

## The Marriage Debates

*Anglican Theological Review*, vol. 83, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 347-355.  
© Catherine M. Wallace

My all-time-favorite undergraduate paper examined what critics call Chaucer's "marriage group debate." I don't remember now why it had that name, but I do indeed remember my stunned discovery that contemporary arguments about the purposes of marriage went back to 1395 or so. In *The Canterbury Tales*, The Wife of Bath, who has outlived several husbands, comments and argues in the interludes between the pilgrims' tales that marriage depends upon the mutual respect, equality, and freely-chosen commitment between marriage partners. Other travelers see her emphasis upon interpersonal relationships as a formula for social chaos and a violation of the natural order: duty, not love, holds a marriage together. Various stories are told to illustrate the different points of view, and in particular the claim that either wives or husbands are necessarily dominant in (and often unfaithful to) a marriage.

In fact the marriage debate is lot older than Chaucer, and its key issues seem not to have changed one iota from his time to ours, or for that matter since classical antiquity. In *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage, and Feminism* (Norton, 1997), Christopher Lasch offers a brief but astute socio-literary history of the classic tension between the free personal equality implicit in romantic love, on the one hand, and on the other those constraints, expectations, and obligations necessary for a marriage to endure for a lifetime and to provide for the financial security, adequate nurture, appropriate socialization, and due legal inheritance of children. When those constraints deteriorate, as Gertrude Himmelfarb argues in *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (Knopf, 1995) and again in *One Nation, Two Cultures* (Knopf, 1999), both divorce rates and illegitimacy skyrocket: children are the worse for it, and so thereby is the society as a whole.

Two very recent books within the marriage debate are particularly rich in potential for parish ministry and for general conversation about marriage within the church.

First on that list is Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (Doubleday, 2000). The subtitle is long but it gets the book's main idea down to half a sound-bite, which seems to be the current trend in subtitles. Marriage is actively good for you; it's not just an outmoded, useless, confining, abusive, bourgeois, patriarchal institution. The creative achievement of the book is its array of evidence: no matter how you look, where you look, what you ask, or how carefully you control for confounding variables, married people are better off than people who are not married. People who live together "without benefit of clergy" do not reap the same rewards.

All of the data on which the book is based comes from nationally representative samples and from studies published in major, reputable academic journals: this is world-class social science in highly readable form. That's not surprising: Waite is a sociologist at the University of Chicago. Gallagher is a journalist and I presume it may be to her credit that Waite's statistical data are explained with such engaging sparkle and clarity. Their argument is straightforward, cleanly organized, and eminently readable.

Waite and Gallagher are appropriately cautious about assigning causalities: when they speculate about reasons why, they make it very clear that they are speculating. But over and over again they suggest that this wide array of down-to-earth, practical goods follow reasonably from sustained commitment and mutual support, and that such compassionate commitment is in turn supported by how marriage is a publicly acknowledged social form.

It should come as no surprise that reviews have been very few and at best quite skeptical: how can commitment be good for us? What about the ideal of rugged individualism, and the popular portrait of divorce as an act of courageous, costly, self-redemptive self-realization? Yet another genuinely important book is falling quickly from the cultural horizon.

Needless to say, there are considerable implications here for the public status of sustained, committed relationships between persons of the same sex. Equally

obvious is how useful a book like this might be for youthful skeptics who think that a marriage certificate is “just a piece of paper.” *The Case for Marriage* might be very engaging for high school students or young singles, especially if paired with all the data demonstrating that the more often one cohabits the less likely one is to marry successfully.

On that point, see another title coming from U-Chicago & its environs: Robert T. Michael et al, *Sex In America: A Definitive Survey*, (Little, Brown & Co, 1994). That’s the readable general-audience version of a massive academic tome, titled *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (U Chicago Press, 1994). They also document that married people have the best and most frequent sex, and furthermore that we are overwhelmingly faithful to marriage vows. It’s amazing stuff.

Waite’s book ends with a small, select, and very intelligent list of organizations endeavoring to strengthen and sustain marriages, including a website, [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com), that offers access to a considerable array of resources. From all this wealth of material, Waite and Gallagher single out one program, developed by a married pair of lay Roman Catholics for use in parishes, which endeavors to link new marrieds into mentoring relationships with couples whose marriages have endured. See [www.marriagesavers.com](http://www.marriagesavers.com).

Above all, perhaps, *The Case for Marriage* implicitly raises very big questions about the pastoral care of single adults. Although some single people will quite reasonably find themselves upset or depressed by *The Case for Marriage*, it pulls into focus the power of healthy, kindly, supportive human relationships of any kind.

In that regard I was reminded of Patrick Glynn’s very engaging book, *God, The Evidence: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason in a Postsecular World* (Prima Publishing, 1997, 1999 [paperback]). Among other things, Glynn collects the evidence that people who are active in churches do better on a whole variety of social measures, even after you control for the possibility that they are active because they are happy, healthy, etc., and not the other way around. Surely

that's because some of the benefits that Waite and Gallagher attribute to marriage are also available through long-enduring friendships fostered by church communities. (Glynn's is another book I'd strongly recommend for teenagers, who suffer a lot from the casual contempt freely expressed by their unchurched classmates.) Ideally, it seems to me, Christian faith and practice help to form in us the capacity to be good friends generally, not merely or exclusively with our spouses.

In *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton UP, 1996) Rodney Stark brings the issue of supportive community into sharp focus from another perspective altogether. He contends that the church flourished in part because mutual care improved survival rates in a wide variety of ways, and in part because many were astounded by and attracted to that example of mutual care in the unquestionably brutal social reality of the ancient world. As various scholars have demonstrated in various ways, historically speaking there is no question that early Christianity was characterized by its particular support for single people and for the unmarried state of life generally.

My second major nominee for important new book on marriage is Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (Hyperion, 2000). Wallerstein and her colleagues put a narrative face upon existing statistics that children of divorce have relatively higher rates of difficulty in getting married and in staying married themselves. Through profiles of various adult children of divorce, Wallerstein *et al* attribute this difficulty to the absence of role models and, to a lesser extent, the disruption in the child's life caused by the parents' grief. In that regard, I always remember Barbara Kingsolver's image for the experience of divorce in her collection of essays, *High Tide in Tucson*: divorce, she says, is like amputating your own gangrenous leg without anesthesia. I suppose that some people marry frivolously and divorce frivolously, but every divorce I've ever witnessed seemed to me not the liberating choice depicted by popular cant but something closely akin to a slow, agonized, unreconciled death in the family.

As Waite and Gallagher will upset singles, Wallerstein et al will surely upset divorced parents—who are often single, after all. This is a very potent pair of books, in short: read them attentively and recommend them with careful forethought. That said, however, these books are vitally important reading for church leaders and policy-makers at all levels, lay and ordained, because it is so very clear that church community is beautifully situated to remedy or to prevent a considerable measure of the loss and suffering that these books describe.

In particular, Wallerstein's book suggests that we should be teaching children every step of the way about what Christians understand by Thomist "friendship with God" and by friendship with one another in the light of that relationship with God. No single pair of parents, no matter how fine, can be the sole models for their children of what commitment means, how it works, and why it's possible. Gallagher's presupposition is that parents are the child's sole model of sustained committed relationship. Empirically speaking, she may be right. Within Christian community, surely she is not. Both historians and sociologists argue that individual, isolated households cannot possibly succeed for long in transmitting so complex a heritage or withstanding the pressures exerted by a consumerist and individualist culture.

Background reading both for *The Legacy of Divorce* and *The Case for Marriage* should begin with Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture* (Knopf, 1997). Whitehead traces the complex history of changing attitudes toward divorce and in particular how we have become progressively more blind to the ways in which divorce leads to increasing rates of trouble for children. She attributes skyrocketing divorce rates to how expressive individualism undermines commitment, and how the triumph of the therapeutic has led to a general emphasis upon personal fulfillment at the expense of duty. Both children and the society as a whole, she insisted, are major stake-holders in the stability of marriage.

Another crucially important background work is David Popenoe's *Life Without Father* (The Free Press, 1996). He describes the sociological evidence

delineating the impact of fatherlessness upon children. Like Waite and Gallagher, he offers a stunning array of rigorous statistical evidence. No matter where you look, how you measure, and how many confounding variables you control for, children growing up without their own fathers in the household do less well on every available measure of outcome. “The case for marriage,” it seems, includes major benefits both for spouses and for children. Popenoe’s crucial conclusion, it seems to me, is that fathers have a tremendous personal contribution to make to their children’s development, *entirely aside from the financial security they can also provide*.

Two other background readings provide useful antidote for the naively ahistorical feeling that at some point in the not-so-distant past we had a clearer understanding of what marriage was all about and how to keep marriages together. There is no such point. There is merely the personal moment—which I can pinpoint to my Chaucer class in 1969—when each one of us realizes that marriage is spectacularly more complicated than it seemed to us when we were kids, when parents were merely inexplicable proto-hominid life forms oddly obsessed with courtesy, cleanliness, and homework.

The first of these historical resources is Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992, Basic Books). Coontz offers a shrewd array statistics about what the last century or so of American family life was really like. Although she is deeply concerned about the unprecedented depth and extent of changes in the coherence and cohesion of family structures, she is also a classically optimistic liberal, convinced that with just a little concerted effort we will figure this out and find new, more workable, above all far more stable social forms within which to rear children.

The second historical account is John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1966). Gillis is a social historian with a nuanced understanding of cultural change and the relationship between household and society. He makes two strongly-warranted claims. First, we must distinguish between the families we live in and the families

we live by, which is to say between our practical situations and our social ideals. Every age, he argues persuasively, has struggled with a sense of crisis originating in the chronic disparity between the ideal and the practical reality.

Second, the stability and moral strength of the individual household was once aided, abetted, and if need be supplemented by the stability and moral strength of the community as a whole. Beyond the literal family there were an array of metaphorical families--congregations, guilds, town councils, etc. etc.—to whom a person might turn in honest need and be honestly welcomed.

Now the situation is reversed. Especially since the rise of industrial capitalism, the morality of the private household is supposed to counteract the rapacious immorality of the culture at large, a task at which it largely fails. Private family “rituals” and the family’s heritage of stories about itself—both widely celebrated and advocated in the popular culture of “family-friendly” publications—are thin, sentimental, ultimately empty gestures toward the religious rituals and narratives that one located our lives securely within a system of moral truths and moral obligations unequivocally credited by the culture in general.

Taken together, *The Case for Marriage*, *The Legacy of Divorce*, *The Divorce Culture*, and *Life Without Father* offer a raft of sociological data not only supporting the wisdom of the sacramental marriage vows but also implicitly demonstrating how vitally we need the support of worship and worshipping community. There is a lot more to the life of faith than cost-benefit analysis of negative outcomes of specific behaviors. Such empirical data at best point us toward prudence, not virtue nor wisdom. But prudence is one very traditional first step upon the long spiritual journey, and we all quickly discover how much it helps to have supportive companionship on even that first step.

I turned with very high hopes, then, to Stephen G. Post, *More Lasting Unions: Christianity, the Family, and Society* (Eerdmans, 2000), from the Religion, Marriage, and Society series edited by Don S. Browning and John Wall. But I was quite disappointed. To Post’s credit, he offers a fairly straightforward summary of what scripture, theological tradition, and ecclesiological tradition

have had to say and to do with marriage for the last two thousand years. But he assumes that Christianity is of course “on the side” of whatever insures the stable families and enduring commitments that we need to flourish. That presumption may have some theoretical merit, but in practical terms it is both shallow and naive.

For instance, he notes but passes by the fact that Jesus “was critical of marriage only when it became an obstacle to his mission” (p.2). He concurs in Troeltsch’s claim that “Jesus also reminded his hearers that at times the family may need to be renounced ‘in response to some imperious spiritual demand’” (p.46). His history of ascetical and monastic traditions acknowledges that such individuals turned away from their extended birth family, but he seems blind to the ways in which the church thereby supported depriving an extended family of potentially important social and economic resources. Secularize that sort of thinking, and you get folks who walk out on marriages so as to fulfill their own “spiritual” quests. In short, the history he is recounting is much more equivocal in its cultural impact than he acknowledges: both out-and-out patriarchal oppression and expressive individualism have deep and massively tangled roots within Christianity.

The question, then—the enduring core of the marriage debates—is how most honestly and most wisely to adjudicate between individual spiritual growth and sustained commitment to what may at times prove utterly mundane relationships. That remains a theologically and spiritually challenging question.

Catherine M. Wallace  
Book Review Editor