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The Phenomenon of Death in the Era of Biotechnologies.

A Perspective of Orthodox Dogmatics

Cristinel IOJA

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“Hilarion V. Felea” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Arad, Romania

Email: cristi.ioja@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this study, I tried to identify some of the current challenges to the eschatology of the Church. The death problem in the era of biotechnologies and nanotechnologies generated by transhumanist philosophy concerns the course of man in an autonomous sense, emphasizing his immortality through technology. Death becomes a “biological option” and is treated as a disease technology can overcome. The present human nature is seen only as a stage in the evolution of the species. The mystery of death is linked mechanistically and autonomously to nature, not to the mystery of resurrection as a dogma of the Church. Man does not simply have a biological structure but an iconic-biological structure, his premises and goals being not in the multiple versions of the technological and computerized society but in the theological Christology of the Bible according to the image and likeness. Orthodox Dogmatics’ optimism regarding eschatology is based on its discovery in the Person of Christ and the Lives of the Saints. At the same time, Orthodox Dogmatics discovers the eschatological path of man on an optimistic note, generated by the face of God perceived not only as a Judge - a judgment that is actually in man, in the mirror of man - but as a good, merciful, forgiving, sacrificial and people loving Father. This perspective that outlines the eternal communion of eternal joy, human fulfillment, and eternal celebration in the light of the glory and immortal image of Christ and the love of the Trinity is distinguished from the immanent, dissolving, unpredictable and dehumanizing perspective of an autonomous “eternity”, pursued everywhere by the virulent action of death. The perspective of

transhumanism on man's destiny deprives man of the premises and the transcendent purpose of his being. Proposing the substitution of God by technology, which acquires divine attributes, transhumanism projects a self-transcendence, which is a pseudo-transcendence. At the same time, the death problem is not solved but only postponed!

Keywords:

Christ, transhumanism, man-robot, dogmatics, death, eternity, biotechnology.

I. The dream of immortality here

In postmodernity the concept of the "God's death" - around which there was a fervent debate in the 20th century - generated an influence on deconstructivist philosophies. To a large extent, deconstruction is hermeneutic of "God's death" of which the "theologies of God's death" have spoken, signaling the inner crisis of Western Christianity that has transformed the tripersonal, communional God of Scripture and Tradition into an idea, a mathematical quantity, an impersonal law, an efficient cause. Theologies of God's death – G. Vahanian, W. Hamilton, T. J. Altizer, J. A. Robinson, H. Cox, P. M van Buren¹ – with origins in Nietzsche's philosophy, open the way to a thoroughly secularized culture, in which the

¹ See: Gabriel VAHANIAN, *The Death of God: The Culture of our Post-Christian Era*, George Braziller, New York, 1961; Gabriel VAHANIAN, *Wait Without Idols*, George Braziller, New York, 1964; Gabriel VAHANIAN, *God and Utopia: The Church in a Technological Civilization*, Seabury Press, New York, 1977; Gabriel VAHANIAN, *Anonymous God: An Essay on Not Dreading Words*, Davies, Aurora, 2002; Wiliam Huges HAMILTON, Thomas J.J. ALTIZER, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Penguin, 1968; Thomas J.J. ALTIZER, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1966; Thomas J.J. ALTIZER, *New Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Davies Group, Aurora, 2002; Thomas J.J. ALTIZER, *Godhead and The Nothing*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2003; Thomas J.J. ALTIZER, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir Albany*, State University of New York Press, 2006; John ROBINSON, *In the End, God: A Study of the Christian Doctrine of the Last Things*, James Clarke & Co. 2011; Harvey G. COX, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, 1965; Harvey G. COX, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology*, 1985; Paul M. VAN BUREN, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel: Based on an Analysis of Its Language*, 1966; Paul M. VAN BUREN, *The Edges of Language: An Essay in the Logic of a Religion*, 1972.

eschatology of the Church is diluted and abolished. Through a hermeneutic of suspicion and a radical critique, the philosophers of postmodernity have deconstructed what modernity has raised. Christianity also entered this plan, especially the structures of Western metaphysics and dogmas in general. If “God is dead”, man is master, and in his autonomy he is called to carve his own path in acquiring immortality. The immortality of man gradually develops strictly immanent meanings by resorting to the forces and means proper to the created world.

Along with these meanings, the belief in the “unseen” is suspended or unilaterally substituted by the belief in the “seen”. Although subject to decay and death, the efficiency of the seen and material receives autonomous redemptive hopes. If the death of God generated debates in modernity, the problem of man’s death also generates debates in postmodernity and it aims at the transition from human to posthuman². Although in the basic definition the term *posthuman* is placed in the register of fiction and futurology, the latest research shows us that it can touch the concrete world of man. In other words, the issue in question is not a fiction, but is about to become reality.

Thus, in relation to the eschatology of Orthodox theology, in postmodernity we encounter at least three conceptual distortions, which, however, occupy the foreground agenda of science, technology and the media: a) The Kingdom of God, a utopia; the one-sided emphasis on the earthly Kingdom structured on consumption, pleasure, power as resources of life and immortal life; b) immortality in the earthly kingdom can be achieved through science and technology in the era of post-individual

² From the multitude of works that address the postmodern issue of human, posthuman, and transhuman, we recall: F. FUKUYAMA, *Our Post-Human Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2002; J. HABERMAS, *The Future of Human Nature*, Cambridge Polity Press, 2003; Nick BOSTROM, “Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up”, in: Bert GORDIJN and Ruth CHADWICK (eds.), *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity*, 2008, pp. 107-137; K. HAYLES, *How we Became Posthuman*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009; Mark CARRIGAN, Douglas V. PORPORA (eds.), *Post-Human Futures. Human Enhancement Artificial Intelligence and Social Theory*, Routledge, 2021; Zahi ZALLOUA, *Being Posthuman. Ontologies of the Future*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021; Robert RANISCH and Stefan LORENZ SORGNER, *Post-and Transhumanism. An Introduction*, Peter Lang Edition, 2015.

and post-humanism, of transhumanism; c) the mystery of death is linked mechanistically and autonomously to nature, not to the mystery of resurrection as a dogma of the Church.

In the consciousness of postmodern man, the theme of the Kingdom of God is absorbed by the theme of human idolatry and the establishment of an earthly Kingdom in an autonomous sense. Archimandrite Sophronius writes:

“The tragedy of our times lies in the almost complete absence of awareness that there are two kingdoms, the temporal and the eternal. We want to build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, rejecting any idea of resurrection or eternity. The resurrection is a myth”³.

Also, there is the *temptation of immortality through technology and media*, especially in the virtual space that takes over, but also often dissolves personality and inter-human communion. Of course, there is also the reflex of a thought that has traversed the history of mankind regarding immortality through power and pleasure, immortality through material riches, and immortality through food and drink, reflexes which through the current environments are fed and intensified to the maximum, often destabilizing the person humanity.

“No wonder, then, that on this skillfully maintained biotope starting from the Renaissance, completely anti-Christian movements flourish, which replace the teleology of man, eschatology and deification with the old myth of terrestrial immortality, but this time with very concrete means, related to the biotechnological revolution”⁴.

Man does not simply have a biological structure but an iconic-biological structure, his premises and goals being not in the multiple variants of the

³ Arhimandritul SOFRONIE, *Rugăciunea – experiența Vieții Veșnice*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2007, p. 47

⁴ Jean BOBOC, *Transumanismul decriptat. Metamorfoza navei lui Tezeu*, transl. Manuel Valeriu, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2020, p.145.

consumerist and computerized society but in the theological Christology of the Bible *according to the image and likeness*.

“The technological system favors the structuring of a de-Christianized world, through the delusion given by a millenarian type of thinking according to which the earthly heaven replaces the kingdom of heaven. The eschatological consciousness specific to Christianity is replaced by a technological messianism, which allows global well-being, prosperity, security and happiness. The technological system offers everything, on the condition that you pay a tribute, not one quantified in material elements, but one paid with soul and life”⁵.

II. The dream of immortality through technology

If the Kingdom of God as an eternal reality has been absorbed into the perception of an autonomous earthly Kingdom, immortality in this earthly kingdom or the horizontality of the material universe is ensured by therapeutic human cloning, stem cell therapies, synthetic organs, molecular nanotechnology, and the digital-brain interface, digitization of the brain, all of which are elements of a version of immortality in today's world plan. These are just some of the challenges of transhumanism in postmodernity, through which man becomes his own creator and demiurge in the conditions of a world without a transcendent and eternal identity in the Christian sense. In these conditions, eschatology is not only deviated from its immanent-transcendent and historical-eternal meaning but is constituted as a unique final version of history, in the work of autonomous man, through the power of technology.

Ray Kurzweil proposes the eternalization of man in the human-robot unity through the “singularity theory”. They talk about the “death of death”, by scanning the brain and downloading it, i.e. about prolonging life and the

⁵ Adrian LEMENI, Sorin MIHALACHE, Răzvan IONESCU, Cristinel IOJA, *Apologetică Ortodoxă*, II, Editura Basilica, București, 2014, pp. 342-343.

possibility of immortalizing the mind on a CD⁶. So it is about digitizing the brain on computer support, an action that goes in parallel with building a computer in the image of the brain, with the creation of a synthetic human brain, with the creation of artificial intelligence without biological support, the combination of nervous system cells with machines. There are two options: 1) human intelligence will be transplanted into the robot machine; 2) the man will receive an implant through which, through digitization, he will be transformed into a robot. This man-machine relationship has preoccupied man since modernity. But while in modernity, the machine remained external to man and controllable, although it significantly influences the structures of the cosmos, in postmodernity, in the posthuman era, the machine tends to become an integral part of man's inner structures, even to replace the fiery core of the robotic human person, equipped with artificial intelligence. With such premises, man's perception and eschatological expectations also change radically. The "eschatology" of postmodernity becomes a religion in the consciousness of the followers in which man's destiny is to become symbiotic with technology. Technology is increasingly perceived as having divine attributes. Larchet identifies several of these when referring to the already recognized "Google Church": 1. Google is omniscient; 2. Google is ubiquitous; 3. Google answers all prayers (all questions asked in the search bar); 4. Google is potentially immortal; 5. Google is infinite; 6. Google remembers everyone; 7. Google does not want and cannot do harm; 8. Google is more sought after and loved than other gods; 9. Google is the only god whose existence is proven⁷.

If Google and the transhumanist technologies propelled in postmodernity have these "divine" attributes, it means that the immortality of man is perceived through technology and science, the eschatological perspective of the Church being, in the consciousness of more and more people, a myth. Affirming the post-individual through the standpoint of genetic mutations, of clones, of homo cyberneticus, offers a hope for man to immortalize himself here. The anthropocentrism of modernity led to

⁶ Ray KURZWEIL, *Epoca mașinilor spirituale. Când computerele depășesc inteligența umană*, transl. Bogdan Chircea, Editura Paralela 45, Pitești, 2012, p. 183

⁷ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Captivi în internet*, transl. Marinela Bojin, Editura Sophia, București, 2018, note 1, p. 272

the premises of posthumanism of postmodernity. Here we are amid the manifestation of man's autonomy.

Death becomes a "biological option" and is treated as a disease technology can overcome. The present human nature is seen only as a stage in the evolution of the species. Of course, such a perspective can perhaps be achieved by man but not without the risk of being transformed into an object.

"There is already an obvious practical contradiction between this search for terrestrial immortality and the actuality of certain ongoing lethal practices, such as the generalization and trivialization of abortion, the destruction of embryos in too large a number, genetic sorting and euthanasia, perfectly integrated into the transhumanist project, apart from any moral considerations, but also outside secondary issues. There is at least one paradox: on the one hand, you want to push death as far as possible and simultaneously grant yourself rights over life. From the moment we want to suppress death, we are trying to change the human condition. The paradox is that it is precisely a criminal and eugenic civilization that has this Promethean claim"⁸.

Of course, in the transhumanist vision, God's plan for man is suspended, and the reality of eternity beyond the edges of death is not accepted. On the other hand, it will be complicated to maintain the natural in man; the tension between the natural man and the man enhanced by technology will be evident, the former remaining alien and "misfit" in an increasingly technological and artificial world. The man who chooses - if he will be able to choose again!? - to remain within the natural human, in the sense of the structure created by God, beyond implants and genetic modifications will be considered "primitive" in comparison with the new structures applied to the human in the perspective of an immortality in death. The era of biotechnologies and nanotechnologies, of the separation of sexuality

⁸ Jean BOBOC, *Transumanismul decriptat. Metamorfoza navei lui Tezeu*, p. 148.

and directed procreation will decisively change man's perception of his humanity.

The "new man" that transhumanism seeks to configure, recontextualizing the unfulfilled efforts of the ideologies of modernity, will be a man abdicated from his own humanity - transhumanism is a step towards posthumanism - also dependent on the cycles of death, even if his life, thanks to the symbiosis with technology and robotics, will take longer. *Hybrid*, dependent on the machine, although existing in a virtual network or a reality supported by a finite center seeking cybernetic immortality, however specialized he may be through science and technology, man will be sub-human since his sublimity does not consist in his horizontally-immanent intelligence and development through technology, as much as in the dignity of personally participating in the infinite divine life, without beginning, and end. By substituting the Creator, man will not evolve in the sense of creation, but will involve, concentrating his dreams and goals of life immanently, unilaterally.

John's principle: "in Him was life and life was the light of men" emphasizes that in human structures, the authentic life is not offered artificially by technology, but the one that has its cause in a personal-communion principle, without beginning and end. Between the life maintained by something - a node of networks, a super-sophisticated technological center - and life itself, which is the divine life in which man is called to participate - "partakers of the divine nature" - there is a radical difference that the Church testifies in an eschatological perspective through the distinction between created and uncreated. The standpoint of transhumanism on man's destiny deprives man of the premises and the transcendent purpose of his being. Proposing the substitution of God by technology, which acquires divine attributes, transhumanism projects a self-transcendence, which is a pseudo-transcendence. At the same time, the problem of death is not solved, but only postponed!

Although, it is impressive due to the force of the technology that it emanates and imposes on a global level, transhumanism represents a distorted conception of man who, wanting to improve, lacks precisely the "treasure in the clay pot". It perfects him biologically, depriving him of

freedom and spiritual heights through autonomy. It offers him life extension through quantitative transformations, linking him to an immanent principle, ultimately subject to the laws of death. Moreover, between the desire for mastery and the loss of control over the parameters and manifestation of the techno-sciences, there is only a subjective line of demarcation which, by violating it, can produce the disaster for humanity.

We are not against science, but in any field of science, we need a clear perception of human structures as a given and a gift, a perspective on man's future inseparable from morality and human consciousness. The substitution of the ontological habit of man with the artificiality created by techno-sciences will create significant confusion regarding man's identity. The era of biotechnologies, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence makes the premises of a "post-identity" era and structures directed by other people following the new models of the post-human society⁹.

III. A possible answer from the perspective of the Church eschatology

Postmodern culture and civilization are significant challenges to the ethos, faith, and life of the Church and implicitly to the eschatological destiny of man and the cosmos. However, following the Fathers of the Church, without demonizing them, we must identify their limits and what the Church testifies from the perspective of Revelation using spiritual discernment. Likewise, the patristic method of selection from the perspective of the Revelation present and experienced in the Church can offer a decantation and distinction between the lights of science and the darkness of the lights of science.

The Church's eschatology discovers man's strength to overcome death through asceticism and, above all, the eternal work of God in the human person - body and soul - in the synergistic perspective of eternity. The premise from which Dogmatics departs in the configuration of man's eschatology is the Incarnation of the Son of God, the love of the Holy Trinity, and the iconic-biological structure of man. In Orthodox theology,

⁹ Jean BOBOC, *Transumanismul decriptat. Metamorfoza navei lui Tezeu*, pp. 192-194.

the immortality of man is not centered in an immanent, scientific, and technological autonomous principle but in the eternal life of the Trinity. Orthodox dogmatics' optimism regarding eschatology is based on its discovery in the Person of Christ and the Lives of the Saints. At the same time, Orthodox Dogmatics discovers the eschatological path of man on an optimistic note, generated by the image of God perceived not only as a Judge - a judgment that is actually in man, in the mirror of man - but as a *good, merciful, forgiving, sacrificial and loving* Father. This perspective that outlines the *eternal communion of eternal joy, human fulfillment, and eternal celebration in the light of the glory and immortal image of Christ and the love of the Trinity* is distinguished from the immanent, dissolving, unpredictable and dehumanizing perspective of an autonomous "eternity", pursued everywhere by the virulent action of death.

If, in the eschatological perspective of the Church, the last enemy of man to be destroyed will be death, in the posthuman eschatology of the individual, death is only postponed. Moreover, there is no full eternity under the conditions of a finite and mortal world - that would be nonsense - but only participation in the eternal life that begins in Christ and the Church even here and is completed from glory to glory beyond, in the dimensions of a world unbounded and renewed and centered in the love of the Holy Trinity and in the light that radiates from the Person of Christ.

Without being against science and technology, specific treatments and technologies for prolonging human life in the world - which we constantly need to discern from the perspective of Revelation and the experience of the Saints of the Church - Orthodox theology affirms the importance of maintaining the balance of creation and avoiding the diversion of man and cosmos from their material-spiritual, historical-eschatological structures and meanings. Because the bio-improvement of the human being by overcoming the biological limits must not mean its spiritual alienation and breaking with the principle of transcendence discovered once and for all in the Person of Christ. But even if we make an abstraction from the Person of Christ, the bioimprovement of man and his transformation into a robot machine through technology hijacks the meaning of man and contrasts it with the meaning of creation, which has in it not only an immanent meaning

but also a transcendent one. Therefore, the interferences on the human condition and structures, up to the imbalance and depersonalization of the data of creation, represent an action against anthropology and cosmology in their data. From the perspective of Orthodox Dogmatics, it means action against Christology because at the foundation of man and the cosmos, in the past, present, and future, is the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ.

Postmodernity seeks to solve the problem of death through technology, within the framework of history, the idea of progress being recontextualized. Based on the testimony of the Church, Orthodox dogmatics testifies that death is a moment of life, being overcome in Christ. Death is a necessity in the sense of moving toward complete union with God in a new life without death. Death cannot be abolished by technology, but by death, a death of man within a Person who has conquered death and in whom Life reigns. Therefore, there is no actual progress apart from the victory over death, which makes Christ, the conqueror of death, the center of human life, science, and culture.

In Christ, death is defeated and given meaning, and progress becomes endless progress into eternal life. Father Stăniloae writes: "Earthly life is required after death as a transition to the full meaning since the fragmentary meaning in this life is required after the full meaning, which is given by the fullness of life in God. Without death, understood as the gate through which we pass to full meaning, the fragment of the rationality of earthly life appears rather as nonsense and as inexplicable, and the world, if it must always remain in this fragmentary sense, is rather nonsense, because if it has nothing beyond it, it leads all men to final death. From this point of view, Christianity considers death a necessary and universal event. Still, it explains this necessity and its universality by the necessity of fulfilling human existence in the transcendent God. In this explanation, death has meaning. Indeed it is an event that finds its meaning through life"¹⁰. To remain in line with his authenticity, man needs transcendence.

Actual progress is victory over death, that is, the immortality of the body as deliverance from sin and evil through death.

¹⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, III, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 145.

“Many do not accept the resurrection and talk about progress. But all these scientific, philosophical, artistic, or cultural advances, whatever they may be, are nothing more than concentric circles inscribed in the circle of death. Progress, which will betray and abandon man at the moment of death, is not progress but a counterfeit of progress. If man cannot give meaning to death and life, which would deify man and humanity, then this does not mean progress but regression in disguise. Thus are all the so-called advances, apart from the progress based on the Lord Jesus, who rose. Unless death is conquered and immortality secured to us by means of resurrection, there is no progress in this throbbing mill of death”¹¹.

From this perspective, the mystery of death must not be mechanistically linked to nature but to the mystery of resurrection and endless progress in God. Otherwise, any improvement in immanentist, scientific, medical, economic, and civilizational vision remains in the circle of death. Jesus Christ remains the fundamental criterion of man and the cosmos, of history and culture, He through Whom all were created and saved, united with the Father, in the Holy Spirit, and in Whom life has no end. The principle of endless life is found only in Him who has endless life within Himself!

¹¹ Sfântul Iustin POPOVICI, *Abisurile gândirii și simfirii umane*, transl. Gabriel and Laura Mândrilă, Editura Sophia/Metafrază, București, 2013, pp. 89-90.