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The influence of the family in raising the next generation

Although the family as an institution has undergone many changes recently, it is remarkably still expected to be the prime source of raising the next generation. In the past, and today in more traditional societies, there were few other resources available for this task, and so the family was the only framework within which this process could take place. Today however the family has radically changed, in both the developed world and also increasingly in more traditional societies, and is now much smaller, more fragile and has altered in appearance to include same sex partners, living arrangements not based on marriage, and a much greater distance between family members. This is in some ways a reflection of greater choice and wealth, with people living longer, and so outliving their partners, and a weakening of the traditional barriers that used to exist to prevent certain kinds of domestic arrangements. One thing has not changed though and that is the tremendous emphasis that society places on the family to raise the next generation, and we tend to organize things so that the parents of a child bring it up, as opposed to a potentially superior group of people, or society. Whereas in extreme circumstances children will be removed from their parents and taken into the care of the state, this is far from the norm and even unsatisfactory parents will be tolerated by society provided that their lack of skill in child raising does not fall below a certain level. The idea that the natural parents of children are the default raisers of those children is widely accepted in all societies.

There is no reason why this should be the case. The act that leads to the birth of a child does not have anything essential to do with raising it, and some parents are not interested in their

children, nor are they good at bringing them up. Some unconnected adults are good at looking after children, and one might think that the best way of raising children was to leave them in the hands of those who are best at doing it. After all, we do not leave any more the teaching of children to their parents, or their medical care. Yet in a sense we do, since the primary teachers and carers for children are generally their parents, and this is again despite the fact that they might not be very good at it. Advanced education and medical care is not carried out in the home, but at a basic level parents are responsible for instructing children in the basics of their culture, including reading and writing, and looking after them through non-critical ailments and similar events that could become dangerous if they were not effectively managed by parents at an early stage. Why do parents get to perform these difficult and often unpleasant and irksome tasks? Usually it is because it would be enormously expensive for anyone else to do it, and if we can persuade parents that it is their responsibility, then we have achieved an immense saving. If we can persuade parents that they should enjoy doing it then we have achieved something even more effective, since this belief will fortify them through the many tedious and difficult episodes of child rearing and socialization. It has to be said that in most cases it is the parents who are best able to do the job, since they take themselves to have a unique link with their children that makes them conscientious, committed and aware of the public censure that would result from failure. Some parents fall down on the job, sometimes so badly that their children are taken away from them, but most do not, and it is worth reminding ourselves of this fact even when the family has changed so radically in a comparatively short time, at least in the developed world. Women are more likely to work, divorce is ever-increasing, pregnancy out of marriage increasingly commonplace, and sexual activity takes place at younger ages as a matter of apparent normalcy. The so-called traditional family with a working father and a mother who looks after the children

has been increasingly rare for some time, and the norm has for some time been quite different, with a very rapid growth in one parent families, so that there is no other partner to share in the childcare or financial provision. Where both partners work, if there are two partners, someone else has to take charge of the primary childcare for an extended period, and the fact that partners are increasingly just that, partners and not married couples, perhaps introduces a sense of the transitory nature of the social arrangements surrounding the child.

It is then remarkable that the family even in its modern denuded state is expected to adopt the same role as in the past. I would not want to suggest that the non-traditional family is any worse at bringing up the next generation than the traditional family, but it is likely to find it harder in many cases. Yet social expectations of the family have not significantly altered while the family has, and it is worth asking whether this is sensible or not. How much change can the family take on and still carry on its child raising functions? One factor worth pointing out is that in several developed countries the average size of the family that is most common consists of just one person living by his, or more likely, herself. One of the interesting changes in the political life of countries with few children is that resources start to be shifted more towards the old and away from children, since most voters are unconnected with children on a personal basis and may prefer such a reallocation of resources, and vote for it. Given the very rapid changes that have occurred in the last fifty years or so it is worth raising the question yet again whether the family is able to continue in its primary socialization role, the role that it had almost monopolized for many centuries.

There are reasons for being optimistic. It needs to be said right from the beginning that the idea of a golden age of the family is far from realistic. In fact, the family has been radically changing throughout history, and is very different in different places and times. One of the major

defenders of the "traditional" family today is taken to be religion, yet there is nothing inevitable or even plausible about this. Religions are often rather hostile to families. In the Jewish Bible families are often sources of conflict or even murder. Jesus is critical of the family, downplaying it by contrast with those who put their faith in him. In *Mark* 3.31-4 he is told that his family want to speak to him and he asks who his mother is, or his relations, implying they are not significant. *Luke* 14.33 reports that he said that those who would follow him need to abandon their families. Abandoning wife and family for Jesus will produce a big reward (*Luke* 18.29-30). The Qur'an is suspicious of tradition, the tradition of the *jahaliyya*, based as it was on clan and family. The Prophet himself hardly had a traditional family, and the internal warfare in the Islamic world between the adherents of his wife ☐A`isha and those of his cousin and son-in-law ☐Ali continues to rent Islam to this day. Although the views of the traditional religions on the family are often criticized today for their unfairness, early Islamic ethics brought an end to female infanticide and gave rights to women, while Jewish family law gradually raised the status of women within marriage, and promoted monogamy.

Religions are very flexible over time in what they allow and even promote. The traditional family, like traditional religion, is entirely a matter of what at a particular time seems to fit in with the current ethos among those who have the power to determine such issues. This is not to say that the Abrahamic religions do not have many interesting and important things to say about religion, since they obviously do. But what they say is not always entirely clear or fixed, nor is it immutable, despite what many religious people say. The exciting thing about having a book as the basis of religion is the necessity to link different passages to each other, passages which may well point in a variety of different directions and appear to be quite discordant. It is this flexibility of religion that has enabled it to survive and indeed flourish during rapidly

changing times, and there is nothing so modern as the traditional.

Yet religion is often linked with the family in the sense that there is the idea that if the family exists within a religious context, it will be more solid, more soundly based, than otherwise. Since as we have seen the Abrahamic religions are often critical of the family, this is difficult to take at face value, and what in fact we should understand as the role of religion in raising the next generation is not religion but a particular culture, one in which a certain interpretation of a religion is widespread. From the context of that culture it looks very much as though the religion prescribes a particular way of life and establishes as a result certain family roles. Many people convert to a religion in which they find clear and firm rules on family behaviour, which they enthusiastically adopt in place of what in the past were chaotic and changing practices. A sense of security then emerges, and one of the benefits of a religion with clearly defined family roles and rules is that there is no need any longer to think about these issues, one just obeys the rules as set out in the religion, on a particular interpretation of that religion, and one then has the very consoling idea that our everyday actions are done for the sake of God. This is something that many religious people report as a source of satisfaction, the idea that even very ordinary actions, how they eat, perhaps, what they wear, and so on, have for the first time a transcendental significance, which is surely a highly comforting thought.

This leads us to the important issue, perhaps the most important issue, as to what sort of family is the best for bringing up children. The evidence here from empirical research is as one would expect all over the place, and advocates of the traditional family, and its opposites, can all find vindication for their views in the research. One way of deciding is by comparing families of different kinds and working out which are more effective in raising the next generation. Of course, what counts as effective here is hardly neutral, since from a traditional point of view

effective might well mean likely to reproduce the traditional family. Let us try to avoid such question-begging by having in mind criteria such as the happiness of the children, their physical well being, their mental health, their preparedness for life in society and ability to cope with the demands of education. It is not at all obvious which sort of family would do better at this. Our intuitions here often play us false, since there is a tendency to think that a child brought up within a more traditional environment is likelier to do better than one brought up otherwise, in the same way that we tend to think that a child educated in a strict school would learn more than one brought up in a more relaxed educational environment. The evidence is not in line with these intuitions, and one of the remarkable facts about child rearing is the ability of children to frustrate even the most determined ambitions of their parents, and avoid the most obvious pitfalls also. Modern families are excellent at washing their dirty clothes in public, while traditional families are much better at concealing lurking problems. This is not to suggest that the former have more or less problems than the latter, but it is worth noting that the ways in which families appear to be getting on is often misleading. Those clean, confident, respectful and well-dressed children may look wholesome, especially if they contrast with their scruffy, uncommunicative and scowling peers, but who knows what the reality is.

Surely this is wrong, though. We know from the statistics that in many modern societies in the West children are becoming sexually active at increasingly young ages, that the same is true of drug taking and alcohol consumption, that a significant proportion of them drop out of any serious commitment to education early on, and in countries with welfare states many of these young people will never work. Indeed, they may well come from families where no-one has ever worked seriously for three generations, so expectations of paid employment are low in the first place. It is not difficult to argue that all these young people have not been adequately prepared

for life in any society that would be worth supporting, although they might be able to cope in the community within which they live. It has to be admitted that there are cycles of deprivation in society, and much of this is cultural as well as material. This is not limited to the modern family, though, but exists just as much in traditional families, and poor parenting is fairly universal, although fortunately not the norm.

It might be thought that with all its problems, the modern family is better adapted to modern life, with all its uncertainties and rapid change, than the traditional family, with its solid foundation and unchanging principles. Yet traditional families flourish in modern societies, they produce many children and manage to keep many of those children, when adults, within the community fold. It is not difficult in most cases to combine a traditional lifestyle with modernity, whereas by contrast many of the products of modern families seem to find it difficult to function in their societies. Accepting a number of basic principles as those that organize your life can provide a feeling of security that serves as a very useful grounding to working and living within a society that does not share those principles. Minorities of one sort or another have often flourished in societies where most people operate in accordance with entirely different ways of doing things.

It looks as though the argument here is that anything goes, that despite how children are brought up, the next generation will more or less be able to cope with their responsibilities as adults. That is in fact where the evidence leads us, since we are aware of a wide variety of different kinds of child rearing practices operating in societies which seem to continue to survive and even do rather well. On the other hand, there is a tendency nowadays to identify religion with opposing the radical changes to family structure that have appeared. For example, in the United States the steady move towards accepting marriages which do not consist of the

traditional man and woman combination is often opposed by religious groups. We forget that religions have not always been at the forefront of conservatism in issues relating to the family, and indeed are not now, at least not in their entirety. There are plenty of religious groups within at least the Jewish and Christian faiths who defend the acceptability of the non-traditional family as fitting in with religion. When Islam was established it opposed the traditional ways of treating women and female children, ways which had been accepted for centuries no doubt as the norm and the way things have to be. There is nothing essentially religious about the defence of the traditional family, whatever that might mean. In fact, one of the most clear defences of that family is to be found in the works of Comte, who from an entirely secular perspective argued that inequality was embedded in the family, and has to be since without it the family would fail to serve its appropriate social role. Inequality is involved since it reflects natural distinctions, and once this is accepted a great deal of stability enters into familial relationships. According to Comte, without subordination of some within the family to others the family itself cannot operate effectively. What is worth noticing about his argument is that it is entirely secular, it makes no reference to any revealed text at all, although the points he makes are often similar to those of religious thinkers also. The important thing to note here is that they do not need to be, and many theological thinkers would argue that the insubordination of one gender to the other is far more a reflection on persistent social norms than anything to do with the religion.

Plato argued in *The Republic* that while the traditional family was fine for bringing up the average family, the elite need to be raised by specialists, and this is never likely to be their natural family. He had a point. Why should we assume that just because someone was involved in the act that produced children, in some perhaps casual way, that he or she is the best person to look after the child? We do assume this since were it not generally the case, society would be in

big trouble. Who otherwise would bring up children? If the state does it, it costs a lot of money and the end results are not very impressive, in many cases. Since bringing up children is both expensive and very tiring it is important that most people feel that they have to do it, that it is their duty, since otherwise they surely would not. Comte is right to think that unless people feel it is natural, they would be reluctant to do it. In many cultures the act that in the end produces children is sharply separated from those children   and so it is not easy for many to appreciate their responsibility for them. Here the understanding of the significance of sex in the Abrahamic religions is very helpful in linking it with the consequent family, and indeed often makes sex only legitimate when it takes place within the context of the family. It seems likely that if you bring up children out of a sense of duty you are likely to make a better job of it than if you are unsure why you ought to be bringing them up at all. But it does not follow that that duty actually exists, in most societies there are others who could bring up children if the natural parents do not wish to, and are perhaps better at doing the job also. On this issue the rules of the traditional Abrahamic religions are significant, since they link the various parts and actions of family members to each other in a way which explains how they are connected, according to the religion, and lay out perspicuously the resulting duties and obligations that then arise. Family members understand their roles and there is often a great sense of security as a result, one of the great attractions of religion for those converting to it from a secular background.

Yet is this feeling of security desirable? This might seem to be a strange thing to ask, since surely it is a good thing for people to feel at home in their social roles and for them to grasp the meaning of the actions that they perform. They can then see even their very ordinary actions as fulfilling some divine plan and gain enormous satisfaction from that. More importantly, perhaps, if one sees child raising as a duty imposed on one by God, one is more likely to do it

properly. We should be careful here, though, since however pleasant it may be to think in this way, we need to ask whether it interferes with the freedom of thought that we also tend to value in each individual. In giving themselves up to a particular view of life, are people sometimes allowing their freedom of thought to be coerced by a doctrine that is attractive yet possibly false. Traditional views of bringing up the family all rest on different religious views, and how do we know that the religion we may happen to accept is in fact the (only) true one? It might be said this is not an issue, since all the religions tend to agree on child raising, at least the traditional versions of those religions, and it could even be suggested that this is because there is a central truth about bringing up children that all the major religions have grasped and seek to encourage their adherents to embody in action.

Here we should distinguish between religion and culture, since the pronouncements of the former are invariably filtered through the latter. What we now regard as the approach of the major Abrahamic religions on the family, and also often on other issues, is in fact a set of doctrines that have developed in certain ways because of the political and social experiences of often quite recent communities sharing a religion. There is no unanimity on how children should be raised, what they can be asked to do and when, among the Abrahamic religions, beyond the very vague idea that the family is an institution sanctified by God and imposes rules on its participants. But what are those rules? Well, these differ from faith to faith, or better, from faith community to faith community. Is it at least better to have in mind the basic idea that the family is divinely sanctioned than otherwise? It is not better if it is not true, is one obvious response, but it might still be better from the point of view of practice, regardless of its truth. Here we have to wonder whether parents being woken up in the middle of the night by a child are going to be less

fed up if they think that God wants them to look after their children than if they do not really know why they are doing it.

This brings us to the nub of the difference between the traditional family, as we are using that term here, and the modern family. The former has a clear idea of what they are doing and why they are doing it. They accept the significance of ritual in their lives, if they are from a religious background, and regard it as very important to embody that ritual in their practice. Ritual can be very complex, of course, and different religious authorities may argue about it and where and when it applies, or whether it applies at all, but that is not at issue here. It is the basis of ritual that is important, and that basis is generally that God wants us to behave in certain ways. If He does, we better do it. That is a rather simple idea and provides for many people a very satisfying answer to the metaphysical questions of existence, plus to the ethical questions of how they should live, and here how they should bring up their families. By contrast, the modern family can be all over the place intellectually. After all, they know that families frequently break up through divorce, that the rules of what counts as a family changes rapidly over relatively short periods, that people often have children outside of a family and that a family may consist of very few people, perhaps all of the same gender. They will have different ideas of why they should act as they do, and not surprisingly sometimes these end in disaster, since someone is faced with a screaming child in the middle of the night who will not keep quiet, perhaps feels little affection for the child and has no idea what to do. The child may be the offspring of other adults, its carers may be inadequate and without the support of other family members, in particular older experienced adults, and the carers can be confused, conflicted in their roles of responsibility and coping with a range of other issues such as drug or alcohol abuse, or of course just poverty. The traditional family has no difficulties in dealing with poverty, by contrast, which perhaps most of

the traditional families in the world today experience, since they have a structure which explains the roles they should adopt in raising children, who counts as a significant other and usually a decent support group of others who are linked together in common beliefs and values.

Yet it has to be repeated that we do not really know empirically what sort of family is better for raising children. Traditional families are far better than their modern alternatives at hiding things going wrong. It has also to be said that the traditional family may base themselves on religious and ethical beliefs which are just wrong. Since the various beliefs that underpin the traditional family are often contrary to each other, some at least of them must be wrong. We often value people who are unhappy with an attempt at simplifying life and its aims, and whose actions and beliefs reflect the complexity and variety of points of view that are available to citizens in liberal democracies. The modern family struggles to find meaning in what it does, and in this sense is genuinely modern, since it operates within a framework of doubt, discussion and debate. Raising children within such a framework may well prepare them better for life in a world without a central ethos, where each individual will need to develop his and her own ideas about how to live and with whom. We just do not as yet know and until we do we should be very careful about producing any sweeping generalizations about which sort of family is best at raising the next generation.

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