

The Significant Role of the Christian Family in our Society

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I am an Armenian Evangelical minister, and, as such, I want to convey the ways I believe Christians, along with our Muslim brothers, share the same values concerning the role of the family in society and issues related to it.

Christians exist in all of the Middle East, mainly in north Syria and other Arab countries. Islamic and Christian Arabs share the same language and collective experience and, therefore, have a similar culture. Christian Arabs see themselves as Arabs and tie their destiny to that of the Arab nation.

Among Syrians today, there is a Christian minority that lives in peace with Muslims. They share the struggle of the nation and work collectively in full participation toward establishing a better future for the nation under the wise leadership of the president of the Syrian Arab Republic, Dr. Bashar Hafez Al-Assad.

The family in the Arabic culture is considered the essential component upon which the whole system of the state is established. Familial systems have lasted even when substantial political change took place in Arab history. Actually, the political system has been affected by, more than it has affected, familial structure.

The Inevitable Role of the Family in our Lives

The family is considered the first great social influence in our lives. Beginning when we are almost totally helpless, our parents lead us into the world of objects, words, and meanings. In the context of the family, we learn the first painful lessons of self-discipline and discover who we are and how we stand in the affections, approvals, and disapprovals of the world surrounding us.

In these critical early years within the family, we also encounter the shocks, fears, insecurities, and resentments that burn into our lives so deeply that they later haunt us and break into our conduct. Many of the anxieties and neurotic patterns that make us aggressive or timid originate in the early failures or maladjustments in the family. The relation of parents to one another, experiences of conflict or mutual trust, attitudes toward others, prejudices, and anxieties—all register their powerful impressions early in our lives.

The family, then, is the primary group in which we translate the faith of our lives into action. By and through the family, my church survives through very difficult days. Today, wherever freedom of having religious schools is very limited, through liturgy, the wealth of theological thought, and family life, the Christian faith continues to get its message to upcoming generations.

Unfortunately, the family—the basic means for Christian

education—is shaken at its very foundation by growing trends of secularization and by the turmoil of our changing society. These elements force the family to face problems. Thus, everyone today, in all churches, is rethinking the role of the family in light of all these changes. What is a Christian family? What is God's purpose for a man? What is God's purpose for a woman? What is God's purpose for children? What is God's purpose for the unity of man and woman in the family?

The Role of the Christian Family in Our Society

The role of the Christian family in our society is to be a model of life. Not only are man and woman created in the image of God, they are also called to unite with each other in order to fulfill the maximum of human nature and human existence. Their union within marriage is founded upon love that stems from God and goes beyond nature. At the same time, it gives nature quite a different dimension—the call for sanctification.

We talk so much about love in our religion. We make it the only and total principle of life. We define God as being LOVE. What does this mean to us in our daily life, our family life? Love, from our Christian viewpoint, implies something that goes beyond the individual. Each spouse loves the other for his or herself, and, beyond all this, they love each other in God.

We define genuine love in psychology as the capacity to sacrifice one's own interests and pleasures for another, to love the other before one's self, to seek his or her interest.

Astonishingly, two thousand years before modern psychology, the main ideas of modern clinical psychology were found in the gospel and in the first epistle of John—a magnificent contribution to the philosophy of love.

After Jesus and John, love become a principle of knowledge alongside that of reason. It is one of the basic contributions of Christianity to the history of civilization and ideas.

When a marriage is based upon genuine love, it becomes a way of a new knowledge for the human being, something that opens the family to society, and makes out of it an active element that serves as a model of change and evolution.

Plato denied the reality of the world of senses. He considered only ideas as "real." The genuine Christian, however, conceives of the flesh as being completely worthy, completely ontological, rooted in being—it has to be transformed through the effect of love, rooted in God Himself.

Any marriage cannot be conceived of as "real" if it is not founded on love. Between spouses, there is a vocation of unity in the spirit and in the flesh, a vocation of mutual

understanding, and the vocation of begetting children and bringing them up worthily.

The second basic model that must be implemented by the Christian family is to be an adequate setting for bringing up children, in order to prepare them for life and service in their immediate society. The upbringing of children in a Christian family is a tremendous task. Now, because of scientific knowledge we have very efficient tools for implementing Christian ethics and social values through practical education and psychology.

What modern psychology has taught us is that genuine love is learned by the child. From birth to six or seven years of age the child learns to love, either adequately or inadequately.

Emotional deprivation in the first years of life is catastrophic for a child's inner-psychology. When there is a lack of proper love, the child's personality may be stifled; he or she may remain immature forever. It is therefore very important for mothers' love to be intense and adequate in order to build up a child's capacity to love. Psychological maturation constitutes the psychological foundation of the ethical life of an individual.

Emotional maturity is the capacity to love, sacrifice, and forget one's self for the sake of community. We have a very excellent definition of genuine love in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians. It is a masterpiece of psychological and ethical analysis of the nature of love. There is no text in modern psychology that matches the description or analysis of Paul. There is no success without mature, genuine love.

In order to let the key notions described and analyzed by Paul become concrete in life, we have to use scientific methods of bringing up children, because emotional maturity is the condition of the whole balance of personality.

It is important for the Christian family to sufficiently prepare young men and women for marriage and their future family life. This is one of the major tasks of the church. There is a tremendous gap in this field. Do we strive earnestly to prepare couples for marriage? Do we show them the difficulties of marital life and the enlightenment of the Christian teachings in this field? As a matter of fact, real preparation for marriage does not start only some months or years before getting married. Real preparation for marriage starts at birth. Why? Because a marriage cannot succeed without the emotional maturity that begins developing at birth. At the moment of birth, the child starts to be molded by the human environment, namely by his or her mother. A child builds up a personality along lines of direction from his or her mother. A mother shapes a child's destiny.

Thus, there is a threefold vocation of the Christian family to serve as a model of genuine love:

- 1) to be an open community to society
- 2) to bring up children so as to prepare them for modern life and for Christian life

- 3) to prepare young people for marriage

We seem to consider sex education as one of the basic elements for marriage preparation. One of the basic findings of psychology is that sexual life in its biological dimensions is completely determined by the psychological element. People confuse sexual information and sexual education—emotional psychosexual or emotional, sexual education. Information is part of a whole structure. That's why we have to begin with emotional educational or psychosexual education. Knowledge about sex that comes at the age of five to seven, or eight to fourteen should first answer personal questions of the child. There should be a natural need for knowledge that may come by a change that stimulates questions for the child. We have to answer him or her in a scientific way with a respect for the truth, but we also have to adapt truth to his or her level of understanding. If we conceive of marriage preparation as a double process, stressing mainly emotional maturity and at the same time informing the child and the adolescent about the facts of life—then this new information can easily be integrated into the whole personality and become something operational and efficient.

Change as a Reality: The Middle Eastern Perspective

Rapid change is undeniable in modern times. Individuals and societies in the Middle East are aware of the drastic changes in their lifetime. Industrialization and urbanization are two main changes that have affected all sectors of life. Modes of living are changing; so are attitudes. Secularization has invaded society and the church. The challenge of change has brought out the conflict between Western and Middle Eastern culture.

Societies in the Middle East have their own social institutions. It is not necessary that they follow the same patterns of change as the West. Our assumptions regarding what changes will take place, and the nature of their impact on Middle Eastern structures need not be modeled on the Western image. This is particularly true when we consider, for example, the importation of Western systems of education and otherwise, which are not adapted to local needs.

However, much change takes place in spite of us, the individual still has power to direct change. He or she must be viewed as an actor in this process, not merely a passive onlooker.

The Impact of Change On Marriage

Marriage comprises a number of elements, some of which may weaken with time. However, Christian marriage is based on the divine will of God, i.e., it is proper for man and woman to be joined together for their own happiness, procreation of the race, and worship of God. There are strains and stresses in marriage. Temptations and breakups are possible. The environment, in a number of ways, greatly

influences the durability of a Christian marriage. The responsibility of the church is to provide Christian education and counseling that will underline the meaning of marriage as a sacrament, a spiritual bond rather than a legal act. Academic education of parents is important, but it must be supplemented by a program of Christian education if the highest aims of marriage are to be achieved.

On The Family

In developing societies, emphasis is placed on physical and material needs. As one consequence, women have had to seek employment outside the home to help meet these needs. This has changed the role of both the mother and the father within the family, and has its effect on children. The entire image of the family in society has changed.

However, in Middle Eastern communities, despite the demands of modernity and secularization, family ties are still strong. The family in the Middle East is still a valid and effective institution. In our consideration of possible future changes, the family should be maintained and used as a basic and stable element in our society.

On Youth

To what extent does the church alienate youth by its condemnatory attitude? The youth of today evidence a wholesome search for faith rather than interest in the institutionalized church. Here the church can play a corrective and preventive role by engaging the youth in a dialogue with older people. Members of different generations need each other. The generation gap would be reduced to great extent if the family would exemplify Christianity in daily life. The church is expected to play a dynamic role by preventing and solving many of the social ills in the home and society at large.

Response of the Church in a Developing Society

The church should speak pertinently to the problems of actual life. Christianity should not be taught and practiced in a vacuum, but in a local context. Its message must correspond to people's thinking and needs.

With particular reference to the Middle East, the church must relate itself to non-Christians in the same community and country. At the same time, while improving a certain culture and educating young people, confidence in their own culture must not be destroyed.

The Role of The Church

The church has an important responsibility to act corporately and individually on political, social, and economic matters that profoundly affect marriage and family life. A duty is laid upon the church by the Lord to speak and act for justice, economic conditions that make dignified family life possible, better housing, educational opportunities, health services—including access to and information about

family planning, and, above all, for peace.

Personal group and family counseling are all creative movements of healing for individuals and families. However, the concern of the church for families, if confined only to personal counseling and church related education, can easily become a new form of pietism, one increasingly irrelevant to actual needs.

From the Family to a Larger Society

How we perceive and begin to interpret our contemporary experience of being lost in the familiar is enormously important. Our lives are not lived exclusively within the family. As we mature, other structures and contexts impose themselves upon us.

As we become aware of our psychological complexity as individuals and begin to assume that we have access to at least some of this complexity, we may also begin to believe that it is possible to understand why people behave as they do. On the other hand, the more we become aware that our experience is affected by others, not just in our families but also in the larger contexts in which we live, the less sure we become about where our individual experience begins and ends.

The danger is that we will lose track of what we think and know in our search for links to something larger. Our aim is to describe how individual experience initially formed within the family setting can be related to a larger context without losing the integrity of the individual.

The Sea of Influence around Us

The world today is experiencing social crisis of unparalleled proportions. The deepest root of that disorder is the refusal of men and women to admit that their responsibility to God stands over and above any earthly community and their obedience to any worldly power.

Churches have often concentrated on a purely spiritual or individualistic interpretation of their message and their responsibility. They have often failed to understand the forces that have shaped society around them (Amsterdam Assembly series, "The Church and the Disorder of Society" (New York: Harper, n. d., pp. 189–191; report on section III):

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, Some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles (Ephesians 4:11, 14, RSV).

One of the most dangerous blind spots of our day centers on the need for an adequate understanding of the massive powers of social and institutional influence that inevitably play upon all living human beings. We live in a moral climate that surrounds us as pervasively as the air we breathe. We breathe it into our lives as continuously and as unconsciously as the oxygen of the physical world. We develop our

habits in the collective pattern of society called "custom." Institutions organize the various aspects of our lives. Public opinion limits our behavior and colors our outlook. Many people have become so impressed by the power of this sea of influence around us that they say that our lives are totally determined by the social experiences and groups in which we have lived. In the Christian tradition, we believe that humans have a freedom to respond to God, but the pressures of the world have always been taken very seriously. Most Christians have hells from which only the grace of God can free us and give us any degree of liberation from the life of either static acceptance or selfish rebellion.

The basic protestant view has been stated in the phrase "in the world but not of it." As Christians who continue to live in the world, we know it is both hopeless and sinful to try to closet ourselves away from our fellow human beings. To do so would be to abandon our responsibility to serve "even the least of these" and to turn away from the struggle for righteousness to which we are called. As long as we attempt to serve the Lord on the crowded ways of life we must inevitably continue to live in our families, work in our vocations, and be citizens of the communities and nations in which we exist. If we hope to influence, we must submit ourselves to the counter pull—to dive in and get wet.

The great opposite temptation has always been to "embrace the world"—to adjust uncritically to the forces of the environment. The powerful influence of the world is not merely a dark, abstract cloud of evil that hovers over us. The world is as real as is the particular situation in which we live. It is the arena in which we conduct our lives, make decisions, and face temptations. It is made up of the family, neighborhood, and work environment. It consists of the patterns of life in which we move and all of the influences that press upon us.

One of most important things for us to understand about the processes of influence is that human beings are not things or objects. As one social psychologist put it, persons do not just live "inside their own skins." Emil Brunner, the prominent theologian, says we are "persons-in-community." This means that our lives are developed in an interplay of responses with other human beings. We respond to others and they respond to us. We influence each other and share experience. Our lives become a conversation not only of words but also of feelings and meanings. Our attitudes, beliefs, and things we cherish are not created by ourselves, but come out of the community and are given to us in the process of sharing. Our relationships, what others do to us and what we do to others, provide the fabric from which our personalities are woven.

This is why it is not strange that we absorb the loves, beliefs, and biases of those with whom we share experiences. This is the miracle and the uniqueness of men and women who are the children of God. We are creatures who do not live by bread alone, but by responding to others and contin-

ually responding to God's actions upon us. This sensitivity, this living in the eyes of others, this limited capacity for sharing is the glory and the genius as well as the danger and the vulnerability of men and women.

For better or for worse, we are created, we grow, and live in fellowship. Community is the soil and support of our careers. Community is not an option that we can take or leave. No individual can deny or escape his or her community and/or the powerful influences that shape his or her life. The Christian must recognize these influences and, by belonging to a higher community of grace in Christ, must learn to criticize the things of which he or she is made. From the higher fellowship, one must strive to bring the judgment and influence of God to bear in his or her relations to the communities of the world. One must not submit meekly to family and community but be the leaven that improves them.

In conclusion, I must say that I see that the challenge for the Middle East, and for the world, is not to improve economic status only or to balance the political arena but to strengthen the family through submission to God. We know well that our children prosper within a family, and that family life thrives when it is built on genuine marriages, and that genuine marriages prosper when there is regular worship and submission to God. Therefore, changes in the world must be recognized. The church must be alive to the needs of children and other people—to this end it must change its mode of reaching people in order to eliminate the gap between it and its members. Rather than claim that it possesses all answers and all truth, the church should identify the problems affecting the family in our changing society by looking at problems in the context of change. I hope and pray that we are firmly convinced that it is urgent to uplift traditional family values and that we take of prime importance the creation of a safe climate for our children. Only in this way we will be able to rebuild a stronger society and safer world for humankind in general and for children in specific.

NOTES

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