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The Church and Bioethics. The word of science and the word of religion

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Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate

Conference on Bioethics

“The Church and Bioethics. The word of science and the word of religion”

Chambésy Geneva 11-15 September 2002

CONCLUSIONS

The international scientific congress convened at the Orthodox Centre in Chambésy Geneva on the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and with the support of the Greek Ministry of Culture was held from 11-15th September 2002. The main theme of this congress was designated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, at the request of many local Orthodox Churches, as the timely and complex theme: “The Church and Bioethics. The word of science and the word of religion.”

Some 30 internationally recognised public figures in the Church, science and culture were invited to attend the proceedings of the conference; they contributed special papers on the progress that has been made in scientific research and identified significant aspects of genetics, biotechnology, medicine and bioethics.

The papers given on these different aspects referred to the prospects and dangers arising in the impressive achievements of modern genetics and biotechnology, and in particular to issues of bioethics implied in the applications of these scientific interventions on a) the beginning of life, b) the duration of life, and c) the end of human life.

The proceedings of this congress were opened by the inaugural address of the Head of the Orthodox Centre, Bishop Makarios of Lampsakos, and by the reading of the inspired Message of His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I by the Metropolitan Athanasios of Helioupolis and Theira. Messages of greeting were also sent by the Greek Minister of Culture Mr. Evangelos Venizelos, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Ioannis Magriotis, and the General Secretary for Religious Affairs at the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs Mr. Ioannis Konidaris. Greetings were likewise addressed to the Congress by the Rectors of the Theological Schools of Athens, Thessaloniki, Belgrade and Geneva. These messages noted the importance and necessity of constructive dialogue between the Church and science. The conference topic and titles of the individual themes clearly set out the orientation of the Congress toward the search for a common meeting ground for the word of religion and the word of science. The purpose of this dialogue is to resolve the great confusion that exists in terms of the possible negative repercussions arising from the decoding of the human genome, in particular by the extreme and arbitrary interventions of science in human genetic material.

The papers given by the representatives of science, i.e. geneticists, biologists and physicians, focused on evaluating scientific interventions on the beginning of life, i.e. in the conception process. They affirmed the legitimacy of science’s use of the genetic material rejected during the conception process, in particular for therapeutic reasons to benefit persons suffering from incurable diseases, as well as scientific interventions during the course of pregnancy to prevent genetic abnormalities in the embryo or foetus that can be diagnosed by prenatal testing. Nevertheless, those of the speakers who had the dual scientific and ecclesiastical capacity and those who were

theologians insisted in their papers and remarks on the determination of the specific moment during pregnancy when the embryo becomes an independent and autonomous being endowed with body and soul.

The debate revolved around the existing differences of views about the gradual development of the biological functions of conception during the first five days or during the first week of pregnancy because there was a disagreement among the scientists regarding the concept of the independent entity of the embryo, i.e. whether it is established through the soul, through the formation of the complete cellular identity of the human body, at the moment of attachment to the uterus, in the first moments of pregnancy, at the moment the foetus acquires consciousness, etc. It is evident that speakers who were both scientists and theologians supported the existence “from the moment of conception” of the independent human entity of the embryo. The biologists, geneticists and physicians placed this event at a subsequent period of the pregnancy by insisting on the “autonomy” of the embryo in biological terms or in terms of its consciousness.

This apparent disagreement over the mystery of the beginning of life - which, it is generally agreed, has been associated with a specific biological entity in a predetermined function of growth - is particularly important for the representatives of both science and of religion. Thus, the former, by transferring to a later time the formation of an independent human being, sought to de-inculcate biological or medical interventions on the genetic material of the embryo for therapeutic or other purposes; while the theologians, by insisting on the traditional principle of the existence of an independent human being from the moment of conception, defended the basic principles of Christian anthropology by referring to Christology with regard to the beginning of life in order to preclude all arbitrary interventions on the part of biomedicine in the life of the embryo.

Convergence was noted in the papers and discussions on both sides in the direction of the decisive significance of the first three days, or even the first two weeks of pregnancy in the formation and the full development of the embryo in the marvellous natural process of growth. The representatives of science focused their arguments on the legitimacy of genetic interventions in the use of the naturally rejected or surplus genetic material (blast cells) for therapeutic or other genetic purposes. Nevertheless, the participants unanimously rejected the use by science of the genetic material of the embryo, and of man more generally, for reproductive cloning, an effort that was deplored unanimously as lacking any moral base and should be prohibited by strict sanctions.

The position of the ecclesiastical representatives of science and theologians were initially negative on the use of the method of therapeutic cloning of genetic material from the embryo in order to correct any genetic abnormalities observed during pre-natal testing or to improve the quality and duration of human life. Because many speakers argued that no one has the right to force nature to do something that she cannot do alone. Nevertheless, on the question of therapeutic cloning, there was a trend to seek possible convergences, by means of which the sacredness of the human person would not be affected nor would the genuine continuity of the mystery of life in accordance with the reason of divine creation.

The geneticists, biologists, physicians and theologians presented truly important papers. Employing a different starting point and different methodology for approaching this particular theme, they contributed to the drawing of precise conclusions which can be summarised as follows:

First, a common meeting point for constructive dialogue between science and religion is man, who legitimises both the word of religion and that of science in addressing his genetic identity and its physical integrity.

Second, in principle no opposition or contradiction is possible between the word of religion and the word of science, as long as the determined limits of the relevant discourse are strictly respected by each, so that the moral and spiritual values that govern human life are not threatened by the extreme or arbitrary interventions of science on the human genetic code.

Third, the Church sincerely respects the fundamental principle of freedom of scientific research and progress, particularly in the human sciences. But at the same time, it defends its special spiritual relationship with man, as this is defined through faith regarding the relationship between man and God and man and the world.

Fourth, science recognises that the use of human genetic material for reproductive cloning lacks any moral foundation and understands the reservations and objections of the Church, but believes that therapeutic cloning is morally acceptable owing to its benefits to man, because in this way it will be possible to improve the quality or duration of life for large groups of people who suffer from incurable diseases.

Fifth, science, expressing man's natural tendency to acquire knowledge, declares that it is fully conscious not only of the freedom but also of the limits of scientific research. Thus it rejects reproductive cloning, but regards therapeutic cloning as necessary.

Sixth, the Church has grave misgivings about certain extreme methods even of therapeutic cloning, because through these methods science forces nature to take part in something which nature cannot do alone, according to the reasoning of creation. Thus it has legitimate reservations not only with respect to the extreme methods used but also to the predicted results for human life.

Seventh, the Church, insisting on Christian anthropology, declares the sacredness of the human person and the inviolability of divine creation for any scientific research, which sometimes violates the natural law in order to improve the quality of duration of human life.

Eighth, both the Church and Science regard constructive dialogue as necessary not only to prevent undesirable controversy, but also to resolve the existing confusion. Thus, it proposes that Ecumenical Patriarchate continue to take initiatives and establish a permanent forum for dialogue at the Orthodox Centre in Chambésy.

The proceedings of the congress were tiring because there were many papers and some of them exceeded the time permitted, which meant that there was insufficient time afterwards for discussions, and these were sometimes dominated by geneticists or theologians. Other papers were not of a scientific nature or were too general. Therefore it is necessary for Orthodox positions on issues of bioethics to be clearly formulated and an appropriate theological language to be developed on the subject. It is also important for the relevant Orthodox literature to be gathered together on these issues (papers, articles, synodic encyclicals, etc.) and for one-day conferences to be organised on the individual issues (abortions, cloning, *in vitro* fertilisation, euthanasia, etc.).

The absence of jurists from the congress was notable, because although many were invited, none were able to attend for various reasons. And although the discussions were often of a very high level, clear answers were not provided on certain issues. It is therefore necessary for the appropriate preparation to be made to continue this important dialogue on the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.