Therefore, life and health are not viewed on the basis of economy and interests, or logic and proper argumentation, but on the basis of their sacredness and respect. Bioethics of this kind, on the one hand, is not set against science, but, on the other, it does not solely rely on bioethical committees.

The same applies to death. The thinking behind euthanasia is that death should not come by itself but that, in certain cases, we should bring it about, whenever and however we want. This is thought to be a human right. We demand that we ourselves designate the quality of life, actually as a precondition for its continuation.

And since we deny life after death with confidence, we reduce man to a biological or physical entity with a specific weight, a transient life span that is subject to uncontrollable determinism. The eugenic

character of his perishable life becomes his sole purpose which of course can “justify all means.”

In other instances, by adopting an entirely different logic we try to prevent the occurrence of death when it comes. We do not let people who are close to dying actually die. We refuse to consent to their biological decomposition, although their systems are slowly collapsing and their consciousness, physical senses, and the ability to express themselves have been irrevocably lost.

The Church respects the end of man’s life. She waits for his hour to come. And when it does come, she simply confesses it and accompanies him into his life ever after. Illness, pain, disability, and imperfection are all part of life, which should be met with patience, love, and humility. None of these can be cured by “provoking death.” Any means that is called therapeutic, i.e., abortion, cloning, etc., ought actually to cure the person to whom it is being applied so as to justify its name.

The beginning of human life “from the very moment of conception” acknowledges the value of the person from the point at which he or she first appears. It grants him the time that belongs to him, and the respect he deserves. Man does not lose his dignity when he endures pain and suffers patiently. He loses his value when, based on myopic criteria, we identify his good with the provoked termination of his biological course either at its initial or final stage.

No one would ever dream of locating the beginning of the universe at some other moment after the Big Bang, just because it took a little while for the first particles to appear, the first nuclei to be formed, the first stars to be born or, even more importantly, for the conditions of life to appear. Nevertheless, many scientists nowadays struggle to convince us that there is no proof that the beginning of human life and the overwhelming moment of fertilization coincide. Furthermore, they try to appraise life based solely on “quality” criteria. But do we speak about the universe as being something of value only when stars are born and not when they die?

The question as to when human life begins or ends is not a simple scientific matter, nor can it be defined in precise terms or expressed

as an observation, resolution, or number. The beginning of any human being is his *very first beginning*, the moment of fertilization. The other stages are phases of his life. The "how" and "why" remain an inscrutable mystery. The same applies to death.

Life is granted; it is not chosen. It reveals the secret grandeur of the soul and the person. Its end is unavoidable. No matter what man does, he will always fight for life, yet he will still inherit death. The massive destruction of embryos so that those alive may improve their life reminds us more of death than it supports life. Similarly, relief through euthanasia does not draw death further away, but rather it hastens it. Life is promoted only when one embraces death spiritually; namely, when one recognizes death as the clearest reflection of life and not as its irrevocable end.

For these reasons, we do not look upon life as a right that belongs to us, but we respect it as a mystery that transcends us. Its value does not depend on any right of man, but on the respect of all of us.

#### *4. Free from scholasticism*

The Orthodox perception does not seek scholastic replies to specific questions that oftentimes by nature constitute inscrutable mysteries. In response to the vast number of bioethical issues, the truth is not presented as an accessible and absolutely conceivable wholeness. Therefore, the mentality of perfect and adequate answers that are offered directly on all subject matters is indicative of an impermissible pride and disrespect toward the mystery of the unknown. The sense that often as our knowledge increases at the same time the field of the unknown is also expanded leads us, on the one hand, to the need to experience an enlightening humility and, on the other, to seek expressions of our free will, instead of secure replies.

Hence, when we raise questions such as: are the products of cloned embryos human beings with a soul? How and when exactly is the soul placed inside the body? What is the relationship between soul and body during the various stages of embryonic development? What is the meaning and the exact moment of death?—the reply is

that we simply do not know and, therefore, we ought to stand with awe before these questions and not rely on the overconfidence of certain replies or resolutions. We respect embryos from the moment we perceive or even suspect that they possess human identity, not because they are something great that we adequately know, but because they conceal a mystery, which will always remain unknown.

Likewise, theologically speaking, we do not define death as the cessation of the heart or of the pulmonary function or as the death of the brain. The separation between soul and body occurs under conditions that transcend our cognitive ability. The physicians know only when the body dies, not when it is separated from the soul. This is a mystery and will remain an unknown mystery forever. That is why we never hurt a dead body; we simply bury it, after ascertaining its biological death, because its decay and decomposition obliges us to do so. The only exception is when it can be offered with the appropriate consent of love so as to grant life to other people. Love as “a still more excellent way”<sup>12</sup> transcends all hesitation or rational argumentation. The opportunity to express our love and communion ought to prevail over our efforts to specify the exact moment of the end of life.

### *5. Not conservative, yet cautious*

The Orthodox mentality does not fear the possibility of an error, because it does not need the safety of correctness. The entire Orthodox Christian anthropology is based on the fact that man can discover God not by direct knowledge, but mainly through his own faults and repentance; not by avoiding all mistakes, but by humbly confessing them. The tradition of the Christian East is not dominated by the scholasticism of correctness and the mentality of infallibility. Oftentimes, our statements on the delicate bioethical issues are quite open, not in the sense of irresponsibility and false liberalism, but in the sense of humility and freedom. Prayer and God’s enlightenment lead to the truth more than the knowledge and judgment of the experts. You may make the wrong decision

12 1 Cor 13:31.

and be in truth and make the right decision and follow the wrong way. Humility and patience that emerge from the reconciliation with our shortcomings constitute the best guarantee of the fact that every problem and dilemma is dealt with the greatest possible respect.

Consequently, the Orthodox Church is very cautious in studying and formulating her bioethical statements so as to offer the wholeness of truth and, at the same time, very lenient in her pastoral practice so as to help the faithful repent and return in humility.

For this reason, we are not startled even at our ability to experiment with the genome and the secrets of our biological existence. If this ability is seen as capability in the hands of a society with proper criteria, principles, and values, then this power is not a danger, but a creative force. The Church is oriented toward man created "in the image and likeness of God" and not toward the scientific achievement.

On the other hand, we are interested in the spiritual protection of man, namely his freedom to recognize God, his ability to visualize eternity, his capability to function according to the godly truth. We cannot close our eyes before reality. Our societies are poor in values. They easily give in to the frequently harmful and absurd consequences of the scientific "achievements" that promise to improve life, but may injure man as a psychosomatic being. Our committees are inadequate; our politicians cannot assess scientific success; and our legislators cannot catch up with the rapid development.<sup>13</sup> Our capabilities are greater than our tolerance. We have the possibility to possess enormous power but we are unable to control it.

For these reasons, we cannot accept the crazy game with destruction or the emerging eugenic perception on life and society. The Church greatly sympathizes with the weak and neglected persons, those ignored by society. She conveys her message through pain—love, patience, and humbleness cannot flourish without it—

13 Human Genetics Advisory Commission, "Cloning Issues in Reproduction, Science and Medicine," *Bulletin of Medical Ethics* 144 (December 1998/January 1999): 9.



and helps man transcend himself through his own imperfections and other people's injustice. Hence, as the Orthodox Church, we are set against the sacrifice of man on the altar of legalized eugenic or euthanasiac injustice.

We also oppose financial captivity and corporate totalitarianism, or the utilitarian ideas and "values" and the insatiable pursuit of authority over nature, which emerge from contemporary biomedical arrogance.

Orthodox bioethics is not secular; it is more ascetic and even more liberating. It is less legally restrictive.

### **Beyond Knowing and Understanding**

Our world is characterized by diversity. We are all so different. Each person has 23 pairs of chromosomes, and at the fusion of a sperm and an ovum,  $2^{32}$  different pairs can be formed. These, when combined per 23, form an incredible genetic "mix" that produces  $10^{40}$  independent possibilities. This means that two parents could give birth to  $10^{40}$  different children.<sup>14</sup>

If we add the modifications that occur after fertilization, for instance the inactivity of certain genes as a result of methylation, which is responsible for the genomic imprint, such as the phenomenon of brain ductility, then the statistical probability of meeting two similar human beings can be calculated as  $10^{-87}$ . That means that no two identical human beings exist, nor will they ever exist.<sup>15</sup>

In our world there also is an amazing co-existence of opposites: big and small, comprehensible and incomprehensible, knowledge and unknowability, magnificence and pettiness, good and evil, unity and dissimilarity. Theoretical physicists speak about the *Theory of Everything*, yet some of them declare that "we are a redistribution of nothing"; we speak about *Theories of Super-symmetry*, yet the theories which we adopt with confidence nowadays go under the names of

14 Claudine Guérin-Marchand, *Les manipulation génétiques*, coll. "Que sais-je?" (Paris : P.U.F., 1997), 28.

15 André Boué, *La médecine du fœtus* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1995), 39.

*Relativity* and *Uncertainty*. We believe that we are decoding the genetic secrets, yet we are unable to combat our great and small biological enemies. We may well be able to discover the secrets of our theories and describe our very first beginning or end, or the details of the microcosm and macrocosm, yet we fail to deal with present-time reality. By using the conceptual tool of what is very small and infinitesimal in terms of time, we may be close to discovering the mystery of the origins of the world and the vastness of the universe, yet we succeed in making mountains out of molehills in our everyday life.

It seems that the more we draw near to its heart, the more nature likes to withhold its secrets. We are nearing the point of the beginning of the world, we are only  $10^{-43}$  seconds away from the Big Bang, and before we can seize upon this moment, our equations collapse and we are left with singularity. We chase after the ends of the universe and we realise that the closer we approach, the faster they are drawing away from us (*Hubble's Law*). The more our knowledge of the world increases, the more it reveals our expanding unknowability. This is also expressed with the *Uncertainty Principle*. We designate with accuracy a certain quality of nature and at the same time we make an error on a respective one.

The same applies to the universe: we carry on researching into it and we find black holes, dark matter and energy, hidden symmetry, unknown particles, strange entities, to which we give names that pertain to the metaphysical (e.g., strange quark, God's particle), and which conceal the most beautiful secrets.

The world becomes very alluring but is revealed to be tragically isolating. The great constants of physics have values that justify our existence as human beings (*Anthropic Principle*), but necessarily lead to our isolation as beings. The universe is enormous and speeds are insuperably low. The speed of light, the greatest speed there is, the speed of communication, is at once both unsurpassable and finite. We can hear—receive stimuli, we can speak—send messages, but we cannot develop cosmic communication with the universe. With our telescopes, we can only see 4% of the entire universe. The remaining 23% is dark matter, and 73% is dark energy. And this is

where the secret of our world lies. We know so little and there is so much more that we are unaware of.

We open the book of the code of life and we find out that we cannot read it. We learn more about the *genome* in the hope that we are discovering the truth of our genetic identity, and we are led to the *proteome*, which confirms our greater ignorance. Before we can even get to grips with one alphabet, we are forced to learn an even more difficult language.

One more glance at our world persuades us that its truth and beauty co-exist with imperfections, disabilities, decay, and death. After the “death” of a star, from its remnants new stars are born. Along with super-symmetry in the early universe as big as  $10^{-33}$  cm in diameter or  $10^{-36}$  sec from the Big Bang, there is a great asymmetry in the world that we perceive with our senses. As forms of life disappear, other more developed forms emerge. In the genetic content of a human cell, even in the so-called “junk DNA,” there seem to be a host of finely-concealed riddles. These play a role that is far from insignificant in the whole hereditary procedure and in determining the biological characteristics of the human species.

Despite all our remarkable achievements, illnesses, physical decay, and death do not simply make their presence felt daily; in the world of “relativity” and “uncertainty,” they constitute its most absolute, certain, and unavoidable parameters.

Yet, how amazing this game with the mysteries of the world and life is! The Orthodox Christian tradition offers to the modern world a theology that confesses that we know much less than what we ignore; that the conceivable is less than the inconceivable and apart from the affirmative way of knowledge there is also the *apophatic* way. We cannot partake of God’s essence but we can partake of His uncreated energies. The term “uncreated” refers to our inability to understand but it does not affect our ability to partake.

What we can ultimately understand is that “God is infinite and incomprehensible and all that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility.”<sup>16</sup>

16 St John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, Book 1, ch. 4.

At this point we are introduced to the transcendental and spiritual values; the need to communicate with the mystery, with what is beyond our capabilities and knowledge; we are called to replace understanding with revelation, to abandon the logic of human limits and to become familiar with the transcendental communion with God.

### Transcending Bioethics

In the end, we must admit that on the cosmic scale we are very insignificant, extremely alone, and our life span is all too short. Thus, we are incapable of knowing the very truth of the cosmos, of comprehending all its secrets and details and of communicating within it.

The greatest speed of communication, the breathtaking speed of light, is finite, while the universe is inconceivably vast. That makes this extraordinary speed to be actually extremely low. While, according to Aristotle, we are social beings, we are obliged to live so lonely in the universe.<sup>17</sup> While, according to the same ancient Greek philosopher, "all men, by nature, desire to know," we are compelled to remain within limited knowledge.<sup>18</sup> The inadequacy of science as well as of our technology thus becomes apparent. Although, our achievements and knowledge are, in human terms, incredible, yet, in cosmic terms they are close to nothing and most likely erroneous.

At the same time, we are so different and special within the universe. We are unique! We have *logos* in terms of our intellectual and thinking abilities, as well as in terms of the ability to express ourselves articulately. Nature and the universe do not possess *logos* in the aforementioned sense, but we can still observe rationality in the workings of both. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork."<sup>19</sup> This cosmic rationality can be approached scientifically, while its truth is better revealed spiritually.

17 W. D. Ross, *Aristotelis Politica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

18 W. D. Ross, *Aristotelis, Post Naturalis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 922a, first line.

19 Ps 19: 1.

Modern scientific philosophy is fixated on proving its self-sufficiency and therefore it questions the existence or disregards the presence of God, the reason probably being that it tries to compete with Him on the level of power. It does not want an almighty God; rather, it favors an all-powerful man. That is why it looks for values that, according to its opinion, can stand better without God.

Orthodox tradition, faith, and theology are not concerned with the question of the *existence* of God, but with that of His revealed and experienced *presence*. Science fails to prove either the existence or the non-existence of God. Every attempt to prove His existence is pointless. God is an inscrutable mystery! Therefore, it is better to question His presence spiritually than to try to prove His existence rationally or scientifically. A god whose existence or non-existence can be proven does not exist. He is not the God!

God as “HE WHO IS” (Ὁ Ὄν) appears to be an adversary to creation; we look for Him and He hides Himself, He is not partakable in His essence, His existence is unprovable. On the contrary, God as “HE WHO IS PRESENT” (Ὁ Παρών), is a friend and father to creation; He reveals Himself and is partakable in His uncreated energies. His presence can be experienced.

Augustine proclaimed that we can see God with our mind or intellect (*nous*) since our *nous* is akin to Him, and thus he led Western thought on a fruitless quest to comprehend the incomprehensible. On the other hand, the Fathers of the Eastern Church maintain that we can transcend the limitations of our created nature only through the Holy Spirit. God combines both that which is comprehensible and that which is not.<sup>20</sup>

20 “As I conceive, by that part of It which we can comprehend to draw us to itself (for that which is altogether incomprehensible is outside the bounds of hope, and not within the compass of endeavour), and by that part of It which we cannot comprehend to move our wonder, and as an object of wonder to become more an object of desire, and, being desired, to purify, and by purifying to make us like God, so that, when we have thus become like Himself, God may, I being united to us, and that perhaps to the same extent as He already knows those who are known to Him” (St Gregory the Theologian, *On Theophany*, Homily 38, 7, GFC (ΕΠΕ) 5.44–46).

God, as far as His essence is concerned, is uncommunable and thus unknowable. As far as His uncreated energies are concerned, He is partakable. The question of His existence is related to His uncommunable dimension, and thus it will remain unanswered. So, He cannot be approached by proving His existence but by experiencing His presence. Every effort to prove Him Who is by nature unprovable is deemed to fail. Instead we need to partake of Him Who is out of love partakable.

God, as experienced in the life of the Orthodox Church, is of course transcendent in His power, although He is transcendent mainly in His wisdom and love. He is Super-substantial, He is All-perfect; He remains not distant from us but always self-emptying for us; he does not punish us but is Himself crucified; it is not that we die and He lives, but that He dies in time for us to live eternally. He does not express His love to us by arrogantly demonstrating His power or outpouring His knowledge but by offering us the possibility of partaking in His uncreated energies and love. God is not an opponent that science should either ignore or extinguish but rather He is the God of love that science must on all accounts discover.

Consequently, Orthodox ethics offers the way to know God not by comprehending His mystery but by partaking in Him and experiencing His presence. It is not a set of protective rules and proper canons, but an expression of dogma, a manifestation of divine truth. It is not always expressed in the form of convincing arguments or specific answers to questions or generalized suggestions applicable to all people. Dogmatic truth is beyond understanding, and in cases of pressing dilemmas even its ethical implications may not be clearly discerned.

However, by humbling ourselves either by acknowledging our weakness or by taking an ethical risk or by accepting our inability to know the safe answer or by repenting for a wrong decision, we can experience God's presence. We may do the right thing and yet be enslaved in the jail of our ethics; and we may do the wrong thing and be liberated through repentance for our personal fall.

Bioethics in the Orthodox tradition and theology is not superficial obedience to the Church's rules, but a way to divine illumination and partaking in God's energies through our free will.

The experience of God's presence and therefore the knowledge of His truth cannot be achieved by developing our intellectual abilities, our knowability, but rather by humbly accepting our limitations in conceiving His incomprehensibility.

If the natural world to a certain degree is a mystery, how much more is God Himself also a mystery. This is why, transcending our knowing capacity, we hope that we may experience knowledge not only as a result of scientific or rational processes, but mainly as a personal revelation of the truth. There are answers to all kinds of bioethical dilemmas that derive from our knowledge; however, there are also answers that spring from the way we reconcile ourselves with our limitations.

The potential of Orthodoxy to give a witness of respect for the human person to the modern world that still seeks its identity is not insignificant. Secular bioethics is limited to temporal and earthly man who weighs 70 kilos without a soul, lives just for 70 years without eternal perspective, or is sustained by 70 dollars per day without joy and fulfilment. Orthodox bioethics discovers the sacredness of God's image through the dilemmas, and through man the mystery of God.

The ancient Greeks used to say: "It is better to prevent than to cure." When the effects and consequences of biomedicine are negative, they don't provide cures. Moreover, the problems of bioethics appear so suddenly and are so perplexing in their nature that they can neither be foreseen by human logic nor be legally restricted or practically prevented. The Orthodox proposal is not to impose laws or designate limits. Instead, it is to return to the principles and spiritual values that do not degenerate man to an ephemeral biological entity, but elevate him to an eternal person; to return to the early Christian principles, to the true roots of contemporary civilization. Then, we do not only "cure" the biomedical "insult" or prevent it. We transform biomedicine from

a threat to a blessing and bioethics from a task of committees to a revelation of theology.

Problems cannot be solved through scientific knowledge or technological achievements; dilemmas cannot be answered through legal resolutions or ethical committees; mysteries cannot be understood through intellect and logic. Truth, the truth of God, can be revealed through authentic theology and be partaken of through transcendental experience.