

THE FAMILY-CHURCH CONNECTION IN A SECULAR WORLD  
A series of theses and comments

by Thomas Kuster

1. The family-church connection in today's world resists simple explanation.

We are not about to view a western movie melodrama, white hats vs. black. It's not just a battle between church (good guys) and the secular world (bad guys) over which will gain control over the family. The family trying to stay close to the church in times like these faces some peculiar problems.

2. Christian families live and grow in an atmosphere of secularism.

Once upon a time the known world could be called "Christendom." No more. Today our world is secular, and we can't go back. The "Amish option", to drop out of current society and pretend to live in a world of yore, we have already rejected. To examine the effects of secularism on Christian families resembles examining the effects of the ocean on fish.

3. Secularism means a loss of religious influence.

That is why the church is naturally inclined to oppose it. No longer does the church control as it once did all schools, hospitals, charitable institutions, even the government, as well as access to society itself. And with the loss of control has gone a great deal of religion's social significance. In Europe drastic drops in church attendance and involvement accompanied the rise of secularism. In the United States, secularism has prompted not a drop in attendance so much as a rise in superficiality among those who go -- recall President Eisenhower's remark that "everyone should have a faith, but it doesn't matter which." President Johnson (a Disciple) and wife Lady Bird (an Episcopal) said their daughter's conversion to Catholicism didn't disturb them since "religion is a private matter." On official forms, religious commitment is reduced to "preferred religion." Even in this secular society, "going to church" may remain an important part of "Americanism" -- but it doesn't matter which one. (Wilson 116)

4. Secularism embodies and promotes a certain set of values.

A secular society has clear marks: it refuses commitment to any particular view of the nature of the universe or the place of human beings in it. It is pluralistic, not homogeneous. It is tolerant, neither enforcing beliefs nor limiting expression of them. It draws boundaries between public and private morality,

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permitting the most private freedom possible. The common aim of a secular society (every society must have its common aims) is quite limited: primarily to enable individuals to achieve their aims. (Munby)

Consider these as the ten dominant values of American secular society: (D'Antonio 81)

1. respect for the individual -- each person's self-development and self-fulfillment is a "duty to self" to be respected by all.
  2. individual achievement -- ingrained first in school, then sport, then career.
  3. activity/work -- God rewards those who work.
  4. efficiency/practicality -- we like to get things done.
  5. progress -- this society is future oriented.
  6. science/rationality -- we can eventually solve all problems by examining facts, mastering the environment.
  7. material comfort -- we achieve this through consumption encouraged by both industry and government.
  8. equality -- of opportunity not result, providing for the realization of each person's potential.
  9. freedom -- and individual rights.
  10. humanitarian mores -- it's nice to help the less fortunate, but we do it from our abundance, not our lack.
5. Family life as we traditionally conceive it, or at least as we idealize it, embodies some differing values from those just listed.

Some major areas of difference:

1. vs. individualism: in a family the group is more important, with individuals expected, through cooperation, to subordinate or even sacrifice their individual interests.
  2. vs. achievement: membership in the family is by ascription -- you are born in, you don't achieve your way in.
  3. vs. equality, freedom, and individual rights: authority in the family is parental and patriarchal.
  4. vs. rationality and anonymity: home is a haven of affection, warmth, love, and nurturance.
  5. vs. progress: families are repositories of traditions, memories, and roots.
6. Family and religion have long been drawn together by shared values.

Compare these "church-values" with the family list in <sup>5</sup> above:

1. Congregational activities stress the importance of the group, and of self-sacrifice on its behalf.
2. Membership in the Church is by ascription: you are chosen in, you don't achieve your way in.

3. Authority in the church is patriarchal.
4. Church is a haven of God's (and fellow believers') concern for others.
5. Church is a repository of traditions (that which is handed down from the past).

So church and family become allies in their set against secular values, and we find that starting a family often makes people more religious, even before children are born, but even more so after. ("Are American") But pursuit of secular goals frequently loosens the influence of family and religion.

7. But individual Christians also respect, even cherish secular values.

The values labeled "secular" listed above are not, in themselves, evil. Living as they do among such values, Christians often find no problem in embracing them. In fact, some historians see secular values growing from religious roots: individual autonomy, perhaps the essential value of secularism, found its modern origin in the Reformation, the movement which provided the theological justification for departing from old values of loyalty and obedience to tradition, and which made possible the Enlightenment, from which secularism emerged fullblown. (Hargrove 22)

8. Careful openness to secular values has had some benefit for Christians and the church.

I find in myself some cherished values that I did not learn, I think, from church or from home -- among them tolerance of people with racial and other differences, and an appreciation of women as whole and important human beings. Many young church people seem to have moved beyond their parents' generation in notions of equity and openness to people different from themselves.

As families, and as a church through our educational system, we try to instill in our children a drive for achievement, intellectual curiosity, and skill in using the scientific method.

Those church people who inveigh against secularism in broad brush strokes should consider the alternative: a government-connected dominant church undoubtedly not ours advancing its own interests over the objections (if any are permitted) of dissenters, namely us. While secularism has limited the scope of the appeal to the supernatural in human affairs, it has also limited the interference of secular persons in spiritual affairs -- a blessing which by taking it for granted we seldom fully appreciate.

The social aim of secularism -- to help people achieve their own self-chosen aims -- provides the atmosphere in which the Gospel can be spread as it should be: by preaching.

We can't go back to days of "Christendom." But would we want to even if we could?

9. The church's own response to secularism may appear ambiguous to Christians and families.

Lay people attending to the church's comments about secularism, and watching its actions in a secular world, may not perceive a clear message. They may at times hear broad-brushed and indiscriminate attacks against secularism and its values. Is it then the purpose of the church to counter all secular values, even at the risk of losing some of the desirable ones?

At times they see secular values espoused by the church and its institutions. Individual achievement, rational approaches to problem solving, and intellectual curiosity are ardently advocated (or so we hope) in all our schools. Is the church succumbing to the humanistic values of the secular society which surrounds it?

Sometimes they perceive secular values embraced by the church, but in limited ways. Democracy, a practice emerging directly not from Scripture but from the secular values of equity and individual autonomy, has become the standard, unquestioned and inviolate method of congregational governance. But only for men. Is it the purpose of the church to adapt and adopt some secular values which serve its purposes, but reject others which do not?

Or is our goal not to oppose secularism so much as understand it and its effects, so we can minimize the bad and maximize the good?

10. The real-life experience of Christian families may resemble secular models more than the traditional ideal.

If this is so, it should come as no surprise; there may never have been a time when families in general conformed to the traditional ideal, which one writer labeled the "family of Western nostalgia" which always flourished in the decade before each person's birth. History has shown that a society can hold an ideal of family for centuries, without any actually attaining it. (Netting xxx)

Lacking a detailed survey, I can only speculate that today's Christian families mix the two value worlds in which they live, following to some extent the traditional notion that the family is an institution which follows the rules laid down by church and culture, but also incorporating the secular style, defining the family as a functional, not institutional unit, fluid in structure, arranging its affairs to accomplish its needed tasks, making do rather than just following rules.

11. Some secular values, when applied at home, clearly conflict with the traditional values of church and family.

Some examples of areas where secular values make a particularly strong impact on family life:

1. A man to succeed must leave his cooperative/ communal/ self-sacrificing home world and become dedicated to a competitive wage-earner world; what values of his life should take precedence, the collective or the individual?
2. The center of achievement, an important secular value, lies outside the home; children learn to achieve at school, and later in the workplace and out in the community. As girl children grow into women and marry, they often find staying at home unrewarding, and are drawn for fulfillment into the community and occupational spheres. Women, then, since at least early in this century, are facing the dilemma (1 above) long wrestled with by men.
3. Attitudes toward vocation shift: no longer is one's work a "sacred calling," but rather it is a "job." We now have only two sacred callings: the pastoral ministry and the teaching ministry.
4. Women have many roles. Changes in society have affected family roles, fertility patterns, childbearing, and childrearing.

12. Government policies too, reflecting secular values, impact family life for all of us.

Public policy regulates family life today (especially in troubled families) much more than churches do, and in so doing indirectly discourages traditional family power relations. For example, the government doesn't deal with traditional breadwinners (because such families do not usually need government attention), but rather it interacts with women dealing with them as decisionmakers, often empowering them against men (in cases of battering) or providing them valuable opportunities for development and growth (as in the very successful Headstart program).

Other important areas where government policy impacts family life include care for the elderly, medical care, home owning, food, education, and equity issues, as well as through laws governing divorce and abortion.

13. Living with two differing value systems encourages Christian families to compartmentalize life.

In the days of "Christendom" religion was the unifier of all knowledge. By functioning as the institutions that linked individuals to the larger society, church and family unified all activity as well. But now the secular spheres of work, education, and government link individuals to society, and church and family become refuges from society as they still hold to some premodern values.

So it is easy today for people to live by one set of values while in the "refuge", and by another elsewhere, considering each set of values appropriate in its own sphere, but irrelevant in the other. Life is lived in little value compartments, each insulated from the others.

The structure of the secular world encourages and continues this fragmentation of life. Systems and organizations are too big for any single person fully to comprehend, so we become groups of specialists and experts relating to one another as roles, not as full people. For those used to defining selves as components, it is easy to deal with the world in compartmentalized form.

14. Compartmentalizing usually works to the disadvantage of the church.

As the secular world reduces the influence of religion in our lives, those values associated with church and family become squeezed into smaller parts of our compartmentalized lives, and in fact become totally unimportant in a growing number of areas. The sense that God rules all things "from above" dissolves in our this-worldly confidence in the things we can accomplish "from below," and in most areas of life, especially those of most immediate importance to us, there is little interest in the wisdom which comes into our lives through religion and revealed truth. (Williams 20)

Perhaps the ultimate compartmentalization appears in a growing tendency even to separate religion and spirituality. One formulation in a popular magazine: "Spirituality, in our society, is inappropriately linked to religion. Certainly morality and religious belief do not necessarily agree. Tolerance, consideration, humanitarianism have little to do with a belief in God." ("Are American" 25)

15. The church has itself contributed to this compartmentalizing.

The church has drawn back from the world, defining its mission and interests primarily, perhaps exclusively, in religious terms, as if God were only interested in religion. In so doing it has yielded the world, all those areas of life outside the religious activities of congregation and synod, over to the realm of the secular. (Williams 52)

For some people, that makes religion (confined to the church) irrelevant to their lives. To what extent do our clergy conform to the description by a British writer, viewing his church, of "specialized ministers, remote from lives of ordinary people -- tempted to believe that being a Christian means participating in the activities in which the clergy are active, and that the 'world' against which the church is set consists of all those activities in which the clergy do not participate." (Munby 66) Might not lay people, if they hold such perceptions, conclude that the values which apply in religion, and perhaps at home, have no relevance to activities in the community at large?

Something different may happen to those Christians who continue to believe that God is involved in all areas of their lives, even those from which the church has withdrawn its interest (job, community service, public affairs, family). For these people, their religion is something that functions primarily outside the church, and the church is compartmentalized into a small corner of their lives.

16. When compartmentalizing occurs, people will have questions and doubts about the church's knowledge.

The rise of the scientific attitude has set human thought free of church tutelage, and we have noted above the decreasing interest in the wisdom which comes down into our lives through religion and revealed truth. Science explains things. And if the church itself has narrowed its interest to religion only, then there is no reason to have a deep respect for its views in other areas of life. Were the church to make pronouncements in those areas (many of which include aspects of family life), the question will arise: Is the church knowledgable?

17. When compartmentalizing occurs, people will have questions and doubts about the church's moral authority.

The church controls and regulates much less today than it once did. Heaven and Hell have much less force as sanctions for moderns, so churches mute that message. While we hope that the lives and conduct of Christian families flow from an appreciation of the Gospel, among those who may not have reached that level of sanctification, conformity with the church's message may arise less from considerations of the afterlife, and more from a perceived need for support, from rewarding friendships with church members, from the promise of positions of leadership and, negatively, from fear of gossip, disapproval of peers, and a reluctance to cut valued ties. Secularism has simply reduced the moral authority of the church. (Hargrove 38)

18. When compartmentalizing occurs, people will have questions and doubts about the church's guidance.

A family member's search for church help in some crises may be discouraged or frustrated by perceptions of church values and doctrine. Will a woman with the doubts and questions described

just above turn to a pastor for help if she is divorced? sexually unhappy? pregnant and single? a career-committed wife? Can a pastor accept as legitimate any problems arising from a woman's push for self-fulfillment? What about other family members who may be living out a critique of the established social order -- the son who wears an earring, or long hair, or short hair (whichever is the latest sign of "rebellion"), or anyone interested in civil disobedience? Will needy family members stay away from church help because they perceive they will be judged before they are supported, or even before they are understood?

19. When compartmentalizing occurs, people will have questions and doubts about the church's love and support.

If the church is perceived as competing with the secular world for the attentions of its members, doubts may arise about its motives as it does so. Religion has always exercised a degree (smaller today than before) of social control, even while it also has offered social support. People do in fact look to the church for both. But those who look to the church for needed support may fear that the church's primary motive in dealing with them is to extend its control, to reinforce its own preferences regarding sex roles, rights, duties, and cultural boundaries (establishing who is to be allowed in and who kept out). With some sects, in fact, the very closeness and love shown those in need provides the mechanism for the exclusionary functions inherent in social control. For those with such perceptions, the question will present itself: Is the church loving? (D'Antonio and Aldous 13)

20. When compartmentalizing occurs, people may change their church habits.

Under such influences, little wonder that families frequently decline to follow habits of church attendance, family and personal devotions, use and support of church functions, fellowship, and activities that tradition has always deemed desirable. Again, the facts on such activities among our people have not been gathered, but one has a distinct impression that conditions are not nearly as bad as they might be considering the extent of secular influences -- in this the power of God's Spirit is evidenced. In fact, throughout our society, secular though it be, there seems to remain a considerable religious commitment. ("Are American")

21. The church/family discomfort may work both ways, potentially involving the church in situations that challenge its traditional values and confession.

Could clergy's work with families involve them too much in matters better handled by secular authorities? Will cooperation with others who have needed expertise involve them in questionable fellowship relations? Could a woman teacher,



though well qualified, counsel someone else's husband, or an unmarried man? (Aldous 68)

22. It remains puzzling how to deal appropriately with these secular pressures on families.

Little is achieved by playing "Ain't it Awful." Is family life really harder today, or would an historical study reveal that problems were perhaps different but just as thorny in the days of "Christendom"? Our task here: to determine what problems Christian families face today and how we can help solve them?

23. We should recognize that there have been and remain many differing family models.

Discussions of family problems, as this one, often are about only white middle class families. Other kinds -- Black families, Hispanic families, working class families, poor families -- face different problems. (Laslett) Far less should we expect the Victorian nuclear family models we often consider "traditional" to work in World Mission fields. An examination of world cultures, indeed of Scripture itself, reveals any number of differing family models. (Netting, Herlihy)

24. We need to appraise and apply values thoughtfully.

We spoke above about avoiding blanket condemnations of secular values, but rather considering them carefully and eclectically. More specifically, we can find helpful models of assistance for families which have emerged from secular institutions, like Head Start and Birthright, that deserve our respectful consideration if we design church-based programs with similar aims.

Perhaps we can design church programs not just to provide havens from secular values, but to take advantage of those aspects of secular values on which we can build positively. For example, perhaps the increased autonomy of secularism will permit the ethic of love to replace some traditional marital obligations undergirded by external social controls. The church could provide institutional support for the growth of this love ethic (aiming to make it as strong in our culture as the old "work ethic"), guiding and modeling commitment and involvement in helping others in all kinds of needs.

25. We must beware of being used.

In Sweden during the 1890's, as the old culture disintegrated, the upper classes sought the solution in reforming the peasants, turning their unrest inward toward the task of developing specific family structures, and thereby converting what should have been an economic problem into a moral one. Their aim: to get every peasant family to conform to the Victorian nuclear family ideal. Even in children's books from those days, all the animals in zoological illustrations were arranged in Victorian

nuclear family groups. Family issues can carry heavy political weight. (Lofgren)

In today's America, among denominations now considered "mainstream", religion has placed its common values at the service of the political and social institutions of the nation. The church, stung by its loss of influence in a secular society, now is looking for more functions to perform, and it lays its eye on politics. X The "decline of the American family" becomes a slogan in the church's struggle to reestablish some larger degree of influence among the American people. (Wilson 121)

If idealizing the traditional family is "sentimentalizing" only, then doing so is a barrier to seeing real problems, and we must carefully ask if restoring this family model is not little more than a political goal of those who do not want to face the REAL, and tough to solve, problems that families face today. (D'Antonio and Aldous 10)

The American people may be developing immunity to politicians and religionists, including our country's President, espousing as a political gambit "family values" they have not themselves lived by. As we develop our approach to troubled families, we ought to be careful that we are not perceived as being in such company.

26. We should design our program to be one that solves problems and provides support.

What are the GOSPEL needs of our families?

And what forms will our help take? Trained individual counsellors? Team ministries including men and women, pastors, teachers and laypeople? Lay support groups enabling families to minister to themselves? Congregational activities providing caring through face-to-face affectionate contacts? -- or might it even be through non-church activities, in which Christians get away from congregational programs and entangle with the world (because God is there), working incognito, so it is clear to us, at least, that the accomplishments are not ours but God's?

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