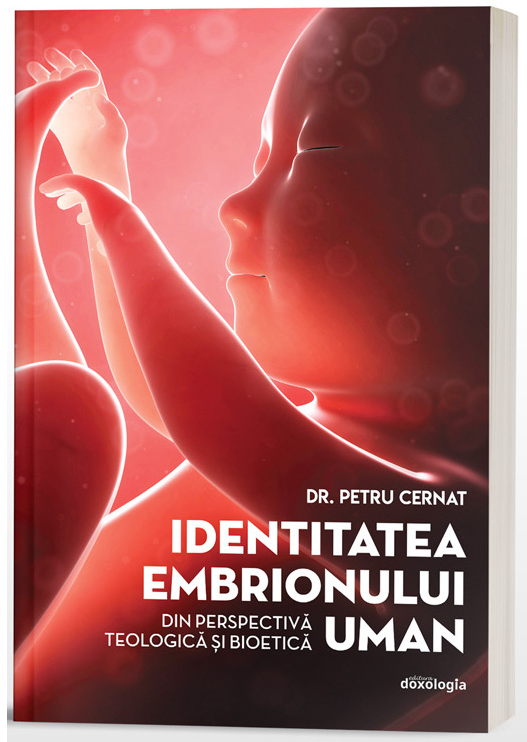


Book Review:

Dr. Petru Cernat, *Identitatea embrionului uman. O perspectivă teologică și bioetică* [The Identity of Human Embryo. A Theological and Bioethical Perspective], Doxologia Publishing House, Iași, 2022, 401 p.

This volume represents the publication of the author's doctoral thesis, defended in 2021 at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, and deals with the identity of the human embryo from the perspective of Orthodox Moral Theology and bioethics.

In his introduction (p. 17-38), Petru Cernat states that the work is based on "the desire to decipher a framework for dialogue between theology, philosophy and the world of sciences regarding the 'identity card' of the human embryo" (p. 19). The author also sets out the hypothesis on which his research is based, outlines the aim of his research and details the five objectives he is pursuing in this endeavor. As we can see from the presentation of the state of the



research, Petru Cernat's work aims to take forward the already existing debates on the identity of the embryo and to offer a theological response to this subject of capital importance for Christian anthropology and bioethical reflection.

The first chapter is entitled "Man - the theological being" (p. 41-88) and proposes first to understand the existence of the human embryo within the relationship between man and woman. In this context, Petru Cernat emphasizes the theological implications arising from this relationship, starting from the truths revealed in the first five chapters of Genesis. One of the implications, the personalization of man, occurs both through his relation to God and to others, to himself and to the whole of creation. The chapter continues with an "analysis of prenatal man from a biblical point of view". The author notes that the periodization of the stages of embryonic development in the Hebrew is attested with the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. In the final part of the chapter, the identity of the human embryo is linked to man's kingly, priestly and prophetic vocation and it is noted that "the abdication of the three dimensions of man's moral vocation influences the status and identity of the human embryo" (p. 88).

The largest part of the work is represented by the third chapter and is entitled "The Foundation of a Christian Reflection on the Human Embryo" (p. 144-230). Broadly speaking, this chapter is constructed on two levels. In a first step, the author presents the erroneous teachings on the embryo found in Origen, Tertullian, Diodorus of Tarsus and Theodoret of Cyrus. Important here is the author's observation that if Origen's errors of thought leave posterity with more questions about the insubstantiation of the human embryo (p. 155), and Tertullian's errors of thought open the problem of traducianism (p. 157), the exegeses of Diodorus of Tarsus and Theodoret of Cyrus on the texts of Genesis 2:7 and Exodus 21:22-23 are wrong because, influenced by Aristotelianism, they speak of the human embryo's insufflation only after its body is perfectly organized (p. 160). Further, in a second step, Petru Cernat presents the theological reflections on the human embryo in Methodius of Olympus, the Cappadocian Fathers, and St. Maximus Confessor. The author points out that Methodius of Olympus is the first Christian writer in whom we find an elaborated creationist theory. Then, if about the Cappadocian Fathers the author writes that they contributed to "anchoring the problem of the human embryo's soul in the perspectives of Christology" (p. 164), in St. Maxim the Confessor the way in which Jesus Christ assumed in his hypostasis the two natures, divine and human, becomes paradigmatic for how we must understand the relationship and union between soul and body in the human embryo.

Chapters four (p. 231-243) and five (p. 244-254) explores the canonical and liturgical documents of the Orthodox Church regarding the human embryo. The author concludes that while the canons issued by the Church aim to practically regulate situations that may violate the embryo's right to life, the liturgical texts and hymns emphasize and promote for the respect of the embryo's right to life from conception.

The sixth chapter focuses on the "bioethical man" (p. 265-277) and first points out the challenges encountered in a biotechnologized society. Petru Cernat speaks of a moral over-emphasis to which the bioethical man is exposed because he is confronted with situations to which he has no viable answers. Without being gloomy or pessimistic in his analysis, the author observes a change in the moral paradigm as a result of the evacuation of God from the discourse on man. Petru Cernat emphasizes that the bioethical man hopes that his problems will be solved by technical and engineering solutions, then warns that, from a theological perspective, the indiscriminate use of the scientific spirit must be amended.

The seventh chapter (p. 287-291) reviews the most important moments in the field of embryology, the author noting that "the science of fetology and the refinement of techniques of assisted medical procreation have produced a veritable revelation of the postnatal human being". This chapter provides valuable information on the developmental stages of the embryo and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the process of the transmission of life.

The eighth chapter (p. 292-334) proposes us to reflect on the identity of the embryo from a biological and theological point of view. Petru Cernat points out the discussions that are taking place today around the individuality or personhood of the embryo and emphasizes that from a theological point of view the embryo has the quality of person because it shares human nature with other persons. Regarding the debate on the elements or attributes that give the embryo the moral status of personhood, the author's response captures the idea that from a theological perspective when we speak of we are considering constituents or attributes. From a theological perspective, when we speak of the human we do not have in view "something" but "someone".

The last chapter of the book is entitled "*Towards a bioethics of Life: the contribution of contemporary Orthodox theology to the delineation of the identity of the human embryo*" (p. 335-361). The conviction expressed by Petru Cernat is that Orthodox Theology can contribute to the bioethical debates on the status of the embryo by inspiring an ecclesial reflection on bioethics, by basing human dignity on the teaching of the creation of man in the image of God and by situating the question of the status of the human embryo in the spiritual sphere.

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The book written by Petru Cernat deals with a highly polarized topic in bioethical debates, presents the main challenges to the moral status of the embryo and has the merit of answering theologically the questions related to the identity of the embryo. In Romanian Orthodox theological research, this book represents a valuable contribution to the clarification of essential aspects of the dignity and sanctity of human life from conception. The author manages to articulate a well-founded orthodox vision, bringing theological, patristic and biblical arguments to emphasize that the embryo, from its very beginnings, is the bearer of the image of God.

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