

***The Heart and the Abyss: Preventing Abortion***

**by Ward Biemans, SJ**

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391 pages, bibliography and index, ISBN 978-1-925138-96-2

The excellent title of this book expresses the terrible depths to which a culture must sink to glorify a “right” to kill the most innocent and defenseless human beings. Much of the world has indeed sunk into a moral abyss regarding abortion. Ward Biemans has written a rather encyclopedic work on abortion. Although his initial focus is limited to the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, he brings together voluminous insights on many topics surrounding abortion from empirical scientific research, philosophical reflection, international political and juridical milestones, and the historical development of Catholic theology. Throughout the text, he also demonstrates a keen insight into the human tragedy surrounding the killing of preborn babies and presents ways to prevent induced abortion and provide healing after abortion.

The book continually references the thought of Paul Ricoeur. Biemans states in the introduction that “the structure of this study is based on a moral philosophical framework developed by Paul Ricoeur, which makes it possible to integrate empirical, social scientific data with ethical and theological presuppositions” (13–14). Those interested in the application of Ricoeur’s ideas to the issues of abortion and the human embryo, such as the transition from values to relevant norms, will have an additional reason to read this work.

This book will also be very helpful to scholars whose areas of research touch on the human embryo. For Dutch speakers, a fifteen-page summary at the end is a welcome

addition. Readers will notice as they progress through the book that the author is not a native English speaker, although the meaning of the text is always clear. Biemans strives for academic rigor almost to a fault. He describes eleven different methodological problems with scientific studies on the psychological effects of procured abortion (117). He also makes an excellent point that many so-called empirical studies relating to abortion have questionable scientific validity because of methodological and ideological issues. At the same time, one should not make the perfect the enemy of the good, and I find him too cautious when he claims that, because of methodological problems with many studies, it is premature to affirm the link between abortion and breast cancer (151). In fact, as Biemans points out, most of the methodological flaws are in studies that contradict the increased risk of breast cancer among women who have had abortions.

One of Bieman’s main and most convincing arguments is that the reality of abortion in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom is very far from the spirit and the letter of the laws which partially de-penalized abortion in those countries. It is indeed shocking that over 90 percent of abortions in the United Kingdom are authorized on the grounds that the continuation of the pregnancy poses a serious threat to the woman’s mental health (130). The author shows categorically that most scientific studies indicate that the greatest threats to the mental health

of a woman with an unwanted pregnancy are abortion and not carrying the child to term. Despite the many abuses regarding abortion in the Netherlands, it is surprising to see what safeguards do exist, such as a five-day waiting period before the procedure. There is even an obligation in Dutch abortion counseling to discuss the alternatives, although studies show that this rarely happens in practice (75).

The author shows that national abortion statistics over time absolutely contradict the ridiculous assertion of some pro-abortion activists that legalization will somehow actually lead to a reduction in the number of abortions. Greater availability and access simply generate more abortions. It is remarkable that so obvious a conclusion even has to be proved, but deception and prevarication surround the abortion debate. Biemans also points to convincing studies that such measures as parental-involvement laws and simple increases in the cost of abortions lead to a significant decline in abortion numbers.

Biemans mentions a Jesuit international meeting as a motivation for writing this book. His discussion of Catholic teaching over the centuries is quite well done. It is especially interesting to see how scientific discoveries in the field of embryology have influenced the development of Catholic doctrine (256). At numerous places in the book, the author makes helpful references to the issue of conscience in the abortion debate, and he

provides a summary of the Christian interpretation of conscience over the centuries. Unexpectedly, he looks fairly extensively at Catholic teachings on birth control, particularly those found in *Humanae vitae*, showing the progressive deepening of the theological objections to contraception culminating in Pope St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. It is a bit curious, however, that Biemans chose to cite Charles Curran's views of John Paul II's teaching twice in that brief section (290–291). Generally speaking, Biemans is quite evenhanded in presenting the thought of both supporters and critics of abortion.

*The Heart and the Abyss* lives up to its title. We find ourselves in an era when objectivity and compassion are rare commodities, especially when discussing abortion. Ward Biemans has provided a solid contribution to our understanding of the current state of the wider philosophical, scientific, and political debate surrounding abortion as well as the concrete situations in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

JOSEPH MEANEY

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### ***Keeping Faith with Human Rights***

by **Linda Hogan**

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240 pages, bibliography and index, ISBN 978-1-162616-233-4

Linda Hogan is the chief academic officer and a professor of ecumenics at Trinity College Dublin. Her book is an ambitious attempt to promote respect for a whole panoply of human rights: first and foremost, the “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations” established by the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 as well as other rights that

have emerged since that time (1). The UN Declaration of Human Rights emphasizes civil and political rights but also includes social and economic rights. The new rights emphasized by Hogan are “civil and political rights for gay, lesbian, transsexual, and bisexual persons” (76).

Right at the beginning of her book, Hogan directs her readers' attention to the fact that