
This thought-provoking book has its origins in the author’s tenure of the William Leech Professorial Research Fellowship in Applied Christian Theology. Its contents have been delivered as lectures and seminars in various places. It is to the author’s credit that while displaying the clarity of thought and rigour of argument that those forums require the chapters themselves conceal their origins and read as the elegant working of a sustained train of thought on a substantial theological topic. The book offers more than its title seems to promise since as well as dealing with classical theologians of Catholicism and more recent theological figures of the Reformed Churches it also devotes considerable space to contemporary philosophers, political thinkers and economic theorists. The treatment of this array of material is always fair and interesting. Sagovsky does not spare his dialogue partners cogent criticism. This can be quite sharply and appositely expressed but only after he has given a respectful account of a particular author’s thought.

Sagovsky is concerned to establish a theology rather than a theory of justice. Nevertheless even applied theology has recourse to abstract speculation on the areas it seeks to put into practice. Sagovsky engages his reader from the beginning in an opening chapter offering an account of the dilemmas of justice and its practice in ancient Greek drama. Even an age unlike our own in its way of life and mentality posed questions as to what justice is and how it is to be enacted that demonstrate how acute questions of living well have always been. This chapter is followed by expositions of the diverse thinking of Greek philosophers in their attempts to codify the nature of justice and its demands, the quandaries posed in the Hebrew scriptures and Christian gospel, the struggles of St Augustine to be true to an interior sense of justice, the justice of God and to Christian truth, and the impressive system of ordered justice elaborated by St Thomas to take account of right action in every sphere as a gift of God to humanity created in the divine likeness.

These chapters form the first part of the book, five of its eleven chapters. The tone of writing is well adapted to the material being considered. It is lucid throughout and Sagovsky is at pains to present what may be matter unfamiliar to some in an accessible and interesting way. The first chapter bears witness to the value of ancient writings for contemporary theology and demonstrates why thinking about justice needs to be subtle, alert to the whole range of possibilities, and comprehensive in its responses – the sort of qualities necessary for good theology of any sort and much in evidence here.
Alongside the classical authors Sagovsky turns his sympathetic and critical eye to the Bible with its positive account of the justice of God as one element of the Hebrew Scriptures, in apparent conflict with instances of apparent divine injustice to particular individuals. The author insists that the travails of Hagar, Ishmael, Isaac, Jephthah’s daughter and Job need to be pondered in the light of Jesus, the just one, who submitted to the injustice done to him out of political necessity and died on the cross.

The second half of the book deals systematically with the strands that require a place in a theology of justice. These have been discovered in the thinkers dealt with in the first five chapters and are explored in more depth in chapters whose titles indicate what these strands are: freedom, the rule of law, the meeting of need and responsible action. These chapters call on Rawls, Sen, Nussbaum, Bonhoeffer and others to help Sagovsky make his point. They also display one of this book’s weaknesses, which is the author’s failure to make wholly plain to the reader what the purpose of this material is, its connection with the earlier chapters and how they contribute to a theology rather than a theory of justice. The last point becomes plain as the book progresses, with some helpful summaries at the beginning of later chapters but the reader often has to guess that the author believes that authors inspired by thinkers of the Enlightenment and by the Aristotelian tradition are recognisably theologians or their thought theological. The book would have been stronger for clearer guidance as to what is meant by ‘revelation’, ‘theology’ and ‘tradition’, especially as it is offered as a contribution to ecumenical dialogue, particularly with respect to the demands for just action made on believers by the Eucharist.

This is the topic of the final chapter and Sagovsky makes a good case for his position. For Christians the model of the just person is Jesus and the strands to be included in a theology of justice are visible in his teaching, his signs, the manner of his death and his glorification. It may have been better if this chapter had been more obviously prepared for in earlier sections of the book. This would have given it a firmer sense of climax and made it a more striking culmination of the author’s thought.

Justice is an abstract notion demanding personal as well as institutional action. From that point of view, what Sagovsky says about human dignity could have been drawn together more systematically as part of a more developed and visible Christian anthropology. These concepts too need to become central matters of ecumenical dialogue for the sake of religious as well as civil liberty, so that the depths of humanity’s relationship with God may be presented as central to the gospel that the Churches are together offering the contemporary world.