

Shaping the Future of Marriage

As the debate over gay marriage heats up, religious thinkers, family advocates, and legal experts are calling for a deeper reexamination of marriage itself. The question is whether the institution represents a contract between two people – or something larger.

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To many, the ground under the ages-old institution of marriage seems to be shifting perilously.

Two state courts in America are pondering whether it's unconstitutional to deprive gays and lesbians of the right to marry; courts in Canadian provinces have already approved marriage rights for same-sex couples.

Some prominent US legal scholars are proposing an even more radical change – a “delegalization” of marriage altogether.

In response, political and religious conservatives are pressing for a constitutional amendment to enshrine the traditional definition of marriage, heralding a new battle in the culture wars.

But step back from the headlines and a deeper question emerges. What should marriage mean in the 21st century: Is it merely a contract between two people – or does it hold deeper social and spiritual import?

As explosive as it is, the gay rights issue could force a deeper consideration not only of who should be permitted to marry, but of what marriage means and what it demands.

“People are so hot and bothered about this issue,” says David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values. “Perhaps this will help us as a society to ask what marriage is and why we value it in the first place.”

One of the more radical proposals – delegalizing marriage – comes from experts involved in domestic-partnership law. In their view, marriage no longer performs the same function as in the past. Under their scenario, people could have religious marriages, and if they wanted legal protections and benefits, they would write a contract. But government would extend legal protections to anyone who might be caregivers – for children, older parents, or the disabled.

The American Law Institute, for example, has proposed that people who live together for a certain time be treated, if they break up, the same as if they were married, even without their consent.

The gay community is itself divided on marriage and its meaning. Some homosexuals are seeking lifelong, monogamous relationships and others a more “open marriage.” Some have no interest at all. But groups are committed to pursuing it on the basis of equal rights: Couples

should get the same government and business benefits no matter how they're constituted. Freedom to Marry (freedomtomarry.org) aims to achieve civil marriage in at least one state within the next five years.

These strands of thinking represent large moves in a cultural shift that is already well under way. Changes in US law and culture have transformed it from an institution with multiple meanings to a personal relationship between two individuals. The idea that marriage exists for the purpose of procreation and for protecting offspring has lost traction in the culture. Short-term consumer values of the marketplace have invaded intimate relationships.

"The big shift in our lifetime has been the shift toward the very individualized, privatized conception of what marriage is," Mr. Blankenhorn says.

"The key question," adds Bill Doherty, a family therapist at the University of Minnesota, "is whether it is simply a contract between two people for mutual benefit as long as they choose to keep it, or whether we want to hold onto the notion that it's a covenant made with the promise and expectation of permanence."

Many sociologists, therapists, and policymakers have come to agree in recent years on the latter view. They argue marriage retains profound import – and in particular provides important benefits when children are cared for by married parents. This view, advocated by liberals and conservatives, religious and nonreligious thinkers alike, has coalesced into the marriage movement.

Two heartening signs cheer marriage advocates: Some of the dire trends on divorce and single parenthood have recently stabilized; and young Americans express a strong desire for marriage in an enduring form.

"We've done surveys that demonstrate how deeply young people – the vast majority – yearn for marriage and want it to last a lifetime," says Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, codirector of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University. "They lament the absence of good information and role models, and the question always is, 'How do you do this?'"

Promoting values that counter the media

With the cultural environment weighing heavily against enduring marriage – from media promotion of sex without commitment, to hyper-individualism, to easy no-fault divorce – promoting countervalues is crucial, some say.

Commitment, perseverance, mutual regard and selflessness, and putting a premium on communication are some of the values seen as key to restoring a healthier marriage.

Unfortunately, "we're in an age of consumer marriage – this comes out not in people's stated values, but when their marriage is troubled," says Dr. Doherty. "Then they start asking, 'Is this meeting my needs? Am I getting what I deserve?'" In his book, "Take Back Your Marriage," the therapist details how to identify and resist consumer values in family relationships.

“Permanent commitment is really the linchpin of marriage,” Doherty insists, along with perseverance through hard times. In a study of people whose marriages had been troubled but were saved, he says a main point was that “they put one foot ahead of the other and persevered, often outlasting the problem.”

Similarly, Richard Land, of the Southern Baptist Convention, points to a University of Chicago study involving people who had described their marriage as “unhappy” or “very unhappy.” Of those who divorced, only 19 percent were happily remarried five years later. Of those who stayed in the marriage, more than 70 percent said they were now “happily” or “very happily” married.

Yet such commitment surprises people today, Dr. Land adds. When his son recently got married, at the end of their vows the couple said, “Whatever happens, I will never divorce you.”

“There were gasps in the audience,” Land says, although it was a very religious group.

One reason people choose to live together rather than marry is a bad past experience with marriage, says Dorian Solot, of the Alternatives to Marriage Project. Yet “commitment, stability, love and respect are values we advocate, too.”

Don Browning, of the University of Chicago Divinity School, emphasizes the importance of learning “equal regard” and mutuality along with the spiritual value, giving of self. Americans need to apply these values both to the personal bond and to communal support for marriage, he says.

“Marriage is in difficulty because of strains in society we haven’t learned how to live with – people want a career and children, and it’s hard to hold it all together,” he says. Societal supports are crucial in terms of jobs, flex time, parental leave provisions, and adequate healthcare.

Great expectations

“We expect more out of marriage now than any culture in human history, and there’s a big gap in the knowledge and skills needed to pull that off,” says Doherty. Contemporary marriage requires higher levels of communication. “A century ago, if you didn’t want to argue and walked away whenever issue came up, no one would divorce you,” he adds. “Now, you’re in trouble.”

To reduce divorce, a better balance between individual rights and family responsibilities should be encouraged, therapists say, along with helping couples gain the attitudes and skills to maintain intimate relationships. Today the federal government’s “Healthy Marriages” initiative is funding programs that train couples in communication skills and conflict resolution.

Those in the marriage movement are working on new proposals for government policies to strengthen marriage, but many also see limits to what government can do. Since more than 75 percent of marriages still take place in religious institutions, they are looking to houses of worship as the most promising point of impact.

“The churches’ role is very important, but they need to rediscover the history of marriage and help people regain a memory as to where this institution came from, “ says Dr. Browning, head of a major project on religion, culture and marriage.

Observers say that churches have done little to promote viable marriages in recent years, with the partial exception of the Roman Catholic church, which has a common marriage policy with a detailed preparation program.

With a great desire to help reduce divorce, Michael and Harriet McManus drew from that policy and founded Marriage Savers. They developed a “community marriage policy,” which they promote among pastors, priests, and rabbis in US and Canadian communities.

They’ve helped religious leaders establish joint commitments to marriage-preparation programs in more than 175 cities, many of which have seen dramatic drops in divorce rates. They also help individual congregations create marriage programs involving mentoring by couples who have successful marriages (marriagesavers.org).

A few denominations are waking to the need for greater support of marriage. Southern Baptists, for example, are developing materials to help local churches in a marriage ministry. The United Methodist Church plans to discuss marriage proposals at its 2004 convention.

Most mainline churches have been absorbed for years, however, in debate over whether to modify doctrine on homosexual practice. So far they’ve largely stayed with traditional teachings on fidelity in marriage between a man and woman, and chastity in singleness. But some struggle with how to minister to the cohabiting couples, heterosexual and homosexual, in their congregations.

And some within the marriage movement worry that the consensus built between religious liberals and conservatives could fall apart as the debate over gay marriage heats up.

With such fundamental changes in the works, the question is whether a reasoned conversation can be held – or would be heard – above the fray.