

THEOLOGY AND FAMILIES

Adrian Thatcher



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Challenges in Contemporary Theology

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For James Robert Thatcher
and Loren Rose Thatcher

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Preface

In several previous books I have tried to think theologically about sexuality, marriage and divorce, and the growing practice of cohabitation. A book which tries to think theologically about families and children broadens the range of recent writing and extends the line still further. Previous writing has required me to become familiar with a particular theological literature, and I am still shocked at the lack of attention this literature gives to children. With notable exceptions, theology of all types, schools and branches, past and present, theoretical and practical, stands accused. Given the teaching of Jesus about children, this hiatus is extraordinary. Elsewhere child neglect is a crime. In this volume children are center-stage. The desire to put children (and parenting) first, and to tap into the neglected theological riches that remain available for the purpose, is the reason why I have postponed other projects and written a further volume in an area similar to my other recent writing.

Extraordinary changes are happening to families at the present time. They raise new questions for everyone interested in them, theologians included, and the impetus of the questions prompts fresh theological insights which make the theological enterprise excitingly worthwhile. I have faced conflicting demands. On the one hand, all academics in British universities face peer review of their “research output” in the national Research Assessment Exercise. This book too must be subjected to that fateful scrutiny. On the other hand, researchers are expected to be accountable to their “publics.” This is called “dissemination” (an unmistakably phallic term). The theological “public” is considerably broader than the academic élite who write for one another and read papers to one another at prestigious conferences. A theological book about families has also to be intelligible at least to people in the churches who minister to, and belong within, families, and to the broader academic and professional communities. I have tried to respond to

both sets of demands. There is no virtue in obscurity. Originality (whatever that is) and accessibility need not be incompatible. It is equally possible to fail in both these undertakings. Readers (and peer reviewers) will judge the outcome for themselves.

During the writing of this book I came to be blessed with not one, but two, beautiful grandchildren, James and Loren. This book is dedicated to them. They will soon know what granddad does (writes boring books with no pictures in them!). They have taught me afresh what it is to see the face of Christ in the face of a child. Their wise parents, Valerie and John, are superb in the art of parenting. The long sections on parents, and on genuine reciprocity between parents and children, were written with them as my role models.

Also during the writing of this book I left the College of St Mark and St John, Plymouth, after working there for 27 years. I rejoice in my new theological colleagues at the University of Exeter and thank them for their welcome, friendship, geniality, commitment, and remarkable erudition. I also thank Caroline Major for her assiduous proof-reading of the text and compilation of the indexes. This is the fifth book on which we have worked together. She has also provided me with a regular flow of press-cuttings about families and children which have been invaluable.

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Part I

Sources

Chapter One

Beginning with Real Families and Children

1.1 Family Forms

“I kneel in prayer to the Father,” exclaimed the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians, “from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name” (Eph. 3:14). This tantalizing aside assumes that families are a universal, human institution: indeed families are not even bounded by terrestriality. More than this, we are invited to visualize the identity of every family, past, present, and future, as constituted in some way by their relation to God. The Christian faith names this family-constituting God, “Father.” While family forms are relative to time and space, and so to religions and cultures, we are encouraged to envisage human parenting as rooted in the being and will of the divine Parent of all.

This book is a contribution to a Trinitarian theology of families and children, offered both to the Christian community as the fruit of what we *already* tacitly believe about God, and about families as constituted by God; and to the wider community as an honest contribution to multidisciplinary reflection on what families are, what they do, and how best they flourish. It arises out of the conviction that the Christian Gospel speaks transformatively to families and children, and to the societies to which they belong, and that it will continue to do so in ways that have not yet been fully articulated. It addresses the root question “How may the resources of Christian faith and practice contribute to the thriving of families, and in particular, of children?” Indeed, one of the most disturbing features of contemporary theology is the neglect of families and children. Marcia Bunge writes “Until very recently, issues related to children have tended to be marginal in almost every area of contemporary theology.”¹

¹ Marcia J. Bunge, “Introduction,” in Marcia J. Bunge (ed.), *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2001) [1–28], p. 3.

The book addresses children's marginality in theology and brings them center-stage. Part I of the book marshals together the sources for a theology of families and children. Part II examines relationships within families and between families and the wider community in the light that the theological sources shed upon them. The book reclaims "family values" from the surface rhetoric of certain Christian pressure groups. In order to articulate a Christian theological vision for families and children it is necessary first to understand actual families and the changes that are presently happening to them. The present chapter engages in this preliminary work. It describes some of the changes that are happening to, and within, families, moves to a description of the main currents of theological thought that engage with these changes, and then summarizes the argument of the book as a whole (pages 21–4).

The definition of family remains an intractable problem. The English noun "family" derives from the Latin *familia* which is best translated "household." This included the servants or *famuli* and other possible recipients of patronage, as well as the householder's kin. One recent textbook, *Understanding the Family*, qualifies its title by confessing its "intentionally ironic" intent:² to understand "the family" aright is already, apparently, to recognize both the diversity of family forms that exist in most societies, and the "ideological power" that is expressed by speaking of that singular substantive, "the family." An Oxford English Dictionary entry illustrates the difficulties. It provides four non-metaphorical meanings (applicable to human beings): "(1) a group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit, (2) a group of people related by blood or marriage, (3) the children of a person or couple, (4) all the descendants of a common ancestor."³ The first definition appears not to require that the two parents be married, or of opposite sexes, or the biological parents of their children. It does require, however, that they live together. Do children cease to belong to their family when they leave home? The second definition allows that a group of siblings, or an unmarried couple with children, or several generations of people living together are a family. Is a couple without children, a family, or perhaps a household? Is a couple a family? How do stepchildren and adopted children fit in? The third definition seems merely colloquial, as when a parent or couple might say of their children, "This is my family." But that usage excludes parents, and the relationships between parents and children. The fourth definition seems plain archaic, akin more to a tribe than to a household.

² John Muncie, Margaret Wetherell, Rudi Dallos, Allan Cochrane (eds.), *Understanding the Family* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 1.

³ *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*. www.askoxford.com/ Accessed 02.09.2006.

Faced with these difficulties sociologists often eschew definitions altogether, preferring to identify families by particular characteristics. One writer speaks of four basic *features* of families (common residence, economic co-operation, reproduction, and sexuality).⁴ Other writers speak of *family structures*. According to John and Olive Drane there are “at least seven distinct types of family structure and domestic arrangements in western culture today.”⁵ (These are “two married parents living together, along with those children who are biologically related to them,” “one-parent families,” “blended families,” “cohabiting couples,” “couples without children,” “other homes,” and “families in transition.”) Another writer works with the concept of *family practices*. Raising, but declining to answer, the question “Who and what are ‘families?’”⁶ she prefers to concentrate instead on the “notion of *family practices*: what we do rather than what we are.” These practices are “everyday interactions with close and loved ones.” This notion “moves away from the fixed boundaries of co-residence, marriage, ethnicity, and obligation that once defined the white, heterosexual, male breadwinner, nuclear family. It registers the ways in which our networks of affection are not simply given by virtue of blood or marriage but are negotiated and shaped by us, over time and place.”⁷ But who then are the “we” who engage in these practices? The move from being to doing, from essence to construction, from theory to *praxis* is familiar to students of twentieth-century theology. And so is the list of begged questions that this move raises.

An overtly theological/religious definition can present begged questions of a different kind. An example is the definition in the Roman Catholic Catechism: “A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family.” The family is a “conjugal community.”⁸ While few Christians may disagree with this definition, does not the concern for doctrinal orthodoxy, expressed as a necessary connection between “the family” and marriage, have the effect of excluding from the definition those families which, for example, are headed by a single parent, or which are united in marriage no longer, or those members of families who are not the children of the married couple unit? If they are not families, what are they?

Leaving families undefined, however, can imply a fluidity that makes

⁴ Diana Gittins, *The Family in Question* (2nd edition) (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 60–72.

⁵ John Drane and Olive M. Fleming Drane, *Family Fortunes: Faith-full Caring for Today's Families* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2004), pp. 22–41.

⁶ Fiona Williams, ESRC CAVA Research Group, *Rethinking Families* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2004), p. 16.

⁷ Williams, *Rethinking Families*, p. 17.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), paras. 2202, 2201, p. 475.

discussion difficult to pin down. Fluidity of definition may well be the key to understanding the growing fluidity of family form, but our interactions “with close and loved ones” have to be structured somehow, especially if they are young children. The relegation in importance of historical family norms and forms in recent decades is sometimes thought to comprise an organized attack on “the family” or to belong to the malaise of post-modernity. I shall therefore employ a definition, and begin with Lisa Sowle Cahill’s: a family is “an organized network of socio-economic and reproductive interdependence and support grounded in biological kinship and marriage.”⁹

This definition draws on historical family forms while also accommodating some of the contemporary changes to families. “Organized” implies social custom and domestic authority, neither of which is fixed. “Network” implies a common residence. “Socio-economic” implies the wider resources of work, social interaction and exchange, necessary for families to survive. “Reproductive” includes children as a *raison d’être* of families: “interdependence and support” implies both mutuality between members and the dependence of some on others. “Grounded” allows for the extension of families beyond their reproductive base to include adopted and fostered children, elderly relatives, and even residing companions and friends. “Marriage” accommodates within the definition the expectation that the core of the family unit still remains the married couple.

With this definition we are prepared for those diverse households that put pressure upon it. As Cahill says, it “is not the only or exclusively legitimate form” of family.¹⁰ But we still need further caveats. A purely structural approach to “the family” is liable to ignore important internal questions of power and gender,¹¹ and these in turn will enhance or impair relationships within the family. My approach to families will be through relationships, and in particular their qualitative dimension. But “relationships” will need to be grounded in theological sources: of the Persons of God with one another; of Christ with the church; of the new covenantal relationship of God with the world, and so on. If the approach is similar to the family practices approach, it will not ignore deeper questions of the being of family relationships, and therefore of the structures required to sustain them.

⁹ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), pp. x–xi.

¹⁰ Cahill, *Family*, p. xi.

¹¹ Drane and Drane, *Family Fortunes*, p. 6.

1.2 Global Upheavals

Changes to families and households in England and Wales since 1971 provide a convenient snapshot of wider changes in the “Western” world. All the trends referred to in this section will be utilized later in the book. First there are more older people and fewer children. The percentage of people aged 75 and over rose from 4 percent in 1971 to 7 percent in the mid-1990s, while the percentage of children under the age of 16 fell from 25 percent in 1971 to 20 percent, since 1998.¹² In 1971 a married or cohabiting couple headed 92 percent of families. In 2002 that percentage had decreased to 73 percent. At the time of the 2001 Census, nearly one in four children (22.9 percent) lived in lone-parent families (91.2 percent of which were headed by the mother). The percentage of families headed by mothers who have never married rose from 1 percent in 1971 to 12 percent in 2002. But 65 percent of children still live with both natural parents, while more than one in ten dependent children live in a step-family. Approximately 149,000 children under 18 provide unpaid care within their family. Over 45,000 children under 16 still live in communal establishments. Over two million children (or 17.6 percent) live in households where there are no adults in work. In Muslim households this is even higher with more than one-third of children living in households where no adult has work.¹³

In 1961, there were 27,200 divorces in Great Britain, which by 1969 had doubled to 55,600. The number of divorces then doubled again by 1972, to 124,900. This latter increase was partly a “one-off” effect of the Divorce Reform Act 1969 in England and Wales, which came into effect in 1971.¹⁴ In 2003, the number of divorces granted in the United Kingdom increased by 3.7 percent to 166,700, from 160,700 in 2002. This is the highest number of divorces since 1997, and the third successive annual increase. But it is still 7.4 percent less than the peak of 180,000 in 1993.

Fiona Williams provides a very recent summary of some of the changes, all of them detailed by the Office for National Statistics. Divorce rates have doubled in the last 30 years. Cohabitation has trebled in the same period. The proportion of children living with a lone parent or with cohabiting parents has doubled. Single-person households have doubled. The average

¹² National Statistics. “Living in Britain.” www.statistics.gov.uk/lib2002/default.asp. Accessed 02.09.2006.

¹³ All data from National Statistics. Census 2001. Online at www.statistics.gov.uk/ci/. Accessed 02.09.2006.

¹⁴ All data from National Statistics. www.statistics.gov.uk/census/default.asp. Accessed 02.09.2006.

family size has decreased from 2.9 children to 1.6 children. Five times as many babies are born outside of marriage. The average age when women have their first child has increased by five years.¹⁵ Her picture of “parenting and partnering” in the 2000s includes the details that around 40 percent of children experience parental divorce by their sixteenth birthday; that around 40 percent of births occur outside of marriage; and that 70 percent of marriages are preceded by a period of cohabitation.

There are similar trends in the wider European Union. There are fewer marriages, and more marital breakdowns.¹⁶ In 2002, there were only five marriages per 1,000 inhabitants in the EU compared with almost eight in 1970. The average age at which people in Europe first get married has increased: for men, from 26 years in 1980 to over 30 today, and for women from 23 to 28 years. The proportion of divorces is estimated at 15 percent for marriages entered into in 1960, and at around 30 percent for those entered into in 1985. The population of Europe cannot sustain itself at current levels. For this 2.1 children per woman would be required. The total fertility rate decreased from 2.7 in 1965 to below 1.5 in 1995 where it has remained since. The proportion of births outside marriage continues to increase, basically reflecting the growing popularity of cohabitation: from 6 percent of all births in 1970 to over 30 percent in 2002. In Sweden, more than half (56 percent) of the children born in 2002 had unmarried parents.

In Australia, the picture is again similar. 72 percent of couples live with their partner before marriage.¹⁷ The fertility rate in Australia is also similar to that of Europe, at 1.7.¹⁸ Changes to Australian families are reflected in the official government descriptions of them which, bound to a secular ideology, *expunge marriage from the official list of family types*. Instead there are “couple families,” “lone parent families” and “other family types.” Couple families are defined as families “based on two persons who are in a registered or de facto marriage and who are usually resident in the same household.” Couples are families, officially, in Australia. A family consists of “two or more persons, one of whom is aged 15 years and over, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or foster-

¹⁵ Williams, *Rethinking Families*, p. 15.

¹⁶ All European data from *Eurostat Yearbook 2004*, pp. 45–50. Online at epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int/ (pp. 13–19). Accessed 11.17.2004.

¹⁷ David de Vaus, *Diversity and Change in Australian Families: Statistical Profiles* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2004). Summarized online at www.aifs.gov.au/inst/pubs/diversity/main.html. Accessed 11.23.2004.

¹⁸ de Vaus, *Diversity and Change*.

ing; and who are usually resident in the same household.”¹⁹ Official figures speak no longer of marriage and divorce, but of “partnering and separation.” The government estimates that between 32 percent and 46 percent of Australian marriages will end in divorce.

The Australian statistics invite analysis regarding the manner of their compilation. The very framework within which they are presented removes most of the traditional markers of families. The crisis facing marriage is met by demoting “registered marriage” to a sub-set of the larger, generic, “couple-family,” while cohabiting couples are promoted to the status of “marriage, de facto.” The framework is at least as value-laden as the one it replaces. Another name for cohabitation in these statistics is “de facto relationship.” A cohabiting couple is included in the restricted category of marriage (they are “de facto marriages” in the category of couple families), while it is also included in the gratuitously broad category of “relationship.” The Australians are reinstating “informal marriage” (*matrimonium presump-tum* it used to be called) but many cohabitators do not presume that their relationships are marriages at all.

The literature regarding the crises confronting families in the United States is daunting (below, 5.1–5.2) and well summarized by Michael G. Lawler.²⁰ The extensive research findings indicate “the greatly elevated divorce rate with negative impact on the former spouses and their children, the increasingly common social phenomena of single motherhood and father absence, and the result feminization and childrenization of poverty.” Half of all children in the United States “will spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent family,” where they are “more than six times as likely to be poor.” Poverty is implicated in further long-term problems. Summarizing the research Lawler describes how

Children in single-parent households are more prone to develop serious social and behavioral problems than are children who grow up with both parents. Their socio-emotive skills and their academic achievement are lower, their behavioral problems and delinquency rates higher. Males who experience family disruption in childhood are more likely to drop out of school, leave home, start work, enter relationships, and become fathers earlier. Females who experience family disruption in childhood are more likely to have sexual relations, to have a child at an early age outside of marriage. A

¹⁹ Australian Government, Australian Institute of Family Studies. www.aifs.gov.au/institute/info/charts/glossary.html#couple. Accessed 02.09.2006. These definitions are fixed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

²⁰ Michael G. Lawler, “Towards a Theology of Christian Family,” *INTAMS Review*, 8.1 (Spring 2002), [55–71], pp. 55–8.

particularly troubling datum is that the effects of single motherhood and fatherlessness are neither short-lived nor easily remedied. Though the multiple economic, psychological, and social effects on children of family disruption, single parenthood, and father absence may remain submerged until years later, they can extend into continuing problems across time and generations.²¹

The countries where most of the research on the effects of family breakdown has been done are inevitably the world's richest countries. When a *global* perspective on children is adopted, the impact of poverty on children is vastly more striking. While 30 to 35 percent of children in parts of Europe are classified as "overweight or obese,"²² a recent UNICEF report, *Building a World Fit for Children*, claims that about 150 million children in developing countries still suffer from malnutrition. Nearly 11 million children under five years of age still die each year – most of them from readily preventable causes. About 120 million children of primary school age, a sizeable majority of whom are girls, have no schools to attend. Some 246 million children work, often in abusive conditions. The sexual abuse, prostitution, sale, and trafficking of children continue on a massive global scale. Recruitment of child soldiers and the wartime targeting of children and other civilians have worsened. The report claims that "at the root of this inadequate record for children are long-standing barriers such as poverty, debt burdens, poor use of resources, armed conflict and excessive military spending, as well as more recent challenges such as HIV/AIDS, which infects four young people every minute and has orphaned millions of children."²³ In response UNICEF "calls upon all of society to join in a global movement for children."

Faced with problems of such daunting magnitude, it would be hard to find a reason for *not* lending support for such a movement. It has already been necessary to speak of children at the micro- and macro-levels of societies. Pope John Paul II encompasses a similar range when he says "each

²¹ Lawler, "Towards a Theology of Christian Family," p. 56, where an extensive United States bibliography is cited.

²² Report of International Obesity Task Force, *Obesity in Children and Young People: A Crisis in Public Health* (London: 2004). The report claims that there is a "global obesity epidemic;" that one in ten of the world's children (155 million) is overweight; and that "30–45 million within that figure are classified as obese – accounting for 2 to 3 percent of the world's children aged 5–17." Summary at www.news-medical.net/?id=1508. Accessed 02.09.2006.

²³ UNICEF, *Building a World Fit for Children* (New York: United Nations Children's Fund, 2003), p. 10. The report was based on a special session of the United Nations General Assembly, on Children, May 2002. www.unicef.org/publications/. Accessed 02.09.2006.

family” is “as a living ‘cell’ of the universal ‘family’ of mankind.”²⁴ That is why Pamela Couture has defined a “social ecology” for children which is useful as a grid for locating, and so for addressing, the range of ethical issues surrounding children.²⁵ The grid consists of four overlapping systems. There are *microsystems*, which belong at the level of “families, friends, care-takers, and institutions that have direct contact with children.” Second, there are *mesosystems*, or “interactions between the systems around the child that influence each other directly and the child indirectly.” These might include nurseries, playgroups, schools, doctors’ surgeries, public facilities for recreation and sport, a safe space with clean air, an attractive physical environment, etc. At the third level, there are *exosystems*, or “larger institutions, such as governments and businesses, that do not have direct contact with children but affect, or are affected by, children and families.” Finally there are *macrosystems*, “that organize and communicate broader sociocultural beliefs and values.”

Religions contribute significantly to macrosystems. In a work of amazing breadth Göran Therborn has analyzed changes to families *throughout the world* in the twentieth century. He believes that patriarchy “was the loser of the twentieth century. Probably no other social institution has been forced to retreat as much.”²⁶ Its demise is convincingly documented, but any readerly relief is tempered both by the horrors of what remains and by the religious sanction these horrors receive. An analysis of the “Matrimonials” section of the *Hindustan Times* (in 1999 on one day) found 1,600 advertisements, mostly placed by parents, in 43 categories, including 25 by “Religion/community/Caste.”²⁷ “In India the marriage market is no metaphor,” Therborn observes, and concludes “Indian marriage is a professional sport.”²⁸ “*Purdah*, female seclusion, is an upper-caste practice common to Hindus and Muslims, still frequent in conservative rural milieux.”²⁹ Among some Tamils a husband is a god, whose name, for that reason, cannot be uttered.³⁰ In Egypt, there is “an old patriarchy vigorously alive under new conditions,” where nine out of ten adolescents held (in 1997) that “a wife needs to ask

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (1994), section 4. www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/. See also section 13, and *Catechism*, para. 2207, p. 476.

²⁵ Pamela D. Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), pp. 23, 42.

²⁶ Göran Therborn, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World, 1900–2000* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 73.

²⁷ Therborn, *Between Sex and Power*, p. 108.

²⁸ Therborn, *Between Sex and Power*, p. 109.

²⁹ Therborn, *Between Sex and Power*, p. 110.

³⁰ Therborn, *Between Sex and Power*, p. 111.

her husband's permission for everything." Unspeakably worse, "Female genital mutilation was almost universal among Egyptian women in the 1995 Demographic and Health Survey."³¹ "Wife-beating is . . . frequent in Southern and Eastern Africa" where it has an "amazing legitimacy."³² In China (but also in India and elsewhere) "selective abortion, and to a minor extent, the old practice of female infanticide, have created very skewed sex ratios."³³

First world readers of Therborn's work are likely to put down this remarkable book thankful for their Christian heritage, and happy to affirm his global judgment that "The Western European family was by far the least patriarchal in a very patriarchal world," and that the Catholic emphasis on "marriage by consent only," was a powerful influence on the decline of patriarchal marriage.³⁴ It is clear that the flourishing of children in individual families, and participation in a global movement for children involve action in all four systems. The systems themselves cannot be exempt from critical analysis, and Christian theology must be alert to them all. Its prescriptions will vary in character, widening in generality according to whether the level of analysis is familial or global. The upheaval in family forms, and the impact of these on children confront the churches and their theologians with a wide range of problems at one level. Equally, a world in which so many children are victims of cruelty and poverty, presents another range of problems at a different level. In many parts of the world an upheaval in family forms, or at least in the power relations within them, is urgently needed and overdue.

A major emphasis of this study, inspired by the doctrine of the Triune God, is a re-thinking of human relations as part embodiments, part iconic reflections of the relations that are God's very self (below, 4.1–4.2). An immediate corollary follows: children's relationships with their parents are therefore a primary subject for theological reflection. Children are a class (of young person), but there are no children in the abstract, only children-in-relationship. Children belong to families and, unless they are homeless, to a household, which resides in a neighborhood, which is topographically and socially specific, and influenced by wider economic and cultural influences.

³¹ Therborn, *Between Sex and Power*, p. 113.

³² Therborn, *Between Sex and Power*, p. 118.

³³ Therborn, *Between Sex and Power*, p. 120.

³⁴ Therborn, *Between Sex and Power*, p. 297.

1.3 Theological Responses

How does Christian thought cope with the changes to families in which they are caught up? How has the good news of the Gospel impacted on Christian families? In this section I shall briefly outline the controversy generated by family change in secular thought, before examining perspectives from conservative evangelical Christians; from official Roman Catholic thought; and from “revisionist” Roman Catholic and Protestant sources. In the final section I will outline the argument of the book as a whole, in the context of the divergent Christian approaches to families and children.

Optimists and pessimists

Fiona Williams posits a polarity between “the pessimists’ demoralization thesis” and the “optimists’ democratization thesis.”³⁵ According to pessimists the family crisis is a moral crisis, fed by selfish individualism and lack of commitment, which has “de-moralised” an entire generation. Pessimists *interpret* family breakdown as a major *causal*, but preventable, contribution to human misery, and in particular to the diminution of the happiness and life-chances of children. There are said to be several versions of the thesis: conservative, where traditional values have been corrupted by liberalism and permissive hedonism; socialist, where market values have corrupted the human spirit; and communitarian, where “the movement of both parents into work, the values of careerism and consumption have weakened commitment to care for children.” The alternative thesis welcomes “the move away from traditional gender divisions, assumptions of lifelong marriage, duty, and dependence as heralding relationships that are more equal and mutually satisfying, because they are no longer held in place by obligation and convention, but are negotiated.” On this view, democratic choice replaces outmoded social expectations and prejudices. Optimists think the consequences of family breakdown are over-dramatized. One version of the democratization thesis holds that people remain just as moral and committed in their relationships as people ever have been. Change is registered rather in the ways by which commitment is expressed. This view “finds people to be energetic moral actors, embedded in webs of valued personal relationships, working to sustain the commitments that matter to them.”³⁶

³⁵ Williams, *Rethinking Families*, pp. 19–23.

³⁶ Williams, *Rethinking Families*, p. 41.

Most, but not all, religious thought has sided with, and contributed to, the former thesis. Indeed the term “harmism” now appears, as a name for the expectation, fueled largely by religious groups, that family breakdown will almost invariably cause harm, whatever the circumstances. However, hypotheses have to be established by evidence, and there will be detailed criticism both of the framing of the polarity between optimism and pessimism, and of the further thesis, claimed to be established empirically, that moral commitment is undiminished but different (below, 5.1–5.2). The preliminary point to establish is that while there is agreement that families are changing, there is little agreement in secular thought about either the causes or the consequences. We will not therefore be surprised to discover a similar polarity in religious thought.

Theologies and families

The flagship book in a major project in the United States on “The Family, Religion and Culture” in 1997 posited “three styles of religious response”³⁷ to the “family crisis” over divorce. Both the crisis and the styles of response can be found far beyond the United States. These are liberal or “mainline” Protestant, conservative Protestant, and Roman Catholic.³⁸ Each of these styles includes within it much internal diversity. The liberal style is most in tune with culture but most likely to accommodate itself to it. A well-known example is the 1991 Presbyterian Church Report, *Keeping Body and Soul Together*.³⁹ A mere three and a half pages (out of nearly 200) was devoted to marriage, and that term did not appear in its index. Rosemary Radford Ruether has advocated “a postmodern view of family – that is, one that recognizes a diversity of forms of partnering.”⁴⁰ This counts as a “liberal” view (and one which does not discriminate between the “forms of partnering” and the different benefits that the different forms may bring).⁴¹ “Conserva-

³⁷ Don S. Browning, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 43. Among the many achievements of the project were 19 scholarly books in the area of family and marriage.

³⁸ A similar schema is used by Fred Guyette in his “Families, Pastoral Counseling, Scripture: Searching for the Connections,” *Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, 38 (2003), [5–33], p. 6.

³⁹ General Assembly Special Committee on Human Sexuality, Presbyterian Church (USA), *Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality and Social Justice*, 1991.

⁴⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000), p. 211.

⁴¹ Adrian Thatcher, “Forming a Family,” *Christian Century*, November 1, 2000 [1122–6].

tive-Protestant” is diffuse, encompassing fundamentalists, a range of conservative and liberal evangelicals, and in the United States, the “Religious Right.” Roman Catholic thought divides between official and unofficial thought, and the latter divides into progressive and more reactionary types.

The Southern Baptist Convention of the United States, a Protestant denomination of 16 million members, must stand as a reliable representative of a range of conservative Protestant views. Section 18 of “The Baptist Faith and Message,” entitled “Family,” says “God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. It is composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood, or adoption.”⁴² (There is a swathe of supporting biblical references, yet the severe strictures of Jesus himself about biological kin (below, 3.1) are unsurprisingly omitted.) Although the section is entitled “Family,” the narrative moves immediately to marriage, which is “the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime.” The longest paragraph in the section is about the subordinate role of wives within marriages. While the husband and wife are of equal worth before God, “A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ.” The remaining paragraph, on children, describes them, “from the moment of conception,” as “a blessing and heritage from the Lord.” Parents are “to demonstrate to their children God’s pattern for marriage,” “to teach their children spiritual and moral values and to lead them, through consistent lifestyle example and loving discipline, to make choices based on biblical truth.” Children, in turn, are to “honor and obey their parents.”

There are very many more Protestant Christians throughout the world who endorse this approach to families and children. The statement is a direct outcome of what the Bible is believed to be. In this denomination’s statement of faith the Bible appears before even the doctrine of God. It “was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.” The statement is perilously close to idolatry, for it elevates the Bible to a similar status given in Christian faith to that of our Lord himself. What room for Jesus Christ is there if the Bible is “God’s revelation of Himself to man”?

The “Family” section is based on a pre-critical reading of the Household

⁴² Southern Baptist Convention, “The Baptist Faith and Message,” section 18. www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp#xviii. Accessed 02.09.2006.

Code in Ephesians 5:21–6:9. The husband loves; the wife submits and respects. The asymmetrical relationship between God and God’s people, and between Christ and the church, is applied uncritically to the married relationship (so that the husband stands for God and for Christ). Leaving aside the non-existent record of husbands as household managers (and the obsequious oxymoron “servant leadership” that should fool no-one), perhaps the saddest feature of the statement is its lack of awareness of the link between the theology of male power it authorizes and the perpetuation and legitimation of domestic violence that too often results from it.

Neither is there much good news for children in the statement. While an absolute position is taken on the status of the human embryo, one suspects that “loving discipline” is the disingenuous sanctioning of corporal punishment. Children are to be taught, led, and obedient. There is little of the joy of Jesus in the presence of children here: nothing of parents honoring their children; nothing even, of their loving them unconditionally (as Christ loves them?). There is still much in this statement that remains commendable, but the dominance of a particular way of reading the Bible inhibits the need to develop what the Bible gives. It encourages theological complacency by its assumption that with regard to family, sex, and gender, all has already been revealed so there is nothing else to learn, and little to be written either. The male power within the denomination continues to derive its authority from a divinely revealed source that cannot be wrong. What is needed, rather, is a hermeneutic that allows the Christ of the scriptures, of the creeds, and of the church, to be God without remainder or biblical rival, and God the Spirit to be allowed to lead the communities of scripture readers into rather more imaginative and inclusive visions of God’s will for families and children. As we shall see, such a shift is crucial to a fresh vision of families and children within the Reign of God.

A different kind of conservatism is expressed in the official writings of the Roman Catholic Church, whose recent leader, Pope John Pope II, regularly and directly intervened in his support for families and children. The best known of these writings, *Familiaris consortio*, or *On the Family* (1981) opens with a statement of regret that “The family in the modern world, as much as and perhaps more than any other institution, has been beset by the many profound and rapid changes that have affected society and culture. Many families are living this situation in fidelity to those values that constitute the foundation of the institution of the family.” The Holy Father wished to respond pastorally and sensitively to the crisis:

Knowing that marriage and the family constitute one of the most precious of human values, the Church wishes to speak and offer her help to those who

are already aware of the value of marriage and the family and seek to live it faithfully, to those who are uncertain and anxious and searching for the truth, and to those who are unjustly impeded from living freely their family lives. Supporting the first, illuminating the second and assisting the others, the Church offers her services to every person who wonders about the destiny of marriage and the family.⁴³

Familiaris consortio is discussed in later pages. We are concerned here with the genre of official Catholic thought about families and this quotation provides several pointers to it. In the spirit of Vatican II, the Pope begins with the problems facing families. That is, as a matter of method, he starts with the situation that he wishes to address. Next he has in his sights his audiences. They are faithful Christians; people who no longer find Catholic teaching about the family convincing; people who because of social injustice cannot operate as the families they are; and finally everyone regardless of creed, marital status or sex who ponders over marriage and family as universal institutions. Twenty-five years later this is still an appropriate method for Christian ethics to adopt, and an appropriate set of questions with which to engage. His opening words also suggest an intriguing question. We will not be surprised to hear the Pope say that “marriage and the family constitute one of the most precious of human values.” But what is to be made of the implication behind the reference to those “values that constitute the foundation” of both? Are there more fundamental values, values that are not identical with marriage and family but which, just because they are more fundamental, constitute the foundation of both? We will return to this suggestion later (below, 4.2).

In the last 25 years or so, the institution of marriage has become weaker. It is now well separated from parenthood and no longer the assured basis, as we have seen, of families. Talk of the substantive “the family” sounds increasingly archaic, and the conjunction of “marriage and the family” bristles with presumptions. Recent changes to families need not, of course, require a change to Christian teaching: indeed part of the appeal of conservative theology of all kinds is that it defines itself as resistant to change, and thereby strengthens its identity over against sinful “others” (cohabitators, divorced persons, single parents, same-sex couples). But conservative Christians too are deeply affected by these changes, and cannot escape them. The more counter-cultural the Christian message sounds, the harder it is to enter into communication with the very audiences the Pope identifies. Ending a

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* (1981), para. 1. www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/. Accessed 02.09.2006.