

Unnatural ties

Theological reflections on non-procreation based families

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A paper for the conference *Theology of Adoption: Critical Reflections from Practical Theology and Christian ethics*, University of Aberdeen, 24th-26th May 2010

To speak of adoption is to speak of family. But it is to speak of family in an unconventional, disturbing, and deconstructive manner. The adoption of a child into a family not only changes the child from being a person without a family to being a person with a family – or from being with one family to being with a different family – but it also changes the family from being a natural one to being an unnatural one. I think this observation is important, because if in our view adoption does not change the family but only the child, then the child remains the excluded, mercifully accepted but always reminded of its difference. This is where our critical theological reflection on the family is called for.

WHERE I COME FROM

But let me start by sharing where I come from. I grew up in a maybe somewhat unconventional family when it comes to these matters. My parents raised five children biologically their own but that did not limit how they lived their idea of family. When we lived in Suriname, South America, a new sister joined our family, her single mother unable to care for her children. She has always remained part of our family. Back in the Netherlands, several other children from troubled situations lived with us for shorter periods of time, and a young woman from Suriname stayed with us for a year or two to study. Another young woman, whom my mother met when she worked at a Surinamese boarding school, chose to adopt my parents as her own, and she counts as family in every sense but legal. This inclusive family style is still in function, even when all the children live their own lives. Partners were welcomed and counted as own children, even ex-partners of the children somehow remain part of the family.

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I started my own family from a teenage relationship, legally accepting fatherhood of my eldest son who had been born out of wedlock. During a sixteen-year marriage we had five more sons, one of whom died at seven weeks. Since almost eight years I live in a gay relationship. Our youngest son lives with my husband and me, one other son lives with his mother, her husband and their daughter. The rest of the children live independently. We all meet regularly and share parts of our mutual lives. In fact, when my ex-wife and her husband had their daughter, I was confused about how I had to take care of a baby girl in the weekends the children would stay with me. And back to today, the hotel that we run is separated from our living room by a sliding door only. It all shows how the boundaries of my family have never been very clear to me.

I don't think my story is exceptional. There are many reconstituted families, built from two or more previous nuclear families. There are many families in which children are adopted without being biologically related. And there are same sex couplings that are accepted in an increasing number of countries (though not Malawi as we heard last week). These different shapes of family challenge the taken for granted meanings of the family as a lifelong living together of one man and one woman with their offspring. Although obviously this is a very common and in some sense prototypical shape of family – at least in the West –, it is historically and culturally not the only one and theologically one that needs to be critiqued as much as it merits to be affirmed.

THEOLOGY'S PREFERENCE

If we embark on such a theological reflection, however, we first have to acknowledge that theology's natural response has been one of full endorsement of traditional families based on biological and more specific procreative connections. I think this can be shown for how the topic 'family' is treated in theological literature, but I am even more convinced that it is the case in the everyday performance of theology in liturgy and church life.

It is not too much to say that the church embodies and teaches, implicitly and explicitly, a preference for the procreation-based family. I am aware of the theological role of celibacy in Roman Catholicism, which symbolizes the otherness or the eschatological – or in a darker interpretation the negative stance toward the flesh and the power of the church over its employees – but it was never the standard for all. Procreation was and is. At the occasion of his recent visit to Fatima, Portugal, pope Benedict XVI gave clear evidence of this when he stated that abortion and gay marriage are 'the most important threats of our time'. Not terrorism, not collapsing economies, not the climate crisis, but two contemporary sexual phenomena that do not serve the sacred aim of procreation. His is not an isolated opinion. The church has for long taught how the family is constituted of a man and a woman, leaving their parents behind to become a new unity that is bound to bear fruit in the sense of having children. Infertile families were and often still are considered a painful and sometimes problematic

exception. In older cultures, it even counted as dramatic and shameful, a reason to end the marriage. Not bearing children was tantamount to not being a good man or a good woman.

This procreative family-based religion and culture is still at the forefront of church praxis. The most important life events celebrated in church are weddings and births or baptisms, and for many these are the sole occasions to attend. If mention is made of singles, childless families, or homosexuals, it is often in the context of pastoral care, sorrow, and petitionary prayer. Apparently these are people in need, people missing out on the normal life that is the procreation based family. The whole paradigm of living in relation with others is this standard type of family. This is not only true for contemporary monogamous nuclear families, but also for polygamous families and multi-generation families.

In this context, adoption can be seen and experienced as mutual mercy or even grace, restoring a person from a position outside to one inside the holy state of the procreative family. In this act of mercy, the adoptee receives parents and becomes their child, the adults receive a child and become parents. This is of course especially true if they have no prior children biologically their own, but in some sense it is true for all cases. The point is that in this perspective adoption based family ties are always the second best option, mimicking the real family ties of procreation.

A similar process occurs around same sex couples. One of the often voiced oppositions is the fact that these relations are infertile by definition and thereby do not merit the label marriage or family. Some go further and argue from anatomy that two males or two females cannot have 'normal', that is procreative sexual intercourse, and that thereby their relation is unnatural, or against nature. In fact, the term sodomy was not only used for homosexuality, but for every form of sexuality that was not procreatively functional, including oral sex between a man and a woman. And here again, sometimes gay marriage is accepted as a second best, mimicking option.

Clearly I am not arguing against the statistical normalcy of procreation based family ties. Most people are born into the family where they are also raised and most people start families of their own in which children are born. There is not so much wrong with that. Nor am I suggesting that any type of family is intrinsically more healthy than the other. I am pointing to the problem that statistical normalcy is easily transposed into existential, religious, and/or moral normalcy, marginalizing those who happen to be different. Their existence is accepted mercifully, as the exception to the rule, but not in its own right, let alone as a challenge to the unreflected bias of the majority position. It is that challenge that I want to take seriously in reflecting theologically on non-procreative family ties. I immediately admit I will only do so in a fragmentary way, raising questions rather than offering answers, challenging rather than proving anything.

FRAGMENT 1: 'AGAINST NATURE'

The first fragment I want to consider is the term 'against nature' as used by Paul in his letter to the Romans. Its first appearance is in 1:26, where Paul describes how same sex activities are a token of a life of rebellion against God. Women turned to a life 'against nature' and men 'gave up the natural use (sic!) of the woman' for inappropriate behavior with one another. These words are often used to prove that homosexuality is wrong and – by implication – that same sex couples cannot be granted the same rights as 'real marriages'. What is more, adoption by same sex couples is disputed because opponents fear that the child will suffer bad influences and have a negative example in her or his same sex caretakers, because they need both male and female role models. That is, children need examples of the normal family. Now the interesting thing with 'against nature' in Romans is that the term is also used in 11:24. It is again a chapter about rejection and acceptance, but here the message is that God saves humans by accepting them against nature. Here 'against nature' is not a signal of sin or damnation, but of salvation.

I take these two instances of 'against nature' as challenging our common understanding. Or more: as clear warnings that natural theology can be dangerous. Natural theology is not just a form of theological reflection that takes human experience and reasoning as its starting point, over against revelational theology that builds on transcendent insights or scripture. Natural theology is a dangerous enterprise when the human experience and reasoning that count are the experience and reasoning of the dominant group. The problem of natural theology is not human subjectivity. It is power that marginalizes others and resists external critique. Karl Barths rejection of natural theology should be understood against the background of the rise of Nazism in which God was claimed to be on the side of the powers that be. His revelational theology has prophetic qualities that are easily overshadowed by his excessive systematization that again disregards the subjectivity of the marginalized. The Barmen Declaration and the Kairos document are examples of the same prophetic spirit against natural theology of the powerful.

Although Paul uses the words 'against nature' in two different contexts and lines of reasoning, I would learn from his examples that we have to reflect critically on self-evident views of family and marriage. The natural division lines between Jews and non-Jews are not decisive when it comes to salvation. Using a botanical metaphor that parallels the language of adoption, Paul shows how gentiles, branches of wild olive trees, will be taken and grafted in among the cultivated branches, the Jews. Those who were not children of God will be adopted to be just that. There are many examples in the Old and New Testament that use that precise image of adoption to understand how we have become part of the kingdom or of the household of God. The central image of human life *coram Deo* is an image of adoption. We are not natural children of God. And those who are natural children of God cannot take that for granted (Romans 9:6-7). Unnatural family ties are the hallmark of the kingdom of heaven.

If we explore this a little bit further, we come across scores of texts decentralizing the procreation based family and instead focusing on unnatural ties. One of the words of the crucified Jesus binds his mother and his beloved disciple into a new adopted relation (John 19:26-27). Jesus regularly disregards natural family ties in favor of unnatural ones, like when he says that his followers are his real brothers and sisters (Mark 3:33-35), that we should give up our natural family (Matthew 19:29), that there will be no marriage in heaven (Mark 12:25), and so on. But most significantly, the story of Jesus himself is not one of procreation. However we understand his virgin birth, the story emphasizes that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, and the book of the generation of Jesus Christ in Matthew 1 leaves open the name of his begetter. In turn, Jesus did not start a family of his own, except for what some obscure legends recount. His life ran against the social expectations of his time and left him living with unnatural ties.

This perspective can easily be connected with the discussion about homosexual relations – the other 'against nature'. A major part of the religious discourse rejecting homosexuality qualifies as natural theology in the sense that it seeks to legitimize the 'natural' state of affairs, that is the cultural default position that benefits the dominant groups and marginalizes others. Clearly biblical texts are used to support that position, but these texts are isolated from their cultural context and applied directly without much sensitivity for the historical and hermeneutical issues. A more critical reading might suggest that Paul rhetorically uses cultural customs and views of his days to prove his point: unnatural salvation. The term 'nature' often actually means 'culture', like when Paul says that nature teaches us that men should not wear long hair (1 Corinthians 11:14). Paul is a master in playing with his audience to convince them of his unprecedented message, using their prejudices and consensual opinions without necessarily sharing them. It is not too far-fetched, I think, to say that the gospel is queer, turning the tables topsy-turvy, and critiquing every natural ideology in order to make us glimpse the utterly different, the holy. I am not claiming here that this should lead automatically to religious approval of homosexuality. I am making another point here: the unnatural ties of same sex families put into question the self-evident natural order of procreation-based families in the same way that adoption does. Adoption, we might say, is a queer thing, just like the gospel itself. It is against nature.

FRAGMENT 2: CREATION

Perhaps the second fragment I want to reflect on will add some perspective to this. The book of Genesis speaks to the creation of the world and of humans. But it does so in two different ways. In one account of creation, the focus is on the *imago Dei*. Humans are created after the image and likeness of God. Certainly there is a library of theological interpretations of that term that I will not survey here (or probably anywhere else, leave that to systematic theologians). But however interpreted, it at least seeks to define humanity closely linked to God. To understand the essence of humanity, we have to look at God or at our relation

with the holy. The second account of creation focuses on the earthly, animal-like nature of our existence. Man was created from dust on the ground and breath in his nostrils and woman was created from a rib of his body. Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, the relation between man and woman is essentially physical and earthly.

This dual account of creation places humans between the gods and the animals, between heaven and earth. We cannot reduce humanity to either, which is precisely where taboos are set in function. Taboo is on the one hand the realm of the holy, of heaven, and on the other the realm of the animal-like, of earth. We cannot walk on holy ground, we cannot speak to God directly, we cannot be like the angels, because we are bound to our earthly existence. But on the other hand, we cannot live out our every impulse, follow instincts, or engage too openly with our bodily functions (especially when it comes to sex or bowel movements), because we are called for a heavenly purpose.

Humanity is an instable identity, warding off the much clearer extremes of angels and animals. They never question who they are. They just are. The dual account of human creation instead points to an instable identity that constantly challenges and critiques us. Any fixed understanding of humanity or of the natural order of our existence, should therefore be suspicious to us. The key to our troubles and to our joys is the dynamic dialectics of being not both animal and angel, but neither. Ideological critique serves to call us from moving to the extremes and helps to keep open our identity as humans, difficult as that may be.

What does all this mean for our reflections on the unnatural ties of adoption and other non-procreation based family connections? I think it challenges us to maintain the dialectics between the two creation narratives. Procreation based, natural family ties belong to the realm of our animal-like creational existence. It is in that sense the natural order, not only in its commonality, but especially in that it binds us to earthly relations. Adoptive, unnatural family ties belong to the realm of the heavenly, the vocation to act and be like God. This does not necessarily imply that it is better. For humans the celestial dimension is equally important as the terrestrial, because we are in between. It is therefore not a value judgment when I interpret the procreative as earthly or natural and the non-procreative as heavenly or unnatural. It is the dialectics between the two that marks our human existence.

EVALUATION: NATURAL AND UNNATURAL TIES

I have argued that adoption changes the family just as much as it changes the child. I have advocated a dialectical approach to the natural and the unnatural, hoping that that will help us move beyond a view of adoption as changing, adapting, normalizing the child. Let me conclude by pushing it one step further. If we reflect theologically on the non-procreation based family, we first have to affirm the natural, the earthly, the physical. Obviously that includes procreation. Our human existence commences on being born, or if you want on the occasion

of the merger of male and female genetic material. Being born and becoming part of humankind means sharing this physical existence. It also creates a very specific connection with the man and the woman whose bodies created ours. To overlook the centrality of that connection is to develop an illusionary theology that negates our fundamental physicality.

And yet, even if this is a necessary condition for our existence, it is not a sufficient one, especially when we talk about becoming part of a family. Even when one is born into a procreation-based family, it is not until the parents receive, accept, adopt that is, the child that a family comes into being. Acceptance, care, love, responsibility: terms like these define the family ties. But they are not defined by procreation, they are part of the process of adopting the child. If parents do not build that kind of relations, there is no family. In that sense, we all have to adopt our children, whether or not they are biologically our own. The defining element of family is not procreation, it is adoption.

And so we have come full circle in critically reflecting on the natural and unnatural ties. Theology's preference as lived out by the church may traditionally have been with the natural order, in the end it should probably be with the unnatural. A critical theological examination challenges our preference for the natural and shows that procreation is just not good enough. This very specifically implies that adopted children are not the exception. They are prototypical for human family life. To speak of adoption is to speak of family, I said at the beginning. But that is not because family life is constitutive for adoption. It is the other way around. Adoption is constitutive for the family.

Yes, the non-procreation based family may indeed symbolize mercy and grace, but not because solitary individuals are restored into the normal situation of family life by adoption. Non-procreation based families are a symbol of grace because they show us that life depends on undeserved acceptance and love, not on any quality in and of ourselves. They are a symbol of grace, of life, because they remind us that it is not our natural origins that count, but our relational future. They are a symbol of grace because they embody that we are not determined by the limitations of natural life, but called into the unnatural freedom of loving care.