

BOOK REVIEWS

Fertility and Faith: The Ethics of Human Fertilization

Brendan McCarthy

Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997

As McCarthy states in his first chapter, 'The whole area of human fertilization and embryology has become a moral and legal minefield'. 'Fertility and Faith' is an attempt to grapple with the complex moral context of recent British legislation and debate on the subject. This does make the book of greater interest to a British readership, but the issues discussed have a general and increasing relevance, and the structure of the book makes it possible to avoid the sometimes lengthy discussions of the British debate while still profiting from the overall argument being put forward by the author. McCarthy himself is a pastor, who has had personally to face the question of the compatibility of modern infertility treatments with the Christian faith.

He begins with a discussion of the purpose and findings of the Warnock Committee, which was set up in 1982 by the British government under the chairmanship of the philosopher, Mary Warnock. Its remit was 'to consider recent and potential developments in medicine and science related to embryology', and to make appropriate policy recommendations on the subject to the British parliament.

A strength of the book is its concern to lay a sound ethical foundation before addressing the specific issues, which include artificial insemination, egg and embryo donation, in vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood, embryo research and storage, and abortion. McCarthy notes that a weakness of many Christian contributions to the debate surrounding the Warnock Committee, was the tendency to express an opinion on such questions without dealing with the fundamental moral issues involved. Indeed a major criticism of the Warnock Committee itself was that it did not adequately explain the moral reasoning which lay behind its recommendations. McCarthy's own discussion begins therefore with a brief consideration of Christian ethics, and of the relationship between morality and legislation. In the course of his discussion he rejects the idea that every moral issue should be the object of legislation, arguing rather that this should be the case 'only if it can be shown that individuals are at risk, that the fundamental order of society is threatened, or that the rest of the natural order is seriously endangered' (p.58).

The fundamental question for many of the issues discussed in the book is the status of the human embryo. According to McCarthy, the view adopted by the Warnock Committee was that it was akin to an animal. Consequently, they argued that legislation should protect it from pain and suffering and ensure that its nature was not compromised, for example by cross-fertilization, but took the view that it should not be given the same rights as a member of society. Recognising the absolute importance of this issue, McCarthy devotes two chapters to it.

In the first of these, while noting that the Bible itself does not directly address the issue, he finds a number of texts which indicate that some of the biblical authors saw the embryo as a personal entity, and argues that the Scriptures as a whole support a high view of the status of both embryo and foetus. In the next chapter he discusses the theological issues. First he considers the evidence of church tradition. Some theologians at certain periods did make a distinction between the 'formed' and the 'unformed' foetus, regarding the abortion of the 'unformed' as less serious although still wrong. Such a distinction was not made however in the primitive church when all abortions were equally regarded as murder, and modern Catholicism has also taken this position, accompanied until recently by most Protestant churches too. McCarthy then considers, and rejects, the view that it is possession of a soul that establishes the full humanity of a foetus or embryo, arguing both that the notion of the soul is imprecise, and that, even if one accepted a dualist understanding of the soul (which he does not), one could not know at what point an individual could be said to be possessed of one. He also rejects the prevalent contemporary view that personhood is tied to certain functions, so that the question of the personhood of the embryo is determined by possession of those functions. Rather he argues that the foetus and embryo should have the same status as the adult, because they are the earliest form of the adult. An embryo is already 'one of us', although at a different stage of development. It has value therefore, just as an adult has value, and already bears the image of God. McCarthy defines this 'image' in terms of 'an endowment by God of a relationship with him and with others' (p.136), which in his view, drawing from Barth, belongs to all mankind as all are elect in Christ.

Moving on to the discussion of infertility treatment, McCarthy makes a fundamental point, certainly in the context of the debate in the West, when he categorically rejects the view that fertility is a human right, a view which would entail the absurd conclusion that God is obligated to provide it. It is simply a gift of God, as is all that is good in life. Nevertheless, he argues that where fertility is diminished or absent it is not inappropriate to seek alleviation of that condition, but always within Christian ethical limits, and McCarthy examines how

certain churches have interpreted those limits. He himself stresses that any infertility treatment must not put at risk the family unit.

In the later chapters of the book McCarthy considers individual issues. Thus, for example, he sees no moral problem with artificial insemination by a husband, but rejects artificial insemination of a woman from a donor not her husband (D.I.), on the ground that it constitutes an unacceptable intrusion into a couple's marriage. McCarthy concludes that a marriage is better served by accepting infertility 'than in looking beyond the marriage for a fulfilment of one aspect of a couple's experience of sex' (p.183). Paradoxically, however, he does not think that D.I. should be illegal, as it cannot be proved that it undermines marriage, but he does emphatically argue that it should be illegal for single women or those in homosexual relationships, on the grounds that in such cases it would undermine the status of the family and denigrate the father's role. A parallel problem is that of egg donation to infertile women, and of embryo donation where both partners are infertile, and McCarthy rejects both. Moreover, he argues that embryo donation should actually be made illegal as it allows the creation of embryos without any parental responsibility on the part of the genetic parents, and so tends to treat children as commodities.

The author approves the continued use of *in vitro* fertilisation as long as it does not involve artificial insemination by donor, or by egg or embryo donation, and is given only to married couples. Also he argues that there must be an intention to implant all the embryos created unless some are seriously genetically malformed. As the author admits, however, in the present practice of *in vitro* fertilisation numbers of embryos are created which will never be used and which are therefore subsequently destroyed. He devotes an entire chapter to the issue of embryo research, arguing that it should only be permissible in cases where it is likely to be beneficial to the embryo concerned. No research should be allowed which causes embryos to be harmed or destroyed.

The book is not always easy reading. The style can sometimes be heavy, and the attempt to discuss a wide range of questions from first principles occasionally entails the compression of complex issues and arguments, with a consequent lack of lucidity. The initial somewhat philosophical discussion of ethics is a particular example of this. In a book which uses technical scientific and theological language, the definition of some terms and expressions, such as 'deontological', 'the primitive streak', 'superovulation', would also assist the reader.

There is also at times a too rapid dismissal of positions the author finds uncongenial, as for example his rejection of the traditional dualistic, body-soul, approach to human nature ('a false view of human nature', p.103), or of the view

that artificial insemination by donor constitutes an adulterous act. Indeed some of the author's conclusions are surprising and would be questioned by many, as when he finds no moral objection to the practice of surrogate pregnancy. Even more questionable is his understanding of Scripture as merely 'a witness to God's revelation' (p.42), which reflects a neo-orthodox approach, evident also elsewhere, and necessarily entails a diminished view of its authority.

Nevertheless, the book is a very useful and full introduction to the whole area. It makes clear the complexity of some of the issues involved, and the consequently wide variety of Christian opinions put forward. It identifies the central questions in the debate and so avoids getting lost in the details, and it stimulates the reader's own thinking. No doubt some of the questions under discussion are of little concern to many or most African churches at the present time, but they are likely to become live issues at some point in the future, even perhaps the near future. Careful reading of McCarthy's book could help prepare the church to face that eventuality.

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**The Epistle to the Romans.
New International Commentary.**

Douglas J. Moo

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996. i-xxv, 1-1012.
ISBN 0-8028-2317-3 \$50.00

Readers of this journal will be familiar with Douglas Moo through his commentary on James for the Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series. Moo's commentary on Romans began as a two volume work on the Greek text of Romans for the Wycliffe Exegetical Series. When the publishers decided to cancel that series after the first volume had been published, Eerdmans asked him to rewrite what he had already done and complete the commentary as a one volume replacement for John Murray's commentary on Romans in the New International Commentary series.

The thirty-five page introduction includes treatments of historical background, literary integrity, audience, genre, purpose, theme, structure, and an outline of the letter. The format of the commentary also includes short introductions to major sections of the letter. Treatments of smaller portions of the letter begin with the author's translation of the passage, brief introductory remarks about the passage as a whole, and then detailed comments arranged one to two verses at a time. Several excursuses are interspersed throughout the commentary. Unfortunately, these are not listed in the table of contents. Indices include subjects, authors, scripture references, and early extra-biblical literature.

The text of the commentary itself contains English only, including translations of biblical and modern languages. However, the original texts of these translations appear in the footnotes. This feature makes the commentary useful for those lacking working knowledge of these languages, yet also worthwhile for those needing to consult the original texts. In addition, while Moo clearly enumerates and explains interpretive options on debated passages, detailed interaction with other scholars and scholarly positions is reserved for the footnotes, meaning that Moo's own line of thought can be followed in the text with less distraction.

Moo's reading of Romans can be described as traditional, evangelical and Reformed. It is traditional in that Moo reads Romans as a theological treatise more than as a letter. While recent scholarship has turned toward viewing Romans like any of Paul's other letters--as a letter to Christians in a specific locale about specific issues related to those Christians, Moo believes

that interpreters should be interested in "theological and philosophical concerns of the biblical authors" (22). While he does acknowledge that Romans is a genuine letter, both his remarks in the introduction and his comments on the body of the letter reveal that Moo reads Romans more as abstract theology apart from Paul's or the Roman Christians' circumstances. For that reason (with the exception of his reading of Romans 7:7-25, which he takes to be referring to Israel rather than to Paul's own experience), one finds little that varies from a customary conservative Protestant understanding of the letter.

The commentary is evangelical in that Moo's deeply conservative and evangelical faith breathes throughout his reading of the letter. Hardly the so-called "neutral" scholar examining Romans from a safe distance, Moo finds Paul's theology in Romans to be living theology. However, this is an academic commentary. The preacher looking for that theology will need to slog through the interpretive details to find it.

Finally, Moo's interpretation lies squarely within the Reformed tradition. For example, he reads Romans 9 as an account of individual predestination rather than as a broad argument about God's elective purposes among the nations. As expected with any detailed commentary on a letter like Romans, a reviewer can find numerous details with which to disagree. To engage the commentary on such a level would be to miss the overall contribution that this commentary makes to the study of Romans. Moo treats fairly and clearly those interpretive options with which he disagrees. He states his own exegetical choices and his reasons for them unambiguously. While one may disagree with his position at times, one is never left wondering how he got there. Moo's coverage of the relevant scholarly literature, especially in German, is exemplary.

Traditional, evangelical and Reformed—just these qualities make this commentary a worthy successor to Murray's long-standard commentary on Romans, which stood firmly in that same tradition.

The sheer size of this commentary warrants one final comment. Eerdmans recently republished the NIC in a fresh, larger format so that newer, longer volumes can still lay flat when opened. However, Moo's volume is so lengthy (1012 pages) that the book will not stay open when within 200 pages of either end. A work of this length needs to be published in two volumes.

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Romans: Sacra Pagina 6**Brendan Byrne S. J.**

Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996. i-xii, 1-503.

ISBN 0-8146-5808-3. \$29.95.

Byrne's *Romans* is part of the *Sacra Pagina* ("Sacred Page") series on the New Testament. All volumes are written by Roman Catholic scholars. Intended for everyone from students to biblical professionals, the series seeks to provide both a serious critical reading of the text without losing sight of its religious significance. Byrne, now teaching at Jesuit Theological College in Melbourne, Australia, is no stranger to *Romans* or Pauline theology. His Oxford dissertation was published under the title '*Sons of God*'--'*Seed of Abraham*' in 1979. He also authored a popular commentary, *Reckoning with Romans*, in 1986.

A thirty-six page introduction includes a treatment of recent interpretation of *Romans*, why Paul wrote *Romans*, Paul's rhetorical task, the structure of the letter, brief comments on specific interpretive issues, and finally, a six page bibliography. The body of the commentary (approximately 425 pages) breaks the letter down into small sections. Each section includes the author's translation of the passage, an interpretive portion that constitutes the main substance of Byrne's reading of the letter, detailed notes that support his reading, and a brief bibliography. Each larger division of the letter (at 1:18; 5:1; 6:1; 9:1; 12:1) is also prefaced by an introduction.

The commentary concludes with indices arranged according to scripture reference, ancient writings, author, and subject.

Byrne sees *Romans* as Paul's attempt to bring the Christians in Rome under his sphere of authority as "apostle to the Gentiles". He does this by "reminding" (15:15) them of what they already know, hoping to increase their allegiance to Paul's law-free gospel. This could, Paul hoped, result in their participation in the Collection for Jerusalem as well as their help with Paul's planned mission to the West.

Byrne's rhetorical approach to the letter sets this volume apart from the plethora of other commentaries on *Romans*. Borrowing from modern rhetorical theory, Byrne reads *Romans* as an "instrument of persuasion," focusing more on the text itself apart from historical reconstructions behind the text. For example, Byrne closely follows Paul's argument throughout *Romans* with little attempt to relate that argument to any particular circumstances in Paul's ministry

or among the Roman Christians. Whereas many commentaries read Paul's argument within a context of a larger body of Christian doctrine, Byrne adheres fairly tightly to Paul's argument as it progresses through Romans alone. At 3:8, where Paul specifically mentions charges that he promotes sin (by downplaying the Mosaic Law), Byrne allows a brief comment regarding this being the general kind of objection that has followed Paul, but makes no attempt to relate this opposition to any situation Paul or the Romans faced as he wrote the letter. When he comes to the disputed passage concerning the "strong" and the "weak" in 14:1-15:13, Byrne refuses to identify these appellations with any groups in Rome. He reviews arguments that do make such identifications, points out problems with such arguments, then interprets the passage as a general call for tolerance.

The strength of this approach lies with its close attention to Paul's argument itself. Yet can the historical context that shapes that argument be ignored? I think not. I do not believe we can ignore questions about why Paul argued *in this way* about *these specific issues* to *these people*. Nevertheless, Byrne's consistent focus on Paul's argument as it progresses through the letter keeps his interpretation from drifting off into the abstract realm of systematic theology.

Students in particular will find this volume useful. Byrne's clear focus, concise comments, and lively style keeps the reader from getting bogged down in details. The short but useful bibliographies found throughout the commentary consistently direct students to the best secondary literature on a passage or subject. While it does not have the depth of some of the massive recent commentaries on Romans, this brevity makes it all the more accessible to students. At the same time, brevity should not be mistaken for lack of substance. Byrne's reading of Romans is obviously well-informed. For that reason, the commentary will prove useful to scholars as well.

Evangelical scholars and libraries on the continent may not be familiar with the *Sacra Pagina* series due to its Roman Catholic origins and North American publisher. But this commentary belongs on library shelves everywhere. For a clearly written, fresh interpretation of the text, Byrne is my first recommendation.

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**THE GODS OF AFRICA OR THE GOD OF THE BIBLE?
The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical
Perspective**

Lenard Nyirongo

Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education
Potchefstroom, South Africa. 1997. Pp. 212. ISBN 1 86822 293 4

This remarkable book of 212 pages on ATR in biblical perspective deserves widespread knowledge and use throughout the continent and abroad. It is thoroughly biblical and written clearly for all to understand.

The book has four parts. Part I with five chapters deals with "Knowing God and worshipping him aright." Nyirongo begins by surveying some of the literature by African theologians together with early Christian thought concerning the value of non-Christian religions. The common strand among them is the belief that Africans before the gospel had "a genuine knowledge of God" with their "own ways of communion with deity," in the words of Desmond Tutu (p.4). As John Mbiti says, "The Gospel is 'that final completing element that crowns their traditional religion, and brings its flickering light to full brilliance'" (p.5). The author concludes the first chapter by saying there is a need to test such statements. "The aim of this book is to show from God's Word that the claims made by the above theologians are a scheme of Satan, aimed at hindering many Africans from obeying and believing the true Gospel" (p. 9).

Chapter 2 is a survey of the biblical teaching concerning the knowledge of God in which he discusses special revelation and general revelation. He then asks the question, "Did the African tribesman have true faith in God before the Gospel came to Africa?" The author directs the reader to "the Bible to find the answer" (p.16). In contrast many African writers appeal to their African experience of seeing God as the great chief who can only be approached by "those nearest to him in rank." Hence Sawyerr and others defend the African practice of approaching God through the cultic and nature spirits. In conclusion Nyirongo believes the "evidences" for a true knowledge of God among the Africans has "no biblical foundation" (p.23).

Chapter 3 deals with "the African and Biblical view of the spirit and visible worlds"; Chapter 4 deals with "The African religious experience: idolatry or true worship?" and Chapter 5 deals with "Who is the mediator: Christ, ancestors, priests, mediums or...?" The chapters are replete with quotations from various anthropologists and theologians concerning the traditional African

beliefs and practices. After each exposition of traditional beliefs he then treats the biblical perspective with a generous treatment of Scriptural teaching.

For example in his discourse on idolatry or true worship in ATR, he outlines in three pages the claims of those who deny idolatry among the Africans, including Parrinder, Mbiti, Metuh and Gumedé. He then provides five pages of biblical teaching on worship. He concludes with six pages of evidence of idolatry among the Africans. Having surveyed parallels of idolatry with other peoples, he writes, "Do these examples sound foreign to the African worshipper? Only pride and stubbornness would make the African deny his identification with, not only the Egyptians, the Cannanites, the Babylonians, the Greeks and the Romans – but with the rest of the pagan communities who have not yet turned to Christ." He concludes, "Adam's fall has corrupted *all* the races" (p.50).

Part II treats "Man's state and destiny" in four chapters. Topics include the African and biblical view of sin, man's judgement, salvation and immortality, fellowship with the dead and the view of time, history and progress. In each case the author expounds the African view by the thorough use of various sources, followed by the exposition of the biblical view with a generous use of Scripture. He concludes by stating that "there is a wide gap between the African and biblical views." "The reason is simply that a wrong relationship with God results in a wrong view of God's dealings with man. What the African needs to do is to first turn from his idolatry and trust in Christ. Then his eyes will see clearly" (p. 78).

Part III in five chapters deals with "Man's identity in the community." This part includes the African and biblical view of man's constitution and identity, the marriage bond, family life, community and church life and the office, authority, power and responsibility. Part IV in four chapters treats "Suffering, health and prosperity." This fourth part discusses suffering, sickness, healing and witchcraft. Surprisingly chapter eighteen deals with "the place of art in the African community and the church." The book concludes with six pages of bibliography.

This is a remarkable book for several reasons. It is a fairly comprehensive book of 212 pages. The author, Lenard Nyirongo, is an African who takes a biblical view of ATR very similar to the late Byang Kato. His biblical theological understanding is mainstream evangelical which should resonate with all Bible believing Christians on the continent. The book is written with clarity and simplicity of outline. Amazingly, Nyirongo is not a theologian by training. He holds a BSc.Ed. degree and a post graduate diploma in Productivity Improvement and is by profession a management consultant in Kitwe, Zambia.

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