

# Comment

## *A child is born*

'If my mother had got me a little later almost certainly she would have had me aborted. And the thought of that frightens me. It makes me feel that I am alive not by any right but of sufferance—as if I were a refugee, merely let in.' It was a young man talking who had spent a disturbed childhood in a succession of foster homes.

Here we are, celebrating another Christmas, another New Year. Those of us who are Christians are again commemorating the birth of that child who, we believe, brought us life. There are many forces in today's world working against life. It is surely a fitting time for us to look round to see what new chances for life may be coming into sight.

Well, there is a new arms limitation agreement. And, if several miracles happen, the chance of fewer slaughters of peasants in Central America. And, of course, coming nearer home, David Alton's bill to bring the legal time limit on abortions in Britain down to 18 weeks. The Commons will vote on it on 22 January.

We welcome this bill. But saying something even as innocuous as that is bound to upset some readers. And if we had not said it just how many would have been upset, do you think? The abortion question is the most risky subject for a periodical like this to try to talk about seriously. Discussion about abortion *should* lead us, as hardly any other issue could, to reflect profoundly and expansively on the quality of human life. Instead the debate is, at the popular level, almost always scandalously narrow and vitriolic (in the U.S. even more than in Britain), with the issues fragmented and abstracted out of their context. Think of those interminable discussions about the preservation of foetuses. And, on the other side, those interminable discussions about women's rights over their own bodies.

It goes on amazing some of us that the most ardently committed pro-life people almost always hold right-wing views on justice and peace issues and questions of general humanity, while many of the keenest supporters of freedom to abort are keen supporters of the causes of social justice too. Surely it should be the other way round? It is quite a long time now since Cardinal Bernardin argued for 'the seamless garment' (his much-debated argument that peace campaigners, 542

strugglers for social justice and fighters against abortion should, if they want to be consistent, favour each other's causes). We seem to be no further on. Rather the contrary.

Our lack of progress in this area reflects the kind of world we are in, with its have-now-pay-later mentality—the very mentality that makes it politically so difficult to protect the Western world from a possible repetition of the recent Crash in the markets. A world without a sense of the wholeness of things: one in which only the now matters. If our talk about something that touches us as closely as the abortion question is so fragmented, that is because our whole ways of seeing things is now so fragmented.

Cornelius Ernst (the English Dominican theologian whose untimely death ten years ago we commemorated last month) once said: 'Christianity is the consecration of the genetic moment, the living centre from which it reviews and renews the indefinitely various and shifting perspectives of human experience in history. That, at least, is or ought to be its claim: that it is the power to transform and renew all things.' (See *Multiple Echo*, p. 34.) One of the great strengths of the basic teachings of Christianity is that they oppose fragmentation. The birth that we celebrate at this time of the year forces us to take death seriously, to realise anew that there is more to existence than the now—a realisation necessary for sanity and survival.

But being aware of all that only cerebrally is of little use. In *Images of God* the art critic Peter Fuller, a neo-Marxist and a firm atheist, writes about 'the plight of good art in a society like ours, which is characterised by the absence of a shared symbolic order of the kind that a religion provides'. Today, at least in the West, that 'shared symbolic order' is hard to find even in the Church.

Arguably, Christians are not going to talk about worldly issues (and that includes abortion) in an arresting way—in other words, one that forces other people to think afresh—until those basic teachings of their religion are more adequately integrated into their lives. And how are they going to manage that? Well, for a start we might, for our 1988 New Year resolution, resolve to find out what we can learn from somebody whom we recognize to be a committed Christian but whose understanding of what being a Christian is is clearly very different from our own. That will not immediately raise the quality of the abortion debate, but it might push us into discovering how fragmented has been our *own* way of experiencing the world ... an indispensable start.

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