Annemie Dillen

Family and Religion

1 Introduction

In 2001 I started writing a PhD on families, theology, ethics, and religious education (Dillen 2009). At that moment, a few major works on families and practical theology were published. The American protestant practical theologian Don Browning was leading a large project on families and theology, called the Religion, Culture and Family project. One of the most famous outcomes of the project was the book ‘From Culture Wars to Common Grounds’, which he co-published with leading practical theologians Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Pamela Couture (2000), who each also published other books on practical theology in relation to family issues (Miller-McLemore 1994; Couture 1991). In the French speaking world, Catholic moral theologian Xavier Lacroix published several books on family and ethics, most of them focused on the value of heteronormative marriage (e.g., 2001). The Austrian Catholic ethicist Gerhard Marschütz published on family and ethics (2000), and several authors wrote about their empirical research on family religious education (Elshof 2009). Since the beginning of this century, a lot more has been published on all issues related to families. Interesting overviews and up to date articles can be found in the journal Marriage, Families and Spirituality (edited by Intams – the International Academy for Marital Spirituality, published by Peeters, Leuven).

In 2008 I became the chairholder of the Catholic inter-diocesan council for family ministry in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. Having this (unpaid) church-related function, in addition to a function as professor in practical theology at a faculty of theology and religious studies in a Catholic University (Leuven, Belgium) in a pluralist country, influences my own theology, as well as my own family experiences and those of people around me.

In this chapter, I will answer the question how a practical theology of families can be conceived, knowing that this is only one possible path, influenced by my own Belgian Catholic context and theological views developed in dialogue with international protestant and catholic scholars from various disciplines and backgrounds, among which also explicit feminist theologians. By developing the core elements of a practical theological reflection on families, I will also explain how ‘religion’ is conceived in this view.

2 Lived Religion and Families

Don Browning and his co-authors developed their practical theological approach on the family in relation to their own definition on practical theology (Browning, Miller-
McLemore, and Couture 2000). Browning developed earlier a ‘fundamental practical theology’ and explained how in fact all forms of theology fall under ‘practical theology’ (Browning 1991, 7 ff). His idea about ‘fundamental practical theology’ includes four steps: ‘descriptive theology’, ‘historical theology’, ‘systematic theology’ and ‘strategic practical theology’. This last step is what is often considered as practical theology. Browning refers to David Tracy’s critical correlation as an important methodological characteristic for practical theology (Tracy 1975).

Within the global field of practical theology there are various paradigms. Browning’s approach is one of them, which is considered as a form of ‘public theology’ that tries to influence a broader audience with ethical positions on family issues. The South African practical theologian Jaco Dreyer describes an ‘intradisciplinary diversity’ within practical theology (Dreyer 2012, 34–35). He cautions about an approach that tries to overcome all the differences and wants to unify all kind of approaches; but he also warns against a pluralist position where the variety in practical theological approaches is “accepted but ignored” (Dreyer 2012, 34–35). In line with this ‘intradisciplinary diversity’, I do not want to deepen the differences between a more strategic form of practical theology, or a correlational approach on the one hand, and an approach in line with ‘lived religion’ on the other hand. I will develop my arguments below in dialogue with a ‘lived religion’ approach of practical theology, but I do recognize the value of other approaches and do not want to position them as totally different from what I suggest. Thus, rather than discussing particular nuances, tensions, differences and communalities between Browning’s approach and an approach of practical theology which focuses on ‘lived religion’, I will discuss how I conceive a practical theology of families in line with a lived religion approach.

Within practical theological discussions, the study of lived religion refers to an empirical approach, which considers practical theology merely in line with the academic paradigm of practical theology, less in line with the clerical paradigm – as they are distinguished by Ed Farley (1988) and discussed by Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2007, 19–38). Studying lived religion focuses on the descriptive aspect of practical theology, whereas a more clerical paradigm focuses on the ‘how to’ or the more pragmatic or strategic approach of practical theology, sometimes even considered as applied theology. This distinction between ‘descriptive’ and ‘strategic’ refers to Osmer’s fourfold approach of practical theology, where he describes a descriptive – interpretive – normative – and strategic aspect of practical theology (2008). In more classical terms, it refers to the see – judge – act triad as it became popular in Catholic Social Teaching. These approaches received critical comments, as the reality and the diversity of practical theological research cannot be grasped in such a schematic form. Other critical questions are whether these schemes do not easily presuppose a form of ‘correlation’ between practices or experiences and theory, or whether they might neglect the friction between them or even reinforce a dualistic view where theory/theology and practices/experiences can be clearly distinguished, or a view where theory/theology seems to be fixed.
We need terms and schematic views in order to think, and thus I go on with using existing terminology. Although a lived religion approach of practical theology will often focus on a more descriptive character of the discipline, I take the position that studying lived religion is as such also transformative (and thus also ‘strategic’) and loaded with theological presumptions and explicit theological choices. Every description of a lived experience or a viewpoint is always colored. A neutral, purely objective description does not exist, as researchers make interpretative choices in what they describe and how they describe it. These choices are influenced by and also influence more formal elaborated theological (or ideological) views.

Starting from the idea that the ‘lived religion’ has to be studied and is itself a real theological endeavor, the question is: what does this mean concretely in relation to families?

Family life is more and more a topic within theological studies since the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, when it comes to empirical research and the study of family life as it is lived, and not only as it ought to be, most studies focus on aspects of religious initiation or religious communication. Some others integrate the reflection on their own family experience within their practical theology. Daily family life of partners, parents or children has received relatively little scholarly attention of practical theologians, in comparison to professional practices such as teaching religion, hospital chaplaincy or the study of the spirituality of children, adolescents or patients in order to conceive good (professional) practices. However, a theological study of the way in which family members experience family life and religion or spirituality related to their family life, is relevant for these family members, but also for teachers, religious leaders, pastoral ministers, and academic theologians. Studying family life and religion is however more than only a ‘mean’ to make sure that churches or schools would thrive. It helps religious leaders and theologians to discover the diversity of religious views between and within families. In this way, a practical theology, as the study of lived religion in families, can function within an intercultural and interreligious context, stimulating dialogue and understanding first of all, and not so much the continuation or renewal of existing church-based practices.

3 Towards a Practical Theology of Families

Choosing which aspects of lived religion in families have to be investigated and discussed, reflects a specific position. I focus here on how people experience ‘religion’ as life giving, but also as a hindrance to their flourishing, as oppressing even. Thereby I use the term ‘religion’ in reference to institutionalized religion while personal experiences of religion are often named ‘spirituality’ or ‘religiosity’. The term ‘lived religion’ refers to the personal way to deal with one’s own spirituality, but also with forms of institutionalized religion. Lived religion cannot be considered as the opposite of institutionalized religion. Such a position would start from a more dual-
istic interpretation of what is happening in Western societies like Belgium. It is all too easy to suppose that our society is characterized by secularization (decline of institutionalized religion) on the one hand and a revival of spirituality (individual level) on the other hand. At least in my own context, in Belgium, the institutionalized religion, especially Catholicism, is present in parts and fragments within many persons’ lived religion, although it is clear that only very few people will go to the church on Sundays. Within Islam, protestants and other groups, the commitment to forms of ‘institutionalized religion’ (communities, doctrines, leaders) is often stronger as they are in a minority position in Belgium. Here, I will focus on how ‘religion’ is experienced, in its various forms. Two remarks have to be made, however. First, studying ‘lived religion’ does not entail an exclusive focus on individuals, but suggests major trends within society and church as well. Second, I will discuss aspects of lived religion that I consider as important for a ‘practical theology of families’, with the question how formal theology (as expressed by academic theologians) and lived religion can be most ‘life-giving’ or empowering for individuals and for the whole society. In this perspective, I will discuss three major aspects.

A first important experience is the tension between the official religious institution and its doctrinal views, normative practices or texts, or authoritative leaders on the one hand, and the lived religion and lived experiences that are influenced by these institutionalized aspects of religion on the other hand. Here topics such as divorce, homosexuality or cohabitation are at stake. Specific family forms or experiences will be discussed in this context.

A second way to study lived religion in families relates to specific experiences within families, which I summarize under the key terms family violence and gender issues. The role of normative theological views and practices and experiences of family members and their operant and espoused theology might be ambiguous (Cameron, et al. 2010, 54), working in a positive or rather negative way. I explicitly choose to name family violence, as this is one of the most widespread problems in the world and endangers many families but is at the same time a taboo and an underdeveloped topic in formal religious texts and theological research.

A third main element in the study of lived religion within a practical theology of families, refers to daily experiences of care by family members. Here I will discuss research on giving birth, breastfeeding, and parenting in families. I could focus on marriage and partner relations as well, but from a practical theological perspective it seems that issues related to parenting and lived religion received more attention recently than the experiences of partner relationships. Much more has been written on partner relationships as such from the perspectives of sacramental theology (marriage), ethics or pastoral care.
3.1 Dealing with Difficult Religious Views

A major question is how family members can deal with the tension between ‘ideal’ and ‘reality’. The Louvain ethicist Roger Burggraeve developed an ‘ethics of mercy’ in relation to classical topics on sexual and relational ethics (2016).¹ He speaks about an ‘ethics of growth’, which recognizes the value of little steps towards the larger ideal as proposed by the Roman Catholic Church (sexuality and relationality embedded within a heterosexual marriage). In my own approach I focus on the resilience of families and criticize a monolithic idea of what an ‘ideal family’ could be. Influenced by narratives from family therapists and personal encounters, I warn in various publications of an all too idealistic view on the family.

The tensions between people’s experiences and the normative teachings of the Roman Catholic Church are more and more recognized by church leaders. In 2014 and 2015 two synods were organized on family issues and the difficulties people in some countries have with some traditional views of the church were recognized, especially in relation to issues on divorce and remarriage. Pope Francis wrote on the value of ‘discernment’ for pastoral leaders and believers, as a way to support persons (AL 2016, 19).

This tension between what is expected from the perspective of the institutionalized religion and the way in which people experience family issues, has been studied within other denominations and religions as well. Recently, the American sociologist Samuel Perry wrote about the reasons people give for their divorce, and the moderating role of their conservative protestant beliefs and practices. He concluded that divorced persons in the USA, with a stronger (conservative protestant) religious practice (church attendance) usually tend to indicate that the other, the ex-partner, was more responsible for the divorce. In the 2018 article “Their fault, not mine”, Perry explained these empirical findings partly by referring to the difficulty religious people experience when their life situation does not match with doctrines of the church. In his words: “Given the stigma against divorce in many religious communities, I argue that divorcées in such communities likely feel internal pressure to account for their divorce in ways that deflect blame” (Perry 2018, 1). This is one way to cope with the tension between church teachings and personal experiences, and a way to stay loyal to the teachings. It can be considered as a way to ‘adapt the experiences’ in order to minimize the gap.

This can be noticed in studies on Islam and homosexuality as well. Some persons who experience themselves as homosexual or lesbian, will choose not to engage in such relations or might even choose for a heterosexual marriage, to stay loyal to what their religious leaders or their families tell them. Within the Catholic Church in

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¹ This was originally published in Dutch, and later reworked and adapted as: R. Burggraeve. 2016. An Ethics of Mercy. On the Way to Meaningful Living and Loving. Leuven / Dudley: Peeters.
Belgium, there is a small minority of divorced people who explicitly choose not to enter in a new sexual relationship to stay honest to the church teachings.

However, there are many other strategies to deal with the gap between official religious expectations and personal experiences. The British sociologist Andrew Yip studied, among others, how British non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims deal with the tension between ideal and reality. He describes how they re-interpret scriptural texts and consider them more in line with their own homosexual experiences (Yip 2005).

Similar results are found in relation to gender issues. Many adolescents in various religious do not support gender-unequal practices in their religion and do not consider this as essential for religion (Page and Yip 2017). Various other results of empirical research and daily experience show how religion is fluid and how various interpretations and practices are conceived by persons, living in complex family situations that do not necessary fit within the normative discourse of the institutionalized religion but who consider themselves as belonging to this religion. What ‘belonging’ means, is very diverse – from taking up leadership positions to weekly attendance at religious services to only praying occasionally to a vague sense of belonging without strong commitment. These ‘reinterpretations’ of institutional teachings might go together with a longing for change by a much broader group of religious people, not only those who experience specific family situations that are stigmatized by the institutional religion. In 2014 my colleague Thomas Knieps and I asked a large group of Belgians active as volunteers or professionals within the Catholic Church about their views on issues such as homosexuality, remarriage after divorce, sex before marriage and cohabitation. A majority of respondents in this survey answered that they would like the teachings to change; these were clearly not only those in these specific family situations. Whether these respondents agreed or disagreed with church teachings and practices on family issues or wanted change, was also related to their general religious views and practices. Those who believed in a more ‘literal way’ were less inclined to disagree or to expect change of church teachings than those who interpreted catholic teachings in a more symbolic way. The way in which religion is interpreted and experienced matters a lot and prevents generalizations when we describe people’s experiences.

Practical theologians are confronted with the challenge to search for ways that support people in their flourishing. They have to juggle between a strong focus on ideals that might be stigmatizing or oppressing on the one hand, and an inclination to give up normative speech by proposing a relativistic view where everything is ok. The focus of Pope Francis on the Jesuit principle of ‘discernment’ can be considered as a way out of the gap between ideals and experiences, but it leaves some questions unanswered. Discernment, as is the case with speaking about grace or mercy in theological and pastoral debates, does not erase the stigmatizing effects of church teachings as such. It supports the personal experience of being cared for, being loved, and welcomed within a church community. However, church teachings might be oppressive or exclusive for some people. Most often, there is a good reason why these teach-
ings have developed and are still defended, but if one cares about individual experiences as well, a form of transformation is needed. We need a theology that focuses on the positive strengths of people in situations that are considered as deviant from norms and that names how ideals can also have negative sites (as marriage is not always so ideal, all forms of violence can happen within marriage and might stay unnoticed, or women and children may be oppressed in some situations). Resilience, flourishing and searching for new narratives are key concepts in such a theology. It is important to avoid positions of ‘cheap grace’ (someone commits a sin, but forgiveness or grace is always there as a way out). Reading the bible, listening to stories of people from long ago and from today, and reinterpreting them time and again, in search of what they tell us for a better future, is important here. In all forms of religious education and pastoral care, it is important to deal with narratives and to show the fluidity and flexibility of people’s dealing with religion, rather than only present aspects of normative theology or institutionalized religion. In terms of church practice, it is important to pay attention to the diversity within experiences of family lives and to notice that people who are living in families that do not fully match the religious norms, also practice their religious faith in various ways and are often partly, and critically, loyal to religious institutions. This could be reflected in catechetical practices and materials, where various types of families are presented and addressed, not only the traditional heterosexual married couple with children.

3.2 Wrestling with Difficult Aspects of Reality: Family Violence

So far, I discussed people’s wrestling with difficult aspects of institutionalized religions (gender issues, views on homosexuality, ...). I explained how a form of transformation is important, but I also warned against ‘relativism’: not everything is good. This is especially important when we consider aspects of domestic violence. Although this reality is gaining more and more attention within society, there is only limited attention for domestic violence within official Catholic teachings. Some (practical) theologians have taken up the topic of domestic abuse. One example is James Poling, who has to be acknowledged for putting domestic violence on the theological agenda. He challenged classical theological views and urges the reader to rethink them in light of the violence and the abuse of power that are happening. He paid explicit attention to male offenders in Understanding Male Violence: Pastoral Care Issues (2003). Michael O’Sullivan, the Irish Jesuit expert in spirituality studies, published How Roman Catholic Theology Can Transform Male Violence Against Women: Explaining the Role of Religion in Cultural Assumptions about Gender’ in 2010.

Most practical theological works on domestic violence challenge practices (what is the role of the church/pastoral minister?) or theologies. They explain how theologies on sacrifice, family, gender, male/female complementarity, forgiveness, or atonement can be used as legitimations of domestic violence and suggest critical re-
lections and transformation of these theologies and the way they are preached or used in catechetical settings (Ganzevoort 2009). An adequate theology can have a public, prophetic function. Especially in contexts where gender equality needs more acceptance in society, churches and theology could have a very important role, under the condition that they critically and continuously rethink their own theology in light of its possible dangerous consequences.

Some recent practical theological books give an explicit voice to survivors of violence. Susan Shooter (2016), for example, was using grounded theory as an empirical method and she started from the experiences of women themselves. Shooter speaks about all forms of abuse, and how it influences the spiritual lives of survivors. Abuse most often has devastating consequences and, as trust becomes difficult, might also lead to questioning the relation someone has with God. Yet survivors interviewed by Shooter also explain how their spirituality helps them, how they find strength in their faith and how they reconsider God’s caring presence now, after the abuse. The Canadian Catholic practical theologian Jean-Guy Nadeau (Nadeau, Rochon, Golding, 2012) explains how the religious education received by many victims of sexual abuse raises lots of doubts. Survivors wrestle with many difficult questions about evil and God’s goodness and support. Most of the studies where survivors of violence have a voice indicate that it is often difficult to speak about ‘religion’ and much more preferred to speak about ‘spirituality’ because the automatic association of the term ‘religion’ with institutionalized religion is not always helpful when one becomes a victim of abuse. Some survivors do not feel welcome in the church or feel very lonely in their experiences – they expected more from the church or might even be misused by persons with a strong link to the church. Still, they might find support in their personal spirituality.

Noteworthy in this (limited) overview of recent studies is the virtual absence of male victims and female offenders. More attention should also go to them, as the taboo here is even much larger. It would be very interesting to study how ‘bystanders’ experience domestic violence and religion. Which religious arguments do they use to care for victims, to defend offenders, to justify their own passive attitude or to be involved in domestic violence policy issues? More attention could also go to survivors of family violence, especially (adult) children, male and female, who experienced all forms of violence (sexual, psychological, physical, ...) by their parents or siblings, or who used violence against their parents. Most important for a practical theologian, reflecting on care issues, on religious education and on narratives is that the experience of domestic violence is named and made visible in all kinds of writings, theologies, catechetical settings. A good practice I experience in the university parish in Leuven (Belgium) is lighting a candle for all victims of violence before the liturgy really starts. If from time to time the presider reminds the people present in the liturgy that these are victims of violence during war, structural violence as in racism or poverty, but also domestic violence, people might feel that leaders in the church at least acknowledge this reality. If domestic violence is not made a taboo but explicitly
mentioned, people might feel more inclined to speak up about their own experiences, doubts, etc. Only then can adequate care be given or searched for.

### 3.3 Wrestling with Family Experiences: Spirituality, Giving Birth and Parenting

Studying lived religion is important for discussing family life and religion. In 2017, a new series of books was established: *Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion and Societal Challenges*. The first titles dealt with tolerance and intolerance, and violence and trauma after mass shootings. Newer titles will deal with homosexuality and Islam, bisexuality, and trauma; issues related to the two previous sections of this chapter. In this third part of this chapter, I will expand the focus and indicate how thinking about ‘lived religion’ and ‘family life’ can focus our attention on other aspects, on experiences of giving birth and parenting, especially on practices of care in family contexts.

Within the Roman Catholic Church, family metaphors get a lot of attention. The church is presented as a woman, the bride of Christ, and as a mother; frequent references are made to Mary, as mother of the Church, mother of Jesus. More infrequently, references are made to Joseph, the father of Jesus. The church itself is sometimes presented as a family (Gomez 2018).

Mostly, these theological metaphors are based on essentialized or idealistic views of the family, motherhood, or fatherhood. Studying experiences of family life from the perspective of lived religion might nuance these all too idealistic views. When results of these ‘lived religion’ approaches are used more in church contexts, people might be able to identify with what is being said, as they will be able to recognize their own struggles. I will show below how parenting can be experienced as a spiritual practice and how this can and should be considered as a very ambiguous and wrestling experience.

Not only explicit religious practices in families can be considered as aspects of lived religion in families. Evidently, when time is made for common prayer, attending liturgical services or speaking about theological questions among partners or parents and children, the religiosity in the family is clearly noticed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2006) and others argued persuasively however that the daily practices of care in family life can be considered as ‘spirituality’ (2006). They are not only an expression of someone’s Christian, or more vague spirituality, but they can be called ‘spiritual practices’ as such. For Christians, preparing food for a partner, parent or children can be read in line of Mt 25:31–46, and be considered as a practice where Christ is present.

This may sound rather idealistic and strongly focused on ethical responsibilities. Parents or partners have to care. But when is it good enough? Many suffer from the idea, coming from others or from themselves, that they have to be perfect. And this might be suffocating, leading to ‘burn out’, maybe even in a family context. Many
family members however also experience God’s grace and love. They experience how they are accepted, loved, and cared for by God, even if they are not perfect themselves. And most of all: they trust that God will also care for the other. It does not only depend on them. Particularly pregnant mothers and expecting fathers, who feel powerless in waiting for the birth of the child, speak about how they may light a candle and ask God or ‘Someone’ or ‘the higher power’ to care for the unborn child as they are unable to prevent all potential risks for such a vulnerable child. That is learned from the empirical research of Judith Cockx, who interviewed twelve Belgian heterosexual couples about the pregnancy and the birth of their child in relation to aspects of a broad spirituality (Cockx, Dillen, and Spitz 2017). The concept of ‘grace’ is seldom used by these parents, living in a secularized culture. They speak however about thankfulness, about the gift of the child and the gift to have the opportunity to become a parent. They also wrestle with this responsibility and the high expectations, and the balance between the search for having some control and the necessity to ‘let it go’ – to trust and to abandon the quest for control. They have to live with vulnerability, and to experience that this is far from romantic. Experiences of grace in daily family life can be related to what is beautiful, what is considered as a present – from God or from a partner or a child – but it can also be experienced in the midst of trouble, difficulties, mourning.

Biblical stories, which are full of narratives about family situations, notably in the First Testament, show how people have experienced God’s grace and presence even in the midst of chaotic or sad circumstances, as the story of Abraham and Sarah who receive a son shows. These biblical stories and other texts (such as psalms) might support people in their daily family life. They deserve critical reflection of course as well; the bible should not be read as a legitimation of sexual violence, corporal punishment, or oppression of women, as is – sadly enough – sometimes happening.

Some experiences in families cannot be considered only as ‘practices of spirituality’ or even ‘lived religion’, but they also give rise to theological reflections. This is what Elisabeth Gandolfo (2013) shows in relation to breastfeeding, which is called a ‘contemplative practice’ but is also a source for theological reflection. Cristina Traina (2011) wrote in a similar way, when she considered the practice of breastfeeding as a challenge for ethical thinking and reflections on self-love and neighbor-love.

### 4 Conclusion

This chapter gives an overview of what is discussed in the field of practical theology and families, with references to literature in various contexts. I am fully aware of the fact that I did not do justice to the work of many other authors, who are not named here but have contributed a lot. The choices in this chapter were partly made based on my own biographical and academic context, partly on the three main areas I wanted to cover with this chapter. Three main aspects have to be seen by religious
leaders and scholars in relation to family and lived religion. This is, first of all, the fact that many people wrestle with institutionalized forms of religion, doctrinal and ethical views of family life and sexuality, but nevertheless find ways to cope with these ‘difficult views’ and call themselves religious or spiritual. Secondly, violence happens in families and studying lived religion and families asks for more attention for this reality. Thirdly, there are also many beautiful and ambiguous experiences that deserve attention from the perspective of lived religion and practical theology. Shortly, people wrestle with religions and institutions, they wrestle with difficult aspects of life (such as violence) and they wrestle with family life itself, as experiences in families are mostly ambiguous. This can be demonstrated with the example of pregnancy and childbirth.

In conclusion, studying family life from the perspective of practical theology as the study of lived religion asks for a study of the ‘wrestling’ of people on a daily basis, and for taking this ‘wrestling’ seriously as a fruitful ground for theologizing.

Bibliography


## Roman Catholic Church Documents