

Book reviews

Life Before Birth: Consensus in Medical Ethics

Kenneth Boyd, Brendan Callaghan SJ and Edward Shotter, 168 pages, Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone Road, London NW1 4DU, £6.95, SPCK, 1986

This book is a result of study into the ethics of abortion and the treatment of infertility. It is aimed at Church leaders, students of theology, members of the medical and allied professions and at policy-makers and legislators and the general audience. It is very logically divided into two parts; one dealing with abortion or destruction of life, the other with the treatment of infertility or the making of life. Each part is then subdivided into three sections, namely, Public statement, Discussion and Comment. The Public statement in each part outlines the significant statements made by Parliament and by medical, professional and ecclesiastical bodies on abortion and infertility, paying particular attention to the Report of the Warnock Committee.

The first sections of both parts of the book are clear and thorough and for anyone not familiar with the Acts, Bills, statements and reports concerning abortion or infertility is a good source of reference. It clarifies without doubt, the attitude of the Churches to the various reports produced by medical and related bodies and by Government instigated reports and Bills. The three Christian Churches represented, the Roman Catholic, the Anglican and the Church of Scotland, find themselves in basic agreement on the subjects of abortion and infertility. The Anglican Church would appear to have a more reasonable and human approach than the other two Churches. The Roman Catholic Church is more inward-looking, remaining rigid in its stand on

ethics and morals although individual freedom of conscience is recognised but not encouraged.

The second sections of both parts of the book represent the views of a selected panel consisting of twelve individuals, six members of the medical profession including one medical student, three chaplains – one from the Roman Catholic Church, one from the Anglican Church and one from the Scottish Churches – a nurse who also represents the Church of Scotland, a radiographer who also represents the Anglican Church and a teacher who is a Roman Catholic. The discussion panel is disappointing in its composition. There are obvious gaps. For example, there are no social workers or health visitors, no special support nurses who have direct contact with individuals and families needing help, no genetic counsellors or scientists; and the views of the young seem to be represented by the single medical student. Most of all, it lacked the views of individuals directly concerned with the main issues, the women and girls who have sought or obtained termination of pregnancy and the couples who suffer the anguish of infertility. Without them, the discussion is just another academic exercise without real substance, and despite efforts made by the gynaecologist and the general practitioner, in both parts of the book, the discussion is based on limited scientific knowledge. The discussion on abortion was more informed than the one on infertility, which is a more complex subject offering a number of alternatives. However, without the views of those who have actually experienced abortion and infertility, the discussion remains shallow and biased. Surprisingly, no one raises the topic of individual responsibilities towards these two vital issues.

In the final section the comments reflect the point of view of the Churches, largely dominated by the

Roman Catholic stand. On reading these comments – on infertility in particular, one is left with the feeling that the Churches have a monopoly on ethics and morals and that the scientist is the bad guy. While the Roman Catholic Church is logical in the light of its teachings on ethics and morals, in my opinion, it does not hold the monopoly on truth, and in relation to advances in medicine tends to be out of touch with day-to-day reality: since on the other side of each moral debate there are individual human beings in need of help for whom we must try to do the best we can, whatever our beliefs. Although there is much that one can agree and identify with in this book there is also much that causes anger and frustration because of the lack of compassion and understanding. This book simply reaffirms the traditional stand of the Churches and widens the gap between their position and current medical practice.

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Ethics and Regulation of Clinical Research

Robert J Levine, 2nd edition, 452 pages, £38, Baltimore-Munich, Urban and Schwarzenberg, 1986

'This book is a survey of the ethical and legal duties of clinical researchers' states the author.

It is substantially based on the reports of the (USA) President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioural Research, and the National Commission for the Protection for Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research. The author has