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Holy Families? Religion, Sacrifice and Family Violence

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This essay examines how family violence, the divinization of the family and the religious call to sacrifice are interrelated. Could a Christian-theological perspective on the meaning of the cross in some way prevent violence from being a legitimization of family violence? Drawing on René Girard's thought, the author shows how the cross of Jesus can be liberating for people in the light of the danger of family violence.

In this contribution we distinguish two phenomena in the 'relational landscape' of the late-modern Western world. First, we speak with Ulrich Beck of the 'secular religion of love' and refer to the glorification of the intense experience of love feelings and the sense of belonging. Secondly, we refer to a counter-movement, where these intense love feelings are criticized. We discuss the approach of relations and families, where marriage, aimed at life-long duration and based on mutual self-sacrificial love, is central. We will show how both approaches can be seen as an 'idolatry of love' that has little critical potential to remark and to stop family violence. Speaking about sacrifice in a Christian context with reference to the cross is not without its dangers. We will develop an alternative approach of the 'cross' that tries to avoid 'idolatry' and 'idealization' and we will demonstrate how the remembrance of the cross can help us take a critical stance towards family violence.

The Secular Religion of Love: Idealization of Relationships

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck speaks of the 'secular religion of love' as a characteristic of late-modern society.¹ The Christian tradition is losing its relevance, and in its place appears a kind of post-religious adoration of 'love,' so writes Beck. Grand institutional traditions have had their day and are replaced by the smaller utopia of 'love' that ignores large spiritual and philosophical systems. This utopia of love is directed at the individual.² Beck sees signs of this 'deification' of love in people's pursuit

1. U. Beck, 'Die irdische Religion der Liebe', in *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe*, U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 222–66.
2. Ibid., 223.

of immediate self-development³ and in their search for happiness in all forms of love and sexual relationships:⁴ apart from classical marriage, one might think surely also of LAT (living-apart-together)-relations, unmarried cohabitation, short-lived relationships, and so on. Proper to this glorification of love is the orientation towards the self, one's own feelings, spontaneity, totalizing and immanent meanings, where there is not much interest in justification and critical reflection.⁵ Characteristic of this love are the huge demands and expectations it makes: it has to be perfect and authentic.⁶

Divorce and the many relational splits are the other side of this 'modern medaille': idealizing love leads to increased divisions.⁷ Marriage loses its stability, but not its attractiveness.⁸ Beck speaks about 'romantic love,' as love without barriers. Love is a form of 'applied reading of novels, lived out pop-song lyrics, biographical-therapeutic Ego-centered philosophy.'⁹ In family science studies, one often reads that the ideal of romantic love is the reason for the great number of divorces. The Belgian family sociologist Thérèse Jacobs remarks that romantic love has been popular in all of society (not only in the bourgeois class) since the beginning of the twentieth century. The number of divorces has increased spectacularly only since the seventies. Could it be then, that the idea of romantic love itself has developed?¹⁰ Jacobs answers 'yes' to this question and refers to the theory of Anthony Giddens, who distinguishes the romantic love ideal and the concept of the 'pure relationship'.¹¹ The romantic ideal of love is directed towards a 'we' and a certain 'durability,' whereas in the idea of 'pure relationship' it is personal wellbeing that is central and forms the permanent basis for an evaluation of the relationship. The concept of a 'pure relationship' explains more clearly the phenomena that Beck wishes to describe than does 'romantic love.' A pure relationship is based on a contract that can be broken at any moment on the basis of feelings of love for someone else or a new relationship.¹²

Beck clearly describes the human quest for intimacy and authenticity. However, the interpretation of this phenomenon as 'religion' is controversial. From a theological point of view, both Beck's concept of religion and the

3. See Ibid., 232: 'In der Religion gilt der Satz: es gibt ein Leben nach dem Tod; in der Liebe gilt der Satz: es gibt ein Leben vor dem Tod.'

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 225.

6. See also X. Lacroix, *L'avenir, c'est l'autre. Dix conférences sur l'amour et la famille* (Paris: Cerf, 2000), 91: 'Du couple, pourrait-on dire, tout est attendu: harmonie, équilibre, entente sexuelle, intellectuelle et culturelle, bonne communication, transparence même, parfois. Une des raisons en est qu'il est devenu l'ultime lieu de reconnaissance, d'égalité, de repos (attendu du moins!) dans un monde de plus en plus compliqué, concurrentiel, impitoyable.'

7. Beck, 'Die irdische Religion der Liebe', 228.

8. Ibid., 227.

9. Ibid., 250: 'So betrachtet, ist Liebe angewandte Romanlektüre, gelebter Schlagerext, biographisch-therapeutisch gewendete Ich-Philosophie.'

10. T. Jacobs and A. Bauwens, 'Liefdesconcepten in Vlaanderen anno 1998,' in *Jaarboek seksualiteit, relaties, geboorteregeling*, CGSO (Gent: CGSO, 2000), 73–95, at 71.

11. Ibid. See also A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge, Polity Press: 1997).

12. Jacobs and Bauwens, 'Liefdesconcepten in Vlaanderen anno 1998,' 78.

phenomenon of the glorification of love, which Beck describes as a sociologist, can be critiqued. In fact the concept of 'idolatry' or 'pseudo-religion' is more suitable for understanding the phenomenon of the idealizing of love than the concept of 'religion' as such.

'Love' becomes a 'contemporary post-traditional religion' and has the function of transforming people's world-experience.¹³ Love makes it possible for people to escape the pressures and the dullness of life.¹⁴ The glorification of love has its roots not only in the increasing individualization and the cult of the 'I' of late-modernity, but also in the growing abstractions that characterize reality. The experience of love is concrete and emotional, and as such is different to mere statistics, technical formulas, and a world that is devoid of experience, according to Beck.¹⁵ People try to find in love a kind of certainty that they do not find in a world characterized by ambivalence and doubt.¹⁶ Love is seen as 'imaginary flowers on the chain,' to use the expression of Karl Marx. Love is, as also is Christian religion, very demanding, so writes Beck. In the search for (so-called real) love, some people leave their children – as in the case of a divorce, for instance, whereby one who is discontented with the actual relationship, searches for a more 'authentic' form of love with someone else.¹⁷

The late-modern experience of love and sexuality produces a kind of religion, as has been the case in other cultures and at other periods, although not in an institutionalized form. Beck considers religion as something functional: people need a transcendent power to be able to interpret their intense feelings and experiences so that they can feel something greater than their limitedness. Such a functionalist approach to religion, in the line of the sociologist Durkheim, can be criticized from a theological perspective.¹⁸ Is not religion more than a function of human needs, or an answer to people and society? Does religion not appeal precisely to human responsibility and contain always a certain 'transcendent mystery,' in the sense that it can never be grasped fully in terms of human existence?

The sociological theory that holds that each society produces a form of religion and that there will always be various forms of religion that help society to establish its norms and worldviews,¹⁹ reduces the complexity of

13. E. Borgman, 'Liefde als geloof in verbondenheid. Een open toekomst voor de katholieke huwelijks-theologie,' in *De ordening van het verlangen. Vriendschap, verwantschap en (homo) seksualiteit in joodse en christelijke tradities*, eds A. M. Korte, F. Vosman and T. de Wit (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1999), 87–105, at 87. See also U. Beck, 'Die irdische Religion der Liebe,' 231: 'Die Bedeutungsanziehung der Welt werden aufgebrochen, Wirklichkeiten anders und neu erstürmt. ... Die Liebenden sehen anders und sind daher anders, werden anders, erschließen andere Wirklichkeiten.'

14. Cf. Borgman, 'Liefde als geloof in verbondenheid,' 87.

15. Ibid., 235: 'Je abstrakter die Wirklichkeit, desto attraktiver die Liebe. Liebe ist ein Güterbad der Erfahrung.'

16. Cf. Beck, 'Die irdische Religion der Liebe,' 231.

17. Ibid., 229.

18. Cf. E. Borgman, 'Liefde als geloof in verbondenheid,' 87.

19. L. Oosterveen, 'Ontbindingen en verbindingen. Kansen voor religieuze gemeenschapsvorming in een postmoderne tijd,' in *Bouwen met los zand. Theologische reflecties op*

religions and society, and specifically love-relationships and people's life styles. The tension between 'religion' and the 'normal chaos of love' (Beck) is not a theme. In the experience of the 'normal chaos of love' an openness to transcendence is lacking. It is exactly this openness for the 'other' that is proper to the Christian tradition – and that makes it possible to look in a critical way at the situation described by Beck.

The term 'idolatry' offers some possibilities for evaluating the 'secular religion of love.' Here idolatry is found in the deification, or making absolute, of the secular, defined and limited reality. Idolatry means that something becomes so demanding and dominating that it requires exclusivity for itself.²⁰ Idolatry in its secular form can be seen as the attachment to a reality that does not deserve this exclusive attachment because it is not divine.²¹ Idolatry can be described as deification with a specific form of 'transmission': 'the chosen "object" is characterized by attributes of God.'²² The object – in this case 'romantic love' – takes on a pseudo-religious character.²³

One may speak of 'idolatry' when the 'wrong object' is worshipped, but also when 'the right objects are adored in a wrong way.'²⁴ Surely, this second meaning may be applied in the context of 'love.' The search for security, for consolation against the coldness of society (the idea of the family as a safe haven), and for an ultimate experience in love, is too weighty an expectation to be placed upon the 'object' of love. Even in the Christian tradition God cannot take on this role of the one who gives security,²⁵ consolation, or the ultimate experience.²⁶ Nevertheless, belief in God and in the Christian tradition can help one deal with the insecurity found in the 'idolatry of love.'

The idolatry of love cannot only be seen as the wrong worship of a good object, namely love, but in a certain sense it is also the worship of a wrong object. We do not mean that love is not valuable. When Christians name God 'love,' they see love as really important, and when Catholics call marriage a sacrament, they express that God blesses the love of marriage.²⁷ Passionate

verschil en verbondenheid, eds M. Kalsky, A. Lascaris and L. Oosterveen (DSTS-cahier, 7), (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1997), 29–48, at 36.

20. R. Burggraeve et al., 'Waarachtig godsgeloof en vormen van religieuze idolatrie,' in *Van madonna tot Madonna. In de ban van beelden, idolen en afgoden*, eds R. Burggraeve et al. (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2002), 19–51, at 39.

21. R. Burggraeve et al., 'Waarachtig humanisme en vormen van profane idolatrie,' in *Van madonna tot Madonna. In de ban van beelden, idolen en afgoden*, eds R. Burggraeve et al. (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2002), 191–232, at 191.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Burggraeve et al., 'Waarachtig godsgeloof,' 40.

25. Cf. D. Pollefeyt, 'De fatale kracht van het fanatisme. Een radicaal-christelijk perspectief,' in *Ethiek en passie. Over de radicaliteit van christelijk engagement*, R. Burggraeve (Tiel: Lannoo, 2000), 277–301, 298.

26. Cf. L. Boeve, 'Religieuze ervaring als onderbreking. De plaats van ervaring in de geloofsreflectie,' in *God. Hoe voelt dat?* ed. L. Boeve (Leuven, Davidsfonds, 2003), 94–135, at 130.

27. See the marriage theology of Vatican II, as presented in *Gaudium et Spes*, nr. 47–52.

and erotic love, as described by Beck, however, differs qualitatively from the (correctly interpreted) sacramental love of marriage and from divine love. The 'love' that Beck describes as 'a religion' is merely motivated by (intense, but fragile) expressions of feeling and high expectation; it leads quickly to disappointments that are very difficult to accept. This so-called religion of love knows no limits, norms, grace or objectivity.

It is this kind of love – with its high expectations and deep feelings – that plays a crucial role in explaining the spiral of violence in partner relationships. The psychotherapist Justine Van Lawick explains that ideas of 'romantic love' (in the sense of 'intense feelings') can be the starting point of violence.²⁸ After some time, a partner discovers that the other is not exactly what he or she thought the other would be. The idea of romantic love is shattered. This can give rise to the first physical blow. Most often reconciliation follows, but over time, the romantic ideal appears to be increasingly an illusion, and further physical and verbal abuse follows. The high and often illusionary expectations of the other – mostly in short-term relationships – can lead to serious violence because people often lack a framework for coping with the fact that the partner and the relationship are not perfect.

The 'romantic love' that characterizes 'pure relationships,' in Giddens's terms, can be seen as idolatrous. It is a kind of 'love' that lacks some features of what we might call 'ethical qualified love.' This ethically qualified human love is not necessarily limited to marriage, but can also be found in couples living together outside marriage. In this love it is not the 'I' and the fulfilment of personal happiness that are central, but the 'other,' the 'we-relation' and the relation to a third. The partner is not only a reflection of one's own desire, but becomes a real 'other' that is valued in his or her being as 'other.'²⁹ This love is not enclosed in itself, but is open to the outside world, to children, to a broader community and to God.³⁰ In this ethically qualified love, it is not only feelings, but also the will, that has an important role to play. Characteristic of such love is an orientation towards durability – and therefore much more is needed than overwhelming emotions and passions. It is also significant that this qualified love does not have to be perfect, but may rest on the belief that it is part of a greater love, namely, the love of God. A qualified love is a love that does not function merely for one's own wellbeing – although one's own happiness may be an important side effect.

It is not only forms of unmarried cohabitation, LAT-relationships and non-committal relationships that may be characterized by the (functional) orientation towards one's own happiness. Thinking also about marriage in terms of 'personal happiness and wellbeing' runs the risk of functionalizing

28. M. Groen and J. van Lawick, *Intieme oorlog. Over de kwetsbaarheid van familierelaties* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1998, 2003), 36–77.

29. Cf. R. Burggraave, *Zinnvolle seksualiteit. Een integraal-relationale achtergrondvisie in christelijk perspectief* (Leuven-Amersfoort: Acco, 1985, 1994), 59–61.

30. Cf. X. Lacroix, *L'avenir, c'est l'autre. Dix conférences sur l'amour et la famille* (Paris: Cerf, 2000), 101–6.

love, and perhaps even deifying it. We could refer here to publications that enumerate the many positive effects of marriage for couples and the individual.³¹ Although these effects may be real, it is important not to reduce the value of marriage to these positive effects. The 'secular religion of love' is not limited to one particular relation or family form. But some relational forms (such as marriage or a family with children) offer structurally more possibilities for the qualitative love that we have described above, than other relational forms, such as short-term relations oriented towards sexual pleasure, whereby the 'ego' and sexual enjoyment are central.

The Family as Highest Value

Empirical research shows that young people who call themselves believers and are related to a church often place a high value on the family. In 2002 we conducted our own research on young people of 17 years old. We found that people who called themselves believers scored higher, on average, on the scale of 'traditional family thinking' and lower on the scale of 'non-traditional family thinking' than people who did not call themselves believers.³² The German ethicist Karl Gabriel discusses the research of the German sociologist Jürgen Zinnecker from 1993,³³ distinguishing four different styles of youth religiosity:³⁴ (1) the sub-cultural style of religiosity, whereby young people focus on alternative symbols, often from the religious culture, oriented towards things 'evil,' negative and dead; (2) the counter-cultural, self-referential style of religiosity, characterized by mixing and matching, syncretism and experiment; (3) the Christian-prophetic style of religiosity, whereby young people are critically engaged and socially active; and finally (4) the 'style of religiosity of those who are centered on the family.'³⁵ Attention to the family as an institution often goes together with attention to institutionalized religion.³⁶ Gabriel refers to the 'quasireligious

31. Cf. L. J. Waite and M. Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); J. Wall et al., eds, *Marriage, Health, and the Professions: If Marriage Is Good for You, What Does This Mean For Law, Medicine, Ministry, Therapy, Business?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

32. Cf. D. Pollefeys et al., *Godsdienstonderwijs uitgedaagd. Jongeren en (inter)levensbeschouwelijke vorming in gezin en onderwijs. Opzet, methode en resultaten van empirisch onderzoek bij leerkrachten rooms-katholieke godsdienst en leerlingen van de derde graad secundair onderwijs in Vlaanderen* (Instrumenta theologica, 26), (Leuven: Peeters-Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, 2004), 412.

33. J. Zinnecker, 'Jugend, Kirche und Religion. Aktuelle empirische Ergebnisse und Entwicklungstendenzen,' in *Religionsunterricht im Abseits? Das Spannungsfeld Jugend-Schule-Religion*, eds G. Hilger and G. Reilly (München: Kösel, 1993), 112–43.

34. K. Gabriel, 'Jugend, Religion und Kirche im gesellschaftlichen Modernisierungsprozess,' in K. Gabriel and H. Hobelsberger (eds) *Jugend, Religion und Modernisierung. Kirchliche Jugendarbeit als Suchbewegung* (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1994), 53–73.

35. *Ibid.*, 66–7.

36. Zinnecker, 'Jugend, Kirche und Religion,' 14: 'Kirchlichkeit und Familienorientierung gehen in der Moderne eine enge Symbiose ein.'

familial world of sense.³⁷ In this interpretation, love and relations take on a quasi-religious character, but unlike Beck, Gabriel speaks about institutional forms of love and relationships. Gabriel and Zinnecker remark that the church functions almost as a service institution for the family in this style of family religiosity: the church offers rituals to give meaning to experiences in the family.³⁸ In this case, there is room still for religion, and there is, on the one hand, a certain distance between the Christian religion and the church, and, on the other hand, between the family and the experiences of relationship. Nevertheless, relationships and love maintain a very high status, and an institutionalized religion is not valued merely in itself, but in its function for the family. In spite of the differences in the openness to institutions, this form of religion is somewhat similar to the 'secular religion of love' described by Beck. Like Beck, Gabriel and Zinnecker use a functional concept of religion, whereby everything that is 'sacred' for people can be seen as a form of religion.³⁹ At the center of the new holiness is now the family itself, writes Zinnecker.⁴⁰ He is referring to research that shows what Germans consider to be sacred. Family relations were the element considered most sacred by them. Central in this attention to the family is the child and the mother as protector of the family. Zinnecker writes: 'Through this tendency of "deification of children and women" the divine is taken into the family itself, instead of it; as in the trans-mitted Christian dualism, meeting the human person as the Other.'⁴¹

Characteristic of this 'family-religion' is that the transcendent as such is not considered powerful. Instead it is important that experiences play a role in the religious style. If the family experience is a norm in itself that determines everything else, one is going too far, and critical reflection on relational experience becomes very difficult. It is, however, not preferable to criticize and to replace the discussed forms of family religiosity with a dualistic form of religion that has nothing to do with experiences. In that case, family and religion cannot challenge or influence each other and a critical questioning of the institutions is not possible, unless on the basis of one's own norms of 'functioning well.'

The Sacred Family and Sacrifice

In the case where the family becomes particularly 'sacred,' the danger of family violence is also as real as in the various forms of the 'secular religion

37. Gabriel, 'Jugend, Religion und Kirche,' 66: 'Neu am Religiositätsstil der Familienzentrierten ist der starke Bezug auf die quasi-religiöse familiäre Sinnwelt.'

38. Ibid.: 'Im Rückgriff auf die kirchliche Symbole und Rituale macht sich die familien-zentrierte Religiosität der Kirche als Dienstleisterin und Anbieterin von Leistungen im religiös-rituellen Bereich zunutze. Im Verhältnis zwischen Kirche und Familie bedeutet dies eine deutliche Veränderung der bisherigen Machtbalance.'

39. Zinnecker, 'Jugend, Kirche und Religion,' 140.

40. Ibid.: 'Im Zentrum der neuen Heiligkeit steht jetzt die Familie selbst.'

41. Ibid.: 'Durch diese Tendenz zur "Deifizierung von Kindern und Frauen" wird das Göttliche in die Familie selbst hineingenommen, statt daß es, wie im tradierten christlichen Dualismus, den Menschen als das Andere gegenübertritt.'

of love.' When the family as such, mostly in the form of marriage and children, is seen as an untouchable value by the outside world, by family members and by the church, the risk exists that family members will want to keep all injustice and violence that occurs inside the family a secret. A woman or a child often receives the message to sacrifice her or himself for the sake of the family: to behave in a 'proper' way and tolerate the violence in order to safeguard the family. As children are existentially loyal to their parents (Nagy)⁴² and partners who are beaten often lack self-confidence, most will want really to keep the family intact, because it is, in spite of the violence, valuable for them.

The risk exists that religion might be used as a means to legitimize power balances in the family that can become very oppressive. The idea that the family is 'sacred' often emphasizes the traditional, marriage-based family, which usually goes together with a pattern of traditional roles. Women are much more likely to become victims of partner violence than men. One reason, among others, is inequality in the family: women who become victims of partner violence often do not work outside the home, do not have money of their own, and feel emotionally dependent upon their partners.⁴³ It is this dependency of some women that causes a common feeling of helplessness when exposed to violence. We do not agree with those theories that suggest that a good family is necessarily characterized by a complementarity of husband and wife – in the place of a more equal task division – since families based on equality lead more easily to divorce. It may be true that families based on equality run a higher risk of divorce, but families based on inequality, defended on the basis of the traditional family ideal, run a greater risk of family violence.⁴⁴ When people stay together in unequal relationships, it is often founded on relations of dependency and power, rather than a real choice or a feeling of cohesion. The Catholic American history professor, Elisabeth Fox-Genovese, states that families should be based on marriage, complementarity, love and self-sacrifice.⁴⁵ She reacts against a vision of man and woman as equal, whereby 'rights' play a role in families. To think in terms of individual family rights means to prefer egoistic self-interest, suggests Fox-Genovese. In spite of the value of promoting the family, this theory is in danger of sacrificing the family as such and overlooking the possibility of violence and injustice in a family. A theology of the family should be able to signal forms of injustice in families and to stop violence.

In the family values movement, as found in the United States, marriage is promoted very strongly. Although we do not want to question the value

42. Cf. I. Boszormenyi-Nagy and G. M. Spark, *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity in Intergenerational Family Therapy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

43. Cf. S. Opebebeck, *Afhankelijkheid en het beëindigen van partnergeweld* (Leuven: Garant, 1993).

44. A. Lehner-Hartmann, *Wider das Schweigen und Vergessen. Gewalt in der Familie* (Innsbruck-Wenen: Tyrolia, 2002), 210–13.

45. E. Fox-Genovese, 'Women and the Future of the Family,' in J. W. Skillen and M. N. Voll (eds) *Women and the Future of the Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 13–45.

of marriage, we wish to warn against a dualistic approach to families and against a promotion of heroic virtues. Some authors see families based on marriage as automatically good, while those where marriage is lacking are immediately bad, irrespective of the quality of the relationship. The defence of marriage is often connected with the argument that one needs a strong character, that the will has to be formed and that sacrifices should be made. Heroic virtues such as lifelong faithfulness and sacrifice are promoted.⁴⁶ In this way, one may lose sight of the ambiguity of daily life. In daily life, people must constantly make difficult choices, which are not always heroic per se. Heroic virtues do not take seriously the daily ambiguous life of most people. They are directed towards a 'chosen' minority that can function as an example of good life. The question is whether the majority of people are helped by this kind of ethics. Those who do not reach the norm do not receive much support. This vision perpetuates a sense of guilt for those who do not live in families based on marriage. Additionally, those who are married are not encouraged to think about their own (little) evil instincts that they can act upon within the so-called perfect, heroic family. Because of a stress on the ideal of sacrifice, one will not be inclined to see the dangers of sacrifice for oneself or for other family members.⁴⁷

Moral activism, promoting strong families based on marriage and eagerly enduring sacrifices for the sake of the family, seems, at first sight, to be the opposite of the tendency we described above, namely the 'secular religion of love.' However, there are also similarities. Those who strive for the 'perfect feeling of love and intimacy' and those who promote the 'strong family' want to be sure that their private life is 'safe' and 'OK.' Both movements implicitly start from the idea that people have to create happiness themselves. The idea of creating a 'perfect lifestyle' – whatever 'perfect' may be here – does not leave much room for trust or an openness for the unexpected, or even for God, to work in the midst of chaotic family relationships, as many Bible stories bear witness.

With the American moral theologian, Christine Gudorf, we stress the dangers and the one-sidedness of a sacrificial language concerning family ethics. Parents sometimes use the sacrificial language themselves to refer to their merits as parents. They want to be the 'perfect parents' and then claim to give up everything for the child and sacrifice themselves for the sake of the child. But this attitude is dangerous because the deficiencies inherent in any parent-child relationship are not seen and because the child is made dependent upon the parent 'who does everything for the

46. On a 'heroic concept of one's own identity' in the context of marriage, see D. McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home: A Theology of the Household* (London: SCM, 2001), 173. For a theoretical critique of the concept of 'heroic virtues,' see D. Pollefeys, 'Victims of Evil or Evil of Victims?' in H. J. Cargas (ed.), *Problems Unique to the Holocaust* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 67–82, at 68–9.

47. Cf. C. E. Gudorf, 'Sacrificial and Parental Spiritualities,' in A. Carr and M. S. Van Leeuwen (eds) *Religion, Feminism and the Family* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 294–309.

child.⁴⁸ The possibility of the child experiencing injustice increases in this way. The sacrificial language and the romanticization of the family function are then ways to hide failures, forms of injustice, one's own limits, and so on. In society we find a pedagogical norm that supports this use of sacrificial language, which goes: 'Parents/educators are supposed to engage themselves for the development of their children, whereby they shouldn't expect something back.'⁴⁹ Implicitly, the idea grows that those who engage themselves so much cannot be seen as evildoers. But real violence in families can then be overlooked. Children need some autonomy and parents also need to deal with their own difficulties and desires. They must not work out their own frustrations on their children by expecting recognition for all the so-called sacrifices they endure. Gudorf writes that some parents try to compensate for their own lack of self-respect, control and power from their childhood through the obedience and thankfulness of their children. It is important that parents respect the child as 'other' and also see how much the child is giving them. In some cases, real sacrifices are necessary, but to speak in general terms of 'sacrifice' in parenting and about family relations as such could be misleading.

The Power of the Cross: Beyond Manipulability of Intimate Life

Although 'sacrifice' has a certain value, justice should not be overlooked. When love is only conceived of in the second person (I–thou-relation), it supposes a kind of never-ending love and devotion to the other. This can be seen as a form of 'self-sacrifice in spite of myself' (Levinas). What is important, however, is that Levinas also speaks about responsibility in the third person. There is not only the responsibility for the concrete other, but also for all others, for 'third persons.' This requires justice.⁵⁰ The question then arises: Who should be preferred, the third person or the neighbour?⁵¹ The human person has to compare and weigh goodness towards the unique other with the right of each other person.⁵² Against this background, one can

48. Cf. Gudorf, 'Sacrificial and Parental Spiritualities,' 300ff.

49. H. Van Crombrughe and L. Vandemeulebroecke (i.s.m. H. Colpin), 'Beschouwelingen over de aard van familiale en pedagogische relaties. Naar aanleiding van de Nobelprijs economie voor Gary Becker,' *Onze Alma Mater. Lewensperspectieven* 47 (1993): 410–30, at 414.

50. E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1974), 20: 'La relation entre le prochain et le tiers ne peut être indifférente à moi qui approche. Il faut une justice entre les incomparables.' See also R. Burggraeve, 'De ander, die mij aankijkt,' in E. Kuypers and R. Burggraeve (eds) *Op weg met Levinas* (Rondom filosofen) (Leuven-Apeldoorn: Garant, 1998), 65–196, at 117–120; R. Burggraeve, *Het kwade als keerszijde van het goede. Een denken vanuit Levinas over de paradoxale verhouding van goed en kwaad*, in R. Burggraeve and L. Anckaert (eds) *De vele gezichten van het kwaad. Medenken in het spoor van Emmanuel Levinas* (Cahiers voor Vredesethologie. 5) (Leuven-Amersfoort: Acco, 1996), 11–56, at 32–9.

51. Cf. Burggraeve, 'De ander die mij aankijkt,' 118.

52. Ibid. See also Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 20: 'La Raison à qui on prête la vertu d'arrêter la violence – pour aboutir à l'ordre de la paix – suppose le désintéressement, la passivité ou la patience. En ce désintéressement – quand, responsabilité pour l'autre, il est aussi responsabilisé pour le tiers – se dessinent la justice qui compare, rassemble et pense, la synchronie de l'être et la paix.'

say that justice takes love seriously because love doesn't count for only one unique person, but is broadened to others and becomes more universal.

If the moral discourse on 'sacrifice' can be dangerous, then we are confronted with the question of how to interpret the Christian tradition and the suffering story of Jesus. Here, the philosophy of René Girard plays a role. The belief in the sacrifice of Jesus as a consequence of his devotion until the end is liberating, not because he is such a beautiful example, but because it liberates human persons from the task of being perfect themselves. The offer doesn't have to be repeated infinitely.⁵³ The belief in the cross does not call people in the first place to activism, but enables a deep spiritual experience of devotion arising from a belief in God. The human person can 'give' him or herself without having to determine the whole future. Parents can engage themselves trustingly in a relationship with their children without having to create their whole lives themselves. In this sense, the metaphor of 'sacrifice,' within the framework of the Christian belief in God, is liberating. On the basis of Christian faith, some parents can find new hope and courage. In difficult situations parents may realize that they have done everything in their capacity and that they have to leave the rest trustingly in the hands of God. In this way, families may overcome difficult situations and achieve a high degree of resilience.⁵⁴

The cross and faith in the resurrection cannot only liberate people from the often frenetic effort to realize a perfect 'intimate life,' but also may motivate people to protest against suffering and evil. Suffering, conflicts and limitations are never salutary in themselves. We do not wish to propose a dialectical vision in which every evil leads automatically to a higher good.⁵⁵ The cross is a sign and a message never to forget the suffering of people (*memoria passionis*).⁵⁶ The death of Jesus on the cross and the Christian faith signify a protest against the rhetoric of the necessity of sacrifices in the name of a higher aim. It is not God who asks for sacrifice, but people themselves who require sacrifices of others in an abuse of power.

Following Girard, the cross signifies a critique of the sacrificial structure where violence reigns. He says: 'If you are the only one who doesn't use

53. Cf. M. Scharer, *Sich nicht aus dem Herzen verlieren. Von der spirituellen Kraft der Beziehung* (München: Kösel, 2003), 139–40.

54. Cf. L. M. Sponsel, 'Spirituality and Family Resilience,' *Family Focus* 48 (2003): F5–F6, at F5: 'Many parents have told me that it is their faith that allows them to persevere. They found relief when they acknowledged that they had done all they could do for their children and began to trust in a higher power. This process of "letting go" created hope and encouragement, not a sense of giving up. Families were able to bounce back and move on with their lives.'

55. See: 'Wer ... die theologische Rede von der Auferweckung des Christus so hört, daß in ihr der Schrei des Gekreuzigten unhörbar geworden ist, der hört nicht Theologie, sondern Mythologie, nicht das Evangelium, sondern einen Siegemythos.' J.-B. Metz, 'Theozieempfindliche Gottesrede,' in J.-B. Metz (ed.), *'Landschaft aus Schreien. Zur Dramatik der Theoziefrage'* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1995), 81–102, at 84.

56. Cf. J. B. Metz, *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie 1967–1997* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1997), 201.

violence in a world that keeps using violence, then you become the victim of this violence. Christ accepts the role of a scapegoat, not out of love for suffering or death, but exactly to denounce the phenomenon of the scapegoat, to make it unbearable and impossible.⁵⁷ Jesus's death disrupts traditional sacrificial structures: no new sacrifices are henceforth required.⁵⁸ Even while on the cross Jesus asks God for his forgiveness of the evildoers. The spiral of violence ends at that point.⁵⁹ It is a challenge for all of us to see how Christian teaching on the family can bring an end to violence in families, instead of legitimizing it.

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57. G. Delbeke, 'Ontmoeting met René Girard,' *De Vloer. KTRC-maandblad voor kerk en media* 8 (2000): 7–16, at 14.

58. Scharer, *Sich nicht aus dem Herzen verlieren*, 133.

59. See R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1983). See also S. Larré, G. Vanheeswijk and R. Girard, *Diogenes of de gekruisigde. Friedrich Nietzsche versus René Girard over de kern van het christendom* (Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2001).