Unatural ties. How adoption queers the family.

R.Ruard Ganzevoort & Marco Derks

In: Swinton, J. & Brock, B. (eds.) *A Graceful Embrace: Theological Reflections on Adopting Children*. Leiden: Brill 2018, 183-194.

Introduction

To speak of adoption is to speak of family. But it is to speak of family in an unconventional, disturbing, and deconstructive manner. The adoption of a child into a family not only changes the child from being a person without a family to being a person with a family – or from being with one family to being with a different family – but it also changes the family from being a natural one to being an unnatural one. We think this observation is important, because if in our view adoption does not change the family but only the child, then the child remains the excluded, mercifully accepted but always reminded of its difference. This is where our critical queer theological reflection on the family is called for.

Origins

The subject of this chapter is not detached from our own experiences, as the story of one of us illustrates. Ruard grew up in a maybe slightly unconventional family. His parents raised five children biologically their own but that did not limit how they lived their idea of family. When they lived in Surinam, South America, a new sister joined the family, as her single mother was unable to care for her children. She has always remained part of their family. Back in the Netherlands, several other children from troubled situations lived with them for shorter periods of time, and a young woman from Suriname stayed with them for a year or two to study. Another young woman, whom Ruard's mother met when she worked at a Surinamese boarding school, chose to 'adopt' his parents as her own, and she counts as family in every sense but legal. This inclusive family style is still in function, even when all the children live their own lives. Partners were welcomed and counted as own children, even ex-partners of the children somehow remained part of the family.

Ruard started his own family from a teenage relationship, legally accepting fatherhood of his eldest son who had been born out of wedlock. During a sixteen-year marriage they had five more sons, one of whom died at seven

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weeks. Since more than ten years he lived in a gay relationship during which time several of his sons lived with them for some time. Their previous home doubled as the small boutique hotel his partner runned, and the demarcation of the public area and their living room was not more than a set of sliding doors. In July 2016, a few months after moving to a new house, his partner passed away. At the funeral, Ruard's sons explained how Ruard's partner had been like a father to them. In other words, the boundaries of 'family' have never been very clear to him.

We don't think this story is exceptional. There are many reconstituted families, built from two or more previous (nuclear or other) families. There are many families in which children are adopted. And there are same-sex couplings that are accepted in an increasing number of countries. These different types of families challenge the taken-for-granted meanings of the family as a lifelong commitment of one man and one woman with the intention to produce offspring. Although obviously this 'procreative family' is a very common and in some sense prototypical shape of family – at least in the Western world –, it is historically and culturally not the only one and theologically one that needs to be critiqued just as much as it merits to be affirmed.

Preferences

If we embark on such a theological reflection, however, we first have to acknowledge that theology's natural preference seems to have been for a rather strong endorsement of traditional families based on biological and – more specifically – procreative connections. We think this can be shown for how the topic 'family' is treated in theological literature, but we are even more convinced that it is the case in the everyday performance of theology in liturgy and church life.

It is not too much to say that many churches teach and embody – implicitly or explicitly – a preference for the procreative family. Whether we look at statements from the Vatican or debates within the Anglican Communion over the last couple of decades, the churches' main concerns are not the doctrinal issues that were at stake in the Early Church or during the Reformation (e.g. Christ's divinity/humanity, divine election and human freedom, the Eucharistic presence of Christ) or on contemporary global social issues (e.g. terrorism, collapsing economies, climate crisis), but on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, which threaten or undermine the procreative character of heterosexual marriage. Apparently procreation is the central value for the church. The obvious exception of celibacy in Roman Catholicism doesn't negate this preference. Whether it is taken as a rejection of fleshly desires based on an eschatological vision of sexuality, as a way of emphasising the otherness of the priesthood, or as a means of the church to exercise its power over its employees, celibacy was indeed the exception and has never become the standard for all.

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Procreation was and still is at the core of marriage – most clearly in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, but also in teachings and practices of other churches. Churches have for long taught how the family is constituted of a man and a woman, leaving their parents behind to become a new unity that is bound to bear fruit in the sense of having children. Infertile families were – and often still are – considered a painful and sometimes problematic exception. In older cultures, it even counted as dramatic and shameful, a reason to end a marriage – not bearing children was tantamount to not being a good man or a good woman.

This procreative family-based religion and culture is still at the forefront of church praxis. The most important life events celebrated in church are weddings and births or baptisms, and for many people these are the sole occasions to attend (apart from funerals). Ironically, the fact that many people only appeal to the church when it comes to baptisms and weddings, actually reinforces the churches' emphasis on the procreative family. If mention is made of singles, childless families, or LGBT's, it is often in the context of pastoral care, sorrow, and intercessory prayer. Apparently these are people in need, people missing out on the normal life that is the procreative family. The whole paradigm of living in relation with others is defined as this standard type of family with its focus on procreation (cf. Derks et al. 2014). This may not be limited to contemporary monogamous nuclear families; procreation also plays a central role in cultures that acknowledge polygamous or multi-generation families.

In this context, adoption can be seen and experienced as mutual mercy or even grace, welcoming a person into the holy state of the procreative family. In this act of mercy, the adoptee receives parents and becomes their child, whereas the couple receives a child and they become parents. This is, of course, especially true if they have no prior children biologically their own, but in some sense it is true for all cases. The point is that in this perspective adoptive family ties are always the second best option: the adoptive family mimics the 'real', 'natural' procreative family.

A similar process occurs around same-sex couples. One of the often voiced oppositions is the fact that these relations are infertile by definition and, thereby, do not merit the label of marriage or family. Some go further and argue from anatomy that two males or two females cannot have 'normal', that is, procreative sexual intercourse, and that thereby their relation is unnatural, or – quoting the apostle Paul – 'against nature'. This connection of 'natural' and procreation is also illustrated by the fact that in Medieval Catholic texts the term 'sodomy' was not only used for same-sex sexual acts, but for any sexual act that was not procreatively functional, thus including, for example, oral sex between a man and a woman (Vosman 1999: 47-48; cf. Jordan 1997).

If in this perspective same-sex relations are sometimes tolerated, they are accepted as second best, as a mimicking option. An illustration of this is found in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Although the Netherlands had

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opened marriage to same-sex couples in 2001, the since then adapted church order still limits 'marriage' to the relation between a man and a woman, which can be "consecrated" (*ingezegend*; Ordinance 5, article 3) after the marriage has been legally solemnised. The next article speaks of "other life commitments", which can be "blessed" (*gezegend*) without legal solemnisation, but only after the local church council has consulted the congregation (Ordinance 5, article 4). The different phrasing and procedure are remarkable and suggest that the procreative relation deserves higher valued terms than the 'unnatural' relation.

Clearly we are not denying the statistical normalcy of procreative family ties. Most people grow up in the family of their biological parents and many start families of their own in which children are born. There is not so much wrong with that. We are pointing to the problem that statistical normalcy is easily transposed into existential, religious, and/or moral normalcy, marginalising those who happen to be different. Their existence is accepted mercifully, as the exception to the rule, but not in its own right, let alone as a challenge to the unreflected bias of the majority position. It is that challenge that we want to take seriously in this chapter by providing some tentative theological reflections on non-procreative family ties.

Natures

The first theological notion we want to consider is the concept of nature, in particular Paul's use of the term 'against nature' in his letter to the Romans. Its first appearance is in 1:26, where Paul describes how same-sex activities are a token – or, actually, a result – of a life of rebellion against God. Women turned to a life "against nature" and men "gave up the natural use (sic) of the woman" for inappropriate behaviour with one another. These words are often used to prove that same-sex relationships are wrong and can certainly not be considered 'real marriages'. What is more, adoption by same-sex couples is disputed because opponents fear that the child will have a negative example in her or his same-sex caretakers, for it needs both a male and a female role model. That is, children need examples of the normal family.

Interestingly, however, Paul uses the term 'against nature' again in Romans 11:24. Here he is also concerned with rejection and acceptance, but now the message is that God saves the Gentiles by accepting them "against nature". Here "against nature" is not a signal of sin or damnation, but of salvation (Rogers 1999: 177f.). We can take this characterisation of God's grace as "against nature" as a warning against the risks of 'natural theology'.

Natural theology is not just a form of theological reflection that takes human experience and reasoning as its starting point, over against revelational theology that builds on transcendent insights or Scripture. It is rather a dangerous enterprise when the human experience and reasoning that count are the experience and reasoning of the dominant group. The problem of natural

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theology is not human subjectivity as such, but a power that marginalises others and resists external critique. One of the most fervent critics of natural theology has been the twentieth-century Protestant theologian Karl Barth. His rejection of natural theology should be understood against the background of the rise of Nazism in which God was claimed to be on the side of the powers that be. The Barmen Declaration (1934), which was mainly written by Barth, and the Kairos Document (1985) are examples of the same prophetic spirit against natural theologies of the powerful.

At the same time, while Barth's oeuvre can be read as a huge critique of natural theology, in his theological reflections on the concept of *imago Dei* – and on marriage in particular (*Kirchliche Dogmatik* III.4) – he himself in fact fails to read human bodily nature theologically or spiritually and succumbs to a natural theology of biological essentialism by arguing that the Trinitarian difference is mirrored by the difference between man and woman (Rogers 1999: 180-191; Ward 2000: 189-194). But, as Graham Ward explains, reading Barth against Barth, "[w]here the true understanding of creation's ontological order comes from a participation in the operation of God's being, the biological – nature as it has been conceived since the seventieth century as an independent realm of self-grounding, self-defining entities – has no value" (Ward 2000: 193).

Although Paul uses the words 'against nature' in two different contexts and lines of reasoning, we would learn from his examples that we have to reflect critically on self-evident views of family and marriage. The natural division lines between Jews and non-Jews are not decisive when it comes to salvation. Using a botanical metaphor that parallels the language of adoption, Paul shows how Gentiles, branches of wild olive trees, will be taken and grafted onto the domestic olive tree, the Jews. Those who were not children of God will be adopted to be just that. There are various examples in the Old and New Testament that use that precise image of adoption to understand how we have become part of the household of God. The central image of human life *coram Deo* is an image of adoption. We – for most of us are indeed *Gentile* Christians – are not natural children of God. And those who are 'natural' children of God cannot take that for granted (Romans 9:6-7). Unnatural family ties are the hallmark of the kingdom of heaven.

This perspective can easily be connected with discussions about same-sex relations – the other 'against nature'. A major part of the religious discourse rejecting homosexuality qualifies as natural theology in the sense that it naturalises – and thereby legitimises – heterosexuality. Clearly biblical texts are used to support that position, but these texts are often isolated from their cultural context and applied directly without much sensitivity for some of the critical historical and hermeneutical issues involved. A more critical reading might suggest that Paul rhetorically uses cultural customs and views of his days to prove his point: unnatural salvation. The term 'nature' often actually means 'culture' (Vasey 1995), like when Paul says that nature teaches us that men should not wear long hair (1 Corinthians 11:14). Paul is a master in playing with

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his audience to convince them of his unprecedented message, using their prejudices and consensual opinions without necessarily sharing them.

It is not too far-fetched to say that the gospel is queer, turning the tables topsy-turvy, and critiquing every natural ideology in order to make us glimpse God as the utterly different. We are not concerned here with making an argument in favour of same-sex relationships. We are rather suggesting that the unnatural ties of same-sex families put into question the self-evident natural order of procreative families in a way similar to the way adoption does. Adoption, we might say, is a queer thing, just like the gospel itself. It is against nature.

Families

If we explore this further, we come across scores of New Testament texts decentralising the procreative family and instead focusing on unnatural ties. One of the words of the crucified Jesus binds his mother and his beloved disciple into a new adoptive relation (John 19:26-27). Jesus regularly disregards natural family ties in favour of unnatural ones, like when he says that his followers are his real brothers and sisters (Mark 3:33-35), that we should give up our natural family (Matthew 19:29), or that there will be no marriage in heaven (Mark 12:25). But most significantly, the story of Jesus himself is not one of procreation. However we understand his virgin birth, the story emphasises that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, and the book of the generation of Jesus Christ in Matthew 1 leaves open the name of his begetter. In turn, Jesus did not start a family of his own, except for what some obscure legends recount. His life ran against the social expectations of his time and left him living with unnatural ties.

By calling their fellow believers 'brothers' and 'sisters', the early Christians redefined the meaning of kinship relations. As followers of Jesus they belonged to a different kind of family, as 'religious siblings' of Jesus and through him as children of God the Father. Now employing the metaphor of family in religious talk about the faith community is not uncommon. Many popularised writings usually implicitly assume that the model for this is the natural family, clearly demarcated from those who are not part of it. In traditional churches this may be expressed in the exclusion of everyone who is not born into the church family. In evangelical churches it can be symbolised by the (male) pastor and his wife acting as the metaphorical parents of the congregation.

We would rather suggest that the analogy should work the other way around: instead of organising the faith community according to the metaphorical logic of the natural family, the latter – as well as *all* 'families' that exist and develop in our human society – can be informed by the Christian understanding of *ecclesia* and *koinonia*, that is, the church consisting of people who are called into community, celebrating the Eucharist, sharing their lives, Christ becoming one body with all who believe in Him. This is symbolised in the ritual of baptism.

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"God's extension of the covenant to the Gentiles, just because it marks the eschaton at the (apparent? penultimate? ongoing?) end of the world, grows by baptism, which is a rite of adoption, not procreation, and promises a future of resurrection, not childbirth." (Rogers 1999: 208) What matters in the church – and thus in the family – is not the celebration of the reproduction of genetic codes in a new generation, but the adoption of each new human being into the fellowship of the community.

Creations

How, then, can we value the natural and unnatural sides of our family lives? The book of Genesis provides two accounts of the creation of the world and of humans. In one account of creation, the focus is on the *imago Dei*. Humans are created after the image and likeness of God. Certainly there is a library of theological interpretations of that term that we will not survey here. But however interpreted, it at least seeks to define humanity as created in a special relation to God: to understand the essence of humanity, we have to look at God. The second account of creation focuses on the earthly, animal-like nature of our existence. Man was created from dust on the ground and breath in his nostrils, and woman was created from a rib of his body. Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh – the relation between man and woman is essentially physical and earthly.

This dual account of creation places humans between God and the animals, between heaven and earth. We cannot reduce humanity to either, which is precisely where taboos are set in function. One side of taboo is found in the realm of the sacred, heaven; the other side is in the realm of the animal-like, earth. We cannot walk on holy ground, we cannot speak to God directly, and we cannot be like the angels, because we are bound to our earthly existence. But on the other hand, we cannot live out our every impulse or always follow our instincts, because we are called for a heavenly purpose.

Humanity is an instable identity, warding off the much clearer extremes of angels and animals. They never question who they are. They just are. The dual account of human creation instead points to an instable identity that constantly challenges and critiques us. Any fixed understanding of humanity or of the natural order of our existence, should therefore be suspicious to us. The key to our troubles and to our joys is the dynamic dialectics of living 'in between', sharing both similarities and differences with both the animals of the earth and the angels of heaven. Ideological critique serves to call us from moving to the extremes and helps to keep open our identity as humans, difficult as that may be.

What does all this mean for our reflections on the unnatural ties of adoption and other non-procreative family connections? We think it challenges us to maintain the dialectics between the two creation narratives. Procreative family

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ties belong to the realm of our animal-like creational existence. It is in that sense the natural order, not only in its commonality, but especially in that it binds us to earthly relations. Adoptive, unnatural family ties belong to the realm of the heavenly, the vocation to act and be like God. This does not imply that unnatural ties are better than natural ones, but they help lifting up all our relations to a higher plane. For humans the celestial dimension is equally important as the terrestrial, because we are in between. It is, therefore, not a value judgment when we interpret the procreative as earthly or natural and the non-procreative as heavenly or unnatural. It is the dialectics between the two that marks our human existence.

Texts

From these queer questions regarding the meanings of family and procreation, we can now look at the Biblical notions of adoption itself. The theology of adoption verges on the controversies around adoptionism, circling around the question whether Jesus was a human being adopted as the Son of God or the pre-existent Son assuming human form. The adoptionist view is usually treated as "the earliest form of Christological belief to be traced in the most primitive strata of the NT" (Young 1983: 5-6), replaced by a theology of pre-existence and incarnation, and later rejected as heresy. Although we will not engage with the doctrinal debates here, it is clear from the controversy that adoption is seen as compromising the nature of a 'real' son. The notion of Jesus as "born of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was *declared* to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness" (Romans 1:3-4, emphasis added) may have seemed too unstable for the identity of the Christ and soon became undergirded by notions of his eternal presence and existence.

The same notion of adoption was applied to the human believer. In this reasoning only Jesus is the real Son of God, but we are adopted to be sons and daughters like him. Already in the first Testament this referred to the King (II Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7). Then it included the children of Abraham who can become the children of God (Romans 9:4-8). The selective promise in this text is sometimes used to interpret adoption as part of the redemptive process. Ephesians 1:4-5 links this to predestination, just like the initial adoptive language about Jesus was widened to include his pre-existence. Galatians 4:4-5 states that adoption is the aim of redemption, liberating us from our natural position under the law. Romans 8:15-17 speaks of a spirit of adoption "by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" and a heritage we share with Christ. Romans 8:23 describes adoption as fulfilled only in the eschatological state of the redemption of our bodies.

Smolin (2012) critiques this reading of the adoption texts in the Bible and its function in evangelical circles as the legitimisation of the practice of adopting orphans. He rightly notes that the number of texts about adoption is very small

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and that there are no New Testament examples of the practice of adoption. Moreover, none of the Old Testament adoption narratives "provide any Biblical foundation for the kinds of stranger adoptions, involving a complete loss of original lineage and identity, envisioned by the modern Christian adoption movement" (Smolin 2012: 283). The New Testament metaphor, according to Smolin, does not refer to orphaned children, but to the Roman practice of upper class families legally accepting a young adult man as the suitable heir. Adoption did not imply the young man should sever his original family ties; like marriage it served to reinforce inter-family and political alliances and ensure succession. But it remains unclear how much of these Roman connotations were intended when Paul used the metaphor of adoption for understanding our relation with God.

If anything, the adoption texts in the Bible cannot easily be connected to contemporary practices and views of adoption. They don't restore the adoptee into a solid natural family but create an ambiguous hybridity in which the family of origin and the adopted family coexist. They struggle with unstable identities and notions of intention, pre-existence, and salvation. They speak to the loosening and widening of our familial connections rather than to the legal conditions. They invite us to be open to a new, transcending relational possibility that will be fulfilled only in the eschaton. Adoption, in short, does neither reject the original or natural family nor simply integrate the adoptee into it. Adoption queers the family by adding hybridity, transcendence and instability.

Evaluations

We have argued that adoption changes the family just as much as it changes the child. We have advocated a dialectical approach to the natural and the unnatural, hoping that that will help us move beyond a view of adoption as changing, adapting, and normalising the child. Let us conclude by pushing it one step further. If we reflect theologically on the non-procreative family, we first have to affirm the natural, the earthly, the physical. Obviously that includes procreation. Our human existence commences – depending on one's definition – with our birth or with the merger of male and female genetic material. Becoming conceived, born, and part of humankind means sharing this physical existence. It also creates a very specific connection with the man and the woman whose bodies created ours. To overlook the centrality of that connection is to develop an illusionary theology that negates our fundamental physicality. As Eugene Rogers puts it, "[p]rocreation can be grace, as creation is grace; and since procreation is also natural, it is a good of the species – though certainly not of every sex act, and not necessarily, either, of every marriage." (Rogers 1999: 208-209)

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And yet, even if this is a necessary condition for our existence, it is not a sufficient one, especially when we talk about becoming part of a family. Even when one is born into a procreative family, it is not until the parents receive, accept, and thus adopt the child that a family comes into being. Terms like acceptance, care, love, and responsibility define the family. But they are not defined by procreation; they are part of the process of adopting the child. If parents do not build that kind of relations, there is no family. In that sense, we all have to adopt our children, whether or not they are biologically our own. The defining element of family therefore is not procreation, it is adoption.

At the same time, there is also a risk in the practice of adoption – as is the case in same-sex marriages – when its theological implications are not fully acknowledged. On the one hand, both adoption and same-sex marriage undermine the procreation-based character of marriage. On the other hand, adoption and same-sex marriage seem to uncritically reinforce the ideal of the nuclear family. By allowing 'outsiders' to enjoy the blessings of the traditional family structures, these structures remain in place. This is not to condemn individual cases of adoption or same-sex marriage, but to show how some practices can at the same time deconstruct and reinforce marriage and family ideals on a categorical or symbolic level (cf. Derks et al. 2014). If the reinforcing effect undoes the deconstructive, disruptive effects, this still leads to a privileging of marriage and family over against those who are married without children or those who are not married.

Conclusion

And so we have come full circle in critically reflecting on the natural and unnatural ties. Theology's preference as lived out by the church may traditionally have been with the natural order, in the end it should probably be with the unnatural. A critical theological examination challenges our preference for the natural and shows that procreation as such is not theologically significant. This specifically implies that adopted children are not the exception. They are prototypical for human family life. To speak of adoption is to speak of family, we wrote in our opening sentences. But that is not because family life is constitutive for adoption. It is the other way around. Adoption is constitutive for the family.

Unconventional families are not exceptional, we wrote in reference to the story of Ruard's family. The reflections in this chapter have shed light on the disturbing importance of the inclusion of genetically unrelated siblings, the 'adoption' of parents and/or children, the acceptance of children born in and out of wedlock, the participation in the 'family-of-choice' that many gay people experience, and the struggle to have these relatively common yet often disputed family configurations acknowledged. Unnatural ties become all the more meaningful if they are not seen as exceptions but as sources of life.

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Yes, the non-procreative family may indeed symbolise mercy and grace, but not because solitary individuals are restored into the normal situation of family life by adoption. Non-procreative families are a symbol of grace because they show us that life depends on undeserved acceptance and love, not on any quality in and of ourselves. They are a symbol of grace, of life, because they remind us that it is not our biological origins that count, but our relational future. They are a symbol of grace because they embody that we are not determined by the limitations of natural life, but called into the unnatural freedom of loving care.

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