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Book reviews

Human Life: a Biblical Perspective for Bioethics

Nelson R J, 208 pages, Philadelphia, £10.50, Fortress Press, 1984

A more appropriate sub-title for this book would have been, simply, 'a biblical perspective'. For it is only in its last six pages that the author, Professor of Systematic Theology at Boston University School of Theology, brings this perspective to bear on a set of bioethical issues, namely, those of genetics. Before doing so he rightly warns the reader that Christian beliefs do not amount to premises which lead by a process of deduction to ethical conclusions but rather that the brief comments he makes on various genetic issues are designed only to show that these beliefs may be correlated with an ethical stance. This comes as something of an anti-climax.

In the preface the genesis of the book is described in such a way as to suggest that it was either not conceived as a whole or else the author diverted certain parts along the way to satisfy the American penchant for publishing. The final product does, however, contain an adequate progression of thought, commencing with a chapter which challenges the humanist capacity for hope in face of the monstrous wastage of human life in the modern world. The case is unfortunately weakened by the space given to the still contested issue of abortion in the catalogue of waste. From here the author proceeds to analyse the deficiencies of philosophical and scientific accounts of human life in dualistic or vitalist (materialistic) terms and to work towards his own theses concerning the nature, meaning and value of such life on the basis of the Judaeo-Christian conception he finds in the Bible. He makes some important points about such matters as procreation being the transmission, not the commencement, of life and 'health' being an elusive and therefore possibly misleading concept. The process of arriving at the theses which sustain these points is, however, exceedingly dubious.

First, the production of a biblical anthropology is no less problematic than that of a biblical theology. There is the same tendency to ignore those elements which do not suit one's thesis (in this case, much of the Wisdom literature, for example such Books as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes), to erase the differences between those that are taken into account (in this case, between Synoptics, John and Paul), and to allow one's own thoughts to intrude into the material (in this case, those on abortion are one example). Secondly, the procedure is essentially fundamentalist, the reader in this case being given the distinct impression that the truth of the psychosomatic unity of human life was revealed long before some moderns managed to discover it. This is hardly calculated to impress upon philosophers and scientists that theologians have a worthwhile contribution to make in discussions pertaining to human life and its treatment! Finally, the attempt to systematise such a variety of material as is found in the Bible is bound to distort the material. It is, indeed, ironic that Nelson should seek to bring out the distinctively 'Hebraic' character of the material by analysis of 'Greek' terms and concepts in much the same manner as Norman Snaith analysed the distinctive ideas of the Old Testament some decades ago. Such a method belies the fashionable, but too ready, dismissal of dualism which Nelson permits himself.

In sum, then, there is much of interest and worth in this book but overall, and in the end, it does not amount to much.

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Doctors Talking: a Guide to Current Medico-moral Problems

Autton N. xii, 242 pages, London and Oxford, £5.95, Mowbray, 1984.

This is a very useful book, but one in which regular readers of this journal are unlikely to find much that is new to them. However, it is one which they will be glad to recommend to members of an intelligent public growingly aware of new and perplexing problems in medical ethics. The most useful job of a reviewer, therefore, is to make clear the scope and character of the book. Autton has consulted some 125 individuals (and some corporate bodies) by taped interview or questionnaire on five key areas of medical ethics. All those consulted are listed, with their qualifications in the case of individuals; oddly enough the previous editor of this journal is not among them. Each area has a chapter: (1) Human experimentation; (2) Organ transplantation; (3) Brain death; (4) Handicapped Infants – To Live or Let Die; (5) Human Fertilisation and Embryology. The text is woven from these sources, with considerable quotations from the tapes. We really do hear doctors talking. Some appear several times. It is not always clear how representative the opinions are, but that does not matter much, because the important thing is to have the various aspects of the problems clarified, and the various approaches to them expressed, as a guide to making up one's own mind.

Some of the issues dealt with are: How far an individual has absolute rights against society (Autton havers on this); The issue of contracting in and contracting out of organ donation; The problem of selecting patients for treatment when resources are scarce, or