10. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Familism

William Haines, October 23, 2026

A leading feature of the Protestant Reformation was its rejection of the Church's emphasis on celibacy, as a requirement for spiritual guardians and adepts (long widely and openly violated), and even as a spiritual ideal. Protestants emphasized instead the spiritual value of married life, the role of husbands and fathers in moral education and spiritual leadership, and the importance of family life as a model for excellent spiritual and social life generally. A historian comments:

> A … consequence of the extinction of monasticism [in Protestant-controlled areas] was the elevation of the home as the area where the gospel precepts can most readily be exemplified. There was no pretense on the part of Luther that perfection could be achieved anywhere; yet in the home there is no mine nor thine, and although the father exercises authority and is comparable to a magistrate, yet he does not wield the sword. In practice the home was the only sphere in which Lutheranism achieved any revolution in attitudes. Politics and business proved much less amenable to penetration. The pious household, where the father was priest as well as magistrate, where family prayers and the recital of the catechism were daily exercises—this picture marked for centuries the Lutheran household.[1]

Later sketches will discuss various aspects of Reformation and Counter-Reformation familism in connection with particular thinkers or particular times and places; the present brief sketch surveys the Reformation's main rival views on the nature of the spousal relation.

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[1] Bainton 1952, p. 256.

Let us say that a "familist" is someone who thinks that norms for family relations are somehow central for moral thought, and that a philosophically grounded familism is a philosophy that proposes a fairly plausible account of why we should think one or another family relational position should involve one or another kind of relating.

To develop a reasonable view of the normative implications of a relation, a familist will want to understand the relation itself. *What is it* to be someone's daughter, father, sibling, or spouse? What makes such a term true of a person?

That is not to say she must think that family relations such as the spousal or sibling relation are constituted by facts other than ways of relating, in part or in whole. But for a family relational norm to have any meaning, there must be some distinction between the relation and what the norm prescribes for the relation. Otherwise bearing a relation but violating its norm would be conceptually impossible. The relation's norms would be empty. And if one of the attractions of familism is that family is a stable source of security, then one wants an account that does not make it hard for individuals to know when the relevant family relations obtain, and that invites the view that family relations are solid facts.

Granted, even a thoughtful familist might fail to see that there is any real question to be asked about the nature of the parent-offspring relation, or therefore the sibling relation (at least where adoption is rare). The parent-offspring relation may be seen simply as a matter of biological origin, and the underlying biological mechanism may be thought irrelevant. Or one might have a theory of the mechanism that suggests different duties toward different genders of parent. Or there may be a thought that it matters whether the biological parents are married to each other, whether they have accepted the responsibility of raising the child, etc. [2]

[2] At *Analects* 17.21, Confucius might be taken to suggest that the ground of the duty to mourn a deceased parent through three years is the parent's *treatment* of one in the first years of one's life, rather than the biological relation, though the latter is excellent evidence of the former should one's memory of infancy be unclear.

A familist's omitting to analyze the nature of the father-son or parent-offspring relation is perhaps understandable if adoption is unknown or extremely rare and not taken seriously as a possible significant institution—unless the familist finds it difficult to *explain* how the relation has detailed moral implications. If she has no good explanation, the problem should push her to think about the relation itself or perhaps adopt a different view.

Less understandable would be a familist's omitting to analyze the nature of the *spousal* relation. Though Aristotle was surely right that we are a naturally spousal animal, still one cannot fail to observe that while the parent-child relation is most naturally seen as a definite all-or-nothing biological relation (or as based on such a relation), the biological aspect of the spousal relation is not like that. Whether two people are sexual partners, or permanent or exclusive sexual partners, is a matter of degree with several distinct dimensions. Further, each particular spousal relation is artificial—at least in the sense that intentional human action assigns the parties (who exist beforehand) and determines when the relation comes into effect between them and perhaps when it ceases.

These facts might be expected to prompt two further questions: **(a)** *What relation* are we thus creating between the two people—i.e., what is it to be married? What is the nature of the spousal relation? and **(b)** How far is the *nature* of the relation up to us as a society by law or convention, or even up to particular people by agreement or habit, and how far is the nature of the relation set instead by history or nature or Heaven or God?

Further, disagreements as to the nature and scope of obligations between spouses are common enough within particular households to bring such questions to the fore for a familist thinker. And even if women are not in a position to speak up, disagreements among men on such issues commonly arise between families, or between men who want one thing and institutions that want another.

Other observations too might prompt questions (a) and (b). For example, we should observe that society involves many other kinds of relation that are

plainly subject to human design in their form, not just in the choice of their parties. Examples are political or administrative relations, trade relations, employment relations, apprentice relations, master-slave relations, friendships, and more. We deliberate collectively and individually about the *design* of those relations, in particular cases and in general. For another example, we might have some historical memory of changes in how the spousal relation was conceived, or changes in other relations; and we may be aware that different cultures conceive the spousal relation differently.

Hence if our culture or philosophy stresses family relations as such, and hence the spousal relation, it will cross our minds to ask: How far is the form of the relation a matter of law or culture or contract, so that we should *deliberate* on what form to have? How far is it determined directly by human nature or Heaven, so that we should rather *inquire* into what form it truly has? Whatever the answers, the form of the spousal relation should be an important object of inquiry and/or deliberation in general, and will certainly be so for familist thinkers and citizens.

Further, individuals may need some social guidance in instituting that relation between them (deciding who is to marry whom), and in understanding the nature of the relation itself. And the spousal relation would seem to depend in various other ways and for various other reasons on clear recognition by society at large. Hence societies need (among other things) conventions or laws about who bears that relation when—about how the assigning is done (including broad ground-rules about who *may* be assigned to whom and by whom); how the relation may be initiated or triggered; how many parties may be involved; what are the legal implications for relations with outside parties (e.g. property rights, authority over children, penalties for adultery); and whether, how, and on what grounds the relation may be ended.

These points about the nature of the spousal relation and its beginning, ending, and registration are of course bound up with views about what gross or subtle duties and rights are triggered by the spousal relation. For example, modes and ground-rules of assignment of parties reflect conceptions of the

nature and function of marriage, and have an impact on what kinds of duties make sense. Procedures for initiating marriages may involve explicit commitments to certain duties, and commitments may be understood to have moral force. Rules for ending marriages may specify certain factors as sufficient grounds, and will reflect conceptions of the nature and function of marriage. And in recognizing the spousal relation, laws and conventions may define what is being recognized—including its implications for property and inheritance, childcare, salvation, and innumerable other matters.

As the spousal relation is central to the family properly so-called, I submit that the quality of thinkers' attention to these issues is one sign of the genuineness of their familism.

These basic issues about the spousal relation were front and center in the theory, practice and bloodletting of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

To orient us to the era's controversies, John Witte has offered a simplified sketch of four main approaches to these issues, four main models of matrimony: the Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican models. Each of the four models was developed and expressed in a vast literature of law, theology, liturgy, and polemic; as well as instruction and advice on how to pursue and conduct the role of spouse and the related roles of parent and offspring.[3] Each model remains widely influential. I shall conclude by attempting a brief paraphrase of Witte's scheme, though the scheme is informed by theological distinctions that I do not fully grasp.

The **Catholic** or **sacramental** model, formalized in a large body of medieval canon law enforced by church courts, sees marriage as a natural form created by God, begun by mutual consent or contract even if in secret, and constituting

[3] Witte 2012 strikes me as a fine beginning guide to these literatures, though perhaps informed by Calvinist sympathies, and focusing more on of theological and legal framework issues than on norms for conduct within the relationships.

an indissoluble holy sacrament or channel of God's grace to the parties. On the Catholic view the chief goods served by marriage are children, fidelity in mutual love and service, protection from sexual sin, and grace by the sacrament.[4]

Protestants agree with the Catholics that marriage is a natural form of life created by God and requiring mutual consent. But they reject the superiority of celibacy (and the laws that privileged it), on the grounds that the family is a vital social institution, celibacy has no special virtue, and the effort is corrupting. At the same time they largely reject the Catholic view that marriage is a sacrament in the way that baptism, the Eucharist, and the ordination of priests are sacraments.

In line with the broad rejection of the role of the church as the sole and necessary mediator of people's relation to God, the **Lutheran** or **social** model holds that marriage, or the household of married parents, is "a social estate of the earthly kingdom of creation," rather than "a sacred estate of the heavenly kingdom of redemption." It is primarily a matter for the laws of the state, not the church. The beginning and ending of any marriage must be a matter of public record and civil law, and marriage can join people of different religions or none. Marital disputes are for the civil authorities. Divorce should be permitted on grounds of great dereliction of duty, such as adultery or desertion. Still, state authorities too are seen as authorized by God; and in general the validity of marriage should depend on "parental consent, two witnesses, church consecration and registration, and priestly instruction."[5]

The **Calvinist** or **covenantal** model regards marriage as a covenant involving the entire community and God as parties. As we might say, the life of matrimony is associated living, i.e. living in a wider community. The formal involvement of parents and church in the joining of spouses is more central than on the Lutheran view, the religious or spiritual aspect of the union receives more

4 Witte 2012, pp. 4f., 53-112.

5 Witte 2012, pp. 5-7. 113-158.

emphasis, conduct within marriage is the community's affair, and Calvinist rules for divorce are much tighter.[6]

Among the Protestant models, the later **Anglican** or **commonwealth** model is the closest to the Catholic. Matrimony here is seen as a quasi-sacrament, divorce is difficult, and church and state are both deeply involved. The core idea is that the marriage-based household is a "little commonwealth," a microcosm of society in general. As a society its end is the good of the members, and as a microcosm its function (role) is to train people for all other social institutions and relations.[7]

References

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6 Witte 2012, pp. 7-9, 159-215.

7 Witte 2012, pp. 9f., 217-285.