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Sex, Marriage and Science



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Pro mundis

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Sex, Marriage, and Science¹

Thomas K. Johnson

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.

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 support the claim that these rules are God-given and built into creation.

Before looking at the social science it is good to recall what has been normally claimed by Christian ethicists. The claim is not only that moral rules come from God; the claim is 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 is true whether one is talking about the ethics of sex, truth telling, protecting life and property, or whatever. Outside of biblically informed ethics there is a strong tendency to separate matters of duty (deontological ethics) from matters that contribute to human well-being (utilitarian ethics). This secular tendency is often seen in popular discussions that

separate religious duty from human happiness. But within the biblical perspective, there is no separation of considerations of God given duty from considerations of human well-being. In the Bible 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. For example, after receiving The 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 the 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 two are perfectly united because God is the source of moral duty and principles of human well being.

An ethicist 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.”² Many biblical laws are “founded on the permanent relations of men in their present state of existence,”

or, as he sometimes says, “are founded on the nature of things; that is, upon the constitution which God has seen fit to ordain.”³ 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 experimental research by hundreds of social scientists from around the world is David G. Myers. In his various books he seems to take pleasure from using the results of research in the social sciences to destroy the myths that everyone supposedly “knows.” In this study we will use Myer’s compilation of research results in the social sciences. Myers invites this type of use of his works, for he openly acknowledges his deep Christian faith, and he has written some interesting studies on the relation between religion and psychology.⁴ But Myers writes as an academic psychologist who is both an award winning researcher in his specialty of social psychology and the author of textbooks that are some of the most widely read in Western culture.⁵

His approach to psychology is that it should be based on precise research, not on speculation, ideology or anecdotes. He says,

My vocation, as one who distills psychological science for various audiences, is to pull together the emerging research and reflect on its human significance. ... I rely much less on compelling stories than on research findings. As an experimental social psychologist – one who studies how people view, affect

*and relate to one another – I'm not much persuaded by anecdotes, testimonials or inspirational pronouncements. When forming opinions about the social world, I tell people, beware of those who tell heart rending but atypical stories.*⁶

To this he adds, "This scientific perspective is quite unlike the postmodern subjectivism that dismisses evidence as hardly more than collected biases."⁷

This does not mean that Myers believes that research and writing in the social sciences is somehow objective or unaffected by the worldview, bias or ideology of the social scientist. He openly confesses, "In looking for evidence, and in deciding what findings to report and how to report them, we are sometimes subtly steered by our hunches, our wishes, our values within."⁸ However, Myers is confident that social scientific research performed according to exacting scientific standards and which is fairly reported can do much to overcome and correct personal hunches, popular wisdom and ideological pseudo-social science, all of which he regards as often being largely wrong.⁹

What Myers discovers in his extensive research in the social sciences is that human life and communities flourish and do well when people follow certain principles and develop the related patterns of behavior. And conversely, the opposite patterns of behavior are very destructive of human happiness and well-being. These results are so conclusive, Myers believes, that they should shape our definition of what it means to

make responsible choices and decisions, whether in government policy, educational priorities, personal lifestyle choices or assessing what it means for the media to be socially responsible.

Many of the most destructive patterns of behavior in the developed world of the new millennium are closely tied to our rather extreme individualism. Myers summarizes radical individualism in these terms:

*Do your own thing. Seek your own bliss. Challenge authority. If it feels good, do it. Shun conformity. Don't force your values on others. Assert your personal rights (to own guns, sell pornography, do business free of regulations). Protect your privacy. Cut taxes and raise executive pay (personal income takes priority over the common good). To love others, first love yourself. Listen to your own heart. Prefer solo spirituality to communal religion. Be self-sufficient. Expect others likewise to believe in themselves and to make it on their own. Such sentiments define the heart of economic and social individualism, which finds its peak expression in modern America.*¹⁰

Myers claims, on the basis of impressive amounts of empirical scientific research, not just his personal preference, that "for today's radical individualism, we pay a price: a social recession that imperils children, corrodes civility and diminishes happiness. When individualism is taken to an extreme, individuals become its ironic casualties."¹¹

For this reason Myers advocates, “a new American dream – one that renews our social ecology with values and policies that balance ‘me thinking’ with ‘we thinking.’”¹²

An important part of the transition from a moderate individualism to an extreme or radical individualism, Myers claims, was the so-called “sexual revolution” of the late twentieth century. And Myers is one of the many sociologists who think the sexual revolution came at the cost of a terrible amount of human suffering. In regard to what he calls the “myth” that people should live together, cohabit, before getting married to see if they are compatible, he writes,

Alas, the myth crumbles. Most cohabitations break up before marriage. In 1995, only 10 percent of 15-to 44-year-old women reported that their first cohabitation was still intact. But what about those who, after a trial marriage, decide to marry? Ten recent studies concur that couples who cohabit with their spouses-to-be have higher divorce rates than those who don't. Several studies illustrate:

- *A U.S. survey of 13,000 adults found that couples who lived together before marriage were one-third more likely to separate or divorce within a decade.*
- *Another national study has followed 1.180 persons since 1980. By 1992, divorces had occurred among 29 percent of those who had cohabited before marriage and 13 percent of those who had not. In the 1995 National Survey of*

Family Growth, the corresponding divorce percentages were 26 and 15 within five years of marriage.

- *A 1990 Gallup survey of still-married Americans also found that 40 percent of those who had cohabited before marrying, but only 21 percent of those who had not, said they might divorce.*
- *A Canadian national survey of 5,300 women found that those who cohabited were 54 percent more likely to divorce within 15 years.*
- *A Swedish study of 4,300 women found cohabitation linked with an 80 percent greater risk of divorce.*
- *And if either partner was a “serial cohabitor” – having previously cohabited with one or more others besides the spouse – the likelihood of divorce is even greater.¹³*

Before looking at the effects of cohabitation on human well-being and happiness because of its association with divorce, Myers summarizes what has been learned by recent studies in psychology, sociology and economics that directly assess the effects of cohabitation.

Women, especially, have paid a price for replacing marriage with cohabitation. Over their lifetimes, women have tended to work and earn less. Thus they have more to lose by replacing a legal partnership with a no-strings attached relationship. Upon separation or death, cohabitees have limited rights to each other's accumulated assets. The cohabitation revolution has therefore not

supported women's quest for economic parity with men. Perhaps due to their relative youth, lesser education, greater poverty and the presence of stepchildren, female cohabitantes are also much more likely than married women to be victims of domestic violence. In Canada, they are four times more likely to be assaulted by their partner and eight times more likely to be murdered. In the United States, even after controlling for education, race, age and gender, people who live together are 1.8 times more likely than married people to have violent arguments.¹⁴

And to that summary Myers adds the further comment, "Cohabiting people are unhappier and more vulnerable to depression – an effect partly attributed to cohabitation's insecurity."¹⁵ And though cohabiting couples tend to be at least as sexually active as married couples their age, yet those cohabiting are "less likely to report that their sex is physically or emotionally satisfying."¹⁶

Myers sees cohabitation as reducing human wellbeing because it replaces marriage for those currently cohabiting, tends to end in divorce for those who cohabit before marriage and also leads to reduced levels of happiness in marriage for those who cohabited before marriage.¹⁷ The proper context for understanding this is provided by the tremendous amount of research in the social sciences that documents a very strong connection between marriage and a sense of happiness or well-being.

Whether young or old, male or female, rich or poor, people in stable, loving relationships do enjoy greater well-being. Survey after survey of many tens of thousands of Europeans and Americans have produced this consistent result: Compared to the single or widowed, and especially compared to those divorced or separated, married people report being happier and more satisfied with life. In the United States, for example, fewer than 25 percent of unmarried adults but nearly 40 percent of married adults report being "very happy." Despite TV images of a pleasure-filled single life, and caustic comments about the "bondage," "chains," and "yoke" of marriage, a stubborn truth remains: Most people are happier attached than unattached.¹⁸

In addition Myers points out, "People who say their marriage is satisfying ... rarely report being unhappy, discontented with life or depressed."¹⁹ And "happiness with marriage predicts overall happiness much better than does satisfaction with jobs, finances or community."²⁰ However, "cohabitants are only slightly happier than single people."²¹

So what does divorce do to people? Myers agrees with many social scientists in his observation that divorce is very damaging to physical health. He quotes biologist Harold Morowitz, "Being divorced and a nonsmoker is slightly less dangerous than smoking a pack or more a day and staying married."²² And Myers is quite aware of the way divorce tends to lead to emotional depression

and economic poverty.²³ But Myers chooses to emphasize the effect of divorce on the children whose parents divorce, and in that discussion to also discuss the distinctive problems of children whose parents never get married.

One of the distinctive problems of children whose parents divorce or never marry is a much higher risk of suffering abuse at home. Myers reports, "A U.S. government study in 1996 found that children of single parents are 80 percent more at risk for abuse or neglect. A recent Canadian study of 2,447 allegedly abused children found that the proportion living in single-parent families was triple the proportion of two-parent families."²⁴ This leads Myers to affirm the U.N. Secretary General's claim that "family breakdown is reflected in ... child-abuse and neglect."²⁵ In addition Myers points out that, "Although usually caring and supportive, stepfathers and live-in boyfriends more often abuse children than do biological fathers, for whom selfless fatherly love comes more naturally." He also notes, "the incest taboo is weaker between stepfathers and stepdaughters they did not know as infants," and, "infants living with stepparents are at least 60 times more likely to be murdered (nearly always by a stepfather) than those living with natural parents."²⁶ Myers thinks the moral implication is clear: "there can hardly be a better child abuse prevention program than the renewal of marriage."²⁷

Another distinctive problem of children whose parents divorce or never

marry is poverty. "Poverty claims 13 percent of children under age 6 living with two parents and nearly five times as many – 59 percent – of children living with single mothers."²⁸ And Myers notes that the poverty rate is even higher among mothers who were never married.

A third distinctive problem is that of crime and delinquency among boys who grow up without their father in the home. Myers notes that "father-absence rates predict crime,"²⁹ and cites David Lykken's analysis that "the sons of single parents are at seven times greater risk of incarceration than sons reared by two biological parents."³⁰ Myers agrees with other social scientists in noting 70 percent as an almost magic number. Seventy percent of runaways, adolescent murderers and long-term prisoners come from fatherless homes. He notes that father involvement restrains male hypermasculinity and aggression, affirming Daniel Moynihan's analogy of an "invasion of barbarians," "teenage boys who become enemies of civilization unless tamed by father care and their entry into marriage and the provider role."³¹ Myers is convinced that the "invasion of barbarians" within the developed countries is largely caused by the lack of fathers in the home during the boys' teenage years. This is generally either the result of divorce or the result of the parents never marrying.

A fourth problem that Myers notes among children whose parents divorce or never marry is a broad package of health, educational and psychological

problems. Relating to psychological health Myers notes that “children of all forms of single-parent and stepparent families were two to three times as likely to have needed or received psychological help during the previous year.”³² And he adds, “even after controlling for sex, race, verbal ability and parental education, youths from non-disrupted families were half as likely to have been treated for psychological problems.”³³ These problems are clearly not only an American phenomenon, for “One Swedish study of the more than 15,000 children born in Stockholm in 1953 and still living there in 1963 found that ‘parental separation or divorce has negative effects on later mental health whenever it occurs and regardless of the socioeconomic status of the household.’”³⁴ Myers thinks reports of this type are under-publicized.

On the issue of the physical health of children whose parents divorce, he notes, “Children from divided families are much more likely to engage in unprotected sex, smoke cigarettes and abuse drugs and alcohol.” The total effect of divorce on children’s health is such that “parental divorce predicts a shorter life by four years.”³⁵ “Greedy morticians, it has been said, should advocate divorce.”³⁶

Children whose parents divorce or never marry also face increased educational and academic problems. “An analysis of Census Bureau data from 115,000 15- to 24-year-olds revealed that among whites, adolescent drop out rates were 61 percent higher among

those in female-headed households.”³⁷ Another study concluded, “the adjusted risk of dropping out of high school was 29 percent among children of lone parents or stepfamilies but only 13 percent among children of two-parent households.”³⁸ And a different research group discovered that “children in intact families were, no matter what their age or race, half as vulnerable to school problems and were a third less likely to repeat a grade.”³⁹

On the basis of this research in the social sciences Myers affirms and advocates 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.”⁴⁰ Though this is not exactly the language of theology or philosophy, Myers is claiming that the best research in the social sciences shows that people find happiness and well-being when they follow the norms about marriage and family that the Judeo-Christian tradition considers to be God-given. This is a social science oriented confirmation of the Christian claim that God’s law is built into Creation, human nature, and human relationships, coming from one of the great social scientists of our time.

What Myers calls “transcultural ideals” discovered by the social sciences are what theologians have called the natural law, the sometimes unrecognized but always present God-given demand that we practice justice, love, faithfulness, honesty, etc.⁴¹ Myers’ work supports the Christian claim that while philosophy

can be relativistic, life is not relativistic, since there truly are norms that are present in human experience. Myers has investigated matters related to the need for practicing faithfulness in the realm of sex, marriage and family. Presumably other studies in the social sciences could show the need for following “transcultural ideals” in other realms of life. One could expect studies in economics to show the need for honesty, while studies in political science might show the need to practice justice.

The social sciences may not be able to prove that there is a natural moral law that is known and present in human

experience because it comes to us from God through creation; there still is a leap, or at least a step, from science to faith. But the social sciences can show that a rational, well informed approach to sexual ethics will not mean the rejection of biblical teaching. Stated more strongly, a rational and well informed approach to sexuality will mean rejecting the Sexual Revolution. With only a trace of exaggeration one might claim that the old commandment “You shall not commit adultery” makes so much sense that an intelligent atheist would follow it.

Annotation Anmerkungen

¹ Much of this article is derived from chapter three of Thomas K. Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics: An Evangelical Proposal* (Bonn: Verlag fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2005). Other parts are derived from the article “Marriage Ethics: The Unity of Science and Religion,” www.WRFnet.org, March 2003.

² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, reprint 1986; originally published in the 1870s), p. 267.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Some of his studies on the relationship between psychology and the Christian faith include: David G. Myers, *The Human Puzzle: Psychological Research and Christian Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); *The Inflated Self: Human Illusions and the Biblical Call to Hope* (New York: Seabury, 1980); T. E. Ludwing, M. Westphal, R. J. Klay, & D. G. Myers, *Inflation, Poor-talk, and the Gospel* (Valley Forge: Judson Press,

1981; M. Bolt & D. G. Myers, *The Human Connection: How People Change People* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity, 1984); and D. G. Myers & M. Jeeves, *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987, 2002).

⁵ Some of Myers’ widely used textbooks include *Psychology* (Worth Publishers, 6th edition), *Exploring Psychology* (Worth Publishers, 5th edition), *Social Psychology* (McGraw-Hill, 7th edition), and *Exploring Social Psychology* (McGraw-Hill, 2nd edition).

⁶ David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, Forward by Martin E. Marty (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. xiii. Though the title of this book is American, Myers often uses European research and address problems common to the entire Western world. His book could almost be called *The Western Paradox*.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ibid. p. xiv.

⁹ As one example, Myers often criticizes pseudo-scientific belief in the occult or in paranormal abilities, such as ESP, mental telepathy or mind reading. He writes, "Poke at claims of the occult and the paranormal, and time and again one is left holding a popped balloon. The more I learn about the human senses, the more convinced I am that what is truly extraordinary is not extra-sensory perception, claims for which inevitably dissolve upon investigations, but rather our very ordinary moment-to-moment sensory experiences of organizing formless neural impulses into colorful sights and meaningful sounds." Ibid. p. 265.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 7.

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 7, 8.

¹² Ibid. p. 8.

¹³ Ibid. p. 29.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 30.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 32.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Discovering the Pathway to Fulfillment, Well-being, and Enduring Personal Joy* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), p. 163.

¹⁸ *The Pursuit of Happiness*, p. 156.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *The American Paradox*, p. 43.

²¹ Ibid. p. 43.

²² Ibid. p. 43. Harold Morowitz is quoted in James L. Lynch, *The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness* (New York: Basic, 1977), pp. 45, 46.

²³ Ibid. pp. 43 and 47.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 63.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 64. Myers is quoting from the Report of the Secretary General to the Forty-Eighth Session of the United Nations, Item 110, "Social Development Including Questions Relating to the World Social Situation, and to Youth, Aging, Disabled Persons, and the Family," August 19, 1993, p. 38.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 64.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 65.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 73.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 116.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 117. The quotation is from David T. Lykken, "On the Causes of Crime and Violence: A Reply to Aber and Rappaport," *Applied and Preventive Psychology* 3 (1994): pp. 55-58.

³¹ Ibid. p. 77.

³² Ibid. p. 78.

³³ Ibid. p. 79.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 82. Myers is quoting Duncan W. G. Timms, *Family Structure in Childhood and Mental Health in Adolescence* (Stockholm: Department of Sociology, University of Stockholm, 1991), p. 93.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 79.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 80.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 82.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 87.

⁴¹ Myers advocates an understanding of the relationship between psychology and theology that he calls "levels-of-understanding," which means that different academic disciplines could describe the same phenomenon in somewhat different terms because the different disciplines examine the phenomenon at different levels. One could also say that different academic disciplines use methods suitable to understand different dimensions of reality. A "transcultural ideal" would be a social science description of what theology calls natural law. See Myers' article "A Levels-of-Explanation View" in E. L. Johnson and S. L. Jones, editors, *Psychology & Christianity: Four Views* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000). The article in this volume by Jones and Johnson, "A History of Christians in Psychology," includes a concise summary of the type of model represented by Myers.

The Author

Über den Autor



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