From the seventies, the number of divorces in Belgium has increased. The consequence of this fact is that more and more children live with parents who are divorced. For example, about one in five children seventeen years old and younger live with separated parents. For this reason it is necessary that research be done on the impact of a parental divorce on the life of the child, not only sociologically, but also concerning the portrayal of humans, the worldview and the image of God. A parent’s divorce not only has an influence on the children’s doings, but also on their thinking about and view of people, the world and God. In this article I will treat two questions: How does a parental divorce influence a child’s portrayal of humans, his or her worldview and religious life?, and How should we look at and handle children with divorced parents? To answer these two questions adequately, I will first discuss the research of Elizabeth Marquardt.

1. The Research of Elizabeth Marquardt

Elizabeth Marquardt is the author of the book *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce.* This book is based on the results of her national United States study on the effects of a divorce on the life of a child. In this book she tries to answer the question: If your parents love you and they get along reasonably well with each other, why is their divorce still so wrenching for the child? In this book Marquardt wants to show that a child after the divorce of his/her parents can be successful, but the child will still always suffer from divorce. Not only immediately after the divorce but also years afterwards, children can experience problems related to the divorce of their parents. Her opinion is that each child of divorced parents carries an impact of this divorce, even though they may seem fine at first sight. Marquardt locates the impact of divorce especially at the inner level of the child. There are consequences on the social world, the notions and feelings, the ethical thinking and the religious life of the child.

Marquardt states that a divorce can never be good, because a child always will experience a negative impact of the divorce. She reacts against the term “good divorce” – an amicable divorce after which the children stay in contact with both parents and families – because she is convinced that this does not exist and that it is only a myth. Several researchers share her opinion. Other researchers however are convinced that a good divorce could exist and that children will experience little or no problems of the divorce when this happened without many conflicts. Some take a middle position. They state that a divorce can be both good and bad. A divorce offers for example possibilities for personal growth and a better life, but these positive consequences are always the fruit of the emotional suffering of the child and the loss of two parents’ togetherness.

It is important to know that Marquardt’s research is just one research on the impact of parental divorce on the child. A whole range of
research exist on this topic, but Marquardt is one of the few who treats the religious aspect of a divorce so extensively.

2. How Does a Parental Divorce Influence a Child’s Portrayal of Humans, Worldview and Religious Life?

2.1. Consequences for the Portrayal of Humans

A divorce can impact a child’s portrayal of human beings, especially concerning the image that children have of their parents.6 Not only the word “parent” changes for these children – the word will no longer suggest unity but it acquires the meaning of two separate people with their own lives, home and habits – but this also changes their feelings in relation to their parents. Children want generally to remain faithful to both parents, but they experience this as difficult because it seems that they now have to take sides with one of the parents. The divorce makes it for the children very hard to express their loyalty to both parents and that is why they feel themselves frequently torn.

Another consequence is that the child will feel responsible, not only for the divorce, but also for the care of the parents.7 Because of the divorce the child often acquires another image of what “being a child” means. A consequence of the divorce could be that the child can no longer stay a child – this can also just be a feeling of the child – because he/she feels him/herself responsible for the parent who is now alone because of the divorce. The child will assume tasks which are in fact unsuitable for him or her. In other words, a danger of “parentification” exists. There is a chance that the child becomes adult faster than his/her peer group, or will behave more as an adult because of his/her feeling of responsibility. A consequence of this could be that the child is unable to get along well with his/her peer group and feels misunderstood by them. Because of this, the child’s feeling of loneliness could be reinforced. The quick maturation process of

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children with divorced parents could also be considered positive:

because of the divorce, the child could discover qualities and learn tasks which are important for his/her future adult life.

The divorce could also have as a consequence that the child has difficulty trusting people. If parents can leave each other, the child can be left as well. The child may also have difficulties trusting people because he/she – more than children from an intact family – realizes that there is often deceit or the truth is withheld. After a divorce, children often – whether or not forced – conceal things from or learn to lie to the other parent. Due to this they question whether other people are actually honest, telling them everything, because they know that they themselves do not do so. As a consequence, they may feel left alone to know what is true and what is not. This reinforces the feeling of loneliness.

Another influence of the divorce of parents on the portrayal of humans for the children is that of the development of a child’s relationships. Much research has shown that children of divorce experience difficulties entering into relations with other people. The child is often skeptical and unwilling in relating, especially in love relations. A reason for this could be that they have witnessed the difficulties that their parents had to maintain their relationship. They have seen their parents separating and if even their parents have not remained together, why should they themselves succeed? Why should they take pains in a relationship if it seems a rather impossible task to stay together for one’s whole life? Another consequence could be that children of divorced parents throw themselves very fast into relationships. The reason for this could be that they wish to prove that they can do better than their parents, or because they are searching for the love they have missed in their parents’ relations.

2.2. Consequences on the Child’s Worldview

After a divorce, the child could have the feeling that he/she lives in two worlds, the world of the mother and the world of the father. The child often feels caught between these two worlds and it seems that he/she belongs in neither one. Because of the divorce, the child gets two “homes”, in theory a doubling, but the child actually feels a loss. Because the children often have to move from one parent to the other, they could have the feeling that they are visitors in each household. Through this they may feel outsiders at their own mother’s or father’s home. Furthermore these two worlds could also be “secret”, for example when the parents do not want to listen to the stories from the child when he/she comes back from the other parent or when the child only is used as a spy.

Another question children could ask after a divorce is whether the world is still trustworthy. If even one’s own parents can separate, an immortal value in life, what about the rest of the world? Is everything that once seemed obvious – like the marriage of one’s parents – still so obvious? Can these children still trust everything they used to believe in? Because their parents could leave each other, they realize that they can be left as well. Through this, the feeling could arise that the whole world and all the people in the world may abandon them, which allows space for the feeling of loneliness.

Another problem children could struggle with after the divorce of their parents is questioning the true values, norms and rules in the world. When their parents were still together, this was often quite obvious for them. Their parents drew up the rules together and they tried to pass on their own norms and values, which they had tuned to each other, to their children. The divorce of the parents can change this. After the divorce the differences between the norms and values of each parent appear according to different rules in each parent’s household. The child is faced after the divorce with several values, norms and rules. Because of this the child could ask him/herself what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Children of divorced parents discover – often faster than their peer group – that there are different values,
norms and rules and they are themselves responsible for their choices and what they believe and stand for. Due to this, the child may have the feeling that the world is not at all as clear and simple as it was before the divorce.

2.3. Consequences for the Child’s Religiosity

A divorce can also have consequences on the religious lives of children. Children of divorced parents are often less religious than children from intact families. But the fact that they are less religious does not mean they are less spiritual. Several reasons can be indicated for this fact. A first reason is that parents who divorce are less religious and thus raised their children with less religiosity before the divorce. A divorce also hampers the intergenerational transfer of religious values and norms. The reason for this is that after the divorce there is often no longer a consensus between the parents about religious behavior. Furthermore, parents after a divorce often have very little time and become more tolerant with the result that children are allowed to experiment a lot in the area of religion. A possible consequence of this could be that the children leave their faith behind. Another possible reason is that children after the divorce can no longer see their parents as religious teachers or role models. For this reason they dissociate themselves from the religious belief of their parents. A last reason is that children from a divorced family are often stigmatized by fellow believers and many church communities offer only limited pastoral care to non-traditional families. They may feel expelled from their own community and thus decide to leave it. There is, however, no consensus about the religiosity of children of divorced parents. Some researchers believe that a divorce in some circumstances has little to no influence on a child’s belief.

Parental divorce can also have an impact on the child’s image of God. After a divorce, children often have a lot of questions about faith and about God. They ask questions like: “Who is God and where was He during the divorce?” “Who is God that He allows this?” Children of divorce often have the feeling that God abandoned them and for this reason they may be furious at Him. A consequence of this could be that they reject faith in God. Another effect could be that through the divorce, children develop a diabolical image of God. They may see God as a punishing judge, a severe and supreme father who masters their life, who imposes restrictions on them and who punishes them. They may see their parents’ divorce as a punishment of God because, for example, they think that they haven’t been good. The child could also interpret the divorce positively as the will of God. God has ensured the divorce because He realized that the parents were a bad match and would be happier after the divorce. When a child allocates this positive role to God, there will be fewer problems for the child’s belief and image of God. Children of divorce could also have problems with the representation of God as Father. It is difficult for children of divorced parents to see God as a

11 E. Marquardt: *Between Two Worlds*, 21-22.
14 E. Marquardt: *Between Two Worlds*, 139.
16 E. Marquardt: *Between Two Worlds*, 138; A. Westerduin-de Jong: “Kind van de rekening”, 42.
18 A. Westerduin-de Jong: “Kind van de rekening”, 40.
“mothering” father who cares for people because if God is like the mother or the father who left the house after the divorce, might not God also leave?19

3. How Should We look at and Handle Children of Divorced Parents?

There is no univocal way to look at children of divorced parents. First of all it is desirable that they are not considered in the same way as children from intact families, otherwise there is a chance that the experience of the divorce will be minimized or even forgotten. Because the divorce is a real part of the life of the child, it is important that it will be accounted for in viewing and handling children of divorced parents. We have to realise, for instance, that these children have another vision concerning their parents and that they approach the world in a different way. On the one hand we must make the children feel that we know that the divorce was not easy for them; we can show this, for example, when we talk to them. On the other hand we must not be too patronizing. It is important not to treat the children as victims or pity them. But we also should not pretend that a divorce does not cause any problems and consider the children as purely powerful beings who come away from the divorce of their parents unscathed. There must be a good balance between these two extremes.

Further we should not identify these children with their parents’ divorce and with the consequences of it. We cannot see them simply and solely as “children of divorce”. We have to know that a divorce leaves behind visible and invisible impressions upon these children, but this need not be emphasized all the time, and certainly not in front of them. Children of divorce are and remain always in the first place children. It is important that we do not forget that. But we should also not forget that these experiences have marked their lives and with different effects on each child.

3.1. Noticing the Child

Everyone in the child’s surroundings could assist him or her in coping with the divorce and so reduce the consequences of it. Most of the time, attention will be given to the parents who have a difficult time during the divorce, but the child also deserves some attention. The child has a right to attention at this time. It is for this reason desirable that children are no longer pushed aside during the process of their parents’ divorce, even though this sidelining happens with good intentions. Children also have a right to the truth and to attention during this hard period. It is important that all people who are involved in the process of the divorce, not only the parents but also the children, can experience a non-condemning, listening presence.20 In this respect pastoral workers could play an important role. Children are also entitled to pastoral care during the divorce of their parents.21

3.2. The Importance of Pastoral Care

Pastoral care for children of separated parents is not very obvious, but it is nevertheless necessary. This pastoral care must in the first place be oriented toward the child. It must take into account that children react in extremely varied ways to the divorce of their parents. That is why it seems best that pastoral care starts from the idea that children could be resilient.22 At the same time one must keep in mind the children’s problems and the scars caused by the divorce. In this way the pastor can, on the one hand, support the children who are already resilient and experience little or no problems to continue developing this resilience and look for where they find this strength. On the other hand the pastor can, by this positive approach and by the belief that not all children experience serious problems, let the children who do not overcome the divorce of their parents so easily, realize that they could also be resilient. The pastor could then look for the strength to get over the parental divorce together with them. Practically, this can for instance be
done in individual or in group conversation or through playful talks about this matter. The pastor must always take into account that these children don’t form a separate group of “children of divorce” besides the “ordinary” children. That is why it is good to organize conversations or meetings which are open to all children.

3.3. The Pastor’s Attitude

Pastoral care for children of divorced parents demands a certain attitude in the pastor. First and foremost the pastor must give attention both to the parents and to the children. Pastors could play a mediating role between the parents and the child. They could try to be partial to multiple parties and acknowledge each side. This “multi-directed partiality” implies that the pastor also take absent persons into account during the pastoral contact. This means that when the child is present, the pastor also has to throw light on the perspective of the parents. So the pastor could give acknowledgement to the child, for example, acknowledgment for the extra tasks the child takes on during the divorce. Because of this attitude of multi-directed partiality, the pastor could speak positively with the child about the divorce of his/her parents. When the child tells for instance how he/she finds it unfortunate that his/her parents are divorced and that he/she still hopes that they will come back together, the pastor could positively anticipate this through an attitude of multi-directed partiality on this situation. Instead of confirming the child in his/her hope, revealing only the bad aspects of the divorce, the pastor could ask “What is your experience of the situation now?” or “What is better now after the divorce?” Such questions from the pastor could allow the child to see the divorce of his/her parents in a positive way.

The pastor wishes, by his/her attitude of multi-directed partiality, to help every family member to see that he/she also adopts this attitude of multi-directed partiality. This attitude guards against making someone or something a culprit for all the problems in the family, while at the same time keeps from banalizing these problems by holding everyone responsible for a piece of the problems.

This attitude of multi-directed partiality requires an attitude of hospitality and listening from the pastor. The pastor must be open to everyone, parents and children. He/she must listen in a non-condemning way to the stories of each person. However, this does not mean that the pastor can force someone to tell his/her story. Everyone is free to tell what he/she wants. Nevertheless, it is also important that the pastor makes clear that his/her door is always open to all without being too intrusive. The pastor has to do this with respect for the situation of the family and for each person’s rhythm in dealing with the divorce.

Another attitude which is important is the attitude of authenticity. When a pastor deals with children – but also in general – it is important that he/she remains him/herself at all times, is honest in relation to the child and is in harmony with him/herself. Children need up-rightness and honesty during a divorce. Due to the divorce, they often have lost confidence in

19 A. Biesinger: Geloven met kinderen, 55.
the people and the world. It is then the task of the pastor to show with his/her attitude that people are honest, sincere and trustworthy. This attitude of authenticity is connected with the attitude of empathy. Empathy should not be understood as compassion, but rather as sympathy. The pastor must try to imagine the situation of the child and try to understand the child as well as possible, but at the same time the pastor should realize that he/she does not understand the child completely. The pastor will always be an outsider.27 Through this empathic and authentic attitude the pastor can build up a relation based on trust with the child.28 The pastor cannot force the child’s trust; he/she is not entitled to this confidence. It can only be given by the child itself. Because there is a need of a relation based on trust between the pastor and the child, the pastor could be seen as a friend.29 Like a child trusts a friend and tells everything to him/her, so the child may also trust the pastor and tell his/her story free from obligations. However, this “pastor-as-friend” model requires a short comment. In this model the pastor gets a lot of confidence of the child, through which the child can become an easy victim of (power) abuse of the pastor. A relation between a pastor and a child cannot be purely friendly. There is always the authority of the pastor and the dependency of the child. The pastor cannot be simply and solely the friend of the child, he/she is also always responsible for the child.

A last and an important attitude is the pastor’s timely referral of the child to a specialist when he/she notices that there is something “more” going on. A pastor may have a sense of how to deal with some medical, psychological or therapeutic matters, but he/she is not an expert in this area. In this respect it is therefore important that a pastor knows his/her limits and shortcomings. Yet it is also important that a pastor has a good basic knowledge of medical and psychological issues which could help in quickly recognizing certain symptoms. In this way, the pastor, especially when he/she is the only one who has contact with the child, may recognize that there is something more going on and offer immediately the right care and refer the child to more specialized care.

4. Conclusion

Good pastoral care for children of divorced parents is important because the way these children are treated after the divorce may influence their self-development, including the development of positive Christian attitudes and life values.30 Pastoral care during and after parental divorce can help children to understand the divorce and give it a place. It can also help the children to acknowledge and express their feelings. It is therefore important that the pastor thus recognizes the impact of the parents’ divorce on the child.

The way people view the child and handle children during and after divorce could influence the degree of its negative impact on the child. A good relationship between the parents, between the parents and the child and of pastoral concern could be factors that help the child to deal with the divorce and to minimize its consequences.

28 J.N. Poling: Render unto God, 213.
30 A.D. Lester: Pastoral Care with Children in Crisis, 48, 55. “How we care for children during their critical encounters with … divorce … may well influence the development of healthy Christian attitudes and values about life’s slings and arrows.”
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There are increasing numbers of children who live with divorced parents. This article brings these children into focus. It develops a pastoral theological reflection on children with divorced parents. It is argued that a parental divorce always has an impact on the child and that a pastoral concern could help the child to deal with the divorce of his/her parents. This article starts with a short presentation of the research of Elizabeth Marquardt. She is one of the few researches who take the religious aspect of a divorce into account when discussing the impact of divorce on children. A second step examines the influence of a parental divorce on the portrayal of humans, as well as the worldview and religious life of these children. The divorce of the parents has an impact on each of these three levels, but it is not the same for each child; some children suffer more from the divorce of their parents than others. In a last step it is discussed how we should perceive and handle children of divorced parents. This is not easy because a balance is needed between pretending that a divorce causes no problems for the child and treating the child only as a victim of the divorce. Further, it is argued that it is important to pay special attention to children during and after the divorce, which is something that pastoral care could provide and this pastoral care necessitates certain pastoral attitudes.