



BOOK REVIEW MARCH 27, 2024

## Breeding Immortal Beings

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What motivates an educated woman to have seven children?

**T**HERE IS A FAMOUS STORY ABOUT ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE, which kept drifting into my mind as I read Catherine Ruth Pakaluk's new book, *Hannah's Children*. Anscombe was an Oxford professor, a high-profile analytic philosopher, and also a mother of seven. People sometimes had opinions about that, and the story goes that she came into her classroom one day (pregnant with her seventh) to find that some mean-spirited troll had written the words "ANSCOMBE BREEDS" on her chalkboard. Calmly, without apparent embarrassment, she picked up the chalk and added two words. "ANSCOMBE BREEDS IMMORTAL BEINGS."

Pakaluk, too, has bred immortal beings, more even than Anscombe. Hers is the latest in a string of significant books on sex, marriage, and family structure, but it stands out from the rest. Instead of pondering why people *don't* have many children anymore (a now-familiar reality), Pakaluk asks why some still *do*.

As a mother of eight, she already knows something about this, but she supplements her own experiences by interviewing more than 50 other American women, all educated and mothers of five or more kids. She knows of course that these women are a smallish minority, breaking the trends. But she sees them as a *creative* minority in more ways than one. Their outlook might be instructive. If we want people to have more babies, learning from the positive examples sounds like a good idea.

Named for the Biblical Hannah (though one of her interviewees bears the same name), the book is frequently moving and sometimes searing. Pakaluk presents her findings in a plain and unadorned fashion, allowing readers plenty of space to draw their own conclusions. In the end though, the book unflinchingly illustrates a point that many pro-natalists prefer to downplay. Raising kids is expensive and hard. That's probably why more people don't do it. Women only choose to have large families if they value children enough to make the hardship and sacrifice seem worth it.

### **Real Choices, Real Costs**

The mothers Pakaluk interviewed had some predictable commonalities. They generally liked kids, for instance. They also liked God. A wide range of religious traditions were represented in the book, but nearly all of Pakaluk's interviewees discussed their faith and its impact on their life choices. This is, on one level, familiar territory for anyone who follows the "birth dearth" conversation: educated women tend to have fewer children, but *religious* educated women often buck the trend. But the reasons aren't always clear, and Pakaluk's findings may be surprising to readers on both left and right.

Progressive liberals might expect to hear a lot about religious patriarchs or religious dogma. Those were hardly mentioned. Conservatives might

expect matrons of large families to talk about youthful socialization and the values of their natal communities. Perhaps these women were taught as girls to aspire to maternity, view homemaking as their central vocation, and spurn the careerism of modern feminism. I suspect that *would* have been a component of the conversation if the parameters of the study had been expanded to include women without college degrees. But it really wasn't the story here. The women in Pakaluk's study hadn't spent their youthful years ironing and dreaming of babies, nor did they necessarily find deep fulfillment in quilting, cooking, and spreading pretty tablecloths. People might like those things or not, but women today don't have eight children because hearth-and-home just feels like their niche. The impact of religious conviction is more subtle and complex than that: it doesn't change the basic spread of costs and benefits associated with childbearing, but it guides people's calculations as to what risks are worth taking, and what sacrifices and struggles are likeliest to pay off.

In short: it's about *the children*. This is the simple, compelling truth that shines through Pakaluk's book. Women have large families because they come to appreciate that children are a tremendous good, justifying the immense pain and sacrifice that they cost their parents. No other social contribution has the same significance; no other pursuit is quite as meaningful. As one woman explains succinctly: "Nothing (else) is as good."

Still, the costs remain very high, especially for mothers themselves. The stories of this book make that clear, and though it did occur to me that the overall effect might be a *bit* sanitized (because some of the darker costs of maternity may be too personal to share), they covered a lot. Some mothers faced medical crises, while others teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. They gave up businesses and careers that they loved. They worked insane hours to keep the wheels on, financially and domestically. They stared down friends and relatives who thought they were crazy, and wondered privately whether they *might*, in fact, go crazy.

What kept them on track through all of this was unshaken conviction about the tremendous value of what they were doing. No temperament, life situation, or lifestyle preference distinguishes large-family matrons, and even religious convictions are far from *dispositive*. But all of

Pakaluk's subjects believed that as mothers, they were "breeding immortal beings," and that the sacrifices were worth it even when they were extremely hard.

Women who have many children see maternity as a high-risk and high-reward endeavor, an ambitious-but-potentially-thrilling life project. It's not merely the successful realization of a "lifestyle preference," and treating it that way only patronizes the people pronatalists should most want to lionize.

One related point that emerges from this book (highlighted by several of Pakaluk's interviewees) is that some women set their sights on a large family partly *because* the buy-in for maternity is so high. For educated women especially, the highest costs associated with maternity are not direct, but rather opportunity-related. A baby is so demanding that other cherished dreams often have to be tabled or jettisoned completely just to meet his basic needs. This is painful. But once that heavy price has been paid, a mother naturally wants a good return on her investment. A houseful of children, in *this* sense at least, may not cost much more than one.

This point very much resonated with me. Like many of the educated women in this book, I was fairly miserable across my first year of motherhood, grappling with the reality that most of the things that I liked, excelled at, and found personally rewarding had been summarily removed from my life, replaced by a new list of responsibilities that I found tedious, unrewarding, and ill-fitted to my talents. Housekeeping never grew on me (even fifteen years later!), and it was hard to see a realistic prospect of ever returning to my old life as an academic philosopher. It's somewhat unpleasant to recall my first year of maternity; it mostly seems to be shrouded in gloom. There was however *one* bright spot: my actual baby. The day-to-day of an at-home mom held no appeal, but I *was* rather fond of my son.

If you're unhappy with your life as a mother, having *more* babies might seem crazy, but it actually kind of makes sense. "Go big or go home" may not be the optimal phrasing here, but that is the core idea. I paid a massive price for that first baby, and I felt it. But that cost was effectively

sunk. If that's your situation, why *would* you stop at one? You might just as well have five! (I do in fact have five.)

### **Religious Freedom as Pronatal Policy**

Pakaluk is unusual among conservative pro-natalists, in that she is largely dismissive of public policy as a mechanism for raising birth rates. No handout or daycare center, she argues, can make much of a dent in the massive costs (especially opportunity costs) that children entail. This argument is primarily explored in Pakaluk's final chapter, but it's such an *unusual* feature of her thought that it has attracted considerable attention from critics.

Proponents of family policy argue that pro-natal policies are not actually meant to *persuade* women to have children, but only to *help* them have the children they already say that they want. Closing the gap between women's "desired fertility" and the number of children they actually have has been the focus of conservative pro-natalist strategizing for some time, and this kind of makes sense. American women do at least claim to *want* more children than women in many other parts of the world, so perhaps that's an advantage we can leverage in some way. We obviously can't pay parents enough to make raising children profitable (nor would we really want people to procreate for that reason), but if people aren't having kids they say they want, perhaps state programs could tip the balance.

As with all debates about social goals and public policy, an implicit question stands in the background: What *else* are we supposed to do? Pronatalism is expensive and its gains heretofore have been quite modest, but public policy is the only tool that sits ready to hand. Can we afford to do *nothing*, and just pray for a religious revival?

Pakaluk suggests in her final pages that the defense of religious liberty is the only effective family policy. Free the temple! Very few people on the right will oppose this plan, but as a solution to falling birth rates, it seems rather diffuse. Is there really *nothing* more that can be done to prevent demographic collapse? We should keep in mind here that a few Asian countries (notably Taiwan and South Korea) now have birth rates *below*

*one child per woman.* It's appalling to think what that could mean for the futures of those societies. Maybe it's worth trying some public policy solutions even if we aren't sure they can work.

These are hard questions, but I think Pakaluk's study can help us to reframe the conversation about pro-natal policy in useful ways, whether or not we give up on pro-natal programs. She brings to the table an essential insight, namely, the key to encouraging fecundity is not a low cost of entry, nor the kind of superficial messaging that assures women that family life will suit them, but an increased appreciation for the tremendous goods that can follow from it. Women who have many children see maternity as a high-risk and high-reward endeavor, an ambitious-but-potentially-thrilling life project. It's not merely the successful realization of a "lifestyle preference," and treating it that way only patronizes the people pronatalists should most want to lionize.

Considering the matter from this point of view, it makes sense that the gap between "desired" and actual fertility would be hard to close. Many people "want" more children than they actually have, but what does that really mean? [More than 80%](#) of Americans say they want to write a book one day. [A sizable percentage](#) have considered running for office. Is anyone confused as to why the great majority don't follow through? Given a choice, people frequently pass on difficult-but-optional life projects.

Sometimes they don't though, and especially in an age when young people are hungry for meaning, and often *looking* for worthwhile-but-achievable life goals, it might be worth making Pakaluk's pitch more broadly. Parenthood is an epic adventure in its own right. Maybe *that's* the truth we need our young people to see. But if that *is* the goal, there might be certain tensions with the line of reasoning that runs, "People want more kids anyway, so maybe they'll have them if we help them out with a down payment on a minivan." It may also just be an unavoidable truth that aggressive efforts to raise birth rates through redistribution will tend to create dependency traps, diminishing the respect people feel for mothers. State programs always have ramifications beyond those that were originally intended, and self-sufficiency is something Americans tend to value.

Despite all this, it could be that pro-natal benefits are ultimately necessary and worthwhile. Developed societies are still working through the implications of falling birth rates, assessing their real options. But as we continue to explore those questions, it's important not to lose sight of the basic underlying issue. Why don't modern people have more kids? *Because it's hard.*

Pakaluk has her eyes set firmly on that truth, and her book can help readers acknowledge and digest it while still celebrating the tremendous good that a child represents. Pronatalist conservatives need this book, which will hopefully infuse more nuance into their conversation. Breeding immortal beings is no joke. To persuade more people to do it, we need to convince them that raising a family is honorable, aspirational, and worthy of sacrifice. We can do hard things! *Hannah's Children* offers a glimpse of what it takes, and why it's worth it.



REVIEWED

## *Hannah's Children*

by Catherine Ruth Pakaluk

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