Still, no text is perfect, and as an introductory marriage or sexuality text for Catholic undergraduates, or even high school seniors, this is a worthy volume. I would tend to supplement it with material by Richard Gaillardetz, Julie Hanlon Rubio, Kenneth Whitehead, Fran Ferder, and John Haegel. Overall, Cloutier brings together a wealth of helpful material, writes in an accessible style, and provides the grist for fruitful in-class discussions.

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Review of

*Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies*

DON S. BROWNING
*Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007. 416 pp. $34.00*

*Water Is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness*

JANA MARGUERITE BENNETT
*New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 256 pp. $55.00*

*The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought*

BRENT WATERS
*New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 320 pp. $125.00*

Over its twelve-year history, the Religion, Culture, and Family Project (RCF Project), led by Don S. Browning at the University of Chicago Divinity School,
with the collaboration of more than a hundred leading scholars in various academic disciplines, produced multiple volumes, numerous articles, a documentary film, and many other conferences, curricula, and contributions to theological, ethical, and ecclesial debates over the family. Starting from the rationale that religious traditions have valuable theological, ethical, and institutional resources to help revitalize families and family culture in North America and around the world, the RCF Project put the family on the radar screen of religious ethics and practical theology—essentially creating an area of scholarship where none existed before. The project coincided with both the growing attention to family in the social sciences and the “family values” debate that emerged in the American politics of the 1990s. Much of the flavor and content of the RCF project is captured in the volume Equality and the Family, a “greatest hits” collection of articles published by Browning in disparate venues over the course of the project’s history and thereafter.

If the success of the RCF Project may be judged by the quality of the critical engagement that it has attracted, then recent studies produced by Jana Bennett in Water Is Thicker than Blood and Brent Waters in The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought suggest that the project achieved its aim of ensuring the family a place as a ongoing subject of inquiry in theology and religious ethics. Both authors single out the RCF Project as a key predecessor and interlocutor for their own work. Both authors also provide pointed critiques of perceived shortcomings of project in the course of offering their own theological arguments about the family. As an alumna of the RCF Project (due disclosure), this reviewer found these critiques to be generally well founded and often constructively provocative, affirming certain aspects of the RCF Project’s impetus and focus while also pointing particularly to possible lacunae and limitations. While both the Bennett and Waters books are broadly constructive in scope and intent and certainly not reducible to their commentary on the RCF Project, an analysis of where their critiques emerge, particularly their areas of overlap and commonality, suggests some important current and future directions for inquiries into the family in theological ethics.

For Bennett, the primary problem with the RCF Project’s take on the family is that it is a “falsely eschatological one” in “suggesting that the savior of our world, or at least of our broken American society, must be a good functioning family” (8), in such a way that it makes these social and political concerns ultimate, with the focus directed not toward God but toward human institutions. It reflects and perpetuates a social and political framework in which “the state undergirds the family and Christians have bought into that ideal” (9). Writing out of her Roman Catholic tradition, with its dual roles of sacramental marriage and vowed celibacy, Bennett seeks to critique this family ideal and its associated eschatology by holding marriage and various states of singleness together in a “theology of households” (30) in which both married and single
Christians are related to, and interdependent with, one another in a common eschatology of redemption lived out in church and liturgy, particularly in baptism and the Eucharist.

Augustine’s theology of nature, grace, salvation, and the family is Bennett’s primary source for this household theology, emphasizing friendship, grace, and redemption as components of Augustinian theology that link married spouses and married and single people in churches “in relationships tied not by blood but by baptism” (80). It is perhaps worth noting that there is an interesting reversal of roles and religious traditions here between the Catholic Bennett’s grounding of her project in an Augustinian theology of grace and redemption in comparison with the Protestant Browning’s emphasis on an Aristotelian–Thomistic theology of nature and creation in several of his collected essays (see particularly “Narrative, Ethics, and Biology in Christian Family Theory” and “The Dialectic of Archaeology and Teleology in Christian Marriage Symbolism”). Indeed, one of Bennett’s most valuable contributions, contra not only Browning but also against much feminist theology, is her deliberate and transformative move from creation to redemption.

Bennett reinterprets both marriage and singleness through the lens of Augustinian theology. Those seeking anything like a sexual ethic for singles in Bennett’s analysis are likely to be disappointed. Singleness is discussed primarily in the context of vowed celibacy or a nonvowed equivalent that remains vaguely defined. Celibacy and virginity are used nearly interchangeably in Bennett’s account. Choice and consent are required and assumed of both continent marrieds and celibate singles. Deploying in a counterexemplary fashion such pop cultural icons as the women of television series *Sex and the City* and the protagonist of the movie *Bridget Jones* (84–85), Bennett admonishes, “Those who find themselves haphazardly single do not fall into this category” (134). Between vowed marriage and vowed celibacy, there is no legitimate middle ground of sexual expression.

Bennett is to be greatly commended for asking her central question, “That is, in having a singular focus on marriage, what is gained and what is lost for Christians?” (87). Through Augustinian salvation theology, Christ’s implication of a radical reconfiguration of households in the eschaton, and the key liturgical elements of baptism and the Eucharist, their mundane equivalents in bathing and meals, and the hospitality that they imply and occasion (46, 163–68; see also Waters, 232–39 on “sacramental inlays” of the family’s witness), Bennett makes the case for the intertwined destinies of marriage, singleness, and perhaps other family forms in the redeemed community of the household of God in ways that avoid both the reduction of the family to a particular form and sublimation of family to the particular political or social imperatives of earthly realm.

For his part, Waters provides a constructive account of the family’s teleological, ecclesial, and civil ordering, preceded by a historical study of the
family in biblical and historical sources, modern liberalism and its critics, and late liberalism and contemporary Christian thought. He situates his account in a landscape in which politicization of the family has "effectively stripped it of any social significance" (x) and the "virtual disappearance of the family has diminished Christian social and political thought" (xi). Waters shares with Bennett a preference for Augustinian theology over the largely Aristotelian-Thomistic, naturalistic, and evolutionary psychological arguments that shape much of Browning's work. Bennett and Waters also share an Augustinian emphasis on the eschatological dimension of the family and a concern to lift up both marriage and singleness as conducing to the same eschatological ends. Finally, as Waters reads him, "Augustine simultaneously affirmed marriage as a providential witness, while upholding singleness as an eschatological witness" (21).

In recommending attention to eschatology and singleness, both Bennett and Waters address one of the central premises of the RCF Project, namely the controversial definition of the ideal family as a "committed, intact, equal-regard, public-private family." Best articulated in one of the project's earliest multiauthor volumes, From Culture Wars to Common Ground (Westminster/John Knox, 1997), the evolution and parameters of the definition are set forth in some of the early essays collected in Equality and the Family. The eschatological focus and orientation of family toward God and church is intended as an antidote to the miring of family too much in either the private world of hearth and home or the public world of politics and culture wars. The inclusion of singles tweaks the exclusive privileging of the heterosexual, two-parent, nuclear family model that early and more recent RCF Project critics have tended to read the "intactness" prong of the definition as implying. Browning and his colleagues would reply that such critics miss the "critical" part of the "critical familism" for which the RCF Project stands. But the fact that both Waters and Bennett suspect a creeping ultimacy and exclusivity the RCF Projects definition of the ideal family suggest that this is still a point of controversy.

What is ultimate but highly inclusive in the eschatological emphasis that both Bennett and Waters recommend is the eventual and inevitable reordering of the family in the kingdom of God. In such an eschatological framework, Waters tells us, it is problematic when the church "magnifies the family instead of representing its impending reordering" (53). In the magnification scenario the church becomes a "confederation of Christian families instead of an eschatological community of Christians with families" (58) and "the household emerges as a bastion of privacy, rather than an institution mediating and linking its members with broader spheres of association" (60). Waters addresses the public nature and duties of the family through a helpful discussion of the importance of hospitality to strangers. Strangers and singles are both social categories with whom families have lost relationship and whose restoration would serve to draw families outside the confines of private domesticity (138-40, 189-90).
Recent surveys in the United States have shown that as many people are now living in single-person households as are living in traditional nuclear households of parents and children. There remains a sense that singleness serves to illumine marriage more than married families and the church serve singles. The efforts of Bennett and Waters to bring singles and strangers within the ambit and embrace of household and ecclesia are apt additions to the “critical familism” pioneered by the RCF Project. They are a welcome remedy for cultural and political tendencies that make the married nuclear family an ultimate and exclusive end that eclipses the larger ecclesial witness and eschatological destiny toward which Christians are called.

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