

## Lisa Sowle Cahill: Five Significant Contributions to Reimagining Christian Ethics<sup>1</sup>

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LISA SOWLE CAHILL IS A LEADING AND very important contemporary Catholic moral theologian. She started teaching at Boston College in 1976 and has held the J. Donald Monan professorship since 1996. She began her academic career in what can be described as the second wave of contemporary moral theology. The first wave dealt directly with the realities of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968), and the reactions to them. Cahill dealt with the aftermath of these two events and directly contributed much to the ongoing development of moral theology until the present.

Her writings, her awards and accomplishments, and her many doctoral students objectively prove the tremendous impact she has had on Catholic moral theology.<sup>2</sup> Cahill has published eight books dealing with the method of moral theology and particular issues, such as sexuality, gender, family, bioethics, global justice, pacifism, just war, and peace building. In addition, she has edited or co-edited six other volumes. Cahill has also co-edited nine volumes in the well-respected international journal *Concilium*. Her CV at the Boston College website includes ten pages of book chapters and articles. It is customary in festschrifts to include all the publications of the honoree, but the recent festschrift in her honor simply gives the books and the volumes of *Concilium* that she co-edited.<sup>3</sup> The logical conclusion is that these book chapters and articles are so numerous that listing them in the book would take up too much space!

Lisa Cahill has served on numerous boards and committees dealing with a wide variety of subjects. She was president of the Catholic Theological Society of America in 1992–1993 and president of the Soci-

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally the plenary address at the celebration at Boston College of the contributions of Lisa Sowle Cahill to Christian ethics, September 10–12, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> For Cahill's curriculum vitae, see [www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas\\_sites/theology/pdf/lcahill\\_cv.pdf](http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas_sites/theology/pdf/lcahill_cv.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ki Joo Choi, Sarah M. Moses, and Andrea Vicini, ed., *Reimagining the Moral Life: On Lisa Sowle Cahill's Contributions to Christian Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

ety of Christian Ethics in 1997-1998. In 1996, she was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the oldest and most prestigious academic society in the United States.

Cahill's influence on moral theology has been extended through the work of her graduate students. Seventeen of her doctoral students contributed to the 2020 festschrift published in her honor—*Reimagining the Moral Life: On Lisa Sowle Cahill's Contributions to Christian Ethics*. At meetings of the CTSA and the SCE in the evenings after the academic sessions have ended, I have many times seen her leading her former and present graduate students into the bar for further discussion and celebration. She has devoted much time and effort to mentoring many who will make significant contributions to moral theology in the future. Thus, no one can doubt that she has been a very important major figure in Catholic moral theology.

Inspired by the title of the festschrift in her honor, this essay develops five methodological contributions Cahill has made to reimagining the discipline of Christian ethics. These five significant methodological contributions have ramifications for many content issues she has discussed over the years. In my judgment, what is characteristic of her methodological approaches is the emphasis on "and." The emphasis on the "and" is a hallmark of the Catholic theological ethical tradition with its emphasis on Scripture and tradition, faith and reason, grace and works, Jesus and the Church. Her methodological "and," however, has its own particular characteristics, which will be developed in the subsequent sections of this essay. Cahill insists on both theological and philosophical sources of moral theology, but the theological is primary. Her philosophical notion of human flourishing is based on Thomism and feminism. Cahill's approach is both Catholic and ecumenical. Whereas many distinguish between the individual and social aspects of ethics, her "and" in this case insists on the social aspect of what previously had often been considered as merely individual ethics. Catholic moral theology in the past insisted on proposing the moral truth. Her "and" in this case adds the need for action to achieve what is the moral good.

### THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES

In her first major work, she mentions four complementary sources of Christian ethics: the scriptural witness and the philosophical accounts of human flourishing received the most attention here and in her later writings. The other two sources are the community's tradition of faith, theology, and practice and the role of the empirical sciences.<sup>4</sup> This essay will develop in greater detail only the theological source involving the scriptural basis and the in-breaking of the reign of God

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 1–6.

with its particular values and the philosophical source of human flourishing.

### *Primacy of the Theological Source*

Throughout her many writings, following the example of her mentor and friend James Gustafson, she has emphasized the primacy of the theological aspect of Christian ethics.<sup>5</sup> The theological source of Scripture and the values of the in-breaking reign of God are not primarily interested in developing norms that exclude but rather a vision that inspires the Christian community and its public life today. New Testament values of the vision of the in-breaking reign of God challenge existing human relationships by reordering relationships of domination and violence toward greater compassion, mercy, and peace, especially by acting in solidarity for justice with the poor.<sup>6</sup>

Cahill applies this theological vision with its scriptural values to three important content issues—the social-political order, human sexuality and the family, and the call to peace-making. The discipleship nourished in the Christian community challenges the realities of human inequality, poverty, violence, injustice, and ecological destruction in the social and political orders. Such realities are evil and wrong, unjust, and unacceptable to the Christian. The Christian community is called to a preferential option for the poor that strives to overcome the injustice, poverty, and powerlessness of so many people in our world. New Testament values are not the liberal values of freedom and self-determination but the integration of all human persons, especially those who are powerless and on the margins, into a new communal unity and inclusiveness in Christ.<sup>7</sup>

With regard to sexual morality, the first function of Christian morality is to encourage disciples to do good, not to set boundaries and condemn and exclude those who fall outside of the boundaries. The positive theological and ethical vision of Christian sexuality focuses on faithful heterosexual marriage. She insists on equality and no subordination in marriage. Unfortunately, early Christian practice existed in a very patriarchal society and environment. Even here, however, Christians made some transformation in the existing realities. The emphasis on virginity, for example, was a rejection of the hierarchically controlled functions of the patriarchal family. Cahill notes that, in the

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<sup>5</sup> Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, ix; Lisa Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics: New Studies in Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics: New Studies in Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 123.

<sup>7</sup> Cahill, *Global Justice*, 1 and throughout.

New Testament itself, there are some small changes and transformations regarding women and slaves toward greater compassion and solidarity.<sup>8</sup>

Cahill recognizes in her earlier discussion of sexuality some departures from the biblical and theological vision of sexuality if they represent the most morally commendable course of action concretely available to individuals caught in difficult situations.<sup>9</sup> Committed homosexual relations, as well as remarriage after divorce, are examples. In a later book, Cahill discusses “adverse virtue.” When choices represent attempts to act with integrity in the midst of unavoidable conflict and adversity, one has what might be called “adverse virtue.” These choices are not virtues in the sense of fulfilling totally all that humans are meant to be, but they also are not essentially sinful.<sup>10</sup> Other theologians are more willing to see actions such as a permanent homosexual relationship and divorce and remarriage as fundamentally good in the proper circumstances.<sup>11</sup> The core of the problem is the relationship between the ideal and the present reality.

With regard to sexuality, Cahill is quite critical of the existing hierarchical Church teaching. This teaching is captive to some patriarchal assumptions, defines woman’s nature in terms of reproductive functioning, ties sexual meaning to the biological structure of sex acts, and focuses on the morality of individual acts instead of emphasizing the personal, familial, and social relationships in which they occur. The greatest liability of Catholic hierarchical teaching on sexuality is its lack of demonstrated commitment to equality and the wellbeing of women worldwide.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the family, Christian commitment calls for marital and kin bonds as the foundation for affectionate, mutual, and just internal family relationships and for compassionate and sacrificial outreach to those beyond one’s family, especially the powerless and those in need. Notice once again the emphasis on the social aspects. The Christian family and its values are not the same as many contemporary understandings of family with exaggerated values of family security and advancement, and definitely not the same as the family of modern liberal individualism where commitments are based on individual choice alone.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 154–165.

<sup>9</sup> Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, 143–152.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Theological Bioethics: Participation, Justice, and Change* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 117–120.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 236.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 130–135.

Her 1994 book *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theories* basically follows the same method of starting with the biblical and theological vision as she discusses how Christians down through the centuries have dealt with the issue of violence. The book does not develop in any detail her own moral evaluation of the issues. Cahill, however, insists here again on the broader methodological issue giving primacy to the biblical and theological vision. The book takes seriously Jesus's call to peace-making and the rejection of violence. The question for the Church and the individual Christian believer today continues to be how the mandate of Jesus to live in love, peace, and forgiveness is to function in our contemporary public life. Cahill again emphasizes the biblical notions of discipleship, the reign of God, and the Sermon on the Mount, while recognizing the eschatological reality that the fullness of God's kingdom will only come at the end of time. Just as the New Testament community itself borrowed some forms of moral knowledge and understanding from its own culture, so the Christian communities today must be in conversation with their cultures and their understandings. But the final criterion of appropriate Christian action today must be the experience of discipleship. The danger of the philosophical just war approach is the use of violence that begins as an exception too often becomes expanded and even normative.<sup>14</sup>

Lisa Cahill's emphasis on the theological aspect of moral theology goes further than the approach of any other Christian ethicist or moral theologian in this country. She has brought together the two separate disciplines of systematic or dogmatic theology and moral theology to deal with the realities of human inequality, poverty, violence, and ecological destruction in our contemporary world. Her characteristic "and" thus brings together what previously had been considered two very different types of theology. However, she points out that religious experience of God involves a moral way of life as its equally original counterpart. In fact, this is the thesis of her 2013 book, *Global Justice, Christology, and Christian Ethics*.<sup>15</sup> In this volume, she shows that the topics usually considered in dogmatic or systematic theology can contribute to dealing with our contemporary global moral problems—salvation, creation and evil, the kingdom of God, Christology, the Spirit, the cross, and hope. This is a most significant and original contribution to the discipline of moral theology or Christian ethics.

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<sup>14</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theories* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 236–246.

<sup>15</sup> Cahill, *Global Justice*, 1–4.

### *Philosophical Source*

The last section discussed the theological source for Cahill's approach while this section discusses her philosophical basis. The philosophical deals with the fundamental question—what contributes to human flourishing? Here again Cahill appeals to her characteristic “and.” Feminist ethics and Aristotelian-Thomistic realism form the basis for her philosophical approach to human flourishing.

### *Feminist Ethics*

Cahill develops her understanding of feminism in a number of places but especially in her 1993 presidential address to the forty-eighth convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America.<sup>16</sup> In fact, this was the first presidential address of the society dealing with the issue of feminism. At the very beginning of this address, she succinctly summarizes her approach to feminism. Feminist theological ethics is thoroughly historical and cultural beginning with the experience of women. The emphasis on the historical and particular explains the many types of such ethics based on different historical situations and circumstances. In the United States, Black women have developed a womanist theology; Latina women, a *mujerista* theology. In addition, throughout the world, women are theologizing from their own particular historical and cultural circumstances.

Feminist ethics, however, issues a universal moral imperative: justice for women! While feminist ethics is particular in its origin, it is universal in its agenda. Out of the particular, feminists recognize what furthers or damages full humanity for women and men. Feminist ethics is not just description, dialogue, and understanding. Feminist ethics, like all ethics, is critical, judgmental, interventionist, and even in a certain sense coercive. It is a form of liberation ethics. We can and should judge certain practices, institutions, and acts as wrong. Feminists work for justice and equality for women and men in all aspects of their lives.

In this address, Cahill recognizes some positive contributions of postmodernist and anti-fundamentalist approaches in pointing out the many false universals which have been held down through the years. But postmodernism by definition cannot take the second step of building up what justice and equality call for in human relationships, communities, and social and political life.

### *Thomistic Realism*

For Cahill, the meaning of Christian love must be further specified in terms of what dispositions, practices, relationships, and actions do

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Feminist Ethics and the Challenge of Cultures,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 48 (1993): 65–83.

or do not serve human welfare. In other words, the practice of Christian love must be structured by justice. Justice and ethics identify the basic human goods which all require and the reinforcement of human equality. In addition, such a theory must also account for how practical moral decision making occurs, especially why there is both greater variety and some basic similarities in how goods are perceived and decisions made. Many Christians recognize a role of common morality, respect for persons, and human rights.<sup>17</sup> Cahill herself proposes a revised contemporary version of Thomistic natural law to develop further what justice requires today. The language of human nature expresses what constitutes human beings as distinctively human, what connects us to other human beings and how humans are related to the natural world, what justice calls for in these relationships, and how and why conversations about justice can be carried on across the many differences that exist in our contemporary world, such as in culture and religion. What appeals to Cahill in Thomistic natural law is its basic insistence on realism. All humans cringe at the horrors often seen and experienced in our world today—murder, pillage, rape, discrimination against immigrants, women, minorities, and the poor, as well as the poverty and hunger that affect so many people in our world. Here Cahill appeals not only to human reason but also to human emotions reacting against the violence and suffering imposed on others. These reactions reveal the existence and importance of our common human nature and the claims it makes. The evils and injustices in our world against the poor and the innocent are appalling and call all of us to hold the perpetrators to account for their atrocities.<sup>18</sup>

An important characteristic of Cahill's realism is the recognition of certain basic human goods that are common to all human beings, exist in quite different cultures, and constitute human flourishing. Some Thomists, such as John Finnis and Germain Grisez, have proposed seven goods that all societies in some way observe—life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability or friendship, practical reasonableness, and transcendence. Many Thomistic authors agree that moral debate and some consensus are possible among different cultural goods because all people and all cultures have at their core a common human way of being in the world, including our bodily make-up; our abilities to reflect, choose, and love; and our dependence upon a community of all other human beings for survival and especially for meaning. Cahill opposes the contention that these basic goods are equally basic and incommensurable, meaning that one cannot prioritize any basic human good and cannot directly sacrifice any basic good.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cahill, *Global Justice*, 248–249.

<sup>18</sup> Cahill, *Global Justice*, 251; *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 52–53.

<sup>19</sup> Cahill, *Global Justice*, 259–260.

A second characteristic of her natural law approach is that morality is teleological. Aquinas recognized that the ultimate end of human beings is happiness. Every agent acts for a purpose or end. A primary way of expressing the teleological aspect is the claim that human flourishing is the end and purpose of morality. A third characteristic of her natural law approach is its inductive nature. Inductive consensus building identifies patterns of continuity within great change, incorporates new insights such as the need for human equality and participation, and recognizes that bias and invested interests must be overcome. Knowledge of human goods, needs, and all obligations approaches universality only if the inductive reasoning process is expansive, inclusive, and critical.<sup>20</sup> In summary, what is worth recovery in Thomistic natural law theory is a view of human existence and morality as purposeful; a conviction that basic moral goods are objective and shared among culturally different human beings; and a moral epistemology of inductive, experience based practical reasoning in which contingent contexts are highly influential in discerning priorities among goods and concrete choices about them.<sup>21</sup>

Cahill also sees an important role for virtue in her natural law method. Virtues modify the basic human inclinations to do the good. In Aquinas, the four cardinal virtues modify the inclinations of reason (prudence), will (justice), the irascible appetites (fortitude), and the concupiscible appetites (temperance). The two most important virtues for Cahill and for Aquinas are justice and prudence. Aquinas gives more space to justice than to any of the other virtues. Justice governs right relationships. General justice disposes the agent to act for the common good. Particular justice is a disposition to act for particular goods in the relationships among parts in a whole (commutative justice) and in the relations of a part to the whole (distributive justice). Prudence involves practical reasoning that deals with contingent matters and is very much in keeping with the inductive approach to our moral knowledge. Justice and prudence for Cahill thus support the recognition of great diversity in our world, but also assert basic goods that all human beings need and have a right to.<sup>22</sup>

Cahill's understanding of Aquinas differs greatly from the Neo-Scholastic approach that was commonly accepted in Catholic hierarchical teaching and in most of the pre-Vatican II understandings of Thomism. This Neo-Scholastic approach insisted on human values as unchanging and universal. Human nature was the same everywhere in this world. There was basically no recognition of historicity and historical consciousness. Neo-Scholasticism used a deductive methodol-

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<sup>20</sup> Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 46–55.

<sup>21</sup> Cahill, *Global Justice*, 250–251; *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Cahill, *Global Justice*, 269–270.

ogy as illustrated in the syllogism. The syllogism was a form of deductive methodology with the conclusion derived from the major and the minor; and if the logic was correct, the conclusion was just as certain as the premises. In addition, Neo-Scholasticism too often identified the moral human reality with the biological aspect as based on Ulpian's understanding of the natural law as that which is common to human beings and all the animals. While not developing Ulpian's understanding, Cahill sees this Neo-Scholastic approach as failing to recognize that the person is more than the biological. Thus, she strongly criticizes the Neo-Scholasticism that had been generally accepted in Catholic theological circles up until recently.<sup>23</sup>

Cahill is also strongly critical of US culture with its emphasis on individualism and the absolutization of freedom and autonomy. She opposes injustices and inequalities that exist precisely because of the failure to recognize that every human being has an equal right to the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare. In the economic sphere, she insists on the preferential option for the poor. The kingdom values from her theological perspective are consonant with her understanding of true human flourishing developed in her Thomism and form the basis for her criticism of American culture today.<sup>24</sup>

On the basis of this long section, two important contributions of Cahill to reimagining Christian ethics stand out. The first is the primacy of the theological aspect, which brings together both dogmatic or systematic theology and moral theology. In the past, especially in light of the need to prepare ministers for the sacrament of penance, the emphasis in Catholic moral theology was on what actions were right and what were wrong. This same emphasis on the morality of particular acts and a casuistic approach also are found in contemporary bioethics with its emphasis on law and public policy. The theological vision proposed by Cahill is not primarily concerned with the margins of the Christian life or the minimal requirements but with the fullness of the Christian life with its emphasis on the call to discipleship.

Cahill's second contribution occurs on the philosophical level where she brings together feminism and Thomism. In the eyes of many, there is only opposition between these two approaches. But Cahill's Thomism is not that of the Neo-Scholastic approach that was *the* Catholic method from the end of the nineteenth century until the post-Vatican II era. She emphasizes the realism of Aquinas as well as the importance of the virtues. Again, her primary concern is not casuistry. Thomism and feminism are involved in promoting true human flourishing. This goal of human flourishing is an important aspect of her

<sup>23</sup> Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 49, 67; *Global Justice*, 250–265.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., Cahill, *Global Justice*.

methodology but is subordinate to the theological aspects of discipleship. She does not neglect casuistry, but it is truly secondary in her approach.

### OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS OF CAHILL'S "AND"

This section considers three other illustrations of Cahill's "and"—Catholic and ecumenical, individual and social, knowing moral truth and doing it.

#### *Catholic and Ecumenical*

Ecumenism became a living reality in Catholic theology only with the Second Vatican Council. My own pre-Vatican II training in theology and especially moral theology gave little or no attention (except perhaps under the category "adversaries") to Protestant theology. As a result of Vatican II, in this country there began a strong and significant dialogue of Catholic moral theologians with their Protestant counterparts. One important illustration of this ecumenical approach from the Protestant perspective was James M. Gustafson's very significant 1978 book *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement*.<sup>25</sup>

Catholic moral theology has had explicit ecumenical dimensions since Vatican II. At the very beginning, only a few Roman Catholic theologians did their graduate studies at non-Catholic institutions. In the aforementioned book, Gustafson mentions the first five Catholics whose thesis he directed. The last of these is Lisa S. Cahill.<sup>26</sup> Gustafson directed the dissertations of more than twenty Catholic doctoral students, most of whom became quite productive scholars. Cahill, unlike Gustafson's earlier Catholic students, came to the University of Chicago Divinity School immediately after graduating from Santa Clara University with a double major in theology and English and no further work in theology. Her 1976 dissertation written under Gustafson's direction was "Euthanasia: A Protestant and a Catholic Perspective."<sup>27</sup>

Cahill's first book, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for an Ethics of Sexuality*, was published in 1985 by Fortress Press, which is associated with the Lutheran Church. The book originated from the E.T. Earl Lectures at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, and is written from the Christian perspective, not the Catholic. The

<sup>25</sup> James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>26</sup> Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics*, xii.

<sup>27</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, "James M. Gustafson and Catholic Theological Ethics," *Journal of Moral Theology* 1 (2012): 92–115.

book includes two chapters recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther with regard to sexuality.<sup>28</sup>

Cahill's earlier books and articles were written from a broader Christian and ecumenical perspective and published often by Protestant publishers. To this day, she generally refers to the discipline as Christian ethics (not moral theology), the name usually used in Protestant circles. As time went on and she became a more prominent figure in Catholic circles, she wrote primarily from a Catholic perspective. Her 2005 monograph *Theological Bioethics: Participation, Justice, and Change* was her first book published by a Catholic publisher—Georgetown University Press. Even when writing from a primarily Catholic perspective, she often brings in the ecumenical dimensions. Thus, her third major contribution has been her emphasis on both the ecumenical and Catholic aspects of Christian ethics.

### *Individual and Social*

Most varieties of ethics—both philosophical and religious—have tended to discuss both individual and social ethics. In this case, however, the “and” is disjunctive, referring to two different types of ethics. Cahill, however, has strongly emphasized the social aspect of what is often called individual ethics. This emphasis on the social aspect of all ethics constitutes a very significant contribution she has made to moral theology.

According to Cahill, the legacies of negativity and oppression connected with sexuality were very present in an earlier day in the Christian tradition. Christian sexual ethics today with its recognition of the sexual body as pleasurable, the interpersonal meaning of sex, and the priority of equality and freedom in defining sexual morality has been effective in overcoming these problems that existed in the past. However, this individualistic approach will not be adequate to the task of shaping a positive ethics of sex and gender for the future. This emphasis on the person-centered understanding of sex with a focus on sex as a pleasurable and intimate activity of couples neglects the social meanings of the body involving parenthood and kinship.<sup>29</sup> Historically, we are reminded again how economic and social conditions have affected sexuality in the past with regard to patriarchy. Christian ethics today needs an analysis of the social ramifications of sex, which is both critical and constructive. Cahill herself with her feminist ethics of liberation opposes the individualism of the Western liberal culture by giving attention to the social and political dimensions of supposedly private and personal sexual relations in marriage. Our United States culture has seen sex primarily as individualistic and even narcissistic and has

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<sup>28</sup> Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, ix.

<sup>29</sup> Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 9–10.

disassociated sex from parental fulfillment and social responsibility.<sup>30</sup> There is an important social dimension to sex that is too often overlooked in our culture and in our ethics.

Lisa Cahill's primary interest coming out of graduate school was bioethics. Married Catholic women theological ethicists were very rare birds when she started teaching in the mid-1970s. Cahill was overwhelmed by invitations to speak, teach, and write about issues dealing with sex, marriage, the family, and women's issues. The social dimension of the family that first concerned her as a feminist was patriarchy as experienced here in the United States and even more prevalent in the Third World. In the 1990s, she became involved with the Religion, Culture, and Family Project directed by Don Browning at the University of Chicago Divinity School. This involvement gave rise to her book as an attempt to understand the Christian family as critically informed by the Christian tradition and as responding to today's social realities. Here she explains what might be called the internal life of the Christian family and its relationships, but also the social relationship of the family working to transform the broader society with its concerns of the common good and the preferential option for the poor.<sup>31</sup> The next section also emphasizes the social dimension of her bioethics. The emphasis on the social aspect of what has often been thought of as individual ethics (e.g., bioethics) constitutes Cahill's fourth important and distinctive contribution to the reimagining of moral theology or Christian ethics.

### *Moral Truth and Action*

In her book, *Theological Bioethics*, Cahill makes the claim that theological ethics should make justice in access to healthcare resources its first priority.<sup>32</sup> For most bioethicists, this is a strange and even wrong and harmful claim. Their position has tended to reduce theological bioethics to the private sphere. Much of the work of bioethics as it grew in this country involved service on boards and commissions dealing with public policy, law, and institutional procedures. Participants in these public policy discussions approached the issues and problems based solely on human reason, which is common to all. Religious perspectives were considered highly particular since all people did not share this approach and knowledge. In fact, many early theological bioethicists wrote for the general public and served on these boards or commissions dealing with law and public policy and gave up their theological perspectives because they could not be shared with all people.

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<sup>30</sup> Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> *Family: A Christian Social Perspective*, xi–xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 1.

Cahill insists that theological bioethics has an important and primary role to play in trying to overcome healthcare inequities. The predominant approach to bioethics today based on philosophical liberalism and market forces reduces all moral values to autonomy and informed consent and conceals the harm done to a more just healthcare system providing care for all in our country and especially throughout the globe.<sup>33</sup> Her approach, as in other areas, insists on the common good and justice for all with a special recognition of the preferential option for the poor.

Cahill's approach once again is based on the "and"—this time, thought and action, theory and practice, truth and action. Her book argues that theological bioethics must go beyond just talk and knowledge and even the vision of a more just distribution of healthcare in a more egalitarian and solidaristic fashion. Theological bioethics must participate in a global social network of mobilization for change. Edward Schillebeeckx, the Dutch Catholic theologian, calls theology "the self-consciousness of Christian praxis" and links theology to Christian practices by calling for a critical examination of the existing practices and working for newer, more just approaches. Cahill herself, then, insists on giving priority to distributive justice, the common good, and the preferential option for the poor in theory and in practice. Cahill calls such an approach participatory theological bioethics. The key contribution of participatory theological ethics is to instantiate, as well as advocate for, practices of healthcare justice and thereby nourish the hope that change is possible.<sup>34</sup>

The primary focus of participatory theological ethics in action is not the narrow political area but the broader social or civic area. Cahill appeals here to the Catholic theory of subsidiarity, which recognizes the myriad social institutions, structures, and practices that exist in the space between the individual person and the government. She gives special attention here to the role of community organizing as seen especially in the work of the Industrial Areas Foundation.<sup>35</sup> After establishing the need for such a participatory theological ethics in chapter 2, in the subsequent chapters she offers further examples of successful local and international religious-theological action for health equity and justice. These include Catholic healthcare ministry and its mission to the poor and underserved; the hospice movement; religiously sponsored pressures for healthcare reform, both nationally and internationally; religious networks supporting the availability of AIDS drugs and working for overcoming the AIDS pandemic, including care for AIDS orphans; adoption as an alternative to expensive, low-success reproductive technologies; and international networks resisting in the name

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<sup>33</sup> Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 1–12.

<sup>35</sup> Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 43–68.

of social justice the implementations of innovations in human and agricultural genetics.<sup>36</sup> Chapters 3–8 spell out the roles of participatory theological ethics in specific areas, such as decline and dying, national and international health access reform, reproductive and early life, and biotechnology, genes, and justice. Cahill thus has dramatically transformed theological bioethics and its role.

In this book and in her writings, Cahill is very cognizant of the realistic presence of human sin in the world. Total practical success has never been the measure or the expectation of Christian political action. The most Christians can do is to keep trying to bring about greater justice in the healthcare system. However, the contribution of Christian theological bioethics is to set these courageous transformative practices against the horizon of an ultimate, personal power that both judges and sustains human efforts. Collaborative, participatory social action can and must bring about somewhat more just and compassionate sharing of global health resources.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This essay has not primarily considered the many topic areas Cahill has discussed in her writings. The focus was on her method with its characteristic emphasis on the “and.” Based on this methodological approach, this paper has emphasized five significant and major contributions Cahill has made to reimagining the moral life and the discipline of Christian ethics—1) the primacy of the theological including both moral and dogmatic theology and the importance of the philosophical; 2) a role for the philosophical understanding of human flourishing based on her understanding of Thomism and feminism; 3) the ecumenical and Catholic dimension of her Christian ethics; 4) the social dimension of what has often been treated as merely individual ethics; 5) the importance of both the vision of moral truth and the need for actions to bring about that vision in reality. **M**

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<sup>36</sup> Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 254.