



**Review of Herbert Anderson, Edward Foley,  
Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Robert Schreiter,  
*Mutuality Matters: Family, Faith and Just Love*  
(Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield  
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In the culture wars of the United States, “family values” became the battle cry of conservatives who advocated a return to “the rule of the father” in the Christian household. This anthology of 16 essays by Protestant and Catholic pastoral theologians, Bible scholars, philosophers and ethicists questions this Christianization of male supremacy and extends the principles of democratic egalitarianism that govern public life into the private world of heterosexual love and marriage. *Mutuality Matters* is a revised and expanded Festschrift for Herbert Anderson, a long-time theological advocate of mutuality and justice in Christian family life.

Four loosely arranged sections move from a more theoretical analysis of love, mutuality and justice to an examination of the changes in expectations in heterosexual relationships, including the rise of domestic violence and conflicting expectations in bicultural families. The third section extends the meaning of mutuality in the context of rearing children and caring for elderly parents, while the fourth unit lays out the role of congregations in infusing and nurturing mutuality in family life.

All of the contributors struggle with the problem of applying principles such as justice, equality and mutuality into the complex, chaotic and often contradictory daily interactions in the most intimate of spaces, such as kitchens, bedrooms, living rooms and nurseries. The term “mutuality” provides a broad platform because it is a fuzzy or even “sloppy” notion (McLemore) that may or may not require egalitarian power arrangements. Several contributors attend to the problem of hierarchy in families. Osiek, a New Testament scholar, roundly rejects the Household Codes of the New Testament that enshrine the obedience of wives, slaves and children to husbands, masters and fathers and maintains that “the very notion of submission of one person to another only because of sex or legal status is simply unacceptable to the modern person” (p. 62). “The revelation given to us by culture” (p. 62), she argues, requires us to move beyond the hierarchies endorsed by the Household Codes. Samuel Lee, on the other hand, defends Korean American families who negotiate “the tension between Confucian hierarchical influence and the more individualistic egalitarian influence of North American culture” (p. 115). Bicultural families should not be forced to abandon their cultures’ emphasis on self-sacrifice and selfless submission in favor of Western calls for self-assertion and egalitarianism. Instead, bicultural families need to be validated and supported in their

daily navigation of such cultural contradictions and the construction of multicultural identity.

And what does mutuality mean in the context of raising children? Surely, children are not their parents' equal, McLemore points out. She argues that mutuality "must be multivalent and responsible to constantly changing circumstances and personal development" (p. 126). Hence, there exist "transitional hierarchies" and "temporary inequities" where persons are put in positions of authority by virtue of their "expertise, responsibility or maturity," in order to guide those who are in need of such leadership towards genuine mutuality (p. 127). Hence, the term mutuality is not co-terminus with equality but encompasses differential power arrangements at certain times.

The most radical questioning of the concept of family is done by Anthony Gittins in his quest for "goodenough families." His experience as a member of a religious brotherhood (the Spiritans) with long-standing missionary histories in Africa and Latin America may have fostered the intellectual courage to move beyond heterosexual love as the exclusive building block of stable families. He compares three different emotional bonds as potential building blocks for families (the mother-child unit, the brother-sister relationship and the husband-wife association) and examines their ability to provide a stable, protective environment to raise children. Each of these bonds has been tested in different cultural and historical periods for their success in providing protection, as well as economic and emotional support in raising the next generation. While he does not advocate any one arrangement, he calls for an abandonment of "extensive definitions" (p. 177) and the courage to look at the "actual social arrangements" that would note "common characteristics such as adequate structure; the support, protection, dignity and fulfillment of members; the intention of stability and endurance; and the relationship to the wider world" (p. 178) and allow multiple domestic arrangements as "goodenough families." In the midst of the tremendous stress on, if not dissolution of, heterosexual, monogamous families, his search for "goodenough families" is inspiring and encouraging. Gittins' elasticity is rooted in a global perspective and draws on Catholic monastic models of community and mutual love. Such conceptual openness is often missing in the contemporary Western world, which is locked into the heterosexual, love-based, nuclear model of family, while at the same time lamenting its decline and break-down.

The significance of Gittins' conceptual openness becomes apparent in dialogue with Homer Ashby's essay on father absence in African American families. Ashby's statistics present a bleak and depressing picture: 70% of African American children born in 1996 were born to single mothers (p. 185). The reality of single parent homes has reached epidemic proportions in the Black community. Ashby attributes the low marriage and high divorce rate in the African American community to a combination of factors: economic reasons, including male joblessness and high imprisonment rates, as well as the bitter legacy of slavery with its deliberate assault and calculated disruption of monogamous relationships. But he also notes a high rate of anger and frustration among Black women and men at each other.

Despite this gloomy picture Ashby remains wedded to the ideal of monogamous heterosexuality and he calls on the Black church to foster and sustain married life more actively. He points to the correlation between regular church attendance and marriage

rates, although that appears to be contradictory and inconclusive. For instance, he says that “church attendance by women doubles their chances of getting married, while it has no effect on men” and it also does not appear to change women’s divorce rates (p. 193). Hence, even a renewed campaign by the Black church (already mired in homophobia) may not succeed in preventing further decline. Gittins’ proposal to conceive of “goodenough families” beyond the confines of heterosexual monogamy, on the other hand, may be more fruitful in securing a male presence in the lives of Black children. If the fundamental objective of family life is to protect, provide for and nurture children, we may fare better drawing on uncles and male members of extended families rather than on married couples. Brothers may play a more stable and supportive role in the lives of single mothers than lovers and the fathers of their children.

Overall, *Mutuality Matters* is focused on heterosexual nuclear families and is dedicated to their democratic transformation. Whether this model is able to weather the manifold challenges by incorporating greater mutuality, or whether it will have to expand structurally in order to adjust to life in Western democratic capitalist societies will remain to be seen.

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