

Culture Wars in Medicine: From Abortion to Physician-Assisted Suicide
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- I. Our Age is a Post-Christian Age: it is after the age of Christendom. Our post-Christian, post-traditional culture embraces understandings of sexuality, reproduction, and child-rearing radically at odds with authentic Christian understandings.
1. Rejection of male priesthood, e.g., ordination of priestesses among Episcopalians
 2. Acceptance of fornication and cohabitation as integral to contemporary culture
 3. Acceptance of homosexual acts
 4. A move to bless homosexual unions and sex outside of a marriage of man and woman
 5. A denial of men and women as equals in an hierarchy
 6. An acceptance of prenatal diagnosis and abortion as integral to responsible parenting
 7. A permissive pursuit of satisfaction, happiness, and at best a do-it-yourself transcendence
 8. The banalization of sexuality, reproduction, marriage, and child-rearing
 9. The radical marginalization and privatization of Christianity
- II. Paradigms, Thought-Styles, and Life-Styles: The Constitution of Everyday Expectations
- A. What we bring to reality guides us in sorting information from noise. We see what we look for.
 - B. Our appreciation of facts comes clothed in our expectations regarding the meaning of reality, as well as the values we affirm. E.g., sexuality becomes an object of consensual human manipulation.
 - C. Assumptions about the meaning of life guide choices about reproduction, suffering, and death.
 1. the secular moral presumption is that one should give birth only to healthy children, even if this requires abortion - tort for wrongful birth and life suits
 2. the secular moral presumption is that activities are not immoral if one is genetically inclined to them; a failure to recognize two orders of intention (one must reject and disapprove of what one cannot control), as well as involuntary sin
 3. the establishment of the contraceptive ethos: couples postpone having their one or two trophy children until being established in their career with the consequence that they often can reproduce only with technological assistance with a cascade into a series of moral problems
- III. In a Self-Indulgent Society, the Emphasis is on Having Perfect Children who will Place Minimal Burdens on Their Parents, whose temporal success becomes the parents' sole goal
- A. The secular moral ideal is that responsible parents avoid having unwanted children, as well as children with serious diseases and disabilities, even if this involves killing children in the womb.
 1. prenatal screening and selective abortion have become integral to the secular ethos of responsible parenting of allowing only healthy unborn children to live
 2. abortion has become central to the secular moral ethos of reproductive freedom
 - B. Orthodox Christianity has always understood all abortion to be equivalent to homicide.
- IV. Appropriate End-of-Life Decision-Making Depends on Having Appropriate Values and Commitments
- A. Traditional Christians pray: "from a sudden and unanticipated death, deliver me, O Lord."
 1. The major downside risk of serious illness is not death but dying unrepentant.
 2. Dying well, like living well, takes thought and effort.
 - B. Yuppie death: a painless death in one's sleep without warning, with good advance financial planning, but without the labor of spiritual preparation.
 - C. The Orthodox Christian prays, "a Christian ending to our life, painless, blameless, peaceful; and a good defense for the dread Judgment Seat of Christ, let us ask of the Lord."
 - D. In a culture of permissiveness and self-satisfaction, immanent concerns will predominate; therefore, physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia are unavoidable in this culture.

- V. The Culture Wars: Different understandings of what is involved in preparing for death
- A. An Orthodox view of the use of medicine
1. medicine is a gift of God: its appropriate use is good. "Each of the arts is God's gift to us, remedying the deficiencies of nature ... And, when we were commanded to return to the earth whence we had been taken and were united with the pain-ridden flesh doomed to destruction because of sin and, for the same reason, also subject to disease, the medical art was given to us to relieve the sick, in some degree at least." [St. Basil, *Long Rules*, Rule 55]
 2. the control of pain and distress can be good: "...with mandrake doctors give us sleep; with opium they lull violent pain." [St. Basil, "The Hexaameron," Homily 5, §4]
 3. faith in medicine should not replace faith in God. "To place the hope of one's health in the hands of the doctor is the act of an irrational animal." [St. Basil, *Long Rules*, Rule 55]
 4. the use of medicine should not be all-encompassing for the patient or family; if one tries to save life at all costs, one will turn this life and medicine into idols. St. Basil forbids "whatever requires an undue amount of thought or trouble or involves a large expenditure of effort and causes our whole life to revolve, as it were, around solicitude for the flesh...." [*Long Rules*, Rule 55]
- B. Advance directives or living wills are legal instruments, which in various forms, in different jurisdictions, allow patients while competent to make decisions regarding their future medical treatment when they will become incompetent. These include:
1. treatment decisions regarding incompetent adult patients: designated family members report the patient's past wishes regarding treatment
 2. directive to physician and family or surrogates: patients in writing direct as to the treatment they should receive when terminal or (at least in some jurisdictions) suffering from the last stages of an incapacitating disease like Alzheimer's
 3. medical power-of-attorney: the patient can appoint an agent to make treatment choices, including the withholding and withdrawing of treatment
- C. Advance directives can allow one
1. to avoid spiritually inappropriate suffering, costs, and indignities, as well as
 2. to prepare for the dread Judgment Seat of Christ
- D. It is important to give the right instructions and to appoint the right agents.
1. Most proxies have inadequate information and may not fully share the same values as the patient; families may be made up of moral and spiritual strangers.
 2. It can be appropriate when terminal and after preparing for death with repentance and the Mysteries to stop all treatment except comfort care.
 3. It can be appropriate when a terminal patient has not prepared for death to attempt to postpone death in order to provide a chance for repentance and reception of the Mysteries of the Church.

VI. Moral Views in Conflict: Christian versus Secular

	CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE	SECULAR
Cohabitation without marriage	fornication	expected relationship
Cohabitation without marriage	adultery	consent cures
Pre-natal screening & abortion	murder	responsible parenting
Religion	spiritual therapy	psychologically comforting
Death	with humility and repentance	with dignity
PAS**	self-murder	rational death

*artificial insemination from a donor, **physician-assisted suicide

VII. The Widening Gulf Between Orthodox Christianity and the Dominant Secular Culture of the West
 "The manner in which we [the Orthodox and the West] exist has become ontologically different. ...the Orthodox Christian does not live in a place of theoretical and conceptual conversations, but rather in a place of an essential and empirical lifestyle and reality as confirmed by grace in the heart [Heb 13:9]. This grace cannot be put in doubt either by logic or science or other type of argument. ... However, the change of man's essence, theosis by grace, is a fact that is tangible for all the Orthodox faithful. Grace is not only obtained through the transformed relics of the saints, which is totally inexplicable without acceptance of the divine. Grace also radiates from living Saints who are truly in the likeness of the Lord [Luke 8:46]." [Patriarch Bartholomew, October 21, 1997]

Suggested Readings for those wanting to learn more about Orthodox Christianity

Available through Conciliar Press (800.967.7377, www.conciliarpress.com)

Thirsting for God, by Matthew Gallatin (2002) - a Protestant's search for authentic Christianity

Our Hearts' True Home, ed. Virginia Nieuwsma (1996) - conversion stories of 14 women Becoming Orthodox, by Peter Gillquist (1992) - how a group of Protestants became Orthodox

Available through Regina Orthodox Press (800.636.2470, www.reginaorthodoxpress.com)

Two Paths, by Michael Whelton (1998) - history of the split of Roman Catholics from Orthodoxy

The Way, by Clark Carlton (1997) - what Protestants should know about the Orthodox Church

The Truth, by Clark Carlton (1999) - what Roman Catholics should know about the Orthodox Church

Available through Eighth Day Books (316.683.9446, www.eighthdaybooks.com)

The Ancestral Sin, by John S. Romanides (Zephyr, 1998)

Adam's sin from the Orthodox perspective

The Mind of the Orthodox Church, by Metropolitan Hierotheos (Levadia, Greece: 1998) what it means to live in the mind of the Fathers

Father Arseny, 1893-1973 (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998) the life of a holy priest in the USSR

Facing East, by Frederica Mathewes-Green (HarperCollins, 1997)

the journey of a Protestant woman to becoming an Orthodox priest's wife

At the Corner of East and Now, by Frederica Mathewes-Green (Tarcher/Putnam, 1999)

the 2nd year as priest's wife

Elder Porphyrios, by Klitos Ioannidis (Athens, 1997) - life of a recent holy Father

The Foundations of Christian Bioethics, by H. T. Engelhardt (Taylor & Francis, 2000)

Available through Light and Life (888.925.3918, www.light-n-life.com)

Common Ground, Jordan Bajis (Light & Life, 1996) - comparison of Protestant beliefs & Orthodoxy