

Marriage Ethics: The Unity of Science and Religion

By Thomas K. Johnson

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Since the time of the Enlightenment, religiously based ethics have had a bad reputation among many western intellectuals. Sigmund Freud could be taken as a spokesman for many scholars and educators in the way he saw Judeo-Christian ethics as irrational, guilt-producing, and falsely restrictive of natural freedom. Along with many others, Freud wanted a more "rational" approach to ethics. And if this rejection of religiously based ethics has had a central point of conflict, it could easily be in rejecting Judeo-Christian ethics with regard to marriage and sex, a rejection that came to cultural prominence with the "sexual revolution" of a generation ago. It is probably less common that secular intellectuals have explicitly rejected Judeo-Christian moral standards with regard to murder, theft, or lying.

But now this rejection of religiously based ethics is being called in question from a direction that may be surprising to some: empirical research in the social sciences. Numerous recent empirical studies in psychology and sociology have shown that people generally experience a much higher level of well-being and happiness if they practice life-time marriage and keep sexual relations within marriage. There is no longer any reason to see traditional religious rules against divorce and extra-marital sex as the irrational impositions of an arbitrary or non-existent God. Scientific research shows that the traditional religious rules about divorce and extra-marital sex are so deeply rooted in human nature that a reasonable person will affirm and follow them, whether or not one believes in God. Thus, this same social science tends to indirectly confirm the claim that these rules are God-given and built into creation.

I. The Traditional View

Before looking at the work of the social scientists, it would be good to review more precisely what was actually claimed by Judeo-Christian moral thinkers. The claim was not only that moral rules come from God. The claim was also that proper moral rules tend to contribute to the human good because these rules are rooted in or correspond to human nature and relationships. This was true whether one was talking about the ethics of sex, truth telling, protecting life and property, or whatever. At least since the time of Kant, philosophy has generally separated matters of duty (deontological ethics) from matters that contribute to the human good (teleological or utilitarian ethics). And this philosophical tendency is often seen in popular discussions that separate religious duty from human happiness.

But in the biblical tradition there is not a separation of considerations of duty from considerations of what contributes to human well-being. In the Bible itself there seems to be no tension between saying one should follow a moral rule because it comes from God and saying one should follow a moral rule because it contributes to the human good. On the one hand, after receiving the Ten Commandments from God and giving them to the people, Moses could use the language of duty before God to explain the importance of keeping the rules. "God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning" (Exodus 20:20). On the other hand, Moses could also use moral language that sounds teleological, that ties moral rules to the human good, when he explains why people should follow moral rules. "Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess" (Deuteronomy 5:33). The modern separation of moral duty from considerations of the human good is simply not present in the biblical perspective. The two are perfectly united because God is seen as the source of both.

A Christian thinker who understood this especially well was Princeton theologian Charles Hodge. He saw a complete unity of moral rules commanded by God and principles that serve the human good because "there is an imperfect revelation of [God's] law in the very constitution of our nature." And many of the laws of God mentioned in the Bible "are founded on the permanent relations of men in their present state of existence." Many biblical laws "are founded on the nature of things; that is, upon the constitution which God has seen fit to ordain." With this in mind we can turn to the social sciences.

A social scientist who is very highly regarded for his ability to synthesize the results of experiments in social science by hundreds of researchers from around the world is David G. Myers. His textbooks on introductory psychology and social psychology are very widely used by universities in the English speaking countries. In his various books he seems to get great pleasure from using the results of empirical research to destroy the myths that everyone supposedly "knows." A person should only read Myers if willing to have one's thinking challenged by real science. In this study we will use Myers' compilation of research results in the social sciences.

II. Cohabitation

Though it seems very common for people to say a couple should cohabit (live together without marriage) to see if they are compatible, in actual practice cohabitation generally does not lead to good results. In fact, there are several bad results that tend to come.

Several large studies, in both Europe and North America, have found that couples who cohabit have a much higher divorce rate than couples who do not cohabit before marriage. In the different studies in the various countries, the increase in divorce rate among those who cohabited ranges from being one third higher to as much as 80% higher. Rather than increasing marital happiness and stability by helping a person find the right partner, cohabitation strongly promotes divorce. (Myers, 29.) In addition, cohabitations tend to be much more violent than marriages. Various studies show that females are beaten up by their cohabiting partner far more often than wives by their husbands. Studies show that there is 80% to 400% more violence in cohabiting relationships than in marriage relationships. One study found that female cohabitees are eight times more likely to be murdered by their partners than wives by their husbands (Myers, 31, 32). Further contrasts are that cohabiting partners generally report a lower level of sexual satisfaction than do married couples. And cohabiting people are generally less happy and more prone to depression than married people. While it is well established by science that a happy marriage is the best indicator that a person will be happy with life as whole, cohabitants are only slightly more happy than single people. (Myers, 41, 42.)

III. Divorce and Single Motherhood

We are probably all aware of the high rates of divorce in most of Europe and North America. With some regional and national differences, it seems that roughly half of our marriages end in divorce. At the same time large numbers of women are giving birth to babies without ever marrying the men who father them, giving rise to the new term, "hit and run dads." This has prompted the social scientists to investigate divorce and single motherhood. The picture is not pretty.

The studies confirm what many suspected. Divorce leaves people feeling lonely, depressed, and rejected, often for many years. What is not so well known is that divorce also damages physical health, roughly as much as smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. The increased death rate means that divorced people tend to live a few years less than their still-married neighbors (Myers, 43). Divorce also strongly tends to lead to poverty, especially if there are children involved. Two households cost more than one. Because of reduced happiness, work motivation and earnings may go down. And relatively few men actually pay much alimony or child support. The absence of biological father seems to be the predominant factor in poverty among children, at least in the U.S. but probably in other countries as well (Myers, 75).

Many of the effects of divorce and single motherhood are felt by the children involved. Stated simply: father's absence creates a number of problems for children, whether that absence is due to divorce or the lack of marriage. Children of single parents have a much higher rate of abuse or neglect by a parent (Myers, 63). Children living with their biological mother and a step-father or the mother's boyfriend also face special risks: higher abuse rates, much higher murder rates, and a weaker incest taboo with the predictable results. Some social scientists write of a 70% "magic number": 70% of those with major social pathologies grew up in absent-father homes: 70% of prison inmates, 70% of adolescent murderers, 70% of teen runaways, and 70% of delinquents. Some scientists have begun to speak of an "invasion of barbarians" as a way of referring to boys who grow up without father care and therefore without the expectation of entering into the roles of husband and provider (Myers, 76, 77). Children of single-parent families and step-parent families are two to three times as likely to need psychological help. They are much more likely to engage in unprotected sex, smoke cigarettes, and to abuse drugs and alcohol. Whereas only about 12% of children living with two biological parents have serious problems in school, this jumps to about 22% if children live with a divorced mother, and to about 30% if the mother never married (Myers, 83).

IV. Scientific Conclusions

On the basis of his exhaustive review of the social science research, Myers affirms what he calls the "transcultural ideal: children thrive best when raised by two parents who are enduringly committed to each other and to their child's welfare" (Myers, 87). And he points out that 70% of divorces come at the end of low conflict marriages, marriages in which the level of conflict does not seriously hurt the children (Myers, 89, 90). One might add that in such low conflict marriages, divorce does not seem to be wise at all, given the human costs, and such marriages might readily be reconciled if there were the will to do so.

Some movement toward this "transcultural ideal" is possible. Practical, helpful steps can be taken. "Marital commitment, studies show, is sustained not only by attraction, but also by a moral conviction of the importance of marriage and by fear of the social and financial costs of breakup" (Myers, 47). This moral conviction and fear of costs or marital breakup can be raised in young people by a new generation of textbooks for schools and universities, books that might identify these scientific facts more clearly than those of the past, while also being oriented to the human good. Attitudes and actions can be significantly changed by laws and regulations about

marriage and divorce, and perhaps even by financial and tax policies. Well-designed marriage preparation classes can be extremely effective in giving couples the ideas, motivation, and practical skills necessary to make a marriage really work. The social sciences tell us that lifetime marriage (and the rejection of sex outside of marriage) is a very large factor in the happiness of individuals and the good of society as a whole. Science can also tell us that there are some things we can do to move closer to that ideal.

V. Philosophical Conclusions

On the basis of real science one can now affirm the Judeo-Christian moral rule, "You shall not commit adultery," as it was traditionally interpreted: you shall not break a marriage or engage in sex outside of marriage. Even an atheist must affirm that this rule has been scientifically shown to be crucial to human well-being. The rejection of this rule is now not only anti-religious but also anti-scientific. Historically Christians have claimed that this rule was both built into human nature and relationships by God, as well as proclaimed by God both in conscience and in the Ten Commandments. Science may not be able to prove that this rule comes from God, but today the leap from science to faith is much smaller than we thought in the past.

We are presenting here a paper which Dr. Johnson prepared and delivered for the fall conference (October 10-11, 2002) held in Crimea, Ukraine. For a complete description of this conference please see the last paragraph at the conclusion of the Russian version. Dr. Johnson's paper was translated into Russian by Georges Carillet.

Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D. teaches ethics and philosophy of religion in the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University, Prague.

Myers, D.G.: *The American Paradox, Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2000.