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Aborting America

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ter, would then attempt to draw out further theological and programmatic implications for methodology as a result of the reflective experience contained in the major sections.

The dissertation breaks new ground in its successful attempt at presenting an integrated discussion on the methodology of theological re-rooting and its exemplification of this venture by dealing with the theme of providence. In its catholic use of every available datum from the social sciences (including pop culture and literature, not merely folklore, and sociological data, actual interviews among the rural poor and the urban slum dwellers, reported by sociologists) as a springboard for theologizing, the investigation likewise breaks new ground.

There is a foreword by Anscar J. Chupungco, O.S.B., who has pioneered in the indigenization of worship, an appendix on Pilipino words culled from Panganiban's thesaurus; and an excellent bibliography.

One hopes that de Mesa's programmatic work will be followed by other attempts to reflect on other dimensions of the faith experience by theologically re-rooting, for example, the Filipino's worship (devotion to the Sto. Niño and the Blessed Mother, devotion to the saints, and fiestas, including the Moriones) and the Filipino's moral values (his sense of commitment, responsibility, justice, social relations and charity, patriotism and social awareness).

Andrew Gonzalez, FSC

ABORTING AMERICA. By Bernard N. Nathanson, M.D., with Richard N. Ostling. New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1979. 320 pages.

A well-known New York City obstetrician and gynecologist, at one time the most prominent doctor in the 1967-73 legal battle to repeal existing American laws prohibiting abortion, Dr. Bernard N. Nathanson has come to the conclusion, after years of agonizing reflection, that abortion on request is morally wrong. The largest abortion clinic in the Western world was under his direction in New York City where, as he now admits, he had "in fact presided over 60,000 deaths." (p. 164) Today he is in the paradoxical situation "of considering elective abortion to be an unjust taking of human life and yet performing one now and then when I was unable to avoid it. Perhaps in the future I will refuse regardless of circumstances." (p. 248)

This immensely readable book is the story of the evolution both of Dr. Nathanson's long-cherished convictions about abortion, and of the medical knowledge-explosion in the past decades about fetal life that forced him to change his moral position. Religion did not influence him in any way. Following the path of his doctor father who had renounced his Jewish religion, Dr. Nathanson became a professed atheist. His opinions about the morality of abortion "have never been influenced in the slightest by the empires of faith." (p. 6)

When the war against all abortion laws was won and all the major legal battles were over, while the other campaigners rested on their laurels, Dr. Nathanson "felt a little uneasy and increasingly impatient with the same old slogans, the tired old clichés, the indiscriminating acceptance of all those shibboleths and battle cries and stereotypes that had passed for arguments over the previous four years" (p. 158). He concentrated more and more on the wealth of scientific knowledge about the "intrauterine patient" that was unfolding before his eyes through electric monitoring or the flickering images on an ultrasonic screen. He reflected on the old data of perinatology and opened himself to the new. He realized that in his revolutionary zeal for legalized abortion he simply did not want to hear the other side and had been filtering out evidence without realizing it (p. 161). The moment of truth had come: he had not only been sold a bill of goods; he had sold a bill of goods (*ibid.*).

RELEVANCE TO THE PHILIPPINE SCENE

This story of the change of heart and mind of Dr. Nathanson has special relevance to the Philippines. Abortion is very much a problem in the country and the legalization issue is far from settled despite the law forbidding abortion except to save the life of the mother, and the Revised Population Act (8 Dec. 1972) ruling out abortion as unacceptable. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines in their 1977 Pastoral (January 28) from Cebu sadly acknowledged that "in fact abortion is fast becoming a practice, gradually losing its criminal character."

THE SPECIOUS ARGUMENTS PRO-AND CON-ABORTION

Of special interest to most readers will be the two chapters in which Nathanson critiques the specious arguments used by those approving legalized abortion. Although he believes that "most of the arguments commonly used by anti-abortionists do not hold water if examined carefully" (p. 180), he attacks the arguments of the pro-abortionists, his former colleagues, with the same objectivity. He admits that he knew the fallacies in the most suasive pro-abortion arguments but still used them (p. 193). He now cites with approval the dictum of the well-known Protestant ethicist, Paul Ramsey: every good argument for abortion is a good argument for infanticide (p. 225).

THE "GREAT" NUMBER OF DEATHS FROM ILLEGAL ABORTIONS

The argument that moved him the most and attracted the most support for the legalization of abortion was based on the number of women sup-

posedly dying each year at the hands of back-alley abortionists. The number "was always 5,000 to 10,000 a year" (p. 193). Nathanson candidly states that "I knew the figures were totally false, and I suppose the others did too, if they stopped to think about it. But in the 'morality' of our revolution, it was a useful figure — the overriding concern was to get the laws eliminated, and anything within reason that had to be done was permissible" (*ibid.*). The actual figure, according to Nathanson, was probably closer to 500 (*ibid.*). That is for the U.S. with a population of over 200 million. The official U.S. government figure for 1972 was 39 deaths (*ibid.*). When we hear figures on the number of women dying in the Philippines in these back-alley clinics we should ask for proof, names, dates. The answer will be an embarrassed silence!

ABORTION PROPOSED AS NECESSARY TO CONTROL POPULATION

The next most popular argument for abortion is that it is necessary for population control. This argument was used by Dr. Malcolm Potts, world-famous population expert, in a lecture published in the [Manila] *Times Journal* on 2 August 1977. "No abortion means no drop in birth rates, expert says" and all the usual arguments were trotted out again as has been done in the past in so many countries.

How does the *Times Journal* react now to the boast of President Marcos during his recent trip to Honolulu that the Philippines has achieved one of the most remarkable decreases in birthrate in the modern world? And this is a land where abortion is illegal and officially excluded from the Population Program!

FLOOD OF NEW KNOWLEDGE ON INTRAUTERINE LIFE

For Nathanson, the arguments that should make all of us reject abortion are the scientific arguments, based on the flood of new biological data which shows that the intrauterine patient is living from the first moment of fertilization with its unique, genetic entity that will never be repeated (p. 198). It is an "independent, self-initiating biological entity from the point when the sperm unites with the egg, and we are able to discern its presence and activity beginning with its implantation, through new techniques in biochemistry" (pp. 206-7).

Scientific advances of the past twenty-five years in the field of obstetrics are moving us closer and closer to the full definition of the identity of the intrauterine patient. Biochemically, the presence of new life is announced "approximately one week after fertilization and as soon as it burrows into the alien terrain of the uterine wall" (p. 216). "In this case, we do not visualize it as a newborn outside the womb, but rather we 'perceive' it through modern

biochemistry" (p. 217). The line of scientific medical progress is moving inexorably backward into gestation, leading Nathanson to speculate that one day it may be seen that "a particular number of cells in the earliest stages before implantation is the beginning of the brain" (*ibid.*). That is why he is so critical of court decisions based on biological data that is so quickly outdated.

NATHANSON'S MORAL REFLECTIONS

Looking back on the campaign to liberalize abortion, the author now labels it as "a seductive and ultimately poisonous dream" (p. 250). An unexamined utilitarian ethic and a corresponding situation ethic are pinpointed as having "led us to this monstrous abortion situation" (p. 251). Medical practitioners were not prepared to appreciate the abortion problem partly because the "teaching in medical school traditionally has been totally devoid of formal instruction in medical ethics" (*ibid.*). Living in the age that has known Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler's Holocaust and Hiroshima, we are all in danger of having our appreciation of the value of life eroded (p. 250). That danger has only been increased by the more recent saga of the "boat people" of Indo-China, and the reports of many thousands perishing as victims of drought in various parts of the world.

For the author, the Hippocratic Oath is a proof that abortion is not merely a "Catholic issue." He calls the oath "an expression of high paganism" and regrets that it was "rarely read in the U.S. Medical Schools in the past generation" (p. 173). The oath forbade abortion but today, moving away from "high pagan virtue," there is a "wholesale retreat from the Hippocratic Code" (p. 253). In the author's opinion this move "should be and has been particularly difficult for physicians to stomach" (*ibid.*). Atheist though he admittedly is, he rejects the eugenic argument in favor of weeding out the useless, the ugly, and the stupid, in order to create perfection and a trouble-free existence. His answer is profoundly Christian: "tragedies cannot be avoided in life and perhaps we somehow need the full texture of existence — the regret, sadness, pity, charity and kindness that these experiences occasion" (p. 236).

In conclusion it can be said that everyone who is interested in the abortion issue will find this book helpful, even though they may not agree with everything the author says. The anti-abortionists may wish to reassess their arguments when they see them through the eyes of the author. The pro-abortionists may even abandon their favorite arguments. Doctors, medical students, nurses, priests, members of the Population Commission, will all benefit from this account of the conversion of a most ardent apostle of abortion into an articulate and forceful defender of the rights of the intrauterine patient.

Gerald W. Healy, S.J.