

Review: “*New Theology No. 10* (M. E. Marty and D. G. Peerman, eds.)”

By Greg L. Bahnsen

Rounding out a decade of sifting, selecting, and selling the theological novelties of the 60's and early 70's, editors Marty and Peerman have now marketed *New Theology No. 10*. As one might expect when today's celebrated theologians generally *trail* a few years behind secular studies (instead of *heading up* the reform of man's heart, behavior, and society by Christ's gospel), the newest episode of the *New Theology* series takes up the recent questions about biological life that have absorbed our culture (e.g., evolution, ecology, euthanasia, ethics of reproduction). They discuss the ethical and theological issues raised by recent developments in the life sciences – “biotheology,” as they put it (p. vii).

No doubt it would be both appropriate and desirable for theologians with biblical presuppositions to speak from that position on bio-related issues (origins, ethics, eschatology); however, it is lamentable that biotheology appears as a rootless theological fad. The writers for this anthology on *bios* take their direction, not from Christ and His authoritative word, but from Tillich, Teilhard, and contemporary process theologians (all of whom are alluded to with liberality). The effect of their denials of fiat creation, literal incarnation and resurrection, bodily parousia, and scriptural infallibility is that biology has made a transmutation of traditional theology: since human nature can be altered in the laboratory (p. xiv), the concept of God the creator has been altered so that we may speak of man the “co-creator” (p. xviii). Such ideas will evidence a pronounced bearing on ethics and eschatology. The following summary of the authors' views follows my own topical rearrangement.

I. Creation, R. T. Osborn teaches that creation “is a statement about God ‘verified’ in man. It is not in competition with scientific cosmology” (p. 4). As a symbolic model (p. 50) it has the following “epistemological relevance”: “Nature is not the conveyer of God to man,” but “the relationships between God and man is . . . the model for understanding that which exists between man and the world” (p. 9). That relationship is one of freedom, and thus science should thrive on “creative, imaginative reasoning” rather than formal method (pp. 9, 15). Thus religion is now a *patron* of science, since they both aim at humanization: redemption “renews man in his humanity” and witnesses “the deification of man,” while the goal of science “is the humanization of nature” with man as “co-creator with God” (pp. 12, 10). Therefore, the doctrine of creation “is not descriptive but prescriptive” (p. 12): “the world is humanized when it meets man in the unity of freedom” (p. 11) – a statement more poetic than informative.

Wolfgang Pannenberg proposes that a comparison between Tillich's notion of spiritual presence and Teilhard's idea of radical energy will give us the self-transcendence of all organic life (its self-creative and self-integrative activities as they anticipate the final goal of the evolutionary process) as the basis for redefining spiritual reality (pp. 33-34). Even overlooking the manifold ambiguities of his discussion, Pannenberg's attempt to harmonize the ideas of nature and spirit should be seen as actually collapsing the two. Further, his explanation of the

divine Spirit as a field of energy effective in the evolutionary process, a power which raises an organism beyond its limitations, must be judged gratuitous – a last ditch effort to salvage some transcendence for the Spirit in the face of a pervasively immanent motif. He certainly does not retain the spirit's personality and creative sovereignty.

II. *Scientific Engineering.* R. A. McCormick's analysis of the moral literature on genetic medicine is undoubtedly the best article in the anthology. While being informative, lucid, and insightful (the critique of Fletcher is telling), its chief value is as a contemporary illustration of the unresolvable dilemma of all autonomous ethical reasoning: the dispute between teleological and deontological methodologies. Paul Ramsey's two-part article opposes genetic experimentation on the grounds of medical ethics and society's future; however, since his theological position affords him no real ethical authority, his discussion will be significant only to those previously convinced on other grounds.

The other contributors favor scientific intervention and engineering of the life processes. V. R. Potter says that man's inevitable perfection and survival cannot be simply assumed, and thus, while preserving some diversity of life-styles, we must reject cultural *laissez-faire* and permit the nurturing intervention into nature by groups who will foster the world's survival. W. Vrasdonk goes further, declaring that man's sin lies in "fearful refusal to assume responsibility for the future" (p. 127); by contrast, the evolutionary perspective of Teilhard "enables man to create his own future," to "collaborate in the creation of something higher" (pp. 122, 129). Man should be "lord over his existence" and take therefore an active role in eugenics, refraining only when led to do so by "something very deep in him" (p. 129). J. M. R. Delgado handles even that, favoring the "manipulation of the physiological mechanisms of mental and behavioral activities" (p. 171) and says we should not fear it: after all, while the scientist can control *what* emotions you shall have, he cannot dictate the *details* of their behavioral expression, which are conditioned rather by culture (p. 177)! Delgado holds that "the search for absolute values is a fantasy" (p. 182) and that "we should propose mental planning . . . for directing the evolution of future man" (p. 193) – a "central theme for international cooperation" (p. 185). In these attitudes we become acutely aware that man's power over nature can be readily perverted into the power of some men over others without the restraints of God's words; the *vicegerent* arrogates to himself *divine* prerogatives.

III. *Eschatology.* In addition to scientific engineering, the anthology offers two other vehicles for bringing in "the kingdom." In a bizarre article based on Teilhard's view of the universalization of love, Sister M. R. Penrose explains "that virginity is not just a sign of the Parousia, but is an integral and vital element in that movement which will bring it into reality" (p. 148). A virginal life, lived authentically, is "realized eschatology" (p. 152) as well as the way to discover your own uniqueness: "We cannot be fully personalized without being totalized" (p. 145) – an utterance we should politely assume to be intended as noncognitive. In a quite different vein Daphne Nash rails against the traditional nuclear family as an oppressive, myth-mongering, reactionary social force that perpetuates a repressive capitalist economy and political system (pp. 155, 157, 158). Being the immediate site of women's oppression and chief support of capitalism, "in the process of the struggle for the final liberation (or the kingdom), the nuclear family must go" (p. 160) and all political action should systematically make it "impossible for the capitalist system to function any longer" (p. 162). Contrary to both Penrose and Nash, God's word presents the child-bearing, nuclear family as an agency for godliness and promoting God's kingdom in the world. The family is central to both the creation covenant ("be fruitful and multiply . . .") and the redemptive covenant (hence the covenant sign is administered to children) as God's people subdue and disciple the world. Scripture certainly does not disdain the child-bearing family (e.g., Eph. 5:22-6:4; Matt. 19:14-15) or private property (cf. Ex. 20:15).

IV. *Death.* Under this category should be included R. C. Wahlbert's essay on abortion. This sole article on the topic takes as its starting point "the existential, experimental reality of carrying a fetus" (p. 130) and concludes that, since the fetus is a subhuman parasite that victimizes a woman against her will (pp. 134-135, 138) and since the fetus is "one Flesh" with her own body (pp. 134, 136), the woman herself must

be free to decide for abortion. D. Maguire argues that, because death is a process difficult to define (not a moment), "in certain cases, direct positive intervention to bring on death may be morally permissible" (p. 195): e.g., medical euthanasia (pp. 191-193) and personal suicide (pp. 195-197). The anthology (appropriately) closes with a dialectical meditation upon death as the key to authentic existence (p. 202) by J. M. Sullivan. He says "life is an absolute. But in that great mystery of Christianity the journey to Life is routed through the heart of humanity and an acceptance of certain death" (p. 210) – and to be sure his article, just as this vague statement, *makes it a mystery!*

The anthology as a whole is an uneven collection: uneven in viewpoints represented (nothing evangelical), in topics selected (does a Marxist critique of the family count as a *biotic* issue?), in choice of spokesmen (from prominent Pannenberg to Sister Penrose), in distribution of space (a full half of the book deals only with eugenic themes), and in the attitudes set forth within each category (e.g., no critique of evolution, abortion, euthanasia, brain-manipulation).

We conclude by noting the editors' commentary on the current state of theology. Over the past ten years they detect two main theologies: secular and transcendent (pp. x, 212); in the future they anticipate increased emphasis upon religious *experience* (p. 212). They admit systematic theology is in an unhealthy state: "practitioners seem often to be casting about aimlessly . . . there seems to be a sterility to so much of their specialized work . . . there was a sense of exhaustion: everything has been tried" (pp. xi, 212). It is ironic that, in light of this admission, Marty and Peerman go on to declare: "There are evangelical theologians of note, but who in the culture needs to cope with their thought?" (p. xii). Such a comment certainly explains the dire state of the "new theologies" – if not also reflecting upon the ineffectiveness of evangelicals in presenting the challenge of Christ's word.