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## The Agonizing Choice: Birth Control, Religion and the Law by Norman St. John-Stevas

(Indiana University Press; 340 pp.; \$10.00)

Gordon Zahn

Conservative and Catholic, in many ways Britain's counterpart of our own William F. Buckley, Jr., Mr. St. John-Stevas has provided us with a competent and comprehensive recapitulation of the great birth control controversy within the Roman Catholic Church. As might be expected, principal attention is given to its course in England and America; and at times it seems to narrow down to a personal account of the author's own private "agony." This clearly enhances rather than diminishes the book's value. Widely regarded as one of the rising stars among the Tory members of Parliament (political success is one of the ways in which he differs from Buckley), and at the same time widely respected as a prominent Catholic layman and intellectual, he knew that his decision to take a public stand against the traditional Church condemnation of contraceptive practices would be seen by many as a kind of betrayal of the Faith.

Others, of course—most notably the outspoken former Archbishop of Bombay, Thomas D. Roberts, S.J.—had gone on record before him. But their association with a range of "far-out" or "left-wing" causes rendered them suspect. No such liability would lessen the impact of St. John-Stevas upon the British public once he took to the lecture platform and television screen to announce and explain his new position.

Here, we are treated to a chronology and analysis of the controversy. Following a brief and necessarily superficial survey of the history of birth control practices and the laws, secular and ecclesiastical, which sought to keep them under control or forbid them altogether,

St. John-Stevas moves on to what he terms "the Catholic Revolution" set off by the introduction of the contraceptive pill. As is so often the case, the fires of this "Revolution" were fanned by defenders of the established order—in Britain, by ecclesiastical officialdom's efforts to stifle the developing discussion of such a critical moral issue with the declaration that contraception by whatever means was "not an open question, for it is against the law of God."

The increasingly heated debates escalated into near schism in July, 1968, with the issuance of Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*. The whole tragic story is told here in careful detail—the appointment by Paul of an "expert" commission to assist him, the arrival at a majority decision in favor of revision, which was pushed aside by the diehard traditionalist minority, and the openly rebellious reactions to the final published document and the punitive measures of varying severity that were threatened or actually undertaken by national hierarchies in response to those reactions. Prominent attention is given to the inflexible, hard-line policy of Cardinal O'Boyle of Washington, D.C., some of whose priests continue under censure today because they have been unable to accommodate their consciences to that prelate's definition of ecclesiastical rights and responsibility.

One might suggest that this book and its contents do not fully justify its title or, at least, no longer do so. Many will find the whole issue much too parochial: those non-Catholics unable to see the agony in a choice most other Christians made some time ago; Catholics bored with a controversy that has clearly run its

course (in Europe and America at least). The newly rediscovered primacy of the individual conscience has been incorporated into questions and decisions relating to sex and family morality, in many cases serving as *ex post facto* justifications for what had already been general practice. Besides, at a time when the Church's teachings concerning abortion are coming under serious challenge by the new feminists, arguments for or against the Pill no longer stir much excitement.

This is not to say the book has lost its value, however. On the contrary, this deliberate and detailed study serves to spotlight two associated but hidden issues which may be of greater, certainly of more immediate, importance. The first is obvious enough: it relates to population growth as a world problem. In areas *outside* of Europe and America where papal directives and episcopal endorsements still carry significant weight—areas, it scarcely needs to be noted, where the problem is most threatening—there will continue to be political strains and controversies over proposals for governmental (sometimes international) programs of population control by means of subsidized contraception. A final chapter, "World Population Growth and Christian Responsibility," addresses itself to relationships that are not sufficiently recognized or honored by Christians, especially Catholic Christians, in spite of all the papal admonitions to look upon international development as "the new word for peace."

Overriding even this in importance is the second hidden issue, the question of authority itself. St. John-Stevas does not ignore this, but his principal concentration upon the more limited and obvious contraception issue keeps it pretty much in the background. A situation in which learned theologians, ordinary priests and pastors, and untrained laymen dare to challenge or ignore papal and episcopal directives is significant in two respects. On the one hand it reflects changes in the ecclesiastical structures that have taken place in the past decade or so, largely due to

John XXIII and Vatican II. At the same time it anticipates further and more far-reaching changes to come as the currently limited rebellion moves from authority and its proper limits with respect to contraceptive practices to other areas of previously unchallenged episcopal prerogative.

Not only the changes themselves but the effects they will have merit serious concern. If Pope and bishop can no longer "command the obedience" of individual Catholics on an issue like contraception with its long history of clear-cut theological condemnations, this could produce in them a prudent disinclination to provide any authoritative moral directives regarding the social behavior of the faithful. Or, a development greatly to be preferred in my opinion, this sad experience might persuade them to redefine their role to one of providing guidance in the formation of fully informed but independently activated consciences instead of demanding abject conformity to edicts and inflexible judgments imposed from above.

That such shift in the mode in which the *magisterium* is exercised is preferable to withdrawal from secular controversy should be obvious to Christian social activists. If organized religion is to have any real impact upon secular affairs or to operate as a potential source of restraint upon immoral or amoral governments, it is to those activists' advantage that ecclesiastical leadership in the new mode be made as effective as possible. One cannot call for formal opposition to patently immoral modern wars or to racism in America or elsewhere and take much comfort from the picture that emerges from the pages of this book of an authority structure that seems to have lost effective control of individuals theoretically subject to it. Perhaps for all the "agony" it has meant to those most deeply involved in the contraception controversy, we may yet draw from it a lesson that had to be learned.

And that lesson, needless to say, can extend to other authority structures as well. Demands for a fuller

recognition of the rights and power of the individual conscience of the *citizen* could have the same profound impact upon the State and temporal rulers as that discovery by the believer has already held for the Church and its official spokesmen. The eclipse of authority in the religious sphere resulting from the expansion of independent religious commitment holds a very real promise (or threat, depending on one's perspective) that expectations of overzealous loyalty or unquestioning obedience held by secular magistrates may soon suffer the same fate. All of which may seem to be far removed from the topic of this book and the objectives set for it by its eminent author. If so, let the fact that it did provoke such extended reflections, even if only in the mind of one reader, be taken as still another point to its credit.

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