

Fr. John Breck and his Orthodox Perspective on Euthanasia

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Abstract: In the present research, the author presents the perspective of Fr. John Breck (1939), one of the most important Eastern Orthodox bioethicists on the topic of euthanasia. Books like *The Sacred gift of life*, *Longing for God*, *God with us*. *Critical issues in Christian life and faith*, or *Stages on Life's Way*. *Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*, are taken into attention in an attempt to understand which are the main aspects that define his attitude, his beliefs and his ideas. The way how the personal experiences in the field have shifted his attitude towards the problem is also emphasized and the principles suggested by the scholar in his books are also presented, together with the radiography of the main contemporary perceptions on euthanasia. The research comes not only to bring into attention an author whose perspectives are still relevant for the contemporary discourse, but also to invite to reflection and debate on a topic that is still actual and important both for the secular society, as for the Christianity.

Keywords: Euthanasia, Fr. John Breck, Anthropology, Theodicee, Sufferance, Purification

Introduction

Fr. John Breck (born in 1939) remains one of the important voices of the Orthodox space in matters of bioethics. Professor of Biblical Exegesis and Patristics at "Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute" from Paris,

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France, director of “Saint Silouan Retreat” from South Carolina, converted to the Orthodoxy and a man with a rich background, both due to his formation (in places like Brown University, Yale Divinity School and Ruprecht Karl University in Heidelberg), to his work as a professors (in areas like Kodiak, Alaska, the aforementioned institute from France and St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary (Crestwood, New York, 1984-1996). His merits were recognized in the Romanian space not only through the translation of his books in this language, but also due to the fact that in 2003, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology from “Babeş-Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca awarded him an honorary doctorate.

His work, containing both titles with relevance for the Biblical scholarship, but also in the one of the Christian ethics² come not only to speak about topics that are important for the theologians, but also about problems that often affect daily life and determine the Christian to question himself of his purpose in this life. The beauty of his works resides both in the documentary relevance of his investigations, because all of them are based on a rich literature which is critically investigated by him from an Orthodox perspective, but also due to the examples offered and to the fact that, in most of the situation, even when they suggest a potential solution to a problem, there still remains an investigation to meditation.

Among the topics approached by the Theologian in his books there can be found abortion, genetically engineering, cloning, or other topics related with life. The author himself notices that, although not exclusively, bioethics mostly deals with the events that accompanies the beginning and the end of life.³ As Archbishop Irineu Pop from Alba-Iulia, who translated his treaty of bioethics in the Romanian language underlines it, all the problems approached are presented by the author “in the light of the values and moral principles of Orthodoxy”, after presenting, “the theological foundations of Orthodox Christian ethics.”⁴

² See, for example: John Breck, *Cum citim Sfânta Scriptură?: despre structura limbajului biblic*, trad. Ioana Tămăian, ediția a 2-a, (Alba-Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2018); John Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, ed. Vasile Manea, ediția a III-a, (Cluj-Napoca: Patmos, 2007); John Breck, *Dorul de Dumnezeu – meditații ortodoxe despre Biblie, etică și liturghie*, trad. Cezar Longin, Codruța Popovici, ed. a 2-a, (Cluj-Napoca: Patmos, 2009); John Breck, *Pornografia, o iconografie demonică*, trad. Ionuț Florin Biliuță, Vasile Manea, (Cluj-Napoca: Patmos, 2006); John Breck, *Puterea cuvântului în Biserica dreptmăritoare*, trad. Monica E. Herghelegiu, (București: EIBMBOR, 1999); John Breck, *Sfânta Scriptură în tradiția Bisericii*, trad. Ioana Tămăian, (Cluj-Napoca: Patmos, 2003); John Breck, Lyn Breck, *Trepte pe calea vieții – o viziune ortodoxă asupra bioeticii*, trad. Geanina Filimon, (București: Sophia, 2007); John Breck, *Longing for God. Orthodox reflections on Bible, Ethics, and Liturgy* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006); John Breck, *The power of the Word in the Worshipping Church* (Crestwood: New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986); John Breck, *God with us. Critical issues in Christian life and faith* (Crestwood: New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003); John Breck, Lyn Breck, *Stages on Life’s Way. Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005).

³ Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 299.

⁴ Irineu Pop Bistrițeanul, “Cuvânt înainte,” in John Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, ed. Vasile Manea, (Cluj-Napoca: Patmos, 2007), 7.

An important topic found in Fr. Breck's work is also the one that we will try to bring into attention in the following rows, namely the euthanasia. He dedicates important passages of his books to it and the approaches are based mostly on facts that took place in the chronological neighbourhood of the moment when he wrote.

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In books like *The Sacred gift of life*, which is, in fact a treaty of bioethics wrote by Fr. Breck and one of the most important titles that he signed, the author underlines the fact that abortion and euthanasia represents two of the most important problems from this area related with one's end of life. Still, he insists on the fact that due to the multiple implication related more with the mother than to the subject of the problem in case of the first one, the last one is the most discussed when approaching the topic. Moreover, as it can be found in another book of essays signed by the theologian, the most intensely debates related with the end of the earthly road are related with people who had already passed thorough the life.⁵

The Sacred Gift of Life

There can be found different approaches of the topic in different works signed by him. The most complex is surely the one from *The sacred gift of life*. Here the approach is made in an anthropological key. Therefore, starting from the meaning of the person, that is related with the one of "*telos*" (purpose),⁶ he will show that, one side, the divine call and the fact of being created on the image of God brings also a divine call. This means that life, as a part of the call must be seen as a gift and received with joy.⁷

The same call is related also with the sanctity of human condition. Fr. Breck underlines the fact that:

“To speak of the sanctity or sacredness of human life is to speak of the person. Only he who reflects in himself the communion of the three persons of the Holy Trinity is truly a person. This concept is misunderstood

⁵ Cf. Breck, *God with us. Critical issues in Christian life and faith*, 85.

⁶ For a detailed approach on the problem, see also: Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2010).

⁷ “Orthodoxy affirms that life is a gift, freely given by the God of love. Therefore, human life should be received with joy and gratitude. It must be cherished, preserved and protected, as the most sublime expression of God's creative activity, which brought us from 'non-being to being' not just for a biological existence.”, cf. Breck, *God with us. Critical issues in Christian life and faith*, 15-16.

in America, where «person» is entirely confused with «individual». Individual characteristics distinguish us from one another, while personhood unites us in the bond of communion with others and with God.”⁸

The theologian speaks about these aspects in order to help a potential reader to have a deeper understanding of the problems related with the beginning and the end of life. He also shows that, compared with the Christian space, the secular one insists on the role of the quality of life. As a priest, he points the fact that: “the sanctity and quality of life should not be seen in opposition, but should be considered complementary.”⁹ In the same time, he militates for the re-discovery of the Christian roots of ethics¹⁰ and for the understanding of the complex relationship between freedom and responsibility, seen as a key topic and as a solution provider. He therefore shows that:

“One of the main challenges for Orthodoxy at the beginning of the 21st century is to defend and proclaim the central thesis of its anthropology: God created man in His own image. The freedom and responsibility that derives from this creative act implies that *imago Dei* refers to three essential conditions, usually called self-creation, self-direction and self-realization. This means that, within certain limits, we are called upon to decide upon our origin, our activity, and our ultimate purpose.”¹¹

Then, he defines the term euthanasia, starting from its etymology and its nuances and insists on the fact that in certain situation, it can be seen as a “mercy killing.”¹² In total disagreement with attitudes like the one of Hans Kung who considered it as not only acceptable from the Christian point of view, but also good and necessary in certain situations,¹³ he appeals the medical deontology. There it

⁸ Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 18. He also insists on the fact that: “We can call ourselves persons only as long as we embody and transmit to others the beauty, truth and love that unite the three Persons – the Father – the Son and the Holy Spirit – in an eternal trinity.”, cf. Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 18.

⁹ Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 21.

¹⁰ Thus, he underlines the fact that: “If there is currently so much confusion about ethical decision-making, it is not because of the novelty and complexity of the issues we face. The main reason is that the discipline of ethics has been cut from its theological roots.”, cf. Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 37.

¹¹ Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 177-8.

¹² “Euthanasia also involves killing an innocent person. In this case, however, the motive is to end suffering, and the act can be euphemistically referred to as a «mercy killing».”, cf. Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 180.

¹³ For a detailed approach of his ideas, see also: Hans Kung, *My Struggle for Freedom. Memoirs* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003); Hans Kung, *Disputed Truth. Memoirs, vol. II* (London: Continuum Publishing House, 2008); Hans Kung, *La mort heureuse*, trad. Jean-Louis Schegel (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2015).

is stipulated the fact that, according to the hippocratic oath there is important the dual principle of well-doing (manifested thorough commitment to prolong and further the patient's vital interests, and non-harm).¹⁴

When approaching the topic in an attempt to realize a synthesis of the main opinions that exist about the topic, Fr. Breck distinguishes between 3 big directions in the secular society, as it follows:

1. Vitalism. According to this perspective the biological life “should be supported at all costs and by all available means” (seen by him as a form of biological idolatry).¹⁵
2. The one defined by the reflection on each case. According to this perspective some forms of “euthanasia” are supported and the conception according to which the patients should be allowed to choose the way how will die and the time.
3. The 3rd one claims that, under certain situations the stop of the medication can allow to the patient a natural form of die (seen as a form of “passive euthanasia”).¹⁶

As expected, the theologian refuses to submit to any of them. He provides a panoramic perspective on the way how the topic is perceived in the contemporary society and in the same time underlines the weak points of each of them. Later, he speaks about the “119 initiative”, presented in front of the American Congress in Washington 1991 and its three stipulations:

“The initiative contained three basic stipulations. The first, referring to Washington’s «Natural Death Act» that allows «Living Wills», would have expanded the list of life-sustaining technologies a patient can refuse, including feeding and hydration tubes. The second would have allowed the signer of a Living Will to stipulate that no means of life support should be used if they entered a clinically diagnosable persistent vegetative state (PVP). These two changes had been previously ratified by the Washington State Medical Association. Contrary to the attitude of the association as well as the attitude of many other medical and religious groups, was the third stipulation. This would have allowed physician-assisted suicide for terminally ill patients based on their written request along with at least two doctors confirming that the patient has less than 6 months to live.”¹⁷

¹⁴Robert Wer, *Selective Nontreatment of Handicapped Newborns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 199.

¹⁵Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 245.

¹⁶Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 246.

¹⁷Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 247.

He follows its history and realises that it was accepted firstly by the Oregon state in 1994. Then he presents a few cases speaking the way how it affected the life and its evolution in practical situations.

The radiography is followed by an orthodox approach to the sufferance that brings to the attitudes like euthanasia. Fr. Breck shows that according to the Orthodox perspective it must be understood as a consequence of the ancestral sin. In the same time, he insists on the fact that it should not be seen as a punishment, but rather as a function of the “theodicee.”¹⁸ Here, he goes in the same direction with Saint Maximus the Confessor, who sees it as a part of the purification process.¹⁹

In the end of his treaty, the Orthodox scholar also speaks about the three bioethics values that should be respected in any kind of demarche from this area, namely:

- “1. The sacredness of human life to be realized and preserved from conception to the grave and beyond;
2. God’s sacrificial love as the origin and foundation of every human relationship (for example, between doctor and patient, or between organ donor and organ recipient);
3. The call to holiness and deification: participation in the divine life, the only one that gives meaning to human existence and constitutes its ultimate goal.”²⁰

He also summarizes the main aspects emphasized in the book and insists on the fact that, the majority of the Orthodox theologians reject categorically all the forms of assisted suicide.²¹

Other Approaches on Euthanasia in Fr. Breck’s Work

If *The sacred gift of life* contains the most detailed and the most complex perspective on the aforementioned topic, it must be said that it is not the only one. Many other books written by Fr. Jon Breck contain references to the topic. Some of them are related with his personal experiences, other with some documents or events. In a book of reflections dedicated to the topic, he insists on the fact that:

“Science operates on the basis of knowledge; politics, on the basis of pressure. It is up to each of us, in appropriate and peaceful yet firm and relentless ways to apply that pressure.”²²

¹⁸ Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 256.

¹⁹ *Filocalia*, volume 2 (București: EIBMBOR, 2008), 187.

²⁰ Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 297.

²¹ Breck, *Darul sacru al vieții. Tratat de bioetică*, 312.

²² Breck, *Longing for God. Orthodox reflections on Bible, Ethics, and Liturgy*, 87.

In the same book, he evokes the situation case of Terri Schiavo and his wife and speaks about the fact that Pope John Paul II was put in the situation to reflect on it.²³ The pontifical document brings him in the situation to reflect again on topics like “the persistent vegetative state,” the relationship between quality and sanctity of life and other similar aspects.

Later, in another book of reflections, he will again bring death into attention by presenting the case of the Maltese Siamese sisters, Mary and Jodie. The conclusion that he will arrive at is the following:

“that death is both a blessing and a curse: a curse, because of the devastating rupture it causes in our relationship with the loved ones; but a blessing in that God is in total and complete «control», and therefore God can bring out of that ultimate good.”²⁴

A personal complex perspective can be found also in the book published together with his wife, Lyn Breck. Here, the scholar provides some of the inner motivations of his concerns about topics like the one that we try to investigate there. Thus, the suicide of his aunt,²⁵ the one who had a great influence on him in the childhood, will determine the author to present three stories about the problem of the end of life and to insist on the fact that the accent in situations that are related with suicide, the accent must be put on how “to offer to dying patients a depth and quality of love that will most effectively guide them along the final stages of the pathway that leads from this earthly existence to life in the kingdom of God.”²⁶ An interesting accent is placed there in the Orthodox approach of the topic. Here, Fr. Breck thinks not only to the ones who depart, but also to the ones who stay and considers that the love of God is stronger than death.²⁷ He even suggests this aspect as a departure point for the dialogue with the ones who feel the fear of death, in order to help them to understand that it does not represent an end to the problem. Conservative, he insists on the fact that: “there is a time to live and a time to die and both need to be respected.”²⁸ On the same line, he shows the fact that:

“Orthodox Christianity cannot accept the solution of active euthanasia, however popular that solution may be in any given society. We need to identify viable, morally acceptable alternatives by which physicians

²³ Breck, *Longing for God. Orthodox reflections on Bible, Ethics, and Liturgy*, 106.

²⁴ Breck, *God with us. Critical issues in Christian life and faith*, 86.

²⁵ Breck & Breck, *Stages on Life's Way. Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*, 209-210.

²⁶ Breck & Breck, *Stages on Life's Way. Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*, 214.

²⁷ Breck & Breck, *Stages on Life's Way. Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*, 216.

²⁸ Breck & Breck, *Stages on Life's Way. Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*, 221.

and the rest of us can accompany dying persons and assure them a peaceful and painless end to their lives.”²⁹

Conclusions

Due to the complexity of the problem and of its actuality, Fr. Breck does not offer a solution to all its dimensions and disagrees with the fact of joining to one or other perspective from the one already existing, preferring rather to emphasize them and to present their weak and strong point, or to speak about their moral relevance. Still, he provides a complex, well-articulated perspective on the euthanasia, offers a synthesis of the main directions that existed in the time when he wrote his books (in the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st one), provides the Orthodox perspective on the topic (linking it with the Christian anthropology), speaks about the general principles that should be respected and attracts the attention on the dangers that accompany some of the initiatives from the field. His perspective is a complex and well-documented one and for sure, it should be taken into attention both by the contemporary scholarship, but also by the conciliar authorities which have the authority to release a social document meant to provide principles of actions and to suggest directions of attitude for the contemporary Church.

²⁹ Breck & Breck, *Stages on Life's Way. Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*, 230.