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Family: A Christian Social Perspective, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000. \$17.00. 170 pages. ISBN: 0800632524

In Family: A Christian Social Perspective, theological ethicist Lisa Cahill offers an eloquent, academically-rich antidote to those who paint the contemporary family crisis in narrow moral terms. Drawing significantly on the results of the Lilly-funded Religion, Family, and Culture Project (perhaps even more than she acknowledges), Cahill proposes a strong moral agenda, while also making clear that the family “crisis” is not primarily a problem of personal immorality, resolvable completely by curbing rampant individualism and declining marital commitment. Genuine restoration of the family will require a far more difficult transformation—the “redistribution of social assets” (5).

This simple one-phrase rendering of Cahill’s position should not obscure the complexity of her proposal or her careful, sometimes dense, analysis of its Christian sources. She promotes “an inclusive and supportive approach” that holds up long-standing Christian ideals (e.g., male-female coparenting, sexual fidelity) while not berating other types of family (e.g, single parents, gay and lesbian families) (p. xi). This is not a rubber-stamp approval of strong families. Christianity and social history itself prove that families can foster hierarchies of privilege and even arrogance, condemnation, and violence as equally as compassion and the common good. A Christian family ethic then must strengthen families that promote the latter while averting the propensity toward the former. In a nutshell, a “Christian family defines *family values* as care for others, especially the poor” (p. 135, her emphasis).

Although arguments for a more inclusive altruism can be made inductively and through public consensus, the Christian tradition provides essential resources. In addition to examining the early Christian tradition, Cahill evaluates the contributions of three affirmations of the family “as church”—Chrysostom, Luther, and the Puritans—according to whether they support reciprocity and equality internal to the family and compassionate, sacrificial outreach to those beyond. Her favored option, however, is the Catholic sacramental metaphor of the family as “domestic church,” an idea that first took root in Chrysostom and experienced resurgence in the past two decades.

In a penultimate chapter, Cahill expands this ideal and moves the discussion into a forum more sensitive to race, intercultural issues, and economics by turning to African American interpretations which embody a Christian ethic linking local efforts to stabilize families with regional institutions and national support. This chapter adopts the least critical “listening” mode, appreciating the strengths of the extended family but hesitant to raise questions about its erosion or about thorny issues, such as abuse, sexism, and homophobia in black churches. Perhaps this careful approach is justified for many reasons, not the least of which is that this chapter represents a new venture for Cahill. The rest of the book, although rich with new material, reiterates ideas largely covered in two earlier books.

Throughout the book, Cahill returns to a common theme that unites her work: the centrality of the Christian ethic of “love of neighbor, care for the poor, and table fellowship with the stranger” (6). The primary responsibility of Christian families is, in short, to serve the common good. The bottom line in judging all articulations of

Christian family values is their transformative social impact in accord with Christian ideals embracing the poor, despised, and outcast in light of the reign of God.

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