

## **A Response to Don Browning's "Critical Familism, Civil Society, and the Law"**

Rebekah Miles (Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University)

### **Locating Browning's Essay and My Response**

In this essay, Don Browning reviews his ideas about the family and presents a convincing argument for the rightful place of religious traditions in forming and reforming families. Browning's proposals about the family emerge from the Religion, Culture, and Family Project. This project, led by Browning and funded by the Lilly Foundation, set off an explosion of interest and research in the field of family studies. It directly launched dozens of books. And the aftershocks of that first wave of books and of the project itself will likely lead to dozens more books on marriage, children, divorce, etc. (For example, I am now writing two books that will be included in that number.) Browning has continued to play out the implications of the research of the Religion, Culture, and Family Project in his subsequent writing -- including a recent book, *Marriage and Modernization*, in which he calls for leaders and scholars of major religious traditions to formulate their view of marriage from the perspective of their religious tradition and in response to the challenges of modernization and globalization. Throughout these many works on marriage and family, Browning combines the roles of scholar and social reformer, eager not only to foster religious reflection on marriage and family but also to reform and revive actual marriages and families.

The impact of Browning's work on the family, both in his own writings and in his leadership of the Religion, Culture, and Family Project, is astonishing. In his role as scholar, Browning has clearly transformed the field. In his role as social reformer, Browning has, without doubt, transformed individual families (mine included) and may well be transforming -- or at least nudging-- social policies that affect many families.

### **A Few Questions and Observations**

I have three questions in response to Browning's essay and his larger project. 1) What role should evolutionary psychology and other sciences play in religious arguments? 2) What role should religious discourse play in public debate? 3) Is the 60 hour mother/father work week ideal? (If you are short on time, you might want to scroll down to the last question which strikes me as the most interesting by far.)

### **What Role Should Evolutionary Psychology and other Sciences Play in Religious Arguments?**

In this essay and more fully in other writings, Browning (along with many neo-conservatives writing about the family) turns to recent theories of evolutionary psychology about patterns of mating and parenting in humans, marmosets, gibbons, and other primates. Some family theorists (Blankenhorn and Popenoe for example) have drawn on the work of evolutionary psychologists such as Robert Trivers to emphasize the crucial role of fathers in child rearing and the unfortunate male tendency to sometimes abdicate responsibility for family. These evolutionary psychologists claim that a shift from mother-child families in the earliest human communities to father-mother-child families was a key development in human culture. Relying on these evolutionary psychologists, some recent family theorists claim that the absence of fathers from many contemporary families is a threat to human culture and should be opposed. (See David Blankenhorn's *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); David Popenoe's *Life without Father* (New York: Martin Pressler Press, 1996); and Robert Trivers' "Parental Investment and Sexual Selection, in B. Campbell (Ed.), *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man* (Chicago: Aldine, 1972).)

Browning, in the co-authored book *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997) and in subsequent writings including the essay under discussion here, draws on the theories of evolutionary psychology, in part because he believes that they are congruent with and help to make sense of some claims about the family that he

The Religion and Culture Web Forum comes from the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Persons seeking to copy or use this material must obtain permission from the Divinity School. 1025 East 58<sup>th</sup> St., Chicago, IL 60637. (773) 702-8230.

finds in classic Christian texts and in the emerging public consensus on these issues. (I will often refer to Browning alone and not the co-author team in the book *From Culture War to Common Ground*, because we are focusing here on an essay by Browning and because I am relying on a wide range of Browning's arguments that extend beyond the *Culture Wars* book.) Browning seeks throughout this project (and others) to draw on, as he says in this essay, "the best insights of contemporary human sciences." Of course, as new scientific theories develop, it is not always clear which ones offer the "best insights." The down side of relying on any one scientific theory is that scientific theories are sometimes proven false. And, indeed, some scholars claim that the evolutionary psychologists and the family scholars who appropriate their theories of evolutionary psychology are simply wrong--wrong on scientific grounds. (For a summary of these challenges to evolutionary psychology, see the controversial article by Louise B. Silverstein and Carl F. Auerbach, "Deconstructing the Essential Father," *The American Psychologist*, Volume 54, Number 6 (June 1999) at <http://www.sharedparenting.net/fact/silver99.htm>. For a summary of this article and links to lively, critical response to it, go to <http://www.copss.org/research/SandA/lunacy.htm>.)

I am not taking one side or the other in this controversy. I will leave the disputes over the mating and parenting habits of humans, marmosets, and gibbons, to others. That is not my area. (Although now that I think about it, I am not completely disinterested in the mating and parenting habits of humans!) In any case, I bring up this controversy because of the link with Browning's work. If the scientific theory on which Browning has drawn proves to be wrong – verifiably wrong, what does this do to his argument? Having relied on this research to make sense of the key role of fathers in the family and the difficulty of keeping some fathers involved in their families, what if the research is not actually true? If the refutation of this theory makes a significant difference in his argument, might it be better to make those arguments on some other grounds? If, on the other hand, the refutation of the scientific theory would make no significant difference to his argument, why use the theory in the first place? What purpose does it serve? I am not arguing that theologians should not appeal to the sciences, keeping instead to the confessional claims of the religious tradition. I am simply noting that relying on these theories, especially the highly disputed ones, brings its own problems.

### **What Role Should Religious Discourse Play in Public Debate?**

Browning insists on the important and appropriate place of religious language and traditions in public discourse on issues like marriage and family. Religious language and traditions are relevant in public policy discussions because of the overlap or "symmetry" between "religious and so-called secular thought." Although Browning supports the place of religious language in public discourse, he insists that when religious claims are brought to the public discussion, they must be couched in "publicly accessible" arguments. In this essay, Browning writes, "Of course, in contrast to confessional criteria that have their authority within their respective traditions, for explicitly religiously informed family theories to gain a hearing in policy debates, *they must advance their arguments in publicly accessible ways.*"

I agree with Browning on many points. I agree both that this symmetry or overlap exists between religious and "so-called secular" views of reality and that religious perspectives have a crucial place in public discourse. Of course, Christian faith or the faith of any other major religious tradition consists of *much more* than these overlapping claims. And in the end, that "more" often includes the most interesting, provocative, and essential things about these faith traditions. I believe that Browning and I would agree up to this point.

I question, however, the boundaries that Browning seems to place on adherents of religious traditions as they participate in public conversation. Browning writes in this essay under consideration here, "for explicitly religiously informed family theories to gain a hearing in policy debates, they must advance their arguments in publicly accessible ways." He continues, "This can happen when religiously informed perspectives present themselves as mixed discourses in which faith affirmations expressed in metaphor and narrative are interwoven with moral arguments about the right and the good that can be expressed in publicly recognizable forms of philosophy and social theory."

It is clear that Browning is not prohibiting explicitly religious language that is particular to one tradition. This “mixed discourse” that he proposes includes, along with the public arguments, “faith affirmations expressed in metaphor and narrative.” That would seem to allow for particular language and story from religious traditions. And yet when he insists that “religiously informed family theories” “must advance their arguments in publicly accessible ways” and calls for the move to appeal to arguments “that can be expressed in publicly recognizable forms of philosophy and social theory,” he is placing clear limits on the kinds of religious arguments that are appropriate in the public realm and the kinds of arguments that are privileged in this “public” discussion. I have several questions about these limits or boundaries.

First, what do we make of the fact that some religious traditions are more amenable to and can make better sense of this idea that religious and “so-called” secular theories have a certain symmetry? For example, because of their contrasting notions of creation and human capacities, some Roman Catholics would be in a better place to *make* these kinds of arguments, and just as important, to *make sense* of these arguments, than some Lutherans. Liberal Protestants (like Browning, for example), precisely because of the particular faith claims of Liberal Protestantism, will be in a better position to make these “publicly” accessible arguments than will, for example, some evangelical Protestants. Adherents of some religious traditions will find it easier than adherents of other religious traditions to appeal to arguments “that can be expressed in publicly recognizable forms of philosophy and social theory” or even to see the *need* to appeal to arguments “that can be expressed in publicly recognizable forms of philosophy and social theory.” In short, this model of public discourse and publicly accessible arguments seems to privilege some religious traditions.

Also, when I try to imagine this public discourse in a religiously and ethnically diverse society, I am not clear what constitutes a publicly accessible argument. Browning writes about Kant, but would Kant really be more congruent with a Shi-ite Muslim worldview (or more or accessible to a Shi-ite Muslim) worldview than, say, Luther or Augustine? Why are confessional claims more particular and objectionable than Kant or what Browning calls “publicly recognizable forms of philosophy and social theory?” Why are recent, debatable scientific arguments better suited to the public square than ancient confessional language and arguments? What makes certain arguments more accessible in certain cultural contexts? Perhaps when members of particular cultures explain what constitutes a “publicly accessible argument” in that culture, they reveal much more about the particular, located values of their own culture than they do about some generic public realm. Even the very appeal to “publicly accessible arguments” reveals something about the particular philosophical (and even theological) assumptions of our culture.

This issue is more complicated, of course, in a culture like the U.S. where particular religious language and arguments are a part of our political heritage and our earliest public discourse. Many of us like to think of our religious underpinnings as somehow generic but, of course, they emerged from particular branches of a particular religious tradition and are now influenced by various religious traditions.

In the end, it is difficult to make sense of religious arguments separated from their confessional criteria and language. It also may be a costly separation. When we place these kinds of limits on the arguments that are permitted in public discourse, the losses are significant. We compromise our capacity for understanding why adherents of a particular religious tradition believe and act in the ways they do. I am not arguing that confessional language and arguments be given a privileged place in public discourse, but simply that when they are included, people have a better—not a poorer—chance of understanding each other. Without the confessional language and arguments, it is difficult to understand the positions taken by religious people. If this language is included, but not privileged, discussion is enriched. And in the end, participants in the discussion will have to make their own assessments about what to do with those confessional arguments.

Certainly, it is difficult to make sense of what Christians are up to—especially in the areas of marriage and family—without explicitly confessional language and claims along with the criteria that stand behind them. One of the dangers of separating out those explicitly confessional claims and criteria is not only that adherents of other traditions will not be able to figure out what Christians are up to, but that Christians themselves will forget what they are up to. This seems to be precisely what has happened. Many Christians have become so taken with models of marriage and relationship emerging from the twentieth

century psychological sciences, that they have lost track of explicitly Christian models. Christian understandings of marriage and family can be fully understood only in the context of particular, confessional claims about sacrificial love, vocation, mission, ministry, and covenant.

### **Is the Sixty-Hour Mother/Father Work Week Ideal?**

One of the crucial categories for understanding family is the concept of vocation, including the relationship between various vocations—our vocation as parents, as spouses, as workers, as community members, and primarily, of course, as Christians. The category of vocation has helped me to reflect on Browning's proposal for a 60-hour mother/ father work week. This is one of the best-known proposals to come out of the Religion, Culture, and Family Project and its key book – *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*. As Browning writes, “of all the ideas in *Culture Wars* . . . this is the one people always pick up on and want to talk about.” (See Pamela Mendels, “Should Working Parents Work Less?” *Business Week*, December 27, 2000.)

Browning and his colleagues lift up as ideal the combined 60-hour workweek for mothers and fathers of young children. In this ideal work week, the mother and father would divide employment either in a 30 hour/30 hour or 40 hour/20 hour pattern. Both would be involved in the public activities and challenges of employment and both would have time to invest in their home and children. For single parents, they recommend a 30 hour work week. According to Browning, the 60 hour mother/father work-week or 30 hour single parent work-week would limit the market's encroachment on family life. (Although this discussion has tended to focus on the work hours of parents with children still in the home, I believe it should be extended to include employees without children. Excessive employment hours can be detrimental to any employees, not just to employed parents with young children.)

To help make these shorter work hours possible (both for poorer single parents and for poorer couples with children), Browning proposes additional social support to provide a living wage, health care, and other benefits. (I have to add that this proposed social support to make lower work hours possible for single parents and poorer couples with children seems much more radical and unlikely now, in our current political and economic climate, than it did when it was first proposed.)

This ideal 60-hour work week for couples is similar to a proposal by the Institute for American Values recommending that parents work no more than 60 hours a week combined in their place of employment. (See “Marriage in America: A Report to the Nations,” Council on Families, 1995 found at [http://www.americanvalues.org/html/r-marriage\\_in\\_america.html](http://www.americanvalues.org/html/r-marriage_in_america.html)). The difference is that the Browning proposal describes the 60 hours not as an upper limit but as an ideal for the combined hours of employment for mother and father. Unlike the Institute for American Values, Browning is clear that it is *better* for *both* partners to be employed. The 60 hours is not a recommended cap if both partners happen to be employed; 60 hours with both partners employed is the ideal. Thus, it is less than ideal when spouses follow a common pattern in which one spouse is employed full time while the other spouse is not employed but works without pay to care for home, children, extended family, church, and wider community.

I have never been convinced that the combined 60 hours (30/30 or 20/40) of employment is better than a 40/0 arrangement. (I should tell you here that this is not only a matter of academic debate for me. My husband, Len, and I have two pre-school girls. For many reasons—too many to cover here—we decided that we would rather live on one income than have two full-time jobs. Len quit his job as a hospital chaplain and is now a full-time dad while also volunteering as a spiritual director and group facilitator at our church. A key influence on our decision was Browning's research on the family and the need for parents to decrease work hours.) I see no compelling advantage of the mother/father 40/20 or 30/30 work week model over the 40/0 model (where one parent is not employed). As long as both partners have enough time in their home and with their children, as long as the financial needs are met (including the long-term financial security of the non-employed partner), and as long as they both find meaning in their work – paid or unpaid, I see no reason to privilege one model over the other.

Clearly, not all families can afford to live on one salary. For parents with low wage jobs, one forty hour a week position will rarely cover the necessities for a family; the additional employment hours are necessary until we enact a living wage or provide greater social supports. But if a family can afford to live on one salary and to have one parent that is not employed, then the opportunities for ministry and service are extraordinary. The person freed from paid employment may be able to do things in the community that would never have happened otherwise – starting a tutoring program in a poorer school or offering services to homeless families, for example. Just thinking through my own extended family, I can think of many examples of service that would never had been rendered if both mother and father had been employed full-time. There are many crucial tasks in our society for which no pay is given. And in light of the recent steep decline of community and community service detailed in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* and in light of the recent budget cuts in services for the poor, children, and the elderly, the need for volunteer service is particularly great in our time.

I have asked Don Browning if paid employment is necessary in this ideal mother/father work week. In our conversations, he emphasized that it was best for the family if each parent is employed (either on the 20/40 or 30/30 pattern). This is consistent with his written statements about the ideal 60-hour mother/father work week.

Why is this 60-hour week ideal? One argument that Browning and his colleagues have offered to support this model is that families are happier with both parents employed in a 30/30 or 20/40 pattern. In support of this proposal, Browning cites a study showing that families with one full time and one part time employed worker report higher levels of marital happiness and general well-being than either families with both spouses employed full-time or families with one spouse employed full-time and the other “non-employed.” (See, for example, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, p 317.)

Other researchers dispute the claim that wives who are employed part-time are happier than wives who are not employed. (These studies, by the way, tend to focus on wives' employment not husbands'.) Some studies suggest, for example, that women's marital quality is diminished by employment—whether part or full-time. Some claim that wives with part-time employment and wives with no outside employment report similar levels of marital quality, while wives with full-time jobs report lower levels of marital quality. (In these same studies, the marital quality of the husband, on the other hand, is not significantly changed by the wife's employment status.) (See Lina Guzman, “Effects of Wives Employment on Marital Happiness,” Working Paper # 85, National Survey of Families and Households, October 2000. Available at [www.ssc.wisc.edu/cde/nsfhw/nsfh85.pdf](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/cde/nsfhw/nsfh85.pdf)) In addition, the impact of maternal employment on young children is also disputed. (See for example, Waldfogel, Jane, Wen-Jui Han, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. “The Effects of Early Maternal Employment on Child Cognitive Development.” *Demography*.) We cannot say with certainty that it is good—or bad—for parents or their young children when both parents are employed. I am not taking one side or the other, but simply noting that the research on employment and marital and family happiness is disputed. It is not at all clear that the 60 hour combined proposal is the model that brings the greatest happiness for the family or for the individual members of the family.

But even if the studies yielded clear results and the 60-hour mother/father work week generally led to the greatest family happiness, would that be a compelling reason to support this ideal? If the study Browning cites turned out to be the most accurate, I would want to know why happiness is linked to employed work as opposed to unpaid volunteer work caring for others.

Perhaps some people are happier with a paying job than with non-paid community and family service because we live in a culture that values people not by the depth of their commitment to God and neighbor but by the numbers on their monthly paycheck. We live in a culture that values our quantifiable contribution to the GNP over our unpaid contribution to the Kingdom of God. Perhaps having absorbed the values of our culture, we value ourselves and others by the standards of money, status, and paid employment. And we like the extra money. This is very American, very middle class, and perhaps even very human; it is certainly not very Christian (although, many Christians, including me, are guilty of these tendencies). In a culture that places a premium on making money, it would be no surprise if people—including many Christians—were happier when they are making money. If many people in our culture are happier with part-time employment than with part-time service without pay, the proper response of the

The Religion and Culture Web Forum comes from the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Persons seeking to copy or use this material must obtain permission from the Divinity School. 1025 East 58<sup>th</sup> St., Chicago, IL 60637. (773) 702-8230.

church is not to encourage people to get jobs so that they will be happier in this money driven, work obsessed culture; the proper response of the church is to challenge that system of values and, indeed, to encourage people to live in opposition to it. (Of course, there are also many admirable reasons beyond money and status that lead people to love their employment. But the focus in these cases is not primarily on the money—if it is not necessary for the well-being of the worker and his or her family—but on the value of the work whether paid or unpaid.)

Browning and his colleagues propose the 60-hour mother/father work week to combat market encroachment into the family. I am simply arguing that they could take the fight against market encroachment one step further by refusing to privilege paid over unpaid work. This is no minor point. By privileging paid work over unpaid service to community, Browning shortchanges a crucial part of Christian family life—the vocation of the family and its members to transform the world through sacrificial service for neighbor. There is much more to public life outside of the home than employment. The vocation of family members extends beyond the family to care for others—especially those others who are poor. And service to and with the poor rarely pays well; indeed, it rarely pays at all. It is costly.

In her book *Family: A Christian Social Perspective*, Lisa Sowle Cahill uplifts African-American families as models for altruistic service. While Anglo families often focus on the survival and fulfillment of the immediate family and its members, African-American families are more likely to find meaning in service to and relationship with those outside of the immediate family (i.e., extended family, neighbors, church community, etc.)

This is an extremely important corrective to much of the recent U.S. discussion about families. We have tended to focus on what family forms and family behaviors produce well-adjusted children, better marriages, happier parents and children, etc. Our arguments about parents' employment, about two-parent homes, about single parenthood, and about divorce tend to focus on the question—How will this family form or behavior affect the happiness and well-being of the members of the family, especially the children? This is, of course, extremely important. We need to know, for example, that excessive employment hours for mothers or fathers are bad for the well-being of the family and its members. But if we stop there, we are shortchanging the family and the larger society. We need a larger vision.

And, of course, one of the many ironies in the family debate is that the research tends to focus on what employment patterns are good for particular families—often middle class dual income families—without giving much thought to how their employment will affect other families. As middle class family members work longer hours at their employment, not only do they have less time for service to neighbor, including the poor, they also come to rely on the low wages and hard work of poorer workers to make their own longer hours possible. When middle class parents are employed longer hours outside the home, low wage workers take up the slack—cleaning the homes of the middle class families and caring for their children. Sometimes what is best for the immediate well-being of middle class families may not be best for poorer families, for the Kingdom, or even, in the end, for the true well-being of those middle class families. If we are all one body, then the well-being of the individual members is dependent on the health and well-being of the whole. (I think Amy Laura Hall, in her response to Browning's essay, is right to push critical familism to be more radical in its concern for poorer families.)

My larger point is that the family discussion is often focused on the happiness of the individual family and that many families in our culture are inward focused to their own peril. It is good for family members and for their well-being and their happiness to remember that the family has a larger purpose than its own survival, well-being, and happiness. And, more important, even if it were not good for their immediate well-being and happiness to remember that larger purpose, it would still be good. It would still be the right thing to do. (And if Cahill is right, isn't it interesting that some of the least self-centered families—poorer African-American families—are among those who might more easily be excused for being self-centered because they often have a tougher challenge simply to survive, to feed their families, and to withstand the blows of racism?)

The Religion and Culture Web Forum comes from the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Persons seeking to copy or use this material must obtain permission from the Divinity School. 1025 East 58<sup>th</sup> St., Chicago, IL 60637. (773) 702-8230.

It is difficult to understand this argument (that family members have a larger purpose beyond the family) without knowing something about Christian notions of vocation, sacrificial love, service, and righteousness. These particular, confessional claims are crucial for understanding the arguments that Christians make about human purpose, about responsibility, and even about the nature of families. Returning to my second point earlier in this response, non-Christians will never fully understand the public arguments that Christians make without hearing these particular, confessional Christian claims and the criteria that stand behind them. More important, Christians will never fully understand—much less live out—their own claims about human purpose and responsibility without hearing and speaking these particular Christian claims and arguments. (Of course, you could repeat these same sentences and replace the word “Christians” with the names of other religious traditions. This is not just about Christianity.) To return to my first two points from the early passages of this essay, confessional claims and criteria are at least as credible, at least as relevant, and much harder to disprove than the disputed scientific claims of evolutionary psychology. If evolutionary psychology can have a place in the public discussion, surely confessional arguments and criteria can too.

Perhaps our tendency to forget about the larger purpose of the family and to focus instead on the well-being of individual members inside the family is rooted in our forgetfulness of Christian language and ideas. We have become so proficient at the public discourse of the market and our shared language of capitalism, that we have grown deaf or indifferent to the claims of our faith that stand over and against the values of the market. Only through the *critical* reinvigoration of our Christian tradition and its ideas about marriage and family, and only through more faithful living in relation to that critically reappropriated tradition, will Christians have a chance to form and maintain authentically Christian families that have a radical vision of service and transformation that goes beyond their own well-being and beyond the values of the market.

And of course, this is exactly what Browning and his colleagues are trying to do—to limit the encroachment of market forces into the family and into our ideas about family and to critically reinvigorate Christian traditions concerning marriage and family. One of the primary reasons that the Religion, Culture, and Family Project has been so astonishingly successful, is that Browning sets up groups and discussions so that they will foster critical discussion. He seems more interested in creating the conditions for arguments to emerge and then to be engaged and reengaged than he is in nailing down the one best argument. I raise these questions in my response here not to argue against Browning and his colleagues, but to join in their efforts. My questions and arguments are not a fundamental challenge to Browning and his colleagues but, in the end, an extension of their arguments.