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Author(s): Stephen G. Post

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# Review Article

## Religion, Culture, and Family\*

*Stephen G. Post* / *Case Western Reserve University*

It is rare for a just-published book to be immediately considered a potential classic in Christian theology and ethics. Don S. Browning's Religion, Culture, and Family Project at the University of Chicago has produced two such books. Browning and his collaborative authors Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin have produced an extremely balanced analysis of contemporary American social scientific, moral, and religious debates over the nature and role of the family. *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* is by far the most comprehensive, scholarly, and deep book on the family ever produced within the context of mainstream Protestant thought. The book is so compelling that it will shape discussion for years to come across the full spectrum of American Christianity. *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* is complemented by John Witte, Jr.'s *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, which is far and away the finest available history of Christian social thought on marriage and the family. These two books will reestablish marriage and family as being central in mainstream Protestant Christian social thought, theology, and ethics, thereby correcting at least several decades of relative neglect. For his leadership of this timely project, which includes a number of other important works, Browning deserves special recognition for bringing empirical data, intellectual sophistication, and courage to an era of questionable opinion.

In *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, the authors defend the Christian normative model of "the committed, intact, equal-regard, public-private family" (p. 2). The equal-regarding aspect of this model provides a higher moral locus from which to critique power relations and identify those situations in which intervention and even family dissolution may be justifiable. The authors contend that, "although Christianity has some-

\* 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), xi+399 pp., \$19.00 (paper). John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), xii+315 pp., \$24.00 (paper).

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times supported unjust family practices, its overall direction has been toward a love ethic of equal regard between husband and wife” (p. 3). Respect for women and children, limits on arbitrary male authority, and the denunciation of polygyny (which is unfair to poorer men and turns women into objects) are some of the aspects of Christianity that point toward the authors’ normative model, although distortions of the Christian message have sometimes obscured its equal-regarding foundation. Thus, this book presents a “new critical familism” that challenges those Christian traditionalists who have misunderstood the Christian moral vision of the family, just as it challenges those who have failed to appreciate the importance of conjugally intact family life.

When author meetings began, some of them asked, “Does Christianity have a stake in the promotion of intact mother-father partnerships, or should it support all families, regardless of form, where genuine need exists” (p. 5)? Of course, critical familism reaches out to serve the needs of single parents, stepfamilies, singles, and others; however, the authors ultimately agreed that fact, scripture, and tradition demand that “central support” should be given to the “mother-father, egalitarian family in which each partner has flexible access to public and private responsibilities” (p. 6). This agreement emerged in part from a set of social scientific studies conducted by various other Browning project investigators, collaborating with the Social Science Research Center and the Gallop International Institute, among other leading organizations.

Each chapter in this book combines clear exposition with well-conceived normative positions. The first chapter, “The Family (1990–1996): From a Conservative to a Liberal Issue,” begins with data—as must all practical theology and ethics. It includes an accurate review of the empirical studies indicating that changes away from the conjugal family have, in general, been disruptive for children, society, and spouses. The transition among the leading liberal social scientists and politicians to the conclusion that children and mothers in single-parent families suffer declining well-being and relative poverty is especially interesting. Neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, and communitarians all articulated the adverse consequences of teen pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, and fatherlessness.

What influence might such facts have on the thinking of religious communities? While the authors point out the validity of the liberal Protestant trajectory toward justice and universality, gender equality, and intimacy, they also note “an inability to delineate the specific goods that distinguish the family from other social organizations” (p. 44). Since the mid-1960s, they demonstrate that official pronouncements of mainline Protestant churches have “abandoned concern with family stability and children’s well-being” (p. 44), while being highly attentive to homosexuality and abortion. While the Protestant affirmation of equal regard and

mutuality have been positive, there has been a tendency to see religiously based marriage and commitment as merely one option among others for the organization of sexuality and reproduction. The authors state that their book is written in large measure to help mainline liberal Protestant churches realize the negative consequences of family decline.

One of the most conceptually innovative chapters, “Love, Christian Family Theory, and Evolutionary Psychology,” discusses kin altruism from the perspective of human evolution. With regard to basic definitions of Christian love, the authors contend that “first, eros must play a part in Christian love, and, second, our modern theories of desire have been too thin, built too much around pleasure and intimacy and not enough around fuller ranges of human motivations, such as parental affections” (p. 107). Kin altruism shapes the human psychologically, so that “kin are most likely to contribute to the flourishing and defense of children” (p. 109). The authors argue that this altruistic propensity is essential for the full moral life; religiocultural symbols and meanings “extend and re-shape these inclinations” (p. 109). The Greek *storge*, or care, especially of parents for children, “is a foundational element in all love” (p. 110), including love for all humanity.<sup>1</sup> The authors do an exceptional job of interweaving parental solicitude, theories of *agape*, and evolutionary psychology. This chapter also describes the evolutionary background of the “male problematic” of insufficient investment in children and the “female problematic” of excessive self-sacrifice.

Like every chapter in this book, “Honor, Shame, and Equality in Early Christian Families” is a model of clarity. The authors move from social science and evolutionary psychology to Christian scripture. In particular, they place the concept of male “headship” over women (Eph. 5:21–23) in historical and cultural context. Against the background of oppressive Greco-Roman patriarchy, the earliest Jesus movement “contained an ethos of genuine egalitarianism between man and woman” (p. 134). The Pauline “love patriarchy” was at least less oppressive than the ancient heroic code of male dominance, for it was a “headship” modeled after the sacrifice of Christ. In an extensive summary of New Testament exegesis and sociology, the authors conclude, “Placed in its proper context, the letter to the Ephesians provocatively but incompletely challenges unilateral authority in families” (p. 147). The fact that Christian wives are counseled to be submissive to their Gentile husbands in 1 Pet. 3:1 simply highlights the difference between the egalitarian Christian ethos in church and family, and the patriarchal pagan world. The authors make a persua-

<sup>1</sup> This is also the thesis of my book, *Spheres of Love: Toward a New Ethics of the Family* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1994).

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sive argument that better New Testament exegesis points toward equal regard in both church and family.

Chapter 6 provides an extensive interpretation of secular and theological contemporary feminist thought. The authors cover the full scope of feminism, including a useful contrast between Jean Bethke Elshtain and Susan Moller Okin. After an analysis of mainstream theological feminism and the important arguments it adds to secular thought, the focus turns to more “conserving [in contrast to conservative] Christian feminists,” who combine feminist egalitarian concerns with a clear statement of the virtues of “the intact, two-parent family and the value of children” (p. 181). The key representatives of this thinking are Catholic moral theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill and Calvinist Mary Stewart Leeuwen. This form of feminism is clearly one that Browning and his collaborative authors find highly appealing. The chapter concludes with a splendid discussion of African-American “womanist theology,” focusing on Delores Williams, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, and Toinette Eugene.

Chapter 7, “Families and the Therapeutic,” asks to what degree the current therapeutic culture is supportive of commitment in marriage, as opposed to being individualistic and neutral on divorce. The chapter is informed by an important national survey of 1,035 therapists, conducted by family psychologist Thomas Needham. Building on discussions of object-relations theory and family systems theory, the authors underscore the fact that, contrary to some facile myths, most secular therapists are quite concerned with marital stability, especially where children are involved. Unfortunately, however, there is less concern among religiously oriented Protestant liberal therapists. The authors consider the writings of Froma Walsh, John Patton, and Brian Childs as some examples of how far Protestant therapists have drifted away from concern with the form of the family, focusing instead almost exclusively on the important function of interpersonal caring. It seems that this hesitancy to address the massive data indicating general benefits of intact marriage for spouses and children is rooted in the Protestant therapists; concern that the articulation of any ideal family form—that is, that committed marriage should precede procreation—would only aggravate a sense of failure in clients seeking therapy. Because Browning and his collaborative authors are pastorally caring, they have no tolerance for the destructive misuse of their ideal family form. With all due pastoral sensitivity, however, it is still imperative to assert “the *prima facie* ideal of the intact, equal-regard, mother-father partnership” (p. 217), with an emphasis on data, ethics, and theology. Common sense can only endorse the authors’ statement that ideals serve as an important source “of critical reflection and a map to living” (p. 218). It is remarkable that liberal Protestant thought and culture are uniquely unwilling to sensitively introduce the Christian ideal

of intact marriage in a time when both secular therapists and liberal social scientists have firmly acknowledged the empirical validity of that ideal. This chapter alone should be required reading for all Christian training programs on pastoral care and psychology.

Chapter 8, “Christian Profamily Movements: The Black Church, Roman Catholics, and the Christian Right,” provides a useful clarification of the literature and debate surrounding the black family, as well as an application of critical familism to the Christian right. The authors selected this particular consortium of movements in part because of the Christian Coalition’s stated intent to bring Catholics, blacks, and evangelicals into its fold.

Although there was much validity in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s concern about the increasing absence of fathers in black families, the authors find his analysis sorely wanting. They would rather he had asked this question: “What great secrets, spiritual or cultural, have made it possible for some of these families to survive and in many cases flourish? Rather than assuming that there is little to be found in black families but disruption and ill health, why not be open to the possibility that there is something for the rest of society to learn from their experience” (p. 225)? Drawing on the writings of Wallace Charles Smith, they emphasize the number of black fathers who are faithful to their children despite overwhelming adverse circumstances. The authors also draw on the work of historian Herbert Gutman and sociologist Andrew Billingsley, who “dismantled the Frazier-Clark-Moynihan thesis about the consequences of slavery on the African-American family” (p. 227). Before and after the Civil War, and into the twentieth century, the intact black family was much more the norm than this trio of scholars supposed. *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* should be read widely by all those who wish to understand the black family both socially and theologically.

In a discussion of the Christian Right, the authors emphasize Promise Keepers, Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition, and the Family Research Council. They find Focus on the Family, which is closely associated with evangelical James Dobson, as “half-right and half-wrong” (p. 233). While the emphasis on the conjugal family is correct, the stress on male “headship” and “love patriarchy” fails to appreciate the equal-regarding aspects of Christianity, as well as the social-historical context of the pertinent passages from Ephesians and 1 Peter. Promise Keepers is similarly “a step forward and a step backward” (p. 234). The problem of lingering patriarchy is also evident in Catholicism. The authors rightly conclude that “male responsibility and leadership must be a *shared* responsibility and leadership. It must be arrived at through an ethic of communicative discourse, an intersubjective understanding of equal regard. The conservative voices—whether African American, evangelical,

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or Catholic—have all fallen short of a full understanding of this ethic” (p. 245).

The final section of this book looks to future directions by articulating practical action-guiding principles. Churches must “retrieve their marriage and family traditions, even though they must do so critically” (p. 307); they must “join with other churches and synagogues to create a new critical marriage and family culture” (p. 309) and “join with other parts of civil society in their local communities to create a critical marriage and family culture” (p. 310). Among other things, they should “take the lead in preparing youth for a critical familism” (p. 313), and address “the tensions between family needs and the demands of paid work” (p. 316). Churches must also help society understand that value neutrality in public policy on family issues is unacceptable.

Browning and his collaborative authors have performed an impressive intellectual service for liberal Protestants. If this book were seriously discussed by every seminarian, theologian, pastoral therapist, and ethicist, liberal Protestantism would migrate toward a better future than the mere endorsement of the current culture of formlessness in marriage and procreation. It is even still possible that liberal Protestantism could have a salutary effect on the wider culture, rather than a diminishing one. It is because Browning and his coauthors care deeply about a possible salutary effect that they have been so thorough, accurate, and thoughtful in organizing an amazing array of important literature. Their “critical familism” is so soundly argued and articulated that the careful reader who takes facts and tradition seriously will find this book necessary, timely, and persuasive. The implementation of “critical familism” will provide new hope for liberal Protestantism, other branches of Christianity, and for our wider social fabric.

While not adhering to the ideal of “critical familism,” the intact conjugal family has been more essential in the history of Christian thought and culture than the filter of Enlightenment contractual atomism can account for and more essential than many contemporary theologians appreciate. John Witte, Jr., is director of the distinguished Law and Religion Program at Emory University. In *From Sacrament to Contract*, Witte provides what is unquestionably the finest history of western marriage in the Christian epoch. He focuses on the theological and ethical models of marriage in the Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, and Enlightenment contexts. Informed by a wealth of primary sources—many of which Witte has highlighted for the first time—the author shows how these models have directly affected domestic law and organization. There is simply no other treatise that conveys the history and cultural impact of Christian social thought in such a thorough and penetrating fashion. Rather than review each excellent historical chapter (“Marriage as Sacrament in the Roman

Catholic Tradition,” “Marriage as Social Estate in the Lutheran Reformation,” “Marriage as Covenant in the Calvinist Tradition,” and “Marriage as Commonwealth in the Anglican Tradition”), I prefer to concentrate on Witte’s core proposition of relevance to modernity. This is contained in the fifth and final chapter, “Marriage as Contract in the Enlightenment Tradition.”

Although the historical models Witte investigates highlight differences within the Christian tradition, the fact is that continuities outweigh discontinuities—that is, marriage is always understood as theologically meaningful rather than trivial. Until the turn of the twentieth century, western law and culture understood the special significance of marriage. In the U.S. Supreme Court, for example, marriage was spoken of as “more than a mere contract,” as “a sacred obligation,” and as a “holy estate.” Law and church had distinct but related roles in holding together the culture of marriage. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, “marriage is viewed increasingly at law and at large today as a private bilateral contract to be formed, maintained, and dissolved as the couple sees fit” (p. 195). We have forgotten the covenantal aspects of marriage, as well as its institutional importance to society. Witte traces this transition to the major Enlightenment philosophers, particularly to John Locke. The Enlightenment interpreted marriage as a mere contract, entered into for reasons of self-interest and dissolved without compunction. As Witte states, “Enlightenment thinkers pressed Locke’s ‘impious hypothesis’ to its logical and legal ends, and grounded their sentiments in a new secular theology. The essence of marriage, they argued, was not its sacramental symbolism, nor its covenantal associations, nor its social service to the community and commonwealth, as was traditionally thought. The essence of marriage was the voluntary bargain struck between the two parties. The terms of their marital bargain were not preset by God or nature, church or state, tradition or community” (p. 197). Witte traces in depth the transition in Anglo-American law that is now a part of our culture of divorce, and he does not find the results particularly salutary. As he concludes, “We seem to be living out the grim prophesy that Friedrich Nietzsche offered a century ago: that in the course of the twentieth century, ‘the family will be slowly ground into a random collection of individuals,’ haphazardly bound together ‘in the common pursuit of selfish ends’ and in the common rejection of the structures of family, church, state, and civil society” (p. 215).

*From Culture Wars to Common Ground* and *From Sacrament to Contract* force the open-minded reader to ask challenging questions. Marriage is still widely understood in the western world and, for the most part, cross culturally, as the stabilizing foundation for responsible procreation. Certainly the monotheistic religions of the western world have surrounded

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marriage with the garb of sacred vows. It is only very recently that the concept of marriage as being merely optional prior to procreation has become thinkable.

While optional marriage remains a somewhat marginal practice, it could not have arisen as a socially acceptable possibility without the increasing moral and theological minimization of the time-honored importance of lasting marriage as an institution. This minimization has occurred in both American and European societies since the 1960s. The law, which was historically allied with Christian expectations for the family, has now much diminished its previously robust statements about responsibility and accountability in marriage and parenthood. There has been a radical deflation of moral expectations in these spheres, and images of the self unencumbered by moral judgments or concerned with the family's stakeholders have come to prominence. Legal diminishment and the privatization of conscience work hand in hand. Nine in ten Americans will eventually marry, and half of the marriages entered into since 1970 have ended in divorce; thus, an estimated 45 percent of American adults will experience the breakup of at least one marriage. Institutionalized monogamy has mutated to serial monogamy. The question, then, is not whether monogamy can be saved; the question is whether it can be restored in a manner most fully respectful of human dignity, equality, and love.

With regard to the current extraordinary circumstances of cultural, political, and legal trivialization of lasting marriage and responsible motherhood and fatherhood, the Christian must enter the public square armed with rigorous rational arguments, informed appeal to established empirical fact, and specific religious reasoning. "Critical familism" promises to rekindle a liberal Protestantism that has, with regard to marriage and family, been too often reduced to "culture religion." "Critical familism" challenges theologians and ethicists to think deeply about the principle of "do no harm" against the background of social scientific fact. It sees the family as a vital institution that socializes or restrains without recourse to the potentially oppressive force of the state and that, to be Christian, avoids materialistic and economic self-indulgence.

One worries that Protestant Christian social thinkers will continue to ignore the agenda that Browning and his project lays out in nuanced, tolerant, and even prophetic form. It is possible that the necessary paradigm shift will require a new generational cohort, which may be one reason for Browning's choice of a group of versatile and now accomplished former students as his collaborators. The task is a heavy one with respect to intellectual leadership, the training of clergy, and the culture of liberal Protestantism. But at last the mandate is abundantly clear.