

ASIAN

HO RIZO NS

Vol. 4, No. 2, December 2010

Book Review

Baiju Julian and Hormis Mynatty, eds., *Catholic Contributions to Bioethics: Reflections on Evangelium Vitae*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2007. Pages: xxii+464. ISBN: 81-7086-408-9.

In the last few decades, advances made in science and technology have changed not only the way we live, think, and relate to others but also the way we understand our bodies, illnesses and health. If biomedical discoveries brought blessings to people, some of them raise serious ethical challenges. Consequently, many people today face moral dilemmas and look for guidance to make informed decisions. Drawing upon the ethical principles the Catholic tradition offers – particularly the 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (the Gospel of Life) of Pope John Paul II- the contributors to this volume examine the various bioethical questions, engage the ongoing debates, and offer scholarly and theologically rich responses.

Baiju Julian and Hormis Mynatty, the volume's editors, have done a commendable job in publishing this valuable book. Composed in a userfriendly language, it will be helpful to pastors and doctors, students and scientists, laypeople and theologians as they deal with these issues at home or work. The book's aim is twofold: to form and inform the Catholics about the biomedical issues and ethical concerns, and, to generate a public discourse that fosters profound respect for life and human dignity.

Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan's 'Foreword' appreciates the authors' efforts, alerts to the inherent dangers in secular ethical stances, and affirms the need to build an ethical discourse that is 'open to the Transcendent' (p.xvi). Introducing the book, Paul Schotsmans wishes that it creates greater awareness among the Catholics on bioethical issues and promotes "dialogue in our pluralist societies" (p.xxi).

The first two chapters, authored respectively by Sabatino Majorano and Felix Podimattam, introduce the encyclical '*Evangelium Vitae*' and the foundational ethical principle, *Sanctity of Human Life*. Majorano sees the encyclical as a prophetic witness, an appeal to all in hope to "respect, love and serve life, every human life" (p. 4)! Podimattam presents the various dimensions of the notion of sanctity of life and its ethical implications. In chapter three *Healthcare in the Face of Commercialization*, Alex Vadakumthala notes that despite commendable progress, market economy and globalization have changed the landscape of Indian healthcare and that the Church

needs to find creative ways to strengthen it. Mathew Illathuparambil in his *Promotion of Life: Claims on Economic Welfare* points to a key component to the discussion on prolife issues – the economy. In *Evangelium Vitae* he finds a link between ‘life’, ‘dignity’ and economy’s impact on them, and, argues for a healthy integration of charity and justice.

The following nine chapters discuss the well-known bioethical issues such as organ donation, abortion, euthanasia and recent concerns emerging from contemporary research. Scaria Kanniyakonil’s *Organ Donation and Transplantation* describes the phenomenon under the principle of totality, exposes its chances of being exploited, and emphasizes the need to foster a culture of organ donation in India. Lukose Kaitharathotty explores the impact of *Biotechnology* on people’s lives and asks if it is a *Blessing or Threat to Humanity*. Noting its promises and inherent ambiguities, he says that it could be “decisive weapon in the struggle against hunger” (p. 140). Chapter seven surveys the field of *Genetic Engineering*, particularly, the Human Genome Project. Acknowledging its capacity to revolutionize human life, Clement Vadakedath warns of its manipulative potential and the possibility of discriminating the disabled and people in employment and insurance sectors.

John Britto’s focus is on *Stem Cell Research*. He makes an objective analysis of the therapeutic applications and evaluates the ethical dilemmas the research involves. Writing on *Abortion*, Thomas Srampickal presents the issue in light of the ensoulment theories and the ongoing debates on the status of embryo and reiterates that the Catholic Church’s stand on abortion is based on the principle of sanctity of life. Lukose Chamakala examines the various types of *Assisted Reproductive Technologies*. In the context of the meaning and value of marriage and procreation, he assesses the benefits of these technologies, and points out how they could endanger human dignity and rights. Writing on *Human Cloning* R.P. Vincent sees it as an emerging challenge. According to him the experimental and commercial motives and its capacity to instrumentalize human person inform the Church’s critique.

In chapter twelve Clement Campos discusses the ongoing debates on *Euthanasia*. Distinguishing between killing and allowing to die, he critiques the views of euthanasia supporters and makes “a proposal for an ethic of dying well” (p. 293). *Death by Choice* is how Hormis Mynatty describes suicide. Reviewing the various types and causes for suicide, he discusses the act’s moral culpability and suggests ways to prevent suicide. *Road Accidents* and *Terrorism* are two new topics on which James Vadakumcherry and Baiju Julian respectively provide initial ethical reflections. Among other things, Vadakumcherry refers to ‘premeditated’ accidents, un-attentive driving, failures to attend to the injured as issues that need ethical discussions even as he calls for a better formation of conscience. Julian defines various types of terrorist activities, their causes and motives, and explores the ways to build peace - incorporating justice, reconciliation and dialogue.

George Therukattil analyses various types of *Cooperation in Unethical Practices* in light of the traditional ethical principles and advocates the need for character formation. In a thought-provoking essay, Felix Podimattam examines *Morality versus Legality*, and notes how they mutually support and intersect. Pointing to the dangers of legalism, he focuses on enabling people who, informed by love, will find ways to fully realize themselves. Drawing upon the *Gita* and the Gandhian notion of Ashram, Kuruvila Pandikattu explores the idea of *Being-at-Home* and finds in it a response to the present ecological crisis – with a call for being at home with the self, other, nature the Divine.

Apart from dozens of typos, the book offers an excellent collection of essays. Next edition would be richer if it could bring in women's voices (all essays by men!) and have an essay on AIDS - a glaring absence in Indian context – and incorporate people's experiences of facing and resolving bioethical dilemmas.

Stanislaus Subba Reddy Alla, S.J. (stanallasj@gmail.com)

PhD student in Theological Ethics, Boston College, USA, alla@bc.edu