

## BOOK REVIEW

**Nicholas Sagovsky, *Christian Tradition and the Practice of Justice*. London: SPCK, 2008. xx + 266 pp. ISBN 978-0-281-06016-0 (pbk), £19.99.**

Nicholas Sagovsky's *Christian Tradition and the Practice of Justice* is an introduction to Christian thinking about justice and its influence upon and interaction with other currents in Western thought. The material within it retains the feel of the lecture form in which its contents were originally delivered, which may account for Sagovsky's failure to engage with or even alert his readers to other interpretations of the material which he explores.

Sagovsky argues that there are four strands to any account of justice: the maximization of liberty, the existence of a system of law to which people can give assent, the imperative that needs must be met, and the requirement for responsible action.

In chapter 1, Sagovsky argues that Christianity decisively transformed Greek understandings of justice. In chapter 2, Sagovsky rightly observes that "The Hebrew Scriptures put the God-given Law (the Torah) at the centre of what they have to say about justice" (33), but his own engagement with the provisions of the Torah does not extend much beyond recognition of its concern for the widow, the orphan, and the alien as the paradigmatic figures whose needs must be considered. This is problematic, because there are widely differing interpretations of the vision of social justice in the Mosaic Law, varying from liberation theology on the one hand to theonomy on the other.

Chapter 3 stresses Jesus' role as the herald of God's sovereign judgment and as the one who judges (57). Jesus brings about the reign of God's justice by proclaiming a message of freedom, as affirming the goodness of the Mosaic Law, as meeting the needs of the people and as acting responsibly in going to His death on the cross. God's eschatological justice is seen in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The Church is to follow Jesus' example in its commitment to justice.

Having considered the biblical material, Sagovsky then turns to two great Christian thinkers: Augustine and Aquinas. Sagovsky argues that, for Augustine, justice, both human and divine, is always at the service of peace, but that there is an instability in Augustine's thought over the relationship between God's justice and the corrupt affairs of men. Nonetheless, Sagovsky suggests that Augustine can be read as a thinker who "cared passionately about the freedom of the human will, about the proper use of the gifts of God to meet human need, and about the responsible exercise of human judgment" (105). The problem for the reader is that Sagovsky does not acknowledge that Augustine's thought can be

reconstructed in a number of different ways: making him an Idealist, a Christian Realist, or even, a proto-liberal.

Sagovsky's reading of Aquinas is especially fruitful because Sagovsky takes Aquinas seriously as a theologian, reflecting on how the personal virtue of justice should be expressed in a created world full of God-given order (106). Law is, for Aquinas, not static but dynamic, "not...inert patterning in the world, but...the mode of God's providential governance of the world" (108). In relation to Aquinas, I am in considerable sympathy with Sagovsky's reading but again would have liked him to explain the advantages of his reading over that offered by, say, Cajetan or the New Natural Law School.

Chapter 6 of the book engages with the thought of John Rawls. Sagovsky does not deploy the hermeneutics of suspicion to denounce Rawls but rather approaches Rawls sympathetically. He applauds Rawls' insistence that the "justice" of social advantage must always be "judged by its impact on the least advantaged" (129). Using Nozick as his foil, Sagovsky shows how Rawls' Kantian individualism does nonetheless pay considerable attention to the fact that individuals are always situated within communities.

Chapters 7 to 10 continue the engagement with modern thought, and are built around the four elements of justice Sagovsky has identified. Sagovsky's agenda in these chapters is not immediately obvious: is it to show how Christian thought has influenced a wide variety of modern thinkers? Or is it to indicate the beginnings of a Christian critique of such thinkers? Or is Sagovsky seeking to show that a range of positions are compatible with Christian insights? Or is he offering the outline of a more tightly drawn Christian account of justice?

In the end, I think that all these things are present in these chapters and that Sagovsky is trying to steer his readers down a gradually narrowing channel towards the particular conception of justice which he favours. In chapter 7, thinkers as diverse as Constant, Kant, and Mill, are presented as taking up a Christian concern with freedom. In chapter 8, Rawls, Hayek, Finnis and Dworkin are all identified as emphasizing the rule of law, a concern which has Christian roots. In chapter 9, Sagovsky explores the human capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum. Sagovsky suggests that she offers "the best attempt...at a general but sharply etched anthropology which could serve as the basis for a natural ethic of justice" (191), which Christians could endorse as *part of* their account of how societies should seek to meet human needs. Chapter 10 looks at the question of "responsible action," in other words, judgment. Justice is a human action which requires decisions to be taken, action which should be, for Christians, based on a conscience formed according to the image of Christ, "through membership of the Church, reading of the Scriptures, meditation and committed action" (205).

The book concludes with a chapter on the Eucharist, in which Sagovsky contends that "It is intrinsic to participation in the Eucharist that Christians participate in the enacting of Jesus' prayer, 'Thy kingdom come'" (206). In the Eucharist, Christians are reminded not only of the hope of God's reign of justice but also of the potential earthly cost of just actions (212).

Although the reader unfamiliar with this area of political theology would have benefited from clearer signposts to the specialist discussions, Sagovsky not only shows why Christianity is relevant to questions of justice but why such questions are amongst its central concerns.

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