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ATTITUDES OF MEDICAL STUDENTS TOWARDS ARTIFICIAL TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY AND EUTHANASIA IN THE CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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Abstract

Medical students' attitudes towards issues associated with the beginning and end of human life are analyzed using interdisciplinary approaches and empirical material (statistics, sociological surveys). The purpose of this article is to determine the peculiarities of Christian

morality's influence on the attitudes of contemporary Ukrainian medical students towards the issues of artificial termination of pregnancy and euthanasia. Based on a comparative analysis of the evaluative judgments of three groups of respondents (group 1 — those who consider themselves Christians; group 2 — respondents who are undecided about religious belief; group 3 — those who consider themselves non-believers), a complex relationship between religious identification of respondents and their attitude towards abortion and euthanasia was revealed. The attitudes of medical students who have identified themselves as Christians differ from the more liberal approaches of respondents in the second and third groups and, at the same time, the evaluative judgments of a large part of this group of respondents significantly diverge from Christian approaches towards artificial termination of pregnancy and euthanasia. It is substantiated that the attitudes of medical students towards these issues depend on the influence of religion on their worldview, family upbringing, and duration of study in a medical school. The relationship between the peculiarities of religiousness in contemporary Ukrainian society and a nature of religious identification of medical students is analyzed. Two groups of believers are distinguished: people who are characterized by internal religiousness and believers who are dominated by "external" religiousness, i. e., a significant dependence of the motivation of religious activity on the values and norms of secular culture.

Keywords: abortion, bioethics, religiousness, medical students, euthanasia, Christian ethics.

Introduction

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the issues of moral and ethical regulators of both a professional activity of medical workers and a behavior of all community members become especially acute. Now, everyone's life position is related not only to their own safety, but also to a safety of other people's lives and health. Judit Sandor rightly points out: "We must not toss basic bioethical principles aside in the COVID-19 panic. Only by upholding the doctor-patient relationship and our obligations toward society as a whole can we ensure that health professionals' heroic efforts do not go to waste, and that participants' moral integrity is maintained. After all, once the pandemic ends, we will still have to look each another in the eye, and not just at the screen."¹

The trend of globalization of bioethics as a socio-cultural phenomenon is quite distinct in the contemporary world. After bioethics' emergence in the United States, bioethical approaches and institutions in the 70's of the twentieth century developed intensively in Western Europe, and later in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and others. In different regions and countries, the specificity of this process is caused by cultural, historical, religious, mental, socio-economic and other features.

One of the essential features of Ukraine is a fairly high level of religiousness of the

¹ Judit Sandor. "Bioethics for the Pandemic." <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/bioethics-principles-for-covid19-response-by-judit-sandor-2020-05>. Accessed 01.30.2021.

population, the rootedness of the Christian religious tradition in the history and culture of the Ukrainian people despite 70 years of experience of forced quasi-atheism. According to a survey conducted by the Razumkov Centre among the Ukrainian citizens as of the end of 2019, the number of people that identify themselves as believers is 66%. Among them, 64.9% identify themselves with Orthodoxy, 1.6% —with Roman Catholicism, 9.5% — with Greek Catholicism, 1.8% — with Protestantism and 8% identify themselves as “just a Christian.”² This study takes into account all age groups of Ukrainians. However, perhaps the most pressing issue is the attitude to the Christian values of youth and especially students. The future of the Christian religion in the country depends on the support of the young generation of evangelical values. In the case of student youth, we are talking about the future elite of the country. Hence, about the social stratum that will determine the ethical standards and strategies of the Ukrainian society in the next few decades. Particular attention in this context is paid to future physicians—people who combine profession and mission in their activities; daily work and social service.

The purpose of this article is to determine the peculiarities of Christian morality’s influence on the attitudes of contemporary Ukrainian medical students towards the issues of artificial termination of pregnancy and euthanasia. Therefore, the task is the following: to reveal the essence of approaches in contemporary Christianity regarding these issues; to analyze the results of sociological research taking into account various influences on the worldview of students, the peculiarities of religiousness of the contemporary Ukrainian society.

Bioethical Aspects of Human Life in the Context of Christianity

Bioethics as an integrative direction of modern knowledge goes beyond the usual interdisciplinarity, because it deals with the integration of scientific (rational) and value-normative approaches that are not only part of philosophy and ethics, but also part of other forms of spiritual culture, especially religion.

As is known, the position of Christian ethics on bioethical issues related to the beginning and end of human life is different from the approaches of secular bioethics. The Christian spiritual tradition substantiates the *uniqueness of human dignity* as the only being in

² *Держава і церква в Україні – 2019: Підсумки року і перспективи розвитку відносин (інформаційні матеріали)*. (Київ: Razumkov centre, 2019). [*State and the Church in Ukraine – 2019: Results of the year and prospects for the development of relations (information materials)*]. https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2019_Religiya.pdf. p. 14. Accessed 01.30.2021.

the world created by God in His own image and after His likeness (Genesis 1:26) and its absolute value from human conception to natural death. The principle of human dignity in Christian moral theology is more fundamental and universal than the principle of individual autonomy, because freedom is only one manifestation of the specific nature of man as God's gift. According to the Catholic theologian and bioethicist Ignacio Carrasco de Paula, the deepest basis of human dignity is not that it is individual (unique and inimitable) and not that it is free, but above all that it is transcendent: as the scholastics insisted, *capax Dei* (capable for God).³ The idea of the fundamentality of human dignity is inherent in all Christian denominations.

The *principle of human integrity* is organically related with the principle of human dignity. It has a special significance in the Christian spiritual tradition. Christian anthropology is characterized by an approach to man in its integrity as a spiritual soul-corporeal creature. The human body is not separated from its "I." Pope John Paul II spoke of a "spiritual body" and a "embodied spirit."⁴ Prominent Orthodox archpastors of the 20th century, the physician and archbishop Luka (Voyno-Yasenetsky) and Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh also developed this approach. Professor of Medicine Voyno-Yasenetsky substantiating the inseparable relationship between the spirit, soul and human body noted that "...spirit forms a body in the embryonic state. All cells of the body inherent of spiritual energy and life from the Spirit."⁵

The Christian Eucharistic ethos is characterized by an *attitude to life as a priceless gift of God*. The contemporary Orthodox theologian Metropolitan John Zizioulas emphasizes the primary understanding and implementation of the Eucharist as an expression of gratitude *for the gift of being*.⁶ Since life is a fundamental good for man, the morally justified attitude to it is the following: *directly—it should be the attitude of accepting life as a gift that must be cherished, nurtured and loved; indirectly—it is necessary to accept death when it becomes inevitable*.⁷

³ Игнасио Карраско де Паула. "Биоэтика. Этика человеческой жизни и ценность личности." [Bioethics. Ethics of Human Life and the Value of the Personality]. *Нравственное действие христианина*. Под общим руководством Л. Мелина. (Москва: "Христианская Россия," 2007), p.148.

⁴ Giovanni Paolo II. *Lettera Enciclica Evangelium Vitae [Text]*. (Citta del Vaticano (25 marzo). [S.p.: s.n., 1995), p. 19. [Encyclical Letter Evangelium Vitae].

⁵ Святитель Лука (Войно-Ясенецкий). *Дух, душа и тело*. [Spirit, Soul and Body]. (Київ: ВД "Авіцена," 2010), pp. 199-200.

⁶ Иоанн Зизиулас. *Общение и инаковость. Новые очерки о личности и церкви*. [Communion & Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church]. (Москва: Издательство ББИ, 2012), p. 114.

⁷ Игнасио Карраско де Паула. "Биоэтика. Этика человеческой жизни и ценность личности." [Bioethics. Ethics of Human Life and the Value of the Personality]. *Нравственное действие христианина*. Под общим руководством Л. Мелина. (Москва: "Христианская Россия," 2007), p. 159.

Thus, today the common Christian position is the recognition of the sacredness, inviolability of human life, the inalienable dignity and worth of man from conception to the natural end of his/her life. This position is comprehensively covered in the documents of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches,⁸ the works of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant theologians. Therefore, it is logical to assume that the increase in the level of religiosity of the population, in particular the number of people who identify themselves as Christians, should be accompanied by a tendency to reduce the number of induced abortions. However, in Ukraine against the background of the positive dynamics of religiousness in general, an increase in the number of artificial terminations of pregnancy is observed. For example, in 2018, in Ukraine 46552 abortions were performed, of which 400 to minors and in 2019—74606, of which 727 to minors.⁹

Medical Students' Attitudes towards Abortion and Euthanasia. Case of Bogomolets National Medical University

Significant divergence between Christian moral guidelines and attitudes to artificial termination of pregnancy and euthanasia among medical students-believers (Christians) were revealed as a result of a study conducted by a sociological group of the Bogomolets National Medical University (hereinafter—NMU) in 2020. During the research, questionnaires were used as a method of collecting information, and a random type of a sample. The object of the study were first-year students of NMU (N=285).

Among the surveyed, 48.0% of respondents considered themselves believers, 35.2% did not consider themselves believers and 16.7% hesitated to answer the question “Do you consider yourself a believer?” The vast majority of respondents-believers identified themselves as Christians (95.4%), 3.1% as Muslims and 1.5% as representatives of other religions. Therefore, in a process of conducting the study, three groups of respondents were distinguished: the first group—respondents who identified themselves as Christians; the

⁸ *Donum Vitae*, 1987; *Instruction on respect for human life in its origin and on the dignity of procreation, Evangelium Vitae: Johannes Paulus II, Citta del Vaticano: Libreria editrice Vaticana*, 1995; *Компедіум соціальної доктрини Церкви* [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church], 2004; “Encyclical Letter ‘Laudato si’”, 2015, *Основы социальной концепции Русской Православной Церкви* [Basics of the Social Concept of Russian Orthodox Church], 2000; *Основы учения Русской Православной Церкви о достоинстве, свободе и правах человека* [Basics of Doctrine of Russian Orthodox Church on Dignity, Freedom and Human Rights], 2008; *За життя світу. На шляху до соціального етосу Православної Церкви*. [For the life of the world . On the way to social ethos of the Orthodox Church], 2020.

⁹ Торік українки зробили понад 74 тис. абортів, - офіційні дані МОЗ. [Last year, Ukrainian women performed more than 74,000 abortions, according to official data from the Ministry of Health]. <http://catholicnews.org.ua/toric-ukrayinki-zrobili-ponad-74-tis-abortiv-officiyni-dani-moz>. Accessed 01.30.2021.

second group—respondents who were undecided about religion; the third group—those who do not consider themselves believers.

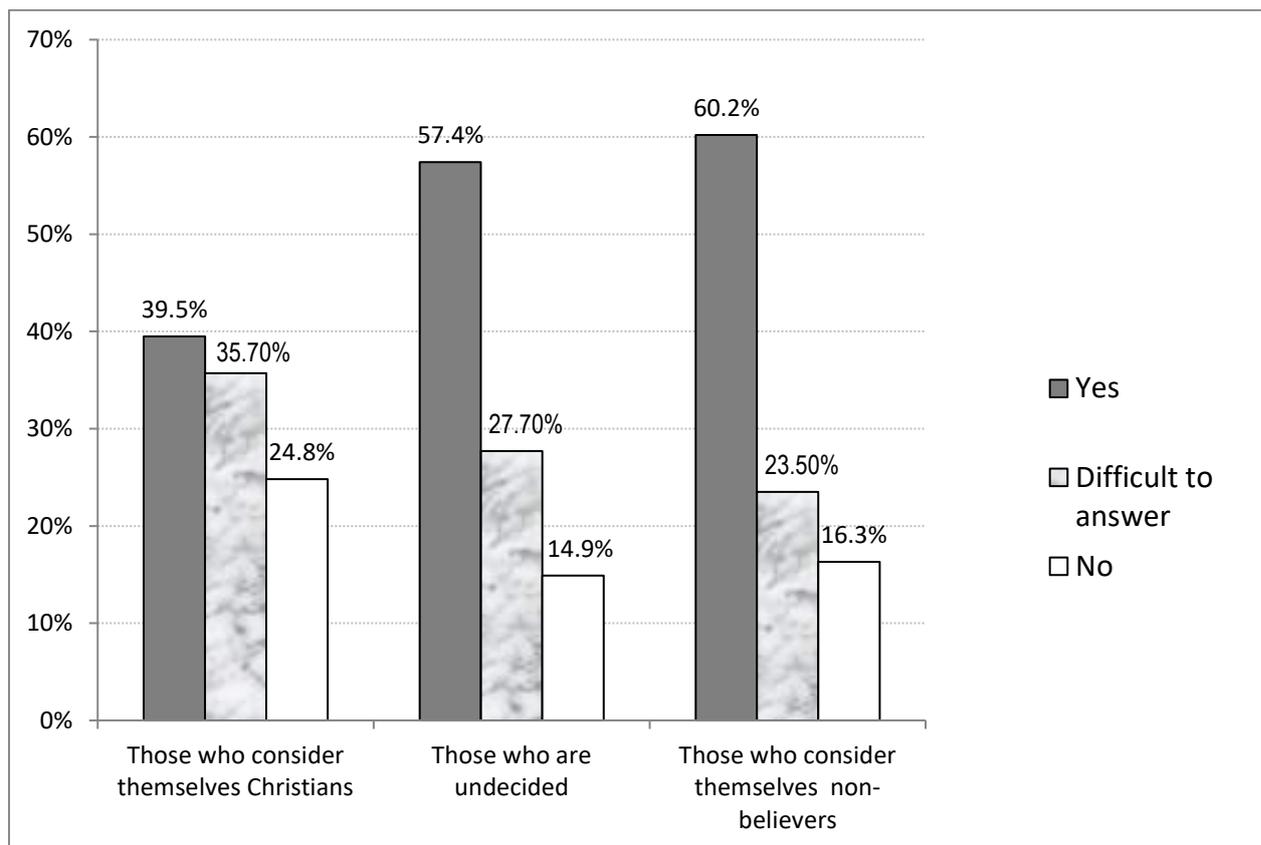
A statistically significant connection was found between identifying oneself as a Christian and attitude on abortion ($p < 0.005$). Among the medical students who have identified themselves as Christians, a moderate attitude prevails (“Abortion is acceptable at the request of a woman only up to 12 weeks” and “Abortion is acceptable only in cases related to medical or exceptional social indicators”) rather than conservative one (“Abortion is acceptable only if a woman’s life is threatened” and “Induced abortion is unacceptable under any circumstances”). Instead, among those who do not consider themselves a believer, the most common is liberal attitude towards acceptability of abortion: 77.5% believe that every woman can decide for herself whether to keep or to abort pregnancy, because she has the right to control her body (see Table 1).

Table 1. The attitudes of medical students towards the acceptability of induced abortion

Attitudes towards abortion	Percentage of those who identify themselves as Christians	Percentage of those who are undecided	Percentage of those who do not identify themselves as believers
1. Every woman can decide for herself whether to keep or terminate a pregnancy	43.2%	71.1%	77.5%
2. Abortion is acceptable at the request of a woman only up to 12 weeks	11.0%	13.3%	12.5%
3. Abortion is acceptable only in cases related to medical or exceptional social indicators	37.3%	12.2%	10.0%
4. Abortion is acceptable only if a woman’s life is threatened	5.1%	3.3%	0.0%
5. Induced abortion is unacceptable under any circumstances	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%

At the same time, medical students who identified themselves as Christians expressed a liberal attitude towards active euthanasia: 39.5% of them believe that active euthanasia should be legalized in Ukraine, and 24.8% believe that the legalization of active euthanasia is unnecessary. For those respondents who do not consider themselves believers, there is an even more liberal attitude towards this issue: 60.2% of them are in favor of legalization, while 16.3% are against it.

Figure 1. Do you think that active euthanasia should be legalized in Ukraine?



The Main Factors Influencing the Nature of the Religiousness of Medical Students

Contrary to the widespread stereotype of the conservatism of Christianity and Christians, the results of the survey show a predominance of moderate approaches on the problem of abortion and a rather liberal attitude on euthanasia among the first-year medical students who have identified themselves as Christians. The evaluative judgments of this group of respondents differ both from the more liberal approaches of the respondents of the second and third groups, as well as from the positions of Christian ethics regarding these issues. In the study, we assumed that the nature of religiousness depends not only on internal

(personal virtues, features of worldly, religious experience, etc.), but also on external socio-cultural factors, in particular, the intensity of influences of religious or secular culture on human consciousness (see Tables 2, 3).

Table 2. The influence of religion on the worldview of medical students and their attitudes towards abortion

Do you consider yourself a believer? ↓	Influence of religion on the worldview ↓	Attitude towards abortion				
		Every woman can decide for herself whether to keep or terminate a pregnancy	Abortion is acceptable at the request of a woman only up to 12 weeks	Abortion is acceptable only in cases related to medical or exceptional social indicators	Abortion is acceptable only if a woman's life is threatened	Induced abortion is unacceptable under any circumstances
Yes	No influence	76.92%	7.69%	15.38%	0.00%	0.00%
	Little influence	66.67%	3.70%	29.63%	0.00%	0.00%
	Medium influence	35.00%	15.00%	41.67%	6.67%	1.67%
	Strong influence	15.38%	15.38%	30.77%	15.38%	23.08%
	Decisive influence	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Difficult to answer	No influence	84.62%	15.38%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Little influence	72.22%	11.11%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%
	Medium influence	77.78%	11.11%	11.11%	0.00%	0.00%

	Strong influence	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Decisive influence	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
No	No influence	85.00%	7.50%	5.00%	2.50%	0.00%
	Little influence	59.52%	16.67%	19.05%	4.76%	0.00%
	Medium influence	50.00%	33.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0
	Strong influence	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Decisive influence	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Table 3. The influence of religion on the worldview of medical students and their attitudes towards euthanasia

Do you consider yourself a believer? ↓	Influence of religion on the worldview ↓	Do you think that euthanasia should be legalized in Ukraine?		
		Yes	Difficult to answer	No
Yes	No influence	38.46%	53.85%	7.69%
	Little influence	48.39%	25.81%	25.81%
	Medium influence	53.33%	6.67%	40.00%
	Strong influence	53.33%	6.67%	40.00%
	Decisive influence	0.00%	33.33%	66.67%
Difficult to answer	No influence	50.00%	35.71%	14.29%
	Little influence	62.50%	29.17%	8.33%
	Medium influence	55.56%	11.11%	33.33%
	Strong influence	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Decisive	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

	influence			
No	No influence	57.14%	23.81%	19.05%
	Little influence	62.22%	24.44%	13.33%
	Medium influence	55.56%	22.22%	22.22%
	Strong influence	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Decisive influence	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Thus, the results of the study indicate a dependency between religious identification of respondents and their attitudes towards induced abortion and euthanasia. However, Olena Lutsiv rightly points out: "...it is worth distinguishing between the concepts of "considering oneself religious" and "being religious," because these are not the same things. Even if individuals identify themselves as religious, their perceptions about religiousness and practices can differ significantly within the same society."¹⁰

Significant differences in positions within the group of respondents who identified themselves as Christians are confirmed by the results of our study. In attitudes towards artificial termination of pregnancy, 45.8% of the respondents chose answers acceptable to Christian ethics (see Table 1, paragraphs 3, 4, 5), towards legalization of active euthanasia, only 24.8% of the respondents expressed a pro-Christian position (see Figure 1). The diffuse nature of religiousness, an eclectic combination of narratives of religious and secular morality in the consciousness of medical students are associated not only with the specifics of religious socialization in teenage and youth, but also the peculiarities of the religiousness of the contemporary Ukrainian society.

In the 1990s in Ukraine, as well as in most post-Soviet countries, according to Viktor Yelenskyi, there was a meeting of religions with a few generations that did not know basic religious upbringing and education, but with the traumas and ulcers of post-totalitarianism.¹¹ This significantly influenced the socialization of those generations of Ukrainians who were born in independent Ukraine, considering the importance of family, i.e. traditional social

¹⁰ О.Ю. Луців. "Особливості індивідуальної релігійності в контексті конфесійної-приналежності в сучасному українському суспільстві." [Features of individual religiousness in the context of confessional affiliation in contemporary Ukrainian society]. (Український соціум. 2015. №2 (53)), p. 10.

¹¹ *Антропология религии: порівняльні студії від Прикарпаття до Кавказу.* [Anthropology of Religion: Comparative Studies from the Carpathians to the Caucasus]. (Київ: Дух і Літера, 2019), pp. 7-8.

institutions and social ties in forming spirituality and religious culture.

The data on the education of children's religiousness in a family in the contemporary Ukrainian society remain indicative. Only 12% of the respondents currently consider this virtue to be the most important. The number of those raised at home in a religious way is 36%.¹² The above-mentioned makes it possible to interpret the results of our study that only at first glance have a paradoxical significance. Among the respondents who identified themselves as believers 10.1% denied any influence of religion on their worldview, 24.0% of them identified the influence of religion on their worldview as little (see Table 2).

One of the features of Ukraine, as well as some other post-Soviet countries, was a sharp, abrupt increase in the number of believers, especially in the first two decades after the collapse of the USSR and gaining independence (1991). This process was due to changes in a social model of Ukrainian society's development, its socio-political and ideological priorities, growth of the volume and diversity of religious stimulation, and so on. The combination of these factors stimulated the mechanism of "pendulum consciousness"—a movement from declared mass atheism to mass religiousness of the post-socialist society.¹³ The latter often took on a demonstrative, indicative character, "acquired social encouragement and became a sign of decency."¹⁴

Quantitative indicators, in particular the growth (decrease) of the number of believers characterize, first, the dynamics of religiousness, but are quite conditional indicators of an actual state of religiousness in society. The identification of a person with religion, faith, church and confessional affiliation may be due to mainly social status, rather than spiritual, personal needs. According to the criteria of motivation of religious self-determination, two groups of believers can be distinguished. People for whom faith is an inner conviction, the result of a complex, often dramatic path of ascension to God refer to the first group. The representatives of the second group are dominated not by internal but by "external" religiousness, i.e. the dependence of the motivation of religious activity on the values and norms of secular culture (well-being, success, career, self-affirmation in society, etc.). Usually, their religious identification is unstable; it can change depending on the change of

¹² *Держава і церква в Україні – 2019: Підсумки року і перспективи розвитку відносин (інформаційні матеріали)*. [State and the Church in Ukraine – 2019: Results of the year and prospects for the development of relations (information materials)]. (Київ: Razumkov centre, 2019). https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2019_Religiya.pdf, pp. 12, 14.

¹³ І.В. Васильєва. "Релігія та освіта в контексті духовного становлення сучасної людини." [Religion and education in the context of the spiritual development of contemporary man]. *Практична філософія. Науковий журнал*. 2014. № 1 (51), p. 158.

¹⁴ *Антропологія релігії: порівняльні студії від Прикарпаття до Кавказу*. [Anthropology of Religion: Comparative Studies from the Carpathians to the Caucasus]. (Київ: Дух і Літера, 2019), p. 7.

priorities in society, state support of certain denominations or churches, as well as a “trend” for a particular religion. To some extent, this classification can be traced in the religious self-identification of medical students, which confirms the division of positions within the group of the respondents who identified themselves as Christians.

Higher medical education has a significant influence on the formation of the medical students’ worldview, their conscious determination of the attitude towards controversial issues of bioethics. According to the research of medical students conducted by contemporary American scientists Sage Arbor, Namita Biala, Scott Breeden, one year of study in a medical school was statistically more significant ($p=0.022$) than religious affiliation from birth, current religious affiliation, gender and age ($p=0.41, 0.30, 0.60, 0.12$). As medical students moved to senior courses (became advanced students), their knowledge of biomedical issues related to the world religions improved ($p=0.22$).¹⁵

The sociological group of NMU in their previous studies identified the influence of education’s duration on the medical students’ attitudes towards the actual issues of biomedical ethics. In November-December 2013, a survey of students of NMU of 1-6 years of studying ($N=8259$) was conducted. The survey allowed us to conclude about a significant influence of attitudes towards religion on manifestations of students’ self-preserving behavior. For example, respondents-believers showed a higher level of focus on a healthy lifestyle and negative attitudes towards alcohol and smoking, etc. 71.2% of believers have a negative attitude towards alcohol, while non-believers—60.2%; 70.6% of believers have a negative attitude towards smoking, while non-believers—54.5%.

Contrary to the stereotypes, that religiousness is associated with a low educational and cultural level of population, the results of the study show that the level of respondents’ religiousness does not decrease with increasing the educational level of students. According to the results of the study, the fifth-year students noted the highest level of religiousness (Table 4).

Table 4. The attitudes of medical students towards religion

Attitude towards religion (percentage)	Year of study					
	1	2	3	4	5	6

¹⁵ Sage Arbor, Namita Biala, Scott Breeden. *Bioethics knowledge gaps in medical students found via a social feedback online grid quiz*. <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/8vh56>. Accessed 01.30.2021.

of those who responded)						
Believer	67.5%	64.7%	67.0%	66.5%	74.0%	68.3%
Non-believer	12.2%	35.3%	33.0%	33.5%	26.0%	31.7%
Undecided	13.9%	15.0%	13.2%	15.9%	10.0%	14.2%

Probably, in addition to the growth of the educational level and the level of professional training, this process is due to other factors, as the senior students of the university are actively involved in their practical medical activities. It is possible that personal experience of meeting with human grief, and perhaps an observation of cases of an unpredictable disease or unexpected recovery of terminally ill (in medicine it is called healing) contribute to a high level of religiousness of the senior students.

Conclusions

The study of the influence of Christian religion on the attitudes of medical students towards the issues of induced abortions and euthanasia revealed a relationship between religious identification and evaluative judgments of respondents. The results of the survey conducted by the authors in 2013 show a positive impact of religiousness on the formation of NMU students' attitudes towards a healthy lifestyle and negative attitudes towards alcohol, smoking, etc. At the same time, the results of the 2020 survey provide grounds for the conclusion about the internal differentiation of the group of respondents who identified themselves as Christians as evidenced by the inconsistency of medical students' evaluation judgments on abortion and euthanasia to Christian morality.

To a large extent, the medical students' attitude towards the studied issues is determined by the level of influence of religion on their worldview that is due to the peculiarities of their microenvironment, family upbringing, life experience, level of education, and macrosocial influences, in particular the specific features of contemporary society's religiousness. Considering consistency of the principles of Christian morality and medical ethics, it is important to ensure their further synergy in higher medical school. This will be facilitated by the strengthening of integrative ties between clinical, fundamental and socio-humanitarian disciplines, by studying not only mandatory subject "Basics of Bioethics and Biosafety," but also more in-depth mastering moral and axiological principles of the

Christian religion by studying elective discipline “Basics of Christian Ethics” (3rd, 4th, 5th years).

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