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978-1-107-02877-7 - Global Justice, Christology, and Christian Ethics

Lisa Sowle Cahill

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## GLOBAL JUSTICE, CHRISTOLOGY, AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Global realities of human inequality, poverty, violence, and ecological destruction call for a twenty-first century Christian response that links cross-cultural and interreligious cooperation for change to the gospel. This book demonstrates why just action is necessarily a criterion of authentic Christian theology and gives grounds for Christian hope that change in violent structures is really possible. Lisa Sowle Cahill argues that theology and biblical interpretation are already embedded in and indebted to ethical-political practices and choices. Within this ecumenical study, she explores the use of the historical Jesus in constructive theology; the merits of Word and Spirit christologies; the importance of liberation and feminist theologies as well as theologies from the global south; and the possibility of qualified moral universalism. The book will be of great interest to all students of theology, religious ethics and politics, and biblical studies.

Lisa Sowle Cahill is J. Donald Monan, S.J., Professor of Theology at Boston College. Her most recent publications include *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (1996), *Bioethics and the Common Good* (2004), and *Theological Bioethics: Participation, Justice and Change* (2005). She is currently a member of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, the Advisory Board of the Public Religion Research Institute, the Board of Directors of the international journal *Concilium*, and the Catholic Peacebuilding Network.

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Christian ethics has increasingly assumed a central place within academic theology. At the same time the growing power and ambiguity of modern science and the rising dissatisfaction within the social sciences about claims to value-neutrality have prompted renewed interest in ethics within the secular academic world. There is, therefore, a need for studies in Christian ethics which, as well as being concerned with the relevance of Christian ethics to the present-day secular debate, are well informed about parallel discussions in recent philosophy, science or social science. *New Studies in Christian Ethics* aims to provide books that do this at the highest intellectual level and demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

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# GLOBAL JUSTICE, CHRISTOLOGY, AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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*Boston College*



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*To my father,  
Donald Edgar Sowle, 1915–*

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## *General Editor's Preface*

After a gap of seventeen years, it is a great pleasure to have another contribution to *New Studies in Christian Ethics* from Lisa Sowle Cahill. Her first contribution, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, was, as expected, very well received. She combined critical Catholic feminism with a theological realism that was committed to both ecumenical dialogue and compassionate social activism with those who were economically and socially marginalized. In her subsequent writings she developed a particular interest in issues within bioethics, especially in areas that involve sharp questions about social justice such as the global challenge of AIDS and novel developments in biotechnology. In this new book she is less concerned with particular social issues. Her aim now is to supply a sustained theological basis for global justice.

Critics of theological realism have long argued that it is short of theology and fatally shaped by the secular world. For many of them it is the bible alone, or perhaps the bible together with certain favored theologians (from Augustine to Barth), that must form the *only* basis for Christian ethics. Writing from a theological position committed to natural law – albeit a reconstructed vision of natural law to that understood by Aquinas – she dissents radically from this dogmatic claim. She contends that “certain goods for humans can be universally known, most obviously those based on the physical conditions of human survival, and on our natural sociality and need for cooperative relationships.” Such a perspective gives Christian theologians a basis for dialogue with both secularists and followers of other faith traditions. For her, the christological commitments enshrined in the New Testament and historic creeds give a distinctive Christian shape to and strong support for otherwise ubiquitous natural laws.

As the chapters of this new book unfold, it becomes clear that for Lisa Sowle Cahill a number of key theological concepts shape a distinctively

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Christian concept of global justice. Among these are the kingdom of God from the synoptic gospels; Word christology, especially from John 1, combined with Spirit christology from Luke, Acts, and parts of Paul; and the cross and atonement properly understood. In the process, she develops an understanding of global justice that is both passionate and compassionate.

This is a rich theological offering that makes a major contribution to theological and moral realism, as well as to *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, now in its twenty-first year. I recommend it without hesitation.

ROBIN GILL

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## *Acknowledgments*

My numerous intellectual and personal debts will be evident in the pages of this book, especially in Chapter 1, where I name several of my teachers and colleagues at the University of Chicago. The example of my dissertation director, James Gustafson, has continually led me to consider and reconsider the interface of systematic or dogmatic theology and theological ethics, and to probe the questions they raise for one another. I was inspired to return to serious study of christology when I read my friend Roger Haight's *Jesus: Symbol of God* in 2003. Tatha Wiley gave me my first opportunity to publish on ethics and christology by contributing an essay to her edited volume, *Thinking of Christ* (2003). Gustafson taught his students not to make facile theological claims about the nature of the moral life and its possibilities, unbacked by any sort of practical evidence, and I have tried to take that lesson seriously here, in drawing connections between christology and global social ethics.

My dependence on and gratitude to fellow teachers and learners at Boston College will be less obvious but just as important. The Theology Department, particularly my colleagues in the ethics doctoral seminar (which includes faculty and students from the B.C. School of Theology and Ministry), has been for me a community of friendship, of scholarship, and of genuine inquiry about what Christianity really means. I could not function as a theologian at all without the companionship of my fellow ethicists Ken Himes, David Hollenbach, Jim Keenan, John Paris, Steve Pope, and Andrea Vicini. Doctoral candidates Sarah Moses, Autumn Ridenour, Jill O'Brien, and Kate Ward have been exemplary research assistants and wise advisers. Many, many more students have challenged, enlarged, and improved my theological framework. Theology faculty members who have most frequently been the patient objects of my importunate pleas for help are Steve Pope, David Hollenbach, PHEME Perkins, Charles Hefling, Nancy Pineda-Madrid, and Bob Daly. My close friend Anthony J. Saldarini supported me for many years in the study of

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Jesus, early Christianity, and Judaism. Since his passing in 2001, I have continued to learn from one of Tony's best friends, Daniel Harrington. My remedial forays into biblical scholarship and christology were aided immensely when I sat in on graduate classes taught by Charles, PHEME, Michael Buckley, and the late Frederick J. Murphy (Joseph Visiting Professor).

It is *de rigueur* to mention one's family in naming one's blessings, and I happily do so here: my husband, Larry, and Charlotte, James, Don, Will, and Ae. There is nothing like a spouse and five adult children – with their own lives, disappointments, accomplishments, sorrows, and joys – to remind one that writing books should not be equated with “the real world” and also to occasion the profound human experiences that nourish, shape, and test our notions of God. Lastly I thank my dad, Donald E. Sowle, who at this writing had recently celebrated his ninety-seventh birthday. Dad is a faithful, traditional Catholic whose trust in God, dedication to the Catholic sacraments, and personal generosity have been an inspiration to my sister and me, even when the “institutional Church” has not. He is also a great supporter of daughters getting PhDs and producing books. I dedicate this one to him.

July 29, 2012