

## Condemnation of Divorce: Survival of Marriage

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While the institution of marriage in Western nations has been subjected to severe sociological strains during the last few decades, it has nevertheless withstood growing cynicism with some renewed integrity, successfully in more recent years. This is the result of tremendous efforts by NGOs. They have disseminated the much-needed intellectual and moral foundations of the inherent indispensability of keeping the family unit intact for the welfare of all peoples. Such *awareness* is a product of the pro-marriage movement that has strengthened on both sides of the Atlantic. Its leaders say, with much justification, that divorce not only damages children in vital aspects of their future psychological attitudes toward life for years to come, it also takes away the basis of a happy life for those who choose to undertake it in the first place.

This movement is far too measured and refined to qualify as backlash. It's been going from strength to quiet strength for the last ten years. Its institutional framework is still largely American, but European, particularly British, initiatives are visible. We owe tremendously to this distinguished group of people—for forming voluntary bodies, whose untiring and dedicated efforts have made possible where we are today. A steady stream of deadly serious, but accessible exposés against the divorce culture has begun to present positive results in the U.S. and Western Europe.

Over the last four decades, particularly since the sixties, we have gone from thinking about divorce as a shame, a stigma, and a minority option, to seeing it as an everyday event and every married person's right. We have convinced ourselves that it is at worst a minor disruption, even for children, and that, even if they are upset and distressed for a while, they generally bounce back as fast as their newly-liberated parents. The absence of keeping aloft the cultural values of yester-years is not considered, to use the American idiom, *a big deal*.

But "concerned communitarians," if I may use this expression, say that this is far from true and argue that the "*It's no big deal*" attitude actually hides more than it cares to reveal! Leaders of such a movement are institutions like the WFPC, at Brigham Young University, and the Howard Center in Rockford, Illinois. These organizations have already held international gatherings of concerned people and specialists to emphasize the indisputable nature of the family unit for the betterment of people of all races and ethnicities. I attended their World Congress of Families II in Geneva in

November 1999, and directly observed the high level of intellectual contributions and events organized to spread the message of their sponsors.

There is a growing list of institutions that have joined hands in this dedicated effort. A number of them are also strongly supported by the religious institutions of the U.S., in which The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has played a major role. I am also impressed by the continuous efforts of the Catholic Church to propagate the message of the clear benefits of a happy family unit for those who are in it, and for the community in which it may exist. In addition, special mention of universities that have very active student bodies or small centers of specialized learning on this subject is necessary. The New York-based Institute of American Values, set up about ten years ago, has been particularly influential. Its composition of intellectuals and academics has put out a "manifesto" called the "Marriage Movement," with the stated aim of putting an end to the "divorce revolution."

These advocates utilize both negative and positive articulations to reach the conclusion that divorce needs to become as restricted as possible. Stressing the negative aspects of the malaise, sociology professor David Popenoe, in his two works on the subject, including "Disturbing the Nest" stresses that society would clearly turn against divorce if its ugly truths were exposed. He says that there has been a "doubling" of the divorce rate over the years and, simultaneously, a five-time increase in the number of children born out of wedlock in the U.S. This has created terrible economic hardships for the children of this category in living in poverty. Popenoe stresses that his research shows that no one is happier for it, least of all those affected directly.

In their most recent work, "The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially," authors Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher point out the advantages, even blessings of the institution of marriage. They assert that those who remain married have a much happier and financially better life than those who have been divorced.

On the same lines is a powerful new book's thesis, just released in the U.S., *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*. Its major author, Judith Wallerstein, whose earlier best-seller *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce* was well received in professional intellectual circles, gives the strong message that marriage not only has to become more modernized, it must be propelled as a good

thing by itself. To illustrate her point, she pairs children from broken families against those from stable homes. Based on a number of case studies, she concludes that children from nontraditional, two-parent families have a tougher time trusting other people. This leads to a wide variety of difficulties that are not nearly as cumbersome for "intact" families. Prospectively speaking, the progeny of nontraditional families are less prone to accept the sanctity of the institution of marriage than those from "intact" families.

Wallerstein's book is based on a longitudinal study she initiated in Marin County, California, in 1971. She asserts, with abundant justification, that even the most conscientious divorcing parents harm their children. Such harm is not only temporary; it can last much longer in many cases. Wallerstein makes a comparative analysis of children from such "affected" backgrounds and those who were luckily "unaffected," to submit that maturity would dictate that divorce, *a fortiori*, must be condemned. As the normative application of this reality seems undeniable, it is totally endorsed.

Things can go from bad to worse. As children grow older, their needs and expectations also change and grow. In order to meet such alterations in life, further action would normally be required. This would produce additional burdens on daily routines, burdens one would have rather avoided. Post-divorce households are often faced with tenuous bonds, even if everyone involved remains highly civil, simply because such establishments are less stable and usually in constant flux. Things can get more difficult and complicated with newer members of the households such as stepmothers/fathers and siblings. This is not to say that all post-divorce families are doomed. Some do manage to escape the misfortunes just articulated. But, even these families face stiff logistical hurdles and difficulties. A recent study (yet unpublished) undertaken by Smart, Wade, and Neale for the University of Leeds in the U.K., reveals that two-household children, even if all else remains as "normal" as possible because of the enlightened attitudes of the divorcing parents, logistically face tremendous difficulties such as, transportation from places like school to home, and to and from other necessary daily or periodic visitations.

The same set of authors set forth their views in a publication called *Parent Problems*. In addressing fifty-two "quotes" taken from such children, the authors contend that their narrated thesis is shared by those they interviewed. Empirically, there is much that can be advanced for the advantages of the pro-marriage approach. This study ends by raising the simple question, What do the children want? A considered and conscientious response would be, it is submitted self-evident.

Similar results are substantiated in a work by Brannen, Hweptinstall, and Bhopal, published for the Thomas Coram Research Center of the University of London. It is entitled *Connecting Children*. The book arises out of a small, but wide-

ranging study of care and family life as seen and constructed by children aged one to twelve in different types of families. Echoing the Leeds University study, the book emphasizes that children from diverse backgrounds considered that living in single-parent homes was infinitely worse than being in two parent households. The family remained a powerful symbol for all of them.

Is it possible to maintain strong ties between parents and children outside of the traditional family system created by the institution of marriage? What will happen if our "correct" answer is in the negative? If we have traditionally looked at the family to care for the old and the young, who will do so in the non-family setup? What kind of world would it be with no lasting relationships of a historical kind? These basic questions predicate the successful thrust of anti-divorce movements.

The legacy of the past fifty years in support of divorce is undergoing a beneficial change. It is possible that fifty years from now, we will look back, shake our heads, and wonder why we allowed it to go where it did. Most importantly, intellectuals, who formed the hard core of divorce-oriented thought, have undergone a metamorphosis.

The writings referred to above are an index of this change. Recent American writings can be cited in support of this conclusion. Bonnie Erbe, a syndicated columnist in the U.S. (e.g. *Boston Herald*, 4 December 2000), said, in her article "With Parents Kids More Likely to Make Grade," that to assure a bright future, children must continuously receive parental guidance and support. She submits that for building a better future for children, it is necessary that the traditional family stay together! Similarly, a report of the National PTA stressed that only family help and support can finally assure that children of tomorrow make the grade in life. As such, it is my hope that greater momentum be given to this view to secure that our future in this respect is safeguarded.

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