

Caring for families

by [Diana R. Garland](#) in the [February 3, 1999](#) issue

*Edited by Herbert Anderson, Don S. Browning, Ian S. Evison and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, The Family Handbook. (Westminster John Knox, 345 pp.)*

This volume is the tenth in a series designed to give academic substance to what the editors have called the "American family debate." The series is the result of the University of Chicago Divinity School's Religion, Culture and Family Project. Each of the books deals in depth with one aspect of the American family. Three discuss families in ancient Israel, in the New Testament world, and in the Western tradition, together providing a comprehensive and fascinating historical foundation for understanding the interplay of religious faith and cultural influences on contemporary family life. Other volumes also make valuable contributions to particular arenas of family study--economics, genetic technology, feminism and religious traditions.

*The Family Handbook* was designed to build on the preceding volumes yet move to a different level of discourse--one of praxis. What does all this discussion mean for living in and caring for families today? The editors claim the book needs to be read by social workers, therapists, lawyers, ministers and health care professionals. "Those who work with families will not only learn new techniques but also develop a sense of vocation for working with families," they say. They thus lead readers to expect what helping professionals normally expect in a book labeled "handbook"--a guide for applying theory and research to particular issues. Such volumes are usually organized around the processes of working with or in behalf of families, with brief articles that address particular issues or illustrate what theory looks like in practice. The editors claim that the volume will deal with such questions as, "What does this mean for an abused child?" and "How can families be faithful amid changed patterns of work and child care and changed roles of genders and generations?"

Since the editors have set themselves an enormous task, it is not surprising that the book does not quite achieve their objectives. It is impossible to address adequately in one volume the implications for professional family practice raised by nine

volumes of historical, cultural and religious research. One of the book's underlying assumptions is that if we understand the historical foundations and some of the current issues of family life, we will know what to do to help families. There is an air of academic elitism in this assumption. The application of academic study to professional care is complex.

The articles addressing the practice of caring for families are thin, compared to the more extensive exploration of historical, cultural and religious research in this and earlier volumes. For example, the chapter on marriage preparation devotes four pages to a Catholic, three to a Jewish and four to a Protestant perspective, plus three pages "to some secular approaches." The chapter's longest sectional bibliography includes only six entries, hardly a comprehensive overview of this vast field. Though it is a great introduction to its topic, the chapter does not prepare the professional to conduct marriage preparation sessions with couples or groups, as one would expect from a handbook.

The volume concludes with a "Directory of Resources for Families" that is organized topically from "adoption" to "youth." The list is diverse but not comprehensive. For example, the resources of the Search Institute are not mentioned under "youth." The topic "publications" includes Cook Communications Ministries, Christianity Today, Inc., and Good Family Magazines, but it does not include the journals *Family Ministry* and *Family Relations*, or the resources of Family Information Services, Inc.

The editors also never explicitly define "family." The book's organization implies that marriage is the central defining relationship of family life, either in its formation or its dissolution. It begins with a discussion of marriage from Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and secular perspectives, and then proceeds to sections on divorce and remarriage from the same four perspectives.

Still, the volume's brief essays offer a number of gems of insight.

Three examples illustrate this. First, Richard Carlson's exegesis of the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21 frames the narrative as a clash of family values. Naboth values the land as the sacred gift that God gave to his family as its legacy, and Jezebel values the royal family's power to rule over its subjects as they see fit. The story subordinates the value of family to God's ultimate values.

Second, Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt discusses the healed women in Luke 4:38-39 and 8:1-3 as models of servant leadership. She points out that, in the story of the healing

of Simon's mother-in-law, Matthew emphasizes the direct ministerial relation between the woman and Jesus. Her hands now serve him. In Luke, the women "qualified" as disciples because they had been healed. "The women's service to the mission of Jesus includes the testimony of their own transformation in body and spirit, as healing available to others, grounding the claims of the Twelve."

Finally, William Johnson Everett offers a valuable insight in his discussion of a Protestant perspective on marriage:

Over the centuries the idea of vocation became attached to jobs and careers of individuals. The very transference of vocation away from the sacramental life of the church now made of occupational advancement a kind of sacred path, first by the male breadwinner and then by the wife as well. Today, the notion of vocation that might have bonded the couple together in a common work now takes them apart in two career paths, with all the concomitant ruptures, tensions, and difficulties of contemporary life. The original tension between family and vocational obedience that was institutionalized in monastic celibacy returns in secular form as the tension between work and family. The original vocational aim of world renewal and redemption is secularized as economic growth through jobs and career mobility.

Such insights win this encyclopedic introduction to the academic study of the American family from historical and religious perspectives "a place on the bookshelf of all those who wish to orient themselves to one of the most important social issues of the time, that of religion and family."