

The Totality of Christian Justice:

Aquinas's Three Spheres in David Adams Richards's *Mercy Among the Children*

Mikala Gallant, St. Thomas University

In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas addresses the virtue of justice, more specifically Christian justice. His account of justice seems to be rooted in the Ten Commandments, taking up three different spheres: divine, family, and community. David Adams Richards's novel *Mercy Among the Children* also illustrates an account of Christian justice; however, Richards's account separates the three spheres of Aquinas's Christian justice. Richards is a contemporary Canadian writer, whose work *Mercy Among the Children*, published in 2000, won the Giller Prize. Richards's work focuses on the working class of Atlantic Canada, specifically, the Miramichi Valley of New Brunswick, where he was raised. Christian ideals and questions of religion are a large focus of many of his novels as he grew up in a Catholic home in a predominately Protestant community. *McLean's Magazine* quotes Richards, during an interview on his 2009 non-fiction work *God Is*: "I believe that all of us, even those who are atheists, seek God" (Bethune). Unlike Aquinas's just person acting according to a hierarchical totality of the three spheres, Richards's characters in *Mercy Among the Children* embody or take up only one of the three different spheres in their personal account of justice. Sydney Henderson, then, becomes an example of a man whose sense of justice lies in his personal faith in God. Other characters, such as Sydney's son Percy, demonstrate different accounts of familial justice, and Leo McVicer is seen as an example of Christian justice in its relation to other human beings in a community. *Mercy Among the Children* exposes the problems that arise

when individuals who take up a single one of the three spheres are integrated into a single community. Richards, using his characters, illustrates the account of justice present in each sphere of Aquinas's Christian justice, and, in doing so, seems to question Aquinas's theory that human beings can take up a complete account of Christian justice.

First, it is important to address the Ten Commandments and the three spheres of Aquinas's Christian justice. In his work, *Exploring the Catholic Faith*, Herbert McCabe states that the Ten Commandments sum up the Law, a rule of life given by God to his people in order for them to live "in justice and in peace with each other" (7). McCabe lists the Ten Commandments in modernized English:

- You shall have no gods except me...
- You shall not speak the name of the Lord to misuse it;
- Keep the Sabbath day holy;
- Honor your father and your mother;
- You shall not kill;
- You shall not commit adultery;
- You shall not steal;
- You shall not testify falsely against your neighbor;
- You shall not covet your neighbor's wife;
- You shall not covet your neighbor's possessions. (7-8)

Aquinas addresses these Ten Commandments in *The Cardinal Virtues*, a portion of his *Summa Theologica*. Here, Aquinas divides the Commandments into three spheres, stating:

The first three Commandments concern acts of religion, which is the most important part of justice. The Fourth Commandment concerns acts of filial devotion, which is the second part of justice. And the other six Commandments are laid down about acts of justice in the general sense, which we consider between equals. (105)

For Aquinas, the Commandments take up the three spheres of the divine, family, and community, in that hierarchical order. In his article, “Biblical Justice,” Leroy H. Pelton refers to these spheres as “policy frames” and classifies them as the “life-affirmation” policy, the “group justice” policy, and the “justice as individual desert” policy (749), corresponding to the spheres of the divine, family, and community, respectively. To lead a life of Christian justice, one must be faithful to God, honorable to his or her family, and also live a “life of friendship” with those in the community (McCabe 8).

In *Mercy Among the Children*, Richards takes up the sphere of the divine with his character Sydney Henderson. Sydney is a man who, at the age of thirteen, makes a pact with God to never harm another person after he is sure he has killed young Connie Devlin. In making this pact, Sydney sets out on a path of life-affirmation, using Pelton’s term, and becomes indebted to God. Life-affirmation is the policy of “unconditional reverence” (Pelton 749). It involves the concept of indebtedness to God, as shown in Sydney’s pact with God over Connie. Richards writes:

He whispered that if the boy lived, he would never raise his hand or his voice to another soul, that he would attend church every day. *Every*

damn day. What is astounding is, as soon as he made this horrible pact, the boy stood up, wiped his face, laughed at him, and walked away. (23-24)

This concept of indebtedness to God is explicitly found in the Bible, in the book of Romans, written by St. Paul (Whelan 447). Aquinas says of this concept of indebtedness that “anything human beings render God is due him but cannot be equal” (104). Sydney has become, in making his pact, indebted to God and it is from this moment that Sydney’s “true life” starts (Richards 24).

Lyle, Sydney’s son, however, grows up resenting his father’s faith, viewing it as a form of slavery to God. Lyle states, “God has made you His slave because of your unnatural self-condemnation” (Richards 24). This imagery of slavery appears many times in *Mercy Among the Children* as Cynthia Pit, a lower-class woman; Diedre Whyne, a social worker; David Scone, an academic; and even Autumn and Lyle, Sydney’s oldest children, are all referred to as slaves to one thing or another. However, Lyle is mistaken in viewing his father as a slave, for although he lives his life indebted to God, he is not a slave to God. In Romans, according to Frederick G. Whelan in his article, “Classical and Christian,” St. Paul says that Christians believe that “they were slaves to sin but they have been ‘redeemed’ by Christ—a word whose literal meaning is the payment of ransom or emancipation from slavery” (447). McCabe, in addressing the Ten Commandments, also uses this idea of emancipation when he states that God introduced the Commandments by stating, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery” (7). Diedre Whyne and David Scone are “slaves of public opinion”; Cynthia is a slave to her

institutional thought (Richards 176-77), and Autumn and Lyle struggle with their enslavement because of their desire to be accepted (219). Sydney, however, is not a slave, for submitting oneself to God is not to be God's slave, but rather, to be emancipated from the slavery of other desires and constructs, owing obedience and obligation to God and the Law only.

In this reading of justice, as in the divine sphere of Christian justice, it is not the acts that make one just, but rather God. Whelan, referring again to Romans, suggests that it is God who "justifies the guiltless, thereby rendering or declaring them just (innocent or acquitted); a just person is one who has been justified in this way" (449). This justification is the result of what Aquinas refers to as a "steadfast and enduring will" to develop the habit of virtuous acts (35), in order to gain the status of being a just person by God's standard. God infers this status through his Grace, a gift of salvation to those who have acted in accordance with his will ("Salvation"). This gift is offered even though their acts have not been adequate to repay their debt to God, for where justice is practiced, "the promise of divine grace and salvation is actualized" (Jans 90). This idea of salvation and a final declaration of one's justice by God can be seen in Sydney's final moments. Sydney on his way home to his family, finds himself again with Connie Devlin, but this time it leads to his own death, as Connie leaves him to die, far from help, on a ledge over the side of a cliff. Connie tells Lyle afterwards, "I asked him if he was in pain, and finally he told me that he wasn't in pain any longer" (Richards 387). This comment of Sydney's, while he is trapped on the ledge, suggests that, in his final moments, God has offered a gift to him, and Sydney is no longer suffering the pains of his life.

A biblical example of a man who also suffers for his faith in the way that Sydney does is Job. Job, like Sydney, chose a path of life-affirmation and justice in the divine sphere, for no matter how much he suffers in his life, Job remains faithful to God and does not turn away from his habitual virtuous acts (Morrison 340). Richards has Lyle make the connection between Sydney and Job quite explicit when he states, “But my father knew by heart the Book of Job, where the world is not a certain place, where anything man has can be taken from him, leaving him to sit in stunned acceptance of the horrible Word of God” (350). Lyle views the Book of Job as evidence against God, in his resentment of his father’s faith. However, Sydney, like Job, recognizes his indebtedness to God and his obligation to remain virtuous, not out of slavery but out of will, in order to be declared just as a reward for his faith in the end.

Richards takes up the Christian justice sphere of the family in *Mercy Among the Children* with his character Percy, Sydney’s second son. The Commandment associated with familial justice states, “Honor your father and your mother” (McCabe 7). Aquinas takes up this sphere when he discusses filial devotion. He states that, like one’s indebtedness to God, “one cannot equally recompense one’s parents what one owes them, and filial devotion is connected to justice in this way” (104). For Aquinas, justice exists between a husband and his wife, and a paternal or maternal justice exists between them and their children (33). Pelton’s “group justice” is the policy that takes up this filial devotion. Percy can be seen as an example of filial devotion, for he remains devoted and faithful to his parents despite what Lyle sees as their failures. Percy is barely three when Sydney leaves for the work camp, desperate to provide for

his family. Percy has no memory of his father; however, he does not give up hope in his father like Lyle does, waiting along the lane for Sydney's return every day. Lyle states:

Percy told me that he had fallen asleep waiting for his father.

"What does your dad look like, Percy?" I asked.

"He is a kind man, and his face glows and he never says anything that isn't true." (Richards 329)

Percy has developed an image of his father, awarding him every honor. Percy takes care of his mother as well. Unlike Lyle, who is absent for most of his mother's illness, Percy sits by her bedside, gets her tea and picks her flowers. He even calls on God on his mother's behalf: "I went to church and prayed so Mom would be better for her birthday" (Richards 323). Percy, in his youth and naivety perhaps, is ignorant of the failures of his parents that Lyle so intently focuses on. Instead, Percy recognizes their goodness and, even when very young, is able to understand his debt to them and the honor he owes them as their child.

Richards takes up the Christian justice sphere of the community, in *Mercy Among the Children*, with his character Leo McVicer. This account of justice focuses on the relationship between human beings within a community and aims to "render to others what is due them" (Aquinas 34). Pelton's policy frame associated with justice in the community and the act of rendering what is due is that of "justice as individual desert" (749). He states of this policy frame:

The "justice as individual desert" frame posits that in a just world people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. But, furthermore, this

frame implies that if people do not get what they deserve, then it is up to society to ensure that they do. This latter position is illustrated, in its negative form, in the familiar “eye for an eye” law of the talion. (749)

Aquinas, Pelton, and other Christian scholars, all seem to agree on and promote the ideal that justice within a group of human beings is to render to each what is due or deserved according to their actions. Leo very much takes up this point of view in Richards’s account, for the reader is shown a man who seems to keep a running tally in his head of those whom he owes or those who owe him. Leo, the wealthy owner of the mill and various businesses along the river, runs the town financially, so he has power over those around him. Leo is sure that because he raised Gerald Dove, who grows up to become an environmentalist studying groundwater, Gerald will support him in regard to the environmental lawsuit against the mill. Richards writes, “It stung him deeply, for he has as yet found no way to fight against it. Or no way to fight against Gerald Dove, whom he had hired just for the purpose of this fight. Dove, whom he had taken from the orphanage on a whim and kept as his own son” (82-83). Leo sees all relationships he makes as give-and-take relationships; he is sure that for everything he gives, others should return what he feels is due to him.

For Aquinas, one way to establish this rendering is through restitution, which Pelton refers to as a “form of desert” (750). Restitution, “insofar as it signifies a restoration, supposes something identical” (Aquinas 54). It is the recompense of an action or something external for something that was taken or received from another person. Leo embodies this idea when he expects Gerald to support his case as recompense for Leo’s having raised him. Leo is seeking

restitution as shown when Lyle states, “Still, Leo had brought Dove back to help him out of a controversy with the environmental agency. And after all, Dove owed him. And like everything in Leo McVicer’s life there was a moment when he would collect what he was owed” (Richards 63). This account also applies to situations of criminal activity where one seeks restitution for a criminal act or personal harm inflicted by another, as demonstrated by other characters in the novel, such as Constable Morris and his various investigations.

However, this idea of restitution, specifically for harm, then leads to the problem Richards exposes with Christian justice. Sydney, the character most harmed throughout the novel, has the strongest reason to seek retribution from those who accused, abused, or excluded him. However, Sydney does not demand recompense, nor does he actively seek it. Sydney, because of his personal experience of justice being in the divine sphere, cannot function in the realms of justice that exist in the other spheres. He does not feel that he is owed anything by those of the community, repaying smelts¹ he knows he did not take (Richards 42). He also does not fulfill his obligations to his family. For, as McCabe states, one’s paternal obligation within familial justice is to provide “for the dignity of children and their needs” (78), something that Lyle feels his father has not done.

Percy and Leo are not excluded from this deficiency either. Percy, although just in regard to the familial sphere, does not seek restitution after he is beaten by the older boy

¹ A smelt, according to the OED is “a small fish, *Osmerus eperlanus*, allied to the salmon, and emitting a peculiar odour.” Smelts are found in the part of the Atlantic Ocean located in the Northern Hemisphere. In the Atlantic provinces of Canada, smelts are usually caught by ice fishing in small shacks out on the frozen water. In Richards’s novel, Sydney is accused of stealing a box of smelts caught by another character.

Darren Votuer, who is supposed to be looking after him one day. Percy, in fact, never brings up this episode again as far as the reader is aware, and it is as though, as Richards states in a lecture, Percy can forgive Darren (*"Mercy Among the Children Question and Answer"*). When it comes to the divine sphere, Percy's account of justice is deficient because he does not have the direct relationship with God that his father does; instead, he grounds his faith on the material. This attitude can be seen when Percy asks Father Poirier about the church's saint bones: "If there are no saint bones, then there is no church—you cannot have one without the other" (Richards 309). Percy has tied faith to objects rather than focusing directly on God.

Leo also fails in regards to justice in the other spheres as he views his relationship with God in much the same way that he views his relationships with others. Leo negotiates what he feels are equal transactions; Richards states, "He wanted God to believe that he was hoping for Gladys [his daughter]'s well-being and thus sanction this relation [with Cynthia] as being in the interests of his daughter. He also wanted the insurance money from his lost store and promised God a stained-glass window" (306). Unlike Sydney's oath, Leo makes business transactions with God, trading what he feels are equal value actions. He is also deficient in the familial sphere, for he gives up his three daughters as babies, watching them grow up and suffer in front of him, without their knowing of their relationship to him. Each of these characters, including Sydney, seems to suffer from this separation and choosing of one of the three spheres of justice; however, in creating such characters, Richards questions Aquinas's theory that the spheres can exist together in one person; if it is not possible for the three types

of justice to exist in one person, then Richards seems to be exploring which single account is the most just.

Pelton suggests that the life-affirmation policy, the sphere of divine justice, is what humans are most attracted to “because it goes to the core of what our sense of justice is, which is that life should not be violated” (764). This choice seems to be supported by the Ten Commandments and God’s presence in the first three. However, Pelton continues, “The concept of individual desert seems to be such a central and enduring part of the sense of justice that we have cause to wonder whether a policy network built solely on the life-affirmation frame could ever come to pass or indeed be viable” (761). He cannot truly provide an answer, so one returns to Aquinas’s theory that one must take up all three spheres in order to be completely just. Though Richards illustrates the difficulty in taking up the full Christian account of justice, through characters like Sydney, Percy, and Leo, he does provide a glimmer of hope in his character Elly.

Elly is a woman who remains faithful to God, honorable to her family, all the while recognizing the importance of seeking restitution. Elly is Sydney’s wife, and the mother of Lyle, Autumn, and Percy. She is also, as revealed later in the book, one of Leo’s daughters. Elly attends church, and when she cannot due to illness, she sends her children in her place, praying to God for her children, especially her unborn baby. In the sphere of familial justice, Elly maintains her honor in relation to her husband as she locks herself up in the bathroom when Constable Morris makes house-calls, apparently to court her during Sydney’s absence at the work camp (Richards 249). Also, taking up the sphere of justice in the community, Elly speaks

to Sydney, when he is home, about his lawyer Isabel Young's sacrifice for him and how he should fight for what is truly due to him. Elly speaks to Sydney about his lifetime of abuse at the hands of others and his refusal to fight back, stating, "You don't fight—you don't protest—you say nothing" (Richards 154). Elly's faith is rooted more in the institution of the church than in a direct connection with God as Sydney experiences, but she still views herself as one who is indebted to God. She may not take obvious steps to remain faithful to Sydney by asking Constable Morris to leave, but she does protect herself from the possibility of dishonor. She may not have the courage or strength to stand up and demand that others receive their due, but she is able to recognize when there is a need to do so. Elly may not be a model for Aquinas's just person; however, she does seem to have the capacity to take up all three spheres of Christian justice, and, in doing so, provides a hope that it is entirely possible to do so.

Aquinas's account of Christian justice consists of the three spheres of the divine, family, and community. To be a just person, according to Aquinas, is to take up all three spheres, acting according to the Ten Commandments. Richards's *Mercy Among the Children* takes this proposition and illustrates the three individual spheres with different characters, such as Sydney Henderson, Percy Henderson, and Leo McVicer. Sydney embodies the sphere of divine justice; Percy embodies the sphere of familial justice, and Leo embodies the sphere of justice within community. By separating the spheres of justice in this way, Richards questions Aquinas's idea that to be just is to act justly according to all three spheres by demonstrating the difficulty in taking up more than one sphere. However, Richards does provide a glimmer of

hope that Aquinas's view of Christian justice can possibly be achieved with his character Elly Henderson: Sydney's wife, Percy's mother, and Leo's daughter.

Works Cited

Aquinas. *The Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance*. Trans. and ed.

Richard J. Regan. Indianapolis: Hackett 2005. Print.

Bethune, Brian. "'I Believe That All of Us, Even Those Who Are Atheists, Seek God' Author David

Adams Richards on His Deepest Beliefs and His New Book." Interview. *McLean's.ca*.

McLean's Magazine, 22 August 2009. Web.

Jans, Jan. "'Neither Punishment nor Reward': Divine Gratuitousness and Moral Order." *Job's*

God. Ed. Ellen van Wolde. London: SCM Press, 2004. Print.

McCabe, Herbert. *Exploring the Catholic Faith: A Guide Through the Basics*. Boston: Pauline

Books & Media, 2000. Print.

Morrison, Wesley. "God's Answer to Job." *Religious Studies* 32.3 (1996): 339-56. *JSTOR*. Web.

21 November 2010.

Pelton, Leroy H. "Biblical Justice." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71.4 (2003):

737-66. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 21 November 2010.

Richards, David Adams. *Mercy Among the Children*. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2000. Print.

---. "Mercy Among the Children Question and Answer." St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB.

26 November 2010. Lecture.

"Salvation." *A Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. W.R.F. Browning. Oxford UP, 2006. *Oxford Reference*

Online. Web. 28 November 2010.

“Smelt, n.¹.” Def. 1a. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Web. 12 February 2012.

Whelan, Frederick G. “Classical and Christian.” *Political Theory* 10.3 (1982): 435-60. *JSTOR*.

Web. 21 November 2010.