

Family Values and The Religious Vision

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Over the course of the past few weeks, the country has been saturated with talk about something called "the traditional family" and "family values." It is a truism that the political process, as it has developed in this country, is not a particularly helpful instrument for careful diagnosis and understanding of the challenges, the dangers, the opportunities which confront us as a people. The political process as it has developed in this country is much more adept at "viewing with alarm," or "pointing with pride," or "embracing the vision" than at helping us understand the situation in which we find ourselves and the alternatives which lie before us. But this issue of family values and the traditional family is even murkier than most. For the life of me, I cannot quite understand what relationship there is between the economic and political life of the nation, and how people choose to organize their most private relationships.

While attempting to understand this whole discussion, I found myself reflecting on my own experience of family. Certainly, I was raised in a traditional family, one sloshing over with family values; at least, I always thought it was a traditional family. True, my father was married four times; my half brother was raised by his maternal grandparents and I do not remember meeting him until we were both grown; my sisters were reared by my aunt Viola and I barely knew them; I grew up in the household of my aunt Martha; my step brother was more like an uncle to me; my cousin was very much like a brother but I always considered it a very traditional family. And most of my friends lived in what I thought of as traditional families, too. For example, the family who lived in the apartment next to us consisted of a mother, a father, and three children. Then, of course, the father was sent overseas to fight in the war, and the mother had to take full responsibility for care of the children and the household on her own. A little over a year after her husband had gone to fight the enemy, she suddenly was pregnant, and from that point on, her traditional family included four children. Or, there was my school friend who was raised by his grandmother; or the one raised by his mother. They never talked about their fathers, but their families seemed quite ordinary. And of course, there were those in the neighborhood whose fathers were in jail and whose mothers worked to feed the families. And there were those who were married but had no children, and didn't act as if they missed the little tykes. They all had troubles and difficulties, but they all seemed like normal, traditional families to me.

To be sure, none of these were the kinds of families we were taught about in school. In the school books, the families were all the same: They consisted of one father who went to work every day; a mother who was at home all day; a sister

and a brother who threw the ball back and forth and never fought, and a dog and a cat who loved each other dearly. They all lived in little white houses, on neat little streets, with fenced yards and flowers and trees and shrubs. And there was never a problem with money, or a quarrel with the neighbors, and policemen existed primarily to help children find their way home, and cross the streets safely, while firemen spent most of their time getting Fluffy out of the trees. Those were the families we were taught about in the public schools, and I suspect that those are the families who provide the definition of "the traditional family" in the current discussion, and whose values we are challenged to embrace. The problem is that most of us did not grow up in those kinds of families, because those kinds of families, if they existed at all, never represented the experience of more than a tiny fraction of the human race.

Most of us grew up in families which struggled with problems, which sought to accommodate divergent and often competing needs and ambitions, families which were often stressed and confused and sometimes painful and abusive. What about the values taught in those families? Well, some of the kids I knew in the neighborhood were bullies and liars and thieves; some were kind and helpful and respectful; some grew up and went to work in factories; some grew up and went into the military; some became professional people; some became alcoholics or prostitutes; some went to jail. But there didn't seem to be any clear correlation between their destinies and the kind of families out of which they came or the kind of values which those families incarnated. Indeed, sometimes the offspring of one family ran the gamut of possibilities.

From my own experience, it is difficult to understand all this talk about family values and the traditional family. So, it occurred to me that perhaps my own experience of little more than half a century is too narrow, too much influenced by the shadow of the Great Depression and the reality of the Second World War. Perhaps I should examine a broader history of the American family. In the process I discovered some very interesting things. To begin with, the notion that the family should be supported by the labor of the father, and that the mother should confine her efforts to caring for the children and the household is a relatively recent idea, and one which never was realistic for all our citizens. In her book, *THE FEMINIZATION OF AMERICAN CULTURE*, Ann Douglas reminds us that in the early years of this country, women and men worked together--on the farm, in the shop, at the loom--to support themselves and their families. Children, at a very young age, were apprenticed out, or put to work on the farm, or hired out to factories and mines to help earn a living. The traditional family found survival to be a full time occupation, requiring the effort and labor of virtually all its members. It was only late in the last century that we began to develop the notion that the public realm was an inappropriate place for women, and even then, that notion did not apply to poor women.

I discovered, too, that if you look at old records--such as family Bibles--and compare dates of marriages with the dates of the births of first children, that there are an incredible number of premature births. Our great grandparents and their

parents were not immune to the temptations of the flesh; for a variety of reasons--not the least being economic--they chose to deal with children conceived out of wedlock in a different manner than our generation, but they were not very different from us in their behavior. Similarly, statistics suggest that despite the large number of divorces which occur in contemporary society, on the average, the couple married today will spend more of their lives together as a married couple than did the average couple of a century ago. And the reason is quite clear. Well into this century, women died at a much younger age--from the results of childbirth and over work and disease and abuse--than today. Thus, my father buried three of his four wives. My guess would be that families of a century ago were not very different from families in contemporary society--some were strong and effective; some were weak or even destructive; some were successful in meeting the needs of the members and others were not; some produced healthy, competent children, some did not. Nor, I would guess, were the values which informed those families much different from the values which are reflected in contemporary families. Indeed, my guess would be that family values have not changed much over the millennia of human history. The Biblical stories of Joseph and his brothers, of Cain and Abel, of Abraham, the abusive father of Isaac, suggest that the challenges of living together in family are not much different today than they ever were.

If that be the case, then what is it all about, this uproar over traditional family values? It has become clear to me after watching the Republican National Convention, and listening to the discussion since that this national conversation is not solely a political device, designed to produce a victory at the polls. Rather, the concern about the American family and about what seems to some to be an erosion of traditional values is rooted in a deeply held conviction about the nature of human existence and the shape of the moral order. In short, the debate over family values is not about the family so much as it is about a religious vision. Pat Robertson was right, when he suggested at the Republican Convention that there is a profound religious struggle going on in this land and the concern about family values is only one reflection of that struggle.

James Davison Hunter has written a book entitled *CULTURE WARS*, in which he explores some the aspects of that struggle. Hunter suggests that the great division within the American nation at the moment is between those who believe that morality consists in conforming behavior to an absolute code of ethics which derives from the God of the universe and which is written into the very constitution of the cosmos, and those who believe that morality consists in seeking to build a personal integrity and in attempting to live that integrity while dealing with the inevitable challenges which arise from conflicting values and uncertain imperatives.

In her contribution to a book entitled *MAPPING THE MORAL DOMAIN*, Carol Gilligan defines the same chasm when she talks about the distinction between rigid morality rooted in unchanging concepts of rights and justice and the more fluid morality of relationship and attachment. The one, she argues, is embedded in

traditional, objective teachings and rules and demands unswerving obedience, while the other seeks to find a subjective moral stance which grows out of a deep concern for sustaining relationships and seeks to understand the impact of behavior on the individual and the world. To say this yet another way, one view of morality asks what must I do, what do the rules require of me. The other view of morality asks who do I want to be and what must I do, how must I respond in order to be the person I want to be.

In theory, there is nothing wrong with these two different understandings of morality existing within the same society. To some extent they have co-existed within the human community for millennia. But in times of stress and confusion, in times of great change--be that change apparent or real--tolerance of fundamental differences becomes profoundly difficult. That is particularly true if your faith, your religious vision is rooted in a conviction that there is one God, who created the earth and all its creatures, and established the unchanging rules by which life is to be lived. If that is your faith, it is hard not to believe that the world's troubles are the result of too many people failing to live according to the rules. And it is only a short step from that conviction to the belief that the solution to the world's problems is to force people to live according to the rules. Such a conviction inevitably leads to conflict with people who believe that true morality lies in seeking out the ethical imperatives which are presented by every situation, and attempting to live with integrity in a world in which values are real and personal, but rules are arbitrary, time-bound, elusive and always in need of re-examination.

It is these exceedingly different visions which are in conflict in the debates over the role of women in our society, over the matter of abortion, over gay rights, and single parenting, and cultural diversity and sex education for our children, and prayer in the public schools and a host of similar issues. Thus, for example, the debate over abortion is not a struggle between those who believe that abortion is a crime and those who believe that abortion is a social good. Rather it is a conflict between those who believe that the rules are clear, that abortion is wrong and the only question is will you obey the rule or won't you, and those who believe that moral behavior requires that an individual confront a range of possibilities and choose that which is right, or at least the lesser evil. You see, I don't know many people who are pro-abortion. Even those of us who, while it was still illegal, arranged for women to obtain safe abortions were--for the most part--not pro-abortion. Rather, we were convinced that given a range of bad options, abortion was not always the worst choice and that to live morally is to confront the alternatives, to consider all those who are affected by one's actions, and then, in fear and trembling, make the choice. And that is still the issue: a struggle between a religion of rules and a religion of choices.

Those who need rigid rules by which to live are threatened whenever they see people living in defiance of those rules. Thus, the advocates of traditional and family values are not offended by the fact that gay men and women exist. But they are profoundly offended when gay women and men live openly among us

and when the institutions of our society inch toward recognizing the legitimacy of gay relationships. The rules, you see, demand that people not be gay, and if society accepts gay women and men, it seems to be suggesting that the rules are not as ultimate as they claim to be.

The advocates of traditional and family values are not offended by the existence of atheists and agnostics and humanists, but they are offended when society seems to place those faith-choices on a par with the religion of the rules. The rules say you shall believe in God. Open challenge of that requirement and the willingness of government to tolerate that open challenge seems to suggest that the rules may not be for everyone and for all time.

The advocates of traditional and family values are not offended by the fact that there are single parents attempting to raise their children or that there are women who work outside the home either by choice or necessity, but when society seems to suggest that these choices are as legitimate as staying home, caring for the babies and obeying the husband, they are deeply offended. The rules say that a woman's job is caring for her husband and her children, in that order, and obeying her husband and her God in that order, and to suggest that there may be other legitimate ways to organize the family seems to suggest that maybe the rules are just a little arbitrary.

The advocates of traditional family values are not offended by the fact that young people tend to experiment with sexuality. After all, most of them and most of their parents and most of their parents' parents experimented with sexuality when they were young. But they are profoundly offended when society, out of a concern for the safety of their children, seems about to respond to youthful sexuality by providing information which is potentially life-saving rather than by an appeal to shame. The rules say that sexual behavior outside carefully defined limits is wrong and to suggest anything else is to call into question the eternal validity of the rules.

Please do not misunderstand me. I do not want to suggest by any of this that there are not serious and profound problems in our society. The fact is that the depth of feeling with which so many people are advocating a return to traditional family values is a measure of the seriousness of the problems we confront. The fact is that more and more of our children, particularly our poorest children are giving birth to children--a situation which, in our social context, condemns both generations to stunted lives of poverty and futility. The fact is that in the third world which is our inner cities, we are creating a culture of crime, violence and despair which has terrifying implications for our future. The fact is that too many people are willing to walk away from their responsibilities, including social responsibilities. The fact is that too often people are unable to find any transcendent meaning in their lives or the world. The fact is that too many people are victims of abuse--from parents, from spouses, from social agencies--and they tend to pass on that abuse to others. The fact is that too many of us live in fear, even out here in our story-book suburbs which look more like the descriptions of

family life we read in elementary school than any thing the human race has ever known.

The question is not do we have problems. The question is can we resolve those problems by imposing a rigid morality of external rules enforced by all the direct and indirect power of the state? And I believe that the answer is no. To begin with, that world to which the advocates of traditional family values would have us return, has never really existed, and therefore it is not a reality to which we can return. There is nothing traditional about the prescription they are offering for our social ills. More than this, as our Universalist ancestors recognized a long time ago while some people can be frightened into an external appearance of rectitude, they cannot be frightened into a moral life. If we want changes in our society--changes which are lasting and viable--we need to be asking ourselves some fundamental questions. Among them are these: What is it that stands in the way or inhibits the development of moral and ethical values among our people? How are we to understand and define, recognize and honor moral behavior in a society which is increasingly and clearly defined by diversity? How can we shift the focus from obedience to choice, from authority to integrity, from rules to relationship.

And there, of course, I have betrayed my bias. I am a partisan in this debate. I believe that morality is not a matter of living by the rules. Morality is a willingness to live outside the palisade of rules we erect in order to protect ourselves from having to choose. Morality is the willingness to ask not what are the requirements, but who do I want to be in this world, and what behavior in this situation is consistent with the person I want to be. One may always choose to act in a given way because it is expected, or because the law demands it, or because that's the way it has always been done. And that may not be a bad way to live. But we ought not confuse that with morality. Morality begins with the question, "Who am I?" Morality develops out of the answer to the question, "Who do I want to be, and what must I do, at this moment of choice, to be the person I want to be." Obeying the rules is a safer way to live. For most of the time it will work out well, and when it doesn't, there is always someone else to blame--the rule maker. But that is not the path to a moral or an ethical life. A moral life is a life of choices--choices made when all the evidence is not in, and the outcome is not clear, and the consequences are stubbornly uncertain. A moral life is a life of personal responsibility for who we are and how we live in the world. We will not all make the same choices. And sometimes we will be right and sometimes we will be wrong. But in the end, we will learn from our own experience and from each other what it means to be human in a world in which the sacred is to be found not in some formulation of absolute and unchanging rules of conduct, but in the endless process of discovering in a lifetime of choosing who we are and what we value.

The political debate will go on, and probably will not help us very much as we seek to resolve the dilemmas we confront. But embedded in the noise and the confusion of the current debate is a profound issue which will cause us social

discomfort for some time to come. What does it mean to live a moral and ethical life in a world in which the rules have become contingent, and we must build our lives out of the choices we make?