“‘There but for the Grace’: The Ethics of Bystanders to Divorce”

— M. CHRISTIAN GREEN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Christian (Christy) Green is a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University. Before that, she was a lecturer at Harvard Divinity School and a research fellow at the University of Notre Dame. Her areas of research include law and religion, feminism and the family, human rights, comparative religious ethics, and religion and international affairs.

Propositions

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NOTE

This excerpt is from a paper written for the Institute-based project, "Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith?" Project findings will be released in a report to the nation later this year.

IN THIS PAPER, I REFLECT ON THE EFFECTS OF FAMILY TRANSformation, particularly the divorce revolution, on bystanders at the individual and cultural levels. The task and test of the bystander ethic that I seek to develop in the divorce context will be whether it can overcome tendencies toward individual apathy or retreat to the collective in addressing the public effects of the divorce revolution, its implications for both the moral formation of individuals and the well-being of society, and what, if anything, organizations of government and civil society should do.

I suggest that the bystander ethic may be especially appropriate for our time. We live in an increasingly globalized world that makes us more aware of the claims of others and the effects of our actions on them. We are also, as families, communities, and nations, growing, at once, more connected and more separated by technology. Connection exposes us to the needs, decisions, and choices of others, but distance makes it easier to turn a blind eye. The result can be knowledge without response, perception without clear possibilities for action. The bystander ethic challenges us to recognize the interdependency of needs, decisions, and choices in ways that are not always direct or obvious, and which are sometimes morally ambiguous or ambivalent.

A Generation Marked by Divorce

GROWING UP IN THE 1970S AND 80S, MY GENERATION SAW A steadily increasing number of divorces among our friends' parents. For those whose parents remained married, like mine, the divorce revolution raised a distinctive set of quandaries. In a sense we were the fortunate ones, spared and seemingly unaffected by the experience of family disruption. Yet we sought to console our friends, providing continuity in friendship to compensate for the rupture of their family life. But we could not console too much, as the powerful narrative of the "good" divorce recommended moving on from familial disintegration rather than wallowing in its aftermath. As divorce became more and more "normal" as a result of its increased frequency, there were real questions about the need to avoid pathologizing divorced families with excessive focus on grief and recovery.

More and more, marriage, family, and divorce came to be perceived as purely private matters. Then-First Lady Hillary Clinton famously summarized this view of marital privacy, observing on a morning news program after being confronted with evidence of her husband's infidelity that, "The only people who know the truth about a marriage are the two people who are in it." It is, however, worth noting that the announcement just over a decade later of the separation and impending divorce of Al and Tipper Gore—the Clintons' partners in power who were thought to have an "ideal" marriage in contrast to the Clinton's flawed one—drew enormous, and largely shocked and saddened, public response. That the Clintons outlasted the Gores must serve as a cautionary note for any bystander perspective on the marriages of others.

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When I grew up and the first divorces and sometimes even ecclesiastical annulments began to occur in my circle of friends, I found myself bristling at this privatized view. I was a bridesmaid at some of these weddings. I considered them to be bona fide marriages to which I was a witness and also something of a stakeholder. But such a perspective is meaningless and perhaps even unwelcome when marriage is conceived as a purely private matter. Perhaps I was to be not a stakeholder, but merely a bystander.

In recent years, a body of literature has emerged concerning the effects of parental divorce on children as they grow up. A related body of literature has focused on the "divorce culture," the way in which divorce and family disruption have larger social and cultural effects beyond those most immediately affected. In this literature, children of divorcing parents are often described as bystanders to divorce, and they are certainly the most direct ones. In this paper, I would like to provide some reflection on the effect of divorce on more indirect bystanders. Do others who witness a divorce experience a "there but for the grace of God go I" moment? Does this witness produce bystander anxiety? Does it produce something like survivor's guilt? How does witnessing the divorce and family disruption of others affect the bystander's own worldview when it comes to normative images of marriage, family, society, and self? Extending the circle of bystanders even further, what effect does the witness of divorce have on society as a whole? Has the divorce culture produced a kind of cultural trauma?

Bystanders

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BYSTANDER HAS A LENGTHY PEDIGREE in law, where bystanders to the injuries of others can sue for emotional distress. It is also routinely discussed in human rights law with respect to mass violence, notably genocide. In the field of ethics, the bystander perspective is underdeveloped. The category of the bystander is also tainted by its main referent in the social sciences—the widely studied phenomenon of the "bystander response." The most infamous example of the bystander response was the 1964 rape and murder in New York City of Kitty Genovese. Thirty-eight of her neighbors witnessed the assault but did not intervene. The term "bystander response" has come to refer to the documented failure of response by people in groups to individuals in distress, apparently out of the view that someone else will intervene, thereby freeing any specific individual from moral responsibility.

The attempt to defend the possibility of a bystander perspective on institutions considered to be private, such as marriage and family, is daunting, particularly for an observer committed to the liberal model of autonomy and agency. Yet putatively private relationships have increasingly been shown to have wider effects, often less than fully consciously understood, on the views, decisions, and choices of a range of bystanders.

Contagion Theories of Divorce

IN COINING THE TERM "DIVORCE CULTURE" IN HER EPONYMOUS book, social and cultural historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead observed, "Once regarded mainly as a social, legal, and family event in which there were other stakeholders, divorce now became an event closely linked to the pursuit of individual satisfactions, opportunities, and growth." Increasingly, she wrote, "mainstream America saw the legal dissolution of marriage as a matter of individual choice, in which there were no other stakeholders or larger social interests." Her book sought to challenge "the popular idea of divorce as an individual right and freedom to be exercised in the pursuit of individual goods and satisfactions, without due regard for other stakeholders."

In the moral anthropology of political liberalism and the ethos of privacy and choice that pervades the divorce culture, it seems unfathomable that the actions of a divorcing couple could have any effects other than the direct (i.e. the dissolution

of the family) or reasonably foreseeable ones (such as varying degrees of emotional harm to children, family members, and similarly proximal others). And yet a growing set of theories in the social sciences suggest that seemingly private choices and experiences can have wide-ranging implications.

Social scientists speak of "social effects," "social network effects," or "neighborhood effects" to describe the ways in which social practices have wider, sometimes unintended and unanticipated, effects on surrounding communities and the wider society. Anthropologists, social psychologists, and neuroscientists have articulated "contagion" theories to describe the very visceral way that people might seek to insulate themselves, perhaps unsuccessfully, from thoughts and behaviors they feel threaten their bodies, relationships, communities, or worldviews.

> "The social science suggests that private choices can have wide-ranging implications."

In a recent article titled, "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do, Unless Everyone Else Is Doing it Too," three social scientists who examined longitudinal data from the well-known Framingham Heart Study found that "attitudes toward divorce flow across social ties," spreading between and among siblings and even across the more attenuated ties of friends and coworkers, to such an extent that "divorce should be understood as a collective phenomenon that extends far beyond those directly affected." The authors suggest their study raises questions about "whether there is an 'epidemic' of divorce and, if so, whether there is a role of social contagion in the 'epidemic.'" While most research on social networks and divorce is "concentrated on person-to-person effects, particularly those related to parent-to-child intergenerational transfer of risk [of divorce]," they found significant relationships in divorce status between individuals extending up to two degrees of separation. They write, "a person's tendency to divorce depends not just on his friend's divorce status, but also to his friend's friend." Further, "a divorced friend or family member who lives hundreds of miles away may have as much influence on [a person's] . . . risk of divorce as one who lives next door." Some of the study's discrete findings are particularly interesting for purposes of assessing bystander impact. People with a divorced sibling were 22 percent more likely to get a divorce. Neighbors

who live within 25 meters [82 feet] do not appear to affect each other, so the literal "neighborhood effect" seems to be nonexistent. But in an era in which many Americans spend more time at work than at home (much less socializing with the neighbors), it is significant and surprising that people with a divorced co-worker are 55 percent more likely to get divorced than those without such a co-worker.

Divorce as Cultural Trauma

THE BURGEONING FIELD OF TRAUMATOLOGY DRAWS ON THE disciplines of psychology, literature, history, politics, and other fields in the humanities and social sciences. Concerns about trauma initially focused on individuals who had experienced various forms of violence and abuse. However, fields such as women's studies, Holocaust studies, postcolonial studies, and other areas of inquiry have shifted the focus from the individual to the cultural level. In these studies, the individual cannot be viewed in isolation from the surrounding culture.

While the leading researchers into cultural trauma tend to focus on particular historical events and phenomena that have mass effects (such as war, terrorism, genocide, natural disaster, economic depressions, mass migration or unemployment, or massive population depletion through disease, famine, and civil conflict), the definitions and measures of cultural trauma are quite broad. They open a terrain in which the "divorce culture," particularly when seen as having effects on bystanders, fits remarkably well.

In his contribution to a recent volume, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, sociologist Neil J. Smelser observes, "No discrete historical event or situation automatically or necessarily qualifies itself as a cultural trauma . . . ." Some cultures may be more prone to trauma than others. These include societies that have recently emerged from states of affliction, including war, economic instability, internal conflict, or other situations of "shaky social solidarity." Cultural trauma is also crucially linked to memory and remembrance. As Smelser puts it, "[The trauma] must be remembered or made to be remembered. Furthermore, the memory must be made culturally relevant, that is, represented as obliterating, damaging, or rendering problematic something sacred—usually a value or outlook felt to be essential for the integrity of the affected society." These memories, he goes on, "must be associated with a strong negative affect, usually disgust, shame, or guilt." Finally, a "given historical event or situation may qualify as a trauma at one moment in a society's history but not in another."

From a child's perspective, might the breakup of a family in a divorce, whether one's own family or that of a friend, seem to be the culmination of a conflict or a dreadful disaster that ruptures a world, potentially giving rise to economic deprivation and residential relocation, in a small-scale replication of traumas that afflict entire societies? At a time in which young memories are being shaped through imprinting, pruning, and the dialectic of fear and hope about the past and future, is not a divorce likely to be remembered especially vividly in ways that shape moral formation? Does the child perceive something sacred, integral, and of value in the marriage that is dissolving, perhaps in ways that lead to shame, guilt, or even feelings of disgust directed outwardly at the parents or, still more problematically, inward toward the self? Is the experience of divorce static over time, or does it wax and wane at different points and with different effects over the course of the life cycle?

Smelser also observes that symbolic struggles over the remembrance of trauma often have a "generational dimension." The generational implications of the divorce culture on adult children of divorce have been explored by Elizabeth Marquardt, Judith Wallerstein, and other researchers. This generational effect would seem to be another magnifying mechanism, along with memory, that gives divorce power beyond its immediate and individual effects.

Cultural trauma theories remain controversial and contested. Indeed, this seems to be part of their nature. The "culture wars" over the family in recent decades—including debates about the effects of divorce—seem emblematic of just this sort of contestation. Some might challenge that, when it comes to divorce, bothered bystanders are possessed of an overly empathic, hyperbolic, or even officiously intermeddlesome imagination regarding the purely private relational decisions of others. But when we bring research on divorce into conversation with rich, emerging bodies of work on social contagion and cultural trauma, we see that bystander effects, while indirect and diffuse, may be no less real or consequential, and that they beckon us to individual and collective reflection on the broader effects of the "divorce revolution." □

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