

The future of family

by [R. Marie Griffith](#) in the [August 26, 1998](#) issue

*Edited by Phyllis D. Airhart and Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, Faith Traditions and the Family. (Westminster John Knox, 172 pp.)*

*Edited by Anne Carr and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, Religion, Feminism, and the Family. (Westminster John Knox, 298 pp.)*

People seeking fresh perspectives for guiding family policy, particularly those convinced that religion has much to contribute to the support of family life, will be delighted by the nine volumes that have emerged from the Family, Religion and Culture Project based at the University of Chicago Divinity School. (A tenth volume is scheduled to appear this fall.) The project director, Don S. Browning, and his series coeditor, Ian S. Evison, have brought together a diverse array of authors who seek to clarify issues heretofore obscured or ignored in the public controversies over religion and the family.

These early volumes focus on some of the major questions facing church people today: What impact have changing notions of the family had on parish life and the needs of particular congregations? How have churches resisted or accommodated to the changing gender roles and sexual ethics that have so powerfully reshaped contemporary American family life? And how might religious people think critically about the prospects for family stability?

The 11 essays in *Faith Traditions and the Family* examine specific denominational perspectives on issues relating to the family, ranging from divorce and remarriage to homosexuality to changing practices of motherhood. They also outline shifts in church policy regarding such issues and suggest possible future trends. The denominations analyzed range from conservative to liberal; they include Southern Baptists, Latter-day Saints, Mennonites, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the United Church of Canada. And they include Jewish perspectives. A final essay compares changing family policy in the National Association of Evangelicals and the National Council of Churches. The essays vary in scope--some analyzing

contemporary family problems with considerable breadth, others zeroing in on particular concerns--but the volume as a whole provides a much needed window onto the attempts by religious groups to deal both with family breakdowns and with new, nontraditional reconfigurations of family life. The brief introduction by Phyllis Airhart and Margaret Bendroth cuts to the heart of these issues with admirable precision.

Among the topics neglected are infertility and the staggering increase in couples seeking treatments such as in vitro fertilization. Yet these practices not only alter American views of adoption (comparable in that sense to abortion), but also deeply affect the couples who undergo such expensive, time-consuming and often emotionally wrenching procedures.

Missing, too, in all but one of the chapters (Eileen Lindner's on the NAE and the NCC) is any thoughtful discussion of childcare, plainly one of the foremost issues in contemporary family life. The book would have been helped by a concluding chapter that more broadly compared denominational practices and analyzed the mixed record of Christianity and Judaism regarding the family.

Jean Miller Schmidt and Gail Murphy-Geiss's essay on the American Methodist tradition is especially thorough, tracing changes in Methodist views on the family through, among other sources, denominational magazines, the *Book of Worship* and the *Book of Resolutions*. Their conclusion that because United Methodists no longer agree on how to define the family the denomination no longer knows how to speak out on family issues applies more broadly to many other mainline groups. Southern Baptists, as Bill Leonard shows, have been slower to confront changing family patterns and, particularly since the denomination's fundamentalist resurgence, have been more willing to promote authoritarian and patriarchal models of the family and clear rules regarding sexuality.

In sharp contrast, Daphne Anderson and Terence Anderson charge the United Church of Canada with adopting a "radical [ethical] subjectivism" that leaves people to choose their own moral and behavioral standards. Lamenting the "preoccupation with self-fulfillment" that has recently colored the church's reports on sex, marriage and family life, the authors indict church leaders for ignoring the church's historical struggles with sexual and familial issues and so becoming vulnerable to the "spirit of the age."

Such denunciations may sting, and they will surely irritate those convinced that the mainline churches' liberal stance on sexual issues has been crucial to beginning the church's redemption from centuries of homophobia. But it is hard to quarrel with the volume's conclusion that when faith traditions refuse to face familial and sexual realities, they fail their members. Religious leaders and laypeople must bring historical and ethical resources to bear in order to shape a coherent, compassionate response to the conundrums of our time. The book does not offer easy answers to the perplexing familial situations in which we find ourselves, but it will encourage readers to do some hard thinking about their own family ties and about the impact of their faith on those commitments.

Viewing the family from a different perspective, *Religion, Feminism, and the Family* analyzes the intersection of the three categories of its title with the keen insight into "religious feminism" one expects from Anne Carr and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. Van Leeuwen notes that the varied contributors together "wish to affirm core religious norms of justice and reconciliation by showing that feminist insights are an asset rather than a threat to the healthy development of those norms. We also wish to show that feminist theory and activism are less than complete if they ignore insights about, and from, women who profess allegiance to a religious worldview." As both editors and contributors note, religion, feminism and the family are rarely considered together, and yet they are linked in crucial ways. Those committed to a feminist, family-centered faith will be especially pleased at how this collection clarifies those links.

The book's opening essays define the terms. The second part examines Jewish and Christian families from exegetical, historical, sociological and ethical perspectives. The third section gives historical background for the present context, including essays on religion, women and the family in the medieval period (Robert Sweetman), the early modern period (Merry Wiesner), the antebellum women's rights movement (Catherine Brekus) and late 19th- and early 20th-century America (Margaret Bendroth). The fourth part addresses modern-day familial issues in personal and practical ways, as the authors develop concrete suggestions for dealing with problems ranging from poverty (Pamela Couture) to the Supermom syndrome (Bonnie Miller-McLemore) to finding new models for fatherhood (Rob Palkovitz) to womanist theory in relation to religion and family issues (Toinette Eugene) to competing ethnic definitions of familial obligation (Jung Ha Kim). Together these essays undermine the tired myth that feminism has been bent on

destroying the family by encouraging women to enter the paid work force. They show that both historical and contemporary feminist thought, particularly when informed by a liberative faith, have been resolutely profamily.

Carr's conclusion ties together the often disparate views of these essays. She shows how they challenge secular feminism to acknowledge the importance of religion and the churches in winning broad support for feminist goals. They challenge religion, especially Christianity, to acknowledge the patriarchal assumptions about women's subordination that continue to govern many church policies on family life, and to affirm instead familial ideals of mutuality, equality and respect for embodiment--ideals central to both feminism and Christianity. And they challenge families to "integrate family love within the broader notion of Christian neighbor-love" in a way that neither dishonors the immediate family nor ignores the society beyond. Family theorists are also challenged to appraise the gains of feminist history, theory and theology in their assessments of American family life and, again, to champion familial patterns of mutuality and equality. The optimism of the book's editors and authors that these challenges can be met by people of good faith will bring hope to all who share their goals. Like the other volumes in the series, the two reviewed here are of great practical use and deserve sustained attention and reflection.