

Reconsidering the Foundations of Marriage for Twenty First Century Secular and Multifaith Britain

Don Trubshaw
June 26, 2014

The Significance of Marriage

The Principles of Marriage

The Character of Marriage

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARRIAGE

In this document we intend to set out a view on the place and nature of marriage, in light of our conviction that it is the foundation stone of family life and a fundamental institution of civilisation in every culture and every age.

We do so in the face of fifty years of decline of marriage in the UK and in other Western countries, believing that this trend should be reversed and that the state, religious bodies, schools, voluntary organisations and other social institutions have an important role in this reversal.

We believe that the decline of marriage has contributed and continues to contribute significantly to the social troubles of our time, such as family breakdown, abuse of partners and children, poverty, illiteracy, innumeracy and inarticulacy, low educational attainment and hence employability, abuse of alcohol and other substances, delinquency and crime in general, depression, poor health and lower life expectancy in advanced countries, amongst other things. The growing number of low-occupancy households also contributes to the housing shortage and therefore has an environmental consequence.

Believing that marriage has innumerable advantages for individuals and societies, we want to clarify what marriage is and should be, and explain its importance in human society, particularly as the UK government is proposing to accord the same status to couples in civil partnerships as married couples presently enjoy.

The need for clarification in this area of human life also comes from the potential conflict between the traditional views of many immigrant communities on this issue and the secular views of a large part of the native population in the UK.

The Decline of Marriage in the West

There are two aspects of this decline: lower uptake of marriage, many choosing never to marry or remarry but to remain single or cohabit; and a high level of divorce.

There are a number of reasons for this decline, but chief among these are:

- 1) The decline of religious belief, particularly Christian belief, and observance has removed many of the theological, moral and social pressures to marry and, once married, to stay married. It has also removed many of the inhibitions and social taboos against alternative lifestyles.
- 2) Greater social mobility means that the support of an extended family or stable local community is no longer a part of many people's life.
- 3) Economic necessity and social pressure to achieve a high economic standard of living means that families have less time to spend together and that their interaction, and even *raison d'être*, is increasingly seen to be economic.
- 4) The prominence of negative and satirical views of marriage in popular culture, the emphasis in sex education on the inevitability of pre-marital sexual experience, the prevalence and celebration of unmarried romance in music, films and novels, all achieve the decoupling of sex and marriage in the popular imagination.
- 5) The economic and social emancipation of women has had a double effect on marriage. First, it has given women the option of a career other than being a housewife and mother. Secondly, being freed of economic dependence on a man has meant that women have come to expect more of a prospective husband than just ability to support a family.

The decline in marriage, though problematic in its own right, has to be seen as part of a larger social

picture, which is a change in fundamental values and expectations in the developed world during the last fifty years. Society is more egalitarian and less deferential, and a great many people have come to believe that their personal happiness is a fundamental right. Expectations of marriage and within marriage have naturally come to reflect these changes. The question of happiness within marriage centres largely on love.

Marriage, Love and Romance

The interrelationship between marriage and love is not straightforward and this complexity has expressed itself in all cultures. Marriage customs are different throughout the world, but share in common a commitment between a man and a woman to each other and any children that are born of their union. This commitment is made before a figure or group representing a higher earthly authority, the tribe or the state. Traditionally, but less so now in the West, a representative of a religion, signifying a spiritual authority, consecrates the marriage. Marriage has been seen in every society as a way of regulating sexual desires, not only to prevent the socially destructive power of infighting and jealousies, but also to ensure the socialisation and enculturation of the next generation through a recognised kinship structure. Thus marriage can be seen to lie at the centre of a complex nexus of cultural concerns.

Love is an altogether more difficult proposition. It is said that in some cultures there is no word for love. That is probably not true, but it is probable that the significance and connotation of the term are different for an average Chinese person compared with an average American or Iranian. Just consider the range of meanings that love has within the context of Western civilisation: there is the love that parents feel for their children and children feel for their parents, there is love between friends, love of country and the love of God that mystics speak of. Then there are the feelings, frequently considered baser, such as lust, possessiveness and attachment, yet which are often described as loves. The love between a man and a woman can be like any of these or a combination of any or all, and more beside.

In cultures where marriages are frequently arranged, love is not seen as a prerequisite for a marriage to take place. British Asians, amongst whom arranged marriages are commonplace, frequently state that love is seen as something that should ideally emerge over time in a good marriage. This, though, may be an adaptive idea in relation to the ubiquity of Western ideas and images. For the majority of historic cultures love has not been seen as central to marriage; marriage has had, principally, a social function. Even in the West marriage has frequently been seen as antithetical to nobler aspirations, of calling for or of a higher 'untainted' love. But Europe is undoubtedly the origin of the modern notion of romantic marriage. In medieval Europe, mirrored to some degree in other civilisations, a tradition of romantic love began, marked by passion, eroticism, anti-authoritarianism, anti-traditionalism and anti-clericalism, and frequently – almost invariably – tinged with tragedy. Over the centuries this idea has taken root in our culture, though its fortunes have ebbed and flowed according to the social trends, until today when romantic love has become the prevalent mode of our thinking about love.

Nevertheless, there is a paradox at the heart of romantic love. While its very intensity brooks no argument as to its authenticity, that same intensity, which is at one with its inherent rebelliousness, means that it has no context within which it can be renewed save that of opposition to the established order, specifically marriage. Romantic love is, therefore, doomed to be transitory and, as such, cannot actually lay claim to authenticity. The liberation from marriage, achieved under the banner of 'free love', is unlikely to result in greater social freedom; perversely, it is more likely to invite further insidious intrusions of the state into family life as it attempts to prevent social meltdown.

This does not mean that the idea of a love marriage is wrong. If there is one positive outcome of the decline of traditional marriage, it is that there has emerged a consensus that if a relationship between a man and a woman is to be meaningful and ongoing it must be based on enduring love or 'true love'. True love is categorically, though, not the same thing as romantic love.

For a start, true love must be reciprocated in a relationship between lover and beloved. Being based on feeling alone, romantic love may assume, but does not predicate, reciprocity. Unrequited love is in fact one of the strands of romanticism, though we tend to view it today as a pathological condition.

Secondly, true love, unlike romantic love, cannot be based on just the given feeling or the given attraction. Basing a marriage on that is equivalent to trying to remain solvent while living solely on savings or an inheritance; sooner or later they must run out, depending on how thrifty or profligate one is. True love requires commitment, investment in the relationship and the creation and recreation of the object of love.

Thirdly, if true love is enduring love, then it cannot be, unlike romantic love, merely a feeling, for the measure of a feeling is its intensity not its persistence and no relationship can be maintained at a level of high intensity indefinitely; therefore, true or enduring love, as opposed to mere infatuation or inconstant attachment, must also be implicated into a human system that partakes of the universal values of a culture, such things as patience, loyalty, compassion, respect and companionship. No human society has devised

any such system with any stability outside of marriage.

If true love emerges as a somewhat complex notion, it is this very complexity, like that of other complex phenomena, that gives it its robustness. At its core, though – and this is where the romantics are vindicated – there is a profound feeling that has both a mysterious and a transcendental character.

True Love as the Basis of Marriage

We have shown that true love needs to be embodied in an institution like marriage. We would also argue that marriage based upon anything other than true love is increasingly unviable. This is the starting point for our view of the nature of marriage: *marriage as the context and expression of true love*; for even though marriage in traditional societies and in religious cultures has been held to embody many virtues, which we would not wish to abandon, we believe those virtues must now be recast in light of, and based upon, the core value of true love.

Marriage as the context and expression of true love reinvigorates the notion of marriage for the twenty-first century. It brings together both the traditional and progressive ideas on the love between a man and a woman. This is not a cynical repackaging exercise, trying to make a worn out institution palatable for the modern world; rather, we have shown that, starting from either the institution of marriage or the heart's longing for true love, marriage as the context and expression of true love is a necessary, sufficient and coherent proposition. It would not be going too far to declare that there are no viable alternatives if we wish to live in a civilised society.

In the next two sections we describe the principles of marriage and the character of marriage, respectively. The first outlines a just and equitable basis for marriage in keeping with the values and views of modernity, the second the characteristics of marriage drawn from the timeless perspectives of the world civilisations. We hope these prove useful in helping those who are contemplating whether or not to marry, social leaders who are called upon to advise young people on relations, to religious leaders in their desire to explain and propagate their traditions, to politicians who are apprehensive of taking correct but unpopular decisions, to policymakers seeking new ideas on an old problem, and to anyone who is confused about the value of marriage.

PRINCIPLES OF MARRIAGE

Preamble

Mindful of the scientific and academic learning about the nature of human nature and human life, but not limited to this,

Applying an interpretation based on the wisdom of the great faith traditions and philosophies to the moral dimensions of human life,

Five principles of marriage for the twenty-first century and beyond have been set out.

These principles acknowledge the limitations of the past and the weight of misery that too strict or narrow an interpretation of religious doctrines has placed on human life, particularly on the life of women, in traditional societies and their marriage customs and family obligations,

But recognise that these traditions have also generated many virtues that sustain and illuminate the inner life of humanity.

These principles also acknowledge the limitations of modernity in its excessive individualism, hedonism and spiritual emptiness, that has greatly contributed the devaluing and diminution of the institution of marriage, with consequent effects on the quality of family and social life,

While recognising the contribution that modernity has made to individual freedom, human rights and an improvement in the material conditions of life.

The consensus underlying these principles neither wishes to look backwards to a mythical 'golden age' before modernity, nor to dwell in the realm of modernity's progressive secularisation of all aspects of life, but to establish philosophical and ethical principles that can sustain and reinvigorate marriage as the centre of the family, the most fundamental biological, social, cultural and spiritual institution, into the future.

These principles are based upon the **concept of marriage as the context and expression of true love**. True love can be said to be:

Rooted in the natural human desire for companionship, intimacy, sexual gratification, survival, increase,

authority and stability,

But forged in the moral requirements for selflessness, compassion, self-control, altruism and sacrifice,

And lived within the possibilities of theological interpretations, religious customs, social norms and cultural opportunities and limitations.

The Principles

The five principles are:

1. Absolute Freedom

True love, of its nature, must be freely willed and freely given. As an expression of true love, marriage must be entered into willingly by both spouses, and can only be recognised as such by the willing consent of those entering into the relationship.

The support, encouragement, advice, guidance and material contribution of the parents, family and wider community are to be actively encouraged; however, any form of coercion is forbidden, as violating the spirit of true love.

Under all circumstances, the support and advice of wider family and community would be expected to sustain and strengthen the marriage bonds of couples in their midst and to seek all opportunities to avert crises in relationships, but if all else fails, the corollary of this is that, should the relationship between husband and wife break down irretrievably, it is the absolute right of the couple to seek dissolution of the marriage.

2. Absolute Equality

Based on the concept of true love, men and women have absolute value; having absolute value, men and women have equal value. The precise nature of this equality in practice is going to vary from couple to couple and from culture to culture, but all men and women should have the rights accorded to them in the United Nations Declaration of Human rights.

Above all, men and women should have the right equally to enjoy love in a mutual and exclusive relationship. Therefore, any imbalance in the distribution of freedoms and rights between a husband and wife is to be condemned. This applies not only to polygamy (and in rare cases, polyandry), but other forms of coercion and abuse whereby one spouse is diminished or devalued with respect to the other, for example gender-biased laws, imposed dress codes or genital mutilation.

3. Absolute Commitment

The moral requirement of true love is living for the sake of the greater whole and living for the sake of others. Marriage is a lifelong commitment; anyone not entering it in that spirit should not consider it.

The concept of true love entails putting the quality of the relationship between husband and wife before all other things: before profession, social standing and wealth, even before children.

For this reason, anything that violates the principle of absolute commitment and trust, such as multiple marriages, concubinage and infidelity is to be condemned.

That relationship should be sustained and developed through all stages of life, including old age and decline. Views on the status of the marriage after the death of one spouse will depend on theological and moral perspectives.

Just as this view accepts the right of divorce, but not its acceptability, it recognises the right of remarriage, though not necessarily its advisability.

4. Absolute Legality

Marriage is a social institution, a part of the greater society. As such, it needs to be recognised and protected by society, via the proxy of the State. Whatever the spiritual or romantic commitment of the couple, it cannot take precedence over, or be a substitute for, a legally constituted marriage.

Marriage is a legal-ethical construct, given form through custom but authorised through the recognition of the state. It carries social obligations and confers certain rights. This underlies its fundamental difference to cohabitation, sometimes referred to as 'common law marriage.'

Given the above, the political momentum for granting rights to unmarried couples equal to those of married couples is irrational, weakening the institution of marriage, the social fabric and, ultimately, the authority of the State itself. Government should involve itself in explaining the value and benefits of marriage (for which there is ample empirical evidence), promoting it through the educational system and perhaps rewarding it more through the tax system.

5. Absolute Communalism

Marriage should be the centre of family life and social life. Families should work for the social good, putting their principles and practices of true love into a social context.

Parents should raise the next generation of good husbands and wives and citizens who practice these principles in their family and society as a contribution to the common good.

Promoting such a view should also be the interest of communities and the state, for which the existence of good marriages is the bedrock of social stability and well-being.

Notes

The five principles of marriage outlined above should be acceptable to the moderate majority of both religious and secular moral opinion. One of its purposes is to deliberately define that constituency and to demarcate it from extreme forms of both illiberalism and liberalism.

The principles are defined along the lines of logical implications of the concept of marriage as the context and expression of true love. For this reason this document is expressed in terms of 'absolutes'. It is accepted, though, that these principles are going to be interpreted into realistic contexts, even by those who accept them wholeheartedly.

There are many ethical issues, which touch on marriage and family life, which these principles do not address and are not intended to address, as they fall into the realm of individual conscience and/or ongoing social debate, such as homosexual relations, sexual practices, contraception, abortion, fertility treatments and genetic engineering.

THE CHARACTER OF MARRIAGE

In considering marriage, we cannot do justice to describing what it is by simply collating all the various statistics on the state of existing marriages, and declaring this to be the sum of what the institution amounts to. Although this may be of sociological interest, such a viewpoint is virtually meaningless for people contemplating entering into a marriage; for these people marriage is about a promise – to remain faithful and steadfast – and an expectation – that love will endure – and hopefully a determination to remove and overcome any obstacles that stand in the way of the fulfilment of that expectation. The essential nature of marriage, that is, is prescriptive, not descriptive, just as the marriage vow is a performative act not a factual statement.

There are many aspects to marriage, such as the traditions of the wedding ceremonies or the economics of running a household or managing a human relationship over what one expects to be a lifetime. Above all these, though, at the heart of marriage, as for every human institution, is an ideal or core value, incorporated at its founding, which can and should thereafter be referred back to, for evaluation and guidance. For marriage that ideal is true love, though no culture has explicitly stated it to be so. True love, as outlined in greater detail in the Principles of Marriage, is a fusion of our natural feelings and desires, our moral insights and ethical rules, and our theological or ideological perspectives. Though true love is the ideal at the heart of marriage, marriage itself is the expression of that ideal. Marriage, therefore, is not just a lived reality, but a lived reality guided by an ideal: true love.

Every marriage is unique, its character being given by the individuals of whom it is comprised. But marriage as an expression of true love has a universal character, which reflects the universality of true love. We can enunciate the following five aspects of that character:

- **Marriage, as the context and expression of true love, completes the universe through the unity of the masculine and feminine principles.**

A marriage is more than the unity of a male and female for reproductive purposes, or the legalisation of sexual pleasure; it partakes in the erotic discourse of cultures, which is the ascription of gender and difference to aspects of nature and the supernatural, carried out through philosophy, religion, literature and the arts. We could call this the *cosmological* aspect of marriage. As an example, Eastern philosophy subsumes masculinity and femininity into the principles of Yang and Yin through which all things

originate and exist. In Hinduism and in the ancient Greek worldview, which underlies much of Western culture, a pantheon of gods and goddesses interact with each other and the human world. Marriage is, therefore, a unity of difference: of gender, but also of temperament, outlook, background and experience, through which we forge an augmented identity.

- **Marriage, as the context and expression of true love, establishes the authority of parents and is the basis of respect in society.**

We talk a lot about the need for respect today, which correlates well with our identification of its lack. We also identify ourselves as a society in which the culture of deference has passed. It is questionable whether respect can exist independently of authority in any absolute sense, however. What is refreshingly new is that authority and respect are seen as moral rewards, which have to be earned, and are not contingent merely upon position. The authority of parents can only be established on the basis of the love that children feel from them. Through the family and the extended family male and female children are socialised by their parents as role models of masculinity and femininity: as adult children to their own parents (grandparents), as brother and sister to their grown siblings (uncles and aunts), and as husband and wife as well as father and mother.

- **Marriage, as the context and expression of true love, is a state of transcendence: of material conditions, of individuality, of local, national and racial origins, and of history.**

Though we all hope fervently for a world in which the present inequalities of access to freedom, health and wealth can be addressed, this does not change the fundamental point that true love is a universal ideal, for which wealth or poverty, class, race or religion are no barrier. Marriage, moreover, as is often noted, can be a route out of poverty and a basis for better health and educational and employment prospects. Promotion of marriage would also undoubtedly improve the social character of many nations that have otherwise made vast strides as the result of more liberal political and economic cultures. Similarly, marriage between those of different background (under generally tolerant social conditions) can overcome the 'suspicion of the other,' contributing to a richer, less stratified and 'ghettoised' social mix.

- **Marriage, as the context and expression of true love, is a gateway to the deepest experiences of the human heart.**

One hopes for happiness in life, but all human life is ringed by potential tragedy as we contemplate the loss of those close to us. Moreover, suffering of some sort is something that we all have to deal with. True love embodies the potential for great happiness, but does not guarantee that life will be easy; rather, true love should be thought of as providing a context in which we can understand and embrace all aspects of life and a source of strength for managing them, including the most difficult.

A good marriage provides the best social foundation for men and women to survive and prosper in a harsh world, not only materially, but also emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

- **Marriage, as the context and expression of true love, embodies the highest virtues and values of our collective cultures.**

In an age where an increasing number choose not to marry, marriage is frequently referred to as 'just a bit of paper,' and even governments cannot bring themselves to officially recognise it as anything special, it is important to reiterate that all civilisations have recognised that marriage embodies the highest virtues of a culture; indeed the socialising effect of marriage is one of the important foundations of the state's authority. Defining marriage as the context and expression of true love allows us to reiterate and clarify that the highest virtues and values of any culture are found in the commitment of a couple to marry, live a life of true love and raise any children to be good men and women themselves.