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Family and family life education between tradition and modernisation in contemporary Greece

1 Contemporary Society and Family in Greece

1.1 Characteristic Transformations of Actual Greek Society

Greece belongs to a complex of countries which have experienced, during the last 60 years and especially after World War II, deep social, economic, cultural changes and transformations.

The country's structure is changing in many ways and these changes influence and act on the institutions as well as on individuals, mainly because these changes come about rapidly, thus creating, during an initial period, relative unbalance and stress.

A fundamental characteristic is the country's urbanisation. The rural, peasant, population is diminishing quite rapidly and it already includes people who do not earn a living by agriculture. This part of the population has already accepted the way of life of urban centres.

The development of the road network and the increasing number of cars has helped the population's mobility with incessant moving, internal and external migrations, and tourism - whether native or foreign. This mobility is linked to the increase of employment and important increases in income. Women's entrance into professional employment also added to the working potential and incomes. Consequently the country, by its industrialisation has now entered the process of producing and consuming a great number of goods.

Greek society has followed the Western model of affluent and consuming societies. This can be assessed by a rapid look at Greek television with its exorbitant number of advertisements. Thus we come to another important element of actual Greek society the prevalence, all over the country, of the mass media. As well as the beneficial influence television can have on the people another phenomenon has appeared - we are being made the receptor of the transmission and public projection of the pluralism of values now existing in the country. This does not mean that in older times there was an absolute homogeneity of cultural characteristics and a total absence of pluralism. It was, however, latent. Actually television especially (and other media) project and advertise strongly international models and ways of life. With the preference for foreign models and values, and the unfortunate mimetic character of the Greek people, we are in danger of adopting foreign ways, undoubtedly not the best of them, and denying traditional secular models. There are not a few among us, who with the pretext of our entrance into the European Economic Community, tend to "transform" ourselves, to lose so to speak our physiognomy, becoming more "common marketers" than its actual members. A friend of Greece, a foreigner, Jacques Lacarrière, says in an interview: ... "Greece has undergone the influence of the Western World much more in its defects than in its gifts; it has shouldered more of Europe's problems than of its good sides ...".

Of course, the touristic orientation of Greece has played no small part. Lacarrière has pointed out: "What really impressed me is the exaggerated importance given to tourism by the country's life; this tends to transform completely the life of small communities. The problem of tourism, for a small country like Greece, is to achieve selling its sun without selling its soul."

I would like to add some more points concerning the nature of Greek society's transformations. First a particular characteristic of the contemporary Greek citizen which is his extreme sensitivity to whatever he considers his rights as a citizen and his claims to

them. Linked to this we have the actual revision of many parts of the existing jurisdiction by state institutions following the pressure from various social groups and the tendency towards the creation of a State of Justice. Last I would point out that the State has undertaken an educational task for larger strata of the Greek population (for instance in what concerns issues of public health; this task is linked to a series of recent laws).

1.2 Characteristics of the Actual Greek Family

Obviously, all these transformations and these new situations mentioned have not left the institution of marriage and the family unchanged. Unfortunately, the phenomenon "modern Greek family" has not been sufficiently examined scientifically so as to permit us to make precise and necessary correlations between the social transformations and their influence on family life and human relations and to pinpoint the factors that have led to the new types of family. We can, however, rapidly revise the characteristics of this new family.

The Greek family has changed in size; it is smaller and the type of "conjugal family" has prevailed, consisting of two generations (parents and children). The extended family appears less often. Birth rates are decreasing and the country faces a slight demographic problem owing to the population's decline, similar to the problem faced by other European countries. The decline of the population is conscious and planned; couples control their fecundity, even by abortion methods. Parallel to this, there is a decline in the mortality rate - that is untimely deaths. This has led to the increase of the life of the family - nearly doubling from 20 to 40 years if we consider that marriages are now contracted at younger ages. Marriage rates have also increased, that is the number of marriages per 1.000 inhabitants of marrying age, by comparison to pre-war rates. Furthermore the frequency of marriages has increased. While we have increased divorce rates we also have second marriages of divorced people (2.5% of the total of contracted marriages).

Something more which is impressive is the shifting of roles inside the family. Parental roles have been limited a great deal, compared to older times - on the other hand the conjugal role is extended which means that as persons are now marrying at about the age of 25, this role will be extended for about 50 years. Who, however, has prepared these people for such a long period of life together? The functions of the family have dwindled - many have been undertaken by the State or other agents. The weight of the family is concentrated on the affective ties of its members.

Another observed phenomenon is that of families which consist of one parent - more frequently the mother than the father - living alone with his or her child or children. There are divorced or unmarried mothers. Another recent phenomenon is that of families consisting of grandparents living with their grandchildren, the parents having emigrated to Western Europe, particularly West Germany.

Finally we have the cases of unmarried couples who live together owing to the impossibility for one or both to get a divorce and contract a new marriage. In many cases these "illegal" couples have children and create new families. Many of these belong to the category of long-time separated individuals who have abandoned the previous conjugal roof and await the "automatic" dissolution of their first marriage after the lapse of some years. One can also include in these free cohabitations many student couples however the marriage of students increases every year as the prolongation of the years of studies makes legalisation of these relationships necessary.

2. Tension between Traditional and Modern Family

Continuing this introduction it would be useful to pinpoint the meaning given by young people to the traditional forms of family life and in particular the forms prevailing in the Church's domain. How do they interpret these forms and what is their criticism of them? Are there any theological, pastoral and educational guidelines we could propose which could help out churches in their pastoral activities with and for the family? I will attempt to propose some answers following these problems.

2.1 Questioning of the Traditional Forms of Family Life by Young People

The questioning of the acceptability by modern individuals of the models offered by the church for marriage and the family is more and more frequent. The demand for modernising traditional ecclesiastical forms is imperative. Many young people could maintain that the text concerning the church's position on marriage, that is the wedding service, bears no spiritual relation to them. The church, with this text, tries to transmit an old-fashioned image of the family structure - a rural, patriarchal model. This model is linked to by-gone forms of socio-economic organisation. Such anachronistic models are not only present in the ecclesiastical texts concerning marriage and the family. They are found in all the moments of the church's life - in her texts and symbols, the images accompanying them (hymnology, lives of the Saints, illustrations, holy canons, etc.). Furthermore they are to be found repeated in more recent texts sent by the church concerning her view in circulars, festive letters, answers to definite questions etc.

However by this stereotyped transmission of outdated models without the necessary critical re-adaptation, the church finally loses her chance to gain contact with young or older people who are sensitized essentially to the issues of love, sex, relationships, marriage and the family.

At this point it would probably be timely to observe whether these criticisms are not the fruit of a stereotyped, indiscriminately repeated conception of the church's teaching on family marriage and the traditional models.

This observation does certainly not have an apologetic character or one of defence of the seemingly traditional against the seemingly modern or modernised. It originates much more from a disposition towards self-awareness and research of the identity of ecclesiastical teachings on marriage and the family.

2.2 Avoiding Perilous Identifications

It would be amiss to identify the traditional family, which is the family that stems from tradition, with the orthodox family, which closely follows the Orthodox Church's conception of marriage and the family. It is however nearly certain that the Greek traditional family has been imbued with the help of the church, by the orthodox truths and has shown it. Equally amiss would it be, if we identified the actual-modern with the orthodox family. The modern family in this transitional period it is experiencing in an ever-changing society, might project demands or achievements which can find foundation and legitimation in the spirit of Gospel and Christian tradition. Such demands might be man/woman equality in wedlock, free sharing and expressing love between consorts and the rest of the family, the concern of parents for their children, a just distribution of duties, rights and roles inside the family.

This new concept of the relationship between the sexes may not be due to any Christian inspiration or motivation. One cannot however ignore this positive evolution. Realising these aims inside a modern family will not automatically make it Christian or Orthodox.

What however can be done is to ignore the qualitative change of these two notions: the traditional and the modern family. As such they are neither positive nor negative. Undoubtedly there should be a fuller and analytical description of the characteristics of each type of family (structural, functional, etc.). We would most certainly ascertain a certain degree of tension between the traditional and the modern family which is merely the stamp and the transfer of the existing tension between traditional and modern society.

Traditional family presents itself as tested by the passing of time, structurally crystallized, functionally adequate in the framework of a traditional society.

Modern family is undergoing a period of transition in the framework of a rapidly changing society. The roles of the members of a traditional family and its functions are under constant revision and see themselves transferred to other institutions and organisms. The roles and functions of the modern family are in search of new forms and contents and are characterized by a relative plasticity and suppleness - also by uncertainty.

We must however guard ourselves against separating in an absolute manner the traditional and the modern family. Many functions of the family that presents a "modern" facade also characterize traditional families (for instance the role of the wife as advisor of the husband). Other phenomena which we had hoped would disappear in contemporary times appear quite frequently in the modern family, for instance the ill-treatment of women and children.

What however is urgent in my opinion concerning the aforementioned problems of the young is to see whether this questioning of the church's family models is just or not. To do this a catharsis of the conception that many have of the traditional Greek family, when identified with the Christian Orthodox conception is necessary. This will help to clarify what is particular to the Christian Orthodox tradition on the subject and therefore transmissible by the channels of education and what is cultural, temporal and therefore not transmissible, at least as Orthodoxy is concerned.

It is, for instance, inadmissible to project or to transmit as a Christian Orthodox idea, the figure of the paterfamilias -padre padrone- when the authentic father model is still that of the pluri-dimensional God-Father "from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its true name" (Eph. 3, 15). The examples can be multiplied: we shall give one more, stressing that it is not possible to give the man-head of the family as a model to imitate without evangelical criteria, that is, without giving him a series of characteristic elements and actions that would bring him close to the head of the Church Christ (Eph. 5, 21-33). Another untimely identification would be that of the authoritarian upbringing and slavish submission of children, with a Christian conception and an example to be imitated in intra-generational relationships. On the contrary, the fact that the church emancipates young people since early age towards its manifestations, confession, monastic life, etc., makes us revise the prevailing opinion that ecclesiastic education is identified with unreasonable discipline, lack of freedom, coercion.

The sense of responsibility with which the church considers children in such issues, could lead to useful thoughts and decisions for the transfer of such attitudes to other sectors of upbringing, especially in the family, which suffers from the over-protective attitude of parents towards their children with its well-known consequences.

2.3 Overcoming the Tension

A third kind of tension appears in family education. It results from the concentration of the tension between traditional and modern society inside the family itself. Family education is actually the field of numerous tensions and clashes.

The questions are inexorable and implacable:

- (a) Which type of family is our young going to have to prepare themselves for?
- (b) What roles will its members play?
- (c) What will its aims be?
- (d) What will be the essence, the methods and the agents of family education?

The church, even the family, are accepted by society as agents or will there be others, such as ideologies, political parties, school, which will undertake education responsibility, under the condition, of course, that we will not witness the burial service of the family following the obituary so many people hurry to announce?

The answers to these questions depend on the reflections and explanations that took place

in the previous discussion on traditional/modern family, the point where they converge, their rupture, as related to the Orthodox conception of marriage and the family. This point of converging, this rupture, is where we have to look for the transcending of the polarisation and tension between the traditional and the modern family, by searching for what is essential and actual *hic et nunc*, with the biblical conception of time as *kairos*. This point can be found in the framework of a dynamic model of marriage and family, the model of the "little church" structured on the dimensions of the large church. The family, as a "little church" will be transformed into a transfigured family, just as the church is transformed into a transfigured world, a sign of God's reign, a space decorated with older and recent treasures belonging there (Matthew 13, 52).

The existence of such a model which would bar any change *a priori*, will help us to avoid the temptation of subjugating modern marriage and family and to protect the education by a "model of traditional Orthodox family education". Such a model does obviously not exist and it would be hazardous to look for it. In fact there would be the risk of forcing on family life out prefabricated moulds, thus taking away much of its diversity and freshness.

To develop a dynamic model of Orthodox family and family life education, the approach of traditional family life with its diversities would help a lot. It would be also helpful the thought that the other way of Christian life, virginity, has many forms and ways of exercise. Here too, in marriage, what stands out is the diversity in the ways of activating the gifts and viewing marriage itself as a gift (*charisma*). This conception urges on the creative development of gifts and talents in this direction.

3 Challenges of the 1980s towards the Church

This diversity in the forms of marriage, this pluralism of structures and functions of family life which Christian couples and the church are called upon to realise creatively, are going to face the ideological pluralism we have already mentioned as a characteristic of modern Greek society. The efforts made in the framework of Christian churches will have, or should have, as a basic condition "the same spirit of faith" (cf. 2 Cor. 4, 13) which will constitute the specific difference towards these "challenges" from society to the field of marriage and the family.

A first challenge will be the instituting of civil marriage. This will create a distance from the religious conception of marriage and the family. It may be that the number of free cohabiting couples will increase with a contract of indeterminate time or with time limits. It is possible that we shall not reach the point of legal cover for, let us say, five-year marriage contracts. Surely however there will be time limits for a *de facto* trial marriage for the definitive conclusion of cohabitation, or the officialisation of a relationship.

The dimension of time, related to space will have an essential role in the arrangement of marriage. We have already mentioned time as a trial period. The abandoning - ill-willed only? - of the common living space will be definitively chosen as a cause for the demand of divorce. I foresee also a further facilitation for the process of divorce. Surely in the draft of laws for changing family legislation there will soon be an article concerning divorce by common consent. Many people ask themselves, if common consent is necessary for contracting a marriage, why should it not be enough for its dissolution?

The challenges do not concern only the variations in the living together of men and women - if we ignore the efforts of homosexuals for the recognition of their cohabitation - or the ways of contracting and dissolving marriages. They will also concern the power, function and role structures inside the family. Already in the drafts of law mentioned, such changes are being attempted with support from one side and attacks from the other.

These challenges will also be directed against the other members of the family, mainly the children. Even if the term "paternal authority" has been changed to "parental care" what share does a child have in the decision-making concerning it? And if parents can divorce, could not a child divorce its parents? Already in Greece the process for creating a legal service protecting and safeguarding children's' rights has started by the initiative of the members of the Executive Committee for the Year of the Children. Of course we say this on

condition that there will be children in the family - their number is irrelevant in the Western World at least. There is a tendency towards decreasing birth rates. The decision of the Greek state to protect and help families with many children illustrates this- families with many children are considered as those having at least four.

We must also ascertain the expected tendencies towards voluntary planned childlessness, marriages without children, couples who exclude the reproductive function from their perspectives and this not only when one or both consorts have physiological difficulties in conceiving children. Here we are talking mainly about the challenge constituted by the denial of children's place in marriage which makes some people affirm that we are advancing "towards a society without children".

The advances in the field of genetics will have more and more importance in the decisions of future consorts or parents, as will science in general and particularly that which concerns reproduction, rational family planning, considered at present as an inalienable right of human beings. Scientific progress is not only used for birth control but also for regulating fecundity so as to allow sterile couples, or people with genetic problems, to conceive and give birth to children. Artificial insemination also constitutes a challenge together with the test-tube babies and "genetic surgery" which over-comes genetic defects. We are thus faced with two existing attitudes; complete, absolute denial of children and their acquisition at any expense by any possible way. All other attitudes vary between these two. Another challenge, this one extreme, is the existence of children outside the institution of marriage; not the children of "integrated" couples, or those of "unfortunate" mothers or unmarried mothers, but the phenomenon of voluntary unmarried maternity, women who deny marriage and companionship and will even resort to artificial insemination.

It is foreseeable that for all these issues and problems there will be corresponding legal, social and financial adjustments and accommodation. These measures will reflect the plurality and diversity of ideologies, mentalities and credos which exist in contemporary Greek society and life, with all the possible internal and external influences.

Owing, however, to the complexity of these problems and their adjustments, man in the 1980s, having lost his traditional field of advice (such as the family in older times), will have to turn elsewhere for counsel and help.

We have pointed out the continually educational and counselling role of the State with the creation of consulting centres for matters relating to marriage and the family, with the forming of experts for educative purposes for the people. As well as the State, other institutions such as Family Planning Committees, the Hellenic Society of Eugenics and Human Genetics, Women's Movements, communities and municipalities, politically-coloured clubs, Christian movements, etc., have undertaken similar advisory tasks.

It would be a pity therefore, if the church did not continue her pedagogic, pastoral and advisory work, close to the people on subjects concerning marriage and the family. With its discreet and discerning presence and the adequate preparation of its staff, it would help people who have negative, hostile or indifferent attitudes towards it, to clarify the various opinions that exist about family education and sex education - illuminating them from another viewpoint which might prove salutary for the isolated individual, marriage, the family, society and the State.

Πηγή: [Μυριόβιβλος](#)