

The Essence of
FAMILY

THE MODERN BELIEFS SERIES

Kirsten Birkett

The Essence of Family
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Preface

THE MODERN BELIEFS SERIES

The world is shaped by what we believe: our values, our society, our daily activities will reflect what we believe to be true and important. This is the case for everyone, not just those who consider themselves ‘religious’ or ‘having faith’. Whatever beliefs a person may hold, be they secular, atheist, religious, modern, traditional, scientific, artistic or a mixture of them all, that person’s world view and way of life will reflect their underlying ideological conviction.

Most people go through life happily (or unhappily) unaware of their beliefs. It’s easy to assume that what we think is what everyone does, or just never think about it at all. It’s a sad way to be, both for individuals and for the society we create. If Socrates considered “the unexamined life is not worth living”, we might add “the unexamined society is not worth having”—if we don’t understand what we believe and why society is the way it is, we will never be able to affect it for the better.

The ‘Modern Beliefs’ series is not meant to be the final word on everything. It is meant to describe the essence of the beliefs that pervade our world; the ideas that tell us who we are, why we are here and what we ought to do about it. There are many such ideas, most of them inherited from past ages, some newly invented. We have no particular criteria for what comes under the heading ‘Modern Beliefs’; if it has affected

our culture today, it's worth understanding.

Our world is full of so many ideas it can be confusing just waking up in the morning. We hope that the 'Modern Beliefs' series will help to make at least a few parts of it more understandable.

About *The Essence of Family*

Most books on ‘family’ begin by trying to define it. Indeed, that’s what many books and papers are entirely about. With a curious regularity, reference is made to Humpty Dumpty’s conversation with Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*:

“When I use a word”, Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less”.

“The question is”, said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things”.¹

The fact that this is quoted so often is interesting in itself. It seems to indicate that what most of these scholars are searching for is an understanding of what people mean when they use the word ‘family’. That is, the search is not for a thing out there in the world, the thing that is unalterably ‘family’; it is for something more elusive and potentially changeable. It is a search for what people, in whatever culture, sub-group or period of history they find themselves, regard as ‘family’. Often, and more revealingly, it is a search for what the scholar thinks *ought* to be defined as ‘family’.

Of course, words do mean what we make them mean—at least to some extent. One can legitimately use the word ‘family’ to refer to things as diverse as gangsters (a Mafia family) and letters on a page (a font family). But it is not totally arbitrary. Language is not infinitely elastic—you can’t use ‘family’

1. *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*, Penguin Books, London, 1988, p. 196.

to talk about paint stripper or ear wax. More importantly, the ways in which people live are not arbitrary or infinitely elastic. The basic unit of society in almost every culture known to man is a group of people related by blood or marriage, living together, with some degree of affection and loyalty.

I want to argue in this book that the parallels between cultures throughout history are no accident, and that there *is* such a thing as ‘family’. Ultimately, I’ll be suggesting that what gives unity and reality to human concepts of family is a God who has a family he loves.

This book is written from a Christian viewpoint, which may delight some readers and leave others less than enthusiastic. Why bring superstition, bigotry and blinkered ideology into the discussion, some may ask? Well, why indeed? I will be proposing that the Christian view actually has something very worthwhile—in fact, crucial—to contribute to the current debate about family. In my experience, the rejection of that view is most often not on the basis of rational debate or reflection, but is a result of thoughtless prejudice or rigid ideology. I ask of my readers only what any author longs for: that they apply their critical faculties to what follows, and attempt to leave their prejudice (even their anti-Christian prejudice) at the door.

My first task will be to outline—in brief—what the Bible’s view of ‘family’ actually is, given that it is widely misunderstood and distorted in many discussions of the topic. (If, when you think of the ‘biblical family’ you think of white picket fences, you’re wrong!) I will then look at the available data on families past and present, and compare the biblical perspective with others that are prominent in the current debate about ‘family’. Following this, I will also look at how traditional Western ideas of ‘family’ are being challenged by emerging biotechnology, debates over sexuality, and feminism.

It will become obvious, I hope, that the biblical idea of family has a great deal to recommend it; that of all the alternatives proposed, it is the most workable and practical, and the most likely to lead to good lives for men, women and children. As well as this, I will argue that what the Bible says about families, and human beings in general, explains precisely why, in our post-Christian Western society, we are facing the problems we are.

To anyone steeped in twenty-first century Western secular values, it may well be that what the Bible says is very foreign. Our culture has strayed far from its biblical heritage, and most of us have been educated to reject the Bible as an authority. However, on another level, I suspect that what the Bible says may well resonate deeply with many of us, like a traveller in a foreign country who hears someone speaking his own language, and recognizes it as a voice from home.

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SYDNEY, 2004