Theology in vitro

John Habgood

Begotten or Made? By Oliver O'Donovan.
Clarendon: 1984. Pp.88. Pbk £2.50, \$4.95.

THE debate sparked off by the Warnock Committee report on human fertilization should benefit from this unusual contribution by Professor O'Donovan. As befits the Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology in the University of Oxford he approaches the topic at a high level of generality, in sharp contrast to the pragmatic and piecemeal procedure often favoured by practising scientists. He modestly claims to make no more than a contribution to the discussion, but his main argument, if accepted, would radically change the thrust of much current practice in this field. I hope that scientific readers who find it hard to cope with his style of argument, and in particular with his Christian presuppositions, will nevertheless persevere with the book if only for the sake of the fresh perspective it opens up.

One of the discouraging and perplexing features of many of the moral choices facing medical practitioners is not the fact that difficult decisions have to be made, but the sense that medical practice is part of a vast and seemingly inevitable process of social change. It is the pre-emption of choice which is worrying, and this is why no amount of analysis of particular cases, and no attempts to specify legal limits in relation to this or that technique, can fully resolve the underlying dilemmas. Effective moral comment entails criticism of the cultural assumptions which make it easy and natural to look for one kind of solution to our practical problems in preference to another. Only by tackling the issues at this level is it possible to see, and maybe begin to counteract, the full implications of runaway technology.

The impact of living in a technological culture carries particular threats for the process of human begetting. What distinguishes our relationship with human beings in such an environment is precisely the fact that they are not "made".

A being who is the 'maker' of any other being is alienated from that which he has made, transcending it by his will and acting as the law of its being. To speak of 'begetting' is to speak of quite another possibility than this: the possibility that one may form another being who will share one's own nature, and with whom one will enjoy a fellowship based on radical equality [p.2].

It is this radical equality, this deep set of assumptions about the status and being of persons, which Professor O'Donovan believes is eroded by reproductive techniques which break up the act of begetting into a series of manipulations. If it is objected that science and medicine are doing no

more than to supplement natural processes which have gone wrong, then the reply is that it is precisely this assumption — that every human ill has a technological answer — which in the end threatens our humanity.

The theme is illustrated by reference to trans-sexual surgery, artificial insemination by donor, experimentation on embryos and *in vitro* fertilization. The first of these raises important questions about the degree to which social perceptions of a person's sex can be used to justify surgical interference with the given characteristics of their body. The second highlights the erosion and confusion of the role of parents. The third leads to an illuminating discussion of the meaning of the word "person", and the tendency to convert a concept whose primary reference is ontological and historical into a qualitative term, indicating the possession of a particular quality, "personality". Embryos, on this latter view, do not yet possess personality and so may be experimented on as being interestingly human but not yet persons to be respected. O'Donovan comments,

The orderly chromosome

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Molecular Evolution and Organization of the Chromosome.

By A. Lima-de-Faria.

Elsevier Science: 1984. Pp.1, 186. Dfl. 450, \$191.50.

THE scope of this book is broader than its title might suggest; it provides a reappraisal of genetics and a very individual view of life. Its main weight lies in an extensive review of many aspects of chromosome behaviour, especially those involving interactions between different parts of genomes. The author has for many years promoted the idea of the "chromosome field", the essence of which is that the arrangement of sequences within chromosomes matters for function. There is therefore much emphasis on such topics as *Drosophila* variegation-type position effects, control of the activity of nucleolus-organizer regions, the activity of centromeres and neocentromeres, and inter-chromosomal effects on crossover frequency. None of these has yet been explained in molecular terms, but the

The practice of producing embryos by IVF with the intention of exploiting their special status for use in research is the clearest possible demonstration of the principle that when we start making human beings we necessarily stop loving them; that that which is made rather than begotten becomes something that we have at our disposal...[p.65].

On IVF itself he accepts the arguments for "assisted reproduction", but wonders whether the price in terms of research and risk-taking is morally too high.

This is not a book which will please those who follow their scientific and technological noses wherever the evidence and opportunities lead them. Even a sympathetic reader like myself spattered the margins with question-marks. Its merit is that it raises some fundamental issues about the character of the civilization we are making (the word is significant) for ourselves, in a way which gives current discussions of particular techniques a new sense of urgency. The fact that its title echoes a phrase in one of the Christian creeds, referring to Christ as "begotten not made", is a reminder of the extent to which traditional Western assumptions about the nature and value of human life have been rooted in Christian theology. I suspect that theology still provides the best defence against the dehumanizing tendencies of a technological culture, but it has to be admitted that, humanly speaking, the defence looks uncomfortably fragile. □

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author is quite clear that they are molecular phenomena.

In his preface, Professor Lima-de-Faria remarks that his book is mainly based on the 25,000 reprints in his personal collection, supplemented by over 3,000 photocopies. Many of these have been drawn upon to supply the book's copious tables and figures which, for the most part, appear with legends reproduced verbatim from the originals. This does not always conduce to close integration with the text but at least helps, I suppose, to minimize error. In preparing a book of the magnitude, it is obviously difficult to be up-to-the-minute in every area; of the (approximately) 2,000 references in fact fewer than 10 per cent date from within the past five years. Thus we find only a brief mention of the nucleosome and little or nothing on non-histone proteins, the sequences of eukaryotic promoters and enhancers, methylation and the relationships of all these to states of transcriptional activity and inactivity.

It is clear that Lima-de-Faria's object in writing this book was not only to review a field but also to correct a number of what he sees as misconceived notions in modern biology. In nuclear cytology he considers that much harm has been done by the concept of chromosome *mechanics*. He