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Section: Philosophy

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FAMILY RELATIONS IN PROTESTANT COMMUNITIES OF UKRAINE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: CONFESSIONAL NORMS, LEGAL STATUS, AND EVERYDAY PRACTICES

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Family relations in Protestant communities in Ukraine at the beginning of the twentieth century belong to those research topics that for a long time remained on the periphery of church-historical and socio-historical studies. As a result, a key aspect was largely overlooked: the family in these communities was not merely a unit of everyday life but the principal institution for the reproduction of religious doctrine and, at the same time, the most vulnerable point of interaction between the religious community, imperial law, and peasant customary practices [1; 2].

The confessional landscape of the Ukrainian lands was heterogeneous. Lutherans, Reformed Christians, and Mennonites of German and Czech colonies in the South, Volhynia, and Tavria belonged to the recognized “foreign confessions”; they possessed their own consistorial law and maintained metric registers, and therefore their marriages were legally valid. By contrast, Stundists, Baptists, Evangelical Christians, and Seventh-day Adventists, who predominantly originated from Orthodox backgrounds in the Kherson, Kyiv, Katerynoslav, Podolia, and Volhynia regions, were classified as apostates from the established Church. Consequently, it was their families that bore the principal burden of legal restrictions [3].

Prior to 1905, the monopoly of the Orthodox Church over the registration of civil-status acts transformed confessional choice into a matter of family law. A marriage concluded according to a community religious rite had no legal force; children born of such a union were considered illegitimate, with corresponding consequences for inheritance, guardianship, and social-estate status. Administrative practice allowed for the removal of children from their families for the purpose of raising them in the Orthodox faith, as well as for the exile of one of the spouses, which effectively destroyed the household and deprived it of able-bodied members [4]. Polemical

writings by Orthodox missionaries, despite their bias, document these circumstances in considerable detail and therefore remain an important source for reconstructing the everyday life of Protestant communities [5].

The normative model of marriage in late Protestant communities rested on several principles. The first was confessional endogamy: marriage was to be contracted “in the Lord,” that is, with a fellow believer. Violation of this requirement entailed disciplinary measures, including admonition, suspension from communion, and, in extreme cases, exclusion from membership, with the possibility of subsequent restoration following repentance. The second principle was the voluntary nature of marriage and the mutual consent of the prospective spouses, which contradicted the widespread peasant practice of arranged marriages. Parental blessing remained a norm but lost its coercive character. The third principle was a restrictive interpretation of the grounds for divorce, which was permitted only in exceptional circumstances and was accompanied by prolonged communal consideration [6].

Community disciplinary control was not merely a repressive mechanism. It performed a function that customary morality fulfilled in the peasant environment, but it was based on a written norm and a formal procedure for consideration at members’ meetings. Consequently, marital conflicts, cases of alcoholism, violence, or neglect of household responsibilities became subjects of collective discussion rather than strictly private matters. Such publicity of intra-family relations constitutes one of the most distinctive differences between the Protestant family and the traditional family model [6].

Church wedding as a sacrament was rejected; instead, a prayer rite of marital blessing became established within the congregation, with the participation of a presbyter, accompanied by a sermon, hymn singing, and religious instruction. The traditional wedding ritual cycle was significantly reduced: alcohol, the ceremonial bride-price, divination, and other practices regarded as pagan in origin were excluded. The temperance wedding became a distinctive marker of communal identity and, at the same time, an object of ridicule and disapproval among neighbors [5].

The position of women in Protestant families was characterized by an internal contradiction. The doctrinal requirement of a wife’s submission to her husband coexisted with practices that objectively expanded women’s autonomy. The requirement of independent Bible reading stimulated female literacy in an environment where it was uncommon; women’s meetings, charitable activities, and deaconal work created a separate sphere of female activity; and women’s testimonies during congregational meetings legitimized their public speech. At the same time, access to the presbyterial ministry remained closed to women, while normative texts consistently reinforced the hierarchy of marital roles [2].

The economic dimension also deserves attention. Abstinence from alcohol and tobacco, restrictions on expenditure related to ceremonial practices, regular labor, and thrift produced a noticeable economic effect, which was recorded even by unfriendly observers. These practices affected the intra-family distribution of resources: a greater proportion of household funds was directed toward children’s education, the

acquisition of books, and improvements to housing. Material prosperity, in turn, became an additional factor contributing to the missionary appeal of Protestant communities among the peasant population [4].

The religious socialization of children was shaped by the rejection of infant baptism. Since membership in the community was acquired through conscious baptism at an age approaching adulthood, responsibility for religious upbringing rested primarily with the family. A stable set of practices emerged: daily family Bible reading, joint prayer, hymn singing, memorization of biblical passages, the father's role as a religious instructor, and, subsequently, Sunday schools and separate children's meetings. Studies of later periods demonstrate considerable continuity of this model, making it possible to regard it as a stable confessional tradition rather than a situational response to external circumstances [9].

Adventist families displayed additional distinctive features. Sabbath observance structured the weekly rhythm of the household, requiring advance planning of work and preparation, while health reform influenced dietary practices and daily routines. In this way, religious doctrine regulated not only festive occasions but also the everyday aspects of family life, intensifying conflicts with the agricultural calendar and with employers [1].

Mennonite families in the German colonies of southern Ukraine require separate consideration. Here, the family functioned as an economic unit of the colony, while family relations were regulated by a developed system of internal law: communal control over marriage arrangements, a system of guardianship for widows and orphans, and regulated procedures for the inheritance and division of property. These institutions ensured demographic and property stability while simultaneously increasing the dependence of the individual on the community [10]. The liquidation legislation of 1915, deportations, and wartime requisitions destroyed this equilibrium and initiated the process of mass emigration in the following decade [2].

Mixed-confessional families constituted a separate problematic category. The conversion of one spouse transformed a private family conflict into a matter subject to the intervention of parish clergy, the rural community, and the administration. Sources document cases involving divorce, disputes over the religious affiliation of children, attempts to force converts to return to Orthodoxy, as well as instances in which confessional differences became grounds for deprivation of property [3]. After 1905, some of these conflicts shifted from the criminal and administrative spheres into the sphere of civil, inheritance, and guardianship disputes. This transition itself indicates a change in the legal status of the Protestant family.

The revolutionary events of 1917 and the introduction of civil registration of civil-status acts ultimately eliminated confessional discrimination in marriage law, although they also subordinated the family to a new ideological framework. In the western Ukrainian lands that became part of Poland, development followed a different trajectory: Evangelical communities operated under conditions of relative legal certainty and developed their own educational and publishing infrastructure, which was largely oriented toward the family and the upbringing of children [6].

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