

BOOK REVIEW

Adrian Thatcher, *Theology and Families*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. 278 pp. Pbk. £22.99. ISBN 978-1-4051-5275-4.

The family is certainly a challenge to contemporary policy-makers. Readers in the developed world may well recall the extensive media coverage last spring of the UNICEF report that ranked child-wellbeing in rich countries. With the UK coming bottom of the table overall, and the US ranking second from bottom, children and families have become key policy concerns in the last year, as the regular rhetoric from politicians in the UK about “hard-working families” demonstrates.

The publication of *Theology and Families*—as part of Blackwell’s “challenges in contemporary theology” series—preceded that of the UNICEF report, yet Professor Thatcher’s concerns about family life prefigure many of those now on the policy agenda. He outlines the “extraordinary changes” that are happening to families in the developed world: an ageing population, a declining birth rate and a decrease in family size; an increasing divorce rate and a growth in one-person households, lone-parent families and step families. Thatcher also articulates other, more qualitative concerns: children are “sometimes unwanted and resented,” and can be “victims of narcissistically needy parents, and of a popular culture which peddles poisonous myths.” Some professionals who work with children have dubbed these influences (and others) “toxic childhood”; Adrian Thatcher, with a reference to liberation theology, doesn’t mince words in calling them “structural sin.”

There are numerous publications and initiatives addressing these concerns in the UK, and a seemingly inexhaustible debate in the media. Yet the sense of urgency that is keenly felt by policy makers has perhaps yet to touch theologians. In his preface Thatcher expresses shock at lack of attention given to children by theology—though he acknowledges some notable exceptions, including the Family, Religion and Culture project at the University of Chicago. “Given the teaching of Jesus about children, this hiatus is extraordinary” he writes. “Elsewhere child neglect is a crime.”

In *Theology and Families* Thatcher attempts to “construct a theological anthropology where children and families are central.” It’s a work close to that of “critical familism,” developed by the Family, Religion and Culture project, but which aims to make a more overtly theological, Christ-centred contribution. So, in his first section Thatcher marshals the resources for a theology for families from scripture and from theology.

He begins by recognizing that the Bible can be a problematic source for a theology for families: there are significant discontinuities between biblical times

and our own, and there is a “plurality of voices within the biblical witness.” He then sets out eight hermeneutical principles for “family-friendly” reading of scripture, and if the reader can’t accept them, the rest of the book may well be a struggle. For example, are all families able to receive and embody the love of God whether or not they believe in or know God? However, what’s important for what follows are these two: that “the love commandments of Jesus take priority over Household Codes, and over all other ethical injunctions that are not derived from them” and that “it has become necessary to allow ethics to be much more obviously shaped by...the doctrine of the triune God.” It’s a hermeneutic that appears to set trinitarian theology against the Bible—or at least prefers it to the way the Bible texts on families and children have been traditionally read.

Using his hermeneutical principles Thatcher then explores the scriptures on family and children—most helpfully the “astonishing” teaching of Jesus on children. Then on to theology, proposing that the trinity is able to be the basis for a Christian family theology, for which he draws in particular on the work of medieval theologian Richard of St Victor; then moving on to Karl Barth with a discussion of parent-child relationships in the light of the relations within the trinity; then to Pope John Paul II to explore “the connection between the doctrine of the social trinity and the Christian understanding of the human family.” Acknowledging Stephen Webb he also touches on the idea of children as gifts from a “gifting God” and touches on the impact of the incarnation—what Robin Maas has called “Christ as the Logos of Childhood.” Perhaps the most transformative of his theological resources is the relational concept of personhood, based on Stanley Grenz: the idea that we image God the trinity “not merely as persons, but as couples and families.”

His second section examines these relations in more depth: relations between spouses and partners, parents and children, in the wider family, between families and churches, and between families and wider society. There’s a defence of marriage with a radical proposal to recognize that there are marital values (love, life-long fidelity, mutual commitment) in relationships between those who are not married; a welcome defence of children’s rights informed by the teaching of Jesus about children; an exploration of parenthood which locates human parenting within the divine parenting of God the Father; a discussion of the Roman Catholic idea of family as “domestic church”; a defence of open families, recognizing the importance of grandparents and godparents; and an awkward treatment of an admittedly awkward subject: the phenomenon of “chosen childlessness.”

Theology and Families is broad, wry and passionately inclusive but lacks a clear argument. Instead, it covers a large number of social and pastoral issues without, for the most part, drawing the clear conclusions that would be helpful both politically and pastorally. I was sorry not to see Professor Thatcher’s theology of liberation for children presented more thoroughly, with a proposal for how children can be released from the structural sins he so clearly identifies earlier on. Thatcher’s challenge to contemporary theology—and he particularly mentions

the “paucity” of thought on family in the Anglican tradition—is to draw on the rich biblical, patristic and theological sources to respond to the changing form and nature of the family to inform present policy-making in more depth.

Esther Hughes
Head, The Good Childhood, The Children’s Society
esther.hughes@childrenssociety.org.uk