

## MISCELLANY

### A COMMENT ON "RULES FOR THE RELIGIOUS CONDUCT OF A FAMILY"

Contributed by P. Laslett

The manuscript which is reproduced below consists of one small sheet folded lengthways and written on one side only. The original was found loose in a copy in my possession of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, by John Locke, 5th edition, London, 1705, a small octavo volume. The handwriting could be dated between 1705 and 1730 or 50 and is exceptionally clear and readable. To anyone familiar with opinions about families and the duties of children and servants held at that time, the sentiments expressed are commonplace.

Their interest to readers of this journal who are at all concerned with families and family life at that time is as follows. The authority of the head of the household, here called the family though the word household could have appeared, was not simply secular and economic, but also religious and spiritual. He or she (for widows could be household heads in succession to their husbands since they were parents) was a priest as well as a master or mistress and responsible for the religious life of the children and servants under his or her authority, and no doubt for that of any other persons resident in the household. The priest/master or priest/mistress was here enjoined to ensure that all of them were baptised, although it is assumed that it was virtually only servants, all of whom had entered the household from outside, who were still unbaptised. The point of cardinal significance is that servants are referred to here and everywhere else as in the identical position of children within the family, most decidedly in respect of the duty of obedience to the family head.

The scriptural obligation to obey, not only on the part of children themselves but of all inferiors in respect of their superiors, can likewise be confirmed as a commonplace sentiment and injunction, appearing in innumerable published treatises. This can be confirmed from another volume chosen at random out of the others in my library, published in 1701 by William Nichols, D.D., *The Duty of Inferiours towards their Superiours ... the Duty of Subjects to their Princes ... of Servants to their Masters ... of Wives to their Husbands ... of the Layety to their Pastors*. Here the biblical injunction of the subjection of servants is based on the text in Colossians, 3: 32, and it is vital to the understanding of how society then worked to observe that political obedience, though not expounded in our manuscript, rested on the same basis as familial obedience and was likewise a religious duty. The family head is a 'Prince' and the patriarchalism which is so vigorously rejected in our time is being spelled out in full.<sup>1</sup>

## Rules for the Religious Conduct of a Family.

Every Parent & Master of a Family is both a Prince & a Priest in his own House. God hath invested him with a Sovereignty over his little Society, a Priesthood over his little Flock. And this Dominion is founded in Nature & Reason, & in all those Facts of Scripture, where Children & Servants are enjoined Honour & Obedience towards their Parents & Masters; to whom God has committed the Guidance & Government of 'em, & intrusted the Care both of their Bodies & Souls.

That therefore they may successfully discharge this great Duty incumbent on them, it will be necessary to observe & Practice the following Rules;

1. To bring their Children to Baptism in their Infancy, & dedicate 'em to God in that holy Sacrament. And if they take any Servants into their Household, that were never baptized, to admonish, encourage, & oblige 'em to it, that being born anew of Water & of the Holy Ghost, they may be made Members of Christ, Children of God, & Inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven.
2. To instill good Principles of Religion & Piety into the minds of their Children & Servants; teaching 'em their Catechism; & instructing 'em from time to time in all those Things which every Christian ought to know & believe to his Soul's Health.
3. To keep 'em constantly to a Reading of some Portion of holy Scripture every Day; and if any cannot read, to oblige 'em attentively to listen to those that can; & by familiar Discourse to make the Subject matter of what is read plain & intelligible to their Capacities, & imprint it the deeper into their Minds & Memories.
4. To see that they do constantly every day worship God in devout & solemn Prayer & Praise, to beg

his Blessing & Protection, & to thank him for all his Mercies. And it is highly necessary for every Parent or Master to have Prayers in his Family every Day, Morning & Evening if it may be, but at least once a Day in the Evening, when all meet together; & He, as the most honourable Person to read 'em himself, either out of the Book of Common Prayer, or some other Book of Devotions, & to require every Member of the Family to be present, & join with him therein.

5. To oblige 'em to a strict & religious Observation of the Lord's Day; not to suffer any of 'em to spend it idly, much less to profane it in vain or forbidden Sports & Recreations: but to oblige all w<sup>th</sup> Sickness or necessary Occasions do not detain at home, to attend him to the House of God, & see that they demean themselves there soberly & decently as becomes both the Place & Presence they are in. And after the Publick Service in the Church is ended, to call 'em to an Account of what they remember, to hear 'em read some Portion of Holy Scripture, & to examine & instruct 'em in their Catechism.
6. To rebuke, chastise & punish 'em severely for any Profaneness or Immorality, or vicious Actions; as for Lying & Stealing, Cursing & Swearing, Drunkenness, & filthy or obscene Discourse; for keeping ill Company, or ill Hours at night, or any other Criminal Misbehaviour.
7. To give 'em a good Example in their own Practice.
8. To settle their Children in some useful & lawful Calling, wherein they may honestly employ themselves & be serviceable in their Generation.

But we must not lose sight of the author's particular purpose which is to refer all these obligations to religion and to set down the duties of the master as to catechising, maintenance of morality and settling children in a useful calling. These injunctions might persuade us that the author, almost certainly a pastor himself, was a Puritan. But the patriarchal attitude was universal and he could have been any parish priest writing things out for the necessary instruction of his flock. It will be noticed that he provides for the members of his spiritual society not being able to read. Cambridge Group estimates of literacy defined as the ability to sign the marriage register vary between 2 per cent and 22 per cent from Elizabethan to Georgian times for servants, and for women in general from 11 per cent to 25 percent.<sup>2</sup> Most of the reading therefore would have had to be done out loud.

#### NOTES

1. For the patriarchal system see Laslett's edition of Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha and other political works* (Oxford, 1949), the discussion in his essay *The world we have lost – further explored* (London, 1983), and for its prevalence and persistence see J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1685–1832*, (Cambridge, 1985).
2. Laslett, *World we have lost*, 231.