

#### 4 THE REFORMATIONAL CONCEPTION OF THE FAMILY

Of all the blessings of God's common grace in this life, the family has been God's greatest creation and natural gift to mankind. Just because this is true, whether we think of the ancient Roman family, of the medieval family, or of the modern American family, the family must never be thought of as a merely existing social fact, but as man's most important task in life. It is a concrete task given by the Creator to realize in history, and as such involves its own peculiar norms to be achieved.

Apart from such a normative structure for the family there would be no way of recognizing and evaluating the actual family as it exists in various cultures and ages. This correlation between "fact" and "norm" is explicit whenever we talk of a good family. But it is just as real, although implicit, when we refer to a certain group of individuals as a *family*. How do we know that this particular group of people constitutes a family? There is only one answer, and that is that it meets the test or norm for the family. Insight into the vast array of anthropological and ethnological information about the family available in the libraries of the world is possible only in the light of such a norm.

Modern sociologists love to enlarge upon the diversity of the family structure in different cultures and ages. Thus Ely Chinoy in *Society* distinguishes between three different types of families: (1) the nuclear or elementary family, consisting of father, mother, and children; (2) the extended family, made up of more than one nuclear unit and extending across two generations to include parents, their married and unmarried children, children-in-law, and grandchildren; (3) the compound family resting upon polygamous marriage.<sup>38</sup>

A more careful examination of the evidence soon reveals that the so-called nuclear family is to be found in all cultures and ages, although interwoven with other social structures. Of this cultural relativism Dooyeweerd writes:

Apart from these normative structural principles the facts do not reveal their true societal meaning. The total elimination of these principles which only enable us to speak of marriage and family in a univocal scientific sense, makes any exact ethnological investigation of the factual marital and family relations impossible. The nominalistic prejudice which lies at the foundation of this elimination is not warranted by science, and is bound to result in a continual misinterpretation of the facts.

The modern cultural scientific school in ethnology has brought to light that among the comparatively oldest extant primitive peoples marriage and family are carrying in a very vigorous actual existence in their internal structure of typical biotically founded love unions. This is quite contrary to the teachings of the evolutionist theory. Among the pygmies, the pigmoids in Central Africa, Southern Asia, and in the Pacific Ocean, certain tribes in Southeastern Australia, the old Californians, the Gestribes in Southeast Brazil, the Fugians, and others, monogamy, matrimonial fidelity, mutual freedom in the choice of the marriage partner, parental love, love on the part of children and married love are of normal occurrence.

Among these races the natural family is still the, center of the simple societal relations. As a rule the sib and the clan are lacking here... .

In their presumably original form (not yet mixed with the totemistic clan-organization) the so-called "matriarchal" phenomena do not enter into the cultural evolution until the rise of the tillage of the soil.... This tillage was the wife's achievement in the development of civilization. When marrying she did not want to leave the spot where the field lay that she had tilled. . . . It is probable that where these conditions arose, man and wife at first lived apart from each other.

In the second stage of development the husband found himself compelled to reside at the house of his wife's relatives, temporarily or for good. In his wife's kinship he was more or less considered a stranger. All this must lead to the effect that the internal marriage and family bonds were forced into the background.

This is the origin of the avuncular relationship, i.e., the remarkable juridical relationship (not that of the family proper) in which the children born of a marriage are placed under the authority of their mother's eldest brother and are his heirs. The father's heirs are his brothers' and sisters' children. Thus arises the computation of the children's descent from the mother's and not from the father's lineage. Not the wife herself, but her kinship acquires a position of authority over the children here. It must at once be clear that these so-called matriarchal phenomena do not belong to the internal domain of the marriage and family community. As typical positive forms of the relations in marriage and family they cannot be adduced to prove the absolute variability of what we have called the internal structural principles of these communities. They cannot at all be understood from the internal positive structure of

the marital and family community among the primitive peoples; rather, they are exclusively connected with the external enkaptic interweavings in which at most the variability types of these societal relationships can be founded.

What has been said about the original matriarchial forms in their relation to the structure of marriage and family life also applies to other abnormal external forms of these institutional and natural communities among primitive races, and even among peoples taken up in the expanded cultural development. We are thinking of the institution of the *levirate*, which in its stringent form had an *obligation* on the part of the husband's brother to marry his brother's widow. Then there are the so-called sororate and brother-polyandry and the "pirra-ura-relation" (married women living with another man outside marriage . . . with real husband's permission).

The external enkaptic interweavings of marriage and family play a leading part in the popular and tribal regulations of these institutions. If this is true, it is methodically unsound to deduce the internal positive structural relations of marriage and family among a certain people from what is found about these institutions in customary popular or tribal law....

For a proper distinction between the different sides of these relations, it is necessary to have an insight into their individuality structure. The *facts* require an *interpretation* if they are to be understood in their proper meaning-structure. Anyone who *a priori* eliminates the structural principles from his investigation continually runs the risk of misinterpreting the *facts*. For the latter are always essentially related to these principles, irrespective whether they satisfy their structural norms or contradict them. Apart from them nobody can succeed in finding a sufficient criterion for the distinction between marital and family relationships proper, and kinship and sexual relations of a different character.<sup>39</sup>