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Abstract

This is a brief review of an important text by one of the leading Christian scholars of the family who is trying to reconcile traditional Christian teachings on marriage and the troubling marital condition in the post-modern West. Thatcher ultimately commends the traditional Christian monogamous, heterosexual, permanent marriage, citing Scripture and various leading Christian theologians of the present and past. But he also offers creative new ways of thinking about engagements contracts, non-marital cohabitation, premarital sex, and more.

Keywords: Marriage; Family; Adrian Thatcher; Sex; Post-modernism

Marriage after Modernity: Christian Marriage in Post Modern Times. By Adrian Thatcher

New York, New York University Press, 1999. 329 pp. \$19.50

Marriage and the family are in trouble today. Statistics tell the grim story in America. From 1970 to 1998, a quarter of all pregnancies were aborted. A third of all children were born to single mothers. One half of all marriages ended in divorce. Two-thirds of all African-American children were without regular fathers. Non-marital cohabitation rates increased tenfold. Juvenile delinquency rates increased twelve fold.

Adrian Thatcher, Professor of Applied Theology at University College of St. Mark and St. John, Plymouth, knows this sad story well. In this lucid and engaging new volume, he documents copiously the exponential changes in modern marriage and family life in the United States and their close parallels in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe. He also assesses critically the corrosive ideology of transient truth and individual gratification that has driven a good deal of this contemporary pathos.

The main purpose of this volume is to offer a constructive theological response to the problems of marriage and family—that speak both internally to the church and externally to broader civil society. Thatcher’s theological starting point is an unequivocal commendation of the traditional Christian forms and norms of monogamous heterosexual marriage, and the traditional Augustinian goods and goals of marriage—faith, children, and sacramentality. He professes repeatedly his “loyalty” to Scripture and tradition, and he devotes a long chapter to a richly

textured description of “biblical models” of marriage, particularly those rooted in ancient Hebrew concepts of covenant and “one-flesh union.”

But many of these biblical and traditional teachings on sex, marriage, and family life are themselves culturally conditioned, Thatcher insists. Christ’s teachings on divorce were, in part, an attempt to diffuse the casuistry of the rabbis, not to obliterate divorce on traditional grounds of adultery, desertion, or “uncleanness.” Paul’s household codes were, in part, attempts to soften the rigid patriarchy of his Graeco-Roman world, not to draw permanent blueprints for Christian domesticity. The Church Fathers’ increased deprecation of sex and marriage was driven by their growing appetite for Platonic asceticism not by an ineluctable biblical logic. The medieval Catholic Church developed its sacramental theology and canon law of marriage not only to provide moral guidance for lay believers but also to seize political power in Western Christendom. The Protestant reformers consigned marriage to the earthly kingdom not only to deny its sacramentality but also to reclaim power for local Christian magistrates.

To recognize the cultural relativity of these and many other traditional teachings of sex, marriage, and family life, Thatcher argues, is not to recommend their moral relativism. But it is to counsel against privileging interpretations of those teachings that worked injustice traditionally or prove unworkable today—especially for wives and children. It behooves church and civic leaders alike to rework some of these “premodern” marital norms to address “postmodern” problems.

Thus, for example, to respond to the continued abuses of patriarchy within traditional homes, Thatcher spurns outmoded Christian constructions of headship, and builds a new ethic of marital equality using St. Paul’s teachings of equal connubial rights and mutual sacrifice. To respond to the problem of neglected children in single- or no-parent households, Thatcher urges married couples to reclaim procreation as an essential good and goal of marriage, and urges non-marital couples to practice non-penetrative sex or at least natural contraception if they must experiment. To respond to the prominence of pre-marital cohabitation and sex, Thatcher urges the Church to return to pre-modern ideals of betrothal as a stage in the marital process that can be both blessed by the church and governed by the state. To respond to the continued marginalization of gay and lesbian couples, Thatcher urges an extension of traditional ideals of covenant and marital friendship to cover if not condone those committed to such unions.

Several such reforms of sexual and marital practice come in for sustained discussion in this volum. A number of them were adumbrated in Thatcher’s Liberating Sex (1993), but they are now elaborated with ample exegetical and historical argumentation. Not all of Thatcher’s reforms and reconstructions will be convincing to every reader. Some of his theological exegesis, such as his

rendering of the Trinity as a freehanded trope for friendship, sharing, and community, will appear strained. Some of his hearty condonation of feminist and liberationist theologies might be off-putting. Some of his historical arguments will not be convincing. For example, non-English readers will at least flinch a bit at Thatcher's repeated statement that Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act passed by Parliament in 1753 "represents the apex of modernity, as it effects marriage, for prior to this date, ecclesiastical ceremonies and official registration were not required for a valid marriage to be enacted" (pp. 28-29). This is a critical premise for Thatcher's long argument that betrothal and private unions might well be licit stages of the marriage process. But ecclesiastical blessing and civil registration, as well as parental consent, public banns, and multiple witnesses to valid marriage, have antecedents in sixth-century Christianized Roman law, and were mandated by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and again by the Council of Trent in 1563. These requirements for marital formation were adopted by many Protestant communities in the sixteenth century and were repeated both in the 1559 Book of Common Prayer and in the 1604 Canons and Constitutions Ecclesiastical. Lord Hardwicke's Act was no "modern" dispensable innovation in the rules of marital formation. It was yet another entry on a long roll of civil, canon, and common law provisions that recognized that marriage was a critical fateful step in life that was best entered with ample publicity and communal safeguards.

Such criticisms aside, Adrian Thatcher's elegant and elaborate effort to rethink and re-pristiniate the riches of the Christian tradition on sex, marriage, and the family is a methodological exemplar for theologians, ethicists, and jurists alike. This important new book should be added to the left side of the growing shelf of recent reconstructive books on marriage written by such distinguished Christian scholars as Don Browning, Michael Lawler, Stephen Pope, David Popenoe, Max Stackhouse, Mary Stewart van Leeuwen, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, among others.

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