

Motherhood As 24/7 Calling A Cultural Lie We Keep Telling Ourselves

The photo on the March 22 cover of *Time* magazine is designed to tug at the heartstrings. A young boy, standing waist-high to his mother, wraps his arms around her and gazes upward. In a comforting gesture, she cradles his head in her hand. The headline: "The Case for Staying Home: Why more young moms are opting out of the rat race."

The magazine cover exploits a cultural lie that may be harmful to mother, father and child, says Vanderbilt Divinity School's Bonnie Miller-McLemore.

"In the last couple of centuries, the culture has portrayed children as innocent and fragile and in desperate need of full-time, attentive adult care," said Miller-McLemore. "I think this cover plays to this (idea)."

Sure, humans are dependent on care longer than any other species, but only recently and only in white society has that responsibility been placed solely on mothers and only in very recent times has childcare been seen as a 24-hour job for mothers, she argues.

The article makes it clear that "we're talking about white upper- and middle-class women," said Miller-McLemore, who is the mother of three children. "We certainly don't make a case for black mothers on welfare to stay home with their kids."

The white context is hard to miss on the *Time* cover. Mother and child are fair-skinned Caucasians. Both are dressed completely in white and photographed against a white background.

In the cover story, *Time* quotes from a book by Susan Douglas, a professor of communications studies at University of Michigan, and Meredith Michaels, a philosophy teacher at Smith College, on a phenomenon they label "New Momism."

They write that our culture insists

that "'to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children.' It's a standard of success that's 'impossible to meet,' they argue. But that sure doesn't stop women from trying."

That statement presumes that women have incomes high enough to even consider full-time devotion to their children, said Miller-McLemore. More importantly, it raises questions of whether full-time motherhood is healthy—either psychologically or spiritually—for the child, the mother or the other partner.

The flipside of a full-time, 24/7 mom is an almost absent dad. The husband in *Time's* real-life example

shaped how we regard both gender roles and obligations within the family. Ever since the Reformation, "there's been a sort of compulsion to dictate the Christian family around select scriptural texts that are taken as definitive," said Miller-McLemore.

Passages in Ephesians, Colossians and Timothy provide an impression of male headship—men over wives, parents over children, master over slave. While these passages have been critiqued and rejected for what they say about slavery, they are today under scrutiny for what they say about family relationships.

Such ideas were common in Jewish and Greek culture, but the Christian spin on them softens the

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leaves home at 5:30 a.m., presumably for 10-12 hours at the office.

"How good is that for him and how good is that for the children?" asks Miller-McLemore. "What does it say about (children's) perceptions of men and women and their private and public responsibilities? We don't realize we're forming children, not only their emotional relationships, but their vision of justice and love by how we parent."

Miller-McLemore's work has involved a recovery of the complexity and richness of childhood and a respect for the capacities of children and their ability to participate fully in life.

The Christian tradition has long

concept of patriarchy, argued Miller-McLemore and her co-authors in *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*.

That men and women are asked to submit to Christ's love—and that children, slaves and wives are addressed at all—emerged with Christianity, said Miller-McLemore. Still, the "household codes" of the New Testament leave men in charge.

"People today might not even think that they're influenced by those types of religious ideals and mandates, but I think we are still largely (affected), whether we read these Scriptures or not," she said.

But that's not the only ideal for



Bonnie Miller-McLemore

gender relationships presented in the Bible. New Testament theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has argued that the early Christian

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community was an attempt to live beyond such strident divisions as men over women and master over slave. The book of Galatians presents a Christ in which there is no male or female, no slave or free.

"There are passages that indicate that this was a radical community that challenged some of the ways that hierarchy and status were established in that early period," said Miller-McLemore. "That's part of the Christian tradition as well, to critique various forms of domination and oppression."

The concept of the 24/7 mom who neglects herself to sacrifice for her children is often seen as a reflection of Christ's sacrifice on the

cross, but that is not the only way Christianity has understood love, said Miller-McLemore. The alternative tradition of mutual love emphasizes care for each other and is embedded in the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself.

"What I see in this picture (in *Time*) and this article are a re-enactment of this selfless, unconditional loving mother which is just a fiction," said Miller-McLemore. "If it's so distorted in one direction, it probably doesn't work."

The Christian tradition offers a strong sense of the shared responsibility of caring for children that stands apart from the upper-middle class white trend to focus on the good of one's own child, almost to

the exclusion of all other children, said Miller-McLemore, who is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Christian parents cannot be content to focus solely on getting their child into the best private school or the best after-school sports program, she said. They are called to understand that their child's welfare is ultimately dependent upon how a parent shows the same concern for other people's children.

Using concepts of parental narcissism, psychology has done a better job than theology in helping parents resist another recent trend, said Miller-McLemore. That is the temptation to try to meet their own

needs through their children's successes, she said

As *Time* noted, the rewards are extraordinary for being home when children ask fundamental questions or say remarkable things. But the notion that you need to hover over your kids at all times is extreme, said Miller-McLemore.

It's OK to miss things, she said. Children may benefit from experiences with a variety of adults and vice versa. An ideal Christian community, she said, would provide several parental figures for each child, as generations of African Americans have done. ◀

Bonnie Miller-McLemore is the author of *A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* and *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*. She is a co-author of *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is the Krister Stendahl Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School. Her newest book is *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*.