

## Defining Christian Bioethics: Foundations for Moral Decision-Making in a Pluralistic World

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the challenges faced by Christian bioethics in a pluralistic world. It explores the methodology of bioethics within the context of Christian theology, particularly Orthodox theology. It delineates a triangular research method encompassing biomedical facts, anthropological insights, and ethical principles. Moreover, it discusses the dual methodology of Orthodox Church Fathers, emphasizing the interplay between reason and faith. The article argues for a holistic approach to moral decision-making, integrating experiential encounter with divine truth alongside rational analysis. It underscores the significance of conversion, asceticism, and liturgical experience in guiding ethical discernment, ultimately advocating for a shift from being-for-death to being-for-life as the foundation for moral clarity in bioethics.

**Keywords:** bioethics, pluralism, methodology, Christian theology, moral decision-making

### Introduction

Faith in a personal God who created man in His own image, and faith that God himself became man in Jesus Christ, led to the birth of faith in an absolute and universal Truth, both of created reality and of man. Jesus Christ, the one who said of Himself that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life, is for Christians the Archetype, the model after which man was created, the goal towards which he is directed, and the One in relation to whom man can attain

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the goal of his perfection, of his deification in Christ. “You are all one in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 3:28), and “I am living no longer I, but Christ is living in me” (Gal. 2:20), said St Paul. Thus, the concept of progress means for Christians transfiguration according to the divine model, whose seal they bear through creation, and who stands by them and helps them in this progress. *Imitatio Christi* and *life in Christ* at the same time. A single absolute Truth, transcendent but also immanent through incarnation, determines both the moral life of christians and their interpretation of reality and the world. Thus, Christian universalism came into being.

Modernity, through the repudiation of Christianity, through the so-called “disenchantment of the world” and the “death of God”, has slowly led to the disappearance of Christian universalism, the disappearance of faith in an absolute Truth and the emergence of a pluralistic interpretation of reality and man. If during the Enlightenment, man still had faith in a universal truth discovered by reason and in a common human nature, the recent postmodern man no longer recognizes any universal value, any common truth, denying human nature itself. Jean Francois Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism is famous in this sense: “incredulity towards metanarratives”, where metanarratives are understood as totalizing stories about history and the goals of the human race that ground and legitimise knowledges and cultural practises<sup>1</sup>. Thus, our world is becoming more and more pluralistic, although it preserves, as in a palimpsest, traces of universal Christian values, still present in social structures and in the collective mind of the heirs of the old European Christendom.

This pluralism has led to what H. T. Engelhardt calls “moral strangers”, people from different cultural groups who may share no ethical presuppositions in common. This ethical pluralism has also led to the emergence of bioethics that are alien to each other, which, starting from different ethical and anthropological presuppositions, sometimes even diametrically opposed, lead to different or even antagonistic bioethical conclusions. In this pluralistic framework, Christian bioethics, founded precisely on faith in an absolute and universal Truth, is often considered fundamentalist and anachronistic. However, in a pluralistic world, even those who do not believe in relativistic pluralism must have a voice.

Beyond the interpretation of concrete bioethical cases, I think that what Christian bioethics must do in the first place in this pluralistic context is to define its meta-bioethical foundations: the methods of interpretation and decision-making in concrete bioethical cases. This is why in this article I aim to clarify two things. First, to define the method of research in bioethics, a method that corresponds to the orthodox conception of knowledge, and then to analyse the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Condiția postmodernă. Raport asupra cunoașterii*, translated by Ciprian Mihaly (Cluj-Napoca: Idea, 2003).

problem of the method of moral decision-making in bioethics, the way, that is, of moving from *being* to *ought-to-be*, from the concrete data of anthropology and medicine, to moral decisions in bioethics.

### **The research method in bioethics**

Christian Truth is a self-revealing personal Truth. Consequently, it reveals itself to men. Truth is not deciphered by the pursuits of human reason alone, and then conceptualised by logical abstraction. That would be a reductionist attitude to truth. Revealing itself through love, in a movement from God to man and not vice versa, Truth only allows itself to be discovered in love. This kind of knowledge goes beyond the sphere of intellectual curiosity justifiable through objectivity.

Not in objectivity can truth be known, but in subjective participation, through *koinonia*, in communion, in truth. Consequently, truth becomes life, that is, a life event. Truth understood as God's gift to man, participates in the transfiguration of the life of the one who is in search of truth and wishes to become the *you* of the loving communication of the divine *I*.

As far as the scientific research method of bioethics is concerned, without prejudice to the distinction of the planes of knowledge into created and uncreated, to which correspond two different but complementary instruments, reason and faith, Christian bioethics of orthodox foundation can adopt the so-called triangular method, determined by three connecting points. The first is the "exposition of the biomedical fact"<sup>2</sup> the second "the anthropological meaning", and the third "the principles and rules of conduct"; biology-anthropology-ethics.

### **The method of moral decision-making in bioethics**

The peculiarity of Christian bioethics interpreted within the horizon of meaning of orthodox anthropology, regarding the method of moral decision-making, is based on the on the profile of orthodox ethics. Since man's current nature is a fallen nature, clothed in the robes of skin as the natural consequences of sin that determine the condition of human existence as being-for-death, the bioethical method cannot simply follow the transition from such a being to moral ought-to-be. *Being* in the condition of being-for-death cannot justly

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<sup>2</sup> Ellio Sgreccia, *Manuale di bioetica*, vol. 1 (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 31999), 63.

ground *ought-to-be* through reason alone. This does not mean that orthodox theology totally distrusts human reason in the exercise of moral decision-making, but that this reason belonging to being-for-death must first be purified and united with divine Reason, to be able to rightly decide what is good and what is evil from the height reached in contemplating Truth itself.

Accordingly:

“We are brought to a fundamental contrast between secular and traditional Christian moral reflection. (...) The first involves a discursive rationality, which is forever bound within the sphere of immanence. The second is noetic and claims on experiential encounter with the Truth, who is personal. The first in being secular engages no transcendent faith. The second claims form of knowledge that breaks through the horizon of immanence. Again, this is not to discount the place and importance of discursive rationality. Discursive rationality brings analytic clarity. It establishes lines of valid argument. It elaborates, explicates, and organizes. Yet, by itself it cannot disclose the substance of truth. In particular, it cannot establish a content-full, moral vision”.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, Christian bioethics, based on orthodox theology, states that the method of moving from *being* to *ought-to-be* is not exclusively a rational method. It must be combined with the method of moving from *being-for-death* to *being-in-life*. The dual methodology of the Eastern Fathers theorized in the field of theology will in this case be assumed as the method of Christian bioethics. Consequently, the bioethical method of moral decision-making is based on two complementary methods: the noetic and the rational. The former helps man to move from *being-for-death* to *being-in-life*, and the latter helps him to process, explain and organize the participatory knowledge acquired, with a view to moral decisions in concrete bioethical cases.

### **The dual methodology of the Fathers**

A pertinent analysis of the dual theological methodology of the Orthodox Church Fathers is provided by Nikos Matsoukas in the first volume of his *Dogmatic and Symbolic Orthodox Theology*.<sup>4</sup>

“This methodology of the orthodox fathers comprises two lines, functionally interconnected, that point the way to truth. These two lines are charismatic theology and scientific theology. They find their foundation in the distinction

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<sup>3</sup> Hugo T. Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics* (Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers, 2000), 188-189.

<sup>4</sup> Nikos Matsoukas, *Teologia Dogmatica e Simbolica Ortodossa. Introduzione alla gnoseologia teologica ortodossa*, vol. 1 (Roma: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1995), 97.

between created and uncreated, which the Orthodox tradition has embraced, with different modes of expression, from its earliest beginnings. In this sense, scientific theology refers to creation and charismatic theology to the uncreated”<sup>5</sup>.

This distinction between created and uncreated, however, does not mean separation, since “creation, drawing its origin from the energy of the divine and not from the divine essence, is sustained and progresses only on the basis of divine energy. Thus, becoming is not defined by ideal forms or ideas or archetypes, but by the ‘reasons for creation’ of created beings. These ‘reasons’ indicate the will of God and are inherent in the energy of the divine will. The relationship always remains ‘energetic’ (*energeiakòn*)”.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, even knowledge of the world cannot only be realized through knowing the laws, ideas or archetypes that underpin it, but also through relational experience. This experience is the main method of knowledge, knowledge that is then expressed through reason, in an analogical and symbolic manner, generating the second, *rational-discursive* method.

The first aspect that illuminates the Father’s dual methodology is, therefore, the distinction between the created and the uncreated, between the natural and the supernatural, to which correspond two different but complementary ways of knowing: reason and faith. The natural and the supernatural represent two levels of reality that intertwine and identify with each other to a point, due to the presence of uncreated energies in the natural. It is one thing to seek the created and another to experience the uncreated. There is a natural functional relationship between them. The created and the uncreated, the physical and the metaphysical, the natural and the supernatural, are not separate but distinct and at the same time united in a functional relationship of complementarity. The link between the created and the uncreated is the uncreated divine energy. Through this inner bond between the natural and the supernatural, the rupture and confusion between reason and faith are overcome, since both the distinction, as different instruments for knowledge of the created and the uncreated, and the complementary unity, as they both express two intertwining realities, are maintained.

This dual methodology of the Fathers was theorised in the East by St. Gregory Palamas, from whom Matsoukas quotes abundantly. By emphasising the method of experiencing God through uncreated energies, St. Gregory Palamas, and today Orthodox theology, are accused of devaluing the importance of rational knowledge. Instead, the Palamasites were only stating the fact that the rational method should be considered neither the only nor the most important. Their fear in this regard was well-founded, since today, rational

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<sup>5</sup> N. Matsoukas, *Teologia Dogmatica e Simbolica Ortodossa...*, 98.

<sup>6</sup> N. Matsoukas, *Teologia Dogmatica e Simbolica Ortodossa...*, 103.

scientific knowledge seems to be the only method of knowledge accepted by today's modern and post-modern society. It is, however, the only method that secular bioethics proposes when making moral decisions.

Matsoukas defends the use of the dialectical method in the East as well:

“Palamas not only accepts syllogisms, dialectics and theological science, but also tries to lay down the rules of their proper function.(...) The divergence between Palamas and the scholastics consists in the fact that he does not accept, in any way, the principle that the dialectical method can scrutinise uncreated things; according to him, it can only investigate created things.(...) The value of cataphatic or positive theology is relative and secondary. Nevertheless, the fathers of the Orthodox Church never rejected it as useless, but accepted it within the functional unity that exists between the dialectical method and the demonstrative method, between theological science and living experience, founded on the vision of the divine presence within the world and history”.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, in orthodox theology as well as in its bioethics, the two distinct methods of knowledge, the dialectical method rooted in reason and the demonstrative method rooted in apophatic experience, are complementary but also hierarchical. The first is the method of experience in faith and the second, the dialectical method.

“According to orthodox theologians, philosophy can in no way form the basis and starting point of theology. (...) It precedes transformation, life experience, contemplation; works and life are prior to the theology of words and examples”<sup>8</sup>.

For Orthodox theology, faith is not just an argument about things not seen but, in its highest form, a vision of uncreated things. It is not a formal adherence but an experience of the relationship according to grace with God. This methodological hierarchy that gives precedence to the experience of faith over rational analysis also applies to Christian bioethics and the methods it proposes with a view to the right moral decisions to be taken.

“This experiential character of traditional Christian theology has implications for its bioethics. Traditional Christianity has not sought to devise better arguments to prove God's existence or discursively to discover the character of divine commands. Instead, the cardinal question has been: how can I live so that as to experience God and know the content of the moral life (including that which bears on health care)?”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> N. Matsoukas, *Teologia Dogmatica e Simbolica Ortodossa...*, 112.

<sup>8</sup> N. Matsoukas, *Teologia Dogmatica e Simbolica Ortodossa...*, 117.

<sup>9</sup> H.T. Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, 163.

In the precedence of the charismatic method, as Matsoukas calls the experiential or noetic method, supported, however, by the dialectical method, lies the specificity of the method of Christian bioethics based on orthodox theology, as opposed to other types of bioethics. The source of morality and of right moral decisions is the sanctity of life, sanctity understood not only as the renewal of human nature according to its original state, which would again lead us, in some way, to a primacy of normative human reason, but sanctity understood as the overcoming of nature within nature, as divinization through union with Christ in grace. A normative bioethics has a content that can be discovered not only through sound argumentation but rather through openness of the soul before grace.

“When scholarly analyses claim a priority over the pursuit of holiness, one loses the central connection to holiness as the source of canonical moral and religious content. (...) A traditional Christian bioethics will not accept the primary contribution of theology to bioethics as that of academic refinement, analysis, and argument instead of theological experience”<sup>10</sup>.

This state of holiness is not merely the perfecting of human nature through the maximum enhancement of its natural and autonomous powers, but a participation in God’s holiness, a vision of God’s uncreated grace in which man becomes “a *partaker of the divine nature*” (2 Peter 1:4). Deification is the authentic way of life in which man experiences the life of God through the One who took on human nature and deified it. Discernment in the moral decisions of those in the fallen state, unsanctified as the norm of the human, comes from tasting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The discernment of the deified saint comes from tasting from the tree of life.

Tasting from the tree of knowledge of good and evil does not offer the perspective of the transcendent as the horizon that gives meaning to life. Should man in this fallen state accept the existence of the transcendent, he does not experience it and consequently has no true knowledge of it. In this case, moral decisions cannot rightly take into account the living experience of God, therefore a more complex process is necessary to make the right moral decisions that includes conversion, humility, asceticism, ecclesial-communal maturation of the person and liturgical- sacramental and Eucharistic experience.

God’s perspective on the world and man constitutes the truth of them, and in drawing on that perspective of truth together with God, through union with Him and the reception of uncreated grace in the Holy Spirit one can have right discernment in moral decisions.

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<sup>10</sup> H.T. Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, 207.

Placed on the axis of creation-fall-redemption-divinisation, arriving at just moral decisions requires first of all the renewal of fallen human nature into autonomy, to the initial state of deified humanity, and then its elevation to the moral likeness of God, to deification. This happens simultaneously by two complementary ways or methods: anthropodicy and theodicy. Anthropodicy is the way that leads from man to God and includes as a method the liturgical-ascetical conversion of consciousness and rational analysis. Theodicy is the way that leads from God to man and grafts divine teachings into man and leads him, through the Spirit, to all truth. The distinction we make between anthropodicy and theodicy is purely methodological. Both God and man go towards each other. The prodigal son re-enters in himself and returns to his Father, but also the Father, “while he was still far away”, goes to meet him and makes him put on “the most beautiful garment”, the garment of light of divinisation, which Christ wore on Tabor. With the return to his true nature, man passes from being-for-death to being-for-life: this son of mine was dead and has risen, was lost and has been found. Receiving then the garment of light of divinisation, he participates to the divine light.

### ***From being-for-death to being-for-life***

To return to the initial state, from being for death to being for life, man needs conversion and penance, i.e. *metanoia*, the transfiguration of the mind, and asceticism, the working of the virtues as “human forms of the divine attributes”<sup>11</sup>. To characterise the condition of fallen man, Christian theology has made use of the concept of sin, a concept that has sometimes been misinterpreted in the course of time, thus leading to the reduction of sin-consciousness in modern and post-modern man, so that secular ethics and bioethics move from being to ought-to-be considering being in its pure natural state as normative for discerning good from evil.

“We usually attribute criminal connotations to sin: we believe that it is disobedience to God’s commandments and that its consequences are God’s punishments. For the orthodox biblical and patristic tradition, on the other hand, original sin, like all sin, is placed in a natural realm”<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Massimo il Confessore, *Questiones ad Thallasium*, P.G. 90, 321B.

<sup>12</sup> Panayotis Nellas, *Voi siete dei. Antropologia dei Padri della Chiesa* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1993), 191.



Sin does not mean a simple moral failing, but a general failing with ontological effects. It does not consist in the number of sinful acts but in the total loss of life. Sin is “a ruin” in the stricted sense of the word, which man perceives as the absence of God, of other persons, of himself and of creatures. In a word, as an absence of goal and purpose, and, therefore, as unbearable loneliness and anguish<sup>13</sup>. The life of fallen man is manifested in its transience, absurdity and irrationality.

Distanced from God and without His life, passions are born in man:

“the impassible faculties of the soul - which in created man appear as windows that open to the uncreated God, and as vessels from which the noetic functions draw the grace of God that nourishes and vivifies the whole man - by their subjection to the body are transformed into passible functions, so that the life of the sinful soul is constituted by *concupiscence*”<sup>14</sup>.

This subjection of man to the passions, generating the condition of being-for-death, weakens all his spiritual capacities, reason, will and feeling, which severely affects his ability to know the world and himself, and implicitly the ability to discern good and evil. “Knowledge, which in the functionality conforming to it is perfect communion between the one who knows and that which is known, in the condition contrary to its nature is reduced to mere observation, i.e. to an accumulation of empirical information relating to the object of knowledge and a simple syllogistic reworking of the data acquired”<sup>15</sup>.

From this state, man is assiduously called to return, with a view to his renewal. This return takes place through a certain change of mind, metanoia, conversion, through asceticism and liturgical-sacramental communion with God. “It was man who departed from God: and it is he who is invited to return. This return, this transposition into God’s space, which goes hand in hand with the healing, restructuring and transformation of human existence, constitutes the core of repentance and the content of the entire spiritual struggle”<sup>16</sup>.

Although in a fallen, torn state, man can keep his existence open to God and can heal by starting with conversion as a change of mind. Metanoia predisposes man to understand the will of God, to moral discernment: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind in order to know what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

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<sup>13</sup> P. Nellas, *Voi siete dei...*, 197.

<sup>14</sup> P. Nellas, *Voi siete dei...*, 192.

<sup>15</sup> P. Nellas, *Voi siete dei...*, 194.

<sup>16</sup> P. Nellas, *Voi siete dei...*, 191-192.

Asceticism is the way by which knowledge becomes love and the mind enlightened by faith and warmed by love, through the descent of the mind into the heart, acquires the gift of discernment that makes true knowledge possible. In a world where man's current state is considered natural, that is, conforming to his autonomous nature, conversion and asceticism no longer find utility. Where iconic ontology is understood as the expression of authentic human truth and the state of autonomy as the state of man clothed in the robes of skin in their ambivalent sense, conversion and asceticism reveal their central significance not only for man, but also for the whole of human history and civilisation.

"These spiritual activities constitute the struggle through which the faithful mortify within themselves and within their works the sinful autonomy, the only evil and repugnant element to be rejected [...], they restore man and his works to primal beauty, they tilt the mirror towards the real sun. And so, man's achievements are illuminated and enlivened"<sup>17</sup>.

Conversion and asceticism are the vectors of the full fulfillment of the authentic, divine-human meaning of man. They offer the possibility of changing the anthropological, social and cultural paradigms that have led to the moral and biological degradation of human life. Not only do they offer the possibility of discernment with regard to the workings of life, but they substantially change these works by turning them towards the authentic fulfillment of the meaning of existence as union with God, i.e. divinisation, of both man and the whole of creation. This union with God is prefigured but also fulfilled in the liturgy. The liturgical act opens before the faithful the way of conversion, of return, it calls him and orients him towards the concrete work of metanoia for his healing, renewal and perfection. The way of the man who limits his existence to the margins of creation, closed in front of his transcendent dimension aimed at living the divine tropos (mode of existence), the way of the autonomous man leads to despair, absurdity and nonsense.

"This liturgical, ascetical and Eucharistic method was applied by the Fathers of the Church and thus saved the great creations of the civilisation of their age. Through this method, ancient Greek thought, for example, was baptised and Christianised, and was transfigured into an expression of divine, transcendent and inaccessible truth"<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> P. Nellas, *Voi siete dei...*, 102-103.

<sup>18</sup> P. Nellas, *Voi siete dei...*, 102-103.

This liturgical, ascetical and eucharistic method can be the method through which Christian bioethics can help not only to improve the quality of life, which in its highest limits always remains fall, but to change life itself with its paradigms, to bring one's own human nature into the authentic self. Only this perspective of a new life as being-for-life offers man the possibility of discerning rightly between good and evil. Christian bioethics does not disregard what man has become in his fallen state, but also considers in making moral decisions what he should be.

The 'natural' man is a fallen man, with all the consequences that this entails for his spiritual faculties, which can no longer form the basis of a righteous moral life. He first needs ascetic purification, self-denial and union with Christ to acquire moral discernment. Purification and union with Christ take place in the liturgical and ecclesial sphere through an ecclesial and ascetic maturation of the human person. Not yet purified, the so-called natural man reasons within the horizon of his passions that clog up his decision-making capacity. Consequently, "the project of truly knowing from a moral point of view is at its core the project of conversion from self, from the love of self, to the love of God and neighbor in order to experience God"<sup>19</sup>.

## Conclusions

In this article, I provided an in-depth examination of the relationship between Christian faith, particularly within the Orthodox tradition, and bioethics. I highlighted how the Christian belief in a personal God, who created humanity in His image and became incarnate in Jesus Christ, fosters a commitment to an absolute and universal Truth. This Truth shapes the moral life of Christians and informs their interpretation of reality, contrasting sharply with the pluralistic and relativistic worldview that emerged in modernity and postmodernity. Modernity's rejection of Christianity and the rise of a pluralistic interpretation of reality have led to the erosion of Christian universalism and the emergence of moral relativism. This has created ethical fragmentation, where different cultural groups, or "moral strangers," operate from divergent ethical foundations, often leading to conflicting bioethical conclusions.

I have also advocated for Christian bioethics grounded in Orthodox theology, which emphasizes a dual methodology combining rational analysis and noetic (experiential) knowledge. This approach involves both intellectual

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<sup>19</sup> H.T. Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, 162.

reasoning and a deeper, experiential communion with divine Truth, enabling a more profound moral discernment that transcends the limitations of secular ethics.

Christian bioethics must navigate the pluralistic context by clearly defining its meta-bioethical foundations, rooted in the Orthodox understanding of knowledge. This includes the application of a dual methodology in moral decision-making, where rationality is complemented by experiential knowledge of God. The goal is not just to make moral decisions based on reason alone but to guide humanity from a state of being-for-death to being-for-life, aligning human nature with its divine purpose through asceticism, conversion, and participation in God's grace.

In essence, I have emphasized that Christian bioethics offers a unique and essential perspective in the contemporary pluralistic world, one that must be both respected and articulated clearly, even as it challenges the relativistic norms of the age.

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