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weeks after conception, Curran opposes any attempt to pass a constitutional amendment to overcome the 1973 Supreme Court decision. Concerning the public funding of abortion, Curran suggests that just as pro-life groups, hoping to curtail abortions, should assure pregnant women the “medical, psychological, economic and social care necessary to bring the child to term and care for the child,” so also pro-choice groups could organize to raise necessary funds for elective abortions (p. 247). The author proclaims his sympathy with those who object to having their tax monies used to finance abortion, but he finally reluctantly approves of public funding for elective abortions for the poor because he believes “in respecting as much as possible the existing pluralisms in our society” (p. 247).

There is much here to ponder or to applaud; but there is also much to question. One would like to have Curran by one’s side while reading the book so that he might be periodically prodded to greater precision. Not every stance Curran takes is solidly or validly rooted in the past; on occasion one sees more transition than tradition in his thinking. All things considered, however, he is often most helpful in creating a living tradition, a modification of Catholic tradition “in light of contemporary realities and the eschatological pull of the future” (p. xiv).

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*Aborting America*

Bernard Nathanson, M.D. with Richard N. Ostling


This is probably the most important book published on the abortion issue since the infamous Supreme Court decision of Jan. 22, 1973. Its importance goes beyond the *apologia* of a man of science, although Nathanson finds all of the cliche pro-abortion arguments to be unsupportable by scientific evidence or close personal experience with the act of abortion. The book is equally important because it gives us insights into tactics and strategies of the early political movement to achieve the legalization of abortion in the United States. The book is, therefore, like a combination of *The God That Failed* and *The Penkovsky Papers*. It tells us something of both the author himself who has seen the light and his former allies who still hide the light under a bushel.

There is little doubt that Dr. Bernard Nathanson has had more personal experience with abortion than almost any other physician in America. If he were merely an abortionist, however, the importance of his defection would be less momentous. He was, in fact, much more than a busy abortionist. He was the only physician among a small handful of social reformers who founded and subsequently operated the enormously successful National Association for the Repeal...
of Abortion Laws (NARAL). As Chairman of the Medical Committee for
NARAL, he was deeply involved in the public perpetuation of the same mythol-
gies and deliberate falsehoods which he now airily dismisses as unscientific and
incapable of tolerating careful scrutiny. We can be grateful for the intellectual
honesty which leads Dr. Nathanson to make this public recantation. It would be
incorrect to say that he has arrived at a pro-life position which is intellectually
legitimate, however. (For example, he opts for defining life as beginning at
implantation for purposes of abortifacient contraception and as beginning at con-
ception when we are discussing in-vitro fertilization.) He admits that he continues
to do what he recognizes as the “destruction of human life” by performing “a few
abortions a year” and he continues to use some rather cynical rationalizations
concerning how the society might adapt to and circumvent a Human Life Amend-
ment. By and large, Dr. Nathanson “tells it like it is.” He points out that his
present reformation has nothing to do with religious insights. He remains a con-
vinced atheist, more bored than angered by those who would see a religious
dimension to the issue of abortion. He was, as he says, “a willing recruit... not
mesmerized, brainwashed or deceived.” He never believed that NARAL was
lobbying for anything less than the total abolition of all restrictions on abortion.
Having arrived at a point where most pro-life physicians begin, Dr. Nathanson con-
tinues to deny that he was ever persuaded by anyone’s arguments except his own.
Though he has obviously plagiarized the rationale of anti-abortion scientists, he
has only contempt for the “Pro-Life Movement.”

One of the most successful strategies of the NARAL was to portray the anti-
abortion majority which unquestionably existed in the 1960’s as representing only
a Catholic pressure group. According to Nathanson, Lawrence Lader emerges as
the architect of this strategy. As represented in quotes attributed to him by
Nathanson, Lader also emerges as a particularly virulent anti-Catholic bigot. Lader
is quoted as describing the Catholic hierarchy as “the biggest single obstacle to
peace and decency in all of history.” Nathanson admits that the branding of all
opposition to abortion as Roman Catholic was an attempt to stir up anti-Catholic
prejudice which he considered at the time to be “necessary political strategy.”
The decade of anti-Catholic mongering described and detailed in this book is
surely one of the saddest episodes in the history of religious intolerance in the
United States. It continues to flourish but it begins to lose its credibility as
evangelical Protestants start to assume leadership in the pro-life movement nation-
wide.

Dr. Nathanson points with pride to the low maternal mortality rate achieved in
his New York “Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health” (a euphemistic title
for his abortion chamber which now makes even Nathanson cringe). It is likely
that the New York mortality statistics (some real and some contrived) were an
important consideration in the Blackmun decision. Behind the pseudo-respectable
facade of the clinic, however, there is the same scandalous story of abuses and
unconscionable medical practice recently detailed in the Chicago Sun-Times-better-
government expose. The abortionists are described by Barbara Pyle, administrator
of the Center, as follows: “And speaking of doctors, they are atrocious. I mean we
get everything, you name it. Sadists, drunks, incompetents, sex-manics, butchers,
and lunatics and nobody to tell them anything. . . . I mean half of them don’t
even wash their hands anymore, let alone scrubbing. They refuse to use masks or
caps and their moustaches are dragging in the suction machines. . . . One guy
refused to take the cigar out of his mouth while doing abortions.”

For their incompetence, this wholesome group was paid up to $2,000 per day
for doing abortions.

The sordidness of the clinic operation extended to the laboratory support
system as well. All pathology reports were stamped “pregnancy tissue” even when
samples of liver tissue were sent to entrap the lab in its fabrications.

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For those physicians who have been in the forefront of the pro-life movement, Dr. Nathanson’s grudging concessions will be a grim satisfaction and an additional vindication. It should be required reading for all the backsliders, fence-straddlers, and mugwumpers who have remained aloof from the battle while claiming to be “personally opposed.” Dr. Nathanson has produced the ultimate “reductio ad absurdum” to those who profess to see two sides to the abortion issue.

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