

Shame and Censure in Family Planning

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Abstract: Unconventional decisions about family planning can be occasions for both shame and censure. This essay explores why married couples who are childfree by choice, struggling with infertility or involuntarily childlessness, or are pursuing assisted reproduction instead of adoption deal with shame and social stigma. It concludes that both shame and censure have no place when such decisions are grounded in progressive Christian commitments that reject the “inseparability thesis” between union and procreation and affirm conscientious decision-making about the different ways a family can be expanded.

IN MY RECENT BOOK ON SURROGACY, I ARGUE ON PROGRESSIVE Christian grounds and from personal experience that it can be a morally justifiable and beautiful thing for a pregnancy-capable person to show reproductive generosity to an involuntarily childless couple by carrying and delivering their child for them.¹ While such births are typically joyous occasions for the persons involved, these and other unconventional routes to parenthood are still often riddled with censure and shame. Ironically, so are the paths of married couples who remain childless due to infertility or have elected to forgo raising any children of their own to pursue other commitments to which they feel called. In short, social fallout often ensues when adults deviate from the conventional marriage and parenthood story of conjugal union leading to the birth and rearing of one’s biological children. In what follows, I will discuss three different occasions for shame and censure to arise when couples form their families in ways that transgress the norm of parenthood through natural conception.

THE SHAME OF INFERTILITY

Persons struggling with infertility often experience shame and social stigma from others, which religion can compound. To wit: the biblical mandate to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) has historically led several Jewish and Christian communities to regard

¹ Grace Y. Kao, *My Body, Their Baby: A Progressive Christian Vision for Surrogacy* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

procreation as such as a religious duty (*mitzvah*), and the Bible records tales of forced surrogacies and levirate marriage for ancient Israelites to bear progeny to continue the family line, provide labor, and enhance the power of the tribe (Gen 16:1–4, 30:1–10, Deut 25:5–10). Several biblical texts also link together fertility, male progeny, and divine blessing (Ps 127:3–5, 2 Kings 4:8–17), while others connect infertility to sin or divine displeasure (e.g., 2 Sam 6:20–23, Hos 9:1–14, Gen 20:1–18, Num 5:11–31, Exod 23:26, Deut 7:14). Today, even if many Christians have shed these beliefs and practices, many churches continue to celebrate children as gifts or blessings from God, extol the virtues of motherhood for women, and teach—especially in the Catholic tradition—that “reproduction is a primary, ‘essential’ end of sexual expression and that the transmission of life is a central dimension of the vocation of marriage.”² No wonder, then, that Christians despairing over their inability to have a (or another) child often wonder if they are being cursed or punished by God for some past wrongdoing on their part.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified infertility as a global health issue affecting approximately 15% of reproductive-aged couples worldwide, with the “availability, access, and quality of interventions to address infertility remain[ing] a challenge in most countries.”³ Persons chronically unable to achieve a pregnancy or unable to maintain one without miscarrying often report feeling hopeless and broken. They also recount feeling anguished about their failure to live up to social expectations about what a married couple should be able to do (reproduce) and become (parents), guilt about letting their partner down if they (not their spouse) are the one with the medical problems, and often relational strain when they disagree about what medical procedures (if any) they should undergo or what alternatives to natural conception (if any) they should pursue in their quest to become parents. Beyond just an experience of “profound disappointment,” persons “facing the fact that [they] will never conceive or bear children” often describe it “as a kind of ‘dying,’ a loss of both an envisioned and a possible self, a potential role and longed-for relationship.”⁴ Catholic bioethicist Maura Ryan has accordingly described this suffering as a “spiritual crisis . . . a deep confrontation of meaning and belief.”⁵

² Maura A. Ryan, “Faith and Infertility,” in *Cloning, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University), 2005, ifl.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj771/files/2022-11/cloningarticleryan_0.pdf, 66.

³ See World Health Organization, “1 in 6 People Affected by Infertility” April 4, 2023, www.who.int/news/item/04-04-2023-1-in-6-people-globally-affected-by-infertility and World Health Organization, “Infertility,” www.who.int/health-topics/infertility#tab=tab_1.

⁴ Ryan, “Faith and Infertility,” 66.

⁵ Ryan, “Faith and Infertility,” 66.

Of course, one's actual experiences of stigma and shame about childlessness can vary depending on race, sex, and other factors. Though male-factor infertility accounts for approximately half of all instances, infertility is commonly perceived in the public imaginary as a "woman's issue" since women either do or do not get pregnant, and their bodies must bear the brunt of the treatment regardless of which partner has the medical problem.⁶ Because the biological ability to father a child has been considered "a major source of masculine identity" in many cultures, a diagnosis of male-factor infertility can often be "conflated with sexual 'failure' leading to . . . feelings of shame" as well as "fear[s] of being exposed as inadequate or fraudulent."⁷ Given the risks of emasculation if it becomes publicly known that a man is "shooting blanks" in light of the strong cultural link between fertility and virility, men often find it difficult to admit their infertility and seek either medical help or social support from others. Indeed, according to the first multi-national population survey of men's feelings about and responses to their infertility, 73 percent of the 1,171 male respondents across all global regions reported that they were not likely to talk about it with others for a variety of reasons, one being fear of ridicule.⁸ The upshot is that male infertility remains largely invisible and shrouded in secrecy, with many men suffering in silent shame.

As noted previously, women largely shoulder the public stigma and burden of infertility because their bodies publicly fail to become pregnant and also serve as the primary site for any medical interventions or other behavioral changes to increase their chances at becoming parents. Studies have shown that women struggling with infertility have levels of anxiety, depression, and other psychological symptoms comparable to persons living with cancer or HIV.⁹ To be sure, there are not only racial disparities in women's infertility, where BIPOC women exhibit higher rates than their white counterparts even

⁶ "Focusing on Male Infertility," *Nature Reviews Urology* 21, no. 61 (2024), doi.org/10.1038/s41585-024-00856-0.

⁷ Barbara Cosson, Deborah Dempsey, and Fiona Kelly, "Secret Shame—Male Infertility and Donor Conception in the Wake of Retrospective Legislative Change," *Men and Masculinities* 25, no. 3 (2022): 498–499.

⁸ Christopher J. De Jonge, Steven A. Gellatly, Monica H. Vazquez-Levin, Christopher L. R. Barratt, and Satu Rautakallio-Hokkanen., "Male Attitudes Towards Infertility: Results from a Global Questionnaire," *World Journal of Men's Health* 41, no. 1 (2023): 204–214.

⁹ Kristin L. Rooney, "The Relationship between Stress and Infertility," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 20, no. 1 (2018): 41–47; Isabel Galic, Amelia Swanson, Christopher Warren, Olivia Negriz, Alexandria Bozen, Dannielle Brown, et al., "Infertility in the Midwest: Perceptions and Attitudes of Current Treatment," *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 225, no.1 (2021): 61e1–61e11.

after controlling for socioeconomic status,¹⁰ but also racial disparities in their psycho-social experiences, where some studies show that Black and Chinese women are “more concerned about social stigma related to infertility” than White women.¹¹ Indeed, a recent systematic review of twenty-eight studies found that while “infertile women worldwide are stigmatized for infertility” and thus suffer “poor mental health and quality of daily life,” the social stigma and personal shame of infertility can vary according to “cultural, religious, ideological, economic, and other differences.”¹² After referencing studies done among women in Hong Kong, Ghana, Turkey, Jordan, and elsewhere, the researchers found that in comparison to women in developed countries, women who live in “traditional societies or accept traditional cultural beliefs” believe that infertile women experience the “most significant burden, stigma, and suffering.” The researchers explained their findings thusly: “In traditional contexts where motherhood is one of the primary ways women can earn and maintain social status, failure to bear children can be especially “socially ostraciz[ing] and humiliat[ing].”¹³

A more compassionate, science-based, and progressive Christian approach would affirm the value and dignity of all persons regardless of parental status and regard infertility neither as a sign of a cosmic curse, nor as an impairment of one’s masculinity or femininity, nor even as the invariable consequence of one’s lifestyle choices (such as being too career-oriented), but as a medical condition and disease. While I will later provide some suggestions of how the church could better support infertile couples, it is worth noting here that the Bible offers more than its pronatalism, son bias, and association between fertility and righteousness. To illustrate, in her years long struggle with infertility prior to finally becoming a mother through foster adoption, feminist theologian Gina Messina has written poignantly about finding solace in the tales of “biblical foremothers who shared [her] barren state”: she found herself intimately identifying with Sarai’s anguish and bitterness about her bareness, Rachel’s envy of her fecund sister (Leah), and Hannah’s hope for a long-awaited child (Gen 17:15–

¹⁰ Jamila Perritt and Natalia Eugene, “Inequity and Injustice: Recognizing Infertility as a Reproductive Justice Issue,” *F&S Reports* 3, no. 2 Supp (2022): 2–4.

¹¹ See American Psychological Association, “Infertility and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous & People of Color) Women,” www.apa.org/pi/women/committee/infertility-bipoc.

¹² Yue Xie, Yue Ren, Changmin Niu, Ying Zheng, Ping Yu, and Lin Li, “The Impact of Stigma on Mental Health and Quality of Life of Infertile Women: A Systematic Review,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2023), doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1093459, 4.

¹³ Xie et al., “The Impact of Stigma on Mental Health and Quality of Life of Infertile Women,” 5.

21, 21:1–7, 30:1, 1 Sam 1:1–20, 2:21).¹⁴ Others who have internalized their grief into shame or self-blame can draw some comfort from the book of Job’s categorical refutation that suffering is invariably a result of divine punishment and in Jesus’s disavowal in John 9:2–3 that a person’s congenital impairment invariably stems from their or their parents’ sin. As a minimum, Christians struggling with infertility or involuntary childlessness should not have to worry about their nonparental status having any bearing on their status as disciples of Christ.

THE SHAME OF VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS

To be married without children, as noted previously, is already an occasion for shame and social censure. But to be married or covenantally partnered and then intentionally forgo having children—to be childfree by choice—is arguably even more transgressive of social norms. Not only is there widespread belief that the desire to have children is natural and instinctive across all human beings, but many societies have understood marriage and parenthood as key developmental stages in a person’s life and believe families to be incomplete without children. With reference to studies from Israel, India, Cameroon, Vietnam, Pakistan, and parts of southern Africa, interdisciplinary researchers have found that a woman’s ability to be properly recognized and accepted as a mature adult in her community can hinge on her status as a mother—or lack thereof.¹⁵ Pronatalism, of course, is not exclusive to developing nations. In the US, a recent Gallup poll has found that nine out of ten adults have children or would like to someday, just 8 percent of adults indicated no intent nor longing to have children, and just 2 percent believe the ideal family does not include any children at all.¹⁶

¹⁴ Admittedly, others might still bristle at the biblical intimation that (restored) fertility is either a reward for righteousness or God’s answer to a fervent prayer and feel even more alone after reading passages such as the Psalmist’s praise, “He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children” (Ps 113:9), when God has not “blessed” a person with a child. For these contrasting reactions, see Gina Messina, “Cursing God (Infertility),” in *Encountering the Sacred: Feminist Reflections on Women’s Lives*, ed. Rebecca Todd Peters and Grace Y. Kao (T&T Clark, 2018), 121–122 and Courtney Reissig, “A Barren Woman’s Home Is Not Homeless,” Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Mar 11, 2015, cbmw.org/topics/barrenness/a-barren-womans-home/.

¹⁵ Arthur Greil, Kathleen Slauson-Blevins, and Julia McQuillan, “The Experience of Infertility: A Review of Recent Literature,” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 32, no.1 (2010): 140–162.

¹⁶ Megan Brenan, “Americans’ Preference for Larger Families Highest Since 1971,” *Gallup*, September 25, 2023, news.gallup.com/poll/511238/americans-preference-larger-families-highest-1971.aspx.

It should thus not be surprising that persons who express no interest in ever becoming a parent are often criticized by others who have difficulty accepting or even understanding their preferences and choices. Pope Francis may have raised a few eyebrows in 2022 when he commented that it is selfish for people not to want to have children, especially if they “have dogs and cats that take the[ir] place,” but social disapproval of those who opt to remain childfree has broad cultural resonance.¹⁷ In the summer of 2024, the Republican vice-presidential candidate, J. D. Vance, went viral for earlier comments he made during his 2021 Senate campaign about “childless cat ladies” who are “miserable at their own lives and the choices that they have made and so they want to make the rest of the country miserable, too.”¹⁸ Though Vance’s comments did not go unchallenged in the public square,¹⁹ they have nevertheless resonated with research findings across the decades about being childless: childlessness, whether or not deliberately chosen, is “often associated with negative consequences, such as feelings of loneliness, social isolation, depression, regret, and a failure to be a productive and generative citizen who contributes to social reproduction, that is the work required to turn children and young people into productive adults.”²⁰ When we additionally factor in the special “visibility and value given to mothering and motherhood in Christianity” and the ever-present inscription of “maternal expectation” through Christian “ritual, liturgical, and social practices,” we should not be surprised that Christian women in Britain in one qualitative study actively attempted to hide from members of their own church their decision to remain childfree.²¹

¹⁷ Elisabetta Povoledo, “Pope Scolds Couples Who Choose Pets Over Kids,” *New York Times*, Jan 6, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/01/06/world/europe/pope-pets-kids.html.

¹⁸ Vance elaborated as follows: “It’s just a basic fact—you look at Kamala Harris, Pete Buttigieg, AOC—the entire future of the Democrats is controlled by people without children. . . . [H]ow does it make any sense that we’ve turned our country over to people who don’t really have a direct stake in it?” See Rachel Treisman, “J. D. Vance Went Viral for ‘Cat Lady’ Comments. The Centuries-Old Trope Has a Long Tail,” *National Public Radio*, July 29, 2024, www.npr.org/2024/07/29/nx-s1-5055616/jd-vance-childless-cat-lady-history.

¹⁹ After initially doubling down on them, Vance months later expressed regret for his exact choice of words. See Lulu Garcia-Navarro, “The Interview: A Conversation with J. D. Vance,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/10/12/magazine/jd-vance-interview.html.

²⁰ Victoria Clarke, Nikki Hayfield, Naomi Moller, and Virginia Braun, “A Critical Review of the Interdisciplinary Literature on Voluntary Childlessness,” in *The Truth about (M)otherhood: Choosing to be Childfree*, ed. Helene A. Cummins, Julie Ann Rodgers, and Judith Dunkelberger Woulk (Demeter, 2021), 33.

²¹ Dawn Llewellyn, “Maternal Silences: Motherhood and Voluntary Childlessness in Contemporary Christianity,” *Religion and Gender* 6, no. 1 (2016): 65, 71.

How might we better understand the perspectives of Christians who opt to live childfree—and not because they have taken vows of celibacy? And how have they managed others' attempts to shame or censure them for what seems like an abnormal eschewal of parenthood?

Among others, feminist theologian and Presbyterian clergywoman Kendra Hotz has written about the admonishments she and her husband have endured for bucking cultural expectations of what “good Midwestern” folks are supposed to do and want for their lives in remaining childfree by choice. Throughout her adult life, Hotz reports that her elders would constantly try to get her to see the “error” of her ways: they would tell her that she would later come to regret not having kids, or that she would inevitably come to yearn for them when her “biological clock starts ticking,” or that it is just “selfish” to reject motherhood *tout court*. Hotz reports that even her well-intentioned friends have tried to “construct some form of parenthood” for her, such as assuming that college teaching must provide her with a vehicle for her to express her maternal instincts or that her dogs must serve as her and her husband's substitute children.

In providing a feminist theological account for how a marriage without children can be a valid path for Christians, Hotz draws upon John Calvin's notion of calling or vocation (*Institutes* 3.10.6). She explains how marriages with children ordinarily bring harmony, coherence, and a sense of purpose—as all callings do—to the lives of the parents who have them, but that other people like her and her spouse might be called to other pursuits, which for Hotz is teaching and theology. Her husband and she nevertheless still show hospitality to (other people's) children and therein fulfill the traditional marital good of *proles* without themselves bearing offspring.²² Her reflections mirror those of Laura—a 46-year-old white British married Methodist minister who has felt that her calling was to “minister, teach, and study”—not motherhood. In her own words, “It is a self-offering and sense of vocation which I imagine is filled for some others by having children.”²³ Hotz's and Laura's stories are also surprisingly echoed in an account published in the flagship evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*. Entitled “The Fruitful Callings of the Childless by Choice,” Emily Timbol explains that it is not that she and her husband are “kid-haters” or “miserable” around their friends' or relatives' children. Instead, their own childfree decisions can be explained by their having found their God-given “purpose” elsewhere: she in writing, in

²² See Kendra G. Hotz, “Happily Ever After (Voluntary Childlessness),” in *Encountering the Sacred: Feminist Reflections on Women's Lives*, ed. Rebecca Todd Peters and Grace Y. Kao (T&T Clark, 2018), 149–163.

²³ Quoted in Llewellyn, “Maternal Silences,” 73.

“bringing God glory through the stories and ideas that he [sic] inspired” and he in “the creative outlets that God has gifted him in,” such as through playing worship music.²⁴

These personal examples and theological reflections on being married without children show that it can be a responsible and conscientious decision for spouses to pursue other callings beyond parenting. Given that many progressive Christians affirm the equality and goodness of same-gender marriage even if such marriages are not naturally procreative, advocate for the responsible use of contraception, and encourage couples to show “fruitfulness” in ways beyond rearing children of one’s own, I too believe that parenthood as such should not be regarded as a necessary component for a marriage to be regarded as legitimate or otherwise good.²⁵ After all, married couple Priscilla and Aquila are esteemed as house church leaders and the Apostle Paul’s tent-making ministry partners without ever being described as parents (Acts 18:2–3, Rom 16:3–4, 1 Cor 16:19). And even those who are parents are not valued simply for the care they show to their children. As feminist ethicist Lisa Cahill has helpfully pointed out, biblical passages such as Luke 11:27–28 “disassociate the honor of women from biological maternity” and “deflect praise of [Jesus’s] own mother” from the role she played in birthing and nursing him.²⁶

Before moving to the next occasion for shame and censure to arise in decisions about family formation, it is important to acknowledge that the societal expectations for adults to marry and bear children are not themselves uniform but often entangled in heterosexual, racial, and ableist norms. As a team of scholars analyzing interdisciplinary research on childlessness has correctly acknowledged, “Historically, only some groups have been expected to reproduce—the most socially privileged. By contrast, those less privileged (poor, young, old, Black, or disabled) have been actively discouraged from procreation.”²⁷ Consider the life of Nancy L. Eiesland, the pioneering author of the classic *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, who was born with a congenital bone defect in her hips and who had

²⁴ Emily Timbol, “The Fruitful Callings of the Childless by Choice,” *Christianity Today*, September 16, 2013.

²⁵ See Margaret Farley’s discussion of how to show “fruitfulness” in ways beyond procreation in her *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (Continuum, 2006).

²⁶ “While he [Jesus] was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!’ But Jesus said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!’” (Luke 11:27–28). Lisa Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 29.

²⁷ Clark, Braun, Hayfield, and Moller, “A Critical Review of the Interdisciplinary Literature on Voluntary Childlessness,” 41.

had eleven operations by the time she was thirteen years old. Eiesland has written about the low expectations many people within and outside of the church have had toward persons with disabilities like her; in particular, how everyone around her thought it was “unlikely” she would ever marry, much less have a child, though she ended up doing both before dying at the age of 44.²⁸ To provide another example, Monique Moultrie, a womanist sexual ethicist who is a childfree Black woman, has noted how the literature on childlessness does not adequately capture a queer person’s obstacles to either parenthood or “childfreedom,” because a queer person becoming a parent “marks resistance to heteronormativity that proscribes family formations in specific ways.” In addition, when Black women in our cultural context opt out of procreating, they defy social norms in a different way—they are “also resist[ing] heteronormative and stereotypical family structures that expect Black women to be single parents.”²⁹ Moultrie concludes from her own qualitative study of nine Black Christian childfree women that since Black women have historically been valorized as the “backbone of the church” while simultaneously being kept in the background, Black Christian childfree women do not use “calling language that resigns Black women to the vocation of service of others,” but instead “agency language that spoke about their procreative choices as God-ordained and in need of support by their religious communities.”³⁰ In ways similar to and different from the white childfree women discussed earlier, they nonetheless actively participate in nurturing others in ways disconnected from having their own children and have learned to “create family from close friends.”³¹

THE SHAME OF OPTING FOR ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY (ART), NOT ADOPTION

The third occasion where social ostracism and shame could arise in family planning is when Christian couples elect to pursue use of assisted reproductive technology. For many reasons likely known to the readers of this journal, the Christian tradition has historically regarded adoption as the morally superior path for conscientious Christians to take when they yearn to become parents but “natural” childbearing is not (or is no longer) possible for them.³² Since I have

²⁸ Nancy L. Eiesland, “Listening for Justice,” in *Stories of Faith, Disability, and Inclusion*, ed. Mark I. Pinsky (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 185–187.

²⁹ Monique Moultrie, “Making Myself: An Exploratory Study of Black Christian Childfree Women’s Concepts of Family,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 49, no. 2 (2021): 316.

³⁰ Moultrie, “Making Myself,” 332.

³¹ Moultrie, “Making Myself,” 325.

³² Kao, *My Body, Their Baby*, 70–72, 78–83.

elsewhere interrogated the assumption that ART is neither needed nor appropriate when childless couples could “just adopt” and advanced a progressive Christian argument for the moral permissibility of surrogacy when arranged and conducted under certain parameters, I will focus below on how the enduring shame of infertility among some couples who opt for ART can adversely affect their relationships with others, including any future ART-conceived child. In what follows, I will first discuss how the use of third-party reproduction has been shown to affect heterosexual intended parents and gay male intended parents differently, with some studies suggesting straight couples bear more shame than queer couples. I will then discuss how the fear of stigma and social disapproval can influence parental decisions toward non-disclosure of their use of third-party reproduction before arguing why Christians should be operating in the truth.

First, given the current state of reproductive technology, reliance upon a third party in donor-assisted reproduction is “universally necessary” for queer couples if they are to become the parents of biogenetically-related children, with the upshot being their turn to ART generally carries “none of the . . . sense of failure within LGBT communities that many heterosexual couples must lay to rest.”³³ Intended parent-surrogate pairings with gay male couples are thus not as emotionally fraught as *some*, but not all, intended parent-surrogate pairings involving an intended mother, particularly when the latter has unresolved feelings of “inadequacy, depression, and low self-esteem” and possibly even what has been called “womb envy” toward her “fertile and likely younger surrogate.”³⁴ In addition, while the turmoil of infertility can linger throughout the long and uncertain collaborative reproduction process for straight couples, gay men typically neither bemoan their inability to have played a gestational role in their child’s

³³ Valory Mitchell and Robert-Jay Green, “Different Storks for Different Folks: Gay and Lesbian Parents’ Experiences with Alternative Insemination and Surrogacy,” *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 3, nos. 2–3 (2007): 82.

³⁴ Susan Golombok, Clare Murray, Vasanti Jadva, Fiona MacCallum, and Emma Lycett, “Families Created Through Surrogacy Arrangements: Parent-Child Relationships in the 1st Year of Life,” *Developmental Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2004): 401. For instance, *New York Times* writer Alex Kucynski who finally became a mother after eleven failed IVF cycles and four failed pregnancies of her own has described the complex feelings she had toward her gestational surrogate (Cathy), including the difficulty she had in giving up control over Cathy’s day-to-day activities. She confesses that she would scan the sonogram images Cathy would give her and then send them to family members and close friends—but only after first cropping out Cathy’s name out of the frame. She writes: “I wanted them to see my profile in the picture, not her name. It was immature, puerile, like a seventh-grade girl blacking out her nemesis’ picture in the yearbook. I wanted her identity to appear and mine to take its place.” See Alex Kucynski, “Her Body, My Baby,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 28, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/magazine/30Surrogate-t.html.

birth, nor feel sad or threatened by other women providing breastmilk to their child—something intended parents sometimes ask their surrogates to do, as I did when I once delivered my friends' baby girl and then expressed breastmilk for her for four months postpartum.³⁵ In short, infertile heterosexual couples who rely upon some form of donor assistance to expand their families might be wise to learn from the experiences of queer families, since they have long managed the (necessary) presence of third-parties in their journey toward parenthood—even if this third party is a birth mother in adoption—and thus have learned to welcome, not resent or feel ashamed about, their involvement.

The second arena where shame and social censure can arise is tied to decisions about disclosure versus concealment. Unlike assisted reproduction involving just gamete donation where the commissioning mother could still carry and deliver their child, couples who plan on having children through surrogacy will likely find themselves being asked by friends or relatives in social settings how they will become parents if neither of them will become pregnant. The surrogacy literature accordingly shows that the vast majority of intended parents do not lie about their use of collaborative reproduction.³⁶ Researchers theorize that their early (pre-birth) disclosures to selected friends or relatives about their childbearing plans facilitate their comfort with continued disclosure to a broader circle of others about the unusual circumstances surrounding their child's birth.

In contrast, these disclosure trends among parents of surrogacy-conceived children differ notably from the same among the parents of donor-conceived children. Because couples tend to seek out an egg or sperm donor who morphologically resembles the non-genetic parent—even in the case of gay or lesbian couples—it may not be obvious to outsiders in the case of heterosexual couples when the commissioning mother also gives birth that their resultant child has

³⁵ That said, gay male intended parents do face a distinctive and potentially competitive situation where only one of them could be the biological father. Gay male couples have found ways of handling this oft-sensitive issue to preserve a sense of fairness, equality, and joint participation between them. See, for example, Deborah Dempsey, "Surrogacy, Gay Male Couples, and the Significance of Biogenetic Paternity," *New Genetics and Society* 32, no. 1 (2013): 37–53.

³⁶ That said, a small fraction are so committed to concealing the truth that they feign an entire pregnancy, complete with prosthetic bellies matching the expanding sizes of their (hidden) surrogate's real "baby bump" and even faux trips to the doctor's office for medical check-ups. See, for example, Gita Aravamudan, *Baby Makers: A Story of Indian Surrogacy* (Harper Collins India, 2014), and Jared Yee, "Women Strap on Bellies to Keep Surrogacy Secret," *BioEdge*, May 5, 2012, bioedge.org/uncategorized/women-strap-on-bellies-to-keep-surrogacy-secret/.

been donor-conceived. The parental ability to conceal the truth during pregnancy and childbirth thus reinforces parental desires to continue to conceal as the child matures; in fact, the research shows many parents of donor-conceived children never plan on revealing the truth, with many hoping to take their secret to the grave. Reported reasons for parental concealment include shame in even needing to use donor gametes, desires to “protect” the non-genetic parent,³⁷ dread about broaching the topic for fear their child might handle the news poorly, anxiety about answering follow-up questions about the other biological parent if they used a non-identified donor, or hopes to avoid their child potentially being stigmatized by extended family members or the child’s current or future peers if these others were to learn the full truth about their biological origins.³⁸

What studies of ART-conceived children show, then, is this: most parents disclose to their surrogate-born children at an early age (three years old and younger) their use of a *gestational* surrogate, though most parents of donor-conceived children have not at that age (or even later) of their use of a gamete donor. In traditional surrogacy where the surrogate is both the child’s gestational and genetic mother, these two trends come together: it is not uncommon for the parents to reveal to their child that they were surrogate-born, but to withhold disclosing that the surrogate is *also* the child’s genetic mother. One UK study of surrogate-born children at age seven suggests there may be self-deception involved: “The parents considered themselves to have been open, [but] they had not in fact told about the donor conception,” therein creating a difficult situation when the parents believe they have disclosed but “their children do not yet know the full story and remain unaware of the absence of a genetic link between themselves and their mother.”³⁹ The parents’ unwillingness to tell their children the full

³⁷ Non-disclosure in the case of queer couples is not usually tied to any shame about infertility but to avoid contributing to the societal perception that only one of them is the “real dad” or “real mom.” See Elizabeth F. Schwartz, “LGBT Issues in Surrogacy: Present and Future,” in *Handbook of Gestational Surrogacy: International Clinical Practice and Policy Issues*, ed. E. Scott Sills (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 59.

³⁸ For a sampling of these professed reasons for nondisclosure, see Susan Golombok, “Non-Genetic and Non-Gestational Parenthood: Consequences for Parent-Child Relationships and the Psychological Well-Being of Mothers, Fathers, and Children at Age 3,” *Human Reproduction* 21, no. 7 (2006): 1921, 1923, and Jennifer Readings, Lucy Blake, Polly Casey, Vasanti Jadv, and Susan Golombok, “Secrecy, Disclosure, and Everything in-Between: Decisions of Parents of Children Conceived by Donor Insemination, Egg Donation, and Surrogacy,” *Reproductive Biomedicine* 22, no. 5 (2011): 490–491.

³⁹ See Readings, “Secrecy, Disclosure and Everything In-Between,” 491, 493 and Vasanti Jadv, Lucy Blake, Polly Casey, and Susan Golombok, “Surrogacy Families 10 Years On: Relationship with the Surrogate, Decisions over Disclosure, and Children’s

truth suggests that “IPs find it more difficult to disclose the use of third-party gametes than the use of third-party gestation.”⁴⁰

I take it as axiomatic that Christian support for ART must be premised upon several ethical parameters, one being that the parents would tell their child, and more selectively others, the truth about how they came into the world. Not only is it stressful to try to maintain secrets, but non-disclosure can compromise trust and intimacy between the parents and child, prevent the child from being in a truthful relationship with their genetic, gestational, and/or social parents, and also create boundaries between those who know and those who do not and therein impede community. Other problems with concealment include the parents needing to perpetuate the lie every time others assume the child to be biologically theirs, every time their child comments upon family resemblance or lack thereof about presumably inherited traits, and every time the parents fill out their child’s medical forms. To the extent silence and secrecy surrounding gamete donation are connected to the parents’ unresolved shame about their infertility or break in genetic linkage, they would also be reinforcing the problematic idea that it is ultimately biogenetic connection—not love, intimacy, care, and commitment—that makes a family. When you add to this list an emerging human rights standard of a “child’s right to know”⁴¹ and the practical reality that parental decisions to withhold rather than reveal cannot guarantee the children will be kept in perpetual ignorance of their biological origins given the possibility of accidental disclosure, legal documents or medical records being discovered or unsealed, and the widespread availability of low-cost, recreational DNA testing and sites such as the Donor Sibling Registry exposing long-held family secrets and cover-ups, it is to both the child’s and parents’ benefit for them to work through any shame or fear of stigma and tell the truth, so as to set themselves free.

Christians can ground additional support for full disclosure on a biblically-grounded understanding that all human beings—however

Understanding of Their Surrogacy Origins,” *Human Reproduction* 27, no. 10 (2012): 3013.

⁴⁰ Readings, “Secrecy, Disclosure and Everything In-Between,” 492–493.

⁴¹ Among human rights bodies, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has interpreted Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights covering the “right to respect for private and family life” as providing for the right of children to know the identity of their genetic parents. UNICEF has also interpreted the definition of “parents” a child has a right “to know and be cared for” in Article 7.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to include “genetic parents,” “birth parents,” and “psychological parents” (the latter are “those who cared for the child for significant periods during infancy and childhood”).

they came into this world—bear the image of God.⁴² As theologian Ted Peters has astutely observed, parental attempts to conceal their use of ART connote “a sense of embarrassment or shame,” both of which are detrimental to the child’s self-esteem. But if the parents were to combine the theological conviction that *every* child is beloved by God, together with “the Herculean effort” they exerted to bring their child to life, there should be no reason for them to hide the truth.⁴³ Even now as IVF-HET allows for a child to have as many as five parents (two genetic parents, two social parents, one surrogate mother), I share in Peters’s conclusion that such a scenario should still be a cause for celebration.⁴⁴ In the precocious words of thirteen-year-old Alice Kirkman, Australia’s first surrogate-born child, who understands herself as a daughter of multiple persons “but one Mum and Dad”:

Some people are born though IVF; some people are born because a man and a woman get very drunk; or when a man and a woman love each other; or when a man and a woman hire a scientist. There are different ways of being conceived. Mine was just one of them. . . . I think that we need to face up to the fact that it’s not [Australian Prime Minister] John Howard’s idealized, conservative world of the ’50s It’s the Noughties, and same-sex parents, single parents, IVF children, and conventional families should all be allowed to exist in peace. Alice’s Wonderland is becoming more common. So don’t be Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee about it. Let’s join the tea party!⁴⁵

⁴² Even as *Donum Vitae* insists that “truly responsible procreation” would involve each “unborn child” being conceived naturally in marriage as “the fruit and the sign of the mutual self-giving of the spouses, of their love and of their fidelity,” this 1987 “Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation” nonetheless maintains that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect no matter how they came into this world (IIA1).

⁴³ Ted Peters, *For the Love of Children: Genetic Technology and the Future of the Family* (Westminster John Knox, 1996), 65. Peters’s position is based on his rejection of the “inheritance myth,” or the idea that “the biological connection between parents and children is definitive of their relationship” (26). Peters argues to the contrary that Christians have no “theological stake” in prioritizing inherited biology because Jesus displayed “low regard for . . . DNA inheritance or kin altruism” as he “takes our positive experience of intrafamilial love and then expands it beyond genetic kin limits” (27).

⁴⁴ Peters, *For the Love of Children*, 65.

⁴⁵ Maggie Kirkman with a concluding section by Alice Kirkman, “Sister-to-Sister Gestational ‘Surrogacy’ 13 Years On: A Narrative of Parenthood,” *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 20, no. 3 (2002): 144–145.

CONCLUSION

Decisions about family planning, including whether to expand one's marriage or covenantal partnership to include children, can be shame-inducing and stigmatizing. I have attempted to capture how shame and censure operate among those who desperately wish to parent but are undergoing the trials and tribulations of infertility, those who opt not to become parents because they either do not believe themselves to be called to it vocationally or otherwise do not choose it, and those who conscientiously pursue ART in lieu of other, more established alternatives like adoption. These decisions and situations might be difficult for outsiders to accept; they are likely even more difficult for the persons involved to live as they bear the social costs of deviating from these longstanding conventions about how one makes or forms a family.

Church communities, it should be said, could play a role in helping to welcome and normalize a diversity of family types, particularly those not based exclusively on biogenetic relatedness. Maura Ryan, among others, has encouraged churches to bring to light infertility's "invisible reality" in the lives of many congregants.⁴⁶ For instance, given that many infertile persons and couples "feel invisible or marginalized within faith communities that place a great deal of emphasis on families and family life," Ryan encourages churches to gently include their struggles, such as by honoring both mothers and those who desperately yearn to be mothers during liturgical celebrations of Mother's Day (and analogously for fathers and hopeful fathers on Father's Day). Doing so would serve as both a "teachable moment" for congregations and a way to show solidarity to those who often find such celebrations excruciating.⁴⁷ I would add to Ryan's suggestion by encouraging churches to adopt a more expansive notion of maternal care without diluting the recognition due to mothers, so that all those who provide such nurturance—stepmothers, mothers-in-law, other mothers (including those struggling with infertility and those childfree by choice) and so forth—would feel affirmed for the role they nonetheless play in the lives of other people's children on such celebrations.⁴⁸ These suggestions in the direction of greater inclusivity and recognition would ideally not encounter much

⁴⁶ Ryan, "Faith and Infertility," 68.

⁴⁷ Ryan, "Faith and Infertility," 70. Ryan additionally encourages churches to attend to the "language and symbols" used in sermons and public rituals "marking religiously important moments of family life, such as baptisms, first communions, and confirmations" to help to "ease the pain of those experiencing those events as excruciating" because of their own struggles.

⁴⁸ These examples, of course, hold for fathers, those who yearn to be fathers, and all others who provide paternal care on liturgical celebrations of Father's Day.

resistance, especially since many congregations across various branches and denominations of Christianity already vow to care for all infants at baptism or in child dedication services.

Of course, making more visible the small, but growing reality in some churches—the existence of ART-conceived families—would likewise help to reduce the shame and stigma such persons historically have felt for their unorthodox manner of bringing children into the world. In the US, the tide might be turning regarding public awareness and support of IVF now that growing numbers of Americans have accessed some form of fertility treatments for themselves or know someone who has,⁴⁹ IVF legislation and healthcare coverage has increasingly become a public policy matter in the wake of the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, and politicians like Catholic-turned-evangelical former Vice President Mike Pence and Lutheran Minnesota Governor Tim Walz and other luminaries have publicly acknowledged their use of reproductive medicine.⁵⁰ Churches, to be sure, have ways to go in acknowledging and validating families expanded by ART, though the official acceptance of the conscientious use of IVF by several mainline Protestant denominations (including the Presbyterian Church, USA, the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and the United Church of Christ) is a start.⁵¹ So too is the *National Catholic Reporter*’s recent longform coverage of several Catholic families who have turned to surrogacy to bear their children despite official condemnation of the use of ART across the decades by the Magisterium.⁵² Might others who have used these reproductive techniques be inspired by the courage these Christians have shown to publicly talk about their experiences and bring down the walls of shame. **M**

⁴⁹ Isabel Goddard and Carolina Aragao, “A Growing Share of Americans Say They’ve Had Fertility Treatments or Known Someone Who Has,” *Pew Research Center*, September 14, 2023, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/14/a-growing-share-of-americans-say-theyve-had-fertility-treatments-or-know-someone-who-has/.

⁵⁰ See Melissa Quinn, “Face the Nation: Pence Says Fertility Treatments ‘Deserve the Protection of the Law,’” *CBS News*, November 20, 2022, www.cbsnews.com/news/mike-pence-fertility-treatments-ivf-supreme-court-face-the-nation/; Chris Megerian and Laura Ungar, “Tim Walz Has Described his Family’s IVF Experience. But They Used a Different Procedure,” *Associated Press*, August 21, 2024; apnews.com/article/tim-walz-ivf-fertility-jd-vance-fc5ebf8f37adb28cf45d0af51224a938.

⁵¹ See Kao, *My Body, Their Baby*, 94.

⁵² Camillo Barone, “Catholic Families Navigate Surrogacy with Faith and Spiritual Discernment,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 20, 2024, www.ncronline.org/news/catholic-families-navigate-surrogacy-faith-and-spiritual-discernment.

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