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2020

Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War and Peacebuilding, by Lisa Sowle Cahill (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Stiltner, B. (2020). Blessed are the peacemakers: Pacifism, just war and peacebuilding [Review of the book *Blessed are the peacemakers: Pacifism, just war and peacebuilding*, by Lisa Sowle Cahill]. *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*.

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Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War and Peacebuilding. Lisa Sowle Cahill.

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019. 380 pages. ISBN: 978-1-5064-3165-9.

(To be published in *The Journal of Catholic Social Thought* in 2020)

Lisa Sowle Cahill, a professor at Boston College, is one of the academy's leading theological ethicists. Among her abiding interests has been the ethics of war and peace. In 1994, she authored *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Fortress Press). That book served an influential role for a generation of students and scholars. It provided a substantive survey of the history of Christian thought on justifying war and promoting peace. It served as a textbook for undergraduate and graduate students, charting the development of Christian thought from Jesus' teaching to twentieth-century theologians. *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* takes the earlier book as its "point of departure," substantially expanding and revising it (ix). Of the ten chapters, three are entirely new, four are "so extensively rewritten as to constitute a new argument," and the remaining three are significantly updated (ix). Cahill says this book has a dual aim: "to offer a critical historical understanding of the Christian traditions of pacifism and just war and to illustrate the promise of a newer approach sometimes called 'peacebuilding'" (1).

She achieves the first aim through a chronological survey of Western Christian theological teaching on war and peace. The chapter on Jesus, one of the all-new sections, marshals longstanding as well as recent historical-critical research on the teaching of Jesus and the use of the scriptures for ethics. Cahill gives background on the complex status of war in the Hebrew Bible and establishes Jesus in his social context as the inaugurator of the reign of God. A thorough examination of the Sermon on the Mount, including the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer, set the parameters within which all future Christian ethics of war must operate; among

these are that “the followers of Jesus and the church as a whole ought to live first and foremost by the virtues of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and justice,” and “the normative character of nonviolence ought not easily be set aside on the ground of the impossibility of experiencing the reign of God historically” (70).

A memorable topic of the earlier book remains central here: how are Christians to understand and apply Jesus’ command to “turn the other cheek”? The early church (chapter 3) took the command fairly literally on the whole. Tertullian was uncompromising in his pacifism, but Origen recognized the impossibility of following everything in the Bible literally. Thus, from the beginning, Christians wrestled with “ambiguity and unclarity” about whether they must remove themselves entirely from public institutions that engage in killing, such as the military (90). Augustine (chapter 4) sought to reinterpret “turn the other cheek” in an era when the church now felt some responsibility for the direction of statecraft. He created “a wide space between preparedness to act on the Lord’s commands and the actual embodiment of their literal meaning” (114). Aquinas (chapter 5) followed suit, while making just war theory a reasonable position that can be “known in principle by all human beings” (143). A variety of options opened up in later centuries (chapters 6–8), from the magisterial Reformers (Luther and Calvin developed Protestant versions of just war), to the Crusaders, to those who were willing to foment some sort of “revolution” (Joan of Arc and the Puritans), to Catholic pacifists (Erasmus), to the peace churches (Menno Simons and the Quakers). The ninth chapter examines important twentieth-century thinkers and practitioners: Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, and the Catholic popes. All of this sets the stage for the final, all-new chapter on peacebuilding.

This is not simply a textbook but an argument for a normative position, woven in through the history. There are two strands to this argument, which fully come together at the end. First,

some moral decisions engage agents in irreducible moral dilemmas. Both just war thinkers and pacifists throughout the book are shown to be alive to the reality of such dilemmas. The second strand is that the arc of Christian views on war bends toward peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is both a set of practices and a normative view. The practices include nonviolent protest, conflict resolution, and economic development, all of which tend to resolve or avoid wars. Cahill champions the just peacemaking practices promoted by the late Baptist ethicist Glenn H. Stassen, by the Mennonite sociologist John Paul Lederach, and by the Catholic Peacebuilding Network. She features the role of women as peacebuilders and illustrates the relevance of these practices to the struggle for racial justice in the United States. As a normative position, peacebuilding is “a way of yoking gospel nonviolence to effective action for change, despite the existentially and morally ambiguous circumstances in which its mission must be embodied” (21). Moral dilemmas of war will never be fully eradicated in this world, but peacebuilding is superior to previous options by providing the “flexibility, creativity, pragmatism, and determination” that are required to defeat violence (21).

Blessed Are the Peacemakers is a welcome addition to the literature on the Christian ethics of war and peace. It will introduce a new generation to one of the finest one-volume surveys of the history of Christian thought on war. Cahill’s updated historical and biblical research and her fresh argument for the normativity of peacebuilding makes the book worthy of careful study by many readers, from undergraduate students up to advanced researchers.

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