

# Family, by Lisa Sowle Cahill

reviewed by [David Clairmont](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

Lisa Sowle Cahill has given a well-reasoned face to a position within the American family debate which has been difficult to describe and even more difficult to promote. The tug-of-war under way between rival claimants to the words "family" and "Christian" makes the voice of a thoughtful centrist difficult to notice. In her new book Cahill is once again at work with her sources--the Judeo-Christian scriptures; the Roman Catholic tradition of papal and episcopal writings on social justice; classic works in theological ethics by Protestant thinkers; the social sciences; and recent public-policy initiatives--to craft a corrective to the seemingly interminable drivel marketed under the words "Christian family."

This is not Cahill's first foray into family studies, nor is it her first attempt to balance multiple secular and theological sources in a sustained reflection on a timely practical issue. The list of topics to which she, a professor of ethics and theology at Boston College, has devoted her scholarly efforts puts her current volume into perspective: euthanasia, war, sex, aging, the rights of women and refugees, birth control and reproductive technologies, human cloning, economic justice--and the list goes on. Cahill's scope of scholarly interests is perhaps even broader than the entire Roman Catholic encyclical tradition from Leo XIII to John Paul II.

Her last book on concerns pertinent to the American family debate was *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), which, building on her earlier *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Fortress, 1985), charted a theology of embodiment and relationality based on a cross-culturally shared set of human goods, the preservation and cultivation of which forms the moral compass for individuals and communities. In each case, she has worked in an interdisciplinary fashion with the four classic sources for theological reflection: scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

*Family: A Christian Social Perspective* is both a summary of her previous thinking about the core principles of Christian social ethics and an important contribution to the ongoing debate about whether the form or function of family ought to direct the

work of concerned citizens and policymakers. Her motivation for her latest research was, first, her concern to engage and think beyond her past collaborations with the Religion, Culture and Family Project, directed by Don Browning of the University of Chicago Divinity School. Second, she has been intrigued by the recent recovery by Roman Catholic bishops of the metaphor of the family as a "domestic church."

Cahill begins by discussing whether the overused rhetoric of "family values" would have made any sense at all to the earliest Christian communities. Her research into the structure and function of early Christian families reveals that the idea of the nuclear family headed by a beneficent male is an oversimplification, even in reference to Greek, Roman and Jewish patriarchal cultures. Cahill accounts for a range of scholarly investigations which have focused on the profound ambivalence of Jesus and his disciples about the ultimate worth of the structure and aims of human families.

When she moves to consider the trio of John Chrysostom, Martin Luther and John Calvin, she demonstrates that the idea of "family as church" is not foreign to Christian thinking, whether the family trains people for a life of charity, nurtures them to responsibly assume their duties in stations of life ordained by God, or provides a model for molding society in accordance with gospel values. As she reads the papal encyclical tradition, she notes its slow but steady shifts in emphasis from viewing the family exclusively as an institution for the propagation of children to viewing the family as a school for social justice and a model of equitable relations.

Cahill brings the theological discussion about the function of families into high relief with case studies of the recent political debate over welfare reform and of the centrality of churches for the family life of African-Americans. In each case, one of Cahill's sources--experience--becomes the test of the theological position she has formulated. In fact, she argues that the overwhelming power that unjust economic structures wield over poor families, particularly as those structures protect a family form most conducive to preserving the position of reigning social elites, makes the oft-heard claims that poor families have lost their moral resolve quietly fade away.

For moral theologians like Cahill, certain assumptions about what is most basic to the Christian message must guide the discussion of practical moral problems. She clarifies "the essence of Christian social ethics: to embody the reign of God in human society by including the neighbor, stranger and enemy in a new family of sisters and brothers in Christ." Though her suggestion that the family is best defined by its

function in proclaiming and witnessing the Christian message rather than by its form--its resemblance to the traditional nuclear family--is right, her approach does not fully enunciate the relative merits and weaknesses of alternative forms in achieving that function.

In addition, Cahill seems to reduce the content of a family's function as a domestic church to its success in providing material benefits to the needy and fostering an equitable, inclusive, nonjudgmental attitude toward all members of the human family. While these are undeniably necessary, one could also argue that, for Roman Catholics, the church is primarily an institution for communicating God's grace, centered on the threefold mission of administering the sacraments, proclaiming the gospel and providing moral instruction. In that case, a domestic church might take the "essence" of Christian social ethics to be not the pursuit of social justice by widening the scope of moral concern, but rather the formation of an attitude of piety and a capacity for self-giving aiming at the treatment of both material and spiritual poverty. If the family's primary function is, as Pope John Paul II has frequently pointed out, to model God's love and to educate those inside and outside the family to bring that love to a shattered world, then one must ask how this should happen and whether or not some family forms are more likely to approximate this ideal than others. How does Cahill fare in addressing these questions?

Cahill calls for a renewed commitment by the smallest and most localized organizations to a preferential option for the poor. And she cites the overwhelming ability of economic factors to influence what family forms people will choose. While such factors may mitigate personal responsibility in choosing these forms in certain cases (adopting families, single-parent households), such economic factors cannot address the choice in other cases (gay marriage, celibate religious communities). Nor does it give due consideration to the equally compelling evidence emerging from the social sciences that some forms may make a more positive contribution to a family's economic well-being than others. Nevertheless, her position is a helpful and much-needed corrective to the dominant strain of "family values" talk which altogether neglects the economic and active social dimensions of family life.