The Work of Fr. Stanley Harakas

M. Therese Lysaught, *Loyola University Chicago*

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mthereselysaught/55/
The Work of Fr. Stanley Harakas: A Panel Discussion

M. Therese Lysaught

I want to start by thanking Vigen Guroian for inviting me to join this panel and share my thoughts on the work of Fr. Harakas. I will admit, I was both honored by the invitation, and humbled by the prospect of the task and the company in whose presence I'd be standing. What I would like to offer is less a 'paper' and more a set of reflections. I initially intended to shape my comments around two questions: (1) how has Fr. Harakas' work influenced me and my own work and (2) what, from my perspective, do I see as the important contributions Fr. Harakas has made to the discipline of theological ethics that remain important challenges for the work of those of us in this Society?

In writing this up, however, I realized that these two questions are not so easily separable. As is probably evident to you, I represent on this panel a slightly different demographic from that of my colleagues, namely, that of a junior scholar. Consequently, in some ways I represent, or I hope my work represents, 'future' directions or the next generation of this discipline of theological ethics. I also bring to this panel a different perspective in another way, insofar as I am liturgically or denominationally a Catholic who has been trained primarily by Protestants, who finds Orthodox theology increasingly compelling, and whose work is practiced in the context of a Catholic university. Thus, I will include in my remarks reflections on the ways the distinct discipline of Catholic moral theology might profit from conversation with Fr. Harakas and Orthodoxy.

Preliminary Caveat

Let me begin, however, with a preliminary, autobiographical aside. My introduction to Fr. Harakas' work came rather indirectly, that is, I did not encounter it explicitly in my training in the dominant conversations and literature of academic theological ethics. I first encountered Fr. Harakas' work in my hiatus
from traditional academia, when I went to work in the world of “bioethics,” at the Park Ridge Center in Chicago. I had recently completed my dissertation on the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick as a theological locus for bioethics—a completely novel and innovative idea, as far as I knew. At the Center, I happened upon a book in their series on health and medicine in the religious traditions, a book written by Fr. Harakas, and—much to my amazement—what did I find but a chapter on “Holy Unction.” Here was someone else looking to the sacrament of anointing in the context of bioethics! I was intrigued, and I knew I needed to learn more about this man. At the same time, my work to that point had been influenced by Vigen Guroian’s work on the relationship between liturgy and ethics. Vigen’s work is deeply indebted to Fr. Harakas; once you know that it is obvious, but at the time I was unaware of this connection. Thus, Fr. Harakas’ work long preceded mine and had in fact influenced mine directly and in profound ways, but I did not realize it. This, in itself, is important, for I think it points to the marginalization or underappreciation of the rich contributions of Orthodoxy as a tradition within the discipline of theological ethics. This is a problem that seriously needs to be addressed in the future by this Society.

Fr. Harakas and Bioethics

Given this preliminary caveat, I would like to organize my remarks into three areas, namely, the significance of Fr. Harakas’ work for bioethics, for the methodology of theological ethics in general, and the renewal of Catholic moral theology. In the interest of giving Fr. Harakas as much time as possible, my remarks will regretfully remain a bit general, focusing primarily on Fr. Harakas’ contributions to the field of bioethics. First, I address Fr. Harakas and bioethics, or more specifically, ‘Christian’ bioethics. For most of the relatively brief history of the contemporary discipline of bioethics, Fr. Harakas has been either the sole or the authoritative voice bringing the resources of the Orthodox tradition to bear on issues in or the practice of bioethics. Fr. Harakas was the lone Orthodox voice present at the “birth” of bioethics in the U.S. in the late 60’s. As early as 1969, we find Fr. Harakas writing on issues raised for Orthodox Christians by science and technology (“The Orthodox Theological Approach to Modern Trends”). Here, he stands clearly in the company of other significant figures who created the field of bioethics, such as Daniel Callahan, Willard Gaylin, Paul Ramsey, and Richard McCormick. An indication of Fr. Harakas’ unique and respected standing in the bioethics community at this time is reflected in his authorship of the entry on “Eastern Orthodox Bioethics” in the first edition of the Encyclopedia of Bioethics (1978).

Fr. Harakas’ work is unique in at least three ways. First, in his work in bioethics, he has consistently endeavored to present the tradition of Orthodoxy, as a wholistic reality, to a non-Orthodox audience. In this capacity, he has authored the first—and to my knowledge, only—comprehensive work on Eastern
Orthodoxy in the context of health and modern medicine, the book I referred to earlier, his *Health and Medicine in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition* (1990). He has likewise supplied the relevant chapters on Orthodoxy to Numbers’ and Amundsen’s *Caring and Curing* (1986) and for the 1991 and 1993 editions of the Kluwer volumes *Theological Developments in Bioethics*. In doing so, he has not only introduced this audience to a ‘new’ (yet ancient and rich) tradition; as Martin Marty notes, this introduction produces “a fundamental reorientation . . . for the non-Orthodox . . . [as] the visitor to the tradition learns to look at his or her own heritage in a new way” (xi). Thus, in simply being faithful to his identity as an Orthodox theologian, ethicist, and pastor, Fr. Harakas has served as, perhaps we could say, an icon for others, fostering the now growing sub-field of ‘Christian’ bioethics. The field of Christian bioethics is thus indebted to the work of Fr. Harakas. But with the exception of the work of Vigen Guroian, which has been directly influenced by Fr. Harakas, and a recent issue of Christian Bioethics focusing on Orthodoxy (undoubtedly at the inspiration of editor H. Tristram Engelhardt), Fr. Harakas remains the major representative of Orthodox bioethics.

But Fr. Harakas’ audience has not solely been the non-Orthodox majority. Again, uniquely (relative to his counterparts—even those in the Roman Catholic church)—one of his primary audiences has been Orthodox Christians. A significant component of his corpus seeks to “educate” the Orthodox community on its own tradition, vis-a-vis bioethics, as well as specifically providing lay Christians with pastorally-sensitive yet authoritative guidance on such topics as contraception, abortion, death and dying, euthanasia, and organ donation (*Contemporary Moral Issues*, 1982). To date, much of Christian bioethics remains highly theoretical and academic, while those who write for lay audiences often lack adequate theological training.

Thirdly, Fr. Harakas’ work in bioethics is unique methodologically. Again and again, his works begin with a rehearsal of the history of Orthodoxy in the Christian tradition, identification of the Church Fathers and other influential theologians, and/or an account of the spectrum of fundamental Orthodox theological convictions, *ethoi*, and aspects of sacramental spiritual life. Thus, attention to specific issues in bioethics is always framed by a discussion which integrates the following: Patristic authorities; an account of the relationship between medicine and the Church in the Byzantine period; those fascinating saints known as the Holy Unmercenarys; the apophatic/kataphatic character of the Orthodox doctrine of God; God as Trinity; humans as embodying both the image and likeness of God, with the corollary doctrine of Theosis; the divine energies; sin; incarnation; resurrection; eschatology; as well as an account of the prayer and liturgical life of the church, with specific attention to the sacraments of marriage and unction. In employing this approach, he is simply reflecting an Orthodox approach to theology. As he notes:

Worship and liturgy, spiritual and mystical life, monastic *askesis* and
polity, communal focus, pastoral care, doctrinal purity, and the
cultivation of an ethos of love in the Christian life interest Eastern
Christian tradition much more than formulations of abstract ethical
constructs. Given this viewpoint, the Orthodox Church has not
developed, in the main, complex rationalistic methodologies for
bioethics. Those positions that it has developed are rooted in religious
perspectives and not speculative reasoning ("Eastern Orthodox

This approach is clearly perceived as 'unusual' among those who do bioethics,
even those who have an interest in relating religious traditions to bioethics. Again,
I think Martin Marty's comments are interesting in this regard:

The first time I read this manuscript I found that, following his helpful
introduction, the author took up liturgy and stayed with it. When, I asked
myself, will he concentrate on the history of doctrine, since Orthodoxy
cherishes true teaching? When will he come to the works of justice and
love that are such a part of religion, of Christianity? ... Then it occurred
to me: Harakas is talking about the teaching of Orthodoxy, about the
action within it, whenever he takes up liturgy in detail. As this realization
dawns upon readers, they are likely to become more patient with the
accent on liturgy and then see their patience grow to fascination (*Health
and Medicine*, x).

While I think it's interesting—and revelatory—that Marty found himself
"impatient" with the manuscript, I think his final comment indicates the more
important issue for us. For not only is Fr. Harakas simply being faithful to
Orthodox methodology, in doing so he has provided the next generation of
theological bioethicists with an alternative, compelling, fruitful, and much more
relevant methodological model, especially for those whose lives are affected by the
issues in bioethics that we academics discuss.

**Fr. Harakas and the Methodology of Theological Ethics**

Moreover, Fr. Harakas' work provides a compelling alternative not only for
developments in theological bioethics but for theological ethics in general. I would
like to make two comments relative to methodology. First, as I have noted, this
attention to sacraments and liturgy as an intrinsic part of the Christian tradition has
significantly influenced my own work. Here, again, Fr. Harakas' work either
precedes or appears early on in the recent turn in theological ethics toward liturgy
as a theological locus. As early as 1974, he is writing on the Sacrament of Holy
Confession, the role of the priest in the Divine Liturgy (1976), icons and ethics
(1987), and the teaching function of liturgy (1989). Although he argues against a
contemporary reductive tendency to see the Eucharist as the one, exclusive source or resource for Christian ethics or to reconceive the entirety of the Christian life through a Eucharistic lens, he provides a model for reappropriating Eucharist and other liturgical and spiritual practices—both sacramental and non-sacramental—as central within the multiplicity of sources of Christian life and Christian ethics. While one finds almost an explosion of work on the relationship between liturgy and ethics among liturgists and liturgical theologians, the appreciation of this linkage among theological ethicists remains sporadic. Given the increasing appreciation within the academy of the epistemological and ethical importance of "practices" as an object of theoretical study, it seems logical that ethicists move in the direction of liturgy. However, factors such as the lack of "openness" of liturgical practices (that is, the lack of ecumenical inter-communion) as well as their theological particularity may inhibit this development.

This latter point raises a second methodological contribution of Fr. Harakas' work. Theological ethics often look less and less "theological." Implicit in all that I have said to this point is an inalienable characteristic of Fr. Harakas' work: it is thoroughly theological. At no point is his social location as an Orthodox theologian-ethicist-pastor obscured or not abundantly obvious. Moreover, he consistently draws almost exclusively on theological resources. Here he differs significantly from most academic theological ethicists who draw equally or exclusively on non-theological sources—be they philosophical (e.g., Aristotle, MacIntyre, Stout), linguistic, critical theory (Foucault), political (Rawls, Marx), feminist, etc.—for their basic frameworks or conceptual categories. Fr. Harakas clearly participates in the contemporary conversation—arguing concepts and topics such as "tradition" (1992), ecological ethics (1988, 1990), just war and peace (1981, 1986, 1993), human rights (1982), or church-state relations (1986, 1992). But he does not become entangled in the problematic tasks of either trying to "fit" theological tradition to secular frameworks or of trying to argue for or justify the use of a theological approach. He simply does it. Although his early works do show more resonance with this contemporary pattern—see "An Orthodox Evaluation of the 'New Theology'" (1967), "An Orthodox Christian Approach to the New Morality" (1970), "The Church and the Secular World" (1972)—they are still primarily focused on the articulation of an Orthodox theological vision. While personally I find this rather refreshing, I think more importantly it ought to admonish those of us who understand ourselves as theological ethicists to self-evaluation, to examine whether the resources, concepts and agendas that control our work are truly theological.

Fr. Harakas and Catholic Moral Theology

I would like to close my reflections with a few brief remarks on the implications of Fr. Harakas' work for the practice of Catholic moral theology. Although I am Catholic and teach at a Catholic university, my work clearly does
not fall within the realm of Catholic moral theology, as traditionally defined. A main reason for this is that I don't find the methodology of Catholic moral theology particularly compelling or theological. Fr. Harakas’ work, in his discussions of the historical developments and differences in Eastern and Western theology, has been helpful for me in clarifying why this is the case. But more germane for our purposes, in addition to showing how moral theology ought to be theological and take liturgy seriously, Fr. Harakas, over the course of his career, has provided Orthodox readings of concepts and topics central to Catholic moral theology—for example, natural law, just war and peace, human rights, church-state relations, conscience. While not afraid to be “distinctively” Orthodox, he still sees a role and possibility for Orthodox thought to influence public policy. It might be interesting, for example, for a Catholic moral theologian to compare Fr. Harakas’ presentation of the Orthodox position on \textit{symphonia} to the work of John Courtney Murray. Alternatively, he offers an account of natural law that minimizes both the biological and juridical components. Insofar as he offers an alternative reading of a tradition that is in large part shared between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, his work provides the most accessible and persuasive Orthodox counterpart—indeed, perhaps the only Orthodox counterpart—for contemporary Catholic moral theologians. Catholic moral theologians might take note of the productive rapprochement between Orthodox and Catholic systematicians, as evidenced, for example, in the influence of the work of John Zizioulas on communion ecclesiology. And finally, Fr. Harakas and his Orthodox colleagues offer positions that are more theologically-grounded, pastorally-sensitive, and reasonable than Catholic positions on precisely those issues which are most troubling for the contemporary U.S. Catholic church—contraception and the ordination of women. Might Orthodoxy provide Catholicism with the means for breaking out of the impasse on these issues? I would suggest so.

In closing, I hope my remarks have indicated my deep appreciation for Fr. Harakas’ contributions to an endeavor I deeply cherish, and I hope I have suggested constructive ways in which we, in the future, might build on his work.