

Reviews

AIMING TO KILL: THE ETHICS OF SUICIDE AND EUTHANASIA by Nigel Biggar, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2004, Pp x+220, £10.95 hbk.

On 12 May 2006 the House of Lords voted, by a clear majority, to block a bill that would have legalised assisted suicide in England and Wales. Reacting angrily to this defeat, Deborah Annetts, Chief Executive of Dignity in Dying (formerly the Voluntary Euthanasia Society) claimed that the public were being 'massively turned off' by 'religious opposition' to the bill. In a political context where 'religious' is thus a term of abuse, it is easy to see why many Christians engaging in the euthanasia debate have steered clear of theology and presented their views in purely secular language.

Despite such hostility, or perhaps in answer to it, Nigel Biggar has written a book on euthanasia that appeals explicitly to theological categories. Such an approach has much to recommend it for several reasons: for a start, there are many Christians who are uncertain on these issues or who want to think more deeply about them. The failure to articulate a specifically Christian account can leave them relying on weaker arguments that fail to touch their central beliefs. Furthermore, if believers shy away from developing an explicitly theological account of death, then they will operate according to an implicit theology that is unexamined and perhaps mistaken.

The divergence between unexamined Christian reasons for a view and public secular arguments used to defend that view can also leave secular thinkers attributing a 'hidden agenda' to believers. If non-believers then seek to characterise the hidden theological motivation, they can get it deeply wrong. Christian moral theology is then open to caricature, as unthinking obedience to arbitrary divine decrees, for example. On the other hand, if the actual theological reasons that inspire Christians are made more explicit (the value of every human being as made in the image of God, the example of Christ's concern for the vulnerable, etc.) then it may be possible for non-believers to see connections between these reasons and some of the values they also cherish.

Nigel Biggar has written a serious book which is exemplary as a theological engagement with public policy issues and with the arguments of a range of thinkers both secular and religious. The book is divided into four main chapters. Having set out the traditional Christian stance, Biggar considers contemporary critics under three headings: the value of human life; the morality of acts of killing; and slippery slopes. In each case he outlines the main dozen or half-dozen objections of the critics and then answers these objections one by one. He makes a genuine attempt to find the strongest criticisms and to present them fairly. Sometimes he will agree in part with a critic and will qualify his own view. The structure is thus similar to that of many of the works of Thomas Aquinas and has the same virtue of using criticism to sharpen and clarify a position.

Some of Biggar's responses are profound. For example, in answer to critics who say that we are not obliged to be grateful to God for an unsatisfactory gift, he discusses *The Thin Red Line*. This film presents both the beauty and horror of life, and shows the choice we face between self-protective cynicism and compassionate hope. Biggar's conclusion is not definitive or facile but even in a short space he succeeds in showing that the dismissiveness embodied by the

objector is not adequate to the possibilities of meaning in life. At other times too Biggar is acute, for example in his response to John Harris who identifies human value only in the self-valuing of the individual and the exercise of choice, abstracting from what is being chosen. As Biggar points out, the use of the word 'value' connotes something that 'transcends the choices of human individuals' and purports to be something more than mere preference, or what we would like.

There is much then to praise in this book, in its structure and approach and in many of its concrete judgements. However, there is a flaw at a key point in the book which blights his whole argument. Against Finnis, Grisez, and O'Donovan, Biggar finds the distinction of 'biological' human life and 'biographical' human life both logically defensible and morally relevant. If someone's brain is irreparably damaged so that he or she cannot think, then according to Biggar we should conclude that he or she is no longer a human *person* and no longer part of the human community. Biggar even describes such individuals as 'irretrievably inaccessible to human care' so that it means nothing to protect them from being killed nor therefore (and this is my deduction) to visit, clothe, or feed them. However, I fail to understand how the inability of a sick person to show conscious gratitude for care renders this care meaningless. O'Donovan is surely correct to say that in such cases what we have is ambiguity which some react to by showing human solidarity and others do not. Biggar, so cautious elsewhere, is strangely dogmatic not only about a diagnosis, which is itself often uncertain, but more profoundly about the criteria for exclusion from human solidarity.

It is in part because he has this 'exception' before his eyes that Biggar is unwilling to make universal his opposition to the deliberate killing of the innocent. His final conclusion, that legalising euthanasia should be resisted, is curiously weak, as it seems on the face of it to have 'reduced itself to essentially pragmatic considerations'. He does have an interesting examination of slippery slope arguments, but this does not advance the argument any further than Keown. For all Biggar's effort, the explicitly theological arguments are left curiously idle, while the debate is finally resolved by appeal to the kind of secular arguments already well explored by others. This is an interesting book and worth engaging with, but it is flawed at a crucial point.

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THE GOOD LIFE by Herbert McCabe OP, *Continuum*, London, 2005, Pp. 160, £9.99 pbk.

In *The Good Life*, Herbert McCabe sets out to produce 'a tourist map of what may be to you, and certainly is to many, an unfamiliar piece of intellectual territory – a map offered by someone who finds the landscape congenial' (p. 1). This is an excellent description of the role admirably fulfilled by his text, which leaves the reader with only one major regret, namely that McCabe died before he was able to complete the work.

In his introduction, Brian Davies explains his role as editor and compiler of McCabe's papers into a number of publications, of which this is the third. *The Good Life* is a work in progress, not a finished product. It deals with issues such as the existence of ethical truth, the role of ethics in relation to the existence of God, and the possibility of whether one can have ethical propriety without believing in God. By the time of his death, McCabe had written the preface and first four chapters of a work that he intended to be somewhat longer, and these are included in the present volume, together with two previously unpublished articles that deal with related issues.