

# Reviews

**ABORTION: THE CATHOLIC DEBATE IN AMERICA** by Hans Lotstra. *Irvington Publishers, Inc., New York, 1985.*

In a debate which has so much conflicting sincerity and highly charged emotion it is invaluable to find a book that presents the issues calmly and clearly, and describes how the various sides have arrived at their present positions. Fr Lotstra's bok will be an essential for everyone involved in the morality of abortion.

The book is based on a doctrinal thesis presented to the Accademia Alfonsiana in Rome, and faithfully represents that Institute's concern that moral theology should combine the highest scholarship with informed pastoral care. It is written in a style that is incisive, that does full justice to the importance of the subject, but that also carries one along with the rapidity of its argument. And although it is about the United States, the language is "British" English.

The book's purpose is to present "an inventory, an analysis and an evaluation" of the arguments and issues used in the abortion debate in the USA. The reasons for choosing America are the influence of things American on the rest of the world ("there today; here tomorrow!"), and the breadth of the debate there. Both pro and anti abortionists have had to face the pluralist problem in force in a country that has been largely formed on a Protestant-Puritan ethic, that is definitely a secular State, that is so deeply involved in world-wide programmes of family planning and population control, and which is very proud of its democratic tradition and defence of human rights. Since World War II, moreover, Catholic theology has come into its own, as making contributions both to the national awareness and to the international theological community.

In the first section of the book the subject is abortion and the person: both the person aborted and the one aborting. It is rare to find the different, conflicting, strands of Roman Catholic tradition presented so clearly and so much without acrimony. Fr. Lotstra has a respect for the traditions that outweighs personal judgements. He offers first of all the history of the Manualist teachings, and shows how these were developed when abortion became an issue in American law. Then follows a section on the status of the fetus that is most informative: from the Manuals and current theology, from genetics and embryology, from episcopal and Vatican statements, and from philosophy, we have the discussion on whether the fetus is definitely a person, probably a person, or possibly a person. This discussion has full references and quotations and the quotations are indented on the page, making for much easier reading. Two leading ideas emerge from these pages: first that all sides in the abortion debate have changed their arguments in the last two decades. The strictly religious and theological reasoning that was typical of Catholics until the 1960s, was abandoned in favour of more secular appeals to the common ethical principles of Americans. Thus abortion became an issue within human rights. Secondly, when the theologians disagreed among themselves and with their bishops, all of them appealed to the traditions, which were seen less and less as having been clear and settled.

In its second section the subject is abortion and jurisprudence. Here the concern is with the ways in which natural law and natural rights should be incorporated into human law. The debates have produced firm advocates of all the functions of civil law, protective, coercive and didactic, and again each is able to show how the traditional, sound and accepted teachings do support them all! It is thus not at once apparent that the theologian who teaches that the civil law need assert no control over abortion is teaching something

contrary to received Catholic morality. This is not to say that all the arguments are equal: it is, for example, carefully pointed out that those who propose no legislation to control abortion, because of the freedom necessary in a pluralist State, in fact lose all sight of the fetus as even a possible human person.

We have then a book that is a mine of information and sources, a most valuable educational tool for assessing arguments and evidence, and learning just how difficult this debate is. It underlines the surprising degree to which theological dissent is founded on tradition, the essential need for freedom of discussion in order to understand arguments and evidence, and present a reasoning acceptable to a secular State lacking a single ethic. In such a context a use of language that is merely emotive and acrimonious deserves to have its users described as no more than sectarian, and therefore promotes its opposing cause. The defence of life is something about which we must feel highly emotional, but, because it is so important, we are all the more called to discipline in the way we speak and argue. Fr. Lotstra's book is a pattern for this right defence.

DAVID WILLIAMSON

**FOUNDATIONS FOR A SOCIAL THEOLOGY** by Dermot A. Lane. *Gill & Macmillan, 1984*

For all the divergences within human culture, as this author sees it, everyone is united in a common search for healing and wholeness; he aims to show that Christianity has within it something which contributes significantly to this quest. He wishes also to provide a corrective to those earlier conceptions of Christianity which saw it as more or less exclusively an individual rather than a social affair; insisting, very properly, that "'personal" sin is tied up with structural sin and ... the salvation of "my" soul takes place only in reference to the salvation of others'. This is what makes his theology a social one.

Every chapter-heading contains the word 'praxis', itself surely a sufficient indication, if any were needed, that the book is up-to-date. A description of the move to praxis in recent theology, particularly as exemplified in the work of J.B. Metz, is succeeded by a discussion of the philosophical background of the notion in the works of Marx and of the Frankfurt school of critical theorists, especially Habermas. This last is commended, I believe rightly, for the sharp distinction which he draws between technical and practical reason, and for his pointing-out of the dangers that issue from a confusion of the two. After showing how social analysis must be an essential element in a theory inspiring praxis, the author turns to a grounding of praxis in Christology, and an account of the teaching of the Catholic Church on the subject since the Second Vatican Council. The 'new praxis' implicit in the mission of Jesus, 'based on the vision of the Kingdom of God', is 'normative for the Church today'.

A final chapter relates the foregoing considerations to the Eucharist. 'The sacramental life of the Church builds up the Christian community. 'At the same time' it 'has a fundamental missionary thrust to it which includes the ethical task of liberating action for justice in our world'.

The book as a whole provides a useful survey of some recent trends in theology. I am not sure that someone who feared that intellectual rigour in Catholic thought has tended to be eclipsed in the last two decades by modish triviality would find much to reassure her. But the clearer commitment to work for justice and peace on earth is obviously to be welcomed.

HUGO MEYNELL