

MARRIAGE

Sociology and history of religion

Sociologically speaking, marriage is a sexual fellowship, the structure of which varies considerably according to general social conditions. It cannot be denied that extraordinarily various forms of marriage in fact exist and that the Christian definition of marriage as a life-long, indissoluble union between one man and one woman is recognized, in this strict form, only by Christians themselves.

Monogamous marriage, however, though dissoluble in certain circumstances, is very widespread indeed and is associated with no particular form of culture. Polygamous marriage is favored by complex social conditions where there is a particular demand for female workers, or where prestige and the desire for numerous offspring is involved.

The factors that determine the concrete structure of marriage can never be sought merely in terms of sex-life and sexual hygiene, or merely in terms of the relationship between man and woman. They are above all the needs of family and society -- that is, the demands of education, economics, property, social security, public morals, and the like. This is so because, in the long run, general social conditions are decisively affected by married life and family life.

So marriage has never been regarded as the private business of the two partners. It has always been fitted into the supra-individual, general human context of morality and religion and always considered to exist in view of the family, law, morals, and ethical rules which concern themselves more with this ordination than with the needs of marriage as such.

Hence, marriage, in the history of religion, is an objectively prescribed order that involves the partners in cosmic relationships. It is often held to have been instituted by the Supreme Being as a special state of life that can only be entered upon through ritual initiation. Wedding brings a new status; it is a turning point in the life of a person, like birth, puberty (admission among adults), and death, and determines whether we can speak of marriage or not.

As a rule, the marriage rite is celebrated only once between one man and one woman, although a wider range of sexual relationships of one sort or another is often permitted. In any case, the wedding makes marriages valid in the eyes of the community. There is really no personal relationship that can compare in importance with this state of marriage created by the wedding.

So we see that the idea of marriage as something willed by God is more deeply rooted in people's religious consciousness than one might at first suppose, considering the wide range of sexual relationships permitted in various cultures.

In order to gain as clear an insight as possible into marriage as the Church understands it, we must realize what a multitude of forms marriage may take and at the same time bear in mind the features common to those many forms.

Marriage in historical revelation

The creation narrative says that woman was created for man's sake, man being in need of help and completion. Woman is created as a suitable helper for Adam, as it were "opposite him". She is to be his lifelong companion. A man leaves father and mother for his wife's sake and becomes one flesh with her precisely because it is only in her that he finds all of himself -- only with her can he enter a union that has no parallel in the human order. It is even closer than the bond of descent with his father and mother. Humans, created male and female, are instructed to be fruitful and to fill the earth.

In the New Testament conception of marriage, another feature of the creation narrative plays an important part. It is the affirmation that the sexes are "hierarchically" ordered one to another -- that Adam's nature is the measure of Eve's nature.

This primordial priority and subordination underlies the whole relationship between the sexes, making their union possible. The priority, therefore, does not aim at favoring an individual but completion in oneness. The difference in position between man and woman is to be appreciated in terms of the oneness that is its goal and fruit. That difference gives each sex its own dignity and at the same time presupposes equality of value.

Man's dignity consists in being woman's head, woman's dignity in being the brightness and the glory of man. This priority and subordination is part of the order of creation. The judgment pronounced upon woman (Genesis 3:16) does not turn it into a moral and juridical subordination but simply recognizes a fact -- that as a consequence of sin woman will not only find many a burden in motherhood but will also be subjected to violence and exploitation at the hands of man. This is not a rule of conduct, implying that things ought to be so.

The Hebrew notion of marriage was "naturalistic", which looked with favor on marriage, children, and intercourse within the limitations set by the force of circumstances. In the New Testament, Jesus deepens the Hebrew conception of marriage in two respects. On the one hand, he spiritualizes it, not only forbidding the dismissal of the wife as an offense against the basic law of marriage contained in the creation narrative and ingrained in human nature, which makes man and wife one flesh, but also teaching that divorce does not sever the marriage bond since he declares that the re-marriage of divorced persons is adultery. Thus, he indicates that the deepest purpose of marriage in God's eyes is the oneness of man and wife.

On the other hand, Jesus consistently states that marriage is a kind of life proper to this

age, which will pass away with it. In heaven, there will be no marrying. Compared with the Kingdom of God and its demands, marriage becomes a matter of secondary importance, and the concerns of marriage must yield to the claims of his Second Coming in glory.

Jesus doubtless had this relative conception of marriage (with respect to the end) in the foreground of his mind, yet not in such a way as to lose sight of the value that marriage represents in its own right. After all, it was at a marriage feast that he performed his first miracle. Rather, that value, which God himself gave it, was set in a special light. At the same time it became clear that the value of marriage is a limited one when we consider the Kingdom of God.

In St. Paul's writings, he tells us (I Corinthians 6:12-20) that sexual union is not merely a marginal erotic function but an act that, by its very nature, so absorbs and expresses the whole personality as to be an entirely unique kind of self-revelation and self-commitment.

Then he stresses the spiritual equality of man and woman and makes it clear that in Christ the differences between the sexes, with all that they entail, are relatively unimportant.

Above all, Ephesians 5:21-33 interprets Christian marriage as mirroring Christ's marriage with the Church, which in turn is foreshadowed by Adam's relationship with his wife (Adam being a type of Christ). This means that in their marriage man and wife preserve the relationship between Christ and the Church and reflect it in their relationship so that the union of man and wife not only is compared to Christ's union with the Church but also is actually based on it. Thus, when husbands love their wives as their own flesh, they are only doing what Christ does with the Church. But this great mystery of the love of Christ for the Church is mysteriously prefigured, according to Ephesians, in the text of Genesis 2:24 about the mutual relationship of the sexes, and goes to constitute Christian marriage.

Accordingly, the relationship between man and wife is theologically set apart from all other human relationships -- that, for example, between children and parents -- of which it is only said, for instance, that they should be "in the Lord". Thus, we are given a view of marriage that makes it possible and necessary to regard marriage as a sacrament in the dogmatic sense.

According to the same text of Ephesians, conduct must agree with the relationship: wives are to be subject to their husbands "in all things". This subjection, however, is to the husband who for his wife's sake must lord like Christ. Only when he is lord unto her salvation does obedience become wholly possible. So the injunction to love one's wife is correlated with the injunction to obey one's husband.

In the Churches founded by St. Paul, women enjoyed a favored position, considering the outlook and standard prevalent at the time. He asserts their equal dignity and equal rights as had never been done before, raising marriage from the all too material state in which

he found it onto a spiritual and personal plane. His letters contain the definite beginnings of a specific Christian spirituality for married people, of which too little was made later.

His pastoral wisdom and theological insight make him affirm that marriage is necessary on account of the structure of human beings, and that to avoid disadvantages married people should not abstain from intercourse except for a sound reason and a short time. Because husband and wife no longer belong to themselves, they may not refuse each other except by mutual agreement, and by Christ's command neither must leave the other. Only by the death of one of the partners is the marriage-bond dissolved. Thus, Paul not only spiritualizes the "naturalistic" Jewish view of marriage but also shows how fragile it is.

Sex and marriage

We can say, then, that according to Genesis 2:18 and Ephesians 5:21-33, the nature of marriage is a mutual completing and perfection of the marriage partners through their union, which finds its strongest expression in sexual encounter. But the immanent meaning of marriage points beyond itself to a transcendental purpose -- personal and physical fruitfulness arising from the union and therefore common service of the world, especially begetting and bringing up children -- the family. This purpose, intrinsic to marriage and yet transcending it, flows from the way in which man and wife are ordered to each other in marriage, and necessarily follows from the nature of their union and the sexual act, which are ordained to fruitfulness. Being married perfects man and woman not only in their manhood and womanhood but also in the oneness that is proper to marriage. That union, which embraces every dimension of the personality, has a sexual dimension and therefore includes the ordination of sex to fruitfulness.

Marriage being thus intrinsically ordered to fatherhood and motherhood, sexual love exhibits fatherly and motherly characteristics from the first, as sexual behavior shows. By giving human beings a share in God's creative power, consummated union orients the partners to the human beings it brings forth. We must not, however, conclude from the fact that marriage is ordered to the child that marriage apart from children is meaningless or even non-existent. In that case, all marriages that were known in advance to be childless, or which eventually proved to be such, would be invalid. On the other hand, marriage is ordered not only to sexual encounter but also to procreation, and that so essentially that no one may contract a valid marriage on the understanding that there will be no sexual union or no children. Even where the partners *intend* to abstain, the *right* to sex is admitted; and the exclusion of children on principle invalidates the matrimonial contract.

Mutual completion

If marriage is seen as a saving state that leads to religious and moral perfection, then its

fundamental law must be the duty of the partners to do whatever will foster the love that completes and unites them and avoid whatever will frustrate and destroy it. They must orient themselves as companions to the transcendent purpose of marriage that makes their complementing union possible -- fruitfulness not merely biological but also moral and religious thanks to their new religious situation. The final criterion of what concrete acts foster or frustrate marriage must always be what acts befit the partners as such. Completion means concretely that the husband helps the wife to be a woman, and the wife helps the husband to be a man. The partners are to affirm each other in their differences, each thus helping the other to find selfhood.

The specific completion that marriage offers is of a sexual nature and must, therefore, be sought in the realm of sex. But it must be remembered that while sex is directly biological, it is indirectly affected by sociological, economic, and psychological factors and, therefore, also by spiritual and religious factors. And so, completion is to be sought in all of these domains in the way appropriate to each; the same is true with selfhood. However much it unites the partners, marriage must not impose uniformity but help each toward real manhood and womanhood -- which are always intrinsically ordered to fatherhood and motherhood. Hence, the choice of a partner must be made with care, taking everything into account, from religion to eugenics, which is the study of hereditary and genetic influences. It is all the more vital to consider eugenic factors, especially in the matter of children. The balance between mutations and elimination in humans now seems to be closer to the point where any further burdening of the inheritance might well jeopardize the continued existence of humankind.

Mixed marriages

Marriages between persons of different religions present a special problem in this respect.

While inevitably on the increase, they always make the common life of the partners considerably more difficult, the more in proportion as the partners have firm convictions of the religious dimension in marriage. Marriage already has a religious character in that it embraces the total human being, including his or her moral and religious dimensions.

As a rule, one cannot simply say that differences of religion between the partners need not matter if only they are tolerant of each other, for tolerance makes co-existence possible but not oneness. By the nature of the case, the disadvantages of a mixed marriage are even plainer when the marriage is blessed with children. The child is not only the fruit of physical union; the development of his or her personality is decisively affected by the totality of the unity of his or her parents' marriage.

So it is a mistake to look on mixed marriage as an admirable field for missionary work, for the attainment of each partner's special perfection presupposes common thinking and feeling to a high degree. It will be all the more effective the more the partners have humanly in common. The same ways of thinking and acting are more a foundation of marriage than a result of it. Mixed marriages come nearest to being justified where there is no religious prejudice -- a different thing from tolerance -- and especially where the

lack of prejudice is combined with receptiveness to religion.

Faithfulness to each other

The union of husband and wife calls for a partnership so intimate that it is neither possible nor desirable outside marriage. It means strict solidarity and absolute faithfulness and the closest intimacy at every level including the bodily one. This is what makes adultery so grave at its various levels.

Partnership and independence, however, do not conflict in marriage. They nourish each other because love addresses the other person in his or her freedom and tries to persuade, not to coerce, when sacrifices are necessary for the sake of the partnership. It follows that partnership ceases at the point where either partner attempts to abuse the other for selfish ends. Any such attempt, and any readiness to let oneself become the slavish instrument of the other, is sinful, the more grievously so the more personal judgment, freedom, and responsibility are violated.

Difficulties of adjustment in marriage are necessary but also may result from differences of origin or upbringing, ingrained habits, crowded living conditions, insufficient acquaintance with one another, and so on. They can be overcome only by a gradual growth in understanding and love. This is especially important when one is planning to establish a marital relationship but has not yet entered into it. All of these factors must be thoroughly addressed, discussed, and agreed upon before a permanent relationship is established.

Marriage looks beyond itself

Marriage must not be lived as solitude for two, for the completion and union marriage brings tends of its own nature to make the partners more open to God and to their neighbor. Moral and religious fruitfulness, when the circumstances are right, should also take concrete shape in physical fruitfulness, marriage widening out into the family. The aim must not be to produce as many children as possible but to found a family that will be qualitatively the best possible.

The right number of children is the number that will best favor the personal development of all members of the family, at the same time taking account of the wider interests of society. Regulation of births will thus be necessary, generally speaking, but should always be inspired by a generous spirit of self-giving love in accordance with the purpose of marital fruitfulness.

If marriage is divorced from its purpose -- which of course transcends physical fruitfulness but includes it within the bounds of what is physically possible and morally responsible -- its nature will also be misunderstood, and the result will be group selfishness hostile to life.

Conclusion

For all the reasons discussed, the Church teaches that marriage is intrinsically indissoluble -- that is, that married people, whether Christian or not, can never abandon their own marriage and then lawfully contract a new one. The Church, however, has the right and authority to decide that an apparent marriage was fundamentally flawed from the beginning and was thus not a valid marriage, thereby annulling it. The Courts have the same authority from the State. In this case, partners would be free to enter into another marriage after sufficient maturity is attained and flaws removed.

Common life can be given up, furthermore, for grave and just reasons (separation from bed and board) so as to avoid a greater evil -- that is, if continuing to live together as befits the nature and purpose of marriage as such would, in the actual circumstances, be contrary to the dignity of either party or the good of the family or both. Such would be the case of serious abuse of a spouse or children that would endanger their health or life. But because marriage is a total dedication that does not involve, but excludes, self-destruction, the right of the innocent party to a separation is limited by the duties of love. There must be grounds for separation so serious that it is too much to expect a person to continue common life, and the interests of the children must be safeguarded so far as possible.

--Waldemar Molinski, edited by Patrick J. Hession