

General Editor's Preface

Family-related issues have featured in a number of previous contributions to *New Studies in Christian Ethics* – especially in Lisa Sowle Cahill's *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (1996) and Adrian Thatcher's *Living Together and Christian Ethics* (2002). Yet, until now, the series has never had a contribution that specifically focusses upon 'family'. Perhaps this is because families in the Western world are changing very rapidly and it has become increasingly difficult to find any single definition of the family that takes full account of these changes. It is hugely to Petruschka Schaafsma's credit that she has taken on this challenge and, indeed, done so with such intellectual elan. I cannot think of another account of the modern family within Christian ethics that betters this highly nuanced monograph.

The Prologue opens with an example of complex family life depicted in Marilynne Robinson's theologically nuanced novel *Housekeeping*. It evokes the question of what the family is about and makes readers aware of the difficulty of answering it. The next chapters also begin with a literary or artistic work. They make it possible to create a starting point in dealing with such a controversial theme as the family without immediately becoming part of often polarised debates. Thus, the book can insist from the outset that (unlike many other works on Christian ethics) it is not going to focus upon the 'problems' of families in the modern world but to approach family as a 'mystery' – two terms taken from Gabriel Marcel. This approach corresponds to the book's basic conviction of the ineffable character of what family might mean and enables a theological approach that accounts for a transcendent moment in family. Petruschka Schaafsma elaborates this mystery approach in dialogue with philosophy, sociology, social anthropology and the arts with a sensitivity to moments when reflection reaches what she calls an 'impasse'. These impasses reveal the need for an alternative kind of ethical reflection. As such, the book is also an experiment in Christian ethics.

In the chapters that follow Schaafsma has a threefold focus upon the family tie, family and givenness, and family and dependence. In terms of the first focus, Schaafsma sees family as 'a separate phenomenon that is rooted in an intuitively experienced, unspoken, yet strong family tie'. She first evokes this focus with Sophocles' *Antigone*, and contrasts her own interpretation of this play with the radical feminist Judith Butler's differing interpretations of it. This dialogue subsequently leads her to Hegel and the recent Hegelian interpretation of David Ciavatta. She concludes that the family tie 'becomes visible much more as a question than as a well-delineated fact with clear implications for acting. Thus, the family tie appears as something family members have to relate to, something they are answerable to but not in the sense that the behaviour corresponding to it can be formulated in general'. Thus, the tie leads to conflict.

In discussing the second focus, Schaafsma starts by analysing two paintings of the Holy Family by Rembrandt, arguing that they have an emphasis on the ordinary character of the family, albeit charged with a sacred meaning. She distinguishes the 'givenness' of family in this sense from that of two current academic debates. First is the use of 'naturalness' in ethical views of family. Schaafsma criticises both the philosopher Brenda Almond and the theologian Don Browning for their defence of a strong notion of a particular, nuclear form of the family as scientifically established and therefore 'natural'. Second, reviewing recent kinship studies within social anthropology, she argues that they confirm 'the difficulty of making sense of what family might mean. In the so-called new kinship studies, there is much more sensitivity to this difficulty than in the ethical studies of Almond and Browning which favour the language of the 'natural'. This anthropological approach has impasses of its own, however. To get beyond them, a mystery approach to givenness points to an 'active mode of taking life as people find it seriously and answering it. This activity is a creative one of finding one's own answer to the appeal implied in the moment of givenness'.

The third focus of dependence is evoked by means of the complex family portrayed in Hosea. Alice Keefe's reading of Hosea highlights the acknowledgement of a greater dependence of all creation rooted in God as being at stake in Hosea's prophetic family life. From this starting point recent advocates of 'acknowledging dependence' are analysed in care ethics – in the fruitful, later work of Alasdair McIntyre in *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (1999) and in Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar's *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics* (2017) within New Studies in Christian Ethics.

In addition, Schaafsma explores Schleiermacher and the French philosopher Jean Lacroix in order to reach a more 'constructive' understanding of family dependence – concluding that dependence is not 'something incidental' but 'something permanent'.

Being a family means being dependent on each other in different ways that change during the course of life and as a result of specific occurrences. This changing character does not do away with dependence as such. Even when people are no longer in contact with their family or when all family members have died, there is a real sense of dependence. Family members remain a crucial part of one's identity; they are persons without whom one cannot think or understand oneself.

For Schaafsma a constructive understanding of family dependence finally 'takes the form of an evocation, in that it reveals the natural presence of dependence in the family context. It reveals it as a mystery. This mystery is embedded in the most fundamental mystery of human life, that of its dependence on God.'

In the Epilogue these constructive reflections are reconsidered together with the critical ones with an eye to the experience within the family of a moral claim which inescapably forces itself upon us. It is to such experiences that a mystery approach to family points. A concrete elaboration is given in a brief analysis of the double 'confession' of both love and guilt that Lacroix highlights as characteristic of family.

This very thoughtful study uses a remarkable range of authors and disciplines in order to reach a constructive understanding of the family that takes full account of the complexities of modern families. It makes a significant and original contribution to New Studies in Christian Ethics and admirably shares its two central aims:

- 1) To promote monographs in Christian ethics which engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level.
- 2) To encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

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