Forming a family: Are all kinds of families equally good?

by Adrian Thatcher in the November 1, 2000 issue

More Lasting Unions: Christianity, the Family, and Society, by Stephen G. Post
Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family, by Rosemary Radford Ruether

These two books should nudge Christians toward a more compassionate, gender-conscious and tradition-aware understanding of marriage and the family. On the basis of empirical evidence, Stephen Post critiques the "divorce culture" in the U.S. and shows, for example, that stepfamilies are much less safe environments for children than are intact families. A Christian "prophetic family" is characterized by the principles of care for all children, faithful monogamy and equal regard between husband and wife.

Post includes excellent chapters on adoption and on the demands, limitations and anguish of intensive caregiving. He considers an issue that has attracted increasing theological interest recently—how to balance the demands of "loyalties to biological family members, the church community, and all of humanity." Post has devoted much of the past nine years to the care of people with Alzheimer's disease and their caretakers, and the sensitivity of his reflections will generate much encouragement and gratitude.

Rosemary Radford Ruether's book invites comparison with her recent *Women and Redemption*, since it too ranges from the birth of Christianity to the present. The book achieves its aim of showing "that shifting ideologies involving the family and 'family values' are generally coded messages about women and how they should behave in relation to men." The idealized, modern, nuclear family, in which male headship and the separate spheres of husband and wife are taken for granted, is shown to lack both biblical and historical warrant. But Ruether is less successful at achieving her second aim of "rethinking the theology of marriage and family."

Ideology can best be unmasked by the prolonged exposure of its falsehoods, and this is what Ruether's historical chapters do. The sections on the family in biblical

times and on asceticism and marriage in patristic and medieval Christianity successfully relativize assumptions about fixed family forms. Different theologies of marriage and attitudes toward divorce are traced through the time of the Reformation. A chapter on the making of the Victorian family examines “key aspects of the reorganization of economic and social roles that laid the basis for . . . dramatic shifts in the ideological identity of the family, women and children in relation to adult men.” Four chapters cover the 20th century.

Ruether describes the many faces of the family at the turn of the millennium and claims that a “postmodern perspective calls for an acceptance of this reality of diversity of family models.” Paradoxically, Ruether premises the availability of divorce on social realities—on changing patterns of work, and on women becoming “autonomous legal persons” with legal and growing financial independence from men. She calls for more sex education and warns that “no American woman can safely be socialized as a teenager or young adult into a future based on the expectation of being supported by a husband for the rest of her life.” The welfare-to-work program doesn’t work, she contends, since the available jobs won’t lift people out of poverty. Ruether makes political proposals for a sustainable family policy, and urges “a new vision of family, of home and work” based on “the mutuality of whole human beings.”

Both authors are positive about lesbian and gay people. Typical of Post’s inclusive vision of Christian faith is his declaration that “nothing I write on behalf of permanence in marriage as a basis for optimal child rearing should obscure my respectful attitude toward human differences in sexual and gender orientation.” Ruether urges the creation of covenant celebrations that are equal in value and equally available to gays and straights. Both disown “the plague of patriarchy,” but in different tones. Post (following Don Browning and others) sees the Promise Keepers men’s movement as both “a step forward and a step backward.” Ruether thinks there is little point in dialogue with most religious conservatives because “irreconcilably different presuppositions” make reconciliation impossible, and “progressives are being stalemated in every church as they try to concede to the fundamentalists in order to keep their international church or congregation together.”

Both authors wrestle with the apparently antifamily sayings of Jesus. These “crisis-sayings,” Post states, “emphatically do not suggest a diminishment of the centrality of marriage and family in Jesus’s teachings and hopes; they do, however, convey

Jesus's strong reaction to the absolute patriarchal grip on the family in antiquity." Perhaps.

Ruether, with disappointing brevity, sees "the antifamily tradition of the New Testament [as] rooted in a critique of the family systems of the day," which were "an expression of the demonic powers and principalities of a fallen world." The new family of the church broke down these disfiguring separations, and a recovery of this subversive character of the early church would enable Christian families to become, once more, "redemptive communities."

A crucial difference between the books lies in their approach to what Post calls "familial formlessness" and Reuther calls "diversity." Mainline Protestantism, Post finds, ignores the data showing that children do better with two parents; it draws "solely on the ethic of unconditional acceptance [for] providing direction consistent with Christian tradition"; and it favors the metaphorical above the biological family. Perhaps, Post suggests, mainline Protestants "do not wish to cause any discomfort." He argues that the further acculturation of Christianity should be resisted. Marriage should be defined as a covenant, and pastoral caregivers "should emphasize the fact that Christian tradition does not accept the contract privatization of marriage."

Where Post sees formlessness, Ruether sees a postmodern philosophy which simply "recognizes a diversity of forms of partnering." She does not discuss the problems inherent in such diversity. Not all forms of partnering deliver equivalent goods. Why then, should they all be equally supported? If we are willing to discuss, say, low wages, or gender imbalance at work, or the oppression of women throughout history, why should we be silent about the oppression of children through arrangements for their upbringing which they may not like and which may not be conducive to their flourishing?

Ruether proposes that temporary vows be formulated for younger couples "not yet ready for permanent commitment personally or economically." This arrangement, which would "explicitly exclude child-creation," would allow these relationships to be no longer "veiled in lies." A second type of covenant would "allow a couple to enter into a permanently committed relationship that seeks a fuller unity of eros, philia, and agape over the course of many years, with or without the expectation of creating and raising children together." Even this permanent covenant is not actually named as marriage, although that is, of course, what it is. Ruether commendably engages with the issue of sexual friendship and sexual

experimentation prior to marriage.

I would argue, however, that the point of the growing use of the biblical word *covenant* in relation to marriage is that it recovers something of the analogy between spousal love and the love between God and the world and Christ and the church. It is hard to see how this basic theological analogy can be fairly used to support temporary relationships. Would these not be contracts (that is, temporary agreements of fixed duration, revocable by either party) rather than covenants, at least in a theological sense?

It is a pity that Ruether only touches on these proposals. They are sufficiently radical and important to demand more careful argument. While the long historical sections of her book provide an important background for her discussion of the contemporary family, sexuality and gender, history could provide her with more help in defining covenant relations. An obvious example is the biblically and historically warranted practice of betrothal, which is capable of providing remarkable new insights for the beginning of the covenant commitment which is marriage.

There may be further problems with temporary covenants. Since contraception can only reduce the possibility of pregnancy, not eliminate it, how is the exclusion of children from temporary (and some permanent) covenants to be assured? Will covenant vows specify what will happen to the children when the vow of childlessness turns out to have been inadvertently broken?

One option is discussed by Post: adoption. Indeed, Don Browning and John Wall, editors of the Religion, Marriage and Family series in which Post's book appears, claim that Post offers "the most powerful theological justification for adoption available in the current literature." Post attacks the "family preservationist" ideology, aptly named "genealogical essentialism," which so values blood kinship that children are often left with abusive biological parents. While biological parents may well have a genetic investment in the flourishing of their children, some seem to lack it. "The successful practice of adoption is proof that parents can transcend the 'selfish gene' of the evolutionary psychologists, and that children can prosper without the narrative of a biological lineage (which can easily be idolatrous)," Post writes.

Post affirms child relinquishment "as a reasonably free agapic act, even if it is inevitably and to some degree a forced option accompanied by at least a degree of

compunction.” Early converts to Christianity “all believed that they were adopted into the faith, and they sometimes left hostile biological families in the process.” Post attacks the deep cultural assumptions, well known to adopting parents, that “a family built through adoption is inferior to a biological one.”

Post’s discussion of adoption and of caregiving is driven by his conviction that agape lies at the root of family relations, while not being confined to them. He might have strengthened his argument by emphasizing the Pauline theology of adoption—not least because of its familiarity to evangelical Christians. All Christians are adopted into the family of God through Christ, and, as Paul states in Romans, “the Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery, leading you back into a life of fear, but a Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry “Abba! Father!’”

A path remains to be blazed from adoption as a core theological theme to the practice of adoption as an instance of embodying divine love. Post’s treatment helps begin that work. Antiadoption prejudices affect the “impartial” advice on abortion given to women contemplating terminating their pregnancies. Adoption is rarely seen as an option because it is rarely presented as one. This book’s cautious but wise commendation of adoption is countercultural in a deeply Christian way.

Ruether is more realistic than Post in showing how patriarchy has disfigured and continues to disfigure Christianity. Many of her proposals and judgments are laudable, especially her insistence that family relations should be “an ethic of sharing that is truly equivalent” and that the “work-home partnership of men and women needs to be re-negotiated.” But her notion of “the postmodern family” involves a suspension of criticism precisely where criticism is most needed. Is it not possible both to sustain an ethic of care that embraces everyone and to advocate particular family forms on theological and social grounds? This worry aside, I am grateful for both books. They demonstrate a critical imaginativeness and a cautious inclusiveness that is vital to Christian faith.