# The Family Crisis in a Christian Perspective

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1994 was the United Nations' 'Year of the Family'. Perhaps you have already forgotten, or didn't even know in the first place? That might be an indication of how much interest it aroused in a world where economic problems, wars and AIDS are higher on the agenda of politicians excepting, of course, a few right-wing oddities!

To celebrate the family was hardly premature. After World War Two, totalitarian régimes fell, more recently communist régimes cracked and in the West 'modernity' became 'post', but the family continued to exist, in spite of great pressures and threats of disruption. It has remained a fundamental unit of society, in spite of accelerated social mutation, a fact which was already implicitly recognized in the *Declaration of human rights* in 1948.

But so much has happened in half a century. Even if there are differing interpretations as to the nature and the outcome of the changes taking place no-one can be ignorant of the fact that we are facing a family crisis in the West.[1] Divorce laws are scrutinized and up-dated, as was recently the case in the United Kingdom.

In some quarters there is still a measure of optimism about the survival of the family as a unit, even though its forms are changing. Since it takes about 20 years for theories to filter into social practice, the anarchistic hedonism of the late 1960s is just about coming to a head. Some sociologists predict that by the end of the century two models of the family will be prevalent: the traditional nuclear family with more conservative values, and a more open version with pass-the-parcel children.

In contrast to this, a new form of radicalism, often feminist, sees the family crisis as irrevocable. The patriarchal model has been overthrown because women have been liberated from the biological tie linking sexuality and procreation. In this situation, it is no longer possible to talk of male and female roles as complementary. The *likeness* of male and female must be recognized, in all areas, even to the point of envisaging, as Elisabeth Badinter does,[2] that one day males will be able to experience the joys of pregnancy by medical assistance. However, France Quéré does not find it surprising that a woman dreamed up the idea of a pregnant male and wonders whether there will be any volunteers.[3]

If it is difficult to envisage possible outcomes, it cannot be denied that the present crisis of the family touches a great variety of areas: fewer and less stable marriages, more divorces, birth control, abortion, the postponement of childbirth to the late 30s or early 40s, falling birth-rates, one-parent families, post-adolescent cohabitation, the generation gap, plus more people opting for living alone. These attitudes are correcting the *textus receptus* of what a family is.

Generally it is recognized that industrialization, urbanization and affluence have contributed to this situation and have made the family more vulnerable as an institution in western Europe than elsewhere. The new attitudes are seen to be an expression of individualistic egoism which places a premium on instant personal satisfaction and has an unrealistic view of what human beings might expect from life.

Gilles Lipovetsky, an in-vogue French sociologist, sees this trend as marking an end to a view of society which held duty and sacrifice to be important.[4] The cult of self-love, called 'second-degree narcissism' by psychologist Tony Anatrella, advocates happiness, leisure and sexual gratification, with 'responsibility' replacing obligation.[5] Chastity and virginity are out, former deviations have become feasible options, and in the realm of morals there are no rights or wrongs, only 'corrects'.

In the light of these and other problems a Christian approach to the family is presented here, which without claiming exclusivity, leads to a few practical suggestions and encouragements.

## I. Family Lines

Christian attitudes on ethical issues too often follow current trends. We have been as individualistic as others in our thinking about the role of the family, talking about couples and marriage—so did John Updike!—and adding the family as an afterthought.

Biblically speaking, the community and family arguably have a more central function. From generation to generation the family provides continuity and prepares for marriage and new families. A marrying person is not an isolated individual, but the member of a family who leaves 'father and mother to be united to his spouse'.[6] Family has a certain precedence over marriage. As Christians haven't we failed to see the importance of this?

In the sphere of political legislation and society this means that preserving family values must be a priority. Unfortunately this sounds like hackneyed conservativism to modern ears, which means it is important to ask: 'What family and why?'

## 1. What is a Family?

Various attempts have been made to state *what a family is*. It has been described as the smallest natural social unit. John Paul II in his recent Encyclical on the Family[7] insists repeatedly that the family is a 'natural' entity with roots in creation. Martin Luther, too, saw the family as being the earliest form of social life, established in paradise and re-organized after the fall.[8]

These views draw on the perspectives of natural theology. Over against this and from a post-Enlightenment perspective, the family is presented as a free association which does not eliminate inequalities, because of the relational structures involved in family life. Natural theology appeals to nature supplemented by grace, as determining the perennity of the family, whereas the modern, romantic view of the family, often places the accent on self-determining human freedom.

Recently, in some important studies about the family in Latin countries, Emmanuel Todd has sought to demonstrate that family structures produce different ideological systems, both political and religious.[9] Socio-political ideologies can be considered as abstract and impersonal reflections of latent family patterns. A given form of family relations produces a particular ideological system. Todd concludes that if the family determines these systems, it is not itself the result of any logical necessity or inherent rationality. So the 'why' of the way the family is ultimately remains a mystery. Unfortunately, in spite of Todd's penetrating analysis, pragmatism seems to emerge the winner, as no social policy for the family can be motivated on these grounds.

However, where Todd can only evoke an irrational mystery, a Christian point of view can appeal to God and his covenant as the transcendent basis of the family. Humankind is neither tied by nature to be 'familial', nor free to create whatever domestic unit may be aspired to. In the words of John Macmurray, the family 'is the original human community and the basis as well as the origin of all community'.[10] In its diversity, it is a human artefact which sustains personal life and as is the case of all human culture, it is a response to God's covenant. As such, it corresponds more or less to the divine purpose. The family may be marred by sin and unrighteousness, but it can also be re-formed in faithful response to the Creator's initiatives.

## 2. Covenant and Family

How does the notion of covenant help us to understand the family?

Man is made in the image of God from whom the 'whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name'.[11] Family is a community of persons, like the Trinity, with love at its centre. God is love; the creation expresses the fundamental nature of God in an ethical sense and consequently man is not made to be 'alone'.

The Scriptures do not dwell on the family as a specific unit, but on the relations existing between man and woman and between parents, children and children's children. On this personal order rests the command of God concerning marriage and the promise. Writing to Ephesian Christians Paul says these relations are 'in the Lord'.[12] In this light, Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not exaggerate when he stated that even in the most intimate of relationships the mediation of Christ is at work.[13] From the start of creation, mankind is qualified by its relationship with God. The Word made flesh was at the beginning the Creator-Word as we read in Hebrews 1:10.[14]

This is a very different view of the family from that which is exemplified by the anger André Gide vented against bourgeois families. It means that self-esteem is not a function of equality, or freedom, but of individual uniqueness as spouse, parent or child. Family life implies a fundamental choice which involves an affirmation of the personhood of others. It is an expression of partnership in love, truth and faithfulness. This fosters the development of persons through all stages of life, as a family makes its own history.[15] Family, says Ray Anderson, should be a place 'where you are loved unconditionally and where you can count on that love even when you least deserve it.'[16]

Practically, this means that Christians in society will seek, by collective and individual action, to safeguard and honour the unique relations which exist between spouses and between them and their children. This is no option, but God's will for their good. It certainly does not imply that hard divorce laws will necessarily contribute to the stability of marriage, as only authentic companionship, not any law, will do this.

## 3. The Family Bond

A family cannot be held together by authoritarianism, sense of duty or social habit but by the positive expression of ethical affection and biological attraction in the case of parents, and by common heredity in that of children and parents. Fundamental is the fact that

man recognizes women as 'flesh or his flesh' and no-one mistreats his own flesh but cares for it.[17]

The family bond implies commitment. As Karl Barth says, if one can love more than one person, one cannot be bound to more than one person with the same specific commitment.[18] The family is tied together by special bonds involving parents and children. It is in this respect that an ethical antithesis will appear between Christians and those who relativize commitments.

Commitment is not alienating if it is qualified by special affection. John Paul II affirms that there is little depth of humanity in our families today. The egoism of 'free love' makes children orphans of their parents and alienates spouses from each other. This is probably because broken vows have become commonplace in our societies, not only in private but also in public life.[19]

Here's the rub: one may fall in love, but can't 'fall out' of love, once one's word has been pledged. The commitment made is a morally binding one. The church has traditionally been right to accentuate 'till death us do part'. Why is this so? Because it is impossible that God deny himself, be faithless, forget his Word or go back on it. Man's true humanity depends on mirroring divine consistency in personal relations. To go back on a given word is *self*-betrayal, belittling one's personal dignity and honour and degrading human nature. Can someone really trust themself or anyone else if they've had as many divorces as Elizabeth Taylor? Such situations, considered normal, are tragic and belie the glitz with which the media surround them.

Commitment creates confidence in covenant partnership. It prepares partners to be faithful parents and fosters competence in bringing up children who will be parents in their turn. There is no such thing as 'instant family'. Family arises out of the apprenticeship of commitment made in love and shared in concrete actions which carry it into reality.

### 4. The Family Bond and Children

The market economy and the rise of educational systems have considerably modified parent-child relations. Advertisers pander to the pre-teen, youth and yuppie markets. Pressure is placed in many ways on the family unit. To avoid being accused of being 'another brick in the wall' parents are often tempted to make their families into pseudo-democratic communes with little authority and consensual decision-making. Many parents adopt the ideal of their children being autonomous as young as possible, which is a polite way of describing latch-key kids with video and virtual-reality baby-minders. Gone is childhood innocence and the privilege of being ignorant of the sullied perversity of the 'adult' world.[20] Is it because some kids never had a real childhood that they seem to be incapable of assuming adult responsibilities?

It is easy for us to forget that authority in the family is ordained by God and exists to hold it together. In the covenant, obedience to God is an expression of human sonship and a guarantee of blessing. In the family, in temporal situations, spiritual values are taught by example. Preparation for life by nurture passes through many stages of 'socialization' on a human level, even if its real goal for Christians is eternal life. When sons and daughters become mature enough to form their own relationships of mutual interdependence for life, parenting is complete. If a society values having mature adults and not perpetual adolescents, the importance of this process will be recognized and protected.[21]

John Paul II states that if parents give their children life, the child becomes a gift for his parents and brothers and sisters.[22] This is one of God's blessings, which is equally true in the case of adoption, and expresses his grace in establishing enriching human relationships. The ability of parents to nurture finds a covenantal reciprocation in the 'commandment with promise': 'Honour your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land'.[23] What does the commandment mean? Dennis Guernsey, a sociologist who finds theological commentaries little help on this subject, has an interesting suggestion, which might seem too 'modern' to rigorous exegetes. A respected parent is one who has been healthily supportive and controlling in the process of growth, communicating a sense of self-worth to children which permits them to acquire knowledge, skills and dispositions for integrating the community.[24]

To put it another way, contrary to the idea that authority and discipline are necessarily alienating, when exercised with the intention of expressing love and care in preparation for life, and not just to counter the nuisance factor, they will encourage obedience and respect. All children are naturally disobedient and resent discipline, but is it too idealistic to hope that by their attitudes, Christian parents may be able to set a different tone in their families to that which exists around them?

### II. Marriage Lines

In a biblical perspective heterosexual marriage is a foundation of the family which exists because it has a committed couple at its historical origin. Temporary couples cannot give children balance and stability characteristic of a fruitful life-style and this is even more so the case with homosexual or lesbian relations.

This obviously cuts against the spirit of our age where throw-away relationships are formed without commitment, where marriage is considered as non-essential to parenting. Some couples programme obsolescence: 'Let's try it for five years'! Others link

persons of the same sex. Such forms of cohabitation cannot hold up against the biblical norm. They are bound to be detrimental to offspring and cannot be accepted as valid alternatives to monogamous marriage.

Changes in male–female roles, in the law, easier divorce and bi-sexuality have weakened marriage. For many people, freedom of association is a must and relationships must include excitement and attraction to be authentic. Fidelity is valued only so long as the home-fires are burning.

However, few people really doubt that children do not suffer from being brought up in a homosexual environment or from divorce. Nor are mono-sexual or one-parent families ideal for balanced upbringing in the fragile formative years. Just as lying is not generally accepted to be a good thing, but it does not stop people doing it when it suits them, people tend to get in and out of relationships, deviant or straight, when it appeals to them.

These attitudes cannot be glossed over. But can it be made clear why monogamous stability is necessary for the family to accomplish its vocation in an effective way?

### 1. The Marriage Bond is a Covenant

What we see around us today is very often a form of serial polygamy, whether marriage has been contracted or not. We should be warned. In the Old Testament polygamy never made for happy bonding. The stories of the kings of Israel are redolent with intrigue and family disorder.

Jesus made it clear that human coupling is not a matter of personal preference. From the start God made *man and woman*.[25] Coupling is not a mere social arrangement that any individuals are free to contract or dissolve.

John Milton said about monogamy:

Marriage is a covenant, the very being whereof consists not in a forced cohabitation and counterfeit performance of duties, but unfeigned love in peace.[26]

The internal structure of marriage is that of mutual attraction of a man and woman qualified by moral love. It implies an act of troth by which the two parties promise to love each other unconditionally.[27] This deep emotive reality is not opposed to public status. If the covenant of marriage cannot be reduced to a legal contract, the initimate troth pledged becomes a visible structure in a public declaration. Genesis 1 and 2 makes it clear that human existence is personal and communal, with internal and external structures existing in complementarity. God's love for his people is public love, culminating in the death of the cross, which expresses externally the deep love in the heart of God. Likewise, the public nature of marriage portrays deep personal commitment.

In many cases marriages are unhappy and internal affection does not always accompany the commitment expressed by partners who are legally bound. All of us have sinful and hungry hearts and betray ideals we hold dear. However, where love fails and goes cold, the norm of love in marriage is not destroyed, any more than the right to ownership by the fact there are thieves. The validity of God's commands is not measured by infractions, but by his standards.

Solitary human existence or mono-sexual unions are not God's good will for humans. Modern individualism which has watered down commitment to the nuclear individual or to two compatible individuals has caused diverse forms of social impoverishment including making platonic friendships difficult and rousing creeping suspicions. Illustration: when two adults of the same sex are lasting friends, what are people tempted to think?

### 2. Women and the Marriage Bond

From time immemorial families have subsisted without men, but never without women as wives and mothers. It is totally banal to say it, but God made women indispensible. France Quéré makes no bones about it: the independence of women unbalances the fragile equilibrium between men and women. Women's calling is to transmit culture, to educate and set the moral tone in society. No other person or institution can do it.[28]

At present, the myth that the Scriptures promote an oppressive patriarchy is quite prevalent. But patriarchs never existed without matriarchs, who in the Bible, as in the Middle Ages, do not give the impression of being inactive or oppressed. Biblical women generally seem to be at ease with their status, not trying to ape men, but being willing to be the 'handmaidens of the Lord'.

Biblical revelation raises the status of women above that of pagan cultures. God's creation of a co-humanity makes them equal with men, and redemption makes them co-heirs of the kingdom of God. If there is a difference between men and women, a complementarity, this is not in the realm of nature, value or dignity, but in that of function. Equality is differentiated and cannot be defined in terms of identity or comparable division of labour. France Quéré also claims that it is healthy for couples to distinguish their different roles and tasks as this avoids point-scoring and rivalries. Scripture has given us great freedom in this domain as the different roles occupied by women in the Bible indicates.[29]

We hope this is not a machist rationalization, not just because a woman said it, but because it is implied in the fact that God created women alone capable of child-bearing, which establishes a physical bond of

complicity between a woman and her offspring that no male can ever experience.

### 3. Men and the Marriage Bond

Men have become also-rans in the marriage stakes. Today they often find themselves on the outside of the family, sometimes through their own fault. Former husbands are excluded or steps-sons are rejected. Evelyn Sullerot, a specialist on family issues who produced a 'white paper' for the French government on trends in marriage, states that if our societies face the dilemma of the new homeless, a majority of whom are working males, this is not just a question of unemployment, but stems from the breakdown of family structures.[30]

The laws enacted since the last war, more often than not, have been in favour of women. Sometimes men are denied the right to visit their chilen and the name of the father is not always recorded on the birth certificate. In the case of couples living together, some children grow up not knowing who their father is. In French law, the mother has a 'right to secrecy' and can even prevent her child knowing the father. As far as contraception and abortion are concerned, the woman can decide whether or not to conceive or give birth. Fathers are sometimes only fathers when and if the mother lets them be. In this intimate realm, men are now the 'second' sex, and often mother acts in the place of both parents. Some boys go through childhood and adolescence having little contact with adult males who can provide them with role models, as there is no man at home and teachers at school are mostly women. The result, says Sullerot, is matricentred social units.

The latest statistics in France reveal that 42% of first-born children in 1993 were born out of wedlock. In 1994, 2.25 million children lived separated from their natural father and 800,000 did not know their father. In 75% of cases, divorces are requested by women and suidices following divorce are largely masculine.

Is this not the fault of men, who have not properly filled their roles as husbands and fathers in the past? Have they not too easily become Dagwod Bumsteads, abandoning responsibility at home to over-worked wives? Perhaps so. If they want to restore their dignity, men will have to be more responsible in decision-making, more present and active, more willing to assume theoretical leadership, showing the moral fibre many women expect of them.

Elisabeth Badinter points out that a plethora of books have been written about women and women's rights and hardly any about the role of men in present-day society.[31] Is it any different as far as Christian literature is concerned? If you know any good books about what a mature Christian male should be, let me know!

### III. Some Practical Lines

Pluralism and alternative life styles are here to stay. The ethical antithesis between Christian views and others is already sharp and will be even more as developments in bio-ethics 'create' family structures little imagined until recently. Attempting to introduce laws and enforcing them is problematic when the current is running in another direction. However, it is precisely because society faces so many unknowns that Christian reflection and standards are necessary.

Ernst Troeltsch in his work on *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* describes the attitude of early Christians in Rome. They didn't try to overthrow the politico-social system but to restrain ethical abuses and reform from within by changing individuals' attitudes. High and strict views of monogamy were held with chastity before and in marriage, abortion and infanticide were condemned and Christians promoted making divorce more difficult than under imperial law. This historical example ought to stimulate our reflection![32]

In the light of what we have said, what can be done to make a greater Christian impact in secular society?

1. More concerted reflection is needed on our present situation. In particular we need to show publically, in preaching, teaching and the media, using *non-Christian arguments* and material provided by psychology, sociology and law, why certain developments are not progressive but detrimental to personhood and to society as a whole.

2. In terms of action and legislation, we must seek to avoid the worst, preventing homosexual relationships from being accepted in our societies as 'normal' family units having the same rights as monogamous couples, particularly in the areas of procreation and adoption.

3. Means must be sought, including financial incentives in the realms of housing, family allowance, for encouraging family stability, with civil marriage a top-of-the-range commitment.

4. Attitudes which reduce the family to a couple and the couple to two sexually consenting individuals must be discouraged. The right of co-parenthood is to be promoted, wherever possible, with parents having equal access to children and children a right to both parents.

There are also things *all* Christians can seek to do, which may be more important than all the effects mustered by socio-political lobbies:

1. Make their families attractive examples of a real alternative life style;

2. Teach their children well;

3. Practise principles, by living according to promise and promoting fidelity. Churches should seek ways of supporting marriage and also of helping the healing process for men, women and children who are the victims of modern individualism;

4. Provide the kind of parenting which will enable children to develop the mature kind of loving-forgiving relationships they have (hopefully) witnessed at home;

5. Work at deepening family ties, even if it means less successful careers and lower material gain;

6. Reflect on the kind of husband and wife relationships which reinforce marriage;

7. Avoid judgmental attitudes about others, most of all with regard to people who are suffering marriage and family break-down, and foster compassion for others.

Would not these actions and attitudes, public and private, make it evident in the realm of family and marriage what it means for Christians to be 'the salt of the earth'?

### Footnotes

1. See Reformed Ecumenical Synod, *The Family in crisis today* (Grand Rapids, 1988); J. Rinzema, *The sexual revolution* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1972).

2. E. Badinter, *L'un est l'autre* (Paris, O. Jacob, 1986), 342ss. Also the section on 'radical feminism' in E. Storkey, *What's right with feminism* (London, SPCK, 1985), ch. 9.

3. F. Quéré, *La famille* (Paris, Seuil, 1990), 132.

4. G. Lipovetsky, *Le crépuscule du devoir* (Paris, Gallimard, 1992), 49ss.

5. T. Anatrella, *Non à la société dépressive* (Paris, Flammarion, 1994).

6. Genesis 2:24.

7. John Paul II, *Lettre aux familles* (Paris, Cerf, 1984), 15,58.

8. See P. Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1972), 45–48. Cf. F. Catherwood, *First things first. The practice of principles in modern society* (Tring, Lion, 1979), 56ss.

9. E. Todd, *La troisième planète. Structures familiales et systèmes idéologiques* (Paris, Seuil, 1983); *L'enfance du monde. Structures familiales et développement* (Paris, Seuil, 1984).

10. J. Macmurray, *Persons in relation* (London, Faber and Faber, 1961), 153.

11. Genesis 1:27; Ephesians 3:14. R. Anderson & D. Guernsey, *On being family. A social theology of the family* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985), 14ss.

12. Ephesians 5:22ss.

13. D. Bonhoeffer, *The cost of discipleship* (London, SCM, 1959), 86; cf. also E. Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (London, Lutterworth, 1961, 7th impression), ch. 31, 32.

14. P.E. Hughes, *The true image* (Leicester, IVP, 1989), ch. 15.

15. E. Stone, *Black sheep and kissing cousins: how family stories shape us* (London, Penguin, 1988).

16. R. Anderson & D. Guernsey, *Op. cit.*, 36–40.

17. Genesis 2:23; Ephesians 5:28.

18. K. Barth, quoted by R. Anderson & D. Guernsey, *Op. cit.*, 40–45.

19. Bob Dylan, in a song about perversity and total depravity speaks of: 'Broken hands on broken ploughs'/Broken treaties, broken vows . . . People bending broken rules . . .' 'Everything is broken' *Oh Mercy* (Columbia).

20. Cf. Chris Rea's vitriolic criticism of prime-time television violence and its effect on children in 'You must be evil' on *The Road to Hell* (Warner Bros.).

21. R. Anderson & D. Guernsey, *Op. cit.*, 65ss, 79ss.

22. John Paul II, *Op. cit.*, 30ss, 52.

23. Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 27:16.

24. R. Anderson & D. Guernsey, *Op. cit.*, 131.

25. Matthew 19:1ss.

26. J. Milton, *The doctrine and discipline of divorce*, quoted by E.L. Hebden Taylor, *The reformational understanding of family and marriage* (Nutley, NJ, Craig Press, 1970), 15.

27. J. Olthuis, *I pledge you my troth* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1976).

28. F. Quéré, *Op. cit.*, 139.

29. *ibid.*, 132.

30. E. Sullerot, 'La famille va mal: la paternité souffre' *Evangile et Liberté* (1994 no. 131).

31. E. Badinter, *Op. cit.*, 214ss; *XY, de l'identité masculine* (Paris, O. Jacob, 1993).

32. E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (London, Allen and Unwin) quoted by E.L. Hebden Taylor, *Op. cit.*, 6.

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