FEMINISM, FAMILY, AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS: A HERMENEUTIC REALIST PERSPECTIVE

by Don Browning

Abstract. In this article I apply the insights of hermeneutic realism to a practical-theological ethics that addresses the international crisis of families and women’s rights. Hermeneutic realism affirms the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer but enriches it with the dialectic of participation and distanciation developed by Paul Ricoeur. This approach finds a place for sciences such as evolutionary psychology within a hermeneutically informed ethic. It also points to a multidimensional model of practical reason that views it as implicitly or explicitly involving five levels—background metaphysical visions, some principle of obligation, assumptions about pervasive human tendencies and needs, assumptions about constraining social and natural environments, and assumed acceptable rules of conduct. The fruitfulness of this multidimensional view of practical reason is then demonstrated by applying it to practical-theological ethics and the analysis of four theorists of women’s rights—Martha Nussbaum, Susan Moller Okin, Lisa Cahill, and Mary Ann Glendon. Finally, I illustrate the importance and limits of the visional dimension of practical reason by discussing the concept of “Africanity” in relation to the family and AIDS crisis of Eastern Africa.

Keywords: Africanity; analogical; capabilities; dialogue; distanciation; hermeneutic realism; inclusive fitness; kin altruism; practical-theological ethics.

Christianity has an investment in marriage and the form that families take. This is the case even though neither marriage nor family form are conditions for salvation. Nonetheless, the Christian tradition has views of nature and the person that suggest that some marriage and family patterns

Don Browning is Alexander Campbell Professor of Religious Ethics and the Social Sciences Emeritus, Divinity School, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637; e-mail dsbrowni@midway.uchicago.edu. This article is adapted from chapter 7 of his *Marriage and Modernization* (Browning in press).

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are more fulfilling and ethically responsible than others. This stance implies that a Christian practical theology should take an analogical attitude toward its view of families and those of other traditions. More specifically, Christian practical theology should find analogies and promote commonalities through dialogue. This requires a framework of interpretation and a model of ethics. In this article, I illustrate an interpretative and ethical perspective that can enhance this dialogue.

I propose a philosophy of hermeneutic realism as the most adequate epistemological framework for a practical theology that can accomplish this task. This philosophical stance makes it possible to develop a multidimensional theory of *practical-theological ethics*, a term I use to refer to a synthesis between the usually separate disciplines of practical theology and theological ethics. I conclude by showing the fruitfulness of this approach by reviewing four feminist thinkers who address one aspect of the family problem—the global situation of women.

HERMENEUTICS, ETHICS, AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

I presuppose the emerging international consensus about the definition of practical theology as critical and correlational reflection on the church's transformative praxis in the world. Practical theology's reflection on the needs and orders of the world is not designed to suppress reflection on the internal life of the church.[1] Nor should it obscure the truth that the promises of God include but transcend the scope of finite life. Its focus is, rather, to locate the scope of practical theology in its most comprehensive context—ministry to the world. It is, in effect, to claim that a fully critical and correlational practical theology must necessarily be a public practical theology. A public practical theology aspires to demonstrate how theology can both analyze and critique the practices of both religious and nonreligious groups as they impact the common good.

For several years I have argued that the descriptive and normative interests of both practical theology and theological ethics should be pursued within a hermeneutic framework. By using the troublesome word *hermeneutics*, I follow such scholars as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Richard Bernstein in seeing all attempts at human understanding as unfolding within a context of dialogue or conversation.[2] Dialogue, or conversation, within this philosophical tradition has a rather precise meaning. It means that understanding begins with questions about one's context of experience, but questions that also have been shaped by the traditions that influence this context. Understanding, therefore, is a kind of synthesis or fusion between the historically shaped questions of the interpreter and the meaning of classic texts or monuments of an identifiable tradition (Gadamer 1982, 273). It is my claim that both practical theology and theological ethics should be conceived as proceeding within such a historically contingent dialogue.

But I move toward Ricoeur and my colleague William Schweiker in calling for a kind of critical hermeneutics (Ricoeur 1981, 155–58) or "hermeneutic realism."[3] Hermeneutic realism, to use that phrase for the moment, acknowledges that all understanding—including scientific understanding—is historically and linguistically shaped. But it also holds that it is possible, through various methodological maneuvers, to gain degrees of what Ricoeur calls "distanciation" (1981, 64–65). The concept of distanciation is Ricoeur's happy substitute for the positivist concept of objectivity. The idea of objectivity holds that understanding must begin with a cognitive self-emptying of one's prejudices and, through controlled experiment, conclude with objective propositions about states of affairs.[4] Hermeneutic realism argues against the possibility of these positivistic assumptions about objectivity but contends that the inquirer can gain enough *distance* from his or her historically conditioned beginning point to achieve glimpses of the stable structures of reality (kinds of regularities within the human and natural world), even though one can never grasp them completely unsullied by culturally and historically shaped prejudgments.

In short, hermeneutic realism is a form of *critical realism*, as this term is used by philosophers of science. It is not naive realism, with its correspondence theory of the relation between understanding and reality. Nor does it hold that all knowledge is nothing but human construction with no relation to the regularities of reality. Hermeneutic realism admits that even the best knowledge is constructed in some sense. Nonetheless, it contends that in spite of the constructed element in all understanding, good knowledge has degrees of approximation to reality.[5] For these reasons, the hermeneutic realist believes that understanding as dialogue, when done well, can increase a shared public sense of workable approximations to the descriptively true and normatively good, even though absolute objectivity on these matters is impossible.

Hermeneutic realism lessens the distinction between descriptive and normative inquiries. Both types of understanding begin with historically shaped preunderstandings, function in the context of dialogue, and achieve varying degrees of distanciation. Descriptive statements of the kind pursued by the natural and social sciences specialize in the question of "What *is* the case?" and normative statements specialize in the question "What *should be* the case?" Hermeneutic realism denies the possibility of conceiving of these distinctions as absolute.

Hermeneutic realism's consistent concern with questions of "What is the case?" as a dimension of understanding has implications for how public consensus is achieved. To clarify this point I compare hermeneutic realism with three commanding contemporary views on the nature of public discourse. First, hermeneutic realism should be distinguished from Michel Foucault's idea that alleged public agreements are really arbitrary enforcement of dominant centers of social power (Foucault 1990, 99–100). Although this is often true, hermeneutic realism holds that cognitive and moral truth exists, however fragmentarily perceived, and that such truth is likely to eventually expose and undermine arbitrary power. Hence, power and truth can, in some instances, achieve a high degree of coherence. Second, critical realism is different from Richard Rorty's view that public agreement is mere consensus achieved by communal conversation with no relation to stable structures of the true and good (Rorty 1979). Although hermeneutic realism acknowledges a huge place for conversation and the conventions it produces (just as it admits a significant place for tradition), it also maintains that the obdurate regularities of reality will force their intrusive noses into human affairs and provide boundaries to the arbitrariness of convention.

Finally, the hermeneutic realist's belief that conversations can achieve approximations to the good and true is different from the idea of consensus found in Jürgen Habermas, with his skepticism that statements about the regularities of human desires and needs can be rationally redeemed in uncoerced discourse (Habermas 1971, 214–45; Keat 1981, 84–91). It is true that propositions about the regularities of human wants and needs are difficult to redeem, but agreements between different cultures about basic human needs and capabilities are in fact often achieved (Lovin and Reynolds 1985, 20, 26–32). And this agreement is partially grounded on rational evidence and not just on the basis of what seems generalizable to the relevant parties, as Habermas would propose. I illustrate below how rational conversations about human need, capabilities, and goods can proceed when I review the work of feminist moral theorists Martha Nussbaum and Lisa Cahill.

HERMENEUTIC REALISM AND THE THICKNESS OF MORAL THINKING

If hermeneutic realism is the most adequate framework for both practical theology and theological ethics, we are forced to acknowledge that a strong separation of the two disciplines is untenable. Customarily, practical theology has been conceived as specializing in the description of the small and large contexts into which the norms defined by theological ethics should be mediated.[6] Theological ethics, on the other hand, often was conceived as specializing in clarifying the norms that practical theology applied. If, however, the normative and descriptive aspects of understanding cannot be so easily distinguished, as hermeneutic theory suggests, the separation of practical theology and theological ethics should be discouraged. A distinction between them should be maintained, at best, for certain rhetorical conveniences. Each discipline, however, should take full responsibility for articulating both the norms of practice and the description of practice in its various contexts. Both disciplines should have interest in transformation. When this happens, their absolute separation will become difficult to maintain.

For the purposes of this paper, I bring practical theology and theological ethics together into a single inquiry called *practical-theological ethics.* Such an inquiry combines into a single discipline a concern with description, normative critique, and the task of social and individual transformation.

The descriptive and normative tasks of practical-theological ethics are both strengthened by grasping the full "thickness" of practical moral reflection. By using the metaphor of thickness, I am arguing that all practical-moral thinking, whether allegedly secular or religious, has many distinguishable, overlapping, and interactive dimensions. In a series of essays and books stretching from the early 1980s to the present, I have identified five dimensions of moral thinking or practical reason: (1) a visional level generally conveyed by narratives and metaphors about the character of the ultimate context of experience, (2) an obligational level guided by some implicit or explicit moral principle of a rather general kind, (3) assumptions about basic regularities of human tendencies and needs, (4) assumptions about pervasive social and ecological patterns that channel and constrain these tendencies and needs, and (5) a level of concrete practices and rules that are informed by all the foregoing dimensions.[7]

In a loose sense, these dimensions are organized hierarchically. The visional or narrative level, which projects general meanings of life, influences all the other dimensions. From another perspective, judgments about any one of the five dimensions can become highly influential for the other dimensions because of the particular life challenge confronting a person or group at the moment. For instance, the American debates over the ordination of homosexuals or the legalization of "gay marriage" generally center on the third level of practical-theological thinking, the tendency-need level. This dispute is regrettably preoccupied with the relevant, but not exhaustive, question as to whether there is a pervasive tendency in some people toward homosexuality that is biologically or psychologically determined or a difficult-to-break habit such as smoking cigarettes. The preoccupation of this debate with level three of practical-moral thinking pushes into the background relevant judgments at the other four levels.

A hermeneutically conceived practical-theological ethics should proceed as a dialogue involving all five of these dimensions. According to this view, practical-theological ethics begins with a problem, crisis, or question that exposes the practical thinker's preunderstanding at each of the five levels. When I teach practical-theological ethics to students in introductory courses, I ask them to discover and describe, at each of the five dimensions, the preunderstanding behind the practical question they choose to study. I then have them give a thick description, at each of the five dimensions, of the witness of the classic Christian texts that they believe have a normative relevance to their primary question. I invite them finally to enter a third critical dialogue between the witness of the classic Christian text and an alternative cultural answer to their primary question, once again at each of the five levels. In summary, their task is to have a critical dialogue among these three perspectives at each of the five dimensions—description of the context of the original question, a Christian answer, and a competing non-Christian answer. This exercise invariably produces an intensely pursued high-quality paper that enables students to focus the central issues of a critical practical-theological ethics around a concrete question of importance to them and the wider public.

PRACTICAL-THEOLOGICAL ETHICS AND THE FAMILY DEBATE

I would like to illustrate this hermeneutically conceived practical-theological ethics with reference to my work as director of the Religion, Culture, and Family Project and the two series of books that have evolved from it.[8] The project was stimulated by a practical question: Is there a family crisis in the modern world, and, if so, what are the interests and resources of the Christian faith for addressing it? To begin thinking about this question is to activate ideas and assumptions at all of the five dimensions I have mentioned. It entails wondering about what vision of life underlies our assumptions about families, what principle of obligation orders relations between husband and wife and parent and child, what tendencies and needs families fulfill or fail to fulfill, how social patterns such as modernization and new employment possibilities affect families, and which concrete practices are guiding families in the present and should guide them in the future.

To bring each of these dimensions of practical thinking into dialogue with the normative claims of the Christian faith entails a wide range of inquiries and judgments. For instance, how does the vision of a good creation, a fall, and redemption shape normative judgments about families? With regard to the obligational level, does the principle of neighbor love help order families, or should families be ordered by some idea of proportional justice as claimed by theories of male headship in Aristotelian philosophy? At the third level, do families primarily satisfy our needs for interpersonal intimacy, as many liberal theological views claim, or do they regulate asymmetrical male-female reproductive patterns and harness the energies of kin altruism, as Christian views informed by Aristotle and Aquinas have argued? Or do families satisfy both intimacy needs *and* reproductive strategies while subsuming the latter to the former, as the revisionist marriage writings of Pope John Paul II argue? At the fourth level, practical ethics might inquire into how Greco-Roman honor-shame social patterns influenced families in the Jesus movement and how, in turn, these families resisted and to some extent transformed this male-dominated and female-constraining family model. Finally, what actual early Christian practices suggest viable practices today? Here the practical interpreter must not fail to take account of the stunning innovations of the common meal in the early Christian house church, located as it was in the boundary-breaking space (the peristyle) between male and female quarters and presided over by both men and women.[9]

Hermeneutic challenges confront the practical-theological ethicist at several of these levels. I illustrate this briefly with reference to dimension four, the social and environmental context of both interpreter and gospel. Practical-theological ethicists with liberal preunderstandings are likely to react negatively to the lingering Greco-Roman honor-shame patriarchal patterns that surrounded early Christianity and ignore how families in the Jesus movement subtly resisted these social forms with alternative practices.[10] On the other hand, practical-theological ethicists with conservative preunderstandings are likely to absolutize these same male honor codes of antiquity, assume they are intrinsic to early Christianity, and miss more egalitarian social patterns in the Gospels, the pre-Pauline Jesus movement, and Paul himself.[11] I could illustrate copiously the dialogical tensions on this issue between the contemporary interpreter and classic texts at each of the five levels of practical-moral thinking. A careful reading of *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Browning et al. [1997] 2000), the summary volume of the Family, Religion, and Culture Series, reveals how we worked at all of these levels in our critical dialogue with the classic texts of the Christian faith and their relevance to family questions in contemporary society.[12]

RIGHTS FEMINISM AND PRACTICAL-THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

In this article, however, I want to illustrate the thickness of practical-theological ethics by discussing one small aspect of the family question, the rights of women in cross-cultural contexts, as these rights are discussed by a group of renowned women scholars. I have in mind the moral philosophers Martha Nussbaum of the University of Chicago, Susan Moller Okin of Stanford University, Catholic moral theologian Lisa Cahill of Boston College, and the Harvard legal historian Mary Ann Glendon. Each of these scholars is, in some sense, a feminist. Each is a theorist of human rights, especially as they relate to women. Each is nonrelativistic in her ethics, even though they all attempt to account for the relativizing influences of culture, tradition, and language. Each rejects thoroughgoing constructivism, relativism, historicism, and deconstructionism—whether proclaimed by Foucault, Jacques Derrida, or feminist literary critics such as Judith Butler—as both false and inimical to the interests of women throughout the world. These thinkers believe some kind of rights-oriented realist ethics is necessary to protect women from such abuses as genital mutilation, discrimination in employment and education, and the starvation of mothers and children. They claim that cultural practices that lead to these consequences must be critiqued and changed, however gently, respectfully, and slowly.

Martha Nussbaum's thought is having considerable impact on international feminist discussions under the auspices of the United Nations. Nussbaum is a feminist Aristotelian. She uses Aristotle, in combination with selected modern human sciences, to go simultaneously in two directions that are often thought to be contradictory. On the one hand, she shows powerful evidence of how our needs and emotions are constructed by the cultural and linguistic interpretations placed upon them (Nussbaum 1997, 19–29). On the other hand, she argues for a significant inventory of human capabilities which, no matter how diversely they are shaped by different cultural contexts, are still universal and should therefore be cultivated and actualized (Nussbaum 1993, 263–65).

Nussbaum grounds her theory of rights in this theory of capabilities. Basic—yes, innate—human capabilities should be recognized and actualized by social protection of human rights. Societies should be assessed by how fully they safeguard and realize these capabilities. Nussbaum's list of human capabilities is gender neutral and includes such items as bodily capabilities (hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and needs for shelter and mobility); the capacity for pleasure and pain; and the cognitive capabilities to perceive, imagine, and think. She also lists practical reason, the need for affiliation, the need to relate to nature, humor and play, and the need for separateness or individuality as fundamental human capabilities (Nussbaum 1995, 76–80). She is aware that all of these capabilities are marked by human finitude, the reality of death, and the impossibility of realizing them all and forever (Nussbaum 2000, 76–77).

Nussbaum claims that her Aristotelianism teaches her to be sensitive to context. For instance, the capability for practical reason and the cognitive capacities for perception, imagination, and thought are universal but will be expressed differently in various social and cultural contexts. To make her point, she shows that efforts by international organizations to distribute educational material to poor rural Bangladesh women failed when first tried because these resources seemed detached from their everyday pursuits. When, however, literacy was introduced as part of efforts to form a cooperative that addressed their economic needs, the cognitive and reasoning capabilities of these same women were awakened, and the literacy program succeeded (Nussbaum 1993, 258; Chen 1995, 37–57). Hence, Nussbaum's ethic of universal capabilities acknowledges that they are expressed differently in various contexts, but this concession to relativism does not dismantle her basic essentialism.

From the standpoint of the five dimensions of practical-ethical thinking discussed above, Nussbaum's list of capabilities is her way of fleshing out what I have called the tendency-need level. Her list is powerful and has been adopted by various thinkers in the field of international development. But both her list and her general ethical position are not beyond criticism. From my standpoint, Nussbaum's ethic is extremely thin on the other levels of practical thinking. She gives little or no attention to the visional and narrative level of either her own perspective or that of the cultures she examines. In her earlier writings we hear little about a principle of obligation except for occasional references to the idea of "capability equality." This concept implies that a good society helps all of its members equally to develop their capabilities (Nussbaum 1995, 90). In more recent writings, she has moved toward a brand of mixed deontology, to borrow a phrase from William Frankena (1973). She believes that Kant's categorical imperative provides a workable theory of justice; but, in contrast to him, Nussbaum argues that justice specifically has the task of distributing teleological goods. In her theory, these goods have to do with meeting and fulfilling human capabilities (Nussbaum 2000, 5, 12). Finally, we hear little from Nussbaum about dimension four, the social and natural conditions that pattern and constrain our human practices. To be fair, we do learn that Hindu and Muslim social systems restrict most women from participation in the educational and wage opportunities of their societies. Other than that, there is no fundamental analysis of the impact of modernization on women in traditional societies, nor, for that matter, is there an analysis of the effects of modernization on the well-being of women and families in modern societies.

Political theorist Okin is strong where Nussbaum is weak. She presents a better-developed and -illustrated principle of moral obligation by adapting for feminist purposes John Rawls's neo-Kantian theory of justice as fairness. She uses this principle to guide her feminist analysis of international development and its impact on women. She has more to say on the issue of justice than Nussbaum does. And, from the perspective of practical-theological ethics, we should acknowledge the analogies, although not identities, between the Christian principle of neighbor love (with its reversible relation between self and neighbor) and the principle of justice as fairness.[13] Hence, there is at least an affinity or analogy between Okin's neo-Kantianism and Christian principles of moral obligation.

But Okin is weak where Nussbaum is strong. Okin has a thin theory of human needs and capabilities. This is my dimension three, the tendency-need level of practical-moral reason. She says little about how human capabilities ground a theory of human rights. She is interested mainly in the basic right to exercise the capacity for practical reason as Rawls defines it. Practical reason, the reader will recall, is from Nussbaum's point of view only one capability among a rather long list of them. Okin argues that this right is precisely what is denied to women throughout the world. This happens to women first in the home—with their fathers and husbands—and second in the public world of wage employment, politics, and education (Okin 1989, 17–24). There can be no real fairness in these public realms, Okin argues, unless there is first gender justice in the home. Okin is so driven to protect women's right to exercise practical reason that she leaves unthematized any list of additional capabilities and rights of the kind advanced by Nussbaum. The right to exercise practical reason as a formal pursuit of justice is so central for Okin that she fails to specify the needs, capacities, and goods that practical reason should promote and adjudicate. Hence, she neglects the third dimension of practical reason and becomes preoccupied with the second.

Okin also seriously neglects the first dimension, the visional and narrative level. First, she does little to clarify the vision of life motivating her own thought. And, for the most part, she either neglects or is critical of the vision of others, especially if that vision is recognizably religious. Like Kant in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1960), Okin measures various historical manifestations of Judaism and Christianity from the perspective of how they conform to the principle of justice as fairness. Judged by this criterion, she finds Judaism and Christianity as wanting—both being principally responsible, from her viewpoint, for the patriarchy in Western families. She is equally unapologetic for condemning Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, and various folk religions (Okin 1997a, 31). To put it bluntly, Okin sees multiculturalism as "bad for women" (1997a, 25–28). She contends that although Western religious traditions have been harmful to women, at least they have been influenced by the emerging Western philosophical traditions of human rights. Most non-Western traditions, she contends, have not benefited from this influence and should therefore be all the more mistrusted by women.

When she considers, however, actual strategies of transformation, Okin's antagonism toward religion is more subdued. She acknowledges the possibility that the world religions might be reformed. This would require what Okin calls "inside-outsiders"—individuals and groups who have critical distance from these religions but also the empathic sensibility of an insider. With reference to Islam, a variation of this strategy can be found in Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im's argument that the Qur'an's strong patriarchy stems from the later and more embattled Mecca period. For that reason, it should be rejected in favor of the earlier, deeper, and more authentic gender equality of Muhammad's founding vision (An-Na'im 1990).

Okin is clearly skeptical that such a deeper stratum can be found in Islam, just as she is wary of finding a ground for women's rights in Judaism or Christianity. She prefers the strategies of the organizations called Women Living under Islamic Law or Sisterhood Is Global. Both groups try to raise the consciousness of Islamic women by confronting them with the diversity of women's rights in today's Islamic societies and by juxtaposing U.N.–shaped theories of women's rights with Qur'anic views of their rights. They therefore encourage Islamic women themselves to search for the analogues, identities, and differences between the two views of rights (Shaheed 1994; Afghami and Vaxiri 1996). None of these three strategies is designed to dismantle Islam, but only the first, represented by An-Na'im, hopes to reform it from within its classic tradition. The other two at best hope to effect social improvement for women without instigating reaction from Islamic fundamentalists.

Three criticisms are relevant to the practical-moral thinking of Nussbaum and Okin. In developing these criticisms, I will make use of the rights theories of Lisa Cahill and Mary Ann Glendon. First, both Nussbaum and Okin have thin theories of the human goods relevant to women viewed in the global context. Okin, as we have seen, is particularly weak here, primarily limiting her moral theory to my second dimension of practical ethics, the principle of obligation. Nussbaum is richer in her theory of goods with her extensive list of human capabilities and their corresponding rights. But, as Cahill points out, one set of capacities is entirely ignored—that set associated with parenthood. In her *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (1995), Cahill makes use of evolutionary psychology's theory of kin altruism—the idea that parents love their children in part because their offspring are literally (in the genetic sense) part of them. In advancing this argument, Cahill deftly locates the rightful context for understanding the important yet limited contributions of the new claims from sociobiology and evolutionary psychology about the ethical relevance of kin altruism and inclusive fitness. She argues that parenting too is a universal capability and is perceived to be a highly desirable one by most people throughout the world. It is only with the bias of Western individualism that this capability, its corresponding rights, and its implications for the institutions of family and marriage could be left out of Nussbaum's list. Hence, although evolutionary psychology can be faulted for making too much out of kin altruism and neglecting the moral relevance of other capabilities, Nussbaum makes too much out of the others and neglects procreative needs and what they imply for parental capabilities and rights.[14]

Mary Ann Glendon, however, shows that familial and parental rights are not excluded from several versions of human rights, especially continental European theories with their higher indebtedness to Rousseau rather than Locke (Glendon 1991, 32–39). Cahill says that it would seem bizarre to women from India, China, and especially Africa to exclude parenthood from the list of capabilities and rights to be respected. Glendon makes a similar criticism, not about Nussbaum specifically but about the documents (strongly influenced by feminists such as Nussbaum) that issued from the 1995 Fourth Conference on Women held in Beijing, China. They dedicate much space, Glendon points out, to women's rights to reproductive health but give little mention to parenting as such, especially parenting within the context of marriage and family (Glendon 1997, 12; 1995, 3). The practical-theological ethicist need not absolutize parenthood, nor the institution of marriage designed to organize it; the narrative of the Christian faith clearly values both as central finite values but makes neither essential for full Christian personhood or salvation. Nonetheless, the parental capability and tendency should be regarded as an important finite good that should not be excluded from an anthropology designed to undergird a theory of human rights.

Second, neither Nussbaum nor Okin is sufficiently dialogical in her methodology. Because of this, they are too quick to impose liberal Western feminist views on non-Western women. Hermeneutic realism holds that traditions have a right to influence and even convert one another in the name of attaining higher degrees of the good and true. But practical-theological ethicists should first try to uncover the respective points of analogy common to diverse traditions. For instance, there clearly are analogies between Nussbaum's theory of capabilities and assumptions about human nature within other traditions. This is the presupposition, as we have seen, of An-Na'im in his belief that Islam, when rightly interpreted, has analogies with certain Western traditions of human rights. Nussbaum's list of capacities is not a product of neutral reason; it reflects a dialogue with Aristotle, the Stoics, modern psychology, and the recent experiences of American academic feminists—all Western traditions. Her list should not be used to rush to judgment about the adequacy or inadequacy of non-Western traditions; instead, it should be used to search for points of analogy between her perspective and views of women's rights within other cultural strands. Indeed, as Cahill and Glendon suggest, the perspective of other traditions—especially on the importance of parenthood—should be used to enrich Nussbaum's list. Parental capabilities should be taken with all the more seriousness in Nussbaum's list in light of the reinforcing insights of evolutionary psychology. The archaeology of parental capability can be illuminated by evolutionary psychology's theory of kin altruism and inclusive fitness. These concepts show how hermeneutic realism can make use of the distanciating insights of the modern biological and psychological sciences. In addition, hermeneutic realism means not that criticism between two traditions is improper but rather that it should occur on the basis of a deeper search for analogies between our own and other traditions, analogies that are deeper than Nussbaum and Okin envision.

Third, both Nussbaum and Okin, as I already have suggested, are neglectful of the visional aspects of practical ethics and therefore prematurely dismissive of religion. Nussbaum measures narratives of religious traditions according to how they contribute to the actualization of human capabilities. Okin measures them from the perspective of their conformity to the principle of justice as fairness. Both Nussbaum's and Okin's framework for critiquing religion, I might add, have some philosophical legitimacy, but they are on the whole far too narrow. The deeper intentionality of a tradition's religious vision also must be taken into account.

I illustrate this point with reference to the indigenous religions of East Africa and what some anthropologists call *Africanity*. Africanity is a term used by Philip and Janet Kilbridge in their *Changing Family Life in East Africa* (1990). It explains the high valuation that both men and women from Kenya and Uganda have for procreation, children, and parenthood. Having children is a way of realizing the divine in human life; children are gifts of God, indeed, expressions of God (Kilbridge and Kilbridge 1990, 246). Of course, this religious vision was expressed traditionally within a family system that sanctioned polygyny, a freer sexual standard for men, and an elevated social status for men over women. The Kilbridges argue that the early phases of modernization—with its emphasis on mobility, urbanization, male pursuit of the wage market, and weakening ties with the extended family—have brought the East African family system to the verge of chaos. AIDS, child abandonment, fatherlessness, the emergence of street children, the overuse of grandparents as surrogate parents, and the restricted access of many women to the wage economy have contributed to a family crisis in East Africa (1990, 225–50). Poor women get more desperate and less healthy but have little access to jobs and education to help them and their dependent children survive.

How should either the church or public policy address the family situation in East Africa? This question illustrates the transformative purposes of practical-theological ethics. Nussbaum and Okin would doubtless emphasize changing the social system so that women can have access to education and the wage economy to support themselves and their children. This strategy is important, but is it sufficient? East African governments and some NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) emphasize education in condom use so that AIDS will not be transmitted and children will not be born who later will be neglected. Doubtless, as an emergency measure, this too is a valid strategy.

But both of these strategies may be limited, and both neglect the vision of Africanity. The Kilbridges advocate a strategy that builds on Africanity. They believe that any effort to change patriarchy, to alter the double sexual standard, to enhance the situation of women, and to limit the disease-spreading potentials of formal and informal polygyny must respect the deep African vision of the relation of children to the divine. Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha in their *The Church and AIDS in Africa* (1998) agree with the Kilbridges when they write, "For Africans, life is essentially reproductive life, and the transmission of life is both a social and religious obligation" (p. 101). Both teams of practical thinkers contend that efforts to change behaviors must be anchored in the African belief in the sacrality of children, their reflection of the divine, and children's right to flourish.

Both the Kilbridges and Shorter-Onyancha agree on the importance of my first dimension of practical-moral thinking, the visional and narrative level. They both believe that retaining the Africanity vision is essential if lower-order behaviors are to be changed successfully. But agreement at the visional level is not enough to produce a complete consensus between them. For a variety of reasons, they disagree about which behaviors need alteration. Shorter and Onyancha see real analogies between the Catholic sacramental view of marriage with its high valuation of infant life and the

Africanity view of the sacredness of procreation. This analogy between the Catholic and East African vision leads them to believe that the Catholic view can tap into the high African valuation of children and procreation to ground appeals for monogamy, paternal responsibility, the rejection of the double sexual standard, and the subsequent elevation and protection of wives and mothers. (The message that Shorter and Onyancha would send to East Africans goes like this: "In order to protect your sacred children and your divine vocations in procreation, you should alter the destructive aspects of your sexual and marital patterns" [1998, 105].)

The Kilbridges, who also want to build on the cultural vision of Africanity, go in a direction different from Shorter and Onyancha in selecting concrete behaviors to be influenced. They advocate replacing the debased postmodern East African sexual behaviors with the older, more classic, and more responsible polygyny that they believe existed before the rise of modernization. At the same time that they envision recapturing a responsible polygyny, they also want to blend it with contemporary feminist values of women's education and participation in the ever-growing wage economy.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to solve the conflict between the Kilbridges and Shorter-Onyancha. My goal is to demonstrate their respective attention to the visional level of moral thinking and how this might be important for practical-theological ethics in the fields of international development, women's rights, family, and sexuality. The case of Africa demonstrates the importance of taking the visional level into account—in this case the vision called Africanity—in ways that Nussbaum and Okin neglect. On the other hand, it demonstrates the various ways in which a commonly held vision, although important, is *never sufficient* to reach consensus. The Kilbridges and Shorter-Onyancha agree that the vision of Africanity is important, but they also illustrate how a shared narrative and worldview are not enough to assure agreement on a common practical strategy. Somewhere amid the four lower levels of practical-moral thinking, these two teams interpret things differently. Agreement on the visional dimension is important and influential on lower levels, but progress between these two teams will entail a careful review of their respective positions at lower levels of moral thinking. Here, the preoccupations of Nussbaum and Okin with capabilities and moral obligations would doubtless and rightly enter the picture again, but, I would hope, with a higher degree of hermeneutic and dialogical sensitivity than either has employed up to the present.

Regardless of the final resolution of this international discussion, the conversation with these feminist thinkers illustrates the thickness of practical moral thinking and the potential contribution of a close relation between practical theology and theological ethics in what I have called practical-theological ethics. It also illustrates the advantages of hermeneutic realism as a way of taking seriously both the vision and narrativity of various traditions as well as the regularities of human nature.

NOTES

1. Recent discussions have distinguished between practical theology done within the clerical, the ecclesial, and the public paradigms. It is my position that the public paradigm is the most inclusive and can and should contain the clerical and ecclesial. For an analysis of these distinctions, see Farley 1983.

2. The central texts of hermeneutic philosophy that I draw on in this article are Gadamer 1982; Ricoeur 1981; and Bernstein 1983.

3. The term *hermeneutic realism* is more associated with the work of Schweiker. See his *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (1995), 4. In one place Schweiker defines hermeneutic realism as follows: "It grants descriptive relativism with respect to how moral values are understood and interpreted; it insists on historical and pluralist consciousness in ethics. Yet I want to show that this diversity of goods is rooted in created life. The way forward . . . is through a multidimensional theory of value rooted in natural needs and relations" (p. 24).

4. For an excellent discussion of the nature and limitations of positivism, see Bernstein 1983, 115–18.

5. For a competent discussion of critical realism, see Barbour 1974.

6. Paul Tillich articulates this point of view in *Systematic Theology* I (1951): 33.

7. For a fuller discussion of these five dimensions, see Browning 1983; 1991.

8. This project began in 1991 on the basis of a large grant from the Lilly Endowment. It has produced two book series, the eleven-book Family, Culture, and Religion series published by Westminster John Knox and the (to date) five-book Religion, Marriage, and Family series published by William B. Eerdmans.

9. For a discussion of the likely location and function of the common meal in the early church, see Osiek and Balch 1997, 6–20, 193–214.

10. For evidence of trends toward gender equality in early Christian communities, see Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; Browning et al. [1997] 2000, 129–56; Osiek and Balch 1997, 103–55.

11. This unnuanced reading of early Christianity is the error of the men's movement in the United States called the Promise Keepers, the highly influential Focus on the Family led by James Dobson, and the convention of the Southern Baptist Church, which, during June of 1998, made the submission of women to their husbands a matter of church doctrine.

12. For a systematic review of how the five dimensions function in the family debate, see the appendix to Browning et al. [1997] 2000, 335–41.

13. Kantian ethics, with affinities to Okin, has been used by Gene Outka to interpret the Christian principle of neighbor love. See his *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (1972). This Catholic synthesis of Kantian ethics and the more teleological frameworks of Thomas Aquinas on the nature of neighbor love can be found in the work of Louis Janssens, "Norms and Priorities in a Love Ethics" (1977). My coauthors and I brought Kant, Rawls, Janssens, and Aquinas together on neighbor love in *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* (Browning et al. [1997] 2000, 274–76) in ways that have some analogies, but not identities, to Okin's neo-Kantianism. Okin neglects systematic discussion, however, of Aristotelian premoral goods.

14. For major statements about the relevance of kin altruism and inclusive fitness to morality, see the following more or less standard references: E. Wilson 1978; 1998; J. Wilson 1993; Wright 1994. The implication of my five dimensions of practical moral thinking is to suggest that the concepts of kin altruism and inclusive fitness help clarify some of the goods at stake at the tendency-need level, but they are not determinative for judgments at the other four levels. Hence, the claims of evolutionary psychology would have a place in moral theory, but a relatively modest one.

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