ESSAY

Toward a Christian Definition of Marriage: A Historical, Sociological, and Theological Approach

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In his ethics, Aristotle considered the *eudaimonic* well-being of humankind to be the end toward which all human action is to be directed. Aristotle's desired end is also the appointed end of the law of God (Deuteronomy 4:40). Human beings are physical, emotional, and spiritual creatures, and their *eudaimonic* well-being pertains to all aspects of their physical, emotional, and spiritual fullness. In this article, we consider the social, economic, and spiritual functions performed by marriages and families in pre-industrial societies as a means of achieving that end. We contrast this with how relatively well modern marriages and families in post-industrialized societies achieve that same end, or not.

Families and Human Well-being in Pre-industrialized Societies

Aristotle describes humans as social beings by nature, because left to themselves they are not self-sufficient, and so they form communities based on common needs, goals, aspirations, and dreams. They form communities first according to their basic needs for survival, and second according to their higher needs to lead a satisfied and fulfilled life. The family was, therefore, the basic unit of such a larger community. From an extensive body of literature surveyed and cited in support, we deduce the following conclusions about families in pre-industrialized societies that are relevant to this matter.

The main distinction between families in pre-industrialized societies from those of modern post-industrial societies is that the former functioned basically as units of economic production whose task is now replaced by industries and social services. The family of the pre-industrialized age usually consisted of a male head of the family, his wife and children, and his aging parents who needed care. The extended family lived together as they worked as a productive unit employed in agricultural fields, or otherwise producing the materials needed to sustain the family's survival. All family members worked at productive tasks differentiated only by sex and age. For large families in which the members depended on each other for survival, it was considered morally obligatory to support each other through all the adversities of life, a task of life security that is now done by our life insurance and other service agencies.

Sexual drive had its appointed end in procreation. In his treatise "On the Good of Marriage," Saint Augustine legitimized sex only for the purpose of procreation, not for pleasure. He wrote that "But because that Continence is of larger desert, but to pay the due of marriage is no crime, but to demand it beyond the necessity of begetting is a venial fault"

(Deferrari 1955). Children were continually born until the age of infertility mainly because life expectancy was low due to deadly plagues and wars often suddenly wiping out millions in the population. Children were fostered and brought up in discipline by adults in the family, not necessarily the biological parents. So pre-industrial families functioned socially and economically to sustain and secure life. Thus the love of the husband and wife was vastly different from modern romantic notions, as it performed a larger socio-economic function of sustaining and securing life. Hence, when preaching on marriage, John Chrysostom, the prominent 4th century Christian theologian asserted that "The love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together" (Bynneman and Newbery 1581).

However, humans do not live by bread alone. They aspire to many other values that make experience of life satisfying and labor under the sun worthwhile. There are many values that have no survival value, but yet make the experience of life worthwhile. As C. S. Lewis said regarding the emotional fulfillment humans find in affectionate companionships, "Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival" (Lewis, 2017). The emotional ties developed by pre-industrial kin during the course of their labor satisfied their need for companionship and emotional fulfillment. Romantic love was not wholly absent, but it was minimal in marriages that were more of a contractual agreement based upon a specific and sharp, gender-based division of labor.

Modern Families and Human Well-being

It is the very element of romantic love found missing in pre-industrial marriages that modern marriages sought to make their very foundation. The prominent 20th century philosopher Bertrand Russell opined that

> Often a marriage hardly differs from prostitution except by being harder to escape from. The whole basis of these evils is economic. Economic causes make marriage a matter of bargain and contract, in which affection is quite secondary, and its absence constitutes no recognized reason for liberation. Marriage should be a free, spontaneous meeting of mutual instinct, filled with happiness not unmixed with a feeling akin to awe. (Russel, 2009)

Thus Russell calls for marriages that are based mainly on romantically affectionate relationships. Modern marriages in post-industrial societies, with its basic economic function replaced by industry, now sought to make romantic, passionate, affectionate and emotionally fulfilling companionship its cornerstone. Young people of the post-industrial era replaced the marriages arranged by families of the respective spouses mainly according to practical and economic reasons with self-selected marriages based on mutually affectionate, passionate, and romantic relationships.

A survey carried out by Pew Research in 2013 reported that 88% of Americans cited passionate liking for the other person, which they termed love, as the reason for marriage. However, this motivation was strained by the economic center shifting away from the family. The family was no longer the center of economics and wealth production, as industry

became the center instead. This meant that marriage partners spent most of their time at their jobs in industry, which left them very little time or emotional energy to pursue their idea of romantic, passionate love and companionship in the family. With this shift of economic production away from the family, adult members spent most of their time at work while the children were at schools and colleges. Thus this led to isolation of family members from each other and emotional abandonment.

This in turn gave rise to the concept of "family quality time" in the modern nuclear family, which required time, leisure, material resources, and effort to be invested in each other's emotional lives. However, this was ill afforded by many whose long work hours drained them of any emotional energy and leisure to invest in each other's emotional lives. Therefore the romantic model of marriage and family became a luxury available only to the affluent social classes who could afford the leisure and material resources necessary to pursue it. Many others struggled to maintain some work-family life balance, if there was any at all, as work consumed most of their lives. They also had to cope with the economic and emotional cost of completely outsourcing the educational training of their children. Acquiring survival skills was previously done within the family in pre-industrial families, as the children learned their trade and skill from their father, but now the training of children was outsourced to schools and colleges for training that enabled them to enter industry, from which they could earn a livelihood.

Besides these strains on the modern institution of marriage, Alain de Botton, the British philosopher and founder of 'The School of Life,' points out the fundamental flaw in the modern romantic model of marriage. He explains that "Romanticism took marriage (hitherto seen as a practical and emotionally temperate union) and fused it together with the passionate love story to create a unique proposition: the life-long passionate love marriage" (Botton 2016). With the foundation of marriage having shifted to emotionally fulfilling and romantically affectionate relationships, Alain de Botton points out the incompatibility of pursuing a passionate romantic relationship within a marriage. Indeed, he contends that many times we have to be disloyal to our romantic inclinations in order to maintain marital faithfulness.

Marriage in Pursuit of Goods Beyond the Material Goods of Life

However, regardless how well modern marriages do in attaining these goods of life, Aristotle's proposed end of *eudaimonic* well-being of humans is only attained by human beings cleaving toward the highest good, which is God himself. Saint Augustine, in his *City of God,* says that "the happy life which all men desire cannot be reached by any who does not cleave with a pure and holy love to that one supreme good, the unchangeable God" (Dods 2018). As has been pointed out by John Piper, God's passion for his glory and the deep desire of humans for happiness are not antithetical. Rather, it is in human enjoyment of the infinite goodness of God in tangible ways that praise and thankfulness overflow, and God is most glorified.

This cleaving of humans toward the highest good, which is toward God, happened within the religious hierarchy of pre-industrial societies, and in which the family formed the basic building block of the larger community. Male headship was predominant in this hierarchy, as it was in every other sphere of life. The grit and physical power that the pre-industrial world required favored this social hierarchy. The accounts of many important people from the classical world found in the Oeconomicus of Xenophon and Aristotle serve to establish this fact. Thus Saint Paul's instructions of male leadership/headship in spiritual matters found in his epistles can be seen as a universal phenomenon in the ancient world, and can be established by parallels found in ancient texts like Plutarch's *conjugalia praecepta*. However, the Protestant Reformation opposed religious hierarchy by reducing power concentrations in the hierarchy, and democratizing and privatizing faith. The industrial revolution that soon followed empowered males and females alike with white collar jobs that soon leveled the playing field and evened the power balance that previously favored males. As a consequence of this in the modern world, we have faith that is privatized, and individual males and females being their own popes and authorities in their spiritual seeking.

Conclusion

In pre-industrial societies, the social institution of marriage and family provided procreation, child rearing, economic production, and social security. In the process, it also provided a community life complete with emotionally fulfilling relationships, and thus, along with its spiritual functions, secured the larger *eudaimonic* well-being of society. It was this institution that Biblical writers approved when they wrote: "Marriage is to be honored by all" (Hebrews 13:4). Any model of marriage and family can only be evaluated by whether it is faithful to the model of marriage approved by the Bible, which can only be tested by whether it is able to fulfill the functions of marriage and family approved by God in the Bible. Therefore all changes to this classic institution, to whatever degree, must take this test of biblical fidelity.

In the pre-industrial world, marriage was not a personal choice of finding self-fulfillment in a partner the way it is today, but rather the collective pro-life choice of the community on which its collective well-being depended. This is why Plato, in his "Laws," says "Let there be one word concerning all marriages: Every man shall follow, not after the marriage which is most pleasing to himself, but after that which is most beneficial to the state" (Schofield and Griffith 2016). In post-industrial societies, many functions of pre-industrial marriage and family have been replaced. In industrial society, machines and computers replaced the economic function of the family, and the family was forced to outsource the care and training of children to schools and colleges. It has even made in vitro fertilization possible to replace the traditional procreation function of the conjugal union. Thus we await the ingenuity of the post-industrial community to see how ably it can replace the many functions of the pre-industrial family in bringing about the *eudaimonic* well-being

society, or if it accepts its failings and falls back to traditional pre-industrial systems to achieve that end. Whatever is to be done is to be hastened, because the happiness and *eudaimonic* well-being of humankind depends on it.

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