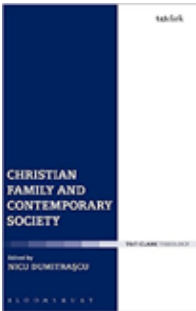


Ascetic Endeavor and Mutual Martyrdom: Review of *Christian Family and Contemporary Society*

Carrie Frederick Frost



Christian Family and Contemporary Society, ed. Nicu Dumitrașcu. Ecclesiological Investigations, vol. 21. London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2015.

Nicu Dumitrașcu, Professor of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at the University of Oradea, Romania, has assembled a fine collection of essays from Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant scholars in *Christian Family and Contemporary Society*. This volume deals deftly with the many contradictions at hand when addressing family in the Christian context. As Dumitrașcu rightly notes, “Nothing is more important and precious in human life than the family... The Christian family provides balance, stability and emotional fulfillment in this world, but also hope, and confidence in acquiring the fullness of happiness in the other, eternal, world.” But, as the author of the introduction, John McGuckin of Union Theological Seminary in New York, also rightly notes, the Church has not always acknowledged this to be so: “The development of a theology of married life has been heavily overshadowed by the extraordinary extension of a spirituality of asceticism.” The result of the essays collected in *Christian Family and Contemporary Society* is a welcome contribution to scholarly efforts at developing Christian theologies of family and marriage, to better appreciate this “important and precious” aspect of human life.

The contributors are impressive in erudition and credentials, but also in geographical span. Whereas many

English-language scholarly collections that boast of international collaboration are largely composed of North Americans with one or two Europeans, *Christian Family* includes just one North American voice. The rest are from throughout Europe and the Middle East, including representation from Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Greece, Austria, Romania, Spain, Poland, France, Germany, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Slovakia. Another unusual and welcome quality of this volume is that many of the authors speak from an Orthodox Christian perspective.

The first of four themed sections is centered on early church sources on family. Elena Giannakopoulou, a Greek scholar of canon law, methodically offers side-by-side comparisons of the Church’s ancient canons and modern Greek law on topics such as divorce, abortion, and remarriage. She concludes that the Church has an incredible opportunity to articulate its ancient concerns for the integrity of the family to contemporary Greek society. Another section examines ecumenical and denominational perspectives on Christian family, including a contribution by the volume editor, Nicu Dumitrașcu, who writes eloquently of sorrow and asceticism as fundamental and necessary features of marriage.

A more sociological perspective drives part three. Its fascinating portrait of the postmodern Finnish family by Gunnar af Hällström, Professor at Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland, includes this gem of an observation about male-female relationships: “Traveling together during vacations is considered a highlight in a relationship—or a terrible risk for the relationship.” A fourth section on contemporary situations of family rounds out the volume, including an essay by Dana Hanesová, a Professor at University of Matej Bel in Slovakia and a religious education teacher, on the religious education of children in Slovakia. It contains eye-opening observations on the ways that different generations confront the question of evil in the world. It is in this section that I most felt the absence of any treatment of homosexuality or of atypical families, such as single-parent families. Even while upholding a traditional Christian ideal of a nuclear family, homosexuality and atypical family configurations are realities of modern family life and, as such, deserve the careful and respectful treatment given to so many other topics in this volume.

All these essays underscore the urgency with which the Church ought to articulate her vision of family life. Destructive trends around the family are multitudinous today—in Finland and in the U.S., in Lebanon and in France. This is evinced not just by any given litany of statistics of divorce rates or

the like, but also in the more subtle narratives offered to us outside of the Church. For example, a group of highly educated and capable women at mid-life who are “nones”—not religiously affiliated at all—recently told me that they bought into the Hollywood mythology of marriage as defined by romantic, effortless, soul mate love, and that they entered their marriages with concordant—and highly unrealistic—expectations. Imagine their shock to hear that crowns were placed on mine and my husband’s heads during our marriage ceremony, to remind us that we were to be martyred to each other; that by entering into the great mystery of marriage and family—the *mega mysterion*—we were choosing to die for each other. These two conceptions of marriage—Hollywood soul mate and Orthodox mutual martyrdom—could hardly be more different.

Christianity has so much to offer the world in its beautiful vision of marriage as unitive, salvific love, of the family as the little Church, and so forth. But its great treasure—which is becoming more scarce as it fades from cultural memory while Christendom grows ever more distant—is the understanding of family as an ascetical endeavor. *Christian Family and Contemporary Society* is a testament to this uniquely Christian understanding of family, and thus has much to offer current theological, sociological, and philosophical discussions of marriage and family today. ✱

© 2017 THE WHEEL.
May be distributed for
noncommercial use.
www.wheeljournal.com



Carrie Frederick Frost, PhD, is a scholar of Orthodox theology, Professor of Theology at Saint Sophia Ukrainian Orthodox Seminary, and Board Member of Saint Phoebe Center for the Diaconess, a U.S.-based non-profit advocating for the rejuvenation of the female diaconate.