

Fourth International INTAMS Summer Seminar 2003

Building Block or Stumbling Block? Exploring the Place of Marriage in Society

Theme

The role of marriage in society is the topic of intense discussion today. Some argue that marriage is the foundational building block of society. Others argue that marriage is a social institution that has served its time and is no more than a stumbling block on the way to human fulfilment. On the one hand, it is claimed that an exclusive emphasis on marriage is detrimental to social growth. Today, the recognition of the equal dignity of women and men, the growing acceptance of different forms of relationship, and longer lifespans make traditional, life-long marriage increasingly obsolete. Some say that continued emphasis on marriage by society serves only to foster gender inequality, discriminate against other forms of cohabitation, and trap people in relationships long exhausted of vitality. On the other hand, marriage is held up by many as the key to social progress. It provides a stable environment where social virtues may be cultivated. Further, recent sociological research has emphasized that married people live better lives than those who are not married: they are healthier, happier, live longer, and are more financially stable. Because of these benefits, it is argued that society should privilege marriage as the preferred way of life, offering legal protection for the institution, as well as tax benefits and other social rewards. The Christian position is not immediately clear. While the churches emphasize the value of marriage, there is at the same time an ancient hesitation in esteeming marriage too highly. Theologians today look beyond the individual ethical questions and seek rather to address the social dimension of intimate relationships. The fundamental question in this debate is whether and in what way marriage enhances society. The course will take up this question from a variety of perspectives: the historical development of marriage, its role as a social institution, its economic implications, the spiritual dimensions of its interaction with society, and its theological meaning. It seeks to understand the relationship between marriage and contemporary society and the implications involved in either privileging marriage or relativizing it.

Faculty

- **Luk Bouckaert** (*Philosophy & Economics*)
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- **Georges Eid** (*Social History of Marriage*)
Professor, Institut des Sciences de la Famille, Université Catholique de Lyon, France
- **Peter Kaiser** (*Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*)
Professor, Oldenburg Universität, Germany
- **Bernd Wannewetsch** (*Theological Ethics*)
University Lecturer in Ethics, Harris Manchester College, Oxford University, England
- **Wendy M. Wright** (*History & Theology of Spirituality*)
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Report

1. The Program

This year's Summer Course addressed the relationship of marriage to society. It took place near the INTAMS office in Sint-Genesius-Rode, Belgium, from 25 August to 5 September 2003. We invited professors from five different fields: Luk Bouckaert, of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium, who specializes in philosophy and economics; Georges Eid, of the Institut des Science de la Famille at the Université Catholique de Lyon in France, who presented on the social history of marriage; Peter Kaiser, of Oldenburg Universität, Germany, who specializes in clinical psychology and psychotherapy; Bernd Wannewetsch, of Harris Manchester College at Oxford University in England, who works in the field of theological ethics; and Wendy M. Wright, of Creighton University in Nebraska, USA, who specializes in the history of theology and spirituality. Each lecture spoke to the theme from their own particular specialization, giving the participants an in-depth exploration of the issue at hand.

The eighteen participants came from 12 different countries: the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Spain, Czech Republic, Ukraine, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Seven were students engaged in some sort of marital study (four from theology), two were professors of theology, five directed programs aimed at helping married couples, and four were professionally involved in working with married couples. The participants attended lectures from the professors, presented material in seminars, engaged in group discussion, and had the opportunity to use the INTAMS library, LIBISMA, for more extended research. They also ate together regularly with the professors and staff, as well as attended special events at INTAMS, including a conversation with the Archbishop of Brussels-Mechelen, Godfried Cardinal Daneels, who shared with us his own reflections on the topic. The ten days allowed them to become acquainted with the various issues involved, discover directions for further study, come to know their fellow participants, and in general grow in their understanding of the interdisciplinary and international project of the study of marriage.

2. The Topic

During the past several years there have been discussions in the legislatures of western countries regarding the nature of marriage: whether marriage should be supported by society and whether society should define marriage as a certain type of relationship. Many westerners are currently asking the question: Is marriage a benefit to society and should marriage, understood as a public bond between a man and a woman, be supported by the broader society, or should it rather be replaced by a broader definition of human partnership that is not limited to the older understanding of marriage? We thus decided to directly address this question in this year's course. We asked: Is marriage a fundamental building block for society or is it rather a stumbling block to human social development that should be discarded as outdated and harmful to society?

2.1. The Social Network

The lectures of professor Peter Kaiser uncovered the embeddedness of marriage in the social fabric. He showed that each person entering into marriage brings with him or her the psychological patterns of relationship learned in their own families of origin, patterns which themselves were passed down from the previous generation and modified in the particularity of the individual family situation. Each marriage, therefore, is a place wherein the psychological competence of each person is put to the test. Because the interaction is continual, daily, and concerns all matter of issues, it is a particularly intense interaction that highlights the social functionality of the persons involved. Thus if the person has learned a problematic way of relating, the problems will impede the relationship with the spouse.

Marriage is thus the product of generations and generations of personal interaction over time. Further, because of the intensity of marriage, it becomes the oven where new patterns of relating are forged from the skills of the two involved. The social competence of each married person, therefore, is to a large extent shaped by the marriage. Psychological intervention aimed at improving a marital relationship can have a large impact on society. It can correct transgenerational dysfunctionality and transform family functioning into the future, bringing unconscious processes to consciousness, training people for self-management, developing boundaries and coping mechanisms, and helping people develop a more realistic conception of themselves. If persons learn how to grow out of damaging social patterns and adopt new ways of relating, they not only are better able to deal with coworkers and acquaintances but they also pass these new skills along to their children. Attention to marriage is actually attention to social problems at their most evident and most sensitive.

2.2. The Benefits of Modern Relationships

The presentations from the perspective of psychology shed light on the social nature of long-term committed relationships and showed how society benefits from healthy relationships. The question remains, however, of what sort of relationships are most beneficial to society. The contributions of Georges Eid, presenting a sociological analysis of marriage and intimacy, addressed this issue. Professor Eid proposed a contrast between marriage as it was understood in the past and relationships today, drawing upon the work of Anthony Giddens. Traditional societies presented a very clear role for men and women and thus for marriage. The social structure depended upon each person taking up these roles, and severe sanctions awaited any who did not. Marriage was fundamental to society, forming the cohesive network between family groups. A high mortality rate and the need to work hard for simple survival admitted little reflection on the situation. Often the woman in such a society was a medium of exchange, establishing and maintaining good relationships between the men. Marriage thus had less to do with emotion than with carrying out one's role. While married couples might develop affection and care for each other, love was more the long-term product of marriage than its motivation. Procreation was essential for the survival of society.

The modern world has changed all of this. In the twentieth century, economic and social structures developed in such a way as to lessen the dependence on traditional marriage. A

stable, salaried work environment became the norm; health care improved; and the new working class became open to women as well as men. This has removed the social incentives for traditional marriage and has allowed the variety of modern relationships. No longer is one's identity fixed at adulthood; the person is called to continual improvement. The ideal of personal happiness has shifted from finding one's role in the family to realizing one's personal best. Relationships, including marriage, are now seen as part of the process of human growth. Marital stability is subordinated to the need for personal development. This state of affairs has its benefits. For the first time, argued Eid, there is the possibility for true intimacy and love between a couple. Because love depends upon the free sharing of equals, before women had the possibility of social equality true love was impossible. Today's social landscape allows the ideals of Christian love to be realized. This possibility is, however, given by the rejection of traditional marriage. Where sex roles are enforced and where marital bonds are imposed from without there is no possibility of this free sharing.

2.3. The Values of the Tradition

Is marriage, then, to be redefined in order to reflect the current social reality? Bernd Wannewetsch's contribution from theology weighed in on this question. Christians hold that marriage is a particular social reality given by God from the very beginning of creation. Prof. Wannewetsch argued that the creation narrative shows that the marriage instituted by God is not the functional marriage of traditional societies but a relationship founded upon equality and communion. Fidelity may seem like an old concept, but it can be seen as a necessary ground for the true friendship that is necessary for a marriage of equals. Traditional marriage may no longer appeal to modern sensibilities, but it embodies central, God-given components that contribute to any society. Christian theologians are called to reflect upon the nature of marriage to see how old values can be reincarnated in new situations.

The debate about homosexual marriage can be seen as an example of this. Prof. Wannewetsch showed how both the strict argument against homosexual relations and the argument for acceptance of same-sex marriage overlook the need for serious reflection on the nature of marriage. It is not enough to maintain a traditional line nor to overturn tradition in response to a new situation. Careful thought must be given towards identifying the values of marriage and the reasons why it has been continually supported by the churches. Why has marriage been upheld as beneficial to human society? What aspects make this beneficial? What is particular about the joining of a man and woman in a life-long relationship that makes it different from other forms of friendship? Prof. Wannewetsch called for a patient, prayerful, and thoughtful exploration of these issues before coming to an ecclesial judgment about the validity of same-sex relationships and their connection to marriage.

2.4. Analyzing the Debate

Luk Bouckaert drew our attention to the nature of the marriage debate. Often the texts which argue for one position or another in the current debate have, hidden within the structure of the argument, presuppositions and assumptions that are often not subject to scrutiny. Using the

insights of Marvin T. Brown (*The Ethical Process*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 32002), Prof. Bouckaert showed that in considering ethical arguments one must identify various different sorts of statements. Some are proposals, arguments that something be done; others are observations, descriptions of fact; there are value judgments, assumptions, as well as alternative views. The problem is that these kinds of statements often mix together in an ambiguous manner. Proposal pass for observations. Value judgements are based on unexamined assumptions. In distinguishing normative claims from descriptive content, one can analyze the logic of an argument. Once the logic is analyzed, one is better able to see whether or not the proposal has merit. Discussions concerning the public good, especially those that take place among lawmakers, are more effective if they proceed on sound logical grounds. This is particularly true in regard to the discussion of the role of marriage in society, an issue where descriptive evidence and normative claims are often confused.

2.5. Discovering the Presence of God

Wendy M. Wright drew our attention to the spiritual dimension of marriage. A spirituality of marriage today should be developed through the cultivation of attention to the divine working in the daily reality of life. Often attention to mystery can be more indicative of the spiritual dimension of existence than can trying to see how the particularities of one's own life fit into classical spiritual frameworks. Prof. Wright showed that this learning to pay attention must be the beginning. There are other ways of uncovering the spiritual: setting aside time for silence, keeping one day of the week for family activities, simplicity, and reflecting upon the daily patterns of life. Such practices develop in one the sense of the sacred. From this, one learns how God is manifest in a given family situation. One can then turn to the spiritual classics. Read from the perspective of one's own life, the relevance of the classics to married existence can begin to unfold. The traditions of spirituality have in the past often been monastic traditions. Through reading them from the perspective of marriage their wisdom can be applied to other contexts and a true marital spirituality can develop. Without such a spirituality Christian discussions about the role of marriage in society are impoverished.

3. Christian Marriage in Society

Marriage presents to both Christian doctrine and the experience of many married couples a style of life with a particular potential for happiness and the realization of human potential. We are struck by the conviction that marriage should be a building block for society. At the same time, the current social terrain is no longer what it once was. Families built upon a lifelong relationship between a man and a woman are less and less common. Modern life cultivates other forms of relationships that seem better suited to success in life and better capable of fostering rewarding, loving relationships. Marriage thus strikes one as an antiquated institution that is not helpful in today's society and in fact only enshrines the inequality of women, constraining gender stereotypes, and the limiting of human freedom. Advocating marriage seems to be the same thing as a condemnation of modernity. Marriage thus presents itself as a stumbling block for modern society.

The course has shown that our task today as Church or as responsible members of society is to reflect upon the joys and potentials of married life and find creative new ways of finding the good of marriage in the new landscape. Defensive postures only cloud our vision, blinding us to ways in which marriage itself can take on new vitality. Traditional marriage to modern eyes has lost its color and applicability. It cannot be simply transported like Dorothy's black-and-white house into the new colors of our current world. Do we then simply abandon it? No, we remodel, using the resources that are given us today, finding the activity of God working through the current situation. Marriage's inner colors must be drawn out, heightened, and complemented by the new life situation with which we are presented. By thinking deeply about the Christian vision of marriage as a privileged place of encounter with the love of God, we will be able to speak with credibility and compassion to the modern world, drawing out and accentuating what is good in current relationships and finding an intrinsic role for marriage in society.