Values of Christian Families: Do They Come from Unrecognized Idols?

Brent D. Slife

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol38/iss2/6
Values of Christian Families: Do They Come from Unrecognized Idols?

Brent D. Slife

Family values among today's Christians show the popularity of modernist and postmodernist philosophies. Of the four most prevalent views, only one is truly compatible with Christianity.

The phrase family values has come to occupy a central role in political and religious discourse in America. Politicians endeavor to associate themselves with this expression, and some religious communities advocate family values as the cure to many of our nation's ills. Many Americans relate these values to a Judeo-Christian tradition, where there is supposedly a clear moral compass for raising children and distinguishing right from wrong. However, this tradition is actually only one component of the values of American families—even religious families. Indeed, it is questionable whether a Judeo-Christian moral tradition is even the primary component of American family values.

Instead, two secular philosophies—modernism and postmodernism—have become significant, if not crucial, factors in America's family values. Neither of these philosophies is typically associated with such values. However, these philosophies have together popularized four centers for family (and cultural) values that enjoy immense popularity. The term center is used here to mean the core or root of a particular system of values. Examination of a center means to cut away peripheral issues and study the main beliefs that give these value systems their vitality.

The first two centers—hedonism and moralism—are shaped and sustained most recently by modernism. They command the allegiance of the vast majority of American families, including, I contend, many religious families. Two other family value centers—relativism and relationalism—are shaped and sustained most recently by postmodernism. Relativism is considerably more popular than relationalism in American families—including, again, religious families. Yet, of the four centers, relationalism is the one that is most friendly to religion.

Indeed, I would like to explore the possibility that the values supported by the relational brand of postmodernism are necessary to Christianity. This possibility may be surprising, especially to many Christian communities,
because postmodernism is often understood as an “enemy” of the truly Christian. But, as I will attempt to demonstrate, in relationalism families can be truly God centered. Moreover, a surprising number of current religious practices and prevalent interpretations of scripture stem from hedonism, moralism, and relativism, sources of values that are ultimately idols in the Christian religious tradition. Christian families will need to look past these philosophies to find a firmer foundation.

**Modernist Centers of Family Values**

Historians and philosophers differ in their interpretations of modernism.¹ An important interpretation of the core of modernism, however, is described by social scientist Donald Polkinghorne in this manner: “At the core of modernism or Enlightenment discourse was the belief that a method for uncovering the laws of nature had been discovered and that the use of this method would eventually accumulate enough knowledge to build ‘the heavenly kingdom on earth.’”² The primary assertion of the modernist, then, is that scientific method will eventually discover the laws of nature. A sometimes overlooked assumption in this assertion is that such “laws of nature” exist and are crucially important. This means that science, in order to do its job as the modernist advocates, must assume a world in which natural laws exist and are fundamental. Two modernist centers for family values are popularized and maintained by this assumption.

**The Center of Hedonism.** The first center concerns the pervasive authority and power of one of the “laws of nature”—namely, hedonism, or the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain.³ As will be seen, this particular principle has become so influential that it is widely considered to govern phenomena in the social as well as the natural sciences. Although the word *hedonism* has many negative connotations—such as immediate physical gratification—it is also used to mean that an individual or family should seek happiness (a form of pleasure) and should avoid suffering (a form of pain). The word *should* here is the key to the hedonist value orientation, because it indicates that people *ought* to act in ways that maximize their happiness and minimize their suffering.

Although natural scientists have not officially endowed this orientation with natural law status, hedonism has attained this status nevertheless. Scientists consider virtually all plants and animals to be seeking “pleasure” and avoiding “pain” because even a plant will move naturally toward a source of water or light. Certainly, most biologists do not consider plants or animals to seek pain and suffering—at least, not naturally. The reason is hedonism’s perceived connection to evolution theory, where pleasure and
pain are linked to species survival. Presumably, to consistently engage in painful activity is to court possible extinction.

As a basic principle or law of nature, hedonism has had a wide influence on the theories of the social sciences. Several approaches to behavior, mind, and personality consider hedonism to be critically important. Freud, for example, surmised that all operations of the psyche ultimately reduce to what he termed "the pleasure principle." Even the ego and super-ego—concerned primarily with reality and social values—ultimately serve the id and its seeking of pleasure. As another example in the social sciences, behaviorists have focused scientific attention on hedonism. They have historically assumed that reward, or "reinforcement," is the prime motivator of all animals, including "higher" animals such as humans. These basic conceptions have in turn influenced other social scientists such as economists and political scientists. Economists routinely make the economic assumption that people act in their own self-interest, and many political scientists presume that holders of political office are similarly hedonistic.

Many such scholars assert that hedonism is not a matter of what we "should" or "ought" to do, because this implies that we are agents of our actions—that we are capable of doing something other than seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Those social scientists say that hedonism simply reflects the way we are, naturally. We have no choice about the matter, because our hedonism is a function of natural law. We do not control it; it controls us. We do not ordinarily consider a lower animal to have "values" that say it should avoid pain: lower animals simply do avoid pain, as a natural consequence of their genetic endowment. Similarly, humans, as higher animals, are not in the position of asking whether they should seek pleasure and avoid pain, because humans must seek pleasure and avoid pain, like all other animals in the evolutionary chain.

Other social science scholars disagree with this deterministic position, even if they agree with the centrality of hedonism in social life. These scholars argue that this position overlooks the evidence that humans possess an agency of sorts. Humans, they contend, really could do otherwise than seek pleasure and avoid pain—they just don't. That is, these scholars admit the possibility of a choice, but they assume that only the rare Mother Teresa will actually choose to do otherwise. In this sense, there is little functional difference between the deterministic and agentic positions, at least in the mainstream of the social sciences. In either case, hedonism is considered a natural social force that leads the vast majority of people and families to engage in various forms of pleasure seeking.

As mentioned, the most pervasive form of pleasure seeking in our culture is probably the pursuit of happiness. Not only is this pursuit considered a fundamental political right, but it is also viewed as a moral good to

Wealth and power are viewed by this family as morally good. In addition, considerable energy seems to have been expended to prepare the royal offspring for success in their current and future roles. These two manifestations of hedonistic family values are often found in modern Christian families.

In addition, those political scientists who believe hedonism is a natural law would presume that Charles IV and other political leaders are hedonistic not only in their private lives but also in their public lives, the assumption being that leaders act in their own self-interest.

which all people should aspire. Such happiness has, of course, many other aliases and guises in our culture: self-esteem, security, fulfillment, and peace, along with the avoidance of depression, insecurity, anxiety, and discomfort. However, the common theme among all these aliases is that feelings of happiness and self-esteem are "good" and feelings of depression and discomfort are "bad." These basic hedonistic notions are so ingrained in our cultural mind-set that they have become a kind of "common sense." They are so prevalent and so reasonable that only the weird or insane would appear not to follow them. These notions seem to question why anyone would ever want to seek or tolerate suffering or anxiety.
Even the religious are not exempt from this hedonistic way of thinking. An example of this value among religious people is the idea that they should seek heaven and avoid hell. Although a divine being may be involved in this thinking, this being serves as a means to these hedonistic ends. Serving God is not an end in itself. The pursuit of hedonistic pleasure, broadly speaking, encompasses many "religious" goals, including the seeking of "treasures in heaven" and the quest for certain forms of "perfection" or "holiness." Reaching these goals may not be hedonism per se. However, seeking them as the ultimate objective for ourselves—while treating everything else, including God, as the means to these self-oriented ends—is hedonism.

Likewise, for religious people the avoidance of suffering includes the avoidance of not just "fire and brimstone" in the future but, often, present personal setbacks and physical ailments as well. For some hedonistic families, mortal suffering indicates questionable religious commitment. Because suffering is morally bad and God is the Grand Rewarder and Punisher, people who suffer may be in trouble with God. This type of hedonistic theology raises the classic problem of why good or innocent people suffer. Since only bad or guilty people should suffer, according to hedonism, a person who is suffering must be guilty of some offense, and God is (or should be) the one who dispenses this hedonistic justice in retribution. Conversely, people whose lives seem pleasure-filled and pain-free must be the recipients of God's favor. The prevalence of this notion among Christian families shows how widespread the influences of hedonism are, because the problem of good people suffering is a problem primarily for those with a hedonistic outlook. In value systems where pleasure is not the goal and where pain is not the result of sin, the problem no longer involves personal worthiness or God's favor.

Parents of families with this hedonistic center have a simple injunction: keep everyone happy. This includes the long term as well as the short term and one's spouse as well as one's children; few parents with any value center are concerned with merely the short-term happiness of their families. Considerable parental energy is expended to prepare children for happiness and achievement in their future lives, even if this means some short-term suffering. This preparation includes good work habits, social skills, emotional maturity, and all the rest of what today's society expects parents to teach their children—all for the sake of a child's future happiness. The measure of a parent is thus equally simple, according to this hedonistic center: a child's happiness, particularly in the long term, indicates successful parenting, while a child's long-term suffering is the sign of parental failure.

The festivities depicted in this scene emphasize sources of pleasure and downplay any pain that may be associated with the marriage. If happiness—material, social, occupational, or heavenly—is the primary pursuit of Christian families, their core value is hedonism. For such families, particularly modern ones, marriage is primarily a means to obtain individual fulfillment. As long as they are happy in their relationships, they remain committed. However, should they no longer feel fulfilled, they believe they are justified in seeking a new relationship they hope will produce happiness.

The pursuit of hedonistic pleasure can also encompass the desirable goals of "treasures in heaven" and "perfection" or "holiness." But for a hedonistic Christian family, those goals become a form of idolatry if everything else, including God, is treated as merely the means to acquiring these objectives for themselves.

Marriages are also frequently gauged by these hedonistic values. Like the religious means-end relationship—with God as the means to a heavenly end—marriage is viewed as the cultural means to individual fulfillment. That is, people pursue marriage because they believe that it is necessary to a happy individual life. Likewise, people divorce when the marriage is no longer fulfilling this function. After all, the hedonist argues, it is "common sense" for people who are unhappy in a marriage to seek a relationship that will make them happy. Individual happiness trumps marital commitment in the hedonistic family.

Needless to say, hedonistic values encourage families to partake of the widespread materialism in our society. Keeping up with the Joneses by
acquiring material possessions is justified, because they supposedly increase our happiness and comfort; they are morally good. Conversely, there can be no meaning or goodness in suffering; suffering is morally repugnant. Children are taught very early that suffering is bad and should be avoided. Parents are to shield children from such things—unless, of course, some degree of suffering will help children suffer less in the future. Self-sacrifice, another form of suffering, makes no sense from this perspective—unless, again, it is a trade-off for some greater happiness. Pure altruism—performing a service without hope of a return—is either impossible, because all people must be hedonistic as dictated by natural law, or merely silly, because all people should be hedonistic.

The Center of Moralism. Contrasting rather dramatically with hedonism is a second modernist stance on values: moralism. Whereas hedonism involves a particular natural law, moralism involves the quality of natural lawfulness. Stated simply, in order for a natural law to be lawful, it must apply in all times and places. This implication is sometimes termed atemporality, because lawfulness is "without time," or timeless. To take a notable example from the physical sciences, the law of gravity applied both in the tenth and the nineteenth centuries; it is unchanging in terms of time. Similarly, it applies both in South America and North America; it is unchanging in terms of location. The law of gravity is considered a natural law because its effects on earthly bodies never vary; if they did, it could not be considered "lawful" in an all-encompassing, atemporal sense.

The center of moralism consists of moral principles or ethical rules that have this lawful, atemporal quality. A family adopts this center when its interactions and relationships focus on the principles and rules that it considers unchanging and timeless in nature. The moralism center is probably the belief center most frequently associated with the "family values" movement, but it is more encompassing, because neither the broader culture nor a religious community has to sanction the principles and rules it contains. Although generally endorsed or religiously sanctioned moral principles are perhaps the most prominent content of this center, relatively unique moral codes and unarticulated rules of conduct can also form the center of family interactions.

The pivotal characteristic of a moralistic center is that the family members see the values as atemporal. For moral principles and rules of conduct to be unchanging by the particular situation at hand or culture involved, they must exist in some other realm outside the particular context and then be "applied" to a particular era, culture, or context. For example, many in the Judeo-Christian tradition consider the injunction "Thou shalt not kill" to be a transcendent and absolute principle. It is applicable, they believe, to all contexts and all eras, and it cannot be essen-
American Gothic, by Grant Wood. Oil on beaverboard, 29¾" x 24½", 1930. Art Institute of Chicago.

The moralistic Christian family has its own form of idolatry. Their ultimate focus, in all cases, is obedience to rules, not to the God who gave them the rules. In this view, Christ is significant only as an exemplar and teacher. Churches are important only as repositories and instillers of the right moral principles (those that Christ lived by).

The sacred job of moralistic Christians is to identify these principles and adapt them to their own families, for moral principles are thought to be the center, or “glue,” of the family. Without such constructs, these families are unable to function. Moral principles, then, are viewed as the key to preserving the future generation. Parental success is measured by how well family moral values are reflected in children’s behavior.
Values of Christian Families

125

ially altered across these contexts and eras. Such moral principles are thought to transcend and unite our changing times and to provide a firm universal ground from which the moralistic family may derive its values.

In the medieval period, many theologians considered moral principles to be the divine principles of God, a timeless and unchangeable entity. Because God was seen as atemporal, these principles took on his atemporal quality. At the time of the Enlightenment, many modernists essentially abandoned the notion of these principles residing in a divine being. However, present-day modernists preserve the belief that an atemporal link among contexts and eras remains necessary; modernists replaced an atemporal God with atemporal natural laws. Just as God was deemed transcendent, immutable, and the unifier of all things, so now from a modernist perspective the principles of nature are deemed transcendent, immutable, and the unifiers of all things. In fact, moralists believe that all principles—including moral principles—possess these atemporal properties. Most professional organizations, for instance, have formulated codes of ethics they believe fit this description.

The nature of a moralistic center, then, depends on the type of moral principles that are endorsed. Many families endorse the dominant principles of their culture. In the case of many Americans, these principles center on the Judeo-Christian tradition, almost by default. The phrase “almost by default” connotes how few families sit down and discuss what type of values they will uphold. Family values, in this sense, are handed down by previous generations. Each moralistic family puts its own unique imprint on the previous generation's values, to be sure, but much of the previous moral code is—sometimes unknowingly—preserved.

Part of this preservation is due to moralistic parents. These parents see the transfer of moral codes as their primary family task. Because moral principles are the center, or “glue,” of the family, they are highly valued and viewed as the key to preserving the future generation. Without this critical glue, families are thought to be unable to exist and function. Giving children such family values, then, is considered a crucial role for society in general. This role explains why so many politicians wish to associate themselves with family values. These politicians assume, along with moralists, that atemporal values are vital not only to the structure of families but also to the structure of society itself. Success in facilitating this structure is measured by how well children reflect these values in their behavior by obeying the absolute rules of conduct. Behavior that violates this implicit or explicit code is considered a failure of parenting and, in some sense, a violation of the family structure itself.

Many religious families are found to have this particular center for values. In fact, many people of all faiths return to church—sometimes after
long absences—when they begin having children. They return because they are concerned about the future conduct of their children. They perceive churches as repositories and instillers of elaborate sets of moral principles. Church congregations are thought to form communities that support a child’s obedience to these principles. Of course, few such parents would agree to just any set of principles. Many feel that churches support the right moral principles. In other words, these parents turn to churches, as opposed to other institutions supporting moral codes, because they assume that churches have access to inspired and righteous moral principles.

In Christianity, for instance, moralism may mean that Christ himself is viewed as having lived by a moral code. Because he was the Messiah, the sacred job of Christians is to take the moral principles Christ lived by and adapt them to their own families. They accomplish this adaptation both by emulating his behaviors and by discerning the ethical rules that lie behind his sermons and other statements. Once families have adopted these principles, they are considered to be followers of Christ, because they have internalized his immutable rules for living. Moralistic families then assume that the next step is to pass these rules on to subsequent generations. Consequently, the primary role of Christ, according to moralism, is that of exemplar and teacher. The ultimate focus, in all cases, is the rules; Christ simply exemplified and taught them.

Are moralistic and hedonistic value centers mutually exclusive? Is it possible for families to adhere to both centers at the same time? Although families can incorporate aspects of both centers, one center is typically ascendant. For instance, a common type of incorporation of the two centers is obeying the rules to achieve happiness. However, the hedonistic center is clearly ascendant in this case since it is the end and moralism is the means. If another means were found that would facilitate hedonism better, then obedience to the rules would presumably be replaced by this alternate means. In this sense, only one of the value centers has a privileged status, and the two (or four) centers cannot be mixed in determining the ultimate objective of the family.

Postmodernist Centers of Family Values

The modernist understanding of the world—as manifested in its value centers of hedonism and moralism—is only half of the family values picture. The other half is the philosophical perspective generally considered to be a reaction to modernism: postmodernism. Unfortunately, the meaning of the label postmodernist is notoriously difficult to capture. It tends to encompass an extraordinarily diverse group of scholars whose only uniting bond may be a disenchantment with the tenets of modernism. Thus,
postmodernism may be defined best in negative terms—what it is against. Understanding this point, however, can provide clues as to what some postmodernists assert positively.

To illustrate, the modernist assumption that natural laws are basic to everything is central to the complaints of many postmodernists. As noted in relation to hedonism, modernists consider natural laws to be foundational to any understanding or explanation of either natural or social phenomena, implying that these laws govern all things, regardless of their culture or context. If a psychologist, for instance, discovers a law of interpersonal attraction, then this law will be assumed to dictate the actions of all people caught up in the attraction. The differing beliefs, cultures, and languages of the people have no consequence. The foundation of natural laws overrides any such extraneous variables.

However, postmodernists reject this foundationalism. They contend, instead, that any foundation is itself formulated within a cultural context. For example, this hypothetical law of interpersonal attraction is cultural in at least two ways: one, it was formulated by real human beings (scientists) who are themselves participating in a cultural mind-set and way of thinking; and two, the subjects used to scientifically investigate this “law” of attraction were themselves part of a particular culture. In other words, the culture is thought to contribute to what is considered a law. The notion of natural law itself, including hedonism, is viewed as a product of culture. In this sense, the education of other cultures regarding nature’s laws is a kind of cultural imperialism. From a postmodern perspective, any such “natural law” should be understood as relative to the particular context in which it was derived. This contention forms, then, the first of the value centers to be sustained by postmodernism: relativism.

The Center of Relativism. A “center of relativism” may seem a contradiction in terms. Indeed, many relativists would claim to have avoided a moral center of any kind. Because they decry foundationalism, “foundations” and “centers” are viewed as merely social constructions. What is foundational for one particular culture may not be foundational for another; who is to say which foundation is correct? Why should one culture’s “natural laws” or moral system be privileged over another’s? Thus, no particular center for values should be considered more important or basic than another. Relativists do recognize that certain moral systems enjoy a privileged status in their respective cultures, but they consider these systems to attain their status through power rather than truth. In other words, the privileging of certain social constructions cannot be justified by their being true in any objective sense; they can be legitimized only by the social power that supports them. In this manner, the relativists seem to have avoided any sort of moral center.
This conclusion is premature, though, because these relativist contentions have led to many relativist moral implications. The moral language of relativists, using words like should and ought, betrays the value center of relativism. For instance, if no particular moral system has any objective justification for its privileged status—and none can, from a relativistic perspective—then no moral system should be privileged in a particular culture. Power may help some to privilege their particular version of morality, but this use of power is morally unjustified. Instead, people ought to be respectful and tolerant toward other moral orientations. People should not judge others from their own moral framework, nor ought they to consider their own views and morals to be better than those of others. Certainly, under no circumstances should they seek to impose their morals on others.

The terms emphasized above reveal much about the relativistic center for family values. Although in one sense the relativist endorses none of the existing moral systems, in another sense this lack of endorsement is itself a moral system. That is, the notion that one ought to avoid endorsing a particular moral system implies a host of implicit moral injunctions that form the center for relativism: First, it is wrong to claim an objective or absolute moral justification that one does not possess (because one should be honest). Second, it is wrong to privilege one moral system over another when the only basis for privileging is power (because might should not make right). Third, the tolerance of other moral systems is a supreme virtue (and intolerance should not be tolerated). Fourth, it is wrong to “judge” other people from one’s own moral framework (because one should be nonjudgmental). And fifth, it is wrong to persuade others to abandon their own moral system (because one should respect the views of others).

The paradox of this relativist moral position is that it is a particular moral position, even while it claims that one should not endorse a particular moral position. Consider the case of a culture that explicitly maintains that its own moral system is the absolute, objective truth—and many cultures, in fact, assert this moral position. If relativists deny this cultural position in favor of their own moral position, they are disrespectful to and intolerant of this culture (violating their own moral position). If, on the other hand, they choose to respect this culture’s absolute values, then they must deny the truth of their own relativism. Put another way, relativists claim that all value centers are relative to the particular culture in which they are embedded, yet the values of the relativist—tolerance, respect, honesty—are often treated as if they are independent of any particular cultural context. On the other hand, if relativism is viewed as itself a product of culture, then it must give equal authority to cultures that disagree with relativism’s values. In either case, relativism—by its own rationale—has no justification for its rationale being taken seriously. 
Values of Christian Families

Interestingly, the paradoxical nature of this relativistic center for family values has not precluded its widespread endorsement and popular use among many American families. Many parents assert the legitimacy of relativism, and they seem particularly sensitive to its caveats regarding power. According to relativists, American parents are the “power brokers” of their respective families. This means that parents should be especially careful not to impose their own family values upon their children. After all, what right do parents have to do this? Given the essential equivalence of family value systems, why would the parents’ views be any better than those of their children? Encouraging children to adopt a specific moral system is akin to a boss encouraging employees to adopt a specific moral system. It violates the dual injunctions of the relativist against intolerance and the misuse of power. Children should be allowed to experiment, grow, and eventually find their own way, without parental influence. Parents should avoid all “power plays”—such as limit setting and authoritarian guidelines—and should attempt to facilitate a nonjudgmental and affirming view of the world that allows all moral systems to be respected as basically equal.

This respect also implies that family members should avoid taking any particular moral system too seriously. All value systems should have a certain degree of respect, of course, but a child’s endorsement of a particular system—especially as the child grows into adulthood—is perhaps the greatest fear of a relativistic parent, since this means that the adult-child is no longer a relativist. To endorse one particular moral orientation—to take it truly seriously—is to believe that all moral systems are not essentially equivalent. Moral systems that disagree with the one being affirmed must be considered wrong, at least in part. Furthermore, it is the nature of any moral system to make discriminations between what is right and what is wrong. Such discriminations mean that some judgments are needed and some things should not be tolerated.

This situation violates the relativist’s own injunctions against intolerance and judging others. The fact that these injunctions are themselves a type of moral system points again to the paradoxical nature of this value center. Nevertheless, the relativist cites the difficulty of objectively evaluating the rightness or truth of any moral system. What reason, asks the relativist, has anyone for adopting a particular moral system? From this perspective, the only logical approach is to avoid becoming too serious about any such system. A religious system, for example, is all right in its place. However, even religious people should avoid a serious belief in their religious system, because this commitment would lead to “fanaticism” or “extremism” and ultimately to a brand of “close-mindedness”—positions that offend the relativist.

In a Christian family based on relativistic values, the parents avoid setting limits, providing authoritarian guidelines, and imposing their own family values on their children. Instead, the parents encourage exploration and experimentation, allowing their children the freedom to find their own way. They teach their children to see all moral systems as basically equal, to respect them without endorsing a particular system.

In adopting a nonjudgmental, open-minded attitude, such a family manifests its belief that Christ is a tolerant redeemer, a redeemer who unconditionally loves and saves all people. This universal salvation means that religions and value systems are unnecessary, since they all lead to the same reward. Such a family’s relativism becomes its unrecognized idol.
According to this view, children should instead be taught an important companion of tolerance: open-mindedness. To relativists, open-mindedness is next to godliness. All worldviews and religious systems have their place, but none should ever be taken in and truly incorporated into one's own beliefs, for this privileging would disallow an openness to all points of view. Without such openness—or "objectivity," as it is sometimes termed—the world would not be seen for what it is. The observer would be biased, would attend to certain aspects of the world and not to others, and would view even those aspects through a distorted "lens." All these difficulties can be avoided, warns the relativist, by not taking any moral or religious system too seriously. Religions and moral orientations are nice places to visit—for educational purposes—but no one should ever want to live with any of them.

It might seem that a Christian God could have no role in such a value center, yet there are many relativistic Christian families. For them, God becomes the ultimate tolerator. He is seen as the advocate and the dispenser of an unconditional love that transcends all belief systems. He is the one who will ultimately save all people through Christ, regardless of their values and their actions. This universal salvation means that religions and value systems are unnecessary, since they all lead to the same reward. Following any one of them will make no difference in the end, according to relativism.

The Center of Relationalism. The second of the postmodernist centers of family values, relationalism, directly addresses the modernist assumption of atemporality, that crucial quality of the lawfulness of natural laws. Lawfulness is timeless and unchangeable, and the modernist conception of truth is similarly atemporal. This view of truth is the reason that a modernist endows moral principles with atemporality so readily: if such principles are truthful, they are assumed to be timeless and unchangeable as well. Any truth, by modernist definition, has to be atemporal. Moreover, many religious people have assumed that timelessness and unchangeability are sure signs of divine truth. Some postmodernists, however, claim not only that secular truth is temporal, rather than atemporal, but that religious truth can also be understood as temporal. I believe this claim has considerable merit. Indeed, I would like now to explore the notion that temporality is necessary for those who claim specifically Christian family values.

What, then, is this temporal and relational value center for families? How, especially, can this value center claim to be dealing with truth? To answer these questions, it is important to understand the postmodern conception of temporality and, specifically, how it differs from the concept of relativism. The "relational" properties of this value center must also be
understood. Because this latter task is impossible to accomplish without a context and because I contend that Christianity requires this relationalism, I use the context of a “God-centered” family here. In the final portion of this article, I describe how this center differs from the other three value centers—hedonism, moralism, and relativism.

**Temporality.** Temporal explanations stem from the hermeneutic tradition, in which the philosopher Martin Heidegger, among others, maintained that humans are inherently temporal beings. As he expressed it in his seminal book, *Being and Time*, “‘to be’ is always ‘to be temporal.’”

Unlike the subject matter of some natural sciences, humans—as social agents—dwell more in the realm of the possible and the particular than in the realm of the necessary and the universal. Humans are inherently contextual and changeable, and thus they require explanations that reflect this contextuality and changeability. As a consequence, temporal explanations are full of time, rather than timeless. Temporal explanations are reflective of the era and context of their construction and interpretation. In this sense, they are embedded in context and culture. They claim no special transcendent status beyond their cultural and contextual embeddedness.

This temporality also implies a kind of temporal*arity*, or a general readiness of one practical explanation to give way to another practical explanation. That is, human explanations and understandings are inherently inadequate, incomplete, and potentially inappropriate to the context at hand. Each explanation is a “humble” explanation, containing within itself the possibility of its own negation. Unlike atemporal understandings that presume objective contact with and representation of a permanent reality, understandings from a temporal perspective make no such presumption. Temporality thus allows an openness to and an expectation of change.

In contrast, atemporal approaches disallow meaningful change and possibility. Because the atemporal laws and truths of modernism are themselves unchanging, and because these laws and truths are thought to control and govern all natural and social events, the possibility of these events being other than they are is ruled out. Natural and social events may seem to change, but in modernist “reality,” they are dictated by unseen and unchanging laws and truths that reside outside the events and contexts themselves. People, for instance, may appear to change—to make different choices, to direct themselves toward various goals in a semblance of agency. However, these changes, choices, and goals are themselves determined by the atemporal laws and truths that govern these events and, thus, these people.

To the temporal relationalist, on the other hand, the determinism of atemporality excludes morality. Because people and their families have no
Values of Christian Families

means of being other than they are, they have no way to be moral. People who do good, for instance, should receive no credit, because some set of psychological or biological laws presumably determine these actions. These people cannot have acted otherwise. Similarly, if people behave badly or even criminally, they cannot be held responsible for their actions. Such criminals were programmed by their past environment, governed by their genetic endowment, or shaped by some lawful interaction of the two. They therefore have no capacity for moral decision making, because no such decision making is possible in a truly atemporal world.

A temporal world, by contrast, is filled with possibility. Because the relationalist does not postulate an unchanging, metaphysical world that governs all contexts, contexts can be taken for what they are—sometimes shifting, sometimes changeable, and often other than any law would determine them to be. In this temporal world, persons and families are constantly confronted with possibilities, must constantly choose from among them, and thus must constantly judge which possibilities are good and which are bad. Judgments of goodness and badness are irrelevant in a modernist world, because that world is amoral. Things and events are neither moral nor immoral—they just are what they are naturally, as dictated by atemporal laws. In a temporal world, however, some things are good and some things are bad, depending upon the context. Choices and changes must therefore be made in light of these moral and contextual evaluations.

Distinguishing Temporality from Relativity. At this point, temporality may appear to be similar to relativity. Certainly, both attempt to take into account context, time, and human agency. However, unlike the relativist, the relationalist assumes that morality and values are themselves grounded in truth—temporal truth. From the perspective of the relationalist, relativism supposes incorrectly that the changing nature of contexts—both across time and across place—rules out the possibility of truth. Because values are relative to changing societies and cultures, the relativist concludes that there can be no truth. This conclusion, however, draws an important, though unacknowledged, assumption from modernism that truth is atemporal. In other words, it assumes that truth has to be transcendent to and outside of the various cultures and contexts in order to be truth. Because cultures are pivotal and because values do not seem to be transcendent across cultures, there can be no atemporal truth.

The relationalist, on the other hand, asserts that truth is temporal. Truth is manifested in how things are, rather than in what things are. The "what" of things leads to a focus on static, transcendent properties, whereas the "how" of things leads to a focus on action, articulation, and change—temporality. With this latter focus, one can legitimately ask questions and discern true and false answers. Still, the truth of an answer is
found, not in its correspondence to an unchanging, static reality outside the context in which the question is asked, but inside the context itself. Consequently, a relational center for family values grounds its values and morals in a truth that is contextual and possibly changing, rather than transcendent and immutable.

The difficulty is that this contextual truth may appear to make truth itself relative, leaving only "local" truths with no unity or connection to each other. From the relationalist perspective, this apparent problem is due to a misconception of the context of truth. In relativist thought, this context is a bounded, self-contained "object" that is essentially independent of other self-contained, objective contexts. A Chinese culture, for instance, is thought to be essentially independent of an American culture, having different languages, customs, traditions, and meanings. Although some "translation" between cultures can occur, all contexts and cultures are viewed as incomparable in many core respects. Furthermore, each context is viewed as containing its own qualities. One understands a culture not by understanding other cultures but by studying the qualities of the culture itself. This independence and qualitative difference among cultures implies that local truths must remain local and have no universality or essential relationship to each other.

The relationalist disputes this implication. Postmodernism's temporality considers contexts and cultures to be parts of wholes that acquire at least some of their qualities from their relation to other contexts and cultures—past, present, and future. Temporality assumes that the "moment" of any context is inextricably woven into the tapestry of all contextual moments across time—that all contexts (or cultures) overflow their presumed boundaries and participate significantly in other contexts. This participation allows a unity or comparability among contexts, because any context (or culture) is itself part of the whole of contexts—past and future, far and near. How could we know that Chinese culture was different from American culture unless there was some common ground to allow comparison between the two cultures? The very idea of a separate "culture" requires a contrasting relation to other cultures to show that it is separate. This contextuality of context prevents temporal truth from being merely a "local" truth, since any truth garners many of its qualities from the context of other "local" truths.

The analogy of a novice player in the middle of a chess game demonstrates the importance of context to temporal truth. If this player turns to a chess master and asks for the best next move, the chess master cannot appeal to an atemporal game. That is, no timeless or transcendent game will be of much help in arriving at the best next move for this particular game. There is, of course, a set of universally accepted rules for playing
chess, but an appeal to these rules alone will not provide a suitable answer to the question of the best next move for this specific context. In addition, the chess master should not necessarily assume that these players are using universally accepted rules. It is common, for instance, for novices to play chess without a time clock, though this is a universally accepted requirement of tournament chess. The point is that the specific rules used are themselves part of the context, rather than a transcendent truth. A truthful answer to the novice’s question, then, cannot be an atemporal answer.

A truthful answer has to take into account the specific context of the question and the questioner: Does the novice want to win? Are the players using accepted rules? And, of course, what is the context of this particular game? Laid out before the chess master is the past, present, and future of the game—its temporality. The present configuration of the board includes the prior movements of the pieces (the givenness of the past) and the possibilities for movements (the opportunities of the future). A truthful answer must consider the past, present, and future contexts of this particular game, as well as other related games. In this sense, a truthful answer is more than a local truth, because inherent in it is a type of temporal “transcendence” of the local context of the particular move. Unlike atemporality—which posits a bounded and self-contained present context that is independent of other contexts, past and future—temporality assumes that the context of the “now,” to use Heidegger’s term, is significantly related to all the other contexts, past and future, that have shaped and will be shaped by the present. A truthful answer must take into account this temporal context of the game.

A truthful answer by the chess master must also acknowledge that the game’s context—and its nonlocal relation to other games and other moves—can shift, even within the particular game. In this sense, the best move can itself change, because it is necessarily sensitive to its context. For the relativist, this contextual changeability implies that the notion of truth must be abandoned altogether. Because the truth can change from game to game (or context to context) and because truth is assumed to be atemporal, there can be no truth. People should be equally respectful and tolerant of all values for the very reason that they cannot claim to have the truth.

The problem with relativism—from a relational perspective—is that it has given up on the existence of truth too easily. The true, the right, and the moral still exist, according to the relationist, but they are implicit in the context itself. In fact, the morality of a context cannot be avoided: even the relativists’ assertion that there is no objective morality implies a very specific list of moral rights and wrongs (for example, tolerance, nonjudgmentalness). In the case of the chess game, there are also right moves and wrong moves. Provided, say, that the novice wants to win, plays by the rules, and is
engaging a Sicilian chess defense, there are good moves and bad moves. There may be many rights and many wrongs, many truths and many falsities. Nevertheless, the truth in this case is a temporal truth. Because all cases are always *specific* cases (that is, all people in all places are embedded in a specific context), all truths are necessarily temporal truths.

**Temporality in the Christian Family.** Temporality might seem to make some sense in a chess game, but how can it be understood in the context of a religious family? As noted above, many religious people have understood their morality from a modernist, atemporal perspective. However, a relational perspective can and does pertain to the dominant religion of America, Christianity. Because the relationalist assumes that morality is implicit in the context itself, family values—or *any* practical values, for that matter—are found by centering the family on this contextual morality. In the case of the Christian family, God is assumed to be an essential part of the context. Christians understand him to communicate proper values to them through the Holy Spirit and intervene morally in their lives.

God, then, is the Christian's "chess master." He is believed to be continually involved in the "game" of living and always available for consultation through the Holy Spirit and prayer. This heavenly master can advise the family on the "best next move" for moral action and can intervene on behalf of what is right or good in the specific context of the family.

Because God is believed by Christians to be intimately involved in every person's life, the heavenly master—like the chess master—must take into account the temporality of the game of living. A God-centered family, then, requires a temporal or relational value center. This type of center puts the emphasis squarely upon one's *relationship* with this Master rather than upon moral principles (as in moralism), tolerance (as in relativism), or happiness (as in hedonism). Indeed, a Christian family should include this divine being as the central member of their family.

This Christian relationship is temporal both in the sense of being "full of time," rather than without time, and in the sense of being "temporary," rather than immutable. God is full of time because he participates in a family's particular context through the Holy Spirit. If he were entirely outside this particular context, as an atemporal being, he could not truly minister to a family's unique needs or intervene in its members' unique circumstances. As a contextual being—at least in part—God is involved in all people's contexts, whether they know him or not (or believe him or not). This Christian temporality allows him to become a guide for one's values. No translation or application of abstract moral principles is necessary in this relational understanding of Christianity. God knows his people and their world intimately, perceives their own special circumstances, and can intervene accordingly.

God is the central member of the Christian family with relational values. Such a family puts its emphasis squarely upon its relationship with God rather than upon tolerance, moral principles, or happiness. Because of the family’s relationship with God, it can and does receive inspiration in applying moral principles to everyday situations. The family recognizes that God knows his people and their world intimately, perceives their own special and collective circumstances, and can and does intervene accordingly. The relationship gives them perspective and fills them with love. And only through a true relationship with God through Christ can sinners truly repent and become new creatures who accept God’s revealed will as their own.
Values of Christian Families

As with the chess master, this intimate knowledge requires continual adjustment, depending on the context and family. In other words, if God lives and participates in a family's context, he must have the capacity to make situational adjustments to meet the ongoing and changing demands of ministering to the needs of a vast and diverse range of people. Of course, as the family responds or does not respond to these adjustments, its relationship with God also changes, possibly requiring further relational adjustments, and so on.

God’s ability to make changes does not preclude consistency and unity. In fact, a relational, temporal center requires some unity among past, present, and future contexts, as described above. For this reason, it is not unexpected that God would bind himself to certain covenants with his people, such as his promises to love them and provide a means for them to overcome sin. However, this binding and these promises are distinct from the modernist notion of atemporality. As noted above, atemporality ultimately precludes possibility and thus morality itself, because unchangeable laws and truths govern all things—including, presumably, God himself. There would be no reason to praise God, because he would have to do what he does as a result of atemporal laws.

A divine being that is temporal, on the other hand, can truly love because he does not have to love. He may have to love in a sense—because as a perfect being he loves completely—but he does not have to love because he is forced by natural law to do so. He may have to keep his covenants with us because he chooses not to lie or go back on his word, but he has real choices and possibilities that allow him to be a truly moral being. He can thus be praised for his choices, sacrifices, and continuing efforts on our behalf. This is part of the wonder of his continual love for us as sinners—he does not have to love us. Another part of the wonder of this love is its contextuality. He knows every hair of our heads and can thus minister to each of us uniquely, changing how his love is manifested depending on the circumstances.

This temporality of Christianity may explain the seeming inconsistencies of certain deity-human relationships. In the Old Testament, for example, God utters the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” (Deut. 5:17) and then commands the Israelites a few years later to kill whole populations, including women and children: “[The Israelites] utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded” (Josh. 10:40).

This apparent inconsistency is inconsistent only from a modernist, atemporal understanding of Christianity. From a postmodern, temporal understanding, a Christian’s obedience to God takes precedence over any atemporal notion of a commandment. One should first obey the Lawgiver and, in so doing, obey the (temporal) law. Some contexts may require a
person to act inconsistently with the law, as understood atemporally, and yet consistently with the Lawgiver. Who can know better, from a Christian perspective, what is needed in a particular context than God? Who can know better what is truth for a specific family than God? Therefore, the primary thrust of a truly Christian family should be on developing a relationship with this contextual "Truth Teller" so that the family can be inspired to act morally in each of life's situations.

Comparing the Four Centers of Family Values

The importance of a relational value center for Christianity may become clearer when it is compared to the other value centers. Specifically, with a relational center a family can be truly God-centered, while the other three centers ultimately direct the family to idols, which draw people away from God.

Moralism and Relationalism. First, a relationship with God, or even an obedience to him, does not mean simply that one should discern God's moral principles and then live by them. This moralistic approach would imply that once this discernment has occurred, the Christian no longer needs God. Christian families could just center themselves on the moral principles. Further, if the principles of this morality were at least implicit in the Old Testament, as Christ himself indicated, and if moral living were sufficient for salvation from sin, then a correct discernment of these principles would mean that the advent of a Savior was unnecessary. Given, however, that Christians do consider Christ to be necessary—in New Testament times and now—the discernment of God's moral principles must not be the correct source or center for Christian family values.

Perhaps the Christian family should model Christ. One could attempt to discover the pattern of Christ's conduct in the various moral situations recorded in scripture and then try to duplicate his actions in similar situations. Unfortunately, this modeling process has the same problem as conventional moralism—it can become an idol, a type of Phariseeism. The Pharisees whom Jesus criticized acted according to patterns or principles without consideration of the spirit of the principles (see Matt. 23). Christ, however, took pains in scripture to say that even correct action cannot be the center of a Christian's life. Christ came into the world, in part, to write God's laws in people's hearts. From a Christian perspective, it is never sufficient merely to duplicate his actions. Christians must also want to do God's will—in their unique circumstances and situations.

Of course, a Christian family may want to model Christ in these circumstances. Still, the unique nature of a family's circumstances raises another problem for a moralistic centering of the family: to model the
pattern or follow the principles of Christ’s actions, one must translate the pattern or principle into the special context of a family. Principles and patterns, by their very nature, apply to many or all families and must therefore be tailored to the specific family and situation at hand. Parents who have tried to model a “perfect” parent or apply a principle of parenting to a particular situation know that this tailoring is not always a straightforward task. Even if parents know the correct rules, they are often not sure how to apply these rules. How can Christians be assured they have applied the rules correctly?

Some moralists may say that the scriptural record of Christ provides us with guidelines. Unfortunately, many family situations are different from the situations in which we see Christ in scripture. For example, marital problems are a topic which Christ does not explore in scripture on a first-hand, experiential basis. This gap does not mean that Christians are left entirely without scriptural guidance for marital problems. Still, from a moralist perspective, it does mean that this scriptural guidance must be applied—that is, a vital and influential translation process must come into play before obedience to this guidance is possible. Sometimes this translation process can make all the difference in what is considered right and wrong in a particular instance. Are Christians left to their own devices for this important application process?

From a postmodern relational perspective, the answer to this question is no. If God is able to minister to people through the Holy Spirit, then he, as a loving being, knows the special situations of his people and can advise them accordingly or even intervene on their behalf. Christians also believe that God invites and desires a personal relationship with them through Christ. Abstract principles and patterns of conduct can be distractions from this personal loving relationship. They can lead Christians to focus too much on the historical Christ of scripture—where Christians are supposedly to discern God’s moral code—and not enough on the living Christ, who was sent to minister to people in their context, and who continues to minister to them in their everyday situations.

Christian moralists are constantly tempted to focus on their own discernment of the proper rules. As evidenced by the Pharisees whom Jesus criticized, this focus leads to a set of human-crafted principles of behavior—with contributions from other, sometimes unrecognized sources—instead of a relationship with a living, divine being. Although some form of discernment of this relationship is surely necessary as Christian families attempt to understand God’s will in their lives, this discernment can never be reduced to a set of moral principles. It is never once-and-for-all or even once-and-for-a-little-while; temporality requires a continual dependence on God for stability and guidance, rather than a dependence on a behavioral pattern or moral principle.
Moreover, a moralist discernment cannot compensate for those times when Christian families fail to follow moral principles, as no family is perfect in their implementation. Even moralists who follow the principle that they must repent of their sins cannot bring about salvation by adherence to this moral code alone. Only through a relationship with God can sinners truly repent and become new creatures who accept God’s will as their own.

**Hedonism and Relationism.** Can this continual dependence on God produce happiness? Why is a hedonistic family center so divorced from a God-centered family? Use of the word *can* in this first question is tricky, because happiness is, of course, possible with God. From a Christian viewpoint, almost anything is possible with God. The important question is Should a Christian seek God as a means to happiness? If Christ’s life reveals nothing else, it reveals that a Christian family is likely to experience suffering as well as happiness. The book of Job describes another devoutly religious person who suffered considerably. It is only the modernist foundation of hedonism that leads many to assume that a Christian family *should* experience mainly joy and happiness. Why else, from a hedonistic perspective, would anyone want to be a Christian?

It is true that those who have lived a God-centered life report an inner peace from doing God’s will. Even so, it is quite debatable—if not unlikely—that this peace is anything like the personal fulfillment that is acclaimed and pursued in our popular culture. Indeed, from a Christian perspective, this peace can never be pursued; it can only ensue. That is, if Christians pursue this peace for their own sake or try to build a relationship with God for the sake of this peace, then their “Christianity” is self-centered rather than God-centered, and a relational center cannot be effected. God and his will must be both the means and the end for the truly Christian. Happiness and peace may ensue, but these are really irrelevant to what Christian families must truly be seeking: obedience to their Lord. They may be promised a type of peace from this obedience, but this peace must be distinguished from the popular definitions of peace as freedom from conflict and suffering (John 14:27). The “peace . . . which passeth all understanding” (Phil. 4:7) finds meaning in the course of many forms of suffering and conflict.

American culture is, unfortunately, so heavily hedonistic that it has given all suffering and conflict a bad name. As mentioned earlier, all sorts of suffering—depression, anxiety, insecurity, blows to the ego, and pain of all types—are automatically viewed as evils of which to rid ourselves. A whole class of drugs and a whole set of psychotherapies have been formulated to this end. Consequently, suffering is rarely thought to be meaningful or good—if you *feel* bad, then it must *be* bad. A God-centered family, however, cannot so easily equate adversity with evil. Suffering can
Values of Christian Families

hold significant meaning, educate, and signal important family problems. Recognizing God as a central member of the family can temper the suffering and give insight into the problems.

With a relational center, then, a Christian family should never automatically rid itself of suffering without first understanding the possible function of that suffering in the family’s relationship to God. For example, this understanding of suffering could be an important feature of a family’s attempts to heal broken relationships if it leads family members to assess, humbly and honestly, the value of those relationships. This is not to say that suffering always means something is wrong with relationships or wrong with anything else. Such a concept would be a subtle hedonism again. In fact, there is much of benefit in suffering, both physical and emotional. It may have all sorts of divine purposes and meanings, from refining one’s Christianity to understanding more fully Christ’s Atonement. Eliminating this type of suffering would mean, in effect, eliminating a crucial part of God’s relationship with Christian families, preventing vital experience that allows human beings to draw closer to him, rely on him, and trust his judgment in dealing with their problems. Suffering, then, can be necessary and good in a relational center for family values.

Relativism and Relationism. A family centered on relativism may be the easiest to distinguish from a God-centered family. Because God stands for particular moral actions, which Christ clearly expressed and exemplified, God would not, as relativism implies, consider all actions to be morally equivalent. Identifying the moral ground for these actions becomes complicated, though, when one can no longer refer to a set of principles for answers to all moral questions. If God did not intend Christians to center their families on moral principles, how can Christians stand against relativism?

From a relational perspective, Christian families are to stand against relativism by making God their moral ground. Moral principles are always one step removed from God, because they are not God himself. Why center one’s life on commandments when the Commander is available for consultation? As Christians make decisions about their families and formulate important relationships, they do not ultimately have to consult a code, a principle, or even a hypothetical consideration of “what Christ would have done.” Such actions may invite and help people to move toward God, but Christians miss the mark if they substitute these codes, principles, or hypotheticals for a direct relationship with him. Christians can consult God himself—through prayer that facilitates “direct conversation” with him, through study of the light he sheds in scripture, and through observation of his continuing activity in the Christian community.
Christians fight relativism, not with a moral system, but with a relationship. This relationship is not a romantic one in which a family “falls in love” with God. It is best understood as a family relationship with God as the head of the family. Such a relationship can give families perspective, provide them with inspiration, fill them with love, and help them to know the truth in any given moment or circumstance. Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” and Emmanuel Levinas’s “authentic relationship with the Other” are examples of conceptions that have some consonance with relationism.23

This relational center must surely be good news for Christian parents, who are saddled with a difficult responsibility in today’s society. It is perhaps this kind of burden that led Christ to say, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). With a relationship to God, parents are no longer solely responsible for their children’s happiness or obedience to a set of moral principles—including those of the relativist. The good news is that Christian parents are not alone in leading their families. In fact, part of being a Christian parent is pointing consistently and continually to the real family Leader. Parents still have responsibilities and must lead, to be sure, but their leadership and responsibilities lie with their responsiveness to God’s leadership and their facilitation of their children’s relationship to their Lord. Christian parents love, for example, not because they are tolerant (as in relativism) or because a moral principle says they should (as in moralism), or because love provides them a reward (as in hedonism). Christian parents love because they are responsive to their own loving relationship with God (1 John 3:16).

There is a type of relativism implicit in this responsiveness, though it contrasts sharply with the relativist center described above. Because God is available to families in their unique and changing situations, he takes the current situation into account when he answers people’s queries and intervenes on their behalf. In other words, the moral grounding of God is always relative to the context in which Christian families find themselves. God is part of this context. With his help, the Christian family can know—without need of translation or application—what is right and what is wrong. This type of relativism, then, is more in the category of relationalism, since it implies that all actions are not morally equivalent. Contrary to the value center of relativism, there is a right and a wrong—or several rights and wrongs, given a particular history, context, and relationship. Further, a relational center also means that a judgment is required and that some things—the wrong things—should not be tolerated.

What do Christians do, then, with the ideas of tolerance and judgment? Actually, these are not atemporal concepts in themselves. Rather, the crucial point is who is to decide what is tolerated and how judgments are to be rendered. Put this way, the “who” is obvious for the Christian—ultimately God is to decide. However, it is easy, as all Christians know, to
Values of Christian Families

insert themselves into this decision-making process and either eliminate God’s contribution or assign it a secondary status. In this sense, charity and humility are necessary in all relationships with others, because God may give different guidance to different individuals, even within a particular community. Again, this does not mean that there is no right or wrong, but rather that different parts of a community may complement one another in becoming the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27).

Summary

I have described four centers for family values, both in general terms and in the context of Christianity, a religion that has historically been highly attendant to the family values issue. Even in this latter religious context, however, where the Judeo-Christian moral tradition would seem to be especially strong, two secular philosophies—modernism and postmodernism—figure prominently in core family values.24 Each of these two philosophies has lent its own particular meaning to the moral systems involved, and each has influenced a surprising number of Christian families. Consequently, the important political and religious debate that is now occurring in regard to family values requires some knowledge of both philosophies. Christians in this debate may need to pay particular attention to the possibility that only a relational center for family values creates the space necessary for a specifically God-centered outcome. The other three—hedonism, moralism, and relativism—lead to an unrecognized idolatry where Christians are drawn away from God, who should be the source of their values.

Brent D. Slife is Professor of Psychology at Brigham Young University.


3. Although hedonism is connected here to modernist understandings of science and nature (and thus the Enlightenment), the doctrine of hedonism can be discerned in numerous sources—from ancient to medieval—that precede these understandings.

11. There is some debate about whether the relativism described here is truly postmodern. Some researchers would consider the acceptance of the atemporality of truth inherent in this relativistic position to be making essentially the same foundational assumptions as the modernist position (for example, James E. Faulconer and Richard N. Williams, “Temporality in Human Action: An Alternative to Positivism and Historicism,” American Psychologist 40 no. 11 [1985]: 1182–83). Although I basically agree with this view, I adopt the more conventional tack of considering this form of relativism and historicism to be a conceptual branch of postmodernism.
18. Most postmodernists avoid the inside/outside distinction altogether. If there is no metaphysical realm of truth or laws outside of context, then there is no need to designate an inside. I use this language here only to distinguish the postmodern concept of the contextual from the modernist concept of the metaphysical.
19. To Latter-day Saint Christians, the concept of temporal truth may seem to conflict with scriptural descriptions of truth as abiding forever (D&C 1:39, 88:66). However, the discussion of truth in D&C 93 is instructive. Immediately following the definition of truth in verse 24 as “knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come,” verses 26–28 speak of receiving “a fulness of truth” over time, implying the Lord’s recognition that a single understanding of God’s rules cannot apply
through the entire course of an individual's life and progression; as context changes, so does one's "knowledge of things as they are, . . . were, and . . . are to come." Hence the need for continuous revelation, daily scripture study, and regular attention to the oracles of the Lord. Then, in verse 30, it is pointed out that "all truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also." This accords nicely with the relational view of a world full of possibilities, within varying but interconnected contexts, about which moral decisions must constantly be made. Also, it is useful for Latter-day Saints to recognize that the term temporal is not intended to mean "carnal" or "physical," as in Doctrine and Covenants 29:34–35 or 77:2; it is used strictly as the opposite of atemporal and refers only to truth's relationship to a time context.

20. Slife, "Different Discourse Communities."


24. Latter-day Saint Christians may be interested to note that although these centers of family values are linked to philosophies that have become influential in recent times—modernism and postmodernism—they have long been anticipated in Latter-day Saint scripture. The descriptions in 2 Nephi 28:3–10 of churches contending over moral interpretations of scripture, encouraging the pursuit of pleasure, and teaching that God is tolerant of "flexible morality" recall certain characteristics of moralism, hedonism, and relativism, respectively.

In contrast, the classic example of relationalism in Latter-day Saint scripture may be the account in 1 Nephi 4 of Nephi obtaining the brass plates. After observing in verse 6 that he "was led by the spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do," Nephi recorded that he killed Laban, stole his sword and armor, gained access to the plates by impersonating him, deceived and abducted Zoram, and stole the plates—all actions which under normal circumstances would be considered wrong and which Nephi at first resisted (verse 10). The exigencies of the context and the higher purposes of the Lord made them necessary in this instance, although they were forbidden in others.