

Bioethics

When the Challenges of Life Become Too Difficult

Gareth Jones

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Reviewer: Paul Babie, Law School, University of Adelaide

Gareth Jones' *Bioethics: When the Challenges of Life Become Too Difficult* raises and explores those issues that Prof Jones calls 'headline makers'—the ones that challenge us personally and conceptually: the issues that surround the beginning of life—the status of human embryos in science and theology, reproduction and artificial reproductive technologies, the use of embryonic stem cells in research and therapeutic cloning, the human genome and genetic mapping—and those issues that surround living one's life and its end—society, mental illness, organ transplantation, care of older people, and death itself. Because all of medicine has affected all of life, Prof Jones attempts to balance human life with the divine dimension in a way aimed at a broad readership. In short, this book is about exploring new territory in the realm of bioethics. In every case, Prof Jones examines and explains these issues in a sensitive and informed, and always accessible, way. No easy task, but one achieved seemingly effortlessly in this volume.

And, of course, as few others are, Prof Jones is eminently qualified to tackle these headline issues. A highly respected and distinguished neuroscientist, medical ethicist and researcher, his research focuses on two areas. First, **bioethical issues**, in which his research explores the use of cadavers, skeletal and human tissue, brain birth and brain death, the pre-embryo, stem cell technology, human therapeutic cloning, dementia and aging, and genetics. The second area of his research explores **neurobiological issues**, and that work deals with neural degeneration and regeneration, and on educational and policy issues relevant to anatomy as a discipline. Questions such as these can only be addressed by reference to the human body, in embryological, neurobiological, and cell biological terms, and Prof Jones is qualified to speak to each area, and the relationship between them.

All of this—his work in the scientific world of anatomy, neurobiology, and the health sciences, and in ethics, especially religion, and specifically Christianity—is brought to bear on the headline issues explored in *Bioethics: When the Challenges of Life Become Too Difficult*. As a reader, the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach employed by Prof Jones to explore the divine and religious is increasingly significant in a world seemingly enthralled by Richards Dawkins and his followers—those who see the role of religion in public life, social and scientific, as a divisive, indeed a poisonous, distraction from reason. Although not its stated objective, Prof Jones' book nonetheless offers the case for religion, and provides a response, arguing that it is always the integrity of one's argument that matters, in both the secular and the non-secular realms.

But above all, Prof Jones accomplishes this ambitious task in a practical way, one open to all Christians. From a purely personal perspective, I find that Prof Jones offers something for me as an Eastern Christian cleric without ignoring me as an academic lawyer. As Eastern Christian whose tradition is founded on the Patristic

Fathers of the Church (those who wrote in the first millennium of Christianity), those collectively known as the ‘Mind of the Church’, it has become increasingly important to turn to those who have engaged with modern science and technology in order to gain insight into the moral and ethical issues surrounding choices that one must make in living a life. Nowhere is this truer for Eastern Christians than in the case of bioethics. The same could of course be said by any Christian.

For the Eastern Christian, conscience and discernment is essential to making such decisions (John Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 43; Stanley S. Harakas, *Toward Transfigured Life: The Theoria of Eastern Orthodox Ethics* (Light and Life Publishing Company, 1983), 212-228), remembering always that the goal of life is conformity and communion with the Triune God and that all our decisions must be in harmony with and contribute to the fulfilment of the image and likeness of God in persons and to the realisation of the Kingdom of God. In other words, for the Orthodox Christian, moral decision-making must be in accordance with God’s will. With this in mind, the Orthodox Christian must first determine whether the Church has a teaching on an issue (Harakas, *Toward Transfigured Life*, 212-228 225-227). In this regard, Stanley Harakas, perhaps the foremost Orthodox moral theologian, says that:

The method of ethics for determining Eastern Orthodox perspectives on bioethical questions is the same as its general methods for making ethical decisions. Briefly stated, the world view of the church, that is, its general understanding of reality, forms the larger context for bioethical reflection. It delineates and highlights the basic orientation toward the issues and problems of bioethics. Within this context, the Church has already taken ethical stances on many biomedical issues from the earliest days of its existence. More study, however, is needed to assess the moral dimensions of newly created bioethical questions so as to form an “ecclesial sense” on many of the new complex ethical problems resulting from scientific developments.

The next step is to carefully examine the specific elements of the Church’s tradition which embody the mind of the Church: Scripture, patristic writings, decisions of the Ecumenical Councils and other Synods, the received doctrinal teachings of the Church, canon law, ascetical writings, monastic typika, liturgical texts and traditions,...penitential books...theological studies, etc. The purpose of examining these sources is to determine whether the[y]...speak directly, indirectly, or by analogy to the new questions of bioethics.

It will be necessary to keep in mind the historic contexts of these specific sources. Both general and specific applications can then be made regarding the topics of bioethics. These conclusions, however, must be tentative, until the mind of the Church—understood as the consciousness of the people of God, as the formulation of theological opinion, and as the decision of the Church in local, regional, and ecumenical synods—specifically decides (Stanley Samuel Harakas, *Living the Faith: The Praxis of Eastern Orthodox Ethics* (Light and Life Publishing Company, 1983), 125).

Thus, every conclusion of Orthodox moral theologians is necessarily tentative and contingent. The teaching of the Church is always shifting as it awaits and responds to further elucidation by the Mind of the Church. But when there is a lack of consensus, as is so often the case with bioethics, the person trying to make a decision must make a serious effort to discern the will of God and what is good and acceptable and perfect in the case at hand, judging options always against the ultimate criteria of *theosis*—communion with God—and the Kingdom. And all of this must be done in the prayer that we will be guided by God to the best decision.

This is where, for Christians, Eastern included, Prof Jones offers invaluable assistance, for this book provides an expert's analysis of the available scientific information combined with an expert's understanding of the theological issues involved. As with all moral decision making, at the institutional and the personal level, in the complex world of bioethics, for Eastern Christianity it is impossible for the Mind of the Church to reach a conclusion without turning to experts. The Mind of the Church must have something to consider and upon which to base a conclusion. Prof Jones is just such an expert who, in accessibly providing the depth of his expertise, guides us through the bioethical challenges twenty-first century life presents. For all Christians, Eastern and Western, this book challenges us with contemporary bioethical issues and it provides the necessary guidance to reach sound ethical decisions about those issues from within our own traditions, whatever they may be.

Similarly, as an academic lawyer with an interest in the morality of law and the intersection of law and theology, this is a welcome addition to the literature which seeks to bridge what some see as an unbridgeable divide between law, faith, and science. Here in Australia, we have recently seen the extent to which those of the religious world can enter bioethical debates. We can perhaps disagree as to the extent of that entry, but few would disagree that religion and faith does have something to say about the issues, and that it must say it. Prof Jones has the expertise, which he makes available to us in this book, to speak on these issues from both camps, the religious and the scientific. He therefore demonstrates that it is possible to move between these disparate disciplines, and to contribute to the legal-political debate in a rational way. Above all, this book demonstrates that the touchstone of such contributions must always and ultimately be the integrity of one's argument.

I commend *Bioethics: When the Challenges of Life Become Too Difficult* to you as a two-fold source: of a scientist's expertise having spent a lifetime exploring the headline ethical issues of life, and as the guidance of a Christian concerned about moral decision-making in facing the challenge of those issues.