Lisa Sowle Cahill


Lisa Sowle Cahill’s recent book aims to provide the reader with ‘reasons for Christian commitment to justice’ and ‘to show why just action is necessarily a criterion of authentic Christian theology’ (p. 1). In doing so, Cahill draws on a wealth of research in biblical studies, systematic theology, ethics, political theory and social theory resulting in a cohesive and compelling work. The opening chapter on the politics of salvation argues that the reality of the incarnation of God in Jesus illuminates the embodied and therefore socio-political dimensions of faith. Therefore, theology must include praxis as a normative criterion because of the centrality of embodied existence within Christian experience. The emphasis on the corporeal and political is brought together with insights from pragmatism as a resource for both theology and ethics. Cahill envisages a threefold connection between pragmatist philosophy and her own work: first, the affirmation that a self is socially constituted; secondly, the word truth does not merely denote a symbol system or set of practices, but refers ‘to the correspondence between reality and a perception about reality’ in a relation of agreement; thirdly, such truths engage with, affect and are affected by human realities and relationships (pp. 13–16). From this starting point and in concert with a theologically sensitive, historical-critical approach to the biblical materials Cahill proceeds in subsequent chapters to work through several key doctrines and outline their impact on a politically engaged Christian ethic.

The first doctrinal locus formally addressed deals with the biblical narratives of creation and sin. With a thorough textual analysis of the biblical materials, Cahill interprets the biblical narratives of creation to offer ample theological material for a fruitful discussion on the dynamics of evil and the possibility of redemption. Cahill highlights that the violence inherent in the evolutionary process of the development of life coheres with the biblical materials in a way which calls a pristine original creation, free from all hurt or suffering, into question. The early narratives in Genesis highlight that before the myth of original sin, humanity still had to subdue a creation which was unruly, give it order through naming, and participate in the overcoming of an original chaos which precedes the divine activity of the creator. While the creative act does not have the violence inherent within it as comparative myths of the ancient world, there is still a need to create and sustain life-giving relationships. In fact, Cahill states that ‘moral evil is the failure to avoid or minimize the harm that plurality and contingency can cause’ (p. 48). The divine image is then fulfilled in relationship. This relationship is seen between the two created persons.
and between these persons and the rest of the created order. The narrative of the fall is then not a narrative of the origins of evil, but rather a display of its dynamics as a failure to nurture relationships.

In the next chapter on the kingdom of God, Cahill argues that, for Jesus, salvation was both corporate and political. Jesus grasped that God’s kingdom was effective in bringing about change in the social and political life of those who came into contact with it. The reader is led through a comprehensive construction of life for a Galilean Jew in the first century under Roman occupation. At the cross sections of Qumran, the Sadducees and John the Baptist, a picture of Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom in ways that utilize apocalyptic, both present and future elements of the kingdom, a liberating involvement for the poor and for women, draw their focus from Jesus’ own person and identity as embodying the kingdom. In his mission in proclamation, table fellowship, and in his death, Jesus shows himself to be an eschatological prophet of the kingdom of his father.

The next two chapters which follow this development of the kingdom of God focus on Christ and Spirit. Here both word and Spirit Christologies are affirmed and held together. Due to the longstanding and somewhat one-sided attention given to the former, Cahill develops a Spirit Christology at some length while not neglecting the Johannine emphasis on word. It is the Spirit that animates the life of Jesus, as the incarnate word, is present in his actions and words, and in the resurrection experience of the apostles continues to transform the life of the church in the world and reconciling the world to God; this also impacts the liturgical life of the church. In the liturgical life of the church, and pre-eminently in the Eucharist, Christ is present through the work of the Spirit in transforming social, political, and ethical life. ‘Conversely, ethical and political failure on the part of the community is also a symptom that the celebration of the sacraments does not adequately mediate Christ and calls into question the ongoing identity of the community as Christian’ (p. 160). In the life of the Spirit, ethical and political life becomes a sort of sacramental indicator to vivifying spiritual life and sacramental faithfulness of a community.

After a chapter on the cross, which works through varying atonement theories and their political effect, Cahill turns to an account of nature in which she offers a modified account of natural law. In contrast to an account of natural law stemming from a static view of the world, Cahill argues for an inductive account which is corrigible and sensitive to changing scientific worldviews and attends to the plurality and diversity in nature. ‘Natural law ethics can accept the reality of change’, states Cahill (p. 257). Natural law requires rightly ordered dispositions to the social good, the prudence of good judgement, and the practical determination to ensure praxis follows through with the equitable