

**The Declining American Family:
Taking a Reasoned Moral Position**

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The past three decades have not been kind to the American family. During this period--one in which many observers were proclaiming with great insistence that "the family is just changing, not declining"--the social institutions of marriage and the family in fact have weakened more, as measured by a variety of indicators, than during any other period of similar length in the history of our nation. In view of today's sky-high divorce rates, burgeoning nonmarital pregnancy rates, and nearly a quarter of all American children still living below the poverty line, even arch protagonists of "family diversity" are now muting their efforts to retire the concept dear to the hearts of each generation's conservatives: family decline.

Despite growing agreement that the family is declining and not just changing, however, many Americans have great difficulty coming to grips with the moral dimensions of this contemporary family trend. Perhaps we should merely acquiesce to it, as for the most part we have been doing? Times do change, after all, and maybe we need the family less than we used to. And anyway, hasn't one's family become a strictly private matter, something that should not be the business of the rest of us?

Most Americans believe, as I do, that the family decline of recent decades should strongly command our social and moral concern. But even for those people who hold such beliefs, taking a reasoned moral position about family decline is no easy task. A wide range of family-related issues presents itself, and it is difficult to know where to draw the moral line. To save the family, should we go to the mat with conservatives in seeking to prevent abortion and premarital sex? Should we take a stand against homosexuality; against pornography? Should we seek to regain Phyllis Schaffly's nuclear family, with its traditional gender roles? What about divorce?

A critical question, then, is which of the many family-related issues should command our greatest moral concern? Fortunately, research in the social sciences in recent decades, especially comparative research, can help in addressing this question. This research suggests that, if preventing further family decline is to become a principal social goal, certain family-related issues are far more important than others. And, surprisingly, the most important issues are not those that have been uppermost in the public debate.

The caveat must be provided, of course, that even if social science findings were conclusive and unambiguous, which they never are, one can not directly transform them into moral positions. The social sciences and moral theory inhabit two distinct cognitive realms. Nevertheless, the social sciences can immensely inform the moral order.

Adding to our current moral confusion about the family is the fact that the family debate in this nation has become heavily politicized and polarized between conservatives and liberals.

The self-avowed "profamily" forces on the right have taken many moral positions--such as the prohibition of homosexuality, premarital sex, pornography, and abortion--that are thoroughly unacceptable to those who stress individual rights. In their turn, the forces of the left have tended to denigrate or dismiss the family, often perceiving it to be an institution that is inherently patriarchal, inequalitarian, detrimental to women, and a bulwark of derided "bourgeois values." Even the simple phrase "the family" has been negative to many liberals, as they sense in its use a moral absolutism and threatened social straightjacket. The much preferred term is "families," which infers that everyone should have freedom of choice in family structure.

Unfortunately, neither position is very helpful in coming to grips with what ails the American family. As so often seems to be the case, the reasoned moral position is one that eschews the two extremes. If social science evidence is brought to bear, the case for the various right-wing "prohibitions" is not very compelling; these prohibitions are at best peripheral to the prevention of further family decline. Yet in sharp contrast to the left-wing emphasis on family diversity, the evidence also suggests that a very high value should be placed on the intact nuclear family--two-parent and child-centered.

Moral support for the intact nuclear family, however, should not imply support for continuing the "traditional" form of the nuclear family--male-dominated and with women restricted to the mother/housewife role. This is a critical distinction, one typically lost in the current debate. The evidence suggests that maintaining the traditional nuclear family, as some conservatives demand, is socially impossible if not also morally unwise. But disowning the nuclear family so as to cleanse ourselves of its traditional form, the disturbing message of much leftist thought, is surely a classic case of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Family Decline

What does it actually mean to say that the family is an institution "in decline?"¹ Let us consider first what a social institution is: a way of organizing human behavior in such a way that society's needs are best served. A social institution consists essentially of normative, accepted codes that indicate how people should act in a certain area of life. (For the most part, we take these normative codes for granted as part of the culture in which we grow up and live our lives.) As a socially sanctioned unit of childrearing, the family was probably the first social institution in evolutionary terms, and it is one of the few social institutions that is universal--found in some form in every known society.

One reason that the institution of the family is universal is because every society has a paramount need to raise children. Children come into this world totally dependent, and they must, for a longer portion of their lives than for any other species, be taken care of and taught by adults. Almost all societies have assigned this task to the biological parents (assuming they exist), or at least to the biological mother. In all societies the biological father is identified, and in most societies he plays an important role in his children's upbringing. Beyond this, family form varies considerably, ranging from our nuclear form with the two parents living apart from their

relatives, to families where the grandmother or other relatives play a major role.

Until recent centuries, however, adult family members did not necessarily consider childrearing to be their primary task. As a unit of rural economic production, the family's main focus was economic survival. Rather than the family being for the sake of the children, it could be said that the children--as needed workers--were for the sake of the family. One of the monumental family transitions in history, therefore, was the rise in industrial societies of what we now refer to as the traditional nuclear family--husband away at work, wife taking care of the home and kids, and the family unit living apart from relatives. The primary focus of this historically new family form was indeed the care and nurturing of children, and parents dedicated themselves to this task. It was within this family form that Western egalitarian democracy, with its emphasis on the relatively autonomous yet socially responsible individual, came to full fruition.² And it was this family form that generated the individuals who were responsible for the tremendous intellectual and economic achievements of the industrial era.

In the past thirty years modern societies have been witness to another major family transformation--the beginning of the end of the traditional nuclear family. Three important changes have occurred. First, many parents voluntarily have broken their nuclear family ties (at a rate currently estimated to be over 50%) and many mothers voluntarily have decided to forego marriage, with the consequence that--for the first time in history--a surprisingly large number of children are being raised in single-parents households, apart from other relatives.³ Second, women in large numbers have left the role of full-time mother and housewife to go into the labor market. And third, the main focus of the family has shifted away from both economic production and childrearing to a paramount concern for the psychological well-being and self-development of its adult members. As one indication of the strength of this new focus, parents increasingly tend to break-up--even when they still have children at home to raise--if their needs for psychological stability and self-fulfillment are not met in the marriage relationship.

Through all of these recent shifts, the family has lost tremendous "social power" in society. Once the only social institution in existence, it is now small, fragile, and overshadowed by both the state and the market. People today spend a smaller portion of their lives actually living in families than at probably any other time in history.⁴ This trend of family decline, of course, is strongly associated with such concurrent cultural trends as increasing individual autonomy, choice of life styles, material affluence, social power for women, and tolerance of individual and cultural diversity. It reasonably can be said that, in many respects, the family's decline is the adult individual's gain.

One thing that has not changed through all the years and all the family transformations, however, is the need for children to be raised by adults--a *raison d'etre* of the family in the first place. Especially in modern, complex societies, in which children need an enormous amount of education and psychological security in order to succeed, active and nurturing relationships of adults to children are critical. Yet children of today probably spend less time with adults, including their parents, than in any other period of history. Absent fathers, working mothers, distant grandparents, anonymous schools, and transient communities, are all indicators of a

dramatic decrease in child-centeredness--not only within the family, but within society as a whole. (Even the speed of modern life is anti-child; children thrive at a much more patient, casual, pace of living.)

Underlying this decrease in child-centeredness is the radical individualism of modern societies--the preoccupation with personal expression, occupational success, and material gain.⁵ Except insofar as they represent means of personal expression for adults, and thus the enhancement of adult self-development, children increasingly are seen as a hindrance to leading "the good life."⁶ This is a fundamental reason why the birth rate is now below that necessary even for the replacement, much less the growth, of the population.

In summary, the trends of modern living--most of all within the family--are leaving children stranded and isolated in their wake. The condition of the family is probably the single most important factor accounting for today's record high, and in many cases increasing, rates among juveniles and adolescents of delinquency, suicide, depression, obesity/anorexia, drug abuse, and nonmarital pregnancies.⁷ High rates of these personal and social problems are found at all class levels and among all sectors of our population.

How should we as a society respond to this socially destructive situation, one that augurs so poorly for the future? Government programs of various sorts may help. But the only long-run solution is a shift in the cultural values by which we live, a shift from family-demeaning to family-supportive values. One way to promote this shift is for society's intellectual and moral leaders to show increasing moral concern.

With respect to the universal moral choice between individual autonomy and social obligation, between promoting individual development and fostering social order, societies historically have tended to suppress the individual in favor of strengthening the social. But today, the United States is at the opposite end of the continuum. Individuals have more autonomy than ever before in history, and it is the social that has become problematic. What is problematic is not only that normally interpreted as social breakdown, for example the extraordinarily high rates of crime, but also the fact that the social order has become less able to nourish individual development. If the social sciences have taught us anything it is that, for maximum personal growth, individuals must live in a reasonably cohesive and stable social order. Yet increasingly, and despite the high value we place on self-development, people are seemingly more fearful, anxious, and stressed.⁸ Their self-development is being inhibited.

A cohesive, stable, and nourishing social order is based on each member fulfilling his or her social obligations and commitments. But what is a social obligation? What commitments do individuals have to society as a whole? Beyond pursuing one's self-interest, how should one's social duties be fulfilled? There is the obvious, albeit minimal, answer to these questions involving a "live and let live" principle. In pursuing one's own self-interest, one should not unduly impair the ability of others to pursue their self-interest. To this minimal answer can be added another obvious yet fundamental principle: one should be a "good citizen" and vote, take an interest in public issues, and participate in community activities.

Yet by far the most important social obligation that each individual can fulfill is to responsibly and successfully raise a child to adulthood. It is clearly in everyone's best interest that adults raise their offspring to be healthy, happy, and productive members of society. On such an obligation, the next generation's character and thereby the future of society depends.

The Key Moral Issues

This brings us to the central question of what moral position to take in regard to current family trends. Based on the perspective presented above, the highest moral priority should be given to parent-child relationships and to the fostering of a child-centered society. It is essential to proclaim that children are a society's most important asset, and that once born, they should be loved and valued at the highest level of priority. A "secure base," in the words of John Bowlby, should be a part of every child's birthright.⁹

This moral priority evinces the unequivocal affirmation of monogamous, procreative marriages, and of strong, enduring families whose members have time for each other, do many things together, communicate well with one another, and mutually foster the social values on which the good society depends: sharing, cooperation, commitment, and social responsibility. Each of the specific moral positions outlined below stems from this overriding focus on the social importance of strong families and child-centeredness.

Marital Dissolution

The first moral issue to be considered is the most important of all to the promotion of strong families and child-centeredness. Yet surprisingly, of the moral issues taken up in this paper it is the least widely discussed. There are no national anti-divorce movements like those for anti-abortion, no national commissions examining the problem of divorce like those for pornography, and few indignant outcries from the pulpit about marital dissolution of the kind heard frequently about premarital sexuality.

The results of ongoing research in the social sciences strongly confirm the negative effects of a high divorce rate, especially on children.¹⁰ Indeed, few bodies of social research have had such consistent findings. But with the well-founded statistical expectation that at least one marriage in two contracted today will end in divorce or separation, moral (and legal) restraints on divorce have obviously weakened enormously.¹¹ To be divorced was once a highly stigmatized status; today it has almost become the norm.¹² We have had a divorced President, most religious congregations now contain a large number of divorced members, and even many religious leaders are in second marriages.

A reinstated moral (to say nothing of legal) prohibition against divorce would be an unreasonable intrusion on personal liberty. Especially when children are not involved, the case

in many marriages today, there is little social benefit in trying to keep two people together who are miserable in each others' company. Companionship has become the main reason for marriage, and when this is no longer obtainable, people should have the right to move on.¹³ A society that values companionate marriages with strong emotional ties must at the same time expect a relatively high divorce rate.

Yet from the perspective of children and the stability of family life, divorce has become too easy, too accepted. There is a new mind set that divorce is now an acceptable possibility in each person's life. People enter marriages realizing that if things do not work out, there is a quick remedy. Indeed, some lawyers now tell people when they marry that they should spend as much time planning for their divorce as they spend planning for their marriage. Worst of all, having children is no longer a compelling reason not to divorce; couples with children divorce at a rate only slightly lower than couples without children.¹⁴ In a momentous change of opinion over the last twenty five years, the great majority of Americans today believe that "a married couple should not necessarily stay together for the sake of the children."¹⁵

The new attitude toward divorce strikes at the very heart of the family institution. If all families consisted of nothing but an intimate relationship between two adults, society could probably survive a relatively high breakup rate. But when children are the involuntary victims of the breakup, we are all the losers. Greater moral concern about the dissolution of families when children are involved, therefore, is absolutely essential. Making divorce involving children somewhat more difficult in legal terms provides one answer. But constant moral reaffirmation of the importance of lasting marriages, and some cultural "re-stigmatization" of divorce when children are involved, are more important in the long run. This moral position draws support from that fact that two family-related conditions in life are still deeply desired by almost all young people: a divorce-free home in which to grow up, and a stable marriage of their own as adults.

With such a moral position about family dissolution comes a correlate--in favor of the intact, nuclear family. Not all intact, two-parent families are successful at raising children. And single-parent families and step-parent families, which today are typically the product of divorce, can often be very successful at this task. Many social scientists have worked diligently to document these facts. Yet the statistical evidence is overwhelming that an intact family is the better vehicle for childrearing.¹⁶ Moreover, it is what children want. For people living in alternative family forms, real sensitivity and often material assistance from others are indispensable. But to waver on the fundamental importance of the intact family, in the interest for example of promoting "diversity" or "tolerance," is to weaken a moral message on which the very future of society depends.

Gender Roles

At the heart of the breakdown of the modern family are changing gender roles. More than anything else, strengthening the modern family involves finding ways to improve intimate,

long-term relationships between men and women, and ways of assisting them in their joint task of childrearing. Unfortunately, partly because the moral issues involved are so complex and difficult to unravel, the gender-role debate is not often cast in moral terms.

Let us begin with the gender-role issue of married women in the labor force, for it is one of the most widely discussed but easiest to resolve. Most men of late-middle-age and older look back with nostalgia to the era of the traditional nuclear family. But social conditions have unquestionably changed. In what represents a tremendous historical shift, only about one-third of the adult life of the average married woman today will be spent as the mother of at-home children. Even if one were to assume that a woman's main purpose in life was to be a mother and housewife, it is clearly unreasonable for most married women to devote their entire adult lives to these two roles because of the later age at first marriage, average family sizes of less than two children, and a much longer life span.¹⁷

If for no other reason, then (other reasons are discussed below), the family era of economically-dependent, full-time housewives should be regarded as a thing of the past. Women today are socialized and educated, as are men, to enhance their personal development, to make an economic contribution, and to contribute fully to public life. For women, as well as for men, the central problem in the organization of adult lives is not work versus children, but how best to encompass both paid work and raising children.

Dramatic though the demographic and economic changes have been, however, the issue of married women in the work force and the demise of the separate-sphere family is only the tip of the iceberg in the gender-role debate. The heart of the matter is the way in which men's and women's "inherent nature" is perceived, and the expectations we have about their "proper" roles and behavior within the family, and within society at large. Again, the debate about male-female similarities and differences has become so polarized between right and left, and has taken on so many ideological-political overtones, that reasoned discussion is difficult. Also, the position at which one comes into the debate depends on the cultural context. In many contexts, one might emphasize male-female similarities. In America today, I suggest, it is important to consider more carefully some differences.

The view of the extreme right is that men and women are biologically and irrevocably different in so many fundamental respects that they necessarily should inhabit separate spheres of life, with women taking domestic roles and meeting the emotional-expressive needs of society, and men taking work and public roles and thus meeting society's instrumental needs. Man at work and woman at the hearth, it is argued, is not only in the best interest of society but is how the world has always been and ever shall be.

One problem with this viewpoint, as noted above, is that the conditions of life have changed markedly, making such traditional gender roles now largely obsolete whether one supports them or not. Another problem is that differences between men and women have been so exaggerated and distorted throughout history that much of social life has been unfavorable to women. Men have frequently used their public power to the detriment of women. Also, because

a wide range of emotions and behaviors is found within both females and males, with much overlap between the two groups, the locking of each sex into separate spheres retards personal development and violates personal liberty.

Some evidence suggests that, at least in modern societies, those members of each sex who have the highest levels of self-esteem and self-confidence tend to exhibit a balance of "male" and "female" characteristics and virtues, so-called psychological androgyny.¹⁸ For this and other reasons, the notion that men and women ought to be socialized to be more alike is worthy of support. It is in society's best interest to promote more sensitive and caring men who take a greater interest in domestic roles, especially childrearing, and more self-confident and assertive women who are active in work and public life. Indeed, the successful experiences of the Scandinavian nations, where this has been a goal of public policy, indicates that such socialization is clearly possible.¹⁹

In contrast to the extreme right, the extreme left takes the view that there are no socially important biological differences between men and women other than childbearing. It is asserted that virtually all male-female differences in psychology and behavior are culturally determined and therefore subject to the human will to change. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) goal of such change is social androgyny--the social identity of men and women. In the utopian society of the extreme left, one would never be able to predict by sex alone what social roles a person will play in life.²⁰ Such androgyny-oriented intellectuals see the perfect society as one in which men would do 50% of the domestic work, including childrearing, and women would do 50% of the public work.

While the right-wing view of male-female differences is detrimental to women, the left-wing view is detrimental to the family. The well-functioning family has always been based on a division of labor that reflects the different abilities and motivations of each sex in childrearing; motherhood and fatherhood have never been thought of as the same. Universally, women have cared for very young children, and men have typically played the child-care roles of provider, protector, and back-up assistant. No research has demonstrated that men and women, who obviously reflect the sexual dimorphism found throughout the higher animal kingdom that is related to the biology of reproduction, are not also fundamentally different in other ways--such as in the ability to nurture infants. Without substantial evidence to the contrary, we can not assume that men and women--given their radically different reproductive roles--could ever be psychologically and behaviorally the same. I believe we should think about gender roles and male-female equality, therefore, more in terms of complementarity, symmetry, and equivalency, than in terms of identity.²¹

Although it has brought many benefits to men as well as to women, the gender-role revolution of recent decades has not been kind to families.²² The negative effects on the family probably stem mostly from the rapid pace at which the revolution has taken place. But the extraordinary emphasis on gender similarities and on work-place equality between men and women, although necessary to counteract the kinds of social distortions still reflected in the views of conservatives, has downplayed women's reproductive roles and thus tended to denigrate

motherhood.²³ And the desirable efforts to change the role expectations for "husband" and "wife," so as to reduce male dominance and female subordination in the home, have tended to undermine the more socially important roles of "father" and "mother."²⁴

The gender-role revolution is implicated in today's historically high marital dissolution rates.²⁵ Gender roles within marriage have become increasingly ambiguous and are thus a frequent cause of marital discord.²⁶ This may be particularly true of economic roles: There is some evidence that the closer a wife's income gets to that of her husband's, the higher the probability of divorce.²⁷

The consequences of the gender-role revolution on women have received the bulk of scholarly attention, but equally important have been the consequences, mostly unintended, on men. Men, for example, seem increasingly reluctant to commit to a relationship. And when they do commit, they are less likely to stay committed. In addition to the fear of failure in a high divorce era, one broad reason for the decline in marital commitment among men is that men's traditional reasons for getting married have been weakened. Through the removal of the double standard of sexual behavior, for instance, women have gained most of the sexual freedoms that men have long held. But this change has also diminished one of the main reasons why men marry--to obtain regular, legitimate sex. Men can now get as much legitimate sex as they want outside of marriage.

Another reason men have traditionally married is to become an economic provider. One important factor in the positive correlation between a wife's income and the chances of divorce, noted above, has been labeled "the independence effect." Because women are more able to maintain themselves economically, they are less likely to stay in an unhappy marriage. But the other side of the coin is that because women are more able economically to maintain themselves, men have less reason for marrying and less compunction about breaking up a marriage once they are in it.

A fundamental problem these few examples point out is the failure to recognize that men and women are in many ways different. They have different sexual drives, different propensities toward children, different perspectives on relationships, different conceptions of morality, and perhaps even speak a different language.²⁸ They also have different reasons for marrying. A major social task that lies ahead, therefore, is how better to organize the modern family in recognition of these differences without retracting the positive benefits of the gender-role revolution. This is no easy task. But one starting point is to view marriage not as a tie between persons with identical roles, but as a complementary relationship between persons who will each bring different outlooks and abilities to the union.

It is both significant and hopeful that in modern societies today the emergence of a new realism about family matters has appeared, one which bodes well for the future of the family and the needs of children. The gender-role debate is turning more in the direction of frankly discussing gender differences. A growing number of women have begun to rethink their lives and their careers along lines different from those of men, with a new interest in "sequencing"

work and family pursuits, for example, in a way that enables them to spend more time with very young children.²⁹ In view of the new work roles of women, many men are becoming more actively involved in childrearing. And the structure of the work place is becoming more supportive of families and children, with the emergence of parental leave, flexible hours, and other measures that enable both parents to better combine paid work with child care. All of these trends should vigorously be encouraged.

The Subsidiary Moral Issues of the Right

Strong positions on four other moral issues--the prohibition of homosexuality, pornography, premarital sex, and abortion--have been forcefully put forth by the right in America as part of a "profamily" agenda. Although these issues have an obvious family relatedness, they are much less important to the promotion of strong families and child-centeredness than the issues considered above.

Homosexuality

Homosexuality is probably second only to abortion in being the most controversial social issue in America today. Yet the controversy over homosexuality greatly overemphasizes its moral significance as a threat to families. On this issue, and several of those discussed below, the distinction between prohibition, tolerance, and affirmation is important. The debate over homosexuality has tended to be between those who favor outright prohibition and those who favor unequivocal affirmation. The position advocated here is that society should, in support of personal liberty, tolerate a wide range of sexual practices including homosexuality. In support of the family, however, society should not necessarily affirm every aspect of homosexuality and the homosexual "lifestyle" as the moral or social equivalent of heterosexuality. As the basis of family life, and thus the key to both social order and societal continuation, heterosexuality should continue to command a high status as a social value.

Moral positions on homosexuality often rest on whether homosexuality is seen as biologically or culturally determined. Many homosexuals have striven in recent years to document that homosexuality is entirely biological, or "essentialist," in character. Like left-handedness or color blindness, it is argued, a person is born either homosexual or heterosexual, and little cultural conditioning, to say nothing of personal or social choice, is involved. In keeping with this assumption, a common (and probably erroneous) assertion is that homosexuals make up "about ten percent" of every population.

As I read the available evidence, it does not support the essentialist position. A biological proclivity may be a necessary, but it is not a sufficient, cause of most homosexuality. Homosexuality is most likely the result, as John Money has concluded, of (still undetermined) biological factors in combination, at certain critical stages of individual development, with a social learning or conditioning component.³⁰ The same holds true for almost all human

behavior.

That societies differ greatly in both the prevalence of homosexuality and in their acceptance of homosexual practices, supports the proposition that homosexuality is a partly learned (culturally induced) phenomenon. Some societies appear to be almost entirely free of overt homosexual practices. Others, such as some American Indian tribes, have sequential bisexuality built into their cultures. (Typically, boys immediately after puberty go through a culturally approved stage involving homosexual practices, but become as adults exclusively heterosexual.) Another societal variation is the concurrent bisexuality of adult Greek males, who had sex both with boys and with their wives. Further support for the proposition that homosexuality is a cultural phenomenon comes from the fact that societies, such as our own, have changed greatly over time in the prevalence of, and attitudes toward, homosexual practices.³¹

It is also important to stress that the term homosexuality refers to a wide spectrum of phenomena, ranging from casual and one-time sexual encounters between persons of the same sex, through bisexuality, to persons who believe that they were born homosexual have never been erotically attracted to the opposite sex. This suggests that the mix of biology and culture in the creation of homosexuality can be quite variable.

Humans are a remarkably sex-oriented species, and we engage in far more sexual activity than is necessary for procreation. Not only does much of our sexual activity have pure pleasure as its goal, but many people seem fully capable of having other than heterosexual interests. The sex drive can manifestly be focused on a wide variety of objects: people of the same sex, inanimate objects, animals, and one's own manipulations. Indeed, a sizable number of males in our society are presumed to have engaged in some non-heterosexual practices at some time during their life course.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, a strong moral stand has been taken against all non-heterosexual sex practices: masturbation, bestiality, and homosexuality (as well as "kinky" heterosexual practices). Yet on scientific grounds it is difficult to make the case that any of these practices, on their own, have a sufficiently negative social or personal impact to warrant moral, much less legal, prohibition. We should be tolerant of these practices when they are engaged in voluntarily, in private, and do no harm to others.

Such tolerance, however, needs to be distinguished from full affirmation. Societies that place a high value on individual rights and freedoms should tolerate a wide array of homosexual practices, but societies dedicated to the promotion of strong families and child-centeredness should not at the same time advocate or affirm all of the values associated with homosexuality as it is expressed today.

Much of the homosexuality we see about us today goes well beyond occasional or even regular homosexual practice. In recent decades, and apparently for the first time in world history on anything like the present scale, many homosexuals are pursuing a separate and

exclusive homosexual lifestyle. Indeed, the label "homosexual" to refer to a particular social status was not even invented until modern times. Throughout history many people have engaged in homosexual practices, but there seem to have been very few exclusive homosexuals of the type that see themselves (and are often seen by others) as a special status apart from heterosexuals. Today's exclusive homosexuals increasingly live apart from heterosexuals and espouse a subculture in which families and children have little place and homosexuality is put forth as the social and moral equivalent of heterosexuality. In the male homosexual world, this subculture is also relatively promiscuous and disparaging of monogamy.

If the exclusive homosexuality and homosexual subcultures becoming so prevalent in the modern world are largely constructed socially, and the evidence strongly suggests that they are, moral questions may properly be raised. Society can reasonably examine the nature of the social construction, for example, and, if necessary, seek changes. If certain political goals of the organized homosexuality community are not in society's best interest, it is reasonable that they be challenged. Society can also proscribe certain homosexual practices if they are socially destructive, just as it proscribes some heterosexual practices.

Nuclear familism and homosexualism as a lifestyle incorporate contradictory values and views of the world. It would be a moral contradiction for society to affirm and promote the nuclear family, its basis in heterosexuality, and its generation and nurturance of children, while at the same time affirming and promoting all of the values of the homosexual subculture. Fully aware of this contradiction, the homosexual community has become a leader in attempts to redefine the family under the banner of "family diversity," and to cast doubt on the validity and importance of heterosexuality. If they are really concerned about the well-being of the family, the moral agents of society should oppose these attempts.

As a case in point, one of the interesting moral questions that has arisen in recent years concerns the granting of legal and church marriages to homosexual couples. Through being legally and religiously married, many homosexual couples wish to fall under both the jurisdiction of family law (with its legally enforceable rights and duties) and be provided the spiritual blessing of the church. In considering this issue one should keep in mind that the main social purpose for the institution of marriage is the insurance of family stability for children.³² This institutional purpose, and therefore the importance of the social institution in general, would surely be compromised by incorporating the marriage of same-sex couples.

It is important to add, however, that society has a stake in the promotion of monogamous relationships among homosexuals and in protecting weaker partners in homosexual relationships from exploitation. For this reason, it seems reasonable to establish for homosexual couples marriage-like "domestic partnership" laws, along with their religious equivalents, that could extend to such couples some of the rights and responsibilities of the institution of marriage.

Pornography

Commercial pornography, mainly consumed by men, is pervasive in modern societies. Recently, the prohibition of pornography has become a burning issue that allies strange bedfellows--radical conservatives and radical feminists. Conservatives believe that it is helping to destroy marriage, while radical feminists hold that it promotes rape and sexual violence and is inherently degrading to women. Evidence to support these positions is limited.³³ Some experimental evidence suggests that the repeated viewing of sexual violence on screen desensitizes and disinhibits men, and fosters attitudes that at least trivialize rape. There is much less evidence that a moderate use of non-violent "erotica" pornography weakens marriages. Relevant to this issue is the fact that Japan, a very low-rape and strong family country, has a thriving market for pornography, much of which is extremely violent, and that the pornography industry has flourished in Sweden and Denmark, where women have a higher status than probably anywhere else in the world.

It is important to distinguish between the different kinds of pornography. Much current pornography, for example that available in the friendly local video store, merely portrays sex acts in which people morally and legally may engage in private. Such a portrayal of common reality (albeit in a distorted, exaggerated, and sleazy way) is certainly not everyone's dish of tea, but in this liberal age the case for its strict prohibition due to some overriding social reason is not an easy one to make.³⁴ At the other extreme is pornography that portrays, purely for the purpose of perverse titillation, patently offensive and illegal acts, for example sex with children and physical violence against women. The case for banning such obscene pornography is compelling.

The social problem of pornography is in some ways similar to that of alcohol. Like alcohol, pornography is something many people (men) desire and, when used strictly in moderation, it appears to be relatively innocuous from both a personal and social standpoint. As in the case of the public management of alcohol, the moral or legal prohibition of all forms of pornography is not the answer. In addition to the virtually insuperable difficulties of enforcing such a prohibition, it would probably do little to promote strong families. Yet all pornography should be kept out of the hands of children, and the availability of even legalized pornography to adults should be controlled.

Premarital Sex

One of the most prominent norms of the Victorian era was the stricture concerning having sex before marriage. It mainly applied to women, however, and was part of the now-infamous double standard. In this regard we have truly been through a social revolution in the past thirty years: few people today, women or men, marry as virgins or even desire their spouse to be a virgin.³⁵ Yet the "profamily" right still seeks to morally enforce this norm of sexual behavior.

If there were evidence to show that waiting until marriage to have sex would significantly strengthen marriages, a case could perhaps be made for continuing the moral prohibition of premarital sex--although for egalitarian reasons it should apply to both men and women. But I

know of no such evidence. To the contrary, members of fundamentalist and conservative Protestant denominations, for example, who almost surely practice premarital sexual continence more than the rest of the population, have a relatively high divorce rate.³⁶ Indeed, it is a plausible proposition that some premarital sexual experience actually enhances the institution of marriage.

In any event, two features of modern life suggest that it is highly unrealistic to continue to expect premarital sexual abstinence. First, the time period between puberty and marriage has lengthened dramatically.³⁷ Average marriage ages today are about twenty-four for women and twenty-six for men. This is some ten to fifteen years after puberty, which in turn comes at an earlier stage of life than ever before in history. Second, our culture and mass media have become highly charged with sexually oriented material.

We might be able to make some modifications in our culture, but we can not do much about the long period of time between sexual awakening and the marital state. Marriages at younger ages might be a solution, but such marriages are ill advised on other grounds. Victorian norms prohibiting premarital sex, therefore, seem clearly outmoded.

Moral concern should be focused not on the prohibition of premarital sex but on sexual promiscuity, teenage sex, and unprotected sex. Society does have an important stake in seeking to limit all three of these phenomena. Sexual promiscuity, the frequent and indiscriminate changes of sex partners, may well endanger marriages through establishing behavior patterns that are antithetical to stable, long-term relationships. Teenage sex, in the sense of sexuality engaged in by immature individuals, is an important moral issue because it involves individuals who are not yet mature enough to successfully envelop sexuality within a loving relationship. And the vast social problems of abortion, unwanted children, and teenage parents, to say nothing of contagious disease, dictate that all premarital sexuality that is unprotected by the use of safe and effective contraceptives should be considered morally out of bounds.

Abortion

Finally, a very brief word about what is undoubtedly the most divisive domestic issue in America today (and one of the most divisive in our nation's history).³⁸ This is obviously not the place to engage the terribly thorny moral questions that have dominated the abortion debate, such as at what point a fetus becomes a human life and whether or not abortion should be included under a women's right to privacy.³⁹ Many reasonable moral grounds exist for limiting, if not prohibiting, the practice of abortion, and almost no society morally condones abortion under any and all circumstances.⁴⁰ Yet as a threat to the institution of the family, the practice of abortion as it exists in America does not appear to be a serious concern.

From a moral perspective focusing strictly on strong, child-centered families, abortion is best viewed in connection with birth control. With current technological knowledge, there is no way to have a satisfactory birth-control system without the possibility of using abortion as a back up when other methods of birth control fail, a not infrequent occurrence given the current level of contraceptive technology. To oppose abortion is to oppose having a satisfactory birth control system.

Of course one can argue that any form of birth control is anti-child, and in the sense that it prevents children from being conceived, that is true. Yet the world hardly needs more children. What it needs is more wanted children, whose parents are able to rear them to become healthy, happy, and self-reliant adults.

At least in a comparison of nations, there is no evidence that tolerance of abortion is associated with anti-child attitudes. In fact, quite the opposite appears to be the case. Japan, for example, which typically receives very high marks for child-centeredness, has since World War II been highly tolerant of abortion. And many European nations, in which abortion has not generated the controversy found in the U.S., have stronger commitments to children than does our nation. It is important to add, however, that in most of these nations restrictions on abortion--and general moral concern about abortion--are considerably greater than in what is advocated by radical American pro-choicers.⁴¹

Conclusion

In trying to decide what moral positions to take regarding American family change and decline, the reasonable person today faces an agonizing quandary. Not only are firm cultural guidelines weakening, but the moral stands advocated by the right and the left are highly contradictory. The extreme right advocates a policy of return to the family form of an earlier era, while the extreme left advocates what often seems a virtual abandonment of the nuclear family in favor of alternatives.

As with most such extremes, the reasoned answer lies somewhere in the middle. The principal moral concern should be for strong and successful nuclear, child-rearing families. Evidence from the social sciences convincingly supports the view that such families are a fundamental social necessity with no adequate substitutes. Once this moral focal point is established, positions on such family-related issues as divorce, homosexuality, and abortion tend to fall into place.

There is no going back to the traditional male-dominated, separate-sphere, nuclear family of an earlier era. Changes in values and in the structure of society have made that family form obsolete. What we should be fostering instead are nuclear families in which women and men are equal partners--equal in power and decision making, and providing complementary and equivalent contributions. Two key characteristics of the traditional nuclear family, however, should be preserved at all costs: an enduring sense of family obligation, and the desire to put children first.

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