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Cathedral (Book Review)

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continue in dialogue with the individuals and institutions concerned" (p. 90).

The chapter on Genetic Engineering is rather weak, partly because he does not understand the biology of DNA and chromosomes. The discussion of eugenics is rather limited in scope and lacks clear perspective. Although he does not speak to the issue of abortion in a separate chapter, he indicates in this chapter that when a mother has had a Downs Syndrome child, in subsequent pregnancies he would advocate abortion! He feels that this would be the most "loving" thing to do because it would save the family from stress and the taxpayer another financial burden. This seems to be in direct conflict with the concept that each person is made in the image of God, a concept the author is well acquainted with.

He approves genetic engineering because "it is in keeping with God's will of love" (p. 98). I think he is misguided in his opinion that "Each one of us can be responsible for our own genes which infect or endow our offspring. . . . It is our duty to pass on to our children healthy genes" (*idem*). Biological scientists are well aware of the fact that we do not hold our genetic fate in our own hands. One could wish that the author were better informed about the biological aspect of these questions. Within this context it is also questionable whether it is right to place his concept of love (the willing of the well-being of oneself and others) above the principle of the sanctity of life.

Chapter nine deals with communicating with patients *in extremis*. Should a patient be told the truth about his condition when he is seriously ill? He indicates that all communication should be sensitively done, must be meaningful, and should aim to maintain hope.

The title of chapter ten is "The Ethics of Suicide." He deals first with some statistics and types. He then indicates the causes for suicide to include first of all depression but also "loneliness, isolation, inability to give or receive love, desire to avoid disgrace, desire for revenge, pressure and competition, and a sense of total failure" (p. 115). Although the church generally is opposed to suicide, he feels that there is no adequate theology of this subject. I am uncomfortable with his position that "When a person become incurably ill, unproductive, and a victim of an intolerable quality of life, and death is the one means of relief, the individual may be morally justified to choose to self-destruct" (p. 122).

Cathedral by Raymond Carver; Knopf; 228 pages; \$13.95. Reviewed by Prof. James C. Schaap, Department of English.

Raymond Carver's characters live in a world where there is no community—no church, no family, no ethnicity. As a result they suffer a terrifying loneliness felt intensely by the reader but rarely understood or experienced by the characters. It is a loneliness that shows

Who is to say when a life is unproductive? And is death ever the only means of relief? And who decides that the quality of life is intolerable? The principle of the sanctity of life should play a greater part in this discussion than the author allows.

In the chapter on death the author's emphasis is on the patient's right to die with dignity, which he identifies with the term "euthanasia." While the concept is appropriate, this use of the term seems somewhat confusing since it makes many people think of mercy killing. His position is somewhat ambivalent, leaning toward indirect euthanasia. He states: "My own position on terminally ill dying is identified with 'kalosthansia.' . . . The term thus identifies a death that is morally right, dignified, and does not shock one's esthetic sense" (p. 130). He further states: "The issue of passive euthanasia is becoming more acceptable to the general public in this country. But this is not the only issue involved in prolonging life. Rather, along with ethical issues are socioeconomic ones. Costs of research, technological equipment, and health care costs continue to burgeon. Who is going to pick up the tab?" (p. 132). While his concern is legitimate, we should be careful not to let the cost determine whether a person should live.

The twelfth chapter is somewhat different, dealing with "Humor as a Therapeutic Tool in the Healing Process." The author sees it as being useful in history taking, indicating therapy needs, inducing better sleeping, giving clearer perspective, coping with loss of autonomy and self-esteem, and relieving stress and strain. He warns, however, that it can also be damaging. "To be ethical in therapist-patient relationships, humor must be spontaneous, sincere, and never at the expense of the patient, his relatives, friends, or other patients. . . . [It] should be that which will edify both therapist and client" (p. 145).

In the Epilogue the author lists ten pages of bibliography of related readings. In the three appendices we find the Oath of Hippocrates, the Prayer of Moses Maimonides, Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Facilities, a Patient's Bill of Rights, an Ad Hoc Committee Definition of Brain Death, and A Living Will. These are followed by a three-page index.

I recommend this book for those interested in theorizing about medical ethics. Those looking for firm, biblical answers and practical applications may be disappointed.

up in the isolation of their own moral vision, the inability to distinguish between or, more importantly, even care about right and wrong.

A character named Lloyd in "Careful," for instance, by mutual consent leaves his wife and takes an apart-

ment. Dizzied by the contrast between his unforeseen freedom and the decay of an old commitment, his life stumbles along as if it were only slightly out of his control. One night, he tries to recount what he had done that day: "Then he remembered eating those doughnuts and drinking champagne. Time was when he would have considered this a mildly crazy thing to do, something to tell friends about. Then, the more he thought about it, the more he could see it didn't matter much one way or the other."

What is strange about Carver's characters, however, is that such a realization rarely leads them to any cosmic conclusions. There are no believers in these stories, but there are no angry nihilists either. Carver's people are floaters, men and women who might stagger blindly through mine fields without being touched—and without even knowing that the world is blowing up around them. They live in low-ceilinged rooms, and they rather readily accept the constant crook in their necks.

But occasionally some of them do catch a glimpse of something greater than their own meager perceptions, and when they do Carver accomplishes great things. The title story concerns a man who regrets his wife's asking a blind man to stop over for a visit. Yet, late in the evening, after his wife has already fallen asleep in front of the TV, he attempts to show the blind man the outline of a cathedral by drawing it on a grocery bag, the blind man's hand firmly placed over his own. The result is a beautiful moment of shared concern and revelation: "So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now." Such moments verify the humanity of his people, pump needed refreshment into the stories' otherwise arid landscapes.

And such moments are somewhat new to Carver. In

two earlier collections, moments of epiphany or revelation, significant treks toward meaning, rarely occurred. In story after story, Carver showed his mastery of the single, dynamic event—as symbol. In *Cathedral*, the event remains, but meaning dawns as well.

On the page, Carver gives us no reason to care at all for his characters, except one—his own regard for them. He is mercilessly tight in his description, and he has an exceptional ear for conversation and the great ability to move into the minds of people, pick up their off-centeredness, and convince us of their reality. A landlady in an Arizona apartment house writes her name on fifty dollar bills and imagines the reaction of people who get the bills in Las Vegas or New Orleans. A farm couple quibble about whether or not they should let their pet peacock into the house when guests are around. When a freezer stops working, the wife of an unemployed husband decides to cook as much as she can to save the meat. Strange things happen to and within his characters, and yet Carver has a way of making them vivid and believable without turning them into grotesques. They are not a handsome lot, these folks, but Carver makes them baldly human and absolutely convincing.

Raymond Carver has been slowly gaining national prominence since the publication of three major collections, and he has done it by sticking faithfully to the short story form. With his latest collection, *Cathedral*, he has taken a step beyond the limits of his previous collections. In *Cathedral* one senses the definite possibility of revelation in the lives of characters who formerly appeared woefully short of the ability to realize anything about themselves and their world.

In his collection Carver creates within his characters some real possibilities for growth. In so doing, he has come even closer to achieving the mastery that has been evident potentially in his earlier work.