

**Church, Family and
Issues of Modernity:
A Response**

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CHURCH, FAMILY AND ISSUES OF MODERNITY: A RESPONSE

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Jack Balswick and Dawn Ward have added a new dimension to our analysis of the family and the church in the context of modernity. The papers so far have dealt with theological approaches that deal with God's intentions for families and societies, and with psychological approaches that examine individual human responses to life. Balswick and Ward remind us that a great deal of understanding can be gained from sociological models of analysis. They help us to see the real worlds in which humans live, and counter-balance our western tendency to see the individual as the center of human activity. They remind us that all individuals are enmeshed in larger social and cultural systems, and that these play an important part in the shaping of the individual.

MODERNITY

Balswick and Ward raise a key question largely ignored so far in the discussions of the family in the modern world, namely, what is modernity? Intuitively we all sense that history is moving in some direction, that the world in which we in the west live is different from the worlds of our historical past, and from those of tribal and traditional peasant societies. But what are the differences and what is the direction in which we are moving? And what is the underlying driving force that moves history in this direction? These are no easy questions to answer.

A Clarification of Terms

It became clear in the discussions of the paper that "modernity" means different things to different people. For some it means "contemporary." In this sense the "now" is always modern in comparison with the past. For

others, it takes on a theological meaning. It is the movement of history towards the *eschaton*. But, as Ray Anderson points out, while modernity is moving towards some type of culmination, it remains in the sixth day of creation - in human history on earth. It does not itself usher in the seventh day - the Kingdom of God on earth. For yet others, modernity is equated with civilization. In this sense the pharaohs and Moses were modern people for they lived in societies characterized by sophisticated technology and complex sociopolitical organization. Similarly, as Scott Bartchy pointed out, Palestine during the time of Christ was a modern world. Greek civilization was spreading throughout the region, cities with many competing cultures were emerging, and political states with centralized power dominated the scene. It was in this setting that Paul sought to strengthen the Christian family (Gal. 5:21 - 6:4; Col. 3:18-21; I Tim. 5:3-15; etc.).

For Balswick and Ward modernity is the unique type of techno-social order that emerged in the west after the sixteenth century. And with it a new way of viewing and manipulating the world. What are the characteristics of this new order? Balswick and Ward draw widely from contemporary writers and provide us with a powerful model for the analysis of modernity. At the core, they point out, is the rapid expansion of techno-economic systems. The production of an ever more kinds of commodities leads to increasingly specialized social roles and institutions. This leads to an increasing fragmentation of human understandings of reality. The result is a breakdown of communication and communities, and the pluralization of cultures. No longer do we share one conceptual world. The result is the fragmentation of the family, and a loss of the sense of meaning and purpose. The individual becomes the basic unit of society. Self fulfillment defined primarily in material terms becomes the goal.

In what sense is all this new? Implicitly we contrast modernity with traditional peasant and tribal societies. But peasant villages and tribes are highly diverse in the ways they organize societies and view economic activities. Some, such as the Hopi of the Southwest U.S. and the Toda of South India have strong group identities and organize their cultures around religious beliefs. Others, such as the Kapauku of New Guinea are individualistic and materialistic. Modern societies are not unique because they produce material goods, or place a high value upon the material world.

What is new is the scale and range of material production. Modernity is characterized by the production of an ever greater number of material objects - from an endless variety of clothes, houses, and tools to jets, missiles and submarines.

Restoring a Dialectical Balance

Balswick and Dawn are right in showing us how economic goods and social organization mold our communication and culture. They also call for a dialectical understanding of the relationship between socioeconomic systems and cultural/symbolic ones. In the end, however, they leave us largely with a unidirectional model in which the emphasis on commodities becomes the driving force of modernity.

To restore a dialectical understanding we need an analysis of how culture (our symbols and mental maps of the world) shape economic and social activities. Material goods alone do not explain modernity. Of equal importance is **the way we look at them**. In traditional societies goods are produced and bartered for subsistence. Or they are given as gifts to reinforce social relationships. In modern societies goods are produced for markets and sold for cash. Moreover they have become central in our

cultural values. The power and rank of individuals is determined largely by the material goods they control.

The result of all this is a commodification of life. Land, which in tribal societies is a sacred trust that cannot be bought or sold, becomes a commodity. The value of labor is calculated in economic terms. Even time is an object that can be bought and sold.

This shift in the way we view material goods leads to a shift in the ways in which we relate to one another. In most traditional societies relationships take priority over material gain. Ties of kinship and of covenant are central to life. But when the accumulation of goods becomes central, relationships tend to become contractual. In a contract each individual evaluates the relationship in terms of gains and losses which are calculated largely in economic terms. Relationships can be broken when the latter exceed the former. In a covenant, on the other hand, the relationship itself is of highest priority, and goods and time are sacrificed to maintain it.

Additional Dimensions of Modernity

The model advanced by Balswick and Ward can also be strengthened by adding other dimensions of modernity noted by other scholars. Durkheim, for example, points out the shift from group-centered societies to individual centered societies. Concomitant to this is the weakening of kinship ties and the breakdown of extended kinship groups which provide support for the family.

This-worldly emphasis Max Weber (1958) suggests that modernity emerged, in part, out of a shift in Christianity during the reformation from an emphasis on the world beyond, to this world. He states that the notion of making money, not as a means to satisfy material needs, but as a duty

which derives from a "calling," an "obligation" toward one's professional activity, is mostly responsible for the overcoming of the traditional economic mentality and for providing the "economic foundation and justification" to the capitalistic mentality of the lower industrial middle classes and modern bourgeoisie (1954:54-75). Out of this emerged the religiously ascetic entrepreneurial personalities that accumulated the capital necessary to create industries and promoted a rational capitalistic organization of free labor.

Balswick and Ward do not attempt to give us a historical account of the origins of modernity. Theirs is a synchronic analysis of how the systems of modernity now operate. Nevertheless, a diachronic study of the emergence of modernity, and now of its evolution into post-modernity (cf. Schilling 1973, Toffler 1980, Naisbitt 1982) can add significantly to our understanding of our contemporary human context.

Mechanistic view of the world. Peter Berger argues that a second shift marking the rise of modernity is a shift from an organic to a mechanistic view of reality. Burt (1954) traces this shift in the root metaphor of western culture in the emergence of the sciences. Physics, in fact, was first called "mechanics." Berger (1974) outlines the consequences of this in western social organization. He argues that the hallmarks of modernity are the factory in which we manipulate nature mechanically, and the bureaucracy in which we order people as if they are machines. Along with a mechanistic view of reality comes componentialization and specialization, universalization and standardization, and an emphasis on production and profit.

In the discussion Scott Bartchy cautioned us of taking a too simplistic view of this shift. He points out that there are other root metaphors, and that every society makes use of more than one at the same time. In fact, a

sharp distinction emerged in western societies in the nineteenth century between the public and private spheres of life. It is the latter that was most deeply molded by rationalization and a mechanistic view of reality. In the latter made up of home and friends, relationships, emotions, art and entertainment retained their dominant positions. Many of the problems we face in modern families stem from this dichotomy of reality, and the fact that more and more areas of life such as education, worship, care for the children and aged and economic support in times of crisis are taken over by the public domain.

Pluralism. Mary Douglas (1970) argues that another characteristic of modernity is cultural pluralism. The consequences of this are similar to those outlined by Balswick and Ward for the fragmentation of consciousness. In societies in which there is no single dominant world view, relativism sets in. People in traditional societies share common views of reality. In modern societies they are faced with a bewildering variety of options. With the loss of communities and other plausibility structures that reinforce their existing beliefs, they are faced with creating their own worlds, and with the collapse of a sense of meaning.

Pluralism also gives rise to a split between forms and meanings in symbol systems. No longer is reality given by tradition. It must be created. The result is a collapse of sacred symbols and rituals and the emergence of a secular world. The family order is no longer seen as ordained by God or society. It must be recreated in each instance by those involved.

We must examine the impact of these and other dimensions of modernity on the relationships between husbands and wives, between parents and children, and between the nuclear family and other relatives. Similarly we must study their impact on the church. Only as we truly understand both our

times and the Biblical message will we be able to make the Gospel relevant to our homes and lives.

A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

Balswick and Ward make it clear that for Christians a sociological description of families in the context of modernity is not enough. We do not accept existing practices as normative. Rather we critique social realities in the light of Biblical truth.

This certainly applies to the modern world's emphasis on commodities. Unfortunately, the church itself too often has become a business, an organization for the marketing of the Gospel. Its organization with boards, budgets, bar-and-staff job descriptions and management by goals is hardly distinguishable from other modern institutions. Members become cogs in a machine, and converts part of growth charts. A Biblical theology calls us to see people as human beings; to give priority to relationships over material goods; to care for the poor, the marginals and the failures; to reject social systems that honor the rich and powerful, and that laugh at servant leadership; and to see ourselves as stewards of resources that belong to God and not us.

Similarly, we must address theologically the extreme individualism and narcissism of modernity. Too often Christianity itself is seen as an avenue to success, wealth, health and the fulfillment of our own personal desires. The Gospel, on the other hand, calls us to covenant communities in which we deny ourselves as disciples of our Lord, and in which we minister to the needs of others (cf. Kraus 1979).

We must critique the specialization that has reduced ministries in the church to specialists, and left the laity as spectators in the arena; that has made the Gospel a highly technical, abstract set of truths detached from

real life and understood only by professionals; and that has reduced the family to a holding pen because its central functions - socialization, education, evangelism and worship - have been delegated to other institutions. We need to balance the rationalization of theology with a sense of mystery and awe before creation and its creator, and a commitment to discipleship and obedience.

We must counter the split personalities that such specialization produces between private and public worlds, between the family and professional institutions, and between belief and practice. We need to return to the personal wholism and congruency called for in the Bible.

We must evaluate the impact of scale on the church (cf. Tillapaugh 1982). What is the optimum size for Christian communities in which the priesthood of all is exercised within a hermaneetical community, in which all give and receive nurture in intimate personal relationships, and in which all have opportunity to minister according to their abilities?

We must limit the "this-worldly" emphasis of modernity by placing human history back into its cosmic framework. Only then will we gain a true perspective of material goods and human achievements.

We must deal with the growing pluralism of modern societies: the pluralism of ethnic groups and social classes interacting in the same social arenas, the pluralism of life-styles, and the pluralism of belief systems and world views. On the one hand, we must avoid the relativism that pluralism breeds. On the other, an imposed uniformity. In the church we need to affirm Biblical absolutes, while allowing for different forms of worship and expression.

And we must counter the growing secularism of modernity that springs out of its pluralism and this-worldly orientation. We must remind ourselves and the world of the cosmic agenda of sin, redemption, and reconciliation.

We need to regain a sense of the sacred by restoring myth and ritual to a central place in the home and church.

THE SEARCH FOR INTEGRATION

Another question raised by Balswick's and Ward's paper has to do with integration. How does a sociological approach to the family in a modern setting relate to the theological and psychological models already presented?

In recent years considerable work has been done on the theory of complementarity (MacKay 1958, 1974; Holton 1970; and Kaiser 1973). Increasingly we are becoming aware that knowledge consists of maps or blueprints of reality (Hiebert 1985a, 1985b). Just as we need blueprints of the wiring, plumbing, structure and foundations to understand a house, we need different types of explanation to grasp human realities.

The papers in this conference are complementary in two ways. First, some articles are theological and others scientific. The former provide us knowledge of God, his intentions in creation, and His redemptive acts. The latter help us to understand the nature of humans, their societies and their cultures as seen from a human perspective.

Second, some articles are synchronic and others are diachronic. The former seek to understand the underlying structures of reality, how these operate and the functions they serve. The latter examine the true "stories" of reality. The two complement each other. We begin with specific experiences in history, and from these we infer the basic structures of reality. And these structural models help us to understand and predict what is going on around us. As is the case in complementary models, normally one is in focus and the other is subsidiary. Synchronic models show us the universal order of things. They do not look at specific events, or at

changes in this order. Diachronic models, on the other hand, look at the story of the cosmos, of human societies such as Israel, and of individuals.

Taken together, science and theology, diachronic and synchronic paradigms provide us with a better understanding of reality (Figure 1).

**Figure 1
Complementary Belief Systems**

	Diachronic Models	Synchronic Models
Theology	Biblical Theology The Cosmic Story: God's acts in history.	Systematic Theology The Ultimate Structure of Reality: Nature of God and of the universe.
Science	Historical Sciences Human History and Biography.	Natural and Social Sciences The Structures of Nature, Humans and Societies.
	Focus on time, stories, real events and change.	Focus on unchanging structures of reality.

The recognition of the complementary nature of the papers in this conference, however, does not assure us of integration. We can deal with the different explanation systems piece-meal, and end with what Clifford Geertz (Hammel and Simmons 1970:50) calls a "stratigraphic approach" to reality. For integration to take place we need to examine the ways in which these understandings of reality relate to each other. We need also to note when problems and contradictions arise, and reexamine our theologies against the biblical data, and our sciences against observational data.

The task of integrating the theological and scientific, synchronic and diachronic explanations of marriage and the family in modernity provided in these papers is task that remains to be done. This will require a

scientific examination of the nature of modernity within an encompassing theological framework that enables us to critique it, and to understand its place in divine history. It will also require an examination of the structures of marriages, families and modernity, but also of the historical forces at work, and the biographies of individuals in the modern context. It is the latter that will bring our theories down to reality. Meaning ultimately lies not in the structures of things, but in their stories - not in the way human beings function, but in the stories of real people living their lives in a modern world.

RELEVANCE FOR HUMAN REALITIES

In the end what does this conference have to say to these real people struggling to make it in their marriages, to raise their children and to find personal fulfillment in a modern society? As Ann Huffman pointed out, we are always in danger of formulating beautiful theories which have little relevance to the problems real people face.

Here Balswick and Ward must be commended for they do show us as Christians the options open to us. Moreover, they point out false roads and dead ends. We need to examine the theological assumptions implicit in their judgments, and work out the real life implications of their suggestions, and those that have emerged in this conference. For example, what does it mean for the church to live as an intentional covenantal community rather than as a contractual institution? And how in a world in which things are viewed as commodities and relationships as contracts can we maintain the view in the church of marriage itself as a covenant? How do we maintain a balance between the creative ministry of the individual and self-fulfillment, and needs and checks of the community; between absolutes and unity, and pluralism; and between being people of the Kingdom of God, and people of the

kingdoms of this earth? And how do we live in the world and change it without ourselves becoming part of it? John Stott points out,

The principle of the incarnation challenges us not to cut ourselves off from the foreign, secular culture around us, nor to become assimilated to it, but to accept the pain and the peril of entering it, of understanding its thought forms and learning its language.

From the discussion it became clear that formulating a clear Christian response to modernity is not enough. This needs to be made known in the churches. Many ordinary women and men seeking to live godly lives find no answers to their anguished cries for help in the church. So they turn elsewhere. For them learned tomes are of no use. What they need is clear simple books with solid theological and scientific foundations that touch them at their point of need. Women caught in destructive and oppressive marriages need permission to look at Scriptures and interpret them Christologically. They need to see how Jesus treated people, without coercion, with unconditional love and as a servant. They need new plausibility structures that give them permission to be full humans, for too often the church has simply affirmed traditional oppressive roles.

The church, too, needs to be called to its task of critiquing its social and cultural contexts. Too often it has lost its prophetic voice and serves only to legitimate the existing structures of a sinful society. In so doing it has become part of the problem rather than the solution. The church needs to model covenantal relationships as the basis for marriage. It needs to teach husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church: to show husbands how to be servant leaders, to show nonpossessive love, and to affirm the growth and personhoods of their wives and children. It needs to teach wives the meaning of partnership in marriage, and children to respect their parents. It needs to affirm the sacramental nature of the marriage bond, and the worth of every individual in the family. It needs to

see the family as the foundation for worship, for the evangelization of the young, and for their socialization into the Christian community.

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