



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 3 (2001)

Lisa Sowle Cahill. *Family: a Christian Social Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000. Pp. 184. \$10.20 (Paper).

[1] At a time in church history when social justice issues have never seemed more prominent, Cahill presents us with a challenge and a choice for new thought and direction. The author guides us through an interpretation of the term "Christian family" weighted on one side by traditional notions of monogamous couplehood to a wider, more inclusive perspective encompassing such groups as single-parent families, post-divorce blended families, and those found in historical and/or cultural derivation as African-American and Hispanic families. The former grounds itself in a hierarchical, boundary-laden unit concept while the latter, bypassing ties of biological kinship, conveys a sense of attachment based on love, nurturance, and inclusion.

[2] Cahill's goal is to propose and promote the notion of a gospel message imbuing Christian families to move from the internal focus of nuclear, individualistic behavior toward a nonjudgmental, supporting view of diverse families.

In my view, the Christian family is not the nuclear family focused inward on the welfare of its own members but the socially transformative family that seeks to make the Christian moral ideal of love of neighbor part of the common good (xii).

[3] Pursuing this line of thought Cahill discusses "domestic church" as a metaphor highly developed in the history of Christian thinking (3). Specific reference is made to its use in the New Testament, the writings of John Chrysostom and Martin Luther, as well as in Puritan and Catholic social teachings.

[4] The book begins with an examination of our civil society, the evolution of narcissistic individualism, and the impact on commitment toward mate selection and children. Viewing family as "an institution of civil society" (7), Cahill makes the connection between those values that dominate the larger realms of civil society, their propagation through societal institutions and their inevitable outcomes at regional or local levels. This in turn is balanced

by the ability of individuals and groups to influence those larger institutional systems that control and manage economics, politics and religious functioning.

[5] Chapter 1 outlines three conclusions suggested by the "plight" of family in its relationship with civil society.

1. Being intrinsically social, human beings affiliate in a variety of groups and communities, and all institutions of civil society are intrinsically connected.
2. Human wickedness, or religious sin, is a reality of the individual that permeates social groups influencing the development of individuals.
3. Christian traditions about family are an intermingling of the "good news" of the gospel with the cultural norms of institutionalized civil society.

[6] Chapter 2 provides an historical examination of New Testament hierarchical family life somewhat contradictory of the more "inclusive families of brothers and sisters in Christ, or of children of God" (45). Although the Pauline letters, as well as certain preachings of Jesus, lead the early Christian movement into a certain ambivalence toward family, "the unfortunate capitulation to patriarchy in later church structures does not erase the subversive memory of a baptismal ideology in which women and men are one in Christ" (46).

[7] Chapter 3 examines Christian identity through the works of John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, and the Puritans. In reviewing the concept of family as domestic church Cahill suggests the limiting characteristics of drawing too close a parallel between family and ecclesial hierarchies. She also suggests that the self-promoting, exclusionary nature of family loyalties should broaden into a Christian perspective of shared resources and compassionate reciprocity.

[8] According to Cahill, Chrysostom "envisions a much less powerful role for Christian identity in society as a whole" (79), although he anticipates the Puritan belief that within Christian faith there lies an inherent obligation toward practical issues such as care of the poor. This links in some small measure to social change, the Puritans expressing a confidence in Christian family values influencing "broad reforms in family, church and Christian civil society" (80). Being entrenched with the notion of sin, Luther proposes a less optimistic view for such change.

[9] Chapter 4 looks at the concept of "domestic church" and the dangers of American individualism. She also considers how moral relativism inhibits a social consensus on a broader definition of family structure. Pointing out that "modern Catholic social teaching has tended to adopt a top-down approach to social change," (84) Cahill suggests that true reform will "empower recipients to become full participants in society and the common good" (109). Such a philosophy challenges church leaders to redefine social ethics from the perspective of those groups underrepresented in the bastions of power, including "nontraditional" families, which Cahill sees as holding potential for exhibiting important Christian family values.

[10] Cahill's analysis forces us to consider individualism, the inherent loyalties of familial hierarchy, and the impact the resulting isolation and insulation have on church functioning.

Use of the "domestic church" metaphor suggests that family spirituality ought to be grounded in accountability for the well-being of all.

[11] In Chapter 5 Cahill proposes that the African-American community is less entrenched in stigmatized social definitions of family, yet more influenced by the economic and social factors that create them. Based on historical experiences, the African-American community appears able to transcend stereotypical family hierarchy to a concept of family enriched and embellished by extended kinship or deep friendship.

[12] Thought provoking and enlightening, this book takes a refreshing look at the morality that is both professed and practiced by modern society. Written in a comfortable yet astute style, this book will be welcomed by lay ministers interested in justice and social reform.

Barbara L. Butler, East Northport, NY