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<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/12/marriage_family_god.html>

**"Marriage"? "Family"? "God"?**

*A new survey out this week from the*[***National Marriage Project***](http://stateofourunions.org/2010/SOOU2010.php)*shows that marriage is an institution in decline in many parts of American society. This "retreat from marriage in Middle America" will have wide-ranging social and economic consequences, say the survey's authors.*
 *Another recent study of marriage, administered by the Pew Research Center, showed that*[***nearly 40% of Americans believe marriage is becoming 'obsolete.'***](http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1802/decline-marriage-rise-new-families)
 *What is marriage? Is it a civil union or is it a religious institution? How do you define it? Is there a marriage crisis in America today?*

New York State, 73 years ago, authorized me, a church-licensed minister, to perform religious weddings. "So," smiled my father, who performed over 1,000 civil weddings, "now you're going to compete with me?" The options, at the time, were church or state weddings (marriage ceremonies) and "common law" (non-legal, not illegal) marriages (later called "domestic partnerships"). Homosexual committed partnerships were on the radar of neither church nor state.

Also at that time in America, three terms - marriage, family, and God - had nailed- down societal meanings. "God" was the biblical deity of America's founding, understood within a tight-loose range of readings. "Family" was the basic social unit consisting of at least three persons, namely, father-mother-child, often including a member of the former generation. "Marriage" was both the ceremony creating society's sexual institution (the "family") and the institution itself as socially sanctioned (by societal-interest laws) in the interest of children, who are born as members both of the family and of the total society.

Now, a mere 73 years later, "*all that was nailed down has come loose*." When I use the word "God" in public, the meeting's chair may ask (as indeed one did, in a medical-ethics meeting), "What do you mean by 'God'?" "Family" has expanded to include other small clumpings of people. And society faces increasing pressure to remove gender as a factor in "marriage" (which change would leave the English language with no common word for the socially recognized committed male/female relationship).

1. "*What is marriage*?" It's a story in which the personae dramatis are God (or, if one prefers, life or evolution), parents, candidates-participants, offspring, and two societies (civil and religious) with their representatives. Not all marriages include all these characters. In any marriage, all the characters involved have a describable interest, and these interests have a range of weights. / In Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," the parents' interest has the heaviest weight, and the story winds up with two dead kids. But parental choice in marriages is still dominant in some of the world's cultures. / The *religious* society's interest is in the spiritual health (including participation in the religious community) of the new family (father-mother-child), and thus the health of both the religious and the general society. / The *civil* society's interest centers in the marriage's offspring, who will be a burden not just on their parents but on the general society: parents are not their children's exclusive owners, and all the owners are subject to law providing supports for the stability of families in the interest of the children. (No expert any longer argues that one-parent children are not disadvantaged.)

2. In America today, the drama of "marriage" is being lived out on the full range of possible scripts. Some say there's no "marriage crisis," but only an inevitable evolution. Others see devolution, the degeneration of society's basic institution and support-system for children, rot at society's core. Our culture's increasing *slide from the collective to the individual* human reality is bad news for marriage, which requires a socio-moral strength ("character," in the ethical sense) each new generation seems to have less of.

3. "It's statistically improbable that you'll have *a good marriage*. Marriage should be life's most valuable and valued relationship (lower only than communion with God); but it is so complex, so difficult, so much work." In the last of the three pre-marital sessions I've had with couples through the decades of my ministry, I've included this doleful sentiment. And, often, years later, a couple has said, "It hasn't been as bad as you said it would be!" My response: "It would have been worse if I hadn't warned you." A familiar parallel is from G.K.Chesterton: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found hard, and not tried."

4. "The least painful sex-trip is *virginal marriage and marital faithfulness*." I've long preached this tightly-defined sex maxim, which has sounded crazier and crazier as three generations have become ever more loose-sex. But Loree and I have practiced the maxim for more than 65 years with never a thought of divorce. One of my books is dedicated to her, "on whom I have never looked without joy." (Gratitude here, not boasting: we have lived as our Protestant parents taught us to live.)

5. On PBS television before our first state legalized civil unions without extending the word "marriage" to include them, I debated for that legalization and against calling legal committed homosexual unions "marriages." No homophobia here: I am for the ordination of homosexuals, but also for *defense of the word "marriage*" and the (heterosexual) institution it names.

6. Some atheists/agnostics have designed wedding ceremonies for "civil unions," "domestic partnerships," having given up on the word "marriage," which (they say) is too involved with religion and the bio-family. / Three days ago, an appellate judge in California asked a lawyer why his homosexual clients insist on invading the word "marriage," the civil-rights issues no longer existing. / And in hundreds of institutions of higher learning, the Puritan-Cavalier pendulum is beginning to swing from C. to P.: disappointment and boredom with, even revulsion at, the hooking-up culture. And the hunger for sustainable relationship is becoming more voiced.
*Not all the "marriage" news is bad*.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  DECEMBER 8, 2010; 10:11 PM ETSAVE & SHARE:                       
PREVIOUS:**[**GOD'S HAND WAS IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE UNITED STATES**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/clayton_christensen/2010/12/gods_hand_was_in_the_establishment_of_the_united_states.html)**| NEXT:**[**HINDUISM IS NOT CAST IN CASTE**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/aseem_shukla/2010/12/hinduism_is_not_cast_in_caste.html)

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Marriage, as discussed here, had always primarily been about establishing hereditary lines and property securities. The reason the offspring of divorced couples or single parent couples are at disadvantage might have less to do with the emotional and religious aspects of the perfect married couple, you know the mommies and daddies of 1950's TV lore, than with the socio-economic impact of modernism.

Does anyone here want to go back in time to an agrarian culture or a medieval system? Wait, I know the Yalie rabbi probably does, sounds like it, and the Catholic Church has rather much remained there. You never hear the religious calling loudly for a new way of living that reaches beyond the capitalist, corporatist state of present life. These preachers might talk about it in the pulpit, but they really aren't very effective politically. Their zealous counterparts in the Tea Party or the Republican leadership are the ones representing the true ties to material wealth in Christian, Jewish and Muslim America and are the ones calling the shots these days. Marriage is the protective trope that they must hold onto to justify their very limited view of society.

When the romanticization of the construct of marriage finally evolves out of its religiously bound nonsense, and it is happening as we speak, the better will be society in the long run. In America people need licenses, certifications, government regulation for practically everything. We tacitly consent to many controls and humiliations without a grumble. We support any military indulgence, but refuse to have a nationally supported education or healthcare system. But anyone can have a baby and call themselves mommy or daddy. (It is usually the case that our young girls these days want to become mommies, at any cost, going straight from virginity to parent). There is no serious discussion or support for the family in the modern American society. Therefore, marriage will break down simply out of its societal meaninglessness.

Never have so many young people been so poorly educated (as were their married parents), poorly provided for and self-indulgent. Of the young people I meet and with whom I have become friends, those who have strayed from the confines of the American culture's religious nonsense are the best equipped emotionally and intellectually to carry on the tasks of society that will one day embrace the commonweal as well as the individual.

A side note for the homosexuals; and I am a proud member of that group; why, oh why do so many of us now wish to fall into the heterosexual trope of marriage? I know, it's politically correct and you badly desire this society's approval. As for myself, I disdain its approbation and eschew its values.

We are in an age of intellectual recession, an age of non-reason while at the same time many around the world are progressing, emerging. And this is primarily owing to secularization, one sign of which is the development of new family mode. Cheers!

**POSTED BY: GDWYMER | DECEMBER 12, 2010 4:42 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

For women its a fantastic deal.

**POSTED BY: FRESNO500 | DECEMBER 12, 2010 4:37 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Mr. Elliot;
Some fun here but there is a serious point:
“which change would leave the English language with no common word for the socially recognized committed male/female relationship”
As you have been performing ceremonies for 73 years, you were certainly around performing ceremonies at least at the same time that many states had laws preventing marriage across certain racial lines.
As the nation gained its senses and started lifting those restrictions, did you ponder about the fact that there would be no English word left to exclusively define the socially recognized, committed, same-race relationship?

When we are discussing the legal status/definition of ‘marriage’ we are talking about the civil/legal definition, not the many, many religious definitions. Perhaps it is unfortunate that religion let the civil laws use the word in the first place, but they did. I don’t recall reading about protests or lobbying efforts to prevent the states from using the word ‘marriage.’ By using the word in a legal context it has its own legal definition, one that can change according to the political process. Religions gave up naming and ownership rights to the civil/legal domain when they released the word into the political landscape.
Many words in our patchwork, melting pot, language mean very many things depending on context. There need be no confusions simply by broadening the legal definition to include other types of couples, exactly like we did with the reluctant southern states in 1967. (Loving v. Virginia, 388 U.S. 1 (1967)).

**POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | DECEMBER 10, 2010 10:09 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Lep:
"Why does a legally recognized committed heterosexual union NEED a special name to differentiate it from a legally recognized homosexual union? "
I was sitting here at my . . my... oh, what's the male/female form of the word 'desk'?. . . wondering the same thing... ;-)

This is the problem? that it will render an english word . . . uh, . . hmm.... (trying to think of the m/f-exclusive word for 'impotent') . . .

**POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | DECEMBER 9, 2010 5:52 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Why does a legally recognized committed heterosexual union NEED a special name to differentiate it from a legally recognized homosexual union?
My husband and I share real estate, cash, pets and their attendant chores, housework, yard work, meals, and bedcovers. We are each other's next of kin, each other's heir, and each other's power of attorney. We are all these things to each other because we signed a marriage license in the presence of a judge and two witnesses, and he placed it on file with the state. A lesbian friend of mine who lives in Massachusetts and her wife share real estate, cash, pets and their attendant chores, housework, yard work, meals, and bedcovers. They are each other's next of kin, each other's heir, and each other's power of attorney. They are all these things to each other because they signed a marriage license in the presence of a judge and two witnesses, and he placed it on file with the state.
There is no difference between their relationship and ours, except anatomy of the spouses. Why should the same relationship not have the same name?
My husband and I are MARRIED. Our relationship is called a MARRIAGE.
My friend and her wife are MARRIED. Their relationship is called a MARRIAGE.

**POSTED BY: LEPIDOPTERYX | DECEMBER 9, 2010 5:40 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**