



ADOPTION AFTER ALTRUISM

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Vietnam, Marshall Islands, Russia, Nepal, Guatemala, Vietnam again. For those who follow the world of international adoption, they have seen history repeat itself in country after country and sometimes even within the same country. A country opens to international adoption, the number of international adoptions soars leading to an increase in unethical practices, in turn leading to a shut-down in international adoptions.

As the father of two internationally adopted children, I have little patience left for the altruistic picture that is so often painted of international adoption—hopeless children destined to live as orphans or in third-world poverty so generously adopted by individuals who will provide a better life for them. Adoption agencies perpetuate the picture, adoptive parents are manipulated by it, and the children are silent third parties. Sadly, when it comes to international adoption, no one speaks for the children.

People who find out that I am an adoptive parent often say, with the best intentions, “Your girls are so lucky.” While I understand the point of the statement, it is based on that altruistic image, not reality. A “lucky child” would be one where there would be no need for adoption because the biological parents would have the resources and a sufficiently positive situation in life so that they would be able to raise the child themselves. There are no children who are winners in international adoption, only children who have been given a chance to make something better out of a bad situation.

Often lost in this altruistic adoption image is the importance of biological ties. Studies of older adoptive children bear this out.¹ Yet again, in the world of international adop-

tion, little is generally known about the biological parents, leaving children with little to no sense of their own history unless the adoptive parents make an extraordinary effort at least to connect the child with the birth culture. A second problem with the altruistic image of international adoption is that it is too easy to manipulate the needs of children into unethical behavior on the part of adults, done in the name of the “greater good.” Once again the children in need suffer silently.

One does not have to search too far on the internet to find “gay adoption-friendly” websites which describe how to “get around” the regulations which limit adoptions to heterosexual couples or singles.² A common approach is to have one member of the gay couple file as a single parent, and then both individuals readopt the child as a

couple once they are back in the United States. But in order to facilitate this adoption, the couple needs to either omit information on their homestudy (the required document which describes the home life the child will have, securing state approval for adoption), or

else outright lie on the document by claiming that no one besides the single adoptive parent lives in the house (even though all adults who live in the house are required by law to have a criminal and child abuse background check as a part of the homestudy). The altruistic argument goes like this: “We know what the country’s laws are, but isn’t it better for this child to be in a loving home than suffering in an orphanage?”

The problem with such a question is that it immediately denies the cultural morés of the child’s birth culture. The very act of this unethical type of adoption severs the rights

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of the members of child's culture to determine how that child will be raised. The argument that "it was illegal, but we did it for your own good," is bound to create problems as the adoptive child grows into an adult. Even worse, it has caused countries like China to impose additional restrictions on who can adopt, such as limiting the number of single adoptive parents, in an attempt to close the loopholes. In the

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end a gay couple rescues "their child," but other orphanage-bound children have a longer wait for their "rescue" as the process becomes even more complex.

Sadly, agencies unethically assisting homosexuals seeking to adopt where they are not legally allowed have not been the worst violators of ethics in international adoption. That dubious distinction goes to many so-called Christian adoption agencies. Most of the great scandals in the international adoption world over the last few years have been perpetrated by religious agencies (both Mormon and Christian)³ who were willing to bend or break the rules of a country, through bribery, coercion, and other attempts to circumvent in-country safeguards for the children, all in an effort to rescue "God's children." The altruistic attitude here is that the Christian agency knows better than a secular government what a child needs. What matters in the end is not how the adoption occurs, but that these "helpless children" find good Christian homes, where they will be much better off than in the care of the state. In some instances the act of adoption is seen

not only as physically rescuing a child, but also of rescuing the child's soul for salvation.

While the agencies may be the ones who provide the means for facilitating unethical adoptions, it is those parents who buy into the altruistic picture of adoption that drive the whole unethical process. It is hard to blame them. Many parents, already devastated by the news that they are unable to have children biologically, quickly fall in love with pictures or descriptions of children available for adoption in other countries. Once matched with a specific child, it is easy for Christian would-be parents to begin to believe that, since God did not allow us to have biological children, then the adoption of this child was meant to be.

But what is that adoptive parent to do when an agency asks them to bring large amounts of money (in cash) to pay an in-country facilitator (without a receipt)?⁴ Or if the adoptive parents are asked to lie about which agency they work with?⁵ Or when irregularities are discovered about the relinquishment of the adoptive child and there is doubt as to whether the child was truly orphaned?⁶ Or when it is discovered that the child has been illegally brought to the United States for the purpose of being put up for adoption?⁷ These questions may be easy to answer before the process begins, but after waiting months for the adoption to go through, and investing tens of thousands of dollars in the adoption, and coming so close to the dream of parenthood, sometimes it is easier just to look the other way, especially knowing that the good end, whatever the means, is helping a child to escape the poverty of an orphanage.

Ultimately, the current system for international adoption is broken. Despite recent attempts, like the Hague Adoption Convention,⁸ to safeguard the rights of children, abuses and corruption in international adoption are still far too common, as can be seen in the recent ethics-related shutdowns of international adoptions in Guatemala and Vietnam. It should not be

surprising that corruption is going to happen when emotionally vulnerable adoptive parents get caught up in a billion-dollar adoption industry.⁹ Systemic failures are built into the process. For example, adoptive parents directly pay the individuals who do their homestudies and have been known to move to another agency or sue¹⁰ if their homestudy approval is denied. If word gets out that a particular homestudy provider scrutinizes too much, that agency will lose business and clients will go elsewhere.

None of this is to say that international adoption is not necessary. In our world broken by sin, in which broken families and broken people often find themselves in need, there will always be a need for adoption. But it should not continue to happen through a broken system. Greater concern needs to be given to the needs of the child, as determined by the child's birth culture. Greater respect needs to be paid to the child's birth culture by adoptive parents; the adoption of children can make them part of an ethnically different family, but it does not change their own ethnicity.¹¹ There is not, nor should there be, an automatic right of adoption for every individual. Greater scrutiny needs to be given to adoptive

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parents by a system that is not tainted by financial conflict of interest. A centralized U.S. Adoption Authority ought to be implemented, taking the responsibility from the hands of individual states which often are not in communication with one another.¹²

Caught in the middle of the adoption crisis are church-related social service agencies that often are forced to choose between their own ethical

standards and being able to facilitate the adoption of children in need. A recent mandate by the state of Massachusetts, legislating that adoption agencies may not take into account a prospective adoptive parent's sexual orientation, caused Catholic Social Services of Boston to shut down their adoption program rather than compromise their ethical standards. Is this really best for "children in need"?¹³

The Missouri Synod, in a similar move at its 2007 convention, passed a resolution that strongly encourages social service agencies of the church to remain faithful to a biblical model of family when placing children (i.e., married heterosexual couples should get preference).¹⁴ While such declarations may be seen as a positive first step, they only address a small part of the issue of ethics in adoption. The crisis is not caused primarily, or even significantly, by homosexual adoptive parents. As such, it is important for the church to move beyond simply opposing adoption into homosexual families, and to begin advocating for adoptions that are done ethically with the best interests of the child at heart. Such an approach will not simply focus on the sexuality of the adoptive parents, but also their appreciation and respect for the culture from which their adoptive child comes, and their willingness to incorporate that culture into their own family's traditions. It will demand transparency in the adoption process on the part of governments and agencies. Ultimately, it will shatter the altruistic myth of adoption, which makes unethical manipulation far too easy, in favor of an understanding that adoption is a tragic necessity, coupled with a commitment to social service that seeks to eliminate the factors that make adoption necessary at all. *LF*

Notes

1. See, for example, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute's extensive study on adult Korean adoptees at www.adoptioninstitute.org/proced/korfindings.html, accessed October 25, 2008.

2. To my knowledge, there are no countries open to international adoption that allow

gay couples to adopt. The state of Florida has explicitly forbidden homosexuals to adopt.

3. Legacy Adoptions of Utah (with Mormon connections) was sanctioned in 2007 for illegally facilitating Marshall Islands adoptions. Focus on Children in Utah was shut down in 2007 for illegal adoption practices in Samoa. Among other things they were falsely promising biological parents that the children they were giving up for adoption would be returned to them. It was not until a child in their care died that their unethical practices were exposed. Tragically, as a result, Samoan adoptions are no longer happening. Adoption Blessings Worldwide (Christian) was shut down by the state of Georgia in 2008 after numerous failed adoptions and accusations of deceptive practice. While families left without children and swindled out of tens of thousands of dollars tried to make sense of the terrible experience, ABW's director was quoted as saying, "I've been praying that God give [me] direction in regards to the future... with Adoption Blessings Worldwide."

4. As was common practice in Russia and other east European adoptive countries.

5. Again, this was common practice in both Russia and Vietnam, as many agencies that were not licensed to do adoptions in these countries would nevertheless illegally perform adoptions in Russia under the "umbrella" of another agency. This practice came crashing down when the main facilitator of the "umbrellaing" process, AMREX, filed for bankruptcy, leaving a number of adoption agencies, including at least one branch of Lutheran Social Services, with clients whose adoptions they could not fill after having taken their money.

6. This became an issue this year in a number of Vietnam adoptions which led the U.S. embassy in Vietnam to further scrutinize a number of adoption visa applications. The result was a widespread outcry by adoptive parents who were upset that the processing of their adoptions was being delayed, rather than being grateful that they could be certain that their prospective child was truly orphaned.

7. This is a particular problem with Marshall Islands adoptions, where biological mothers are illegally flown over to the United States, in order to give birth to a child who is then automatically a U.S. citizen. In one particularly egregious case, Legacy Adoption in Utah was found to be operating what the Marshall Islands government described as a "sweatshop" of pregnant Marshallese mothers who had been falsely promised that their children would be returned to them in the Marshall Islands when they grew older. Here, again, adoptive parents inexplicably defended Legacy Adoptions for helping them to find their "forever child."

8. See www.hcch.net/index_en.php, accessed October 25, 2008.

9. The amount of money that changes hands in international adoption has also led to

instances of governmental corruption, particularly in third-world countries like Guatemala, where a government employee can make far more money in a few adoption kickback fees than in a whole year at a civil service job. The problem also occurs in Vietnam and China where orphanage directors have been accused of placing non-orphaned children for adoption, either under governmental pressure to provide children for adoption or in return for adoption-related fees that are necessary for the ongoing operation of the orphanage. See www.research-china.blogspot.com/2008/10/what-are-problems-in-china.html, accessed October 25, 2008.

10. Lutheran Social Services of Southern Illinois is one such agency that has been sued. In *Cade vs. LSSSI* the agency was sued for, among other things, denying approval for an adoption based on information that they had discovered about the prospective adoptive parents, and then releasing that information to the prospective adoptive parent's new homestudy provider. Under law, that information should have been kept confidential. In other words, even though LSSSI had information indicating that the prospective adoptive parent should not be approved, it was still not allowed to share it with another homestudy agency! Case 2006CH147 in Williamson County, Illinois Judicial Court.

11. One of the most tragic quotations from the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute's survey of adult Korean adoptees is this one: "Many of us were from the same orphanages. Many of us came over on the same flights. Many of us were adopted into predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon communities, many rural. Many of us considered ourselves white trapped in Asian bodies."

12. Amazingly, while under investigation for fraudulent adoption practices, Tedi Bear Adoptions in Florida chose to relinquish its Florida license in 2003 before it was shut down. As a result of it not being shut down by the state of Florida, it was able to reopen in Georgia under the name Adoption Blessings Worldwide, where it continued its unethical practices before finally being shut down in the summer of 2008.

13. See www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2006/03/11/catholic_charities_stuns_state_ends_adoptions, accessed October 25, 2008.

14. See the 2007 LCMS convention resolution 6-03A: "To care for foster and adoptive children in a pure and undefiled way," www.lcms.org/ca/2007_convention/proceedings/143-148.pdf, accessed October 25, 2008.