

New families, old values

The standard model of a family – husband, wife, children – is no longer the norm, and the whole notion is in flux. Should the Churches stick to upholding the traditional version as the bedrock of society? Here, participants in the latest of a series of debates analyse the arguments

Christianity has always contained two different views of the family. One affirms the biological family. The other believes that the true family is bound by ties of love – brothers and sisters of a heavenly Father. Protestantism elevated the first view, and the Catholic Church followed suit in the modern period. The clearest indication of the latter shift is the revived debate about ending clerical celibacy and allowing Fathers to become fathers.

The survey that we commissioned for the latest Westminster Faith Debate on “What’s a Traditional Family and Do We Need It?” finds that when questioned, most people in Britain today, Christians included, support a biological view of the family. Almost everyone agrees that a married couple with children is a family, but only half of the population think that an unmarried

couple without children is a family.

But our ideas about the family differ widely from how we actually live. The 2011 census revealed that only 34 per cent of us live in a family consisting of a married couple and children, and only 44 per cent of all households contain a married couple at all. This is not just a result of divorce. Increasing numbers are choosing never to get married or have children, and many people now cohabit, live alone, or in a “blended family”. In practice, if not in our imaginations, we have shifted towards a “spiritual” view of a family as those who love and care for one another.

This has become a serious issue for church leaders who still speak out in favour of the “traditional” biological model of family. Churches purport to welcome everyone, even if they don’t necessarily approve of their lifestyle. But this is not how the message is received. When we asked if the Churches

are welcoming to divorced people, whether remarried or not, only 45 per cent think they are, and a mere 21 per cent believe they are welcoming to gay, lesbian and bisexual people. Among 18-24-year-olds, those proportions fall to 37 per cent and 17 per cent. The fact that so many people think the Churches would not welcome them is almost certainly contributing to decline.

■ The survey was carried out by YouGov in January 2013. Linda Woodhead is professor of the sociology of religion at Lancaster University. The Westminster Faith Debates are organised by Linda Woodhead and the Rt Hon Charles Clarke, and supported by Lancaster University, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. Videos and podcasts can be viewed at www.religionandsociety.org.uk



EARLIER THIS month, the Office for National Statistics traced the developing characteristics of families in Great Britain, writes Andrew Goddard.

Its report reveals major changes in family patterns, although many occurred in the final decades of last century and have since stabilised. Among its findings was the growth in one-parent families tripling from 8 per cent in 1971 to 22 per cent in 2011, with the proportion of never-married women rising from 18 per cent in 1979 to 43 per cent in 2011. A decline in marriage has been matched by a rise in cohabitation. Whereas in 1979, only 11 per cent of women aged 18 to 49 were cohabiting, in 2011 just over a third were cohabiting. One consequence has been the unprecedented rise in the number of children born outside marriage. For over 350 years between 1600 and the 1960s this fluctuated between about 1 per cent and 6 per cent, reaching double figures by the 1970s. Since then, births outside of marriage have risen to stand now at 47 per cent of all live births.

Whatever we make of it, it cannot be disputed that Britain – like many other Western nations – has witnessed a social revolution in family structure. In this context the Church remains a major defender of what we often call “the traditional family” where children are brought up by their biological parents who committed themselves to each other in marriage as the relational base on which to start a family. This support for the family is perhaps a surprise given

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Jesus’ teaching. He shocked his contemporaries with his radical relativisation of family ties faced with God’s Kingdom. Told that his mother and brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him, Jesus replied: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Then, pointing to his disciples, he said: “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” Even more shocking was his list of qualifications for being a disciple: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple.”

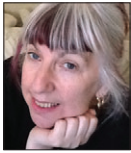
The Early Church followed Jesus’ redefinition of familial relationships, viewing the Church as a new family where fellow believers were brothers. The first Christians were then not simply “pro-family” in the way we often understand that phrase and their familial pattern of church life challenges the lack of community in the contemporary Church.

Nevertheless, alongside this critique and the honouring of celibacy, the Early Church also supported marriage and family life. Over the centuries it has witnessed to these as crucial for the common good of a healthy society. It has done so partly because of Jesus’ teaching. He pointed to God’s purposes in Creation revealing how as individuals and society we best flourish.

In a context where divorce had become – for men – easy, Jesus described Moses’ permission of divorce as a necessary evil, a concession due to “hardness of heart”. What was best was the union described in Genesis: “God ‘made them male and female.’ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” Later the Apostle Paul saw the exclusive, faithful love of marriage as a sign in human life pointing to God’s loving commitment to us.

One of the most important questions to be asked is what forms of family provide the best environment for children’s healthy development. Without condemning people, we need to ask if recent social changes have generally been beneficial or harmful. Should it concern us that, on current projections, a child born today has only a 50-50 chance of living with both its parents when 15? And doesn’t our experience of fragmenting families support biblical revelation and Christian tradition and suggest we would benefit by encouraging families centred on a man and a woman living – even if at times with difficulty – on the basis of public promises of exclusive love for each other “till death us do part”?

■ Fr Andrew Goddard is associate director of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, Cambridge.



The “traditional family” conjures up a husband and wife living together with their children, and evokes stability and continuity, comfort and togetherness, obligations and reciprocity, writes *Rosalind Edwards*.

Statistics tell us it is no longer the family that many of us live with. Over the past half century, marriage rates have declined, and when people do get married they are older than previously. There has been a strong rise in the proportion of children born outside marriage. Divorce rates have risen, then stabilised as marriage rates have declined. The proportion of families headed by lone mothers steadily grows, step-families are common, and more mothers of dependent children are in paid employment.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens maintains that the demise of the traditional family means that people can escape from unequal relationships and construct families in whatever form best suits them. This is a liberation. Others, such as the Centre for Social Justice think

‘Family forms continually change, but much of what people want from family remains the same. We still value family life’

tank, believe that people are pursuing their own selfish ends and leaving behind them broken relationships and damaged children.

Both “for good” and “for ill” perspectives confuse changing form with changing meaning. What I and other researchers have found is that most people still value family life, seek to do the “right thing” by each other and put their children first. They look for long-term relationships and value commitment.

Although their commitments do not always take the form of a traditional family, that does not mean they act as self-centred individuals. More often than not, they consider whether their actions are morally right in their particular context.

This appears to be a case of the wine of old family content in the bottles of new family form. That’s because society is changing around families, and for families to stay the same they have to change. Families cannot stand still while all around there are

shifting types, amounts and stabilities of employment, and changes in financial arrangements and legal frameworks, in housing and welfare provision and in technologies and transport. Families may have consequences for society but society also has consequences for families.

The meaning of marriage has changed. It has become unhooked from sex and child-rearing; it is no longer the only respectable way to create a family. People may simply do things in a different order: cohabit, have children, then save up enough money to have a big wedding. A new tradition evolves.

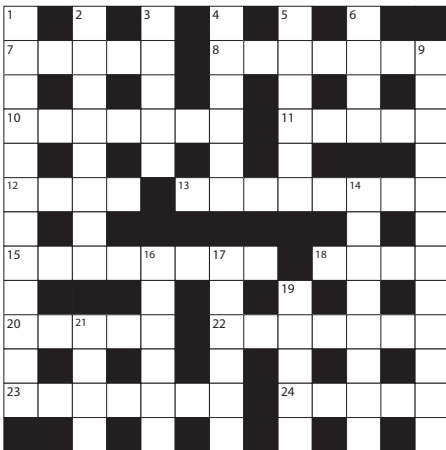
But don’t children do better when they are brought up in the traditional form of family? Research does often purport to show this, but like needs to be compared with like. Today, teenage parents are regarded as symbolic of contemporary social breakdown, but half a century ago they were not seen as a problem even though they were

more common. Comparisons over time are not dealing with the same entity. And research that compares teenage mothers with twin sisters with a later age of motherhood shows that it is pre- and post-pregnancy disadvantage that causes poor outcomes for mother and child, not the age of becoming a mother.

Much of what people want from family remains the same. We still value family life and “being there” for each other. We want to do the “right thing” and regard putting children first as important. We value long-term, committed relationships. But new traditions evolve to express these aspirations, in a context in which life is changing around us. When it comes to family, there is more continuity in its changing form than either its traditional defenders or critics acknowledge.

■ **Rosalind Edwards is professor of sociology at the University of Southampton. She has been researching family lives for the past two decades.**

CROSSWORD No: 355: Enigma



Across

- 7 Instruments of treble pitch, played with a double reed (5)
- 8 Tungsten, or its ore (7)
- 10 Chief character in opera which includes the aria: “What is life to me without thee?” (7)
- 11 Legendary Greek seer who uttered her predictions while in an ecstatic frenzy (5)
- 12 Surname of commander-in-chief of British forces in France in the First World War (4)
- 13 Now means: “Incident in a daring adventure”, obsolete meaning: “a fit (in a horse) of plunging and rearing” (8)
- 15 Helium is one (5,3)
- 18 “What will survive of us is ----” (Philip Larkin) (4)
- 20 First of two words forming soubriquet of Iva Toguri D’Aquino, charged with treason in the US in 1949 (5)

- 22 Surname of the first British actor to be granted a life peerage (7)
- 23 Narrative or descriptive piece of music with orchestra, chorus and vocal solos (7)
- 24 A ship does this when it leans over due to wind pressure or an uneven load (5)

Down

- 1 The Christian, Jewish and Islamic faiths are all this (12)
- 2 The final monastic office of the day (8)
- 3 Tenth-century Welsh monk: teacher and biographer of Alfred the Great (5)
- 4 Cable and hawser ----- are part of the process of spinning fibres and yarns (6)
- 5 Alternative name for Dido in Greek mythology (6)
- 6 The ---- Nebula in the constellation Taurus was discovered by John Bevis c.1731 (4)
- 9 Religious symbol formerly worn by the Knight Hospitallers (7,5)
- 14 Coated with a protective layer by electrolysis (8)
- 16 Disciple known as “The Twin” (6)
- 17 Not written in any musical key (6)
- 19 War of the ---- Saints resulted in the removal of the papacy from Avignon to Rome (5)
- 21 Metaphysician/philosopher (1724-1804) whose works include *Critique of Pure Reason* (4)

Solution to the 23 March crossword No. 352

Across: 1 Umbral; 5 Purim; 8 Facts; 9 Cranial; 10 Reek; 11 Fine Life; 13 Shona; 14 Ozone; 19 Realtors; 21 Klee; 23 Gordian; 24 Eunan; 25 Nashe; 26 Elijah. **Down:** 2 Macbeth; 3 Rash; 4 Loc. Cit.; 5 Piacenza; 6 Reiki; 7 Mallee; 8 Fire; 12 In a trice; 15 Nalanda; 16 Dragon; 17 Brontë; 18 Leon; 20 Arras; 22 Yeti.

Winner: Stephen Morgan, of Oakham, Rutland.

Please send your answers to:

Crossword Competition
13 April,
The Tablet,
1 King Street Cloisters,
Clifton Walk, London
W6 0GY.
Please include your full name, telephone number and email address, and a mailing address. A copy of *Begat: the King James Bible and the English Language*, by David Crystal, OUP, will go to the sender of the first correct entry drawn at random on Friday 26 April. The answers to this week’s crossword and the winner’s name will appear in the 4 May issue.

Begat: the King James Bible and the English Language

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Solution to the 23 March sudoku puzzle

1	3	6	2	4	7	9	5	8
7	2	5	9	3	8	1	4	6
4	9	8	1	6	5	2	3	7
8	1	3	7	9	6	5	2	4
9	7	2	3	5	4	6	8	1
5	6	4	8	1	2	7	9	3
2	5	7	4	8	1	3	6	9
3	4	1	6	2	9	8	7	5
6	8	9	5	7	3	4	1	2