

Interview with Cornelia Delkeskamp-Hayes - 3

[Ξένες γλώσσες](#) / [In English](#)



(Previous publication:...)

“P”. *At the Religion and Politics Conference in Alba Iulia, in Romania, we saw you were with a group of Orthodox bioethicists from the USA. Just how important is bioethics and are bioethical issues? Is it worthwhile for Orthodox Christians to spend so much time on them?*

“Cornelia Delkeskamp-Hayes”: The conference in Alba Iulia focused on both political theory and theology. It engaged theology as a resource for cultural criticism. Our group of friends and disciples of Engelhardt share his insight about the cardinal role which the bio-medical complex plays in our own secularized Western culture. This culture is defined in terms of the Enlightenment and its moral principles, as brought to political salience in Europe through the French Revolution and Napoleon’s satellite states. Bioethics addresses an area of (often rather “invasive”) applications of these principles. The extent to which these affect even the most intimate and most vulnerable aspects of humans’ embodied life has generally been ignored by academic teaching and research on morality or ethics. Bioethics remedies this lack. It offers a heuristic for determining where our culture’s social democratic liberalism has become destructive, in fact, a culture not

only “of death”, but even of hostility to life.



Source: <http://bioethics.wfu.edu/>

As guests from the West, our perspective was to complement Romanians' own approach to the contrast between Constantine's Christian Empire (with its Eastern inheritors) and the post-Maastricht European Union. Our focus was on that Union's claim that the principle of separation of church and state safeguards religious freedom. Such separation is taken to offer a neutral ground on which believers and non-believers can peacefully pursue their diverging, immanent or transcendence-anchored, visions of human flourishing. Each of us, in our specific fields of study, argued against that claim. Of course, as Engelhardt pointed out, one may concede that a theoretically conceivable "minimal state" (as developed, e.g. by Robert Nozick) could in fact secure world view neutrality. But such a state exists no-where in the world. Actually existing states, and thus also the countries making up the European Union, are more than minimal states. They have to decide how to extract and where to allocate public resources. They need to determine how to regulate commercial and private interaction within society. All such decisions presuppose some specific, and thus particular, understanding of a "common good". This understanding, and its corresponding vision of social flourishing, is nevertheless claimed to be generally acceptable. It is then imposed on all members of society, whether in their capacity as taxpayers or as subject to publicly funded and imposed education, as beneficiaries and competitors of the publicly sponsored arts and sciences, as beneficiaries and victims of modern technology, urban development, regulation of labor, traffic, insurances and pensions, and, over and above all of

that, Europe's rules defining how to "respect" human rights.

Now biomedicine is involved in many aspects of such policy design, from decisions about how health services are publicly financed, how these are organized, supervised, developed and what they should include, right down to the individual encounters between a doctor and his patient. Life in the technologically advanced societies in the West today is characteristically "medicalized". Biomedicine powerfully frames the way in which humans are born, invest resources for healthy or unhealthy life styles, procreate, deal with handicap and suffering in themselves and in related or non-related others, and finally, when and how they die. This is why bioethics can serve like a magnifying lens for assessing the real, flesh and blood implications of a culture's confessed moral profile.

The term "secular fundamentalist state" which Engelhardt coined, and which recurred in the presentations of his disciples, summarizes the diagnosis on which all our papers focused: that this state, in drafting all taxpayers into the financing of abortion, in imposing on gynecologists the obligation to inform pregnant mothers of their option to abort a child that has been diagnosed as at risk of being imperfect, in normalizing homosexual marriage, prohibiting the provision of desired therapies for homosexuality, in allowing children to be adopted by single sex parents, in imposing sexual education on all school children, in endorsing pre-marital sexual relations and encouraging these through the provision of contraceptives, in imposing on physicians the obligation to respect the privacy of children even against their parents, in gradually weakening opposition to physician assisted suicide, in subjecting religious hospitals in their policy of hiring only Christians to the suspicion of unlawful discrimination, – in short, that this state, in placing Christians under all sorts of constraints, reveals its own, robustly anti-Christian bias. Our focus on bioethics could thus give substance to our shared major concern: Orthodox Christians should not allow themselves to be pushed into the defensive whenever they advocate (as they should!) a "soft establishment of Christianity": Such a project would not be any less civilized and "rationally respectable" than the soft establishment of anti-Christian principles behind the European Union's alleged world-view neutrality.

"P": Apart from cultural criticism, what do you see as presenting the most burning bioethical issues today and why?

"C. D.-H.": For me, the most burning problems concern medically supported killing of oneself and others: Both inescapably affect the victims' eternal condition. The wide spread practice of abortion has become integral to the very normative profile of the Western world. That culture advocates equal education and

professional opportunities for women and men. It thus postpones the time at which women can and are even supposed to want to marry. That same culture disparages sexual chastity as unhealthy. This is why a child that is conceived at an importune moment becomes a powerful temptation for abortion. The same holds for this culture's affirmation of a life of affluence and its endorsement of marital instability: Both impose the need for married women to stay employed. They feel they must safeguard the desired second income and also limit their poverty risk after a divorce. In such a setting (more) unplanned children are very likely perceived as a "problem" that must be "solved" through abortion. In this way, the very "moral principles" underlying that culture's quest for equality between the sexes have rendered abortion an indispensable insurance against contraceptive failure (or contraceptive negligence). Millions of victims are thus deprived not only of their opportunity to live their earthly life. They are also deprived of baptism, and thus of all we Christians are led to know about their opportunity to partake of eternal life in the fullness of communion with the Divine glory.

On the other side, the legalization of physician assisted suicide and euthanasia in some Union members has powerfully encouraged an ever widening public support for self-killing. Such support seeks to extend the liberal principle of respect for individual self determination even beyond decisions about how to shape one's dying process (through analgesics or life prolonging interventions): Today, self determination is also claimed to command respect when it comes to timing one's death. At stake are decisions about hastening one's death or authorizing others for that purpose. At stake are also ways of representing such decisions (i.e. discounting the crucial role of intentions) which obfuscate the moral scandal. All of this seeks to normalize courses of action which deprive the agent-victim of the possibility to repent, and which also exclude him from intercession of the Church during liturgy.

Both deadly sins are advocated in the name of freedom, or justified by reference to one of the foundational moral ideals framing our Western societies. Such cruel perversion highlights the extent to which our culture has left behind a truly Christian respect, as framed by recognition of freedom as Divine gift. In the horizon of such a recognition, true respect surely minds God's own willingness to refrain from interference, even when freedom is abused. But such respect also seeks to emulate the loving care, with which God forever goes after His lost children, even having become one of them, restoring their fallen nature, and inviting their return into the genuine freedom of communion with Himself. Christian respect, in other words, is contextualized by a sacrificial love that seeks to protect the brother's salvation.

[To Be Continued]