A Synthesis of Christian Ethical Perspectives on Family: Critical and Pastoral Appraisals

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ABSTRACT

Ordinary Christians seek moral guidance for even ordinary dilemmas they confront in their daily lives. The present generation both in Western and Eastern societies witnesses tremendous and wide-ranging changes in family patterns. The growing number of divorces, births out-of-wedlock, extra marital relationship, same-sex marriages and cohabitation of people without a marriage contract are commonly exposed phenomena. Towards this, a synthesis of family life and Christian family ethics encompassing a sturdy dedication to social justice (social obligation) and pastoral commitment and its practical application is explored. Family Ethics, as relatively new emerging trend in theological ethics, tries to integrate the experiential categories of contemporary humans living in various contextual situations. In each situation, intentional practices can function as acts of resistance to a cultural conformity promoting individualization and globalized materialism over family relationships. This article brings a new 'familism' appreciating the importance of conjugally intact family life with the recognition of the vulnerability of each member (genuine egalitarianism) in the family within each cultural and social context.

Keywords: *Christian Ethics, family ethics, egalitarianism, familism, intact family.*

INTRODUCTION

There is a recent alienation of family from the church due to the growing discrepancy between the teaching of the church and the real and concrete family experiences and practices. The increased individualization, lacking passion for others, saturated into the family relationship decreases the conscientious family ties. Here, we can criticise and accuse either the faithful for deficient understanding of family for its deterioration of individual and familial moral consciousness or the church can have a self criticism that she has failed to explain the family situations in a comprehensive and intelligible way to the people who are actually living it. The abstract teachings that do not respect and comply with the diversity of contemporary life will bring only a devastating effect for the family ties. In this regard, 'Family Ethics', as relatively new emerging trend in theological ethics, should try to integrate the experiential categories of contemporary humans living in various contextual situations. It demands for a reinterpretation of the teaching of family ethics which is more comprehensible and realistic. A theological synthesis of Christian family ethics, reviewing certain literature with personal and critical appraisal, is given below.

RECURRING TRENDS OF POST-MODERN FAMILY LIFE

The current era has witnessed remarkable changes in family life and its structures and dynamics. There are number of interrelated and mutually reinforcing and globalizing socio-economic, technological and cultural factors accelerating those changes in existing family features. These changes function as a sign of disintegration of the family as a social unit and instead arises a consensus union along with the deterioration in the intensity of family formation.

The ever visible, growing and recurring current trends of family life are exposed in commonly bare phenomena of the mounting of divorce cases, births out-of-wedlock, extra marital relationship, same-sex marriages, one parent households, cohabitation of people without a marriage contract, non-marital recoupling, voluntary childless couples, teenage pregnancies, abortions, mad obsession with pornography and obscenity, other sexual fixations or perversions like voyeurism, exhibitionism, frotteurism, fetishism, bestiality, pedophilia, etc. (Vorster 2008; Browning 2001). We also experience a rapid decline in genuine nuptiality, fertility rate, average household size,

family bond, intimacy, loyalty, conjugal love, etc. The postponement of childbearing and thus the late family formation is relatively common at present (OECD 2011).

Apart from or going beyond the traditional responses to this phenomenon of changing trends in family life by Christian ethical circles, such as liberal theological views that normalizes these patterns adjoining with modern human rights sensitivities, the conservative theological view perceiving them as depraved and as immoral that opposes biblical commandments and finally little conservative Catholic view (Vorster 2008; Keane 1980), this research takes an interpretation that is more realistic and comprehensible to people from all folks of life. The following discussions will elucidate the Christian view of family life and will explore whether it can change the varying perspective on family life in the contemporary societies of East and West for the better.

A DOGMATIC THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF FAMILY

A dogmatic theologization of family upholds a Trinitarian anthropology. For example, basing on the teachings of Second Vatican Council, M. Card. Ouellet uses a Trinitarian framework to explain a theology of family, which is ultimately a participation of human relations (communion). For him, God as Trinity is the model for familial communion. This has implications of positive appreciation of human love, sexuality, women's dignity and the sacramentality of the family. For, the family sacramentality affects the love of the Trinity in the world. A spiritual fruitfulness in the family life is fetched out with the union of mind and body of the family members, particularly of spouses, in Spirit (Ouellet 2006). The emphasis here is on communion and the sacramental relationship of love.

In the same vein, Adrian Thatcher, who concentrates more on practical theology of families, begins his analysis with the real families and children and their relationships in the light of the doctrine of Triune God. Emphasising the equal relationship between wife and husband, an egalitarian family is advocated. His main focus is on a family-friendly reading of the bible that deals with the incongruence between modern and gospel understanding of family. Relational aspects of Trinity allows for an adequate understanding of human person in the family, which is expressed in the relationality of love (Thatcher 2007). Preference is given for the Trinitarian theology

and the relationship of Triune God as the best way to establish a root of relationship with equal regard in the family.

A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF FAMILY

Apart from the understanding of family as a domestic church participating in the Trinitarian relations, some scholars, like Annemie Dillen, explain the ambiguous nature of everyday reality of family life. Dillen (2014) ethically explains the power balances in the family that the couples should accept the imperfections in the family caused by the ambiguity and change. In the family, the search for perfection and holiness is brings openness for vulnerability and continuous reinterpretation. So, she argues for a family ethics that goes beyond the pursuit of perfection. The pressure to perfection and the tension between reality and ideal make the expectation of family life troublesome. Therefore, we need a movement from utopia of love which look for perfect love and life with high expectation of personal well-being and passionate love to an ethically qualified human love with sustainability and the respect for the other in his/her otherness. Basing on natural law thinking and human experience, Dillen feasibly sets out towards an ethics of family with connectedness, responsibility, resilience, and trust. The knowledge (with experience of life) of people's life is an important source for theology because it elucidates the tension between the life experience (lived experience) of lay people and the elements of traditional teachings of the church (Dillen 2014).

Analysing Catholic Social teachings, Julie Hanlon Rubio (2010) considers family as the basic community of the society and perceives marriage as a union of two persons over and against its recent romantic understanding. Since this union is sustained in relation to others, it also has a social significance and responsibility. Rubio, against the over identification of idealization of the Holy Family, asserts that a realistic family should take always into consideration sins and imperfections of the family and should give a room for God's grace to be present. Along with the model of *ordinary families*, Rubio analyses the practice of sexual fidelity in the family life, giving a central role for 'pleasure' in married life with the goods of vulnerability, sacrifice, self-love, and bodily belonging. In this regard, the main contribution of Don Browning in the fields of family ethics,

with his idea of 'critical familism', is the notion of committed, intact, and equal regard family.

While the term 'intact' refers to a family system in which father and mother parenting their children in a lifetime marriage, 'equal regard' describes the relationship between husband and wife with mutual respect, affection, and justice that values both the self and the other simultaneously with equal grade (Browning et al 2000). Browning speaks about committed equal-regard marriages and families along with its religio-cultural and social vision, such as the love ethic, to support and maintain them. However, the new ethic of love as mutuality or equal regard includes *eros*, sacrificial self-giving, and an equal concern for other and self. Good life, for Browning, is always the result of these inherited normative practices, because "love as equal regard is the most adequate view of love for families" (Browning et al 2000, 102). Christian ethics locates even the self-sacrifice of both parents and even of children within the love ethic of mutuality.

A DEVELOPMENTAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF FAMILY

David Popenoe opines that, today, tearing apart the social purpose, family is conceived as an entity merely for self-development. The understanding of family as a personal institution intended only for personal well-being has to be transformed into an understanding of social institution representing social improvement (Popenoe 2009). Marriage, cross-culturally around the globe, had been conceived as a stabilizing foundation for responsible family life. The past few decades have, however, witnessed major shifts in family life and family ethics that the concept of marriage became merely optional prior to living together and procreation. Popenoe, in this regard, speaks that the disintegration of two-parent family structure (heterosexual) with a child-centred perspective weakens the familial commitment and causes further individual and social problems. For a better individual and social development, this commitment to the marriages and to the children is to be renewed and strengthened.

John Walls (2010) perceives humanity from a childhood perspective asking fundamental questions such as what does it means to be human (ontological questions of human being); what humanity strives for (teleological-purpose); and what is owed to one another (deontological - responsibilities). Childhood,

from its old image of a passive recipient of all external forces, changed into a contemporary image of a dynamic representation with intrinsic worth and value. The understanding of childhood producing its own meaning for humanity remodels and transforms the morality practiced and lived. It is about "reconstructing already constructed historical worlds toward more expansive moral horizons" (Walls 2010, 10). Since, children are also endowed with the capacity of constructing worlds of meaning, there is a 'narrative expansion', which includes the narrative of others. This expansion decentres the self and includes the otherness and becomes an infinite stretching out to the other.

FEW THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS

1. Family, sacramentally, affects the love, communion, and communication (relationality) of the Trinity in the world. (Ouellet)

2. A relational view on the trinity allows for an adequate understanding of persons and relations in the family. (Thatcher)

3. The alteration of abstract teaching with lived experience expands the moral horizons of family ethics. (McCarthy, Dillen, Rubio)

4. A growing and recurring concern in family ethics is a synthesis or an adequate understanding of what is real and what is ideal in relation to family life and experiences. (Thatcher, McCarthy)

5. Over idealization of family morality affects the family life adversely. (McCarthy)

6. The values and ethical norms pertaining to family [life] are influenced by and depended on the contextual factors and thus cannot be absolute. (Dillen)

7. Various family modules represent a lens interpreting what it means to be a human. (John Wall)

8. The decline of parental generativity and investment (commitment) threats civilization. (Browning)

9. The notion of love as equal regard is the most adequate view of love ethic for families. (Browning)

10. The traditional concept of 'self-sacrifice' in a family is replaced with the understanding and practice of 'mutuality'. (Browning, Wall)

11. Though environmentally and culturally conditioned, a family without transforming love is inherently unstable. (Popenoe, Wall)

12. A person, who expands his/her self-creativity in response to the diversity of others in the family, gives birth to the world of shared meaning of life. (Wall)

CRITICAL REFLECTION WITH PERSONAL APPRAISAL

There is a growing incongruity, today, between the Church's teachings and the actual experiences and practices of the family. Understanding the cultural differences in family perspectives, scholars suggest diverse approaches to family. More individualization and lack of concern for others permeated into family relationship, however, weakens the responsible ties of family as such. The question, how could the notion of family be perceived both by the church and society in this postmodern context, is saturating all recent discussions. Within the Trinitarian perspective of Ouellet and Thatcher (an upward spirituality), the egalitarian and communion model is more emphasised in the family discussion. However, though the idealization of the family ethics seems to propagate that it does not value and abide by the multiplicity and complexity of contemporary life and thus disturb the family ties, we cannot fully overrule its growing possibility of basing itself on a solid ethical ground of relationality and communion. Here, Macarthy, Dillen, and Rubio hold the recent theological trend of taking seriously the lived experience of the people. The tension we find here, for me, is the ambiguity of the 'real' and the 'ideal' and the polarity between normativity and complexity of reality.

Along with the religious factors, the cultural and social factors also play a vital role in the generation and sustenance of a family. For example, traditional Christian family ethics seem to be so 'idealistic' in West, where as in Indian context the same witnesses a lasting marital and familial commitment amidst the tensions and challenges of everyday life. Browning's notion of 'intact family' is well practiced in India irrespective of religious, cultural, racial, and other such nominal discriminations. The great deal of the notion of 'sacrificial self-giving' in family relationship, which is characterised as idealistic, is a normal practice in Indian cultures. In this regard, I cannot fully agree with the argument that the reflection on family as a movement towards the sacramental realization of Trinity puts enormous moral and ethical strain on family. For, Trinitarian understanding of family relationships tries to uphold the value of mutual love, sharing, communion and communication, which has to be fulfilled in a family relationship. This speaks of an inner disposition that every member of a family is supposed to uphold. Hence, an alteration of family ethics by acknowledging human imperfections and accepting God's grace in family and in relationships should be the growing concern here. Combining the above discussed 'love ethic' of equal regard and mutuality between wife and husband and 'power ethic' of parental care and responsibility still remains a challenge.

Joining with Popenoe, I advocate the heterosexual two-parent family structure and a marital commitment favouring the children for a better individual and social development. I find an irreducible importance of marriage (heterosexual) for the well-being of the family and of human life. In the same vain an integral family ethics should hear the voice from every possible entity such as father, mother, children, and even the relatives within the context of an extended family. This also reemphasises the relational aspect of human person which is realized in the family. We need to admit today the plurality of families and challenges faced in the context of individualism, materialism, consumerism, and the globalization. It demands, however, for a reinterpretation of the teaching of family ethics which is more comprehensible to the people at the threshold of new millennium.

CONCLUSION

This analysis argues for the construction of a new family ethic central to the concern of both the society and the church, which can provide practical assistance for the revitalization of contemporary families. The idea that theologians (clerics and lay) from various contexts and cultural situations coming together and giving form to a new family ethics, which when combined, could speak to people of the whole world about the distance and similarities between the 'ideal' and the 'real' seems to be very utopian. We need a new 'familism' appreciating the importance of conjugally intact family life with the recognition of the vulnerability of each member in the family within each cultural and social context. Egalitarian family scenario or genuine egalitarianism with equal acceptance of rights, duties and responsibilities, should mark the centrality of this new familism.

In this regard, the 'male problematic' of insufficient investment (commitment) and 'female problematic' of excessive self-sacrifice have to be balanced for a normative family ethics. Family, as a proto-type of the church, for me, is a new community of people who in their relationship reflect the dynamic existence, communication and relationship of Father, Son and Spirit in the Godhead. Finally, what we need is not taking a middle position between sacralisation and functionalization, but, acknowledging the richness of both and transforming family life in view of individual and communal development and well-being.

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