

Propositions

Dear Reader,

In my last letter, I cited Judith Stacey as the author of an unpublished 1995 paper, "Do Parents Make Better Citizens? The Civic Order and the New Familism." I was wrong. The author is Karen Struening of Kalamazoo College, and the final version of this essay was later published as "Feminist challenges to the new familism: Lifestyle experimentation and the freedom of intimate association," *Hypatia* 11, no. 1 (Indiana University Press, Winter 1996). I'm sorry for the mistake.

I'm also sorry that this letter is late. If you are a subscriber, we'll extend your subscription and also send you a free copy of our latest Institute report, *The Course of True Love: Marriage in High School Textbooks*. If you are not a subscriber, please become one, so that in the future you, too, will know when I make mistakes and if you have missed something.

Two True Things

Regarding the (sorry, just this once) Clinton scandal, it strikes me that two true things are competing for our attention. The first is that public lying by a president is unacceptable in a democracy. The second is that the process by which this scandal came to public attention is itself illegitimate, a clear sign of democratic decay. The first truth concerns the failure of a president. The second concerns the failure of a system and a culture. In today's warlike political debate, each of these truths is being used to discredit the other.

President Clinton and his defenders seem to believe that a president should not be removed from office for public lying — including lying under oath in federal court — if the lying was about sex and if the questions originated from his political opponents. This is wrong-headed. Democracy itself depends upon the norm of public truth telling. All acts of civic engagement, from voting to attending a PTA meeting to working for a political cause, are based in the hope that citizens, by listening to one another and reasoning together, can find an enlarged and shared understanding of reality.

Public lying destroys that hope. Apart from treason, brazen and on-going public lying may be the worst thing that a democratic leader can do. There can be no excuse or justification for it.

At the same time, many anti-Clinton partisans seem to believe that there is nothing wrong with asking prosecutors to spend any amount of money for any length of time to find anything at all that an elected official might ever have done wrong. This is deeply misguided. Investigating persons, as opposed to investigating specific crimes, is a method more suited to police states. It is flatly inconsistent with the democratic idea.

Beginning with Watergate, and accelerating dramatically in recent years, we have created a prosecution culture in Washington. The basic ethos is to destroy your political opponents by any means necessary. One result is that democratic debate is increasingly overshadowed by criminal investigations. Special prosecutors and perpetual allegations of wrong-doing become politics by other means, a strategy for solving problems and settling scores without the burden of democratic procedures.

Special prosecutors now constitute a permanent and growing presence in Washington, almost their own branch of government. In the case of President Clinton, a quasi-permanent investigation of something called "Whitewater" that allegedly took place in the 1970s eventually bore the strange fruit of a minutely detailed investigation of President Clinton's and other people's recent sexual behavior. President Clinton's defenders are right. This system is rotten.

But so, unfortunately, is Bill Clinton. By his appalling behavior and chronic mendacity, he has dishonored himself and seriously damaged the presidency. The refrain from his defenders that "everybody does it," including all or most previous presidents, is not only untrue, but is itself a shocking assault on the moral underpinnings of democracy. The president should resign or be impeached.

Yet surely we should also dismantle the prosecution culture. When people tell the pollsters that they deplore President Clinton's conduct but approve of his "job performance," part of what they are saying is that their disgust with President Clinton is at least partly off-set by their disgust with the prosecutorial enterprise that has stalked and finally exposed him. Any change in this system will come too late to benefit Bill Clinton. We can't forget what we now know about him. (In a society with clear ethical standards, it's not necessary or even desirable to expose publicly every instance of bad behavior. Yet once exposed, bad behavior in high places cannot be publicly ignored without undermining standards.) Apart from the fate of Bill Clinton, however, surely one of the great tasks before us is to put democracy and due respect for privacy back into our political procedures.

We could start by either reforming or getting rid of the independent counsel statute, and relying once more on the Department of Justice to do its job. At a minimum, sitting presidents should not be investigated for actions that occurred prior to their election. Similarly, courts should not allow private lawsuits to proceed against presidents until after they have left office.

The scope and reach of our current sexual harassment laws, which effectively transformed Bill Clinton's sexual affair with Monica Lewinsky into a criminal matter, should also be reduced, so that they no longer produce such open-ended legal inquiries into private sexual behavior. Similarly, our courts should reconsider recent rulings that permit the state to compel innocent third parties to reveal their sexual secrets.

Regarding the media, I suspect most people at this point would prefer a return to the pre-Watergate double standard in which journalists did not report the private misdeeds of public figures, on the reasonable assumption that to do so would erode important distinctions between public and private.

These are only initial steps toward democratic civility and a society in which disclosure is at least partly balanced by reticence. The needed changes are systemic and cultural, extending far beyond our judgement of any individual, even a president. In this sense, impeaching Bill Clinton would be the easy part.

Any True Things?

If you are looking for fighting words, especially among intellectuals, try these three: Moral truth exists. In his recent book, *Achieving Our Country*, the noted philosopher Richard Rorty approvingly describes American pragmatism as our "refusal to believe in the existence of Truth," in the sense of "something which has authority over human beings." For Rorty, and apparently for many Americans, moral truths are best understood as "tools for achieving human happiness" rather than "representations of the intrinsic nature of reality."

Citing Walt Whitman, Rorty celebrates the ideal of America as "the first nation-state with nobody but itself to please — not even God. We are the greatest poem because we put ourselves in the place of God. . . We redefine God as our future selves." Accordingly, Rorty wants Americans to be "curious about every other American, but not about anything which claims authority over America." For "there is no standard, not even a divine one, against which the decisions of a free people can be measured."

Citing John Dewey, and building on his theme of no external standard, Rorty urges us finally to "abandon the idea that one can say how things really are." After all, what we call "truth" is merely the product of "intersubjective consensus," not a verifiable description of some antecedent fact. Citing Andrew Delbanco's praise for Ralph Waldo Emerson, Rorty thus announces that he "has no room for the idea of a fixed standard by which deviance from the truth could be measured and denounced."

And what of ordinary Americans? According to the sociologist Alan Wolfe in his recent book, *One Nation, After All*, most middle-class Americans have by now learned to get along fairly well in "a world without fixed moral guidelines," which specifically means "not accepting God's commands regarding right and wrong, but developing one's own personal ethical standards." In such a world, are public moral judgements even possible? Can there be any true things? Not really. Wolfe reports that most middle-class Americans currently endorse what Wolfe calls the Eleventh Commandment: "Thou Shalt Not Judge." What's true for me may not be true for you, and that's OK.

Moreover, though he hems and haws a bit, Wolfe ultimately embraces this philosophy as the best possible moral solution to the challenges posed by pluralism. As a result, in a book about morality, Wolfe concludes that the basic problems in the U.S. are not moral at all, but economic. Specifically, our core challenge is "making the United States the one nation economically it already is morally."

In a similar vein, writing this summer in the *New York Times*, Wolfe chastises those who, by continuing to focus on the Clinton mess, refuse to "move on" to more important issues, like the Russian economy. Wolfe views the public's steady refusal to disapprove of the president's job performance, or to demand his removal from office, partly as evidence of its superior moral capaciousness. For Wolfe, and apparently for many Americans, the Eleventh Commandment seems to have become at least as important as some of the others.

Recently at the Institute, our 24-member Council on Civil Society tried to make a different argument. Our report, *A Call to Civil Society*, does not mention President Clinton and strives (I believe successfully) to be politically nonpartisan. But the document does argue that "moral truth exists and that it is accessible to people of reason and good will."

This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as "the Tao." . . . It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others are really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are. Those who know the Tao can hold that to call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognize a quality which demands a certain response from us whether we make it or not.

C. S. Lewis
The Abolition of Man,
1944

Because our access to truth is imperfect, most moral disagreement calls for civility, openness to other views, and reasonable argument in the service of truth.

A Call to Civil Society

Why is this issue so important? Because the only alternative to knowable and shared morality is power, the raw assertion of strength. If I do not believe that I can and ought to deliberate with you about what is morally true, then there is no reason why I should refrain from using you as a means to whatever end I choose. In fact, there is no reason why I should not cut your throat. What is at stake, then, among other things, is the possibility of democracy.

Richard Rorty seems confused on this point. When he calls the modern nation-state "the greatest poem," a replacement for God, he is clearly calling the nation-state the highest good, the Absolute, the thing that we worship. Presumably Rorty expects his preferred version of this "greatest poem" to do good things for people. But the Nazis also declared the German state, as the embodiment of the German people, to be the new Absolute, a replacement for God. Communists regularly made exactly the same claim, with exactly the same contempt for "bourgeois" notions of truth, especially moral truth. What would immunize Richard Rorty's idolatry of politics from these same evils?

Closer to home, this idea that politics trumps morality is everywhere on the ascendant. It might well become the most enduring legacy of our current political culture. The highest good in life, the greatest poem, is advancing my political agenda. Ignore the nuances and the niceties; don't sweat much about old-fashioned "fixed standards." Just choose your side on political grounds, then lock and load. Take no prisoners. It's a war, after all, and the main point is to win the war.

James Carville, the famous political consultant and advisor to President Clinton, proudly explains this philosophy in great detail to anyone who will listen. His best-selling book on politics, co-authored with his wife, Mary Matalin, is quite appropriately entitled *All's Fair*. With great gusto, Carville lives out the meaning of this creed every time he goes on television to attack whomever he is attacking that day. Many Republicans, in their intemperate zeal for political gain and especially in their blood lust for the president, are mirror images of this same approach to life.

In this sense, the warriors opposing one another over the Clinton scandal are more alike than different. Both are increasingly averse to "fixed standards" that operate beyond and above politics: one side especially because such standards would expose the president as a man without integrity, and the other side especially because such standards would relativize the partisan objectives that it views as Absolute.

So our Council tried to speak up for the external standard of moral truth. Here is the nub of our case, as it appeared in A Call to Civil Society: "We understand human beings as free, reasonable, and therefore responsible beings with a basic drive to question in order to know. Deliberating, judging, and choosing — having reasons for what we value and love — are characteristic human activities. For this reason, what we value and love is intelligible and therefore public. What is reasonable transcends our purely private imaginings; it is something in which all persons have the potential to share. Our capacity for reasonable choosing and loving is what allows us to participate in a shared moral life, an order common to us all.

For these reasons, we understand humans as intrinsically social beings, not autonomous creatures who are the source of their own meaning and perfection. We humans only live in communities, through which we are talked into talking and loved into loving. Only through such connectedness can we approach authentic self-realization.

From this perspective, the basic subject of society is the human person, and the basic purpose of government — and all other institutions — is to help foster the conditions for human flourishing. In turn, the essential conditions for human flourishing are the elements of what we are calling democratic civil society, anchored in moral truth."

When Alan Wolfe spoke earlier this year at an Institute symposium on *A Call to Civil Society*, he argued for a "civic" (i.e., secular and largely procedural) as opposed to moral understanding of American democracy. Again, the idea is that politics trumps morality. He also argued that his own (I believe Rorty-like) skepticism regarding the language and idea of moral truth is much more in line with current U.S. public opinion than are the views expressed in *A Call to Civil Society*. He may be right.

Ten years ago, when the Institute was first getting started, I began to realize that by far the most controversial assertions in the family debate were also the shortest and, to me, the most obvious. The two-parent family is a good thing. Children need fathers. The divorce rate is too high. Unwed childbearing is wrong. Those were the fighting words. To some degree, they still are. To me, they are still the most important. In today's emerging and much broader debate on civil society and the state of our culture, perhaps the sword that will eventually cut the Gordian knot — the assertion that will most effectively untangle and clarify all the others — is the seemingly simple proposition that moral truth exists.

Sources: Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 27, 96, 22, 16, 34-35. Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (New York: Viking, 1998), 10-11, 54; and "Oh, Those Beltway Innocents," *New York Times*, August 30, 1998. *A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths* (New York: Institute for American Values, 1998). Mary Matalin and James Carville, *All's Fair: Love, War, and Running for President* (New York: Random House, 1994).

No Surprise

"Fatherless homes nation's largest problem, Fordice says," reads the headline of a *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* story describing Mississippi's new "Responsible Fatherhood Initiative" and Governor Kirk Fordice's proclamation of June 1998 as "Responsible Fatherhood Month." On November 6-7 of this year, Mississippi's Department of Human Services brought together pastors and other community leaders for a statewide "Responsible Fatherhood Summit."

What is surprising about this story is that there is nothing surprising. In the last three years, any number of governors — including Democrats such as Evan Bayh of Indiana and Roy Romer of Colorado as well as Republicans such as Pete Wilson of California and David Beasley of South Carolina — have publicly insisted that fatherlessness is at or near the top of the list of the nation's worst social problems. State and local initiatives aimed at reversing the trend of fatherlessness are popping up everywhere.

Politically, the issue has become thoroughly bipartisan and about as safe as any issue can be. In 1992, the two presidential candidates, the two parties, and in many respects the nation itself, divided sharply over "family values" and whether Dan Quayle was right about television's glamorization of unwed childbearing. But for the election of 2000, it's hard to imagine any serious candidate

I'm convinced that fatherlessness is the single biggest problem in this Commonwealth.

Gov. William F. Weld,
Massachusetts State of
the State Address, 1997.

of either party disputing the proposition that fatherlessness is a serious national problem. We are all pro-family now.

Perhaps we are already seeing behavioral results from this shift in values. The Census Bureau reports that several of the trends toward family disintegration, which took off in the late 1960s and rose rapidly throughout the 1970s and 1980s, have now either bottomed out or slowed down dramatically. Divorce rates flattened in the 1990s. Rates of unwed childbearing appear to be stabilizing. The number of births to teenage girls under age 15 dropped 8 percent from 1995 to 1996. The proportion of all U.S. children living with their two married parents continues to decline, but at a much slower pace. Other recent studies suggest that rates of teenage pregnancy, as well as the proportions of adolescent girls and boys (age 15-19) who report having ever had sexual intercourse, are modestly declining.

What's causing the change? A better economy, some say. The slow exit of the baby boomers out of the age groups most likely to get divorced or have children outside of marriage, others say. Some point to the spread of school-based abstinence programs and initiatives such as "Best Friends" and "True Love Waits." According to the *Boston Globe*, Census Bureau analysts also credit some of the change to the emergence in the 1990s of "a fatherhood movement" in the United States.

I know I fretted in my last letter that "the economy is getting better while the culture is getting worse." But at least regarding the trend of family fragmentation, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that we are now seeing some hopeful signs.

Unless, of course, you believe that family fragmentation is a good thing. Or unless you have spent years insisting that steadily rising rates of family break-up constitute a permanent and untouchable fact before which we must all bow, scrape, and make excuses. Stephanie Coontz (author of *The Way We Really Are: Coming To Terms With America's Changing Families*) is an ardent defender of the 1965-1990 family trend. When the Census Bureau had the temerity to publish data suggesting that, from her point of view, nothing good can last forever, here is what she told the *Globe*: "It's really nonsense to say the traditional family is coming back, because there is no such thing as a traditional family any more. We can't pretend that families haven't irreversibly changed. And it does a disservice to everybody. . .to suggest it's otherwise." No surprises there.

Sources: Jimmie Gates, "Fatherless homes nation's largest problem, Fordice says," *The Clarion-Ledger*, June 2, 1998. Ken Bryson and Lynne M. Casper, "Household and Family Characteristics: March 1997," U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, P20-509 (April 1998). P. Donovan, "While nationwide birthrate is stable, black women achieve a record low, and teenagers' rates decline," *Family Planning Perspectives* 30, no. 3 (May-June 1998), 151. "U.S. Teenage Pregnancy Rate Now Lowest in Two Decades," *The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy* 1, no. 5 (October 1998). "Fertility, Family Planning, and Women's Health: New Data From the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth," *Vital and Health Statistics*, Series 23, no. 19 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 1997). Freya Sonenstein, Leighton Ku, Laura Duberstein Lindberg, Charles F. Turner, and Joseph H. Pleck, "New Data on Sexual Behaviors of Teenage Males," (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, May 1997). Mary Leonard, "A familiar look to U.S. families," *Boston Globe*, May 28, 1998.

A Cultural J-Curve? (cont.)

Regarding this question of whether things are getting better or worse, one reader, John J. Reilly, writes: "Falling crime rates, budget surpluses, and public school uniforms are not the substance of a good society, but I have less and less patience with people who insist that they are not evidence of a society that is getting better. In a way, the current era presents a far harder test. . . than did the years when the whole world seemed to be going to wrack and ruin. Then, all that was necessary was criticism. Now what we need are positive proposals to promote reconstruction, but what we are still getting is pollsters' scams. . . Any society can have a long spate of bad news without necessarily being decadent. Decadent is when you cannot benefit from good news, such as we are hearing today." Point well made and well taken.

Normalizing Divorce (cont.)

OK, enough good news. A reader from Phoenix writes: "Here's one for you. Phoenix taxicabs now have signs advertising 'The Divorce Store.' I assume this is some kind of document preparer. I guess the implication is that getting a divorce is like going to the store for some soda."

My son and I recently noticed similar advertisements in the subways in New York City. One ad shows two angry faces, turned away from each other, and says to call 1-800-DIVORCE for a free consultation. Another ad, showing a chain saw cutting a sofa in half, says to call Jacoby and Myers at 1-800-97LEGAL. The caption reads: "Divorce? Problem Solved."

A highway billboard on Interstate 75 near Cincinnati shows a baby in a diaper with a troubled look. The caption reads: "Wanted - My Daddy." You can call 1-800-IDENTITY to get a DNA test to determine the identity of your baby's father. The cost is about \$500. There are at least two private companies now displaying such billboards around the country.

In Scott Spencer's recent novel, *The Rich Man's Table*, two fatherless boys play a game called "Is That Your Dad?" The idea is that they tease one another by pointing to odd-looking strangers on the street, then posing the question. On the Internet's Episode Guide for the popular television comedy, South Park, featuring a hapless cartoon kid named Cartman, viewers are urged to tune in to a forthcoming show to "find out who Cartman's father is."

In the recent movie BASEketball, a little boy's mother is introducing the boy to a man that the child obviously could care less about. "Look who's here!" the mother beams. The child replies: "My biological father?"

In the *New York Times*, the television critic Caryn James praises TV sitcoms not only for having long since, thank goodness, "moved beyond" the Nelsons and the Cleavers, "those improbably cheerful 1950's ideals," but also for having, more recently, moved beyond the Archie Bunkers and Roseanne Connors, those TV families "that fought together and stayed together." ABC's recent family sitcom, "Something So Right," has a much more "daring" and "up-to-the-minute premise": "the adults each trail a string of ex-spouses behind, along with children from their assorted marriages."

Power Food, Digital Teachers, Optional Marriage: A Kid's Life in the 21st Century.

Cover Story
Newsweek
November 2, 1998

You might say, "Divorce is a grown-up thing that some mommies and daddies do when they make each other sad for a long time. They decide not to live together in the same house anymore, and the children will usually stay with each parent in their homes at different times. This way, the parents hope they can get along better and that their kids will have a happier family also."

"Explaining Divorce
Parents
November 1998

At Lifetime Online (lifetimetv.com), we learn about the network's new TV show, "Oh Baby": "Tracy is in her 30s, her biological clock is ticking and her boyfriend of three years just gave her a turquoise friendship ring. 'Oh Baby' traces the hysterical journey of Tracy (Cynthia Stevenson) as she takes control of her life and decides to be artificially inseminated." Tracy's best friend is Charlotte (Joanna Gleason): "Married twice and now a single mother, she's got more than a few words of wisdom for Tracy as she decides to take a solo plunge into parenthood." For each episode, viewers who check the website are invited to "Weigh In" by emailing to Lifetime their answers to topical questions. For example, for the "Oh Baby" episode on "Dating and Pregnancy," the question for viewers is: "Do you think most single men are averse to dating pregnant women?"

From Melbourne, Australia, the journalist Bettina Arndt, writing in *The Age*, reports: "Single motherhood is now totally acceptable," says Susan Bower, who has spent nine years working as a writer and story editor for local television dramas. "Particularly with the older women in their 20s, you may choose to have a character become a single mother because then she'll be seen as a strong role model. She's not a victim; she's taking charge of her life."

Also from overseas, Kathleen Kiernan of the London School of Economics evaluates the desirability of new public policies aimed at strengthening marriage. She concludes: "The increased diversity and turnover in family life which largely emanates from partnership changes makes policy built on marriage increasingly problematic and suggest that parenthood rather than marriage should be the primary policy focus, and that parenthood rather than marriage contracts should underpin family relations."

Just in case you were feeling better.

Sources: Laura Pulfer, "Fatherless kids a growth industry," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 19, 1998. Scott Spencer, *The Rich Man's Table*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998). Caryn James, "The Marrying Kind: Till Divorce Do Them Part," *New York Times*, March 3, 1998. Bettina Arndt, "And Baby Makes Two," *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia), February 21, 1998. Kathleen Kiernan, "Family Change: Issues and Implications," in Miriam E. David (ed.), *The Fragmenting Family: Does It Matter?* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1998), 64.

Rumor of Angels?

Why do fatherless children need and love their fathers? That children would love fathers who first love and care for them is surely not surprising. But what about children who have never known their fathers? Or children whose only contact with their biological fathers has been unstable, destructive, abusive, or based in neglect? One of the most startling and (to me) largely unexplained findings of clinical researchers is that these fatherless children deeply love and want their fathers. Judith Wallerstein reports that these children experience the absence of the father as psychologically "intolerable," leading to profound "distress," even if the fathers are "ne'er-do-wells who have abandoned them without a backward glance."

Why do these children cry for a father who is not seen or known? Why, for example, do they so often ask their mothers to "bring me my father"? Why do they typically create imaginary fathers in their minds — fantasy fathers who are strong and kind, who love them and miss them and would certainly be with them today,

taking care of them, if only they could? Researchers report that these imaginary fathers are quite important to the mental health of young, fatherless children.

What are we seeing here? Some of it might be explained as a primal fear of abandonment. Some of it might be that these fatherless children feel less safe, less protected, when they realize that they do not have a father. Surely some of it stems from questions of gender identity and embodiment (What do male and female mean?) and the related question of origins (Where did I come from?). But because I am not sure that anyone can fully explain what these children are crying for — children who have never experienced a father's love and who know little or nothing of what it means to be fathered — I suspect that these children are drawing our attention to something about ourselves that might properly be called mysterious.

For it appears, based on these facts, that the human child is "meant" for something called fatherhood. A fatherhood that is knowable, even to very young children who have never personally known it; a fatherhood that is larger than the actual biological father in question; and indeed, a fatherhood that appears to have little to do with whether the "real" father is absent or present, loving or neglectful, nurturing or abusive. I wonder whether these facts might add up to a signal of transcendence, what Peter Berger whimsically terms a "rumor of angels": an indicator from everyday life suggesting that the relationship between father and child points to something larger than itself, something that perhaps ultimately can be conceived only in spiritual terms, as part our intrinsic connectedness to one another and to God. Does anyone have any thoughts or information they would like to share on this question?

Sources: Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 234. Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

A Crime

Which variable most accurately predicts the likelihood of criminal behavior by a young man? His skin color? His family's income? His or his parents' level of education? Where he lives? Or whether or not he lives with his father? Well, all of these variables matter; everything is connected; no single study is definitive; and blah, blah, blah. But the scholarly evidence continues to mount that fatherlessness is the single most important predictor.

A new study by Cynthia C. Harper of the University of Pennsylvania and Sara S. McLanahan of Princeton examines a nationally representative sample of 6,403 teenage boys who were followed over a period of fifteen years, up to their early thirties. Of boys who were living in mother-headed families at age 14, about 13 percent had been incarcerated by their early thirties. For boys from father-present homes, the figure is 5 percent. But of course one could argue — and I have found, whenever I speak to groups on this issue, that many people strongly believe — that this finding, properly understood, actually points less to father-absence "per se" than to other, presumably more potent variables such as poverty or racism.

So in their study, Harper and McLanahan "controlled" for a wide variety of factors, including race, income, residential instability, urban location, neighborhoods with a high proportion of single mothers, parents' education, the child's cognitive ability, and child support payments. None of these factors could explain — could do what some scholars call "make go away" — the strong relationship between fatherlessness and the risk of incarceration. Even after all the controls, fatherless boys were twice as likely as boys living with two parents to have been incarcerated.

Moreover: "For each year spent in a nonintact family, the odds of incarceration rise five percent." Can't stepfathers substitute in this regard for fathers? Apparently not: "Youths living in stepparent families face odds of incarceration 2.9 times as high as those in mother-father households." In fact: "The odds for youths from stepparent families are similar to those from youths who do not live with any parents, although these children, in addition to not having any parents care for them, are selected for more difficult family circumstances." When single mothers remarry, it seems that many boys do not so much gain a father as lose some of their mothers' attention and support.

Another recent study by William S. Comanor and Llad Phillips of the University of California at Santa Barbara reaches similar conclusions: "Examining the likelihood that boys will be stopped, charged or convicted of a crime between the ages of 14 and 22, we find that the single most important factor, more relevant even than family income, is the presence of the father in the home. The probability of delinquency, measured in this way, is typically twice as high in cases where the father is absent than when he is present."

This study, too, looked at the role of stepfathers and boyfriends: "There is strong evidence that delinquency rates are lower when the mother is alone with her son than when she has invited another man into the house. To be sure, these rates are not as low as when the father is present, but they clearly indicate that stepfathers or boyfriends are not the solution. There is no statistical difference between rates with father-mother families and those with fathers and stepmothers, while delinquency rates are much higher with mothers and stepfathers."

Sources: Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, "Father Absence and Youth Incarceration," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (San Francisco, August 1998). William S. Comanor and Llad Phillips, "The Impact of Income and Family Structure on Delinquency," Working Paper in Economics no. 7-95R, University of California at Santa Barbara Economics Department (February 1998). Authors' remarks summarizing the study are from Letters to the Editor, *Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 1998.

Separation of Marriage and State

Recently two well-known Catholic guys from New York got into a public argument over the meaning of marriage. The dispute started when Mayor Rudy Giuliani proposed that the New York City Council pass new "domestic partnership" legislation that would effectively make unmarried cohabiting couples, both heterosexual and homosexual, the legal equal of married couples in a wide range of matters, from housing to death benefits to city contracts. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York, John Cardinal O'Connor, objected: "Marriage matters supremely to every person and every institution in our society. It is imperative, in my judgement, that no law be passed contrary to natural moral law and Western

tradition by virtually legislating that marriage does not matter." In reply, the Mayor begged to differ: "You know, we have a division of church and state in the United States, and it's a healthy one. We're all here because people left other places because someone wanted to enforce their religious viewpoint as the view of the state." Judging from public and political reaction, the Mayor won the debate. The domestic partnership proposal is now law.

But this exchange deserves a moment of attention, for Mayor Giuliani made a breath-taking assertion. The goal of maintaining a privileged legal status for marriage, the Mayor tells us, is essentially a sectarian religious preference. It would be similar to insisting, say, that all public school students wear yarmulkes, or that all elected officials publicly affirm the Nicene Creed. Obviously, the potential abuse that stems from state-mandated religious practice is precisely why the Founders disestablished religion in the first place, instituting the separation of church and state. Here in America, the Mayor proudly reminds us, we simply don't permit people to use the state to "enforce" their "religious viewpoint" on their fellow citizens.

So it's come to this. Scholars tell us that marriage is a universal human institution. It is often called a "natural" institution, since marriage in all societies meets and guides basic human needs for sexual expression, reproduction, and intimacy. Yes, marriage is a religiously shaped institution; almost everywhere, marriage vows are viewed at least partly as sacred promises. But marriage also contains important economic, social, and legal dimensions as well.

Across time and cultures, human societies have not only viewed the married couple as a primary cell of society and an essential guarantor of child well-being, but have also gone to some lengths to develop customs and laws that recognize and protect marriage as a social institution. To the best of my knowledge, no recognized modern scholar — no sociologist, no historian, no anthropologist, no philosopher or theologian — has *ever* suggested that marriage as an institution can or ought to be viewed primarily as a matter of sectarian religious practice.

And yet the Mayor of New York, to public applause and political effect, tells us plainly that inherited legal supports for marriage constitute illegitimate actions by the state to "enforce" a particular religious doctrine on nonbelievers. At least in the family debate, I don't think I've ever heard a smart person say a dumber or worse thing.

Postscript

But I want to for a moment to widen our frame of reference on the Giuliani-O'Conner debate, taking us back to Richard Rorty and the question of whether moral truth exists. To the degree that the Mayor is claiming that the separation of church and state prevents the state from recognizing marriage, his argument can be dismissed as, at best, ridiculous. But insofar as the Mayor is implying that our view of marriage is ultimately a religious question, he may be righter than he knows, or right in a way that I doubt he intends.

For it would seem to be more than coincidence that the Mayor, offering what he describes as his "secular" analysis of U.S. democracy, seems prepared to dejuridify marriage, while the Cardinal is not. On so many of the cultural challenges that now perplex and divide us, from unwed childbearing to divorce to

cloning, if we push those issues upstream, toward what is foundational, we not only discover questions that are irreducibly religious, but we also discern downstream reasoning that seems frequently to divide along religious lines. Put simply, as we push intellectually upstream, toward origins, we find the question of God.

Who am I? Why am I here? What is the highest? Everyone must answer these questions. In this sense, everyone is religious, even those people who are most adamant about the "secular" content of their beliefs. Marriage is "religious," then, precisely to the degree that marriage raises core questions about purpose and identity. Marriage is naturally religious, we might say, because people naturally seek to understand the truth about themselves, including what is true about sexual embodiment and procreation. Yes, there are many individual exceptions. But, so often in today's culture debate, those people who seek to know and follow the God of the Jews and Christians — or for that matter, of the Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists — tend to think a certain way about marriage, while those who do not, those who worship other Absolutes, tend to think differently, about marriage and about many other issues as well.

Richard Rorty understands this fact, and is honest enough to call it by its proper name. Again, it's no accident that Rorty so frequently describes his entire project, including his goal of relativizing "Truth," as a project that aims to substitute "ourselves" for God. For if the external standard is to go down, then God must surely go down, since the latter ultimately provides the former. Rorty knows this.

Earlier I suggested that the question of moral truth would become the finally clarifying question in our emerging debate on civil society. But as I read Rorty, he clearly sees God as the core question. Did God create us or do we own ourselves? Maybe I pulled up too short. Maybe Richard Rorty has pointed out a true thing.

Source: "Cardinal Sees Marriage Harm in Partners Bill," New York Times, May 25, 1998.

Sincerely,

David Blankenhorn

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