

REVIEWS

Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life

Edited by J. H. CHANNER,

(Paternoster Press, 1985, 151pp, £2.95)

Life in the Balance.

Exploring the Abortion Controversy

by ROBERT N. WENNBERG,

(William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985, 181pp, £7.95)

As you read the titles of these two books you may immediately close your mind, already convinced that there is no need for more books on abortion. Christian bookshops certainly seem to be saturated with anti-abortion literature. But wait! How much do you personally know about the abortion controversy? It is an issue which Wennberg, the second author, believes to be 'the most morally provocative and intellectually intriguing of all the moral issues involving killing that confronts contemporary society'.

Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life consists of a series of essays examining the topic of abortion from the perspectives of Medicine, Law, Philosophy and Theology. The opening essay on medical aspects of abortion gives a fairly lucid description of foetal development *in utero*. However the medical viewpoints as to the risks of abortion to the mother in Channers and Wennberg's books are in disagreement. In the former the author interprets the facts with innate prejudice. While admitting that the dangers of abortion are being reduced daily, he still claims that damage due to abortion is inevitable and can be permanent, with the uterus never recovering. In contrast Wennberg cites scientific evidence to show that the frequency of mid-trimester spontaneous abortion among women who have had one previous abortion is the same as that for women having their first pregnancy. In Channer's book even this opening essay, which one might expect to be objective, uses language which often appears to be chosen primarily to arouse an emotional response. For example, the essayist claims 'It does not matter at what stage you kill "child unique" be it immediately after fertilization, before viability has been achieved, just before birth or after birth. At whatever stage the deed is done "child unique" is killed.' Such

language judges the issue before the relevant arguments are discussed. As to the objectivity of the statement, whatever one's beliefs about the origins of personhood, not many people accept that a fertilized egg is of the same value as a newborn baby. Yet, when these ideas are couched in such inflammatory language the Christian public is prejudicially swayed in favour of this viewpoint. Another example of this emotive type of language is seen in relation to abortion after rape. Here the essayist, a specialist in moral theology, contends that 'Having failed to repel his (the rapist's) assault must she (the victim) now be content to let the fruit of his victory rule over her life and grow inside her body . . . It is an unjust intruder. The sin of the father is visited on his child and deprives it of its right to life'. Quite apart from the language, does this argument strike you as in keeping with the spirit of the New Testament? In fairness, a quite different viewpoint is held by the essayist discussing Personhood and the ethics of abortion. Having argued that the foetus is a human being from the point of fertilization and that abortion is morally tantamount to murder he is consistent in making no exception in the case of rape-induced pregnancy. He suggests that this foetus possesses a natural right to intra-uterine life equivalent to that of the foetus conceived with the consent of its mother.

On the credit side Channer's book contains several very interesting essays; in particular one on the use of the Bible in the debate about abortion. Here the author accepts that the Bible does not directly mention abortion anywhere. He also appreciates that over-zealous advocates of the pro-life viewpoint have used (or misused) Bible passages in ways repugnant to Christians who are not hard-line fundamentalists. He cites several instances of this to support his opinion. Having thus won over this latter Christian group, he argues against abortion from the demands of the biblical imperatives of salvation, rather than by literally applying individual texts. He appeals to Christians simply to emulate God's love, believing that the natural outcome of this will be a resistance of the destruction or cheapening of human life. Another essay which I found interesting was one on abortion and early Christian thought. It gave a very succinct synopsis of the beliefs of the church fathers on this issue.

Throughout Channer's book I found a propensity to project personal prejudices alongside valid facts. An entrenched conservatism amongst many of the essayists prohibited them from letting facts speak for themselves. To strengthen their arguments they tended to extrapolate to the future and speculate on its possible terrors. For example the much used 'thin edge of the wedge' argument was often in evidence. In one instance the claim was made that by aborting the foetus today the life of the handicapped or those children with a low IQ would be in jeopardy tomorrow! I personally find such charges irresponsible and unhelpful, only serving to cloud the issues under debate.

In conclusion I must admit that I was disappointed by the selection of essays edited by Channer. To my mind there was very little newness of either

content or approach to separate this book from the wealth of anti-abortion literature already available.

In marked contrast it was a refreshing experience to read *Life in the Balance, exploring the abortion controversy* by Robert N. Wennberg. Wennberg is a Professor of Philosophy at Westmont College, Santa Barbara and writes out of an evangelical Protestant tradition. However this does not prevent him from dealing with the abortion controversy in a clearly objective and unbiased manner. His non-crusading presentation has immediate appeal. Here, as in Channer's book, the moral, ethical, biblical, theological and legal aspects of abortion are examined. However, Wennberg's approach is quite unusual because he sets out the merits of arguments, both for and against abortion so that the reader can judge for himself.

As well as focusing on the Christian arguments, Wennberg applies himself to a broad range of argument which will interest the secular community too.

I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in a serious examination of the abortion issue. Wennberg's purpose in writing is to give all the principal arguments a fair hearing, and I think he achieves his goal. He concludes that 'the considerable complexity of the abortion issue suggests that a measure of uncertainty is appropriate in whatever position one adopts'. Wennberg's book certainly makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the abortion controversy.

SHEENA LEWIS

The Catholic Faith

by RODERICK STRANGE

(Oxford University Press, 1986, £3.95)

The Catholic Faith, by Roderick Strange, is basically a doctrinal primer designed for the inquiring student who ambles up to him — an Oxford University chaplain — and asks, 'What is it you Catholics believe anyway?' The refreshing absence of scholarly clutter and the author's unpretentious style ensure that the serious inquirer will at least find Dr. Strange's answer to the question. Whether that answer will find universal approval is, however, another matter. For the book is also aimed at those Catholics unnerved by the spectre of uncertainty that has haunted many minds since the advent of the Second Vatican Council. Some have profound anxieties about theological change; others a sentimental hankering after the moral certainties of a bygone day. To both Dr. Strange has much to say in his concern to restate traditional Catholic dogma in a way that makes sense to late twentieth century men and women.

The central Christian doctrines of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection are introduced with confidence and conviction — reminiscent of the reassuring tread of the proverbial village bobby. These chapters are solid, but not stodgy. And if on occasion the pitter-patter of proof-texts

stutters a shade too loudly, these are more than compensated for by the anecdotes and analogies that greatly enliven the argument. Here indeed the preacher's craft shines brightly through. In an age of doctrinal malnutrition it is good to have these fundamentals of the faith unapologetically, but winsomely, presented.

Having sketched out the contours of these central Christian convictions, we are led deeper into exclusively Catholic territory. The nature of the Roman Catholic Church, the papacy, sacramental life and the Mass in particular, and the theology of Mary are chief among the landmarks now on the horizon. Here Dr. Strange approaches his task with a candour that apologists for other Christian traditions would do well to imitate. Self-criticism in religious writing is like the bitter lemon that brings out the flavour of good fish. So Dr. Strange does not hesitate to meet head on nastiness wherever he finds it. The loose morals and shady finances of past papal regimes, for example, are squarely faced. Besides, throughout these pages, the author is, if anything, prepared to err on the side of ecumenical generosity. His treatment of the emergence of the doctrine of papal infallibility in the context of a loss of the Vatican's temporal power introduces a tantalizing note that might have been sounded more frequently. His claims for papal authority, therefore, tend towards the minimalist side, so much so that some may well feel that he has extracted the teeth of the dogma altogether. Similarly liberal-minded is his exposition of the Mass, where differences between the Christian traditions are played down, and his tentativeness about Catholic teaching on contraception. Still, Dr. Strange does have the gift for making you feel that if you don't see things quite his way, you are neither impious nor perverse.

For all that, a real Catholic heart beats beneath the veneer of benign ecumenism. Old chestnuts like transubstantiation, the immaculate conception and bodily assumption of Mary, baptismal regeneration, Purgatory, and priestly celibacy show no signs of cracking. On these he is graciously inflexible. Nor does his exposition of the Christian mainstream suffer from the stultifyingly scholarly anxieties about myths and modernism that have long plagued Protestant liberals. Here we encounter a full-blown supernatural Christianity. Not that miraculous events, like calming the storm or cursing the fig tree, are consciously paraded; they are just quietly assumed.

As an introduction to the Catholic faith, Roderick Strange's book presents the best face of the urbane partisan. The difficulty this reviewer faces is therefore not so much with *how* the case is treated, but with the case that has to be treated. Curiously enough it is the very admirable mixture of tentativeness and assurance that creates most problems. Where he is tentative, he will do little to persuade the unconvinced. Where he is assured, many will feel he has obscured the full biblical teaching on the triumph of grace. For many traditional Irish Catholics, I suspect, Roderick Strange affirms too little; for non-Catholics, he claims too much.

DAVID N. LIVINGSTONE

The Role of Women
Edited by SHIRLEY LEES
(IVP, 1984, 224pp., £4.95)

This book is one in the recent IVP series 'When Christians Disagree' which tackles issues over which there are strong varying opinions in the church today. (Others in the series are concerned with Pacifism and War, Creation and Evolution, Charismatic Gifts and Politics).

In each of the books the structure is similar. A reasonable starting position or set of 'theses' for approaching the topic is outlined at the beginning. The contributors agree or disagree with these premises and endeavour to set out a Christian position as they see it. At the end of each chapter there is a response from someone of a different point of view and the book concludes with a summary in which the main points are clarified.

The Role of Women considers firstly the area of woman as wife and mother under the titles of 'Woman in the home' (article by Elizabeth Catherwood), 'Headship in marriage: the husband's view' (David Field); then 'Mankind: male and female' (Valerie Griffiths), and 'Husband/wife relationships: a practical Christian viewpoint' (Michael Griffiths). James Hurley, Daphne Key, I Howard Marshall and Joyce Baldwin then look at women's ministry in the church (but not at the issue of ordination, a wise omission which was 'deliberate so as not to overshadow the wider issue of "ministry"' p 18).

For both the traditional and less traditional viewpoints in these two areas, the writers consider the biblical evidence and then seek to apply it. The book succeeds in highlighting some of the key areas of disagreement which have resulted from different interpretations of scripture and will be a good guide for someone considering the topic for the first time.

For me the outstanding article was the one by Michael Griffiths, who begins by saying that the series allows him 'to express a strong viewpoint, knowing that it will be balanced by a different one' (p. 96). The depth of feeling with which he writes and communicates, not at all to the exclusion of biblical argument, concerning what he calls a practical Christian viewpoint on the question of husband and wife relationships, is most welcome. It 'scratches where the itch is' and perhaps will be acceptable because it has been written by a man. Curious? Why not read it for yourself!

This series looks very promising and is very much to be welcomed for its honest tackling of today's thorny issues which, nonetheless, acknowledges the very real differences of opinion held by Christians. If healthy discussion does not produce an agreed view, hopefully the spirit of the series will mean we will indeed see 'the need to re-examine our view in the light of Scripture and to exchange views, so that we may ensure that our position is not the product of wishful thinking but is really faithful to the Bible' (p. 5).

This is particularly crucial in considering the role of women — a realm

in which the church should be leading the way rather than recoiling from too much non-Christian feminism and so refusing to face up to these issues that, to our shame, it has taken such movements to bring to wide attention.

FRAN PORTER

Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith

by C. STEPHEN EVANS

(IVP, UK, 1985, 192pp, £3.50)

The last decade has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the philosophy of religion, from philosophers and theologians alike. In this period I have noted approximately twenty new introductions to the subject. Dr Evans' book is the latest addition to an area of study in which evangelicals (Plantinga, Wolterstorff, Helm, Abraham, etc.) are increasingly making a contribution. In general this indicates that the linguistic (A.J. Ayer) and theological (K. Barth, and Ritschl before him) vetoes on metaphysical claims are now, and in my view quite properly, discredited.

C. Stephen Evans is Editor of the series, 'Contours of a Christian Philosophy', in which this book is included. He should be already familiar to those interested in philosophy for his earlier studies: on Existentialism; on the loss of the concept of 'personhood' in the Human Sciences; and on *Subjectivity and Religious Belief* (Eerdmans, USA, 1978), a more technical work, in which the section on Kant particularly impressed me. This present work will probably arouse the greatest interest, since its subject matter and introductory nature are well suited to the requirements of theological colleges and seminaries.

Evans provides a clear and informed introduction to the chief issues of the philosophy of religion. He examines the traditional philosophical 'proofs', and the more modern argument from religious experience, for God's existence. He investigates the credibility, meaning and significance of revelation and miracles; the nature of religious language, and helpfully reviews some modern scientific, ideological and philosophical objections to theistic belief. Finally he considers how religious pluralism relates to individual commitment (*contra* John Hick and W.C. Smith). One surprising omission is consideration of the after-life. Evans is acquainted with the 'classic' philosophical discussions of religion (Aquinas, Hume, Kant, etc.), as well as the more modern treatments. Of the latter, he is clearly indebted to Mavrodes, Swinburne and Mitchell. He follows Mavrodes in his discussion of religious experience and what constitutes validity and proof

in rational theology; he follows Swinburne and Mitchell in their probabilistic inductive justifications of God's existence.

A weakness, and one which necessarily applies to all introductions, is that some topics receive inadequate and superficial treatment, e.g. neo-Wittgensteinian interpretations of religion, revelation, the ethics of belief, i.e. the proportioning of commitment to evidence and mysticism. However, in other places Evans shows the rare talent of presenting quite complex philosophical arguments within a brief compass such as, for example, his discussion of Norman Malcolm's version of the ontological argument or his use of interpretative judgements and the development of a cumulative case in philosophy.

The book is well produced and inexpensive, and would seem an adequate and economical introduction to the philosophy of religion. It is intended for those of little acquaintance with modern philosophy, and it well succeeds in this aim; for those with more knowledge the introductions of Yandell, Gaskin and O'Hear are to be preferred.

L. PHILIP BARNES

Idols of our Time
by BOB GOUDZWAARD
(IVP, 1984, 115pp., £2.50)

'We live in a world possessed. And we know it.' These are the opening words of this book and succinctly convey its main thesis. In eight short chapters Goudzwaard outlines the hopelessness of the present world situation with its bankrupt ideologies, and makes a specific policy proposal to bring hope. There is also the constant theme that these ideologies have a demonic background, a view which some may find difficult to accept.

He outlines the essence of ideology briefly, and suggests that 'an ideology arises when idolatry takes root in the pursuit of a legitimate end.' (p.20). He calls ideology 'the conduit of idolatry' (p. 23) and suggests five trademarks of a mature ideology.

The major part of the book is concerned to demonstrate by means of the five trademarks that the four chosen ideologies are indeed ideologies: revolution, nationalism, material prosperity, and guaranteed security. Tying the book together, Goudzwaard emphasizes the complementarity of opposing ideologies, and finally points out that the only hope of breaking the Arms and Economic Spirals is the Christian hope.

This is a short and extremely readable book, but it lacks penetrating analysis. To be fair, the book does not purport to be a comprehensive treatment of the subject. One idea that I found unconvincing was the notion that God would automatically bless nations that renounced the dominant world ideologies in favour of biblical norms. This view was taken for granted, but I would have preferred some attempt to support it from

scripture. It is all too easy, and fashionable, to apply certain Old Testament ideas to contemporary nations.

All four ideologies dealt with have relevance for Christians in Ireland. The idolatry of material prosperity springs readily to mind (not that we would ever admit to it), but there is also an insidious nationalism among evangelicals. I do not think the concluding 'specific policy proposal' will be taken seriously by many world leaders, but this book will have achieved something if large numbers of individual Christians are challenged to begin to rethink their own lifestyles.

PETER F. WHYTE

And God Came In
by LYLE DORSETT

(Collier Macmillan, 1983, 167pp.)

Lyle Dorsett's book *And God Came In* brings the often shadowy figure of Joy Davidman vividly to life. The magical love story of Lewis and 'that American lady' is known to many, but Dorsett here treats her to a serious examination in her own right. The intellect, creativity, mental agility and sheer humour of the lady come across in no uncertain terms, as do her tough assertiveness and dogged determination.

Although born into a Jewish home, Joy learned to think of herself as a purely material girl at a very early age. The proud intellectualism and almost impossible expectations of her father placed both a strain upon and a challenge before this exceptionally precocious youngster. And so, at the age of eight, she pronounced herself an atheist. Ill health further alienated her from her peers and thus she was thrown back more and more on her own mental resources and creative imagination. Irresistibly drawn to fantasy in literature and to Christian symbol for poetic expression, she was later to realise that this was all part of her unconscious search for God, even while vehemently holding to secular rationalism.

Dorsett painstakingly takes us through her life, detailing for us, on the one hand, her academic and literary distinction, and on the other her unhappy marriage and domestic misery which drove her to seek the God who 'had always been there'. Her subsequent voracious appetite for spiritual knowledge had to be satisfied, and thus she turned to the works of C. S. Lewis. Soon after began their correspondence. In Lewis she encountered someone with whom she could really communicate, both mentally and spiritually. Dorsett suggests a sense of inevitability about their eventual intimacy, if not their marriage. He stresses their calming effect on one another, stemming, no doubt, from their similar mystical experiences — something by which most of the world would be baffled. He does not sentimentalize this relationship as some have been tempted to do; Joy is presented as a woman of genius but not without her faults. One feels that

Dorsett's research has led him to an ardent admiration of the woman while still retaining a healthy degree of detachment.

The interpretative voice of the author may occasionally be irritating but this book is a must for anyone wanting to understand the true balance of the Lewis/Davidman relationship. It will evoke varying emotions towards its subject, culminating ultimately in unstinted admiration for her courage and spirit in the face of indescribable suffering and, eventually, death. Lewis, as seen from this perspective, also 'comes out of hiding', emerging much more as a man, a human being, not just the literary genius who draws us irresistibly into Narnia or coaxes us to faith in his apologetic.

FRANCES LIVINGSTONE