

Reviews

HOW BRAVE A NEW WORLD? by Richard A McCormick, *SCM* pp 440 £8.50.

Within the space of a single week in early November a British paediatrician was found not guilty of attempting to murder a mongol baby suffering from Downe's syndrome who died three days after birth, and two men were found guilty of aiding and abetting suicides. The issues raised by these cases are without legal precedent and are beyond the scope of traditional medical ethics. And yet, as the Press recognised in several exceptionally lengthy articles and editorials, our response to these issues forms the moral basis of how we live.

Richard McCormick, Professor of Christian Ethics at Georgetown University, has attempted to chart his way through a range of bio-ethical issues including birth control, abortion, foetal and genetic research, test tube reproduction, human experimentation and euthanasia. He offers the essays which make up the book in the conviction that "those who believe that theology and theologians are out of place in these discussions have got it all wrong, difficult as it may be to spell out the exact contribution of theology, especially in a very concrete problem of bioethics" (p x).

The book as a whole suffers from the major defect of being a series of essentially separate articles rather than a sustained treatise. Nevertheless what emerges is a courageous attempt at an iterative style of theological reflection which does adequate justice to the very profound and ultimate nature of the questions posed.

The diversity of the issues which McCormick confronts makes detailed comment difficult, but the sections which deal with the problems of the "hopelessly ill" (as, for example, the two cases mentioned above) are illustrative of his general approach. McCormick views the Judaeo-Christian tradition with regard to medical ethics as a middle path between medical vitalism (preserving life at all costs) and medical pessimism (i.e. you terminate life when it becomes burdensome and "useless"). He argues that both these stances

are rooted in an identical idolatry, viz: that death is an unmitigated evil and life is the absolute good. The middle course is that life is a good to be preserved precisely as the condition of other values, such as, for example, the establishing and deepening of human relationships. These values and latent possibilities both anchor the duty to preserve life and also dictate the limits of that duty.

McCormick maintains that life is a relative good and that the duty to preserve it is consequently limited. But whereas many moral theologians who would agree thus far proceed to discuss the *means* required to sustain life within the limits prescribed by the sense of duty stemming from its latent possibilities, McCormick considers the *quality* of life that is saved or prolonged.

A distant echo of this position is to be found in an allocution by Pius XII in 1957. After noting that we are normally obliged to use ordinary means to preserve life, the Pope states:

A more strict obligation would be too burdensome for most men and would render the attainment of the higher, more important good too difficult. Life, death, all temporal activities are in fact subordinated to spiritual ends.

McCormick argues that these "spiritual ends" are to be found in love of God and of one's neighbour, which are inseparable. But what makes the attainment of the "higher, more important good too difficult?" Here the argument is more tortuous. It appears to be that when a disproportionate amount of effort places so much stress on maintaining the *conditions* of relationships that the pursuit of the very relational goods that define our growth is rendered impossible, then we have some sort of criterion for a decision (p 339 ff). The importance of consensus among a group of people including relatives and medical experts is rightly stressed in respect of such decision-making (p 342).

While recognising the unreasonableness of expecting water-tight answers to the issues posed and acknowledging the highly unsatisfactory nature of the present situation, it is none the less difficult to avoid a sense of unease at certain aspects of McCormick's criteria. At what point does the pursuit of the relational goods which define growth change from being very difficult (and inconvenient) to impossible? How significant is the ability or otherwise to establish meaningful social relationships compared with, say, the evocations of the individual memory in response to sensory stimuli (e.g. music, the smell of flowers, incense etc)? To what extent is the inability to establish relationships a conse-

quence of negative social conditioning, the institutional nature of hospitals, or a host of other factors which could be ameliorated?

I wish that Richard McCormick would go to India and spend some time with Mother Teresa. Her criteria in respect of such issues tend to be much more intuitive and less cerebral than his, and more stress is laid on the dignity and self-respect of the individual than is possible in most western medical institutions. Much as I admire McCormick's brave new world, I personally find it chilly, and feel more at home in the less clinical atmosphere of the East!

DAVID GOSLING

PERFECT FOOLS: FOLLY FOR CHRIST'S SAKE IN CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY by John Saward. *Oxford University Press, 1980 £9.94.*

Folly for Christ's sake is one of the more obscure branches of Christian hagiography, known mostly in the West through those bizarre characters, the *yurodivye*, who flourished in Russia in the sixteenth century, and which attained an unfortunate notoriety through the claim of Rasputin to belong to their number. The last Russian fool for Christ was canonized in the seventeenth century, and thereafter there has been a conspiracy of silence about such people at an official level, though the character of the fool continued to appear in Russian literature, above all in the writings of Dostoevsky and notably in the figure of Prince Myshkin.

The tradition of such folly is however much older and more widespread in the Christian Church, and it is the great virtue of Mr Saward's book that he both demonstrates the theme of folly in many ages and places and also that he explores the theological basis of the behaviour of such people. From a somewhat abbreviated survey of the *saloi* in the Greek east, and the early Russian *yurodivye*, he passes to early Christian Ireland, eleventh century Italy, the Cistercians in the twelfth century, the Franciscans in the thirteenth, and so to the central part of the book, sev-

enteenth century France, and the life and works of Jean-Joseph Surin. There is here a wealth of information, conveyed with enthusiasm and vigour, and in the last chapters a study of depth and penetration in a little-known area. The footnotes provide a useful if limited bibliography for further reading and are especially helpful in the references to the seventeenth century material.

The conviction and zeal with which the 'perfect fools' are presented almost persuades us that this is not only a neglected but in fact a central area of Christian living; and with this comes the suspicion that Mr Saward is claiming too much. There seems to me to be two caveats about this book. The first is simply a matter of style; the author insists on the doctrinal orthodoxy of these saints: 'here is the development of an apparently wild and unrestrained spirituality *firmly and loyally* (the italics are significantly those of the author) within the limits of what seem to some monolithic, authoritarian, ecclesiastical organizations' (preface, p x). A very interesting point, which however, here and elsewhere, goes too far and becomes a polemical insistence on a particular view of the Church, in which it seems at times that the