

# Fatherhood, Childism, and the Creation of Society

John Wall

This essay argues for a new religious ethical approach to fatherhood centered on children and their expanding capabilities for participation in society. Under the notion of "childism"—in analogy to feminism, womanism, humanism, and the like—it takes the perspective of the experiences and concerns of childhood as such. In contrast with a soft patriarchal argument for fatherhood that dominates much religious discourse today, it argues for a larger and more hopeful vision of fatherhood as directed toward the human social good. This requires, methodologically, a richer hermeneutical circle between religion and the social sciences. Substantively, it calls for Christian and other religious ethicists to re-imagine fatherhood as an integrated public-private responsibility that aims to cultivate children's fully human social creativity as images of their Creator.

THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE QUESTION OF WHAT RELIGIOUS VOICES can and should say about fatherhood in the United States today. I approach this question as a Christian ethicist deeply influenced by feminism and hermeneutical phenomenology. Most importantly, however, I take what I call a "childist" perspective in which I prioritize the meaning and point of view of childhood (or rather childhoods). I use this hermeneutically complex approach to reflect upon fathers' responsibilities toward children, as well as upon larger implications for

John Wall, Department of Philosophy and Religion, Rutgers University, 311 N. 5th street, Camden, NJ 08102. E-mail: johnwall@camden.rutgers.edu.

*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March 2007, Vol. 75, No. 1, pp. 52-76  
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfl059

© The Author 2007. Published by Oxford University Press, on behalf of the American Academy of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org  
Advance Access publication on February 14, 2007

society and moral thought. As children are so deeply marginalized in both the world and the academy, a child-centered approach to fatherhood challenges, like feminism but in new ways, the fundamental methods and norms of religious ethics. It involves a disruptive and self-reflective gesture not unlike Jesus' placing a child "in the midst" of his disciples to explain the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3-5; Mk. 9:33-37; and Lk. 9:46-48).

I begin by examining and responding to a sophisticated argument for a widespread religious view of fatherhood in the United States, that of the sociologist Wilcox (2004) in his book *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*. Like the growing field of family sociology of which it is a part, this book provides nuanced and sometimes surprising empirical analyses of the experiences and problems faced by fathers today and, in more depth than anywhere else, how fatherhood is shaped by religion. I then critically examine the hermeneutical strategy of such an argument—how it relates sacred meanings to empirical observations—and argue for a richer and more dynamic methodology of a "hermeneutical circle" between the social sciences and religious ethics. The remainder of the paper makes a contrasting substantive argument for the meaning of fatherhood in contemporary American culture. I claim that the "soft patriarchal" view described by Wilcox and underlying much American discourse today is neither the most ethical nor the most Christian possibility. Instead, fatherhood should be rethought from a child-centered rather than adult-centered point of view. A truly childist ethics of fatherhood would demand overturning historical gender hierarchies within and outside the home, but it would focus most importantly on nurturing children's gradually expanding capabilities, as images of their Creator, for creative participation ultimately beyond the family in wider society.

## THE SOFT PATRIARCHAL ARGUMENT

Wilcox's argument, based on the empirical analysis of around 30,000 men across three national surveys, is essentially this: Conservative Protestant fathers today are not the distant authoritarians one might assume, but on average more expressive and engaged in home life than either mainline liberal Protestant or non-religious fathers. Because these largely evangelical and fundamentalist fathers think of themselves as "soft patriarchs" or "servant-leaders," they are more thoroughly "domesticated" into the responsibilities and attachments of the home than their more egalitarian peers. They develop what Wilcox and others call a particularly strong ethic of "familism." Ironically, on Wilcox's view,

while conservative Protestant fathers are therefore more gendered in their family outlook, they also provide a more compelling response than liberal fathers to what Hochschild (1989:13) has called the "stalled revolution" of feminism. Imperfect though it may be, their family ideology provides the most robust and visible available antidote to the well-documented contemporary epidemic of father absence from parenting. Thus, "conservative Protestantism domesticates men ... [and] the soft patriarchs found in [it] come closer to approximating the iconic new man than either mainline or unaffiliated men do."

Specifically, Wilcox comes up with three key findings. First, compared to mainline Protestant fathers (that is, Lutherans, Methodists, and the like), and even more so compared to non-religious fathers, conservative Protestant fathers report spending more time in "one-on-one" and "youth-related" activities with their children (such as playing, talks, helping with homework, outings, and sports) (112-118). They also put in more "positive emotion work" (such as praising and hugging) (118-120). Second, however, conservative Protestant fathers spend the least, and mainline Protestant fathers the most, time on household labor (such as meal preparation, dishes, cleaning, laundry, and shopping). However, no group of fathers averages as much time on these activities as their respective spouses (146-150). And third, conservative Protestant fathers' spouses report, on average, feeling more appreciated by their husbands than do other groups of spouses and happier with their husbands' "marital emotion work" (such as love, time, and affection) (176-180).

To complicate matters further, these findings apply chiefly to conservative Protestant fathers who are "active" in their churches. Those who are merely "nominal" conservative Protestant fathers in fact perform the worst on all three factors: time with children, household labor, and emotion work with wives. Whatever else you do, don't marry (or be) a conservative Protestant male who doesn't attend church! One indication of this unique active-nominal division—not found among mainliners—is that actively religious conservative fathers commit the lowest levels of domestic violence of all the surveyed groups, whereas nominally religious conservative fathers commit the highest (181-183).

Wilcox's explanation for these differences between conservative and mainline Protestant fathers is that, in his view, conservative Protestantism teaches "resistance" to the corrosive effects of modernity on the home while mainline Protestantism teaches "accommodation" to modernity. By "modernity" Wilcox means the forces that he claims culminated in the 1960s and 1970s: a conglomeration of hyper-individualism, sexual liberation, gender equalization, civil rights, and increasing toleration for divorce and out-of-wedlock parenting (200-202).

Conservative men, he says, employ an "innovative traditionalism" in which they recover biblical and historical gender roles within the home while at the same time imbuing them with a modern element of what he calls therapeutic expressivism. The literature of influential conservative groups like Focus on the Family and Promise Keepers involve a mixture of biblical literalism and psychological advice, resulting in a supercharged "familism" that is at once highly gendered yet highly committed. Mainline fathers, in contrast, pursue what Wilcox and the larger sociological literature calls a "golden rule liberalism" in which the spirit rather than the letter of the Bible is used to affirm gender equality both within and outside the home, and the home itself is somewhat relativized to the norm of justice across society. The result is that mainline fathers have a stronger sense of gender equality but lower familism in the sense of investing less in the family institution as the emotional and moral bedrock of society.

Wilcox's argument is powerful and intriguing. It is both old and new. What is old is not only its description of well-known conservative perspectives on fatherhood but also, and more interestingly, its fit within a significant tradition of American family sociology. A number of prominent sociologists—of both conservative and liberal leanings—have revealed the growing detachment of fathers from the home to be a historically unique and pressing issue affecting contemporary society at every level. Among these one could include Bellah (1985), Hunter (1992), McLanahan (1994), Gleen (1996), Popenoe (1996), Amato (1997), and Waite (2000). Fathers in America today need to find ways of making deeper family attachments, for their own sake as well as for the sake of children, mothers, society, economics, and culture. What is relatively new in Wilcox is a detailed empirical analysis of the role played in father attachment and detachment by religion, and particularly the complex and even paradoxical role of the conservative religious ideology of soft patriarchy. This analysis adds a layer of moral complexity surpassing even the conservative religious ethics of families developed by theologians such as Hauerwas (1981), Elshtain (1990), and Meilander (1990). While many in the academy, across all disciplines, have fought long and hard to problematize the social lens of patriarchy, especially in connection with religion, Wilcox is able to describe in depth why it remains in one form or another a significant force in American moral culture.

#### A MORE CRITICAL HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

In order to gain a critical perspective on this soft patriarchal argument and move toward a different religious ethical alternative, let us pause

first over a question of methodology: namely, how the sociology and the religious ethics of fatherhood should relate to one another. Wilcox provides a good starting point because he is rare among social scientists in examining how fatherhood is impacted by actual religious practices and beliefs. The question remains, however, how to avoid oversimplification on both sides of the equation: the sociological analysis of religious norms and the religious ethical interpretation of sociological descriptions of reality. I believe the best way to do so is neither to conflate these spheres of discourse nor to keep them separate, but instead to open each to listening to and learning from the other through an interdisciplinary and mutually critical "hermeneutical circle."

There are many ways to describe such a relationship or circle (Gadamer 1989; McFague 1982; Caputo 1987; Vattimo 1994, 1997; Schweiker 2006). For reasons I cannot defend here (but see Wall 2005), one of the most helpful for our purposes is that of Ricoeur (1981), who defines the hermeneutical circle as constructed around what he calls "moments of distanciation," that is, critical distances provided by alternative modes of discourse that allow for increased disciplinary self-reflection. Sociologists face a moment of distanciation when they confront the real complexity of religion itself, both in its sacred texts and theological traditions and in its multiple contemporary expressions, practices, and interpretations. Likewise, religious ethicists face a moment of distanciation in the empirical complexities of contemporary religious and ethical life made available by sociological, as well as anthropological, psychological, biological, economic, and so on, description. These empirical complexities are particularly important for religious scholars to understand when it comes to issues related to children, since children are generally less able to articulate their experiences for themselves in the public sphere. Tracy (1975) and Browning (1991) have adapted this hermeneutical circle to argue that religious thought and the social sciences should be "critically correlated" with one another. New understandings of social realities must be able to question religious beliefs and traditions at the same time that religious thought must be able to question social scientific starting hypotheses and deep societal presuppositions.

One consequence of such a circle for our purposes is to complicate any simple opposition between religion and modernity that would force religious persons into a choice between "resistance" and "accommodation." Despite their own apparent self-understanding, conservative Protestant fathers neither could nor should resist modernity through biblical norms. This is not just because of the problematic notion of

reading the Bible "literally" or as one's sole moral authority. It is also because any reading of "biblical" fatherhood is both undertaken through unavoidably contemporary eyes and interpreted back into the reader's contemporary world of meaning. The meaning of a text, however ancient and sacred, is not finally completed within the structures of the text itself. It is completed in the new worlds of meaning opened up for the reader *in front of* the text. Wilcox's dichotomy of conservative resistance and liberal accommodation to modernity, however incomplete he sees both, rests on the hermeneutically problematic structuralist notion that the meaning of Christian fatherhood lies in Christian texts, rather than in their present and ongoing interpretation into meaning. This view uncritically assumes a modernistic, non-circular view of hermeneutics in which texts report independent moral truths. A hermeneutical circle, in contrast, accepts the postmodern insight that texts have plural possible meanings as they are interpreted into particular historical contexts.

Growing scholarship on biblical families (Osiek and Balch 1997; Perdue *et al.* 1997) has clearly demonstrated that biblical "patriarchy" made fathers virtual monarchs in the home. Such fathers possessed almost total authority over multigenerational households to act as judges, jury, and executioners toward their wives, children, concubines, and slaves. Divisions of household labor in biblical families did not align gender roles along today's familiar private-public lines. This sharp opposition was chiefly formed in modernity in the nineteenth century period of industrialization when paid work moved largely outside the home. In biblical families, in contrast, everyone, including women and children, contributed toward the household's public *economia*, its functioning as a self-sustaining economic and social unit. This pre-privatized, fully patriarchal family was the presupposed norm throughout the many centuries in which the Bible was written and for many centuries thereafter.

If the early followers of Jesus added anything to such Aristotelian household codes, it was not greater male expressivity in the home. Rather, if anything, it added greater equality for women, providing women increased leadership opportunities in religious life as (in principle) equally children of God. This remains the case however much women still remained ultimately subordinate and however much the growing early church appears to have very quickly reverted to Greco-Roman form. Despite their patriarchal sound to modern ears, Paul's letters in the context of the ancient world were often quite revolutionary when it comes to gender equality. The second half of 1 Corinthians 7:4, for example, would have been practically unheard of: "For the wife does

not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his body, but the wife does" (emphasis added).

At the same time, however, it must be noted that Jesus himself says relatively little about family life compared to broader social issues such as oppression and poverty. When he does address families he seems to be particularly interested in relativizing them to larger concerns, particularly subordinating an all-powerful Greco-Roman familism to the coming kingdom of God. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:26). This is hardly an argument for expressive familism. Apart from the fact that Jesus does not appear to have married or had children himself, he clearly resists over-attachment to the home because he comes to announce a much broader and more radical ethics of love. The true test is not love for those who love you back, love for one's own embodied in familism, but a wider love for strangers, outcasts, and enemies.

The real difference between contemporary conservative and liberal Protestant fathers would therefore be better framed not in terms of *whether* they resist or accommodate modernity but rather in terms of *how*. The kind of "innovative traditionalism" that Wilcox assigns to conservative fatherhood necessarily applies to *any* interpretation of the meaning of fatherhood. Religious or not, neither conservatives nor liberals can avoid interpreting fatherhood through a hermeneutical innovation in relation to the past. Nor is conservatism necessarily more traditional or biblical. The question must be asked which tradition in particular it seeks to conserve. Liberal Christians can and have argued that they are closer to biblical norms since they respect but do not idolize families and take up Jesus' egalitarian trajectory. The conservative ethic of "soft patriarchy," in contrast, as we will shortly see, is much more distinctively "modern" than both conservatives and liberals generally think. It looks significantly less like ancient biblical patriarchy than it does the separate spheres, bourgeois ideal of nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and North America. Furthermore, it would strain Jesus' critique of familism beyond recognition to argue that it leads from hard to soft patriarchy. Jesus' ethics of love, insofar as it is familistic at all, would be significantly more demanding than the private attachments of therapeutic expressivism. Broadly speaking, religious fatherhood and modern fatherhood cannot simply be opposed to one another. Any dichotomy of religion and modernity on this matter is hermeneutically untenable.

What is needed in order to move beyond this thicket of interpretive conundrums is a more critical hermeneutical circle between sociology (and other descriptive disciplines) and religious ethics. Sociologists can help religious ethicists understand the great diversity and complexity of religious views and practices of fatherhood today. It is indeed noteworthy that religious conservative fathers may be more persuadable to investment in the home. And, more generally, since children cannot articulate their own worlds as fully as can adults, the sociology of childhood in particular is absolutely vital to understanding children's experiences beyond our usual historical assumptions. But religious ethicists can in turn help sociologists avoid an oversimplified view of religious traditions and norms. In particular, when it comes to contemporary fatherhood, they can challenge the socially and sociologically overused opposition of religion and modernity. They can also challenge the assumption that religious views of fathers are necessarily "familistic" in Wilcox's sense of committed to private family attachments. Not only is biblical fatherhood itself subject to ethical debate, but so also, and more importantly, is the way it should be interpreted into contemporary ideals and practices. Both sociologists and religious ethicists are thereby enriched by the distanced moment offered by the other, particularly around contentious and charged issues like fatherhood.

#### DEEPENING ETHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The needed hermeneutical circle can be illustrated in relation to Christianity. What, substantively, could a more complex and hopeful contemporary Christian ethics of fatherhood look like? This question has been difficult to ask because of the widely presupposed narrowness of possible answers. It can be more helpfully approached on at least two levels: on the "ascending" side of our hermeneutical circle by deconstructively examining contemporary ethical *assumptions* about the meaning of fatherhood, and on the "descending" side by constructively developing practical social *conclusions*.

In terms of the first, Wilcox's sociological hypotheses provide a useful example of the kinds of assumptions that are made about the Christian ethics of fatherhood in America today. The most pronounced assumption that needs to be addressed—one shared by conservatives and liberals alike—is that liberal Protestant (and Catholic) fatherhood must be based chiefly on secular rather than theological or biblical convictions. Similar assumptions are made in other religions too. The less one embraces soft patriarchy, it is thought, the less one can be

considered fully religious or Christian in this respect. Among other things, this assumption explains why mainline Protestants are not in fact, as Wilcox presupposes, more or less uniformly liberal, but deeply split between progressive and conservative camps, the one rejecting "Christian" approaches to fatherhood as no longer usable and the other seeking once again to reassert them.

The history of Christian theologies of fatherhood demonstrates, however, a profound, even if itself also problematic, set of liberal fatherhood ideals. By far the most influential theologian of Protestant fatherhood today, in fact, is the father of liberal Protestantism himself, Friedrich Schleiermacher. It was Schleiermacher (1990, 1991) who, in the early nineteenth century, first adapted Christian family ethics to the then emerging world of modern industrialization. He argues for a new bourgeois, separate spheres ideal in which mothers focus on the private inner sanctity of the home while fathers provide the home with public financial support and are nourished in turn by its natural grace and joy. (For detailed discussions of Schleiermacher on childhood, see Devries 2001 and Wall 2003). Against the harsher Calvinistic views of his day, Schleiermacher claims that the adult male role in the home should not be forceful, angry, or authoritarian, lest it disturb the child's natural innocence and capacity for love. Rather, fathers should be at once protective of the home's inner sanctity and, within it, loving, engaged, appreciative, and deeply attached. Ironically, it would be hard to find a clearer articulation than in this founder of modern liberal Christianity of the "soft patriarchy" now promoted by conservatives, involving as it does a unique historical combination of sharply gendered spheres, idealized familism, suspicion of a corrupt larger world, and the home as chiefly a site of emotional expression.

One of the reasons that American liberal Christian ethicists of the twentieth century have had relatively little to say on the question of fatherhood is that they too have accepted such soft patriarchy as definitive of Christianity. On the whole, they have worked hard to overcome this kind of gendered Romantic sentimentalization of the home that lies deep within their own traditions. Liberal Christianity grew uncomfortable with what Wilcox describes as the family's "sentimental solidarity," "the [gendered] marital economy of gratitude," and "an aura of enchantment" (138–141). Starting with Reinhold Niebuhr, emphasis has been placed instead on the human capacity for individual and collective sin and the need, in response, for a compelling Christian ethics of social justice. On the rare occasions that Niebuhr (1943:124) mentions families in his major work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, it is generally to point to its dangers of idolatry and

egoism: "[T]here is no possibility of the family escaping the fault of regarding its own weal and woe as more important to the whole [of society] than it really is." Or as the liberal feminist Catholic theologian Cahill (2000:6) more recently puts it, "family belonging is potentially idolatrous [as] a socially acceptable form of arrogance and greed."

Liberals have not relativized family life, therefore, simply because they accommodate modernity or prioritize gender equality over family commitments. They have relativized family life for the distinctively theological reason, itself in opposition to certain powerful aspects of modernity, that family attachment should not be allowed to replace or overwhelm commitments to others and to a just kingdom of God in society. In this they pick up on biblical norms, as above, that oppose the potential excesses of familism as an end in itself by placing family life within a larger context of God's love for humankind. Up until recently, when conservatism redefined the Christian family around "family values," liberal mainline Protestants viewed their approach as more rather than less authentically Christian and less rather than more accommodating to modernity.

The assumption, however, that liberal Christians lack a theological ethics of fatherhood finally obscures perhaps the most important and innovative development in Christian family ethics of the past two decades, namely what is sometimes referred to as "progressive familism." Wilcox (2002) acknowledges this alternative in other writings but does not use it as a category in his book. This may be because progressive familism does not fit very neatly into the hypothesized dualism of Christianity and modernity. Rather, as a range of mainline, liberal, and even evangelical Christian ethicists have variously claimed—including Browning (2000), Cahill (2000), Couture (2000), Van Leeuwen (2002), and Miller-McLemore (2003)—an authentic Christian ethics of fatherhood today can be at once familist *and* feminist, committed to the family as a vital institution *and* in an egalitarian and just way. Familism is here married to a larger Christian love ethics of "justice" or "equal regard" in which fathers and mothers, as equally children of God, should have the same opportunities in both private and public life. Such an alternative clearly promises a more complete response to Hochschild's stalled feminist revolution than does soft patriarchy. For it invests fathers' roles in the home with both emotion work and shared household labor, interpreting fathers' familistic involvement in wider relation to God's kingdom. Indeed, if, as some have argued, soft patriarchy is really just a symbolic way to get men more involved in the home, then progressive familism articulates this aim more explicitly and honestly.

Progressive familism represents, in effect, a fundamental challenge to the assumption that Christianity and modernity are engaged in a culture war. In the latter hermeneutic, a "Christian" interpretation of families and fatherhood is of necessity an act, however innovative, of moral resistance. Progressive familism argues that such a dualism is neither the most effective nor the most Christian analysis of the situation. The most enduring Christian ethics of family life, from Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to John Calvin and Schleiermacher, have consistently synthesized biblical with other perspectives on family norms, whether from Plato, Aristotle, or modernity. More importantly, each has recognized that however much it is rooted in the past, Christianity is also a historically transforming religion that, in response to the depths of human fallenness, seeks ever more hopeful and transcending wisdom about human ends over time and for the future. As the authors of *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* put it: "The capacity to hold ideals and realities together creatively is what we call the *ironic-realist* element within the Christian message. Churches should protect against the moralism that ... existed in Christianity's idealization of the nineteenth century middle-class family" (Browning *et al.* 2000:6-7). In other words, progressive familism is a good example of how religious ethics can overcome the false opposition between resistance and accommodation and embark instead on the more difficult but rewarding middle path of a hermeneutical circle in which Christianity is interpreted in dynamic relation to the unfolding historical present.

#### THE PROBLEM FROM A CHILDIST POINT OF VIEW

On the "descending" side of constructive normative conclusions, religious ethicists can learn from the sociology of fatherhood without being limited to its ethical assumptions or actual proposals. What can be learned most importantly in this case is how fathers experience the contemporary moral problem. Protestant fathers appear from Wilcox's work to be deeply concerned, like Protestant (and other) mothers before them, with negotiating today's great gulf between public and private, work and home, responsibilities. In other words, neither fathers nor mothers are content with men's gradual erosion of meaningful roles in the home and the lives of their children. Does this mean, however, that fathers should go back to earlier roles? Should they engage in a soft patriarchal tradeoff of their former public authority over the home for a new kind of symbolic private authority within it? Or, as I propose, can religious ethicists offer a more hopeful and

socially transforming vision of fatherhood centered on the well-being and perspective of children?

From a childist point of view, fatherhood today faces such a great divide between private and public responsibilities because the world of children themselves is so profoundly privatized. On the one hand, as historians like Cunningham (1995) have demonstrated, the home in the developed world today is more radically separate from the public realm even than in the nineteenth century, where parents could at least rely on supportive extended families, communities, workplaces, civil society, and cultural institutions. The privatization of child rearing over the course of the twentieth century is truly historically unprecedented. On the other hand, as social and cultural theorists like Hewlett and West (1998), Buckingham (2000), Quart (2003), and others have shown, society itself increasingly treats children as "privatized" market commodities. The public world does play a role in children's lives, but chiefly by instrumentalizing them for its own separate ends: whether through multi-billion dollar advertising campaigns, "branding" children with ever new needs for goods, using mass media to promote attachment to products, sentimentalizing and sexualizing childhood in popular culture, or politicizing childhood to get elected while reducing public initiatives and funding addressing children's health, education, and poverty.

This historically unprecedented marginalization of children both from and by the public sphere has been well documented in its wider social dimensions by European sociologists in the emerging field of "childhood studies." These sociologists—including most prominently James and Prout (1990), Jenks (1990), Qvortrup *et al.* (1994), and Prout (2005)—founded what has now grown into a vast interdisciplinary field including also anthropologists, economists, legal scholars, cultural theorists, literary theorists, and others. Childhood studies sociologists take a wider view of childhood and child rearing than American family sociologists like Wilcox. They examine children's experiences through the social and cultural lenses of class, race, ethnicity, social construction, diversity, poverty, health, and children's rights. Wilcox himself suggests that his findings may be impacted by class, since conservatives are typically poorer than liberals, but he does not explore this question in depth, or any other larger social and cultural factors besides religion. As James (2004:36) has put it, childhood studies "sees children both as individuals who participate in the social world and as members of a social category defined by particular social, historical, and ideological processes." Only by also looking beyond the private realm of the family itself can one begin to grasp the depths of

the privatization of fatherhood, motherhood, and childhood in relation to society.

The ideal of soft patriarchy not only fails to critique, but it actually seeks to revive, the industrial-age "separate spheres" mentality from which child rearing's privatization is derived. The privatization of family life is only deepened by a solution that is chiefly limited to increasing fathers' personal expressive attachments. While fathers should indeed be encouraged to undertake greater emotion work in the home, such a therapeutic approach taken in isolation would ultimately be counterproductive for children. It would at the very least mask the problem of the relation of children to their larger social worlds. Insofar as Christian fatherhood is reduced to an ethic of expressive familism, even if this familism includes activities outside the home such as participation in youth groups, it cannot address the true complexity of the problem of fatherhood from a child-centered point of view. Children are parts of families and families help mediate their relations to society, but children are also directly parts of larger society itself, such as through mass media, culture, ethnicity, education, peers, non-family adults, healthcare, economics, and public policies.

By the same token, the classic liberal solution of fathers taking on equal household labor is also too narrowly focused on the private life of the home. The advantage of such an approach is to at least free mothers to negotiate the private-public divide with greater possible success. Let it be stated unequivocally: fathers are morally obliged to take up their fair share of household chores. However, this solution, while necessary, is also insufficient. Its effect is only to place fathers in the same double-bind of the conflict of private and public worlds that has long frustrated mothers. Fatherhood and motherhood need to be more broadly re-imagined in the context of larger society if they are to address child rearing's historical privatization and full moral complexity.

#### THE CREATION OF SOCIETY

My own proposal for a new Christian ethics of fatherhood is based on the more hopeful, socially transforming, and child-centered responsibility for forming children's expanding social capabilities.

The progressive form of familism above takes us a good deal of the way in this direction. Browning (2003:49) has argued that fatherhood should be strengthened through marriage as a public-private institution by holding men to investing their children with needed social capital. "The great new task of all modern societies in the new global age is to

create secular and religious institutions [like marriage] that will educate youth and adults in an ethics of discourse, interpretation, and dialogue." Family attachment, on this view, is linked to larger societal and dialogical aims. Miller-McLemore (2003:143) has described Christian parenthood as opposed to the sentimentalization and infantilization of childhood (like that of women before) by taking as its aim the nurturance of children's growing social "agency" through "the gradual transfer of appropriate responsibility." And Cahill (2000:16) uses a traditional Christian notion of the home as a "domestic church" to argue for teaching children what it means to contribute toward larger common goods: "Humans have a natural capacity for intimacy, empathy, compassion, and altruism that can be learned and fostered in close associations like the family and gradually extended, with the help of cultural symbol systems [like religion] . . . , to larger and larger communities." What these progressive familist perspectives have in common concerning fatherhood (and motherhood) is its ethical responsibility for educating children *through* the family—and not just *for* the family—toward wider social and moral capabilities.

My own view builds on these suggestions while arguing for an even more fully "childist" perspective. Childism is not exactly the same as familism, however progressive. It takes as its central point of departure not the family but the child. Children are ultimately more important than families, however important families may be to them, and children's worlds include but are not limited to their family contexts. Children, families, and society are not arranged in neat concentric circles; rather, children have multiple family and social identities. Childism is also not necessarily normatively identical to feminism, as the experiences and perspectives of children are in some ways different from those of women. Most notably, the younger the child the less she or he can stand up and advocate for "childism" for herself or himself, such as through cultural, social, political, or academic work. No infant will ever hold a university chair in religious ethics, sociology, or childhood studies. The full difference of children from adults, however much they are more similar than we generally imagine, needs to be understood and recognized if we (adults) are to resist the specific ways in which children are marginalized and privatized in our world. On this religious ethics very much depends on the empirical observations of social scientists like sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists in their capacities to overturn received assumptions by explaining the actual experiences of children, in relation to both families and larger society, insofar as possible from children's own points of view.

The depths of children's privatization in the contemporary world means that parents' ultimate ethical responsibility is for nurturing children's increasingly broad capabilities for social participation and creativity. By this I mean that fathers and mothers should understand themselves not only to contribute toward the private good, important though this is, nor only to mediate private and public worlds, but most fundamentally of all, and from the very start, to nurture and encourage children's growing capabilities for inhabiting and transforming society. Such an ethical responsibility is rooted in the very first command to humanity in the Bible, the Genesis 1:28 injunction to "be fruitful and multiply," which implies not only literal biological procreation but also a broader human ethics of ongoing social reproduction. Immediately following the affirmation of humankind as made "in the image" of its Creator, the command suggests humanity's primordial responsibility for the ongoing new creation of its own social world (Wall 2005). Parenthood is in this case one symbol, perhaps the ultimate symbol, for the human responsibility amidst imperfection for forming an increasingly more loving and just human community. Creation symbolism provokes what Ricoeur (1995) has called a moral "economy of the gift" in which the gift of original human createdness by God demands in turn ever more superabundant gifts of love for one another (and oneself) and hope for ultimate reconciliation. Christian love is not, from a hermeneutical point of view, a bland golden rule ethics of fairness or reciprocity. It is placed in the context of the more radical command to love even your enemies (Lk. 6:27-31), so that it makes a transformational call for the re-creation of this fundamentally distorted world in an ever more humanly inclusive direction.

Children themselves must be affirmed as fully human social participants through their primal gifts for play, imagination, wonder, and social relationality. Children bring the gift of and for creativity into the world, as well as its degeneration into destructivity (Wall 2006). From its earliest relation to caregivers, even at the breast, each child as another human being recreates his or her own social world anew. At the same time, children's growing capabilities require nurturance, guidance, protection, and education by parents and society if they are to be realized in wider relation to children's complex and often destructive social environments. Children need to learn what it means to participate in the historically-situated hermeneutical circle of social life, and in increasingly expansive and transforming rather than narrow and uncritical ways. Such a view mediates two opposed constructs of childhood in the history of Christian ethics. One views children as chiefly animal-like or depraved and hence requiring values initiation or inculcation

(in figures like Augustine, John Calvin, and John Wesley). The second sees children, on the contrary, as pure, innocent, and the source of the renewal of divine goodness in the world (in figures like Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Friedrich Schleiermacher) (see Miller-McLemore 2003 and Wall 2004). A childist perspective helps us overcome such simple polarities and see children in their fuller and more complex humanity. Children inhabit the same tension as adults of being both primordially good yet also caught up from the beginning in personal and worldly fallenness. Over the course of children's maturation, this tension should be turned toward children's creation of socially inclusive rather than exclusive worlds of meaning and practice.

What children need to learn above all in the crucible of the home is therefore not just the values of the home itself. Important though these are, what children themselves most need and want to learn are capabilities for participating in gradually more expansive moral and social worlds. From children's own points of view, the home is the start of a wider and larger life. A childist ethics of fatherhood cannot be reduced to either private sentimentalism or public justice. It demands the encouragement of a creative tension between children's private and public worlds, to both of which children always belong, with the aim of increasing, in developmentally appropriate ways, children's own broader social and moral capabilities. As far as Christianity is concerned, parents and others responsible for children are called in this socially transforming direction by faith in the possibility that, however corrupt, humanity—including children—is ultimately world-creative in the image of its all-inclusive world-Creator.

#### THE RECREATION OF FATHERHOOD

From this childist perspective, the biblical symbolism of God the Father suggests a vision of human fatherhood that is more than either hard or soft patriarchy. It takes on the more complex dialogical and superabundant creativity that feminists have found also in symbols of God the Mother (Johnson 1993; Christ 2003). God as Mother has been described as bodying forth into the world in order to recreate the world itself to become increasingly less violent and unjust. Likewise, God as Father strives to create an ever less exclusionary kingdom of humanity. In the image of such an ultimately non-gendered generative Creator, human fathers and mothers are called to nurture in their children the capabilities required for forming a more loving and hopeful world. The gift of outward superabundance from the Father to humanity provides a model for actual fathers to give their children the most important gift



of all: genuine capabilities for just and superabundant giving to the world in turn. The family is where this larger capability typically first starts to take form.

Genesis itself echoes the unusual language of humankind as an "image" (*tselem*) of God in 1:27 when it goes on in 5:3 to say that Adam "became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image (*tselem*), and named him Seth." Responsible fatherhood on this view does not mean taking charge of the home, as Promise Keepers and Focus on the Family claim, but teaching one's children to grow in taking on loving responsibility themselves. Between servant leadership and moral permissiveness lies the more dynamic and dialogical possibility for cultivating children's own growing moral capabilities. Furthermore, any such "patriarchy" toward children—in the original sense of the obligations of the father or *pater*—need not be confused with "patriarchy" toward wives. The latter is sometimes defended in Christian conservatism as symbolic rather than practical, on the view that soft patriarchy only invests men in the home without making them actually dominant (Gallagher 2003). This strategy assumes that fathers are naturally disinclined to parent (and that mothers parent with little difficulty). It thus places little trust in the primordial capabilities of fathers to be images of their Father. Even more importantly, it teaches children to grow toward dominance or submission, depending on their gender, which falls short of nurturing children to grow toward inclusive love in the image of the one Creator of all.

If there is a difference between fatherhood and motherhood, it should not then be broken down along public versus private lines. This division as understood today is rooted less in the Bible or any other ancient tradition than in modern industrialization. Even so, the gender divisions of sacred texts themselves need not dictate gender divisions today. Few could or would return to this kind of absolute male authority in the home, as even Wilcox's qualification of "soft" patriarchy implies. A hermeneutical circle allows us to interpret the deeper possible meanings of religious norms about fatherhood unencumbered by the sins of the past. Since both genders—as girls and boys, women and men—are created in the image of God, gender difference may be important in certain respects but it is ultimately relative to the inclusive aims and responsibilities of being human. Since girls and boys both grow up to become participants in society, neither the home nor parenting should be gendered in terms of nurturing social creativity.

Nevertheless, fathers today, unlike in most of history, require a particularly forceful new ethics of parenting, one in which a culturally sanctioned absence from the home is opposed by a morally imperative

responsibility in it. Rather than basing this ethics on sentimental expressivity, however, in which familistic attachments become an end in themselves, childism must insist on the deeper responsibility for gradually expanding in the crucible of the home children's larger social capabilities. The separate spheres ideology of the nineteenth century fails in this aim. By separating mothers from the public sphere and fathers from the private sphere, it undermines the profound connection that needs to be encouraged for children between the two. The connection is severed also in a privatistic ethics that domesticates motherhood and fatherhood both. A socially creative ethics of fatherhood helps to reinvigorate the vital private-public tension that lies at the heart of a morally regenerative society. It counts on the home to function, not merely as a haven in a heartless world, but as one of the most important social institutions, alongside schools and civil and religious organizations, for forming children's increasing capabilities for participating creatively in their world for themselves.

A more fully childist ethics of fatherhood is as a result broader and more demanding than the prevailing ideologies of our time. Judging by the state of fatherhood today, these ideologies are no longer working. On the one hand, soft patriarchy has focused on emotion expression and work within private relations at the expense of gender and social justice. It commits the Augustinian sin of mistaking part of the picture for the whole. On the other hand, liberalism has focused on gender justice in the home at the expense of high levels of emotion work and, again, larger public aims. The sin is likewise narrowness of perspective. A truly child-centered ethics of fatherhood for today should be focused on the more dynamic and complex aim of nurturing children's expanding social creativity. Understood in this child-centered way, parents' emotion work and equal household labor are both vitally important. Emotion work increases children's capabilities for attachment with others, both close to and far from the home. Parental equality increases children's senses and capabilities for human justice, both at large and in intimate relations. But the aim of both should not ultimately be to instantiate God's love only in the home, important though this is. From the point of view of children themselves, the home is not just an end in itself but also a means for beginning their own larger life in the world. Children thus need and deserve more. The aim, as children move toward adulthood, should be to instantiate God's love in children's ever more extended capabilities for love in the world, including both in their own eventual family life and in their meaningful participation in public areas of work, culture, and society. These latter aims are not merely the province of schools. Fatherhood and motherhood must be understood

in such an expansive way because the goal of child rearing itself is fundamentally concerned with children's moral and social expansiveness.

In the end, a childist approach to fatherhood is not just about fatherhood itself but also about larger human and social norms. It teaches us about ethical life. Among other things, it teaches that the Christian ethics of love, for example, cannot be reduced to either private affection or public justice. Rather, it is disruptive, decentering, expansive, dynamic, and socially transforming. It is ultimately aimed at the creation of an increasingly inclusive human world. A good society will actively welcome even the most marginalized in its midst into its practices of social formation. It is in fatherhood and motherhood that most of us undertake the most significant forms of self-sacrifice: by relativizing our own needs to the more acute needs of others, responding to the deepest of human vulnerabilities, and opening ourselves in self-disruptive ways to others' perspectives and experiences. Yet, self-sacrifice for one's child is always ultimately made in the service of a larger human mutuality and social good: in the immediate satisfaction of acts of care and nurturance, the remarkable return of love that children give back, and the longer-term realization of children's potentials to make a meaningful difference in their world. As the feminist Christian ethicist Gudorf (1985:190) puts it, parenthood should be viewed as "enriching, life-enhancing, and joyous despite the real sacrificial elements within it," so that "self-sacrificing love is always aimed at the establishment of mutual love." Fatherhood in America today, arguably a great deal more than motherhood, is particularly in need of this creative and decentering impetus to expand and "distanciate" oneself in the service of a more demanding and rewarding love. It is this great possibility for wider social formation and transformation that Jesus might have had in mind when placing a child in the midst of his disciples. It may be toward such wider and more expansive moral horizons that religion calls us generally.

### CONCLUSION

Of course, childism requires more than rethinking fatherhood. The point of view of childhood needs to be more fully extended into any area of life in which children are involved: motherhood, marriage, civil society, culture, mass media, economics, public policy, human rights, globalization, climate change, and so on. It should inform and challenge our deepest assumptions about humanity. Each of these areas calls for religious ethical inquiry to enter into a dynamic interdisciplinary hermeneutical circle with the various human sciences. As our discussion of

fatherhood illustrates, the goal of religious ethics cannot be reduced simply to applying traditional ethical norms to children. The study of children should also involve, in a more hermeneutically self-critical way, the challenging and recreation in light of children of our own fundamental ethical beliefs. Though I cannot defend it here, an argument can be made that this childist gesture has informed ethical theory from Plato to Augustine and John Locke to Schleiermacher, in eras during which children were less emphatically separated off into their own private sphere than today (Bunge 2001; Wall 2007). Just as feminism has transformed so many disciplines and areas of social life, so also should childism and perhaps even more profoundly. The fact that it is adults and not children who are ultimately responsible for this transformation only deepens its hermeneutical and moral complexity.

In the case of our particular inquiry, childism suggests that fatherhood can be saved from its current descent into marginality only by a better understanding of its larger moral and social significance. This significance cannot finally be reduced to the sphere of private relations in the home, however important these are. It must include a wider sense of responsibility for nurturing children's socially creative capabilities. This more demanding moral aim requires overcoming the false dichotomy of religion and modernity in which religion functions in opposition to the world rather than as dialectically engaged in its meaningful formation. Fatherhood in this larger sense, however diversely interpreted, places children themselves at the center of its self-understanding and practices. It can then be re-imagined in response to children's own capabilities, including those of others' children, as fellow emerging participants in forming a more loving and inclusive society.

### REFERENCES

- Amato, Paul and Booth Alan  
1997 *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bellah, Robert, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven Tipton.  
1985 *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Browning, Don S  
1991 *A Fundamental Practical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

- 2003 *Marriage and Modernization: How Globalization Threatens Marriage and What to Do About It*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Browning, Don S., Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, Robert M. Franklin 2000 *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*. 2nd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Buckingham, David 2000 *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of the Electronic Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Bunge, Marcia, ed. 2001 *The Child in Christian Thought*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing.
- Cahill, Lisa Sowle 2000 *Family: A Christian Ethical Perspective*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.
- Caputo, John D 1987 *More Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutical Project*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Christ, Carol 2003 *She Who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Couture, Pamela D 2000 *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon.
- Cunningham, Hugh 1995 *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*. New York: Longman.
- Devries, Dawn 2001 "Be Converted and Become as Little Children": Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Religious Significance of Childhood." In *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. by Bunge Marcia. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke 1990 "The Family and Civic Life." In 119-132 *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family*, ed. by David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain. Milwaukee, WI: Family Service America.

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg 1989 *Truth and Method* [German original 1960], trans. Weinsheimer Joel, Donald G. Marshall, Second revised edition. New York: Crossroad.
- Gallagher, Sally 2003 *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Glenn, Norval D 1996 "Values, Attitudes, and the State of American Marriage." In *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*, ed. by David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and David Blankenhorn. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Gudorf, Christine E 1985 "Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice." In *Women's Consciousness and Woman's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. by Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer, New York: Harper & Row.
- Hauerwas, Stanley 1981 *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Hewlett, Sylvia Ann, Cornel West 1998 *The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hochschild, Arlie and Ann Machung 1989 *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Viking.
- Hunter, James Davison 1992 *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- James, Allison, and Alan Prout eds. 1990 *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. Basingstoke, UK: Falmer Press.
- James, Allison 2004 "Understanding Childhood from an Interdisciplinary Perspective: Problems and Potentials." In *Rethinking Childhood*, ed. by Peter B. Pufall, Richard P. Unsworth, 25-37. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Jenks, Chris 1990 *Childhood*. New York: Routledge.

- Johnson, Elizabeth  
1993 *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*. New York: Paulist Press.
- McFague, Sallie  
1982 *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- McLanahan, Sara, and Gary Sandefur  
1994 *Growing Up with a Single Parent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Meilander, Gilbert  
1990 "A Christian View of the Family." In *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family*, ed. by David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, 133-148. Milwaukee, WI: Family Service America.
- Miller-McLemore, Bonnie  
2003 *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold  
1943 *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation. Volume II: Human Destiny*. New York: Charles Scribner's.
- Ostik, Carolyn, and David L. Balch  
1997 *Families in the New Testament World*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Perdue, Leo, Joseph Rlenkinsopp, John Collins, and Carol Meyers.  
1997 *Families in Ancient Israel*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Popenoe, David  
1996 *Life Without Father*. New York: Free Press.
- Prout, Alan  
2005 *The Future of Childhood: Towards the Interdisciplinary Study of Children*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Quart, Alissa  
2003 *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus.
- Qvortrup, Jens, Mariata Bardy, Giovanni Sgritta, and Helmut Wintersberger eds.  
1994 *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate.

- Ricoeur, Paul  
1981 *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 1995 *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. by Mark I. Wallace. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich  
1990 *Christmas Eve: Dialogues on the Incarnation*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon.
- Schweiker, William  
2006 "On the Future of Religious Ethics: Keeping Religious Ethics Religious and Ethical." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74.1 (March): 135-151.
- Tracy, David  
1975 *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: The Seabury Press.
- Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart  
2002 *My Brother's Keeper: What the Social Sciences Do (and Don't) Tell Us About Masculinity*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Vattimo, Gianni  
1997 *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* [Italian original 1994], trans. by David Webb. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Waite, Linda, and Maggie Gallagher  
2000 *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*. New York: Doubleday.
- Wall, John  
2003 "Animals and Innocents: Theological Reflections on the Meaning and Purpose of Child Rearing." *Theology Today* 59.4 (January): 559-582.
- 2005 "Fallen Angels: A Contemporary Christian Ethical Ontology of Childhood." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 8.2 (Fall): 160-184.
- 2005 *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- 2006 "Childhood Studies, Hermeneutics, and Theological Ethics." *Journal of Religion* 86.4 (October): 523-548.
- 2007 "A Childist Christian Ethics of Responsibility." In *Children, Community, and Faith Formation: Perspectives from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* ed. by Marcia Bunge. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing.
- Wilcox, W. Bradley  
2002 "Religion, Convention, and Paternal Involvement." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64.3 (August): 780-792.
- 2004 *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.