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Why Do Family Values Matter?

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At the end of May 2017, the 11th World Family Summit took place in Budapest. The four-day mega conference[1] was organized by an American conservative umbrella organization, the World Congress of Families (WCF).[2] It was generously supported by the Hungarian state.[3] The lavish conference was opened by the Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who announced new governmental measures to encourage Hungarian families to have more children and thereby stop long-term population decline. The involvement of politicians and representatives of the main Hungarian churches exemplifies the importance of 'family values' or family centred discourses for both religious and secular power holders.

The pro-nationalism of the current conservative government consists in propagating 'traditional family values' and providing extra financial support for more affluent 'working' families through a 16% flat income-tax credit system. The revised constitution palpably shows what the government means by 'traditional family': "the family shall be…based on the marriage of a man and a woman". As Dorittya Szikra has pointed out, this definition of family not only impedes marriage between same-sex couples but also excludes the large number of cohabiting couples and their children (2014: 494). To establish a 'work-based' economy which relies on strong, property-owning middle-class families, the government also introduced various plans and programmes to provide state subsidies to small and medium-sized enterprises.

While the Hungarian Catholic Church and its institutions are rather 'quiet' on economic and social issues, they have well-formulated opinions on the topics of family, marriage, and relationships. Since 1990, public statements[4] and discourses of the country's dominant Church were dominated by questions concerning the position of families in society, whether the social-political context encourages married couples to have children, whether state institutions and social policies provide adequate financial support for married couples with more than three children, and similar matters.

Sociological studies of values and attitudes toward family and gender roles place Hungary amongst the most conservative countries of Europe, and this in spite of the fact that marriage

is increasingly delayed, that many do not marry at all, and that the divorce rate remains high. As Dupcsik and Tóth point out, "a gap has opened between the real life of families and the attitudes/values shared by the members of these families" (2015: 238). To explain this discrepancy the authors differentiate between 'social familism' and 'ideological familism'. The first refers to institutions, legal regulation, and economic context, which combine to push people to marry and live in families, while the second refers to a set of normative political discourses. These sociologists argue that social familism has its roots in the socialist period, when practices of relying on family members helped to compensate for political and economic uncertainty. Distrust in institutions did not diminish following the regime change in 1990 (2015: 236). From the end of the 1980s this complex social phenomenon was accompanied by ideological familism. For Dupcsik and Tóth, "the 'traditional family'-image is essentially a utopia – but, it has strong relations to reality; (a theoretically) available life-alternative because people could make themselves believe that 'my grandparents lived in such a family' and 'even I could live a similar family if I meet a suitable partner' " (2015: 238).

Chang Kyung-Sup characterises the social process whereby a growing number of people are forced to assume private responsibility for individual and familial livelihoods in the course of state retraction as 'familial liberalism'. As she writes, "in nearly all post-socialist societies, family (and sometimes kin) has been brought back as the main social institution for immediate material survival and, hopefully, long-term prosperity" (2015: 24). Familial liberalism is mainly driven by socio-economic and institutional factors, but it is buttressed by familist ideologies, religious beliefs, and cultural ideas more generally.

Since my research in Szeged was concerned primarily with family businesses, I paid close attention to the entanglements of individual economic considerations, structural constraints, and the ideational background of such businesses.

I met with Adél and her husband Ottó through the Franciscan Church of Szeged where both are active parishioners. For the last three years they have been renting premises from the Church, where they produce artistically natural beauty products – mainly soaps and various creams. As they told me, they had been thinking for a long time about various 'family friendly' solutions to their 'work' dilemmas. Both were university graduates: Adél an archaeologist, working as a researcher for university, and Ottó a classical musician, playing in a well-known symphony orchestra. Nevertheless, Ottó's career required him to spend lot of time abroad and go on tours. He also missed important holidays, such as Christmas, which caused further tensions within the family after they had children. They had to choose between pursuing their professions but living largely apart, and giving up their careers and starting something new which would allow them to live and raise their children together. Having chosen to prioritize their family life, they decided to start a business together. As Ottó came from an

entrepreneurial family, they received advice and learnt practical things from relatives; however, the initial capital to start their business came from a public tender which particularly targeted initiatives such as theirs. Moreover, the idea to launch a well-designed natural beauty product label and to start selling their own products through an internet store was supported from the very beginning by the leading monk of their parish. In fact, in addition to renting their workshop from the Church, they have also contracted to supply numerous Catholic monasteries with their products (mainly soaps). In addition to their joint involvement in the production of the soaps and creams, Adél mainly focuses on the design and marketing of the products while Ottó deals with the bureaucratic aspects of the business.

To me Ottó declared that "the main advantage is that we do this together and that we can raise our children together. With this business, we try to create a decent material life for ourselves and for our children, but at the same time we can spend time together and see each other often. This is how we can *serve each other*."

The phrase "serving each other" has a direct religious and biblical resonance since, according to Christian teachings, people serve God through serving and caring for each other. While the livelihood strategy of this couple was definitely driven by cultural, religious factors, Adel and Ottó were confident that in the course of time their business would grow, and thus by founding their own business they would end up establishing more decent, more 'dignified' living conditions than they would have been able to from wage labour. Their decision to stay in their local community and become self-employed entrepreneurs can be also interpreted as an answer to the growing challenges of the Hungarian labour market and governmental wage and taxation policies, an answer which in this case was ultimately reinforced by the Church and religious teachings.

References

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Notes

[1] The title of the congress – 'Building Family-Friendly Nations: Making Families Great Again' – is a paraphrase of Donald Trump's memorable campaign slogan. The participants of the panels were mainly activists from religious conservative NGOs, think tanks with pro-family and pro-life agendas (and/or, as their critics claim, with anti-LGBT and anti-abortion agendas).

[2] The umbrella organization includes various American right-wing and far-right movements.

[3] https://444.hu/2017/06/06/nagyvonaluan-tamogatta-a-kormany-a-fundamentalista-csaladkonferenciat

[4] http://uj.katolikus.hu/adattar.php?h=10#mag