

Marriage debate

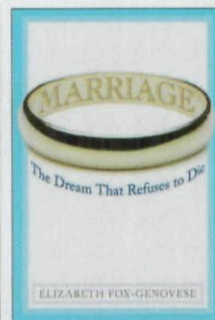
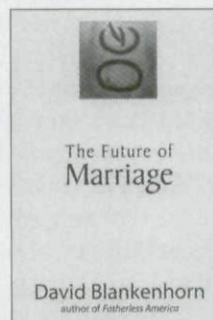
by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

IT WOULD BE HARD to find more divisive, jabbing rhetoric on marriage than in these publications by self-described “marriage nut” David Blankenhorn, the founder and director of the Institute for American Values, and the late historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, well known for her testy rebuff of feminism. Those familiar with Blankenhorn’s *Fatherless America* and Fox-Genovese’s “*Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life*” will find few surprises.

Fighting what he sees as the vacuous definition of marriage as a purely private relationship of love, Blankenhorn urges readers to work toward resurrecting marriage as a public institution designed to uphold what he believes is the birthright of every child—to have a mother and a father. Fox-Genovese’s book, published posthumously by a former doctoral student who is effusive in her praise for her teacher, combines three lectures delivered at Princeton in 2003 with five previously published essays and concludes with a praise-filled eulogy by Princeton professor Robert George. Sparse footnotes for the initial chapters reveal how little Fox-Genovese kept up with literature on families. She drew heavily on her complaint, launched in the 1990s, that the women’s movement undermined families, and she argued for reclaiming marriage as an institution that resolves the inherent antagonism between women and men, an institution based on what she claimed are naturally complementary roles of female nurture and male authority.

I found the accusatory tone of these books troublesome and tiresome. Can Christians and Christian theologians do better than this? I think so. Scholars who study religion and the family such as Lisa Cahill, Mark Jordan and Adrian Thatcher tend to search for common ground or at least for greater understanding of the complexities. Heated conflicts still arise, of course. In 2003 Don Browning of the University of Chicago Divinity School, one of the major scholars on the family, termed a Presbyterian report on families as elitist, and Presbyterian ethicist Gloria Albrecht retorted by calling Browning oblivious of economic realities. But by and large those who study religion tend to acknowledge the ambiguity of human action, the complexity of ideals in practice, and the inescapable difficulties in interpreting scripture, history and religious traditions. I also believe there are Christian approaches to the family that would contest the win-lose, either-or rhetoric of Blankenhorn and Fox-Genovese.

“So long as an opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings,”



The Future of Marriage.
By David Blankenhorn.
Encounter, 260 pp., \$25.95.

Marriage: The Dream That Refuses to Die.
By Elizabeth Fox-Genovese.
Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 225 pp., \$25.00.

John Stuart Mill observed, “it gains rather than loses in stability by having a preponderating weight of argument against it. . . . The worse it fares in argumentative contest, the more persuaded its adherents are that their feeling must have some deeper ground.” This is certainly true for marriage debates. Rational argument, while essential, “will not resolve all controversy,” notes legal theorist Martha Nussbaum in writing about the move to give full equality to gays and lesbians, “because it is very likely that the resistance . . . has deep psychological roots.” Fear in particular plays a huge role.

Blankenhorn and Fox-Genovese openly confess their fears. *The Future of Marriage* begins with and repeatedly returns to a conversation with prominent attorney and gay rights advocate Evan Wolfson that left Blankenhorn extremely worried that the “movement for same-sex marriage is going to win.” This “potentially lethal threat” inspired him to write his book. He has devoted nearly 20 years to strengthening the infrastructure of heterosexual marriage, and he fears that the rise of same-sex marriage will open a floodgate of aberrations, such as polygamy and group marriage, and will destroy the role that marriage has in bringing women and men together for the sake of having sex and rearing children. Although he says clearly that gay marriage is only “one facet of the larger threat” to marriage, for him the choice is clear: either support same-sex marriage or support heterosexual marriage.

Though Blankenhorn believes his side won the battle in the late 1980s and 1990s over whether marriage is key to children’s well-being (many now agree it is), he fears losing the war. When it comes to marriage, he argues, society cannot have it both ways. Either support same-sex marriage or strengthen heterosexual marriage, support the rights of gays or care for children. Countries in which there is strong support for same-

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sex marriage, according to Blankenhorn's reading of two international surveys, display the weakest support for heterosexual marriage. And redefining marriage to include gay and lesbian couples will undermine a basic rule for children's well-being: "a mother and a father for every child."

Fox-Genovese also sees a "campaign to destroy" marriage. She is more upset than Blankenhorn about the demise of social authority, especially the moral influence of the church. She locates the essential purpose of marriage not in bearing and raising children but in overcoming the natural opposition of the sexes. For her, feminism is at least as disruptive of social order as is the rise of gay and lesbian couplings. Just as Blankenhorn insists that he is not attacking homosexuals, Fox-Genovese reiterates that she is not blaming feminists. But it is a slippery slope for both. "Most of the inequalities" of marriage call for redress, Fox-Genovese admits, but she says women's rights (to property, divorce, protection from marital rape and abuse, etc.) have come at an "exorbitantly high price." Insistence on full equality fuels an "uncompromising attack on authority—natural, human, and divine," destroying traditional marriage with "crippling consequences" for families and children. Feminists have taken modern claims about individual rights to a libertarian extreme, she says, with *Roe v. Wade* delivering the "real blow." White middle-class women in the early feminist movement failed to appreciate the benefits they had through patriarchal gender roles and even through the law of coverture that completely subsumed a wife's rights under her husband's in the 1800s.

Such claims are extreme. But sometimes the problem is as much the emotional tone and manner of the argument as the content. All too often, Blankenhorn and Fox-Genovese belittle and stereotype their opponents. Blankenhorn, for instance, construes the progressive Council on Contemporary Families, founded by historian Stephanie Coontz, as aimed only at promoting divorce and unwed childbearing, a description not borne out if one reads the council's Web site or Coontz's works. The main reason people like Coontz back same-sex marriage, according to Blankenhorn and Fox-Genovese, is that they see it as another way to undermine marriage. Yet in *Marriage: A History*, Coontz identifies promoting good marriages as a worthy goal, even though she opposes social policy that would enforce this goal and exclude same-sex couples.

Fox-Genovese makes no attempt to understand the multiple strands of feminism extant today. Feminists as a whole, she says, deride all forms of service or self-sacrifice and "consider any view of marriage as sacrament or covenant a

self-serving deception" that oppresses women—a gross misrepresentation of many feminist theologians who affirm both marriage and altruism. In Blankenhorn, scholarly analysis gives way to blanket dismissals of other views as "intellectually vacuous," "utterly specious," "morally irresponsible," "nonsense" and "pure flapdoodle." Then he coaxes his "kind reader" to be more benevolent toward his own views.

More serious distortions occur in their interpretation of history, nature and religion. Fox-Genovese complains that "many scholars project upon the past" their own views but falls prey to the same accusation. Neither book offers a history of marriage, but both use ideological interpretations of history and nature to argue for the norm of heterosexual marriage. The first five chapters of Blankenhorn's book mix history, colonial anthropology, neuroscience and cross-cultural analysis to argue that one-man/one-woman marriage is a near-universal institution. Fox-Genovese's historical survey is even more general, organized vaguely to move from Genesis ("male and female God created them"), to a literary analysis of 19th-century novels and the turn to romantic love, to the 20th-century denouement of marriage as a personal choice.

Historical changes that each find disturbing, whether the reduction of marriage to a private relationship in the past century or the increased number of working mothers in recent decades, are described as unprecedented, ominous or cata-

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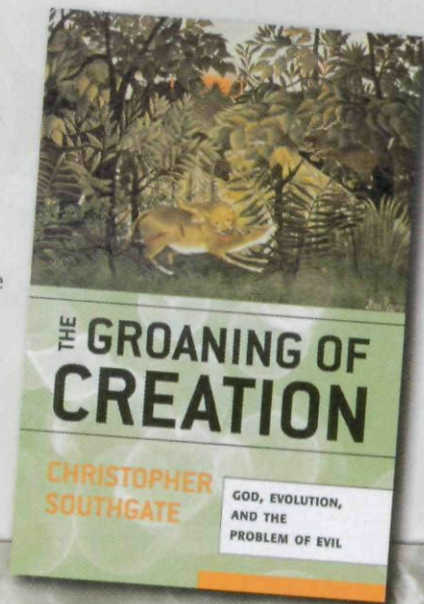
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clysmic. Civilization itself stands at a precipice. Blankenhorn divides history into two sexual cultures—a prehistoric culture of “prostitution, cohabitation, and males as inseminators-not-fathers” and an enlightened culture of marriage where men become nurturing fathers and lifelong husbands. The origins of social fatherhood and marriage “coincide with the origins of civilization.”

Fox-Genovese sees marriage as the “fulcrum of civilization, the threshold between nature and culture.” From this angle, society is on the brink of a slide into a Hobbesian existence where people are susceptible to “every imaginable sexual prac-

tice.” Fox-Genovese says same-sex marriage “will decisively contribute to disaggregating all of the remaining social institutions” that protect people from harm.

A similar leap occurs in both writers’ interpretation of nature. Blankenhorn believes, for example, that he has found the “biochemical foundations” of the social form of marriage for humans in the female’s lack of estrus, her “forward-tilting” vagina and her capacity for orgasm, and in the “unusually large” (by comparison with a gorilla) male penis—all destined to make heterosexual intercourse a more enticing project for humans. “These brain-and-hormone phenomena help to create and reinforce a *particular family structure*”—the male-female childbearing unit.

Fox-Genovese uses doctrine instead of biological science to ground her position. Sexuality is not infinitely plastic, as some cultural theorists claim. Fixed gender roles are a product of “natural or divine order,” recognized by every society except our own as a foundational “biological” fact.

Perhaps most serious for those in religious communities is the use or misuse of religion. Blankenhorn believes that his definition of marriage does not depend on any particular religion. But defining marriage is not so simple. As Emory professor Mark Jordan observes, “Marriage is a topic uniquely suited to disrupt any distinction between secular and sacred.” Putting “legal issues over here and theological issues over there” cannot be done. The most we can hope for, he argues, “is to be wary about the confusion of legal and religious issues.”

Religion surfaces in Blankenhorn’s book mostly to support his views, for example, that a main theme of the Hebrew scriptures is the establishment of patriarchal fatherhood or that the world’s great religions share a common marriage heritage that dates back to early Egyptian and Mesopotamian society. Fox-Genovese directly links her adult conversion to Catholicism (she used to be a Marxist) to her impatience with feminism, her “horror at abortion” and her views on marriage, but her references to religion are anything but intellectually informed. One essay is mostly an ode to John Paul II. Scriptures from Genesis, the Gospels and Paul are dropped in mostly as proof texts. Her nostalgia for a “common or shared faith” in society is a longing for a very particular Christian faith and seems ill-



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informed about the many religions and forms of Christianity now shaping U.S. society.

Does feminism or same-sex marriage really undermine marriage or foreshadow the end of civilization? Radical women and flamboyant homosexuals are easy (and ancient) targets, but neither undermines heterosexual marriage more than an array of other factors, such as financial instability, emotional dysfunction, unfair distribution of domestic labor, widespread divorce, interreligious differences and intercultural conflict. To portray same-sex and heterosexual commitment as mutually exclusively seems more a tactic of fear than one of love and grace.

In debating the family we have to talk about how our deepest fears shape our views. We need to assume greater care for language and rhetoric. We need greater appreciation for the influence of religion and the complexities of interpreting history and nature. And ultimately Christians need solutions to the debate over marriage that are win-win rather than win-lose.

One of the few historical observations on which there is a large consensus is that companionate marriage of the last 150 years—in which the marriage relationship is based on intimate love alone—has created more problems than it has solved, carrying within it the seeds of its own destruction. A private sentiment of love alone is a precarious basis for long-lasting commitment. Theologians have long recognized this and have sanctified marriage as a social institution whose rules sometimes need to take precedence over individual needs.


On this point there is something to be learned from Blankenhorn and Fox-Genovese. We do need a fuller public discussion of the meaning of marriage. Definitions have become vacuous. Children are often casualties. Marriage is more than a personal choice determined by individual wishes or a legal right that awards benefits. Marriage seeks to secure larger social goods that those on all sides should take seriously—social order, sexual loyalty, life-long commitment, the contributions of fathers and the shared adult responsibility for slowly developing offspring.

Upholding the social institution of heterosexual marriage, however, is not Christianity's only or even primary conviction. Besides recognizing the complexity of scripture and history when it comes to family values, Christian theology cautions against glorifying marriage and families. The social institution of family is not an end in itself or an ultimate good. It is a fallible institution and a preliminary and vulnerable means to the greater aim of seeking God's realm on earth. As Jewish prophets, early Christians, Reformed Protestants and neo-orthodox

theologians have all insisted, social institutions like church, state and family can support common goods, but they can also control, pervert and destroy them.

The gospel presents a more encompassing mandate—a preferential option for the poor, vulnerable and oppressed. Christians must ask who is harmed besides children by the collapse of social institutions and by their tyranny. Centuries ago, widows, orphans and aliens fell outside the shelter of society's familial order. Jewish law and prophets called the Israelites to the obligation to care for them. Jesus asked his followers to care for those who threatened normal religious and family structures. Today those most frequently accused in marriage debates of overthrowing the social order are women and homosexuals.

Whatever legal and public policy solutions are reached in the coming years, Christians need to find a social, political and religious way to secure the well-being of women and children, involve fathers in the lives of their children, and support gays and lesbians who want to establish committed relationships and receive the benefits and blessings that go with this commitment. There is good reason to affirm the value of heterosexual marriage for children and society. But there is no valid Christian excuse for restricting the social goods of marriage to heterosexuals. Striving to reconcile these diverse convictions, Christian scholars just might make what Christian ethicist Sondra Wheeler dubs the "festival of mutual recrimination" in the marriage debate a bit more constructive, even if more demanding. **CC**



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