

LAY SPIRITUALITY AND THE FAMILY

By SUSAN DOWELL

NOW THAT THE FAMILY HAS BECOME the focus of such widespread public concern we frequently see the Church called upon to make a clear public stand on its importance in Christian teaching. There is a wide spectrum of Christian thought on the role and function of the family and any initiatives of prayer or action, lay-based or led from above, will to some extent take their cue from the individual or community's location within this spectrum. Between those two extremes, so beloved of the media—the born-again Right with its campaign to restore the biblical, patriarchal family, and the family-is-dead school—there lie two broad mainstream tendencies that I will begin by outlining as fairly as I can.

The first sees the nuclear family as the cornerstone of society and believes that the Church must play a far more robust part in protecting and affirming this beleaguered institution. One of the most influential and compassionate representatives of this position is the Roman Catholic psychiatrist Jack Dominian. Dominian, who is deservedly recognized as an expert on marriage and family life, sees the home (along with the work-place) to be where 'the central drama of life is enacted', the place where 'men and women experience love and try to realise it and, through the difficulties of achieving it, experience the journey of living faith. The home is the domestic church.'¹ Dominian demands that this great work of love is visibly affirmed at every level of the Church's public and sacramental life. He takes the clergy firmly to task for their desultory and uninterested efforts, noting that the 'preaching directed to the other sacraments outweighs by far that devoted to marriage. This is a great pity and can mean that the people of God, most of whom are in the married state, have a sense of reality which the priest does not share.' Dominian believes that a 'transformed spirituality' requires of the Church's hierarchy nothing less than a transformation of its ethical priorities. He urges the Church to pay less attention to contraception and abortion and recognize that the trauma of marital breakdown is now, particularly with the advent of AIDS, the 'single most serious

NOTES

¹ Dominican, Jack: 'Evangelism begins at home', *The Tablet*, 15 June 1991.

² Dominican, Jack: 'Marriage's inner world', *The Tablet*, 10 August 1991.

³ Hebblethwaite, Margaret: *Motherhood and God*, (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1984).

⁴ Ehrenreich, Barbara: *The worst years of our lives: irreverend notes from a decade of greed*, (New York, 1991).

⁵ Report in *The Guardian*, 12 October 1991.

⁶ See Furlong, Monica (ed): *Mirror to the Church*, (S.P.C.K., 1988). This collection was prepared to coincide with the 1988 (Anglican) Lambeth Conference. Three essays, by Una Kroll, Sue Walrond-Skinner (a family psychotherapist) and Jane Williams (see also note 9) address the inaccurate ideas many Christians have about family life. Williams' essay focuses on young families' liturgical needs.

⁷ Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks: 'Battered women and interpretation', in Letty Russell (ed): *Feminist interpretations of the bible*, (Blackwell, 1985).

⁸ Brown, Peter: *The body and society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity*, (Columbia University Press 1985; London, Faber, 1987).

⁹ In Furlong, *op. cit.*, pp 101-2.

evil of Western society'. On the positive side, Dominican welcomes people's rising expectations of marital happiness and fulfilment and proposes that 'a major revolution has occurred in law and theology whereby the couple is seen as the heart of marriage'.²

The second tendency, in which I stand, has some serious reservations about the Church's high-profile investment in the heterosexual nuclear family. This might seem a somewhat contrary position for someone like myself to take. I have lived most of my adult life in the 'reality' Dominican describes: marriage and motherhood followed close on the heels of my becoming a Christian in my late teens. As a clergy wife (Anglican) with four children my faith has developed within and through a context of parish, home and family life to a greater degree than I imagine to be the case for many other lay women. So the obvious thing for me to do, here and in my own life, is wholeheartedly to endorse Dominican's affirmation and proceed to develop and expound the authentic lay experientially-based spirituality that the Church is calling for nowadays. Useful initiatives have sprung up among lay women of all denominations who do just this, individually and collectively. So why not just join in? It is a good place to begin.

Perhaps I am just a contrary sort of person but Christianity is a contrary, contradictory sort of faith and has a disconcerting way of setting us against the grain of our lives. I must emphasize that I have the greatest respect for the more traditional forms of women's work. My own Church's Mothers' Union, to give the example I know best, is firmly committed to pray for and support those people whose family life has come under pressure and does a lot of what is too often dismissively called 'good work'. On the theological front, Margaret Hebblethwaite's moving and original account of finding God in motherhood and motherhood in God³ has been a source of inspiration to countless people. Both endeavours are based on a central, enduring model of Christian discipleship, one that starts from the inside and works outwards. Stably (and happily) married women, firmly rooted in a parish base, form the core and leadership of the Mothers' Union, and although their charity begins at home, it by no means ends there.

But this model does not fit the circumstances or indeed the convictions of all women. Nor is it the only 'responsible' one. If the present crisis tells us anything it tells us that we need as many new perceptions and ways of working as are available to us. It is feminism that has, more than anything else in my life, confirmed this

intimacy and provided insights and models that both inspire and challenge me.

Feminism has of course exposed some painful contradictions between family life in our society and the liberation to which I, as a Christian and a woman, feel called. I believe, quite passionately, that the predominantly patriarchal base of Church *and* family is a major source and sign of disordered social and familial relationships. Despite Church and society's failure to act upon it in any truly transformatory way, I believe this message is now received and understood by more and more church people. Feminism's gifts to me far exceed the intellectual/analytical. Rather than teach me my 'oppression', feminism brought me up sharply against the privileged condition of my life. I am privileged by luck—in being healthy, fertile and economically secure—and love, rather than by my own grace. Nor is my condition 'natural' as the romantics in Church and society would have it. Nature would, till very recently, have long ago weeded out one with my obstetric history, along with at least half my children, and I and my loved ones would have had no space in which to participate in or respond to other kinds of familial tragedy, let alone nurture the emotional heart of our life together. Since this remains the condition of so many in our world, my own good fortune must give me pause for thought as well as thanks.

The model feminism offers is, in a word, sisterhood. Feminism's rigorous multi-dimensional analysis of the way women are discriminated against as women gave me a clearer window onto the world of structural injustice in which I collude and participate at every level of my life. There are those in Western society for whom the stable nuclear family pattern remains an impossibility. A recent economic appraisal⁴ of the 'parlous condition of the black family'—which has become something of a *cause célèbre* among US conservatives—reveals that given the average black income it would take four fathers to bring the black family into the home-owning bracket; the only other way of stabilizing family life would be the forcible marriage of rich white men to poor black mothers! Since both solutions are unrealistic we must accept that any 'domestic church' will, to some degree, be a segregated one.

A further example of how perceptions of falling family values become linked to conservative/sexist ideologies was furnished by a Tory Minister of State at their recent party conference. Only socialists 'treat women like a beleaguered minority when we know that women are half the human race,' she pronounced.⁵ Would this

speaker deem it equally inane to treat blacks in South Africa as discriminated against (their family life deliberately and systematically disordered by apartheid), when we know they form the majority of the population?

In the present political climate I am tempted to wonder whether anyone with a true concern for the family can pursue it through a politically neutral Church. I do absolutely know however that it is not enough for me to enshrine my own experience and set it up as an ideal to be striven for by others less fortunate than myself. I must relativize it by getting alongside—if only by the efforts of prayer and imagination—the lives of women and men whose experience, both personal and political, is utterly different from my own.

For the Christian feminist, this identification is more than desirably 'right-on'; it is a mandatory requirement of faith. And a particular encounter with others across time and space is offered through our membership of a particular historical community—the Body of Christ. Christ offered his followers a new kind of family, as different from our nuclear version as the Kingdom of God is different from the United Kingdom I live in. The Church took root and spread among women and men who sat very lightly to familial ties and were honoured by the Church for doing so. Paul and Christ himself warned the first Christians that their allegiance to the new 'household of faith' would grievously disrupt old loyalties to kith and kin.

This anti-family strand of Christian teaching can of course be misused as a cop-out of any responsibility for family disorder today. This is both dishonest and delusory in a secular society whose disorders can hardly be said to arise from over-zealous adherence to the demands of the gospel. Christ's teaching, moreover, in no way superseded the ethical and symbolic importance accorded marriage in his own Hebrew tradition. But a certain Christian ambivalence towards the blood family does need to be acknowledged and incorporated more honestly and imaginatively into our thinking and worship. Screening out this perspective by singing the cosier hymns and a somewhat selective use of biblical texts, as happens in much of the 'family-oriented' worship on offer in all our churches, has contributed to the anodyne quality that Dominian and others have complained of.⁶

An inspiring example of a more rigorous approach is provided by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite's⁷ account of the use of the bible in battered women's refuges—an initiative that came out of the women's movement in the 1970s. Thistlethwaite observes that

battered women from Christian homes bring a greater burden of guilt and passivity to their situation: many have been told that the bible forbids protest and are urged, by pastors and husbands, to follow Jesus in forgiveness and self-sacrifice. But once these women allow their bible faith to work for them instead of against them, they realize the righteousness of their anger and achieve a greater degree of self-esteem and control over their lives than those not similarly handicapped. When we look to texts that are not 'about' nor addressed 'to' women and families, we hear a different drummer. Nowhere in the bible is righteousness seen in terms of keeping the home together at all costs. Those who can *only* realize the peace and love to which all Christians are called by 'shaking the dust'—and clearly this includes many women caught up in spirals of domestic violence—must be liberated by the realization that the Church had no trouble with this idea in the first four centuries of its life. For the rest of us Thistlethwaite's work demonstrates the importance of really hearing those at the cutting edge of what Paul called our 'present distress', and I am not sure if we really can hear if we absolutize the nuclear family. 'The cornerstone that the builders reject . . .'

Feminism's profound respect for history has nurtured an awareness that everything from social and familial structures, religious forms and language, including God-language (theology) and my own and others' 'private' spirituality, is constructed within history. Our God is the God of history who has his/her own way of deconstructing some of these things as well.

I am convinced that laypeople can pray and act more responsibly within the present crisis when they understand something of the shifting perceptions of the nature and function of marriage in Christian history. This is not generally encouraged among the laity, and women, who have traditionally been required to uphold and not reflect on 'family values', are determinedly seeking greater theological *glasnost*.

The present lack of a robust spirituality for married life at which Dominican protests is firmly constructed in and mediated by a particular set of historical circumstances, namely the millennium-long elevation of celibacy over marriage. I have no wish to rub the Church's nose in all this. It seems to me that the Church, *semper reformanda*, is making considerable efforts to dismantle the 'two-tier system' of holiness (salvation for the mass of married laity, perfection for monks and nuns) that came about after the fourth century. But for

rather a long time—over half of our history—‘lay spirituality’ was as much a near-contradiction in terms as ‘holy matrimony’, and the two are deeply connected. I really feel my layperson’s intelligence continues to be profoundly insulted when I read, as I do quite often, that in spite of its affliction with some sexual ‘hang-ups’ the Church has always and everywhere taught the sanctity and centrality of marriage. The briefest perusal of some of the Fathers’ writings or the history and forms of marriage rites in the pre-Tridentine Church makes a nonsense of this claim.

Dominian calls upon today’s clergy to share more imaginatively in the reality of married life but this, it seems to me, is only half the problem. We laypeople need to share ‘their’ reality too. As Peter Brown⁸ has shown in his excellent new study of asceticism in early Christianity, this was much more possible in the first two centuries CE than is commonly supposed. The increasing separation of hearth and cloister was unavoidable in the political and cultural circumstances within which later Christianity developed and spread. For all its flaws, however, the ascetic period was the richest and most formative for Christian spiritual language and so in some senses it is inevitable that this language should be perceived as ‘belonging to’ those among whom and for whom it was formulated. The Second Vatican Council’s declaration that every Christian is called to perfection marks the Church’s most concerted effort yet to deconstruct this part of our history.

More and more people are enthusiastically taking up the call. Women particularly are going further than protesting against a tradition that has undoubtedly denigrated and excluded them, and are using its riches to make deeper spiritual sense of their own experience. In a moving essay, ‘Mothers, chaos and prayer’,⁹ Jane Williams writes of ‘the dark night of the soul’:

Perhaps I am stretching a point by suggesting that, for many women, motherhood represents some of the conditions that John of the Cross describes. And yet the comparison seemed obvious as some of these women talked to me. Most striking of all was the sense that the distractions and doubts, the being forced to break the old moulds, were all purposive. . . . By committing yourself to God, as by having a child, you permit yourself to go where the relationship takes you, become what it makes you. Women who go through the distractions and darkness as an inevitable part of motherhood should learn to trust them as parts of the journey in God, not as a time when you have been pushed off the bus altogether. To give yourself to a time of

uncertainty when you have no choice, when it is where a commitment of love takes you, is recognisably part of the Christian way of growth, quite different from the uncertainty that arises out of a long spell of lazy or indifferent prayer—the latter is your own fault and you can only put it right by hard work; the former is one of the ways by which God draws us beyond our natural capacities.

Despite the best efforts, lay and clerical, towards a genuinely two-way process of spiritual sharing, we are, all of us, heirs of a divided Christendom and our denominational divisions seriously hamper the Church's mission in all areas of life. When I hear calls for a more affirmative theology of married life I have a sinking sense of *déjà vu*. The dignity of marriage and family life was the great rallying call of the Protestant revolution which was not content to 'demote' celibacy but swept it away altogether. This episode of our history has its own unfortunate legacy, most notably a lingering triumphalism on the part of Protestants who are not averse to claiming that 'we' have got it—marriage and family life—right and 'they'—sex-fearing Romans—have not. All this is of course re-inforced by the anomaly of *mandatory* celibacy for Catholic clergy, the ban on divorce and artificial contraception. But if the Romans can be charged with a continuing over-investment in sexual renunciation, the rest of us must also acknowledge a corresponding over-investment in marriage. To give but one sign of this, it is not uncommon in Nonconformist and Anglican parish life for the married parson with 2.x children to be highly preferred, as the 'good all-rounder', over the problematical single man. What does this say to the reality of the growing numbers of single people in our churches?

This is not the place to go into the vexed question of divorce and remarriage but rising figures are inextricably linked to the rising expectations of marriage that Dominian refers to. So we do need to ask how universal or realistic these expectations are. Perhaps we give such a high value to sexual and emotional fulfilment because the circumstances of marriage in our late twentieth-century Western industrialized world have stripped it of any other kind.

In other words the kind of family life we are being required to safeguard is a highly privatized affair. Maybe the centre is not holding because the cocooned couple was never meant to be the centre. It never was till very recently and never, anywhere at all, in the New Testament account of our first forebears. By teaching us that higher standards of loving must be incarnated in the community not enclosed in the private family, biblical faith offers an effective antidote to cosy couple-ism.

There is a further drawback to the separate development of lay and religious vocations. Just as one side has, historically, looked with suspicion on the other, so too has one been tempted to idealize the other. Nuns have suffered from sentimentalization, just as mothers have, and are now (many of them) not only exploding the myth of cloistered serenity but making common cause with their lay sisters and taking up issues of sexual justice not previously thought their business. From the other side, the work of women like Margaret Hebblethwaite and Jane Williams can be valued both as a personal exploration and also for telling the Church something of the grinding reality of mothering small children.

I have a deep personal interest in all the matters I have tried to present in this essay. I remember well the exhaustion and isolation of young motherhood. Perhaps like Hebblethwaite I 'had the experience but missed the meaning'. But I am at a new stage in my own family life and one that can be even more dispiriting. As my children grow into teenage and young adulthood, the pressures of our consumerist society increase. They were quite easy to resist when they were little. Back then, the best things in our life together—ducks on the pond, the costumes for the nativity play we did all together with my Sunday School—were almost free. What they required of me—physical affection, food, friends for tea and steering them safely though the alarums and excursions of each day—was clear. With enough good-will and energy I could give them what they needed. I feel quite nostalgic for this clarity, for those sharp needs that I could satisfy. Now they need designer sneakers and for me to 'get off my case, mum'. This is not a complaint against my kids—they are wonderful and I want them to grow up and, eventually, away—it is something of a complaint against shoe-designers! And it is a plea that the Church recognize that the family has become the main channel into which all the false as well as good values of our society are directed.

Perhaps my bluff has been called. Given what I have written here of the Christian's high investment in communality, I cannot speak dismissively or suspiciously about 'peer group pressure'. It is my children's friends and contemporaries who must keep them safe now. Together they must claim their place in a wider family which I and the Church ignore at our peril and whose needs are legion. It is those needs that I must offer as I hold up empty hands at the altar rail with my own chosen family: the household of the faith.