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LEADERSHIP IN ETHICAL FAMILIES. A NORTH AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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In this paper I have been asked to respond to two papers presented at an earlier conference. Both deal with the ethics of leadership in families. The first paper, by Rachel Xiaohong Zhu from the People's Republic of China, reviews the concept of family relationships and duties in the Confucian tradition and compares that with the changes going on in China today as a consequence of westernisation and modernisation and also as a consequence of China's one child policy.[1] The second paper is by Richard Ondji'i Toung from Cameroon.[2] He reviews the concept of the family, as is understood by the Fang people of southern Cameroon. He is particularly concerned with the breakdown of assumptions about how traditional leadership roles should be carried out and what resources Christianity may have to offer in this situation. Both papers pay very close attention to the questions that emerge from their geographic and cultural context and both take for granted that families are biological.

I want to respond by paying close attention to my context and the questions that emerge there. I am a Canadian academic theologian with special expertise in Christian social ethics, specifically ethics and economics, born of English and American immigrant parents. I am a lay Anglican, who worked for almost 20 years for the United Church of Canada, a 20th century denomination formed from the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian traditions.

1. Biblical and Historical Forms of the Family

In North America the form of family life is contested terrain. One of the fields of contest is whether the concept is reserved for the biological family or whether it can encompass a larger variety of social forms. Especially in the United States of America, conservative evangelical Christians like James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family demand a return to the traditional Christian family. Focus on the Family is an evangelical organisation dedicated to 'helping to preserve traditional values and the institution of the family.' It runs a radio program broadcast on 3500 radio stations in the USA and in 163 other

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countries including Canada, China and Southern Africa.[3] It is opposed to divorce, abortion and homosexuality as social practices that undermine the family which is considered one of the three institutions (alongside the Church and the government) ordained by God for the benefit of all humankind. Its publications approvingly quote and publicise others who promote the concept of the natural family which is defined as 'married mom and dad, with children.'[4]

That is to say, the traditional or natural family is a two-generation family in a monogamous marriage. Is this the kind of family promoted by the Bible and the early Church?

Well, it is not the kind of marriage that Abram had with Sarai, who encouraged him to sleep with their Egyptian slave Hagar in order to have children (Gen 16:1-6). Yes, Abraham eventually renounced Hagar and sent her and Ishmael away, but only after Sarah produced her own child and started worrying about his eventual inheritance. It is not the kind of family Jacob had. In Genesis (46:26) we read that his household numbered 66 persons. Indeed scholars tell us that the average Hebrew household numbered closer to 50 or 100 people. This contrasts with the average American household, which consists of 2.63 people according to the U.S. Census.[5] Canadian families have a similar character.

It is not the family of the early Church. The family structure typical of the society of the early Church is vastly different from the family structure of contemporary North America. As Lisa Sowle Cahill pointed out, 'the family of [first century Palestine] is decidedly not the nuclear family of today. Parents and children never function as a social unit in isolation. The latin *familia* can refer to all those related through the male line; it can also denote all those under the authority of the *paterfamilias* in a household, the membership of which is not limited to kin. The household *(domus)* includes a married couple and their children but also incorporates slaves, clients, unmarried relatives, freedmen or freedwomen, and other tenants of the property.'[5] I note in passing that some clergy friends of mine in Canada now make a point of referring not to families but to households, in order to include all those with whom people live and on whom people depend.

It is not the family of Roman society in this period which was far from a social arrangement freely entered into. In Rome there is an ancient church dedicated to an early Christian martyr. It is called the Church of Sant'Agnese, or the Church of St. Agnes who died in 305 C.E. Her story goes like this: 'Agnes had aroused a burning desire in the son of a Roman prefect, who had seen her coming home from school. Agnes was twelve or at most thirteen years old, the age at which Roman women could be engaged to be married. He begged her to marry him, offering her houses, riches, and luxury, as well as the

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power of being a member of the prefect's family, if she would agree… Agnes replied that she was engaged already, to someone far better than he, and who loved her more… She had chosen Christ over the son of a Roman prefect… The law gave Agnes a fiendish choice if she would not marry: either to be made a vestal virgin and spend the rest of her life sacrificing to Roman idols, or to be exposed naked… in a brothel. She chose the brothel, but was miraculously saved from rape. In the end she was stabbed in the throat… The story also tells us that they tried to burn her alive because she would not change her mind, but the flames divided and went out.'[7] Agnes' story is matched by the story of many virgin martyrs. Victoria refused a marriage and died in a prison in Carthage. Lucy and Agatha refused their suitors and were sent to brothels as well. Lucy was stabbed to death and Agatha tortured. Cecelia was beheaded and Vivian was beaten to death.[8]

Is the family being imagined by North American conservatives, the family endorsed by the New Testament? In the New Testament St. Paul considers singleness to be a higher estate than marriage (1 Cor 7:38) and Jesus envisages a family far different from a biological relationship. It appears as though his disciples are required to hate their fathers and mothers (Luke 14:25). Indeed he declares as his closest relatives anyone who 'does the will of my father' (Mark 3:35). Some people actually consider the traditions of the gospels and early Christianity to be 'anti-family.'[9]

In response to the claims of people like Dobson, many scholars have begun to critically examine this concept of the traditional Christian family. What they have found is that 'what evangelicals call the "traditional family" is in fact the bourgeois or middle-class family, which rose to dominance in the nineteenth century – not accidentally alongside capitalism and, a little later, America as the ascendant world power.'[10]

In the discourse of conservative, evangelical America, what is being imagined is a family made up of a married father and mother with children where the father works outside of the home and is the head of the household and the mother is devoted to the religious and moral education of the children and the nurturing of affective bonds in the family.

It is a patriarchal family model that emerged in the late nineteenth century within the growing urban North American middle class. It was an urban model because agriculture was still being organised in the north and west of the continent around the model of the family farm where all family members participated in production.[11] It was a middle class model because the upper class had servants to perform domestic labour and the working class provided servants at the expense of their own family bonds. This model peaked in the early twentieth century in North America when the agricultural popula-

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tion peaked. The patriarchal model was enshrined in social policy in Canada until about 1970.[12]

2. A Christian View of Socially Constructed Families

Even from this brief review we can see that forms of family life are socially constructed, that is, they can change over time and across cultures according to economic, political and social needs. The nineteenth century North American patriarchal model was partly a response to the economic forces of the day. That does not make it better or worse; just a creature of its time. Today in North America, the single parent family is also in part a response to contemporary economic forces. People are less likely to live in the same place they grew up and so lack the supports of an extended family in close proximity. When both parents work outside the home, there is increased stress involved in child rearing. An intentional but not biologically related extended family is one contemporary response to these pressures.

In Canada there is an influential research institute called the Vanier Institute of the Family, named after the first Canadian born Governor General, George Vanier. The Vanier Institute defines the family as 'any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibilities for variant combinations of the following:

- physical maintenance and care of group members;
- addition of new members through procreation or adoption;
- socialisation of children;
- social control of members;
- production, consumption, distribution of goods and services; and
- affective nurturance – love.[13]

This definition of the family is not a biological definition. It is characterised by freedom (mutual consent), mutual responsibility (maintenance and care of group members) and legal obligation (in Canada, procreation and adoption automatically generate obligations in law). To fit this definition you do not have to be married, though it allows for that. You do not have to have children, though it allows for that, too. Finally, you do not have to be a heterosexual couple, though, of course, it allows for that. You can still be a family without those qualifiers.

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3. Christian View: Family More Than Biological

The question now is: does this definition fit with our Christian tradition? The Old Testament is also full of examples of families that are not biological families, in the narrow sense of that term. For example, do Naomi and Ruth not constitute a family? Naomi is a widow, and Ruth, also a widow, was married to Naomi's son. They are related by marriage but not by biology, especially after the death of their common parent. In many cultures the expectation is that when a woman marries a man she leaves her father's household and joins her husband's. In this arrangement she has an obligation to her mother-in-law. In the story of Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, Orpah is obedient by returning to her people, the Moabites, as she is commanded to do by her mother-in-law Naomi. Ruth is disobedient and refuses to leave. In the story she emerges as disobedient but faithful. Can we not say they are a family despite biology? In the text we find one of the most famous and moving declarations of devotion and loyalty when Ruth says to Naomi:

> 'Where you go, I will go;
>
> Where you lodge, I will lodge;
>
> Your people shall be my people,
>
> And your God will be my God.'[14]

If Ruth had not married Boaz, would not Naomi and Ruth still have been a family?

Let me use another example. In 1 Samuel we find a narrative establishing the rise of great leaders, Kings, in Israel. In this story the mantle of leadership passes from Eli to Samuel to Saul and finally to David. In the New Testament, Jesus is described as having descended from the House of David (Luke 1:69). We are accustomed to the mantle of kingship being passed through blood lines, that is biologically, from father to son. And yet in 1 Samuel, that is emphatically not what happens. There we find leadership being passed, not from Eli to his sons Hophni or Phinehas, but to Samuel who is like a son. Indeed Eli calls Samuel 'son' (3:6,16). In turn, leadership then passes not from Samuel to his sons Joel or Abijah, but to Saul. Finally, leadership passes from Saul. Again, it does not pass to his son Jonathan but to David. Once again, David is like a son to Saul and Saul is like a father to David. David calls Saul 'father' (24:11) and Saul calls David 'son' several times (24:16; 26:17,21,25).[15]

In each case one leader functions as a surrogate father to the next. Their relationship is not biological but is it not a family relationship? Families are social units characterised by obligation and entitlement, responsibilities and rights. We use the language of biological relation-

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ship to describe the various roles we play but that does not mean families should be normatively defined by biology. It is common in cultures around the world for families to have extensive networks of people identified as aunts and uncles, without there being a biological tie through the brother or sister of one's father or mother.

So, two people can form a family by mutual consent. They may or may not procreate. We would surely have said that Zechariah and Elizabeth had formed a family during all those years that they were childless (Luke 1:7). They did not become a family only when John (the Baptist) was born! (In China a family is commonly thought to be made by marriage, not by procreation.) A family is characterised by love and the physical care of one another. On this ground Ruth and Naomi are also a family.

Some scholars use the term 'fictive kin' to describe relationships that are familial but not biological. They provide relationships that are supportive and caring, responsible and communal. The church has made extensive use of these relationships in the institution of godparents through baptism. In the medieval period these relationships were taken so seriously that European laws of incest were extended to cover relations between godparents and godchildren. In many parts of the world today, the godparent relationship is an integral part of the family system.[16]

I do not know of any culture where parents do not have an obligation to care for their child, though responsibilities may be divided unevenly between father and mother or shared with village members or an extended kinship group. These obligations are matched by the rights of the child to receive such care and we have various enforcement mechanisms to ensure such care. So, family members have both rights and responsibilities.

Children, upon reaching the maturity of adulthood, must choose to assume these mutual responsibilities in their own right in order to maintain their membership in the family. I recall a story I heard from a friend who was born into the Cree First Nation of western Canada. A friend of his had grown up on a poor, rural reserve and moved to the city where he received a European style education, married a woman who was not Cree, and was employed in a high status government job. Members of his extended family felt entitled to spontaneously come to his house in the city and stay for months at a time, eating his food without making any financial contribution to the household. This was very stressful for his wife and eventually he asked his family to stop doing this. His family returned to the reserve and held a funeral for him. He had violated a norm so central to their understanding of family relationship that they no longer considered him a part of their family.

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So, families can take many forms and I do not believe any one form is mandated by God for all time and in all places. One of the questions this raises is: how do we derive ethical norms from Scripture? This is too big a subject for this small paper.[17] However, we should not derive them by isolating some texts from others and applying them uncritically to contemporary life. Rather we must apply the tools of reason to all the biblical texts taken together in the same way we apply our critical faculties to contemporary society. In addition we must critically appropriate Church teachings in the same way as we critically appropriate our own experience of God and the world. Only then can we begin to say what ethical norms can be derived from Scripture and how they relate to the Christian life.

4. Four Criteria for Ethical Families

One implication of the idea of multiple family forms is that it is possible to distinguish between ethical and unethical families. The Vanier Institute definition already implies some ethical criteria since it characterises families by mutual consent, mutual responsibility and legal obligation. Families that are not characterised by freedom cannot be ethical. So, forced marriages would not be ethical but arranged marriages might be if the participants were truly free to consent. Families where members refuse to care for one another are also unethical. So, where parents refuse to care for their children or adult children refuse to care for their dependent parents, they are acting in an unethical manner. Where legal obligations are not met, society will enforce sanctions (I do not assume here necessarily, that all laws are ethical. Some laws can be unjust). Obligations exist in both given families and constructed families. It is not the presence or absence of obligations that determine whether or not a family is ethical. Relationships of mutual support freely entered into will always entail obligations.

To the criteria of freedom and mutuality I would also add the criteria of peace and justice. Families have always had the potential of being unsafe places. Abraham's threat to sacrifice Isaac is not the only example in the Bible of violence being threatened by a parent against a child. We also read of examples where a father is allowed to have his son stoned (Deut 21:12-21) or his daughter burned (Gen 38:24), and instructed to execute them if they lead the father to serve other gods (Deut 13:6-9). In Judges (11:34-40) we read the horrific account of Jephthah slaughtering his daughter.

Today in Canada, some families continue to be unsafe places, primarily for women and children. Studies have shown that '29 % of [Canadian] women who have ever been married or lived common law with a partner have been assaulted by their marital partner and 45 %

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of these cases resulted in physical injury to the woman… 39 per cent of all women have experienced at least one incident of sexual assault since the age of 16.'[18] So, a violent family is an unethical family.

Finally, there is the criteria of justice. This includes care for the poor and right relationship. A family where one member (a man for example) uses all the resources of the family for his own purposes without regard to the needs of the other family members would be an unethical family. Here I am in agreement with the American Catholic ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill who redefines 'family values' as care for others. 'The Christian family, Cahill writes, defines *family values* as care for others, especially the poor; it appreciates that truly Christian families are not always the most socially acceptable or prestigious ones; it values and encourages all families who strive earnestly to meet the standard of compassionate action; and it encourages both personal commitment to and the social structuring of mercy and justice.'[19]

A family of whatever form, characterised by freedom and mutuality, peace and justice is an ethical family in the Christian tradition of ethical discourse, even if it is not explicitly Christian. As Rosemary Ruether has written, 'Today we face the breakdown of this Victorian pattern of the idealised family, with its segregation of male and female in separate spheres of work and home. The question now becomes: Is there some new way or reading marriage, family, sex and procreation theologically that can support a more just and sustainable harmony of women and men, home and work?' The response of James Dobson and his ilk is not to re-imagine the family but to reinforce its Victorian patriarchal form. For Ruether, by contrast, 'A new vision of family, of home and work, needs to be based on the mutuality of whole human beings, not on the truncation of such beings into separate parts, home for women and work for men… Theologically, this requires first of all a clear and explicit rejection of the doctrine that holds that the patriarchal family of male headship and female subordination is the "order of creation", mandated by God. The patriarchal family in its various forms, from the slavocracy of antiquity to the Victorian nuclear family, is a human construct, not a divine mandate.'[20]

I can summarise this form of family, characterised by freedom and mutuality, peace and justice by saying that it is a democratic family. My early nineteenth century ancestors would have been appalled by such a suggestion. An American Church newspaper from the early 1800s described the idea of 'pure family democracy' as 'most alarming.'[21] Even today, within the United Church of Canada there are dissenters who agonise about the direction their Church is taking with regard to a theological interpretation of the family.[22] However, I would define a democratic institution as one where all the adult members can participate in the decisions which affect them. Does that mean constructed families are more moral than given families? No,

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even democratic institutions can be unethical. One of the characteristics that makes a democratic institution ethical is that it cares for and protects the rights and interests of its dependent members.

So, in North America, the form of the family is contested. I advocate for ethical democratic forms as those which come closest to the gospel message of freedom and mutuality, peace and justice.

Conclusion

Having successfully inverted the question of the ethics of leadership in families into the question of leadership in ethical families, I will now conclude as follows. The question of the ethics of leadership in ethical families is the same as the question of leadership in all democratic institutions. Formal leadership must emerge from just processes that ensure the possibility of participation of all qualified members. Ethical leadership will encourage participation in decision making, protect the rights and interests of dependents members and minorities, avoid self-interested behaviour and conflicts of interest, and seek the common good.

As always, the problem with Christian ethics is that it sets a high bar!

NOTES

1 Xiaohong Zhu, Rachel, 'Family Leadership Shift in China. Preliminary Perspectives For A Confucian and Christian Dialogue', in: Stückelberger, Christoph/Mugambi, J.N.K. (eds), *Responsible Leadership. Global Perspectives*, Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2005, pp. 34-45. See also Chapter 3 in this volume.

2 Ondji'i Toung, Richard, 'Responsible Family Leadership. Traditional and Christian Approaches in Cameroon', in *op. cit.*, pp. 46-58. See also Chapter 4 in this volume.

3 Focus on the Family Mission Statement at www.family.org (last accessed 5 September 2005).

4 'But for too long, Carlson and Mero say, traditionalists have been more divided by distractions than united in defending their common base: the natural family – married mom and dad, with children – as society's bedrock.' http://www.family.org/cforum/fosi/marriage/nac/ a0036244.cfm (last accessed 10 September 2005).

5 Clapp, Rodney, *Families at the Crossroads. Beyond Traditional and Modern Options*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993, p. 35.

6 Sowle Cahill, Lisa, *Family. A Christian Social Perspective*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 19.

7 Visser, Margaret, *The Geometry of Love. Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church*, Toronto: HarperCollins, 2000, pp. 96-97.

8 These stories are also recounted in *op. cit*., p. 242.

9 See Radford Ruether, Rosemary, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.

10 Clapp, Rodney, *op. cit.*, p. 11. He relies heavily on Brigitte and Peter Berger's *The War over the Family*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983.

11 In the east and south, especially prior to the American civil war, agriculture was organised around a plantation model based on slave labour.

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[12] See Eichler, Margrit, *Family Shifts. Families, Policies, and Gender Equality*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 7.

[13] http://www.vifamily.ca/about/about.html (last accessed 11 September 2005).

[14] Ruth 1:16, New Revised Standard Version.

[15] This relationship pattern is explored in detail by Jobling, David, *1 Samuel*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998, chapter 5.

[16] See Radford Ruether, Rosemary, *op. cit*, p. 231, note 3.

[17] For a fuller discussion of this question see Birch, Bruce/Rasmussen, Larry, *The Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989, rev. ed.

[18] Eichler, Margrit, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[19] Sowle Cahill, Lisa, *op. cit*., p. 135.

[20] Radford Ruether, Rosemary, *op. cit*., p. 228.

[21] 'Second-generation American Episcopalians carried an almost proprietary view of leadership in a "world turned upside down" by the Revolutionary War; indeed, the prospect of "pure family democracy" was … "most alarming" [according to an 1807 author in a church magazine].' Bowen Gillespie, Joanna, 'Episcopal Family as the Nursery of Church & Society', in: Airhart, Phyllis D./Lamberts Bendroth, Margaret (eds), *Faith Traditions and the Family*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, p. 143.

[22] See Anderson, Daphne J./Anderson, Terence R., 'United Church of Canada: Kingdom Symbol of Lifestyle Choice', in: Airhart, Phyllis D./Lamberts Bendroth, Margaret (eds), *op. cit*.