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Interview with Cornelia Delkeskamp-Hayes – 1

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We have the pleasure today to re-publish an exclusive interview with Mrs. Cornelia Delkeskamp-Hayes, a famous modern Orthodox bioethicist, one of the editors of «Christian bioethics», and on the Editorial Advisory Board of the «Journal of Christian Bioethics».

«Pemptousia»: You are an editor of the Oxford journal *Christian Bioethics,* a journal which is perhaps unique in its field. Tell us a little about it. When was it started?

«Cornelia Delkeskamp-Hayes»: It was Herman Engelhardt's idea. He realized that Orthodoxy needed a greater international presence in the academia. And he was willing to invest his own world-wide reputation for the purpose. The Orthodox voice was finally to make itself heard in the public forum of Christian reflection on the moral issues raised by biomedicine. When Herman presented this idea to his wife, Susan, his indispensable "right hand", in fact, his only access to anything as technical as a word document or an email message, – she saw the point at once: This is what needed to be done. "If not we, – who else?" They decided to simply disregard their overcrowded work schedule and take on this additional burden.

Next, Herman drew on his many academic friends to fill issues for the first years. These were mostly heterodox Christians, because at that stage he had not yet converted the required bioethicists. That would happen later, and in part even through work with this journal. But at first, Herman had to win his non-Orthodox friends for the idea of bringing together Christians from different faith cultures and traditions for discussion, in each issue, of one particular problem in bioethics. Each author would have to lay out the theological resources recognized in his particular Christian culture. He would have to specify which authorities he recognized for determining the proper interpretation of these sources.

Then he would have to explain how his own moral conclusions were supported by the sources thus authoritatively interpreted. Some of Herman's friends immediately consented. They recognized the need, for anyone who tries to be serious about his faith, to be very precise about the moral guidance offered by that faith, and that a difference-theological approach would be helpful. Other friends gave a deep sigh. But it was made clear to them that here was their chance to finally reciprocate on the many years of friendship benefits they had enjoyed. In the end, both groups became quite enthusiastic about this new project and formed a Christian bioethical culture of their own, some, as I mentioned, even converting to Orthodoxy in the process.

I was a Protestant at the time and belonged to the "draftees". But I discovered that observing how theologians from differing Christianities engage in a proper "logon didonai" about their bioethical positions was actually like attending an informal

Christian bioethics academy. In addition, Herman had wisely started me by appealing to my passion for acid criticism. Charged with responding to essays written by fellow Protestants and Roman Catholics, I gleefully took their reasonings apart. In this way, I was forced to acknowledge the superiority of the Orthodox approach. Here (at least) no claims to rational compellingness were advanced. Instead, I found an invitation into a vision and a life, which offered no lever for intellectual arrogance.

Of course I had to get over my evangelical reserve against “big talk”. Words like “deification” sounded like rather much of a mouthful at first. But then I sensed a deeper sobriety underneath the initially suspect “cloud of verbal incense”, a sobriety that was sorely lacking in the hazy appeals to emotions and studied intellectual imprecision in my Christian home cultures. In comparison with the confusing diversity of viewpoints and the lacking stringency that mars the more “creative” heterodox approaches, the Orthodox authors wrote coherently, and their arguments were tightly knit. What they said looked challenging for those who tried to live by it, to be sure, but at least it all fit together.

Today, my reactions at that time remind me of how my own mother (much later) got on track for her conversion: I had already been baptized, but during the last years of her life she depended on me, her caretaker, to get to church in our village. That was the church in which my own faith had grown, and here she had resumed a long lost habit of attending Sunday services. Since she was almost blind and rather immobile, I had received a special blessing to join her at those services. On our way home, she would complain about the sermon, not stopping at the Gospel either. There were many things God could have arranged more sensibly, so she thought, and the pastor forever failed to raise the proper issues. Still, knowing of my new faith, she challenged me for a defense. So I could tell her about St. John Chrysostom, and how he would interpret a given text so that it all fell into place and was, in addition, rather beautiful. And each time, after a grumpy silence, she would look up and say: “Well, that makes sense. Why did nobody ever explain this to me?”

Such a response is, of course, exactly what we hope to elicit through this journal: Here, confrontation with the Orthodox view throws a totally new light on the usual Christian answers to burning bioethical problems. Non-Orthodox readers thus get an opportunity, even within their own field of research, to “come and see”.

«P»: Can you explain why the Orthodox voice had until then not been very present in the Western Christian discourse on bioethics?

«C.D.-H.»: I think it needed a really influential scholar to break the ground.

Obviously, Orthodox theologians had been working in the modern West for a long time. Just think of the Russian emigration which produced much valuable work in French and English. But Orthodox theology still remained separated from the moral and political problems discussed in the academia of the West. Why?

Probably the most important reason lies in a very specific, and as such confining, model of scholarship. The Western Christianities have internalized the conditions imposed by that model, so that their voice could be heard in the public forum. They have resigned themselves to limiting their claims to what can be established by discursive reasoning. In order to safeguard their academic respectability in a world transformed by secularization, these Christianities have internalized even the moral commitments which were powerfully advanced by the Enlightenment. A central decision framing those commitments concerns reducing religious truth to "perceived truth".

Western Christians thus resigned themselves to bracketing their confession of truth by a "reflective" regard for the many other (almost) equally legitimate perspectives on "truth". In this secular academic culture, it is very difficult to speak in the name of the authority of the Church, and about the Truth Who is the person of Christ, and still get published, – or more precisely: get published outside of a specifically quaranteened-off domain of «religious literature». The Christian obligation to "teach and baptize the nations" has no legitimate space in the (career relevant) mainstream of the Western academia. Here, universal validity is instead claimed for a faith-neutral rationality that is also invoked for grounding moral norms. This is why the mainline heterodox Christians today address moral issues in predominantly secular terms, i.e. by appealing to human dignity, social solidarity, and equality.

Orthodox theology was never exposed to the transformation from a monastic into an academic discipline, as was the case with Western Christianity after its («scholastic») reception of pagan philosophy in the 12th century. Orthodoxy thus has no natural affinity with the Enlightenment's re-affirmation (now however with the goal of secularizing the culture) of a purely human rationality. The very notions of noetic experience, of Divine un-created energies, and of humans' Divine calling, in fact, Christianity's even more basic affirmation of the incarnation and bodily resurrection of Christ, and of a final judgment, – all this remains opaque to a scholarly discourse that places all faith on human reason, un-informed by faith.

This is why it took real courage, and at the same time an already established academic prestige, to press for the acceptability of a theology which is disqualified as "fundamentalist" in the West. At stake was nothing less than to create space for

that theology’s own terms of intellectual integrity and scholarly excellence. Engelhardt was probably the only one who could impose on the academic mainstream a bioethical dialogue partner that derives moral guidance from the mysteries of the faith.

[To Be Continued]