

# Notes

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## Sources:

Exceptionally helpful for the development of the thought of this presentation have been:

Breck, John. *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998.

Breck, John, and Lyn Breck. *Stages on Life's Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*. Foundations Series (Book 1). Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005.

Zizioulas, John. *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Edited by Paul McPartlan. London and New York: T & T Clark, 2006.

## Additional Comments:

### 1. On the intra-Orthodox debates about the beginning of human life.

The Brecks also note the debate among Orthodox Christians as to the meaning of "conception" and the fact that some would delay the beginning of "human life" until the point that human "personhood" begins (at "singularity", or with the implantation of the embryo in the uterine wall). The latter position emphasizing personhood seems in many cases to be influenced by the theological personalism of Metropolitan John Zizioulas and his *Being as Communion* in particular. However, as Zizioulas would reiterate in his more recent *Communion and Otherness*, human personhood is, theologically, to be patterned after divine personhood and, in any event, in fallen human existence nature and personhood do not fully coincide as they do in God. In human existence, human nature (and thus life) actually precedes the appearance of particular individuals and persons. In any event, true personhood for us is something to which we aspire, not

something fully realized in this age, while each human being in whatever “form” or mode of life has a relationship with God. Finally, “epigenetic” factors (additional influences on the human genome” in the course of development) from the mother are now known to begin even prior to implantation on the uterine wall, thus suggesting that there is indeed a physical relationship between mother and child before “singularity.” So the science here proves to be somewhat more complicated when seeking to apply broad theological principles. The science here continues to develop.

Logically, the developmental process of any human person’s life begins at syngamy, the fusion of sperm cell and egg cell. Prior to this we cannot speak of any developmental process that leads to a unique human life. Following this point, there is *scientifically* no consensus or basis for suggesting that the nature of the zygote changes from non-human life to human life at any particularized point on the timeline. Just a tiny fraction of a second pinpointed on the timeline at any point with the claim that life begins there is widely debatable even among scientists. This only points to the affirmation in theological terms of the perpetuation of human nature (and hence human life) in the procreative process.

In another way, even if we are not definite about exactly when the human person might be living on this timeline, we can be definite that termination of the zygote, embryo or fetal development will prevent a human being from living.

## **2. The Politics of Exceptions**

Two wrongs do not make a right. In the widely touted “exceptions” to the opposition to abortion on demand by some, those of rape and incest, the fundamental axiom, two wrongs do not make a right, hold true. But there is also more to be said in the following points.

a) God is the creator of human life. Human life does not come into being – neither the species nor particular members of it – outside the will of God.

b) The will of human beings is also a requirement, even when and if two human persons do not consciously choose to participate in the procreative process.

c) Rape and incest are tragic crimes that are always contrary to the will of God. However, the hard part about any tragedy and any appearance of evil is that God permits human choice to result in evil. The challenge is to turn evil circumstances to good, which God is capable of doing even if we are not. Traumatized persons, however, cannot be—from a pastoral perspective—held to the same standards of personal conduct as those not traumatized. This leads to

d) One common assertion—actually wrong—is that the Orthodox Church permits abortion when the life of the mother is threatened. The Orthodox Church never endorses death of any person. Death is always the final enemy, a tragic circumstance even in the most benign and expected situations such as old age. The Orthodox do not prioritize the value of any human life over any other human life. We do not prefer a mother's life to a preborn child's life. When there is the tragic choice between the survival of one or the other, it is a choice of evils, and the Church cannot choose between two evils. On the other hand, love implies sacrifice for the other, and the Lord states there is no greater love than one lay down his or her life for another even as he did. In such cases, the pastoral recognition is that we cannot demand virtue and sacrifice for there is no virtue in compulsory acts. There is also no condemnation for involuntary acts (even though we pray for forgiveness for involuntary sin) and actions made under extreme duress (and threats to survival are examples of extreme duress).

The fairest and most honest answer in regard to an exception for the life of the mother is that the Church would be thankful a mother was willing to die for her child, and mourn the death of that mother at the same time. Likewise, the Church would seek to bring the Lord's peace and comfort to a mother who, for perhaps numerous reasons, felt unable to make such a sacrifice (as when she had other dependent children and so forth) and—with the mother—mourn the child.

### **3. Substantialist and Cognitive Theology**

In *Being as Communion* and especially in *Communion and Otherness*, Zizioulas implies that the real difference between Eastern and Western theological thinking comes down to an emphasis on epistemology (how we know things, how we think about things). I noted that in the Western tradition, especially under the influence of Cartesian thought (and the

successors of DesCartes) but really since Augustine, there has been an *emphasis* on cognition and consciousness, on the idea of comprehension, objectivity, and so forth when it comes to matters of faith and theology, and this has ultimately affected the culture of western civilization.

This is a matter of emphasis, but we see the consequences of this emphasis in the preference for substantialist language in theology, a psychological approach to personhood, the objectification of dogma, ethics and so forth. This can be obviously seen in our cultural debates about abortion and trying to define that particular, objective moment when a preborn child becomes “fully” human and should be accorded the legal rights of the individual. Easterners did not generally make recourse to things such as “natural law” theory and other such constructs when approaching such problems, at least in the early Church.

It is not that we don't have such things in the Eastern Christian tradition. Indeed, we do, though in many instances Zizioulas and others have shown this is precisely due to western influences over many centuries. With the “neo-patristic synthesis” that essentially began in the earlier twentieth century—largely thanks to dialogue with western Christian theologians and historians!—Florovsky, Zizioulas, Yannaras, Schmemmann and others have shown that there is a different approach to theological questions rooted in the Eastern patristic tradition. I think it is also important not to exaggerate this issue; we are speaking of a difference of emphasis, and it is noteworthy that western theologians have listened seriously to Zizioulas and other “easterners” on such matters because we all recognize that there are serious questions and problems in our society and the philosophical foundations of our western culture (which even affect theological thinking) have not always provided adequate solutions.