

[Assessing the Challenges of the 21st Century](#)

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Assessing the Challenges of the 21st Century A Multi-Religious Perspective and Summary of the Papers

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When I was asked to write a paper on the Family from a multi-religious perspective, I hesitated at first because I am not a family expert, though I have worked with families and youth in over seventy countries. I finally decided to accept the invitation for two reasons. First, my global travels since 1961 have made it clear to me that the world needs and is ready for a major Congress on the Family, and we must begin a process that will lead to this Congress. Second, because 1993 is the 100th Anniversary of the First World Parliament of Religions, there are major commemorations of the event on different continents. The initiation of a major study on Religion and the Family will add to these commemorations and hopefully move the international community to promote new emphasis on the family as a basic religious unit in the 21st Century. I write these reflections as one who believes that families of today are being called, in the words of Dr. Thomas Berry, "to accept a new role, the most difficult role that any of us have been asked to fulfill, that of stopping the devastation that humans, principally our Western, commercially driven humans, are inflicting on the planet. Otherwise the natural order will not survive in any integral manner. Nor in this situation will humans." 1

My paper has three main sources. The first source is what I have learned from families in places such as Northern New Guinea, the pampas of Argentina, the villages of the Kerala and Mysore States in India, the extended families of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, as well as through my daily interaction with families in the Lower East Side of New York City, USA, and through my ongoing work with families of working people and international civil servants and diplomats. The second source is my decades-long experience of community sessions with individuals, families and spiritual leaders of many religions in different parts of the world through my work with: a) "The Movement for a Better World," an international organization working with families and communities and b) "The Temple of Understanding," a Global Inter-Faith Association; and my participation in UN conferences, consultations and General Assembly sessions on family and spiritual values. The third source is the writers of this volume who have provided me with a kaleidoscopic view of beliefs, values and concerns that I reflect on in this paper.

What appears in this paper is my own personal belief: it reflects the urgent need to move toward a new global approach to Family and Religion. I see the paper as a beginning, a call, a plea for the international community, the religions, the academic world and, above all, the local communities throughout the world to join in a major UN-sponsored Congress on Family and Religion. What I am offering does not contain official teachings of any religion. It is not an academic paper. It is a call for the international community to use the International Year of the Family for greater enrichment of the family.

I. The Family in a Transitional Society

Today we are living in a transitional society. In his Agenda for Peace, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali writes, "We have entered a time of global transition marked by uniquely contradictory trends."² A civilization is dying. It is the civilization that gave us, inter alia, the expansion of different religions, the European empires, the benefits and problems of an industrialized world, capitalism, socialism and atheistic communism, the United Nations. A new civilization is not yet in place, we can even say that it is not born; therefore there is no context within which to set up social structures and values and mechanisms to give us "a new society."

A transitional society includes good aspects and delicate realities which, if not addressed properly, can be a major negative force. One of these is religion and its relationship to the family.

The question of religion and family is one of the most fascinating, intriguing, complicated, even contradictory, though life-giving aspects of the relationship between society and religion today. On the one hand, the family is buffeted by very serious new problems; on the other, young adults continue to marry, to accept the responsibilities of a family, to have children. Nonetheless, we do not seem to have a matrix for this new multi-cultural, multi-ethnic-racial and multi-religious relationship between families and religions.

Religion and its relationship to society are thus deeply affected at this axial period of history. We hear a great deal about how religion is affected, how out of date it is, what needs to be

done, etc., but I do not know of any profound diagnosis of "the state of religion," or of any inspiring religious vision that can be a focal point of attraction to express the role of religion and spirituality in today's family and new civilization in the making. Religion can and must reformulate the expression of mystery, the power of the beyond, the place of prayer, reflection, meditation, centering, mysticism, the mystique of sexual intercourse, the commitment to justice and peace, an attitude of ongoing conversion, etc.

II. The Concept and Philosophy of Family

"The Family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society."³ Family is a group of people tied by blood. The marriage vow takes on a unique cultural and religious significance, far beyond the legal connotations it carries: it is a sacrament, a covenant, a bond, a "we:" "God is the Author of Marriage,"⁴ "Marriage is half religion," "Paradise is at the foot of the mothers,"⁵ "Living from, for and in one another is the basis of existence,...husband in mutual interdependence with wife, and wife with husband."⁶

The characteristics of family are very diverse. The papers in this volume show that in one religion the family is monogamous, in another it might be polygamous, in yet another it is a clan that includes the living, the dead, the unborn. All the papers I offer here forcefully bring out the meaning of a particular religion to the family.

III. Problems of the Family

The greater part of the different papers here included is dedicated to problems, most of which appear to be the result

of the impact of modernity on the family. I will point out some of these problems, especially the newer ones that are affecting the family today.

A. Modernity, Urbanization

How profoundly new lifestyles are influencing the family! In the papers we are shown how in some cases elderly people and women are cut off in their villages, while their sons and husbands are far away earning a living for the family, establishing other personal relationships that affect their families negatively; in others, wives and children are left to rule the household while the husband and father, gone far away to another land to raise their standard of living, becomes a mere bread winner and feels alienated, unnecessary, once he returns. Some of the papers also address the problem of immigrant families who see their ancient traditions compromised or destroyed by the values of their country of adoption; or the tendency of children in cities to be the ones teaching their parents on modern ways of thinking, rather than the parents passing on their traditions to the young.

Reading between the lines of several papers, we cannot but ask ourselves who will be working on families in the industrialized world, who will make the streets of large cities safe, who will think of the dignity of male and female children brought up among televisions, portable radios, new cars, computers, and whose image of a great person is an actor or a sports hero. Is anyone thinking of the problems of industrialized families and "families"?

Urban life--with its opportunities for better education, better

entertainment, better jobs, etc., on the one hand, and its deadening avalanche of stereotyped, uniform, impersonal social mores on the other--is affecting the family very profoundly.

Some of the papers in this volume reflect this phenomenon. The combination of market economy and liberal democracy that is slowly advancing in today's urban world is imposing a superficial, uncritical sameness to all cultures, geographical areas and religious diversities.

B. AIDS and Sex

AIDS is not dealt with at any length in the papers included here. And yet, in its cruel, multi-faceted and ever-varying forms, it is one of the most dreadful problems families are facing today. Until the scientific community gives society a comprehensive view of it, I do not believe religions will be able to contribute their best effort to help overcome this epidemic. It is clear, though, that religions need to exercise compassion and love toward persons and families affected by AIDS.

The very early initiation of sexual activity, on the other hand, is creating problems of unwanted pregnancy, the cult of the condom, the lack of a mystique for such a profound form of union, a growing habit of casual relationships that do not lead to mutual commitment. There is only a superficial knowledge of the human body and psyche and a still more rudimentary appreciation of religious and even cultural values affecting sexual relationships.

C. Drugs

The papers do not dwell much on drugs, but do include them among the more dangerous causes of a breakdown in family life, not only in countries of the industrialized world, but increasingly in countries in which tradition has a greater importance. "The devastating effects of drug abuse on the family are perhaps those which pose the greatest threat to society as we know it." 7

D. Television

The present television and video culture that is spreading throughout the world is far from a family builder. It presents mainly secular Western values that foster selfishness, a particular blindness induced by peer pressure, competition, aggressiveness, cheap sex, the "bottom line" money addiction, leaving little or no place for regional cultures to be manifested, honored and remembered.

E. Psychologizing the Family

In recent decades, ever-increasing importance has been given the psychological interpretation and approach to family roles and values, to the place of women and children in society, the issue of machismo. The result is that slowly but relentlessly the world is growing accustomed to seeing everything psychologically, and unknowingly it is downgrading religious habits, customs, rituals, as well as cultural values. Psychology is one of the greatest blessings of science and of our present civilization, but it must be kept separate from religion. Society needs both psychology and religion.

F. The Study of Population

Even the study of population, the propaganda for condoms, the discussion on whether small or large families are preferable, pre-nuptial sex, etc., seem based more on an ideological perspective than on a respectful and warm concern for the person and the family. It seems that a basic tenet of this transitional society is, "use a condom and have a happy and healthy sexual relationship." UN Agencies, the Catholic Church, Islamic religious groups, etc., do not usually appear in the study of population as partners--sometimes coming from opposite but respectful camps, trying to help the basic unit of society--but rather as competitors who want to impose an ideology and mask it under different political or religious agreements or beliefs. Religions and UN agencies, when meeting at conferences and consultations, have to make compromises, and this weakens both religious and legal approaches. We need partnership, and we need to find a way of achieving this without compromising genuine interests and personal, societal or religious values. Unfortunately, due to the rapidity of change today, religious and international agencies do not have viable models for intercultural and international socio-religious cooperation and, therefore, are using very outdated models that do not allow for the richest form of mutual cooperation.

G. Religion

In the present shift from one civilization to another, religion presents special problems. The very issue of religion is seen very differently, even oppositely. In a large portion of the world, influenced by the industrial revolution, it is relegated to the personal sanctuary of each person's conscience. In another large portion that is under the influence of strong Islamic values, religion is seen as a social reality that must be accepted without question. In still other parts of the world

where the so-called "Theology of Liberation" has affected vast continents, it is looked upon by some as the greatest force of social justice, and by others as a leftist negative influence. What is perhaps most tragic, in all of the world, is that ancient indigenous spiritual traditions and rituals are not taken seriously enough.

In the world of the so-called educated people, and of those who live in large cities, religion is increasingly seen more as an institutional social entity than as a God-sent message with beliefs, moral ideals and revered rituals. As a result, there is an ever-increasing leaning toward diverse forms of spirituality as expressions of one's values, and an ever-increasing dislike for the institutional aspects of religion. If we take this a step further, to its logical conclusion, it becomes clear that we are fast becoming a world in which people not only claim absolute ownership of their bodies, but also determine what is moral and what is not. Unless this trend is reversed, we will soon have a generation with no accepted moral standards or knowledge of the role of religious institutions and the family as an institution. I consider this trend to be extremely dangerous because it means the total rejection of objective social norms and the utter glorification of "me." I believe that we need to call upon educators, heads of religions, politicians to address this issue urgently; otherwise, the family itself will be further weakened and may even die. Spirituality or spiritualities alone can never be the soul of society. They need the God-sent religious spiritualities as their basis. 8

H. The Most Vulnerable in Today's Family

I was asked to address this question when I received the request to write on Family and Religion. I asked it also of each

contributor to the paper. I leave it to the readers to judge for themselves if and how this crucial point has or has not been addressed. I will say that modern studies by UN agencies very forcefully indicate that women in villages or the poorest neighborhoods and street children in cities are the most vulnerable members of today's family.

I wish here to add one other "most vulnerable" element: teenage men. I believe that we need to work quickly and hard to show these young men how, for instance, to be inter-dependent and not independent, how to look at women as companions, how to understand the evils of machismo and casual affairs, how to see and appreciate the beauty of a home, how to be a father, what fidelity and loyalty to a woman is, etc., etc. This view may at first glance seem myopic or shortsighted. But I am thoroughly convinced, as a result of dealing with male teen-agers in industrialized cities, in villages, on the streets, on campuses, that if we address this issue in-depth it may give us a clue to the happy family for the future. These are some of the important problems the papers highlight. There are others as well. Perhaps the most important question is this: is there is a basic problem that if addressed properly can give us the key to building the families of the new society?

IV. Suggested Actions for the International Year of the Family
What do we need to do today to bolster the family? Although I was asked to suggest policies that the UN can work on to address this question, I prefer not to do so because it would be nothing more than theoretical. Instead I will describe what I believe we need by way of steps the international community can take, even though these may appear to some readers to

be a wish list. They assuredly are not.

A. A New Vision of Family

We need a new basic direction before we talk of a Declaration or, better still, a Convention on the Family. We need a new vision for the family, dreamed by mystics, elders, poets, artists, married couples with a long experience on family, even street children who so frequently yearn for family. They are the ones who can give the new society an ideal to work toward that is attractive and inspiring. This vision must go beyond the present structures of the UN, deeper than the legal aspects of family, far beyond the opposite ideologies of separation of church and state, or of a theocratic state, or a state with the evident predominance of one religion. I hope and pray that the next UN Conference on Population and Development will give the international community a new world vision of family so that society can help it and build it.

In order to move toward this needed vision and help provide a wider context for the study of the family, I consider that the following actions would be of extraordinary help in the International Year of the Family and beyond.

B. Academic Volume on The Family in Major Religions

As stated above, I felt we needed to begin our modern look at the family from a religious perspective with an experiential type of volume. The papers gathered here, though, call for a companion volume on comparative studies of the family in each major world religion. The academic volume needs to be done in accordance with academic standards that prevail around the world, but including the traditional standards of

indigenous peoples that have rarely, if ever, been reflected in Western university conference halls and academic conferences. The volume needs to be prepared with academic freedom and not be restricted by authoritarian impositions of any religion or any single scientific guru. It also needs to be inter-disciplinary in order to ensure a vital, mutual influence and a more comprehensive scientific view of the family.

C. A Congress on Religion and the Family

One of the greatest services the IYF can offer the international community is to convene, as part of the commemoration for the 50th anniversary of the UN, a Congress on Religion and the Family. I realize that this suggestion goes beyond the mandate given the IYF by the General Assembly. But it could be adopted as a resolution by the UN during the IYF. A number of verified inter-religious organizations are ready to lead this effort. "The Temple of Understanding" has already initiated this with a similar project in the context of the UN 50th anniversary. I repeat though that the Congress needs to lay stress not solely nor principally on population, but on the family unit.

The research for this Congress would involve collecting and analyzing in depth the findings of religions on the family, the academic studies, the place of family customs, values and traditions, the impact of the new society on the religious aspects of the family. As a very special part of the research, the Congress should seriously take into account the findings of the proposed volume on the academic study of religion and the family; but the Congress cannot and should not be academic, psychological or multi-disciplined. It needs to be a "story" Congress, since religions are major stories of the

human spirit and its relation with the Divine or the Ultimate, through hymns, talks, narrations, dances, rituals, festivities. Our indigenous peoples should be the true elders in the Congress.

The Congress could challenge religions to move faster toward a curriculum for multi-religious global education, based on understanding and revering each religion and expressing it with accepted life-giving models of religious tolerance, even offering new academic degrees in this field. The need for this is vital, and the world is ripe for it.⁹

The Congress could formulate a vision for the family of the 21st century, and challenge the UN and its agencies to give the international community realistic ideals to look up to. The Congress needs as participants official spokespeople for each religion (to the degree that each religion has them), and families from diverse regions of the world with unique experiences of different forms of family. For this reason Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) must be a constituent part of the Congress so that the Congress can really be an expression of "we the peoples." Among the NGOs, the religious NGOs could be a most powerful group because they touch the religions and/or spiritual traditions of the world.

The Congress needs to bring out once again the vital importance of magic. It needs to give us a modern term of reference so that we will know how to make science and spirituality work together, rather than be dichotomized or alienated from one another.

D. New Types of Family

We also need a study on two new types of families that are contributing values to the new society in the making:

i) The family that today extends from a village to a national or even international level: we need to investigate what is happening with families in areas of the world in which one part of the family lives in the village or countryside, and the other lives in a large city, or overseas. It is my belief that we are slowly forming a new "creed" of family values or a new form of expression of family values which we have not yet interpreted. We need the voices of these families to do this effectively and inspiringly. Otherwise we will be mired in the problems this new type of family brings, as stated above.

ii) The multi-religious and multi-racial family. Interesting studies have been done along these lines. Some experiences show how both religions gain in this type of marriage when there is tolerance and love.¹¹ There are also religious movements and religious leaders rooted in the belief that we need to bolster families of the same culture and the same religion. Our papers address this issue. We need to investigate what grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren of multi-religious families are experiencing, what their dreams and frustrations are, what happens to their value systems, etc., and propose some policies to international agencies.

E. Sexuality

We need a more comprehensive study of sexuality, not overemphasizing or limiting it to a psychological or a physiological view, but directly addressing what religions contribute to sexuality, or possibly detract from a healthy sexuality, what a civilization of men-women as equal partners entails; what feminism is teaching us, but also whether there are important factors that feminism is not looking into. We

need to support, enhance and go deeper into the study of homosexuality, learning what religion has to contribute to it or learn from it. Perhaps most essentially, we need to update our studies on intercourse and sex from a religious perspective, bringing out the inexhaustible mystery of penetrating each one's sexuality.

F) The Family in the UN Human Development Reports (HDR)

UNDP has issued three excellent Human Development Reports(HDR). I have studied each one and tried to be in contact with the Special Advisers who wrote them. These reports, though, have still not squarely addressed the issue of the impact of family and religion on human development, or vice-versa. In the 1990 HDR, human development was defined as "a process of widening people's choices." 12 In the 1993 HDR the original concept of human development has been deepened and it is seen as "development of the people for the people by the people."13 Still, the family as a key element of development is not analyzed nor, less, evaluated, except as the first basic group in which "people's understanding of the world is formed and nurtured."

I strongly urge the authors of HDR to deepen their study of human development to include the family and spiritual values. These two are not always quantifiable elements of development; but can there be true human development without family or values? Why then not study them? Also, why such an emphasis on development as a gift that is only three decades old and affects mainly, though not always, the so-called "developing countries,"15 when some of the most serious social developmental problems on education, participation, true group interaction, security, value systems

today are increasingly the result of so-called "developed countries"? It is my belief that UNDP and the HDRs need to make a quantum leap in order to see development in its totality and from a family perspective. Otherwise in thirty years development will have lost its appeal.

F. Responsible Family Planning

This phrase has become a catchword for all UNICEF, UNFPA and other UN Agencies' excellent works with and for people.¹⁶ May I suggest that UNICEF expand the notion of family planning to study primarily the family, and that UNFPA explore the issues of sustainable development and women's status¹⁷ primarily from the family perspective. If not, I fear that we will either dichotomize family policies or, worse still, create a notion of family and its values on the altar of a limited number of births per family.

Conclusion

I invite people to look at the papers in this volume as the first chapters of a new old story that is unfolding before us humans with great poignancy, and offer further chapters by sending us their own contributions, expressing their personal experiences and beliefs in family. I believe that we can thus expect the smallest democracy to become ever more and more the global womb where new, vigorous, religious families are brought to life for the good of society.

In his final verses of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante, describing his vision of divine reality, speaks of "all the scattered leaves of the universe bound by love in one volume."¹⁸ This is what the family is called to do for the new society.

Notes : 1. Dr. Thomas Berry, author of *The Universe Story*, in his paper, "Women Religious: their future role" (Riverdale, New York: Riverdale Religious Research Center Publications, 1993), 1.; 2. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in his report, *An Agenda for Peace* (January 31, 1992).; 3. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 16, 3.; 4. Vatican Two Documents, "Gaudium et Spes," Art. 48, 1.; 5. Jacques Joumier, *How to Understand Islam* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 76.; 6. Rev. Toshio Miyake, Konko Church of Izu, Osaka, Japan, *The Living of Peace* (Laporte, Pennsylvania: Heiwa Press), 172.; 7. *The United Nations and Drug Abuse Control*, Chapter V, 39.; 8. See Father Luis M. Dolan, C.P., "Religious Spirituality: the Soul of Development and Change," a paper delivered at the UNDP Round Table on Global Change (Bucharest: September 1992), 3-4.; 9. See Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992).; 10. See Bryan Appleyard, *Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4.87-88. See also "Los Textos Sagrados de Abia Yala," a project begun by Prof. Geiko Muller Fahrenholtz (Costa Rica: University of Peace, 1990).; 11. See Rabbi Roy A. Rosenberg, Father Peter Meehan, Rev. John Wade Payne, *Happily Inter-Married* (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988).; 12. HDR, 1990, 1.10.; 13. HDR 1993, Overview, 2.3.; 14. *Ibid*, 5.84.; 15. Cfr. inter alia, 1992 UNDP Annual Report on Human Development at Work, 7-23.; 16. Cfr. UNICEF, *The World's Children 1992*, UNICEF "Planning Births," 58.; 17. Cfr. UNFPA, *The State of World Population 1992*, 32.; 18. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, "Paradise," XXXIII. 12. 0