

FROM JAHR TO GLOBOKAR: TOWARD A GENUINE CONCEPT OF BIOETHICS

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■ ABSTRACT

Roman Globokar's 2025 textbook on bioethics places significant emphasis on the historical development of the discipline, highlighting in particular its original, globally-oriented interpretation. This study aims to demonstrate how Globokar attempts to define a genuine concept of bioethics by drawing on its historical evolution. The roots of bioethics go back further than traditional medical ethics: Fritz Jahr's pioneering "Bio-Ethik" concept, Albert Schweitzer's principle of the "reverence for life," and Van Rensselaer Potter's concept of global bioethics all contributed to making bioethics a bridge between the natural sciences and the humanities, encompassing the protection of human, animal, and environmental life. Furthermore, the study addresses the decisive role of theologians and church thinkers in the international institutionalization of bioethics and its domestication into the Central European scientific discourse.

Keywords: bioethics, global responsibility, medical ethics, Fritz Jahr, Albert Schweitzer, Van Rensselaer Potter

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Anyone wishing to write the history of bioethics cannot ignore the role that theology and religion played in its development. Theologians and concepts derived from theology remain present in this discipline to this day. Although the interdisciplinary nature of bioethics cannot be denied, some scholars question the relevance of theology,^[1] especially regarding whether theologians can say anything relevant in this field beyond the boundaries of their religious communities – even though there is ample evidence for the significance of religion in bioethics in today's societies.^[2]

The author, Roman Globokar – whose 2025 bioethics textbook is the subject of this study – is himself a theologian and a professor at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana. As an academic who has been engaged with bioethics for more than two decades, he addresses a broad spectrum of topics in his publications, including euthanasia and assisted suicide,^[3] palliative care,^[4] transhumanism and human enhancement,^[5] surrogacy,^[6] pandemic ethics,^[7] AI ethics,^[8] and the ecotheology.^[9] This demonstrates, on the one hand, the extraordinarily broad scope of bioethics, and on the other, the manifold areas in which a theologian can contribute to bioethical discussions.

Globokar's 2025 Slovenian textbook reflects this same versatility.^[10] The volume covers topics such as the status of the human em-

bryo, abortion, assisted reproduction, surrogacy, genetic engineering, euthanasia, environmental ethics, and animal ethics. Crucially, before addressing these specific applied topics, the textbook situates bioethics within the history and taxonomy of science, paying particular attention to its relationship with theology.

In what follows, we seek to enter into dialogue with the first three introductory chapters of this work, focusing especially on Globokar's conception of bioethics, its theological dimensions, and the specific Slovenian context – the latter being paralleled with the historical development of bioethics in Hungary.

What Do We Mean by Bioethics?

Today, bioethics is taught across a vast array of academic settings, ranging from medical schools and faculties of theology and philosophy to law and even technology departments. This institutional dispersion underlines a fundamental challenge: defining precisely what we mean by bioethics is far from being straightforward. The simplest approach is to interpret it strictly as medical ethics – a discipline that replaces traditional medical casuistry, the cultivation of professional ethos, and deontological instruction. Another possibility is to expand medical ethics to encompass environmental ethics or, in a theological context, the care of creation, thereby affording the discipline a broader scope.

There is, however, another approach that seeks to understand the organic development of the discipline and, proceeding from there, attempts to define the essence and task of bioethics. Roman Globokar follows this path in the first chapter of his book, where he examines the emergence of bioethics historically from the broadest possible perspective, referring to two theologians who are not traditionally recognized as bioethicists today. One is Fritz Jahr (1895–1953), a Protestant pastor who primarily published on educational topics; the other is Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), known for his work in church music and biblical studies – among other things, as a leading figure of the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung* – as well as for his medical missionary work in Africa.

Fritz Jahr and the Term Bio-Ethik

There is no doubt that bioethics was introduced into scientific discourse in the 1970s by the American biochemist and oncologist Van Rensselaer Potter, who made it widely – indeed, globally – accepted.^[11] For a long time, the academic community considered Potter to be the first to coin the term.

Globokar notes in his book, however, that the German term Bio-Ethik had already been used earlier by the German theologian Fritz Jahr (1895–1953).^[12] While Hans-Martin Sass appears in the reference, Rolf Löther^[13] had already pointed out in the closing years of

the twentieth century that the term figured prominently in the title of Jahr's 1927 article: *Bio-Ethik: Eine Umschau über die ethischen Beziehungen des Menschen zu Tier und Pflanze*.^[14] In this work, drawing on Kant, Jahr formulated the so-called bioethical imperative, according to which we must consider not only other human beings – more precisely, persons – as ends in themselves, but as far as possible all living beings.^[15] Globokar highlights this as well – “the fundamental rule of our actions, namely the respect for every living being, as something that has an end in itself” – as the core of Jahr's concept of bioethics.^[16]

This idea – although it may seem self-evident in our time – was considered revolutionary a hundred years ago, representing a break with the fundamental anthropocentrism of the ethics of that period. Unfortunately, historical circumstances were not favourable to Jahr's ideas, and his work fell into oblivion for more than half a century. It would have been desirable in many respects for Jahr's approach to spread throughout the scientific world. One reason is that Jahr did not argue on an emotional or purely speculative basis but referred to contemporary scientific research exploring how animals and plants can feel and react to environmental stimuli.

Among the cited researchers are Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), an early researcher of plant psychology; Raoul Heinrich Francé (in Hungarian, Francé Rezső; 1874–1943), a

representative of bionics and plant behavioural research; and Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858–1937), a pioneer of plant physiology. Although their findings may no longer hold up entirely today, taking natural science results into account was a fundamental step toward the emergence of bioethics. Jahr's other key insight was that humans are capable of empathy not only with fellow human beings, but also with animals and even plants. On this basis, he attempted to establish why human moral obligation extends to other living beings, and how respect for other living beings could be integrated into education.

Albert Schweitzer and the Reverence for Life

Globokar connects the aforementioned concept of bioethics to the thought of a Nobel laureate born twenty years before Jahr, in 1875, stating that Jahr's "definition is strongly reminiscent of the thought of the theologian, philosopher and tireless humanitarian Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) on the reverence for life".^[17] In his thought and throughout his life, Schweitzer uniquely combined medicine, ethics, and theology, transcending the anthropocentric thinking characteristic of his era and recognizing that the technological power acquired by mankind could no longer be interpreted within conventional moral frameworks.

Globokar appropriately references Schweitzer's reflections on the First World War, which

he viewed as "an outward sign of the inner collapse of Western civilisation."^[18] He cites Schweitzer's famous phrase, "I am a life that wants to live, in the midst of a life that wants to live," and emphasizes that in contrast to the isolation of Cartesian thought, it centers on "the experience of his connectedness with all living beings".^[19] Globokar excellently highlights an essential element of Schweitzer's contribution to ethics, which is not satisfied with mere intellectual insight, but takes into account the experience of the interconnectedness of all existing beings and the will arising from it:

"The starting point of ethical thinking is that my life is embedded in the interplay of life, the life of human beings and the life of other living beings. I experience in my interior the will to my own life, but I also co-experience the will to the life of other living beings around me."^[20]

Globokar refers to Schweitzer at another place in his textbook, when listing ecological bioethical models, as one of the main exponents of biocentrism.^[21] From this perspective, it might seem that Schweitzer is viewed primarily as an environmental ethicist. However, this is only partly true: in Globokar's concept of bioethics, ecological and medical bioethics cannot be separated; rather, they rest on identical principles and form a single system. Schweitzer therefore plays a significant role not only as a parallel and deeper developer of Jahr's Bio-Ethik concept, but even

more so as a thinker who was able to recognize and live out the fundamental connection between life and moral action.

Van Rensselaer Potter and Global Bioethics

Regarding the concept of bioethics, Globokar typically attempts to depict its organic genesis. This presents difficulties in several respects: partly due to the challenge of demonstrating connections and mutual influences among individual authors, and partly because bioethics is understood in many different ways. Nevertheless, Globokar succeeds in presenting a continuous unfolding, connecting the ideas of Jahr and Schweitzer not only with each other, but also with later thinkers more distant in time and context, such as Van Rensselaer Potter (1911–2001), widely regarded as the father of modern bioethics.^[22]

Globokar identifies in the term “global” used by Potter the link through which the thought of Jahr and Schweitzer can be connected to the modern bioethics that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Through this, he rightfully views them as precursors to the approach of Van Rensselaer Potter (1911–2001). Potter’s goal was to create a discipline that serves as a bridge between the natural sciences and the humanities, primarily between biology and ethics in order to ensure the long-term survival of humanity.

This idea is reflected in the title of his 1971 book: *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future*.^[23] In the preface of the book, Potter writes:

“The purpose of this book is to contribute to the future of the human species by promoting the formation of a new discipline, the discipline of Bioethics. If there are ‘two cultures’ that seem unable to speak to each other – science and the humanities – and if this is part of the reason that the future seems in doubt, then possibly, we might build a ‘bridge to the future’ by building the discipline of Bioethics as a bridge between the two cultures.”^[24]

Potter interprets bioethics extremely broadly, in a “global” manner, building a bridge between human health and the natural world, between healthcare and environmental protection. For this reason, topics such as sustainability or population issues can also fall within the scope of bioethics.

Despite the parallels, Globokar clearly sees the difference between the approaches of Jahr and Schweitzer on the one hand, and Potter on the other. Potter emphasizes global responsibility because he lived in a truly globalized world, where responsibility for the planet extends beyond individuals, communities, national borders, and continents: “Thanks to the new power that man has acquired through scientific and technological progress, he also has a responsibility – for the first time in history – for the survival of the entire planet.”^[25]

Although Globokar does not explicitly mention it, Potter, as a physician, was heavily influenced by the work of the forester and ecologist Aldo Leopold, which led to ecological and medical-ethical issues becoming closely intertwined in his understanding of bioethics (Potter 1988). Through this, the concepts of Jahr and Schweitzer took on a form that could be integrated into the framework of the academic world. This is not only because Potter emphasizes the accountability of science, but because representatives of various disciplines – physicians, agricultural specialists, natural scientists, and humanities scholars – could all find their place within this new form of discourse.

When Theology Enters Bioethics

At first glance, it seems that the above concepts of bioethics have little to do with what is traditionally called medical ethics. Since the latter was traditionally part of university structures, it was natural that bioethics primarily found its place within the framework of medical ethics. Globokar continues his narrative of the historical development of bioethics here, directing attention to institutions whose establishment was partly motivated by the exposure and ethical analysis of abuses in human medical experimentation.^[26] He focuses on two morally fraught experiments: the Willowbrook Hepatitis Study and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Following these, he presents the emergence of bioethical institutions that

retain immense significance today: The Hastings Center, founded in New York in 1969, and the Kennedy Institute of Ethics, established at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. in 1971. Although historical events such as the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial and the creation of the Nuremberg Code – which prompted a rethinking of ethical norms regarding medical experiments – underlie these developments, Globokar rightly points out that ethical problems arising from new medical technologies, such as organ transplantation, dialysis, and IVF, were also driving forces behind the establishment of The Hastings Center and the Kennedy Institute of Ethics.^[27] He emphasizes that this brought a shift in perspective, placing “the rights and duties of patients and doctors; the rights and obligations of subjects and researchers; and the developing guidelines for ethical review of medicine and human research” at the center of bioethical inquiry.^[28]

Although Globokar is himself a theologian and makes reference in the textbook to theological texts – primarily Christian and especially Catholic magisterial documents – the significant role that theologians played in the development of the new, largely principle-oriented bioethics is not elaborated extensively. For example, Globokar only mentions Albert R. Jonsen (1931–2020) as a representative of “the new casuistry”, but does not write about his role in the development of bioethics anything further. Jonsen, who was a Catholic priest and a Jesuit

theologian, became a representative of this new discipline at a time when no one in hospitals or universities yet knew what bioethics actually was.^[29] Among Jonsen's mentors was James M. Gustafson, who regularly addressed moral questions raised by the "new biology," particularly genetics and neuroscience. Alongside them, it is worth mentioning the Methodist Paul Ramsey, who grounded his bioethical thought in the biblical concept of covenant;^[30] the Anglican Joseph Fletcher, who based his approach on love-centered utilitarianism; and the Catholic Richard McCormick – one of the key contributors to the Kennedy Institute – who utilized natural law reasoning as a common language applicable in both religious and secular contexts, deeply rooted in Catholic theology.^[31]

The Belmont Report is also mentioned in Globokar's textbook in connection with the development of the four principles of bioethics. Although not explicitly stated, the role of Catholic theological tradition and Catholic thinkers can be traced in two seminal documents in the history of bioethics: the Belmont Report^[32] and the manual *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*,^[33] published by Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress. In both documents, there is a clear effort to rediscover relevant elements of tradition in order to create new frameworks for medical ethics.

Published in 1979, The Belmont Report is one of the foundational documents of modern bio-

ethics, establishing basic ethical principles for research involving human subjects in medicine and psychology. The report was prepared by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, established in 1974, which, alongside Jonsen, included or consulted several Protestant theologians, such as Karen Lebacqz, James M. Gustafson, and LeRoy Walters, director of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics.^[34]

During the drafting of the Belmont Report, Tom Beauchamp served as one of the staff philosophers working with the commission. While drafting the Belmont Report, Beauchamp worked concurrently on his own academic volume with his colleague James Childress. *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* was likewise published in 1979 and quickly became the standard textbook for bioethics education. It is important to mention that both Tom Beauchamp and James Childress held degrees in religious studies, with the latter earning his doctorate in religious ethics. Their manual popularized the logic of the Belmont Report worldwide by transforming it into a highly usable framework that medical students and ethics committees across the globe could readily adopt.^[35]

Bioethics in National Languages

An interesting feature that also appears in Globokar's textbook is that in Central Europe, it was typically theologians or church-affiliated

ed laypeople who pioneered the groundwork for bioethics and consolidated the new discipline within universities. Globokar's textbook mentions Jože Trontelj (1939–2013), who played a significant role as a member of national and international bioethics committees, including participation in drafting the Oviedo Convention. In Hungary before 1989, religious scholars forced into exile abroad, such as Andrew C. Varga SJ (1917–1994) and Béla Somfai SJ (1932–2015), transmitted bioethical literature from Western countries, as did Gyula Gaizler (1922–1996), a physician who was the first layperson to graduate from the Theological Academy in Budapest.^[36] Varga authored the first bioethics textbook published in Hungarian, while Gaizler's textbook is still used in medical and healthcare education today. It can be stated that theologians in Central Europe played a major role even in the time of socialism in transmitting bioethical issues and concepts, and in domesticating bioethics as an academic discipline.

Back to the Origins

Globokar outlines a compelling trajectory in presenting the historical development of bioethics. In the work of Schweitzer, Jahr, and Potter, bioethics emerged as a global endeavor – one that not only encompasses the whole world but also elaborates humanity's relationship toward all dimensions of life, living beings, and life itself. In contrast, the new bioethics that emerged primarily in the Unit-

ed States after World War II was a more broadly conceived, interdisciplinary science integrating the sobering experiences of the Third Reich and reflecting the rapid advancement of medical science. Interestingly, theologians were actively involved in both stages of development. This dual presence is due partly to the similarly global character of theology, and partly to its focus on social processes and sub-systems, including healthcare. For this reason, Globokar's textbook can cite encyclicals such as Pope John Paul II's *Evangelium vitae* (1995), Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate* (2009), and Pope Francis's *Laudato si'* (2015), as well as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's instructions *Donum vitae* (1987) and *Dignitas personae* (2008). This demonstrates that ecclesiastical documents simultaneously address both of the aforementioned domains and apply both horizons in formulating teaching.

At the same time, Globokar points out that “in the early 1990s, the understanding of bioethics begins to return to the original meaning of the word, as if an adolescent were returning home to his father after years of searching as a child and teenager”.^[37] In doing so, he rejects the interpretation of bioethics as merely “an updated medical ethic” and outlines a much broader horizon: according to this view, bioethics is “a call to modern man in a scientific-technical civilisation to adopt a new attitude towards life in general: towards his own life, the life of his fellow human beings and

the life of the biosphere as a whole”.^[38] This renders bioethics truly global in both its perspective and its sphere of responsibility.

Here, the textbook refers primarily to Hans Jonas as an indispensable representative of this approach, who, alongside his critique of technological progress, made decisive contributions to formulating the nature of responsibility.^[39]

The final definition articulated in Globokar’s textbook reflects this comprehensive, global approach: Bioethics is “a science that studies the ethical aspect of human intervention in life in all its forms: human life, animal life and the life of the natural as a whole; it characterised by an interdisciplinary approach and can be understood as a human responsibility towards all that lives”.^[40]

The Concept of Bioethics and Textbook Writing

A key aspect of different bioethics textbooks is the specific concept of bioethics from which authors proceed. Textbooks written for agricultural, law, or medical faculties are clearly more limited and focused in their particular perspective and scope. Globokar’s textbook, thanks to its global definition of bioethics, can be utilized across virtually any university faculty, as it is comprehensive in both subject matter and perspective. It does not merely examine the sub-themes of specialized sciences through the critical methods of ethics, but, in accordance with the nature of ethics, explores both traditional and emerging fields of bioethics by working with the broadest possible concept of human responsibility and life. Consequently, this textbook can be consulted not only by physicians, biologists, theologians, jurists, and environmental specialists, but by anyone, since, true to its understanding of bioethics, it embodies “a call to modern man in a scientific-technical civilisation to adopt a new attitude towards life in general”.^[41]

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