

Christian Theology and the Family¹

By Susannah Cornwall²

Introduction

The theology of family continues to be explored in research institutes and at symposia the world over. In the last decade, two particularly significant developments have been the Roman Catholic “synods on the family” held in Vatican City in 2014 and 2015 (which drew on the lived experience of practicing Catholics, and frankly addressed questions such as pastoral care for those remarried after divorce, blended families, families headed by same-sex couples, families headed by unmarried couples, polygamy, intimate partner violence, and marriages between people of different religious traditions), and the 2016 publication of Pope Francis’ letter *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*), deemed controversial by some conservative Roman Catholics because although the Pope endorses marriage as sacramental and indissoluble, and family life built on marriage as an image of God’s love for humanity, he also seems to hint at space for the embrace of “irregular” or “non-traditional” family forms. Both the synods themselves, and Francis’ letter, drew on the principle of graduality, that is, the idea that it is both possible and necessary to recognize the (limited) goodness of situations which do not chime with “official” theological accounts of the good. In *Amoris Laetitia*, for example, the Pope holds,

“It can no longer simply be said that all those in any 'irregular' situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. ... It is possible that in an objective situation of sin – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – a person can be living in God’s grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity.” (Francis 2018: para 301, 305)

It makes sense that explorations of the family are particularly common in Catholic social teaching, but Christians of other traditions also appeal to family (and, in particular, the importance of the potential of families for the protection and nurture of vulnerable people). Collections such as Marcia Bunge’s *The Child in Christian Thought* (Bunge 2001) centre the theme of the initiation and care of vulnerable people across the Christian tradition. That said, the nature of exactly what is meant by “family”, and what if any are its necessary limits, often go uninterrogated in theology, perhaps because it is assumed that they are self-evident. A notable exception is found in the work of Adrian Thatcher (2002, 2007, 2015), who relativizes the Bible’s own often problematic accounts of family in light of Jesus’ love ethic and striking privileging of children, women and other marginalized people, and constructs a theology of family drawing on Richard of St Victor, Karl Barth and Stanley Grenz, appealing to non-exploitative intra-Trinitarian relations and the possibility of the *imago Dei*’s being outworked in human relationships, not just individuals. Thatcher is particularly eager not to be an apologist for families per se given the violence, abuse and structural sin often perpetuated in them.

Family, identity and diversity

¹ Parts of this paper are adapted from Cornwall 2013 and Cornwall 2017.

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The Christian tradition has always acknowledged that families come into being in various ways. There is a long history of adoption and support for adoptive families. Theologians including Thomas Aquinas took it for granted that it was normal and natural for parents to privilege their own (i.e. biological) children over others, but such kin altruism is treated more circumspectly elsewhere in the tradition. Unlike in Islam, in Christian theologies adoptive children are considered full members of their adoptive families with concomitant rights (for example, to inheritance) and responsibilities (for example, not to marry or have children with close family members). Whilst undoubtedly given importance in mainstream Christianity, families are also considered contingent and something belonging to this present realm. Mainstream Christianity has not, for example, had the understanding, as in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, that families are eternal.

Theologies of adoption have varied in their quality, but some excellent recent examples are found in Swinton and Brock's 2018 collection, including Jana Marguerite Bennett's analogy between adoption and baptism, with similar tensions about rejecting and leaving behind an old life in order to take on a new one, and R. Ruard Ganzevoort and Marco Derks' reflection on how adoption queers the family, in which they show persuasively that adoption is not just a case of assimilation of a child into a monolithic, unchanging wider family, but rather redefines family altogether. The essays in Timothy Jackson's 2005 anthology also effectively disrupt and interrogate notions of "natural" and "unnatural" as they play out in adoptive families.

"Family values" have often, particularly in the USA, been a byword for social and religious conservatism and been associated with anti-abortion movements, abstinence-only sex education, opposition to contraceptive use, minimal state interference or intervention in private affairs such as how children are educated and disciplined, and traditional gender roles (see, for example, discussions in Browning et al 1997). Theologies informed by liberationist, feminist and queer concerns have questioned how far the promotion of this form of "family values" is really good for all those concerned, including children, women, single people, and those unwilling or unable to enter into families of this kind (Althaus-Reid 2000; Thatcher 2007). It is important to acknowledge that families are also statistically the places in which sexual abuse of children, and intimate partner abuse, are most likely to take place.

Clearly family is not, then, an unproblematic concept for Christian theologians, or one which does universal good or justice to those involved. Pragmatically, then, more thoughtful theologies of family have often focused on *what kinds* of family life are most able to enhance care, nurture and wellbeing. Pastoral theologies of family have often focused on goods for children – as, for example, in the work of Don Browning and colleagues. Browning's model of the "equal-regard marriage" in which both men and women share responsibilities inside and outside the home, including childcare, housework and paid employment, was, he held, the most life-giving for all those involved (Browning 2007: 255; see also e.g. Miller-McLemore 1994, Witte, Green and Wheeler 2007). Browning holds that the reason children raised inside marriage by their biological parents tend to have better outcomes than other children is because parents invest more care in their biological children. However, he perhaps does too little to interrogate the economic, social-prejudicial and other corollaries in play.

The Church of England's own previous work has acknowledged that nuclear families built on marriage are not the whole story of family life, and that blended and multigenerational families are increasingly common. The 1995 document *Something to Celebrate* aimed to celebrate the diversity of family forms, whilst still ultimately exhorting the good of marriage as basis for stable family lives (Central Board of

Finance 1995: 188). It specifically recommends, 'The Church needs to recognize and value the different ways in which people live in families. ... We recommend that the life of local churches be ordered in ways which help everyone feel welcome, whatever their family circumstances' (210; original emphasis). As we have seen, this kind of approach is also found in *Amoris Laetitia*, in which Pope Francis acknowledges that "family values" have often proven an impossible and damaging ideal to live up to and have particularly harmed those in "non-traditional" families, but ultimately reaffirms Roman Catholic teaching on the good of heterosexual marriage and the impossibility of recognizing same-sex unions as marriages.

Family, sexuality, procreation and celibacy

The family has often been the assumed location for sexual activity, and the Church has often held that sex can only legitimately take place within a marriage out of which children may be produced: "Sexual intercourse, as an expression of faithful intimacy, properly belongs with marriage exclusively" (House of Bishops of the Church of England 1999: 8). Marriage, it is claimed, "plays a central role in the transmission ... [of] the life of the church" (Archbishops' Council 2013, 11) via procreation and the raising of children in the Christian tradition (*Men and Women in Marriage*). The justification for this kind of view rests in both a conviction that marriage is the best foundation for stable family life, and that sex without the commitment ideally expressed in marriage is likely to lead to hurt and instability. "The effective framework for sexual intercourse is a committed, permanent and faithful relationship and that is what marriage is ... Sexual intercourse can only have justice done to its richness in a relationship we call marriage" (Dominian and Montefiore 1989: 32).

In 1753, Hardwicke's Marriage Act made a public wedding ceremony a legal requirement in England and Wales (Thatcher 1998: 77). It provided a much more distinct marker for the beginning of a marriage than had existed before. Before this date, to postpone sexual activity until after the wedding had clearly not always been the norm (Dormor 2004; Gillis 1985; Stone 1977: 604), especially in contexts where a wedding service had been the preserve mainly of the upper classes. At certain periods many brides were pregnant or had already had a child by the time they got married (see Lawler 2002: 170-4; Stone 1977: 607-611). Betrothal for couples who intended to marry later was fairly common at points in the church's history until the late eighteenth century. The period of betrothal lasted up to two years before marriage, and sexual activity of various kinds (including penetrative vaginal sex) was acceptable during this time. Betrothal was seen as part of an ongoing process of joining together the couple and their families, but the arrangement could be broken off before the wedding if no children had been produced.

As we have seen, latterly the Church has tended to hold that children are ideally conceived and born within marriage, and that this might be understood as the foundation of a new family. In practice, however, a vast majority of people married in church today have also already lived together, and many already have children. Adrian Thatcher notes that this represents a discontinuity with more recent history, but is perhaps more like the situation that persisted several hundred years previously when it was not uncommon for brides to be pregnant or have children by the time they married. The notion that children "should" follow marriage may stem in part from the strikingly young age at marriage in the middle of the twentieth century: in 1968 when the average age of women at marriage was 24 (that is, when half of women marrying were *younger* than 24) it made sense that they were less likely to have a child already. The average age of women at first marriage is now 35 (Office for National

Statistics 2018). Whilst the average age of women giving birth has also risen, the majority of births are still to women aged 34 and under.

There is plenty in the Christian tradition to relativize the “good” of procreation and family. Gregory of Nyssa in common with many other early Christians is suspicious of sexual and familial ties since he associates them with our irrational “animal” nature. Gregory sees a strong disjunction between Adam and Eve, who must reproduce just like all the other animals, and Jesus, the “new human”, who represents a departure from this pattern and in whom there is no longer male and female (*De hominis opificio* XVI:7; Schaff 1892: 751). This kind of view is informed by a reluctance to endorse earthly practical and affective ties prevalent in some Mediterranean cultures in the early centuries of the Christian era. Latterly, theologians have been happier to endorse the goodness of concrete bodily materiality, but this has perhaps led to an overemphasis on procreative sexual relationships to the exclusion of others.

Augustine is also among those early theologians who relativized procreation and held that metaphorical “fruitfulness” and fertility were a greater gift and blessing than biological children were. His own family life might lead us to be circumspect about holding him as an exemplar in this area, particularly his abandonment of his partner of fifteen years’ standing and their son in order to enter into an engagement with a young heiress. That said, Augustine’s own situation reminds us that marriage and entry into family life have often been pragmatic economic and political arrangements even for Christians (Witte 1997). Furthermore, he helpfully indicates that spouses *already* constitute a family together even if they have no children (*On the Good of Marriage*, para 17). Their primary commitment is to one another and they should not, for example, seek to leave the marriage in order to reproduce with others.

In the present day, Roman Catholic theologians including David Matzko McCarthy and Gerard Loughlin have been among those who have highlighted the more-than-biological nature of Christian kinship and care. For Loughlin,

“Children [are] born to the Church, and not merely to their parents ... This is why ... not everyone in the Church has to look for the gift of children, why not every particular relationship or sexual act has to be open to the gift of children, in short, why there can be infertile straight couples and gay couples; why there can be celibates, consecrated virgins and single people. For in the imagination of the Church, children are first and foremost gifts that arrive through the nuptial union of the Church with her beloved, Jesus Christ.” (Loughlin 2004: 97)

In practice, despite the celibate or “Josephite” marriages of the middle ages which separated marriage from sex and procreation (Elliott 1993), the expectation more recently has been that the usual standard for Christian marriages is to produce children. That said, the acceptance in most Protestant denominations of contraceptive use already relativizes the connection between sex and biological reproduction. Rowan Williams is among those contemporary theologians who hold that if we legitimate non-procreative heterosexual activity through the use of contraception, it is difficult to argue that homosexual activity is any less legitimate from a natural law point of view (Williams 2002: 11-12).

All that said, families centred on married couples have never been the only forms of community that the Church has sanctioned or celebrated, and there is obviously a long-tradition of (usually) single-sex

monastic communities, some of which borrow familial language but which have given opportunities for service and leadership outside the constrictions of family life. There have been times when this was a much better bet for women because of the physical dangers that pregnancy, birth and sustenance of multiple children posed (Elm 1994). We have accounts of vowed virgins who faced opposition from their own biological families upon entering religious orders because this represented an economic loss to the family.

Indeed, a deliberate choice among some early Christians not to marry or have children represented a discontinuity with both the Hebrew heritage (in which marriage, sexual activity and children were figured as divine blessings, and the begetting of children a religious duty for males) and contemporary Roman society which rewarded early marriage and reproduction as a defensive tactic (Brown 1988: 6-7).

Early Christian virginity and celibacy did chime with ascetic Gnostic and Stoic philosophy which advocated the transcendence of the “lower” material realm in favour of the spiritual. For Gregory of Nyssa writing *On Virginity*, such virginity echoed God’s own constancy by anticipating a time when humans would not have to sully themselves with a constant earthbound cycle of births and deaths (section 14.1). However, Gregory also noted that it is possible to be married and sexually active and nonetheless live an ascetic life: conversely, virginity does not guarantee love or purity of motive.

Family, gender and Church

The use of the family as a metaphor for the church is not uncommon, but its biblical antecedents are often rather troubling. The Hebrew Bible sometimes portrays God as a violent figure who becomes Israel’s husband-father by dubious means, and uses strikingly rapacious language for their relationship (with passages like Ezekiel 16, Hosea 2 and Numbers 5 as particularly notorious examples). In the New Testament, even if some of the Pauline and (especially) pseudo-Pauline epistles are relatively conservative about family, the Jesus of the Gospels is more circumspect about its value. Many commentators have noted and attributed significance to depictions of Jesus’s generous and non-biological approaches to family (such as in Luke 8:21 and John 19:25-27); his apparently casual attitude towards his own blood relations (Matthew 12:47-49; Luke 8:19-21 and 14:26); his superseding of existing familial ties and commitments in favour of commitments to the new community (Luke 9:60-62 and 18:29-30); his disruption of the assumption that childlessness is a curse (Luke 23:29); and his querying of Roman imperial and Jewish patriarchal norms of male supremacy which tended to disadvantage children, women and slaves (Matthew 19-20) in favour of the elevation of the latter groups. We should perhaps not be surprised that Jesus appears to sit light to norms of family given that, on some readings of the gospel accounts, he himself likely grew up without the presence of a human father figure (Van Aarde 2001).

Families headed by a mixed-sex married couple have sometimes been understood as microcosms both of the state (with the paterfamilias as “monarch” or “president”) and of the church (with the paterfamilias as “priest”, “king”, “prophet” and “covering”) (Thatcher 2007). Roles within the family have often echoed those within church leadership.

The Protestant Reformation led to a re-emphasis on associations between church and family leadership, with husband-fathers as their families’ priests and mother-wives as their helpmeets. Clerical marriage became more accepted and a theologian like Martin Luther was (eventually) able to

depict marriage and family life positively, not simply a concession to human weakness but a suitable proving-ground and place for intimate delight. Luther was suspicious of monasticism and mandatory clerical celibacy, as he believed celibacy was a gift only for a few and that when it was imposed on those without this charism it led to perversion and lust (see, for example, his *Judgment on Monastic Vows*, 1521). Luther considered sexual desire, and the desire to have children, God-given, natural and healthy in women and men alike. Indeed, he held that offspring were the greatest good of marriage, and knew that involuntary infertility was a source of enormous anguish and distress to most whom it befell. He was clearly influenced by his own controversial marriage to Katharina Von Bora, a former nun, to whom he depicted himself as subordinate within the household and with whom he brought up ten children. Nonetheless, Luther did not consider either marriage or family life sacramental, and held that while they were contingent goods for civil society and a crucial location for the nurture of Christian children, no Christian could be compelled either to marry or not to marry.

Of course, gendered metaphors have also been used for the relationships between God and the Church, and this has often had the effect that norms of heterosexual family life receive theological sanction by association. Queer theologian Linn Marie Tonstad (2015) has recently incisively critiqued the deeply embedded alliance between Trinitarian divine difference and human sexual difference, showing that Trinitarian theology has been less adept than it needs to be at holding space for authentic otherness not rooted in subordinationism. Attempts to recast the persons of the Trinity as “two blokes and a bird” (as Tonstad does not say) – which have the ostensibly good motivation of identifying feminine elements in the nature of God, particularly in the Spirit – actually risk reinforcing hierarchy, and mean that “divine difference gets gendered and sexed, grounding the ultimacy of heterosexuality in the Christian imaginary” (Tonstad 2015: 11).

For John Dunnill, the eschatological nature of the Christian promise means that biological generation (and its concomitant activity, such as patterns of marriage and child-rearing) are relativized. For example, he characterizes the story of the wedding at Cana as “the one final feast, which fulfils all the ‘marrying and giving in marriage’ which constitutes the old age. ... From this point on, the balance between mortality and eternity is fundamentally altered” (Dunnill 2013: 120). In other words, from this point onward, at the instigation of Jesus’s earthly ministry, the social and cosmic significance of marriage and regeneration have changed (as Barth also holds in *Church Dogmatics* III/4, which is why parenting is a grace but not an obligation under the new dispensation in Christ).

This new “kingdom” is not actually called a family, and there may be good reasons to be circumspect about the use of familial metaphors for the church. Postcolonial theologians and biblical interpreters have recently asked whether Christianity represents a problematic colonial takeover requiring disloyalty to existing familial and affective ties in a way that echoes some of the worst excesses of the imperial project (see e.g. Donaldson 2006, Dube 2006). Being called to leave one’s existing ties and loyalties behind for the sake of the new community is in one sense very democratizing and levelling, but in another it risks erasing all diversity, and the hazard is that ethnic and cultural identities which were already marginal are the ones which disappear into the melting pot.

Conclusions

Christian theological accounts of family are diverse, perhaps more so than we might realize if we were to look only at denominational texts on marriage, gender and sexuality produced in the last half-

century. In the remainder of the *Living in Love and Faith* process it will be important to ask which goods and norms the church wishes to uphold; how effectively families might provide an environment in which to do that; whether some forms of family are more able than others to do so, and if so how and why; and whether, if it is shown that in fact these goods and norms can be brought about in quite other ways, there is a continued justification for giving special precedence to (some forms of) family life.

In my own work I have suggested that models of marriage, parenting and family are not immaculate or unchanging, but the responsibility as well as the inheritance of those who practice them and theologize about them (Cornwall 2017). I have shown that we both receive and disseminate our institutions (including the family), shaping them along the way, and that this is precisely part of our God-imaging vocation of generativity. As such, appeals to the tradition are vital but only get us so far, because they do not answer the whole question of how a living, dynamic tradition should look here and now.

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