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*Family
Disintegration
and
The Retreat From
Common Sense*

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**FAMILY DISINTEGRATION
AND
THE RETREAT FROM COMMON SENSE**

“Cohabitation, births outside marriage, lone-parent families, repartnering and reconstituted families were common in earlier centuries.”¹ *Something to Celebrate*, the Church of England’s Report on the Family to the General Synod, continues: “*Families* which have not worked well, domestic violence and the abuse of young and old people, betrayal, cruelty, depression and isolation, previously largely hidden, are now increasingly out in the open (*italics added*).”

But is the Church Report, to be debated in November, talking about the failures and abuses within life-long monogamous families and their children here? Or is it talking about every kind of household and non-household arrangement where there is a sexual dimension or children — couples without children cohabiting for their own sexual purposes; births outside marriage; voluntarily constituted lone-parent families; those remarried once, those remarried more than once, with or without children of former marriages?

Is the reference to the “families”, whose deficiencies have at last come out into the open, a reference to families where there was formal marriage and life-long fidelity? Or is it about people also in unstructured “relationships”, and therefore a statement that all private arrangements and all public institutions are flawed? If it is the latter, that some people behave badly whatever the institutional framework or private relationship, it is a platitude which still leaves us with the problem entirely untouched of what is the best, or the least damaging, structure or lack of structure in practice.

“Past centuries” is a vague term. Allow me to leave them to one side for a moment, and concentrate on what has happened to young men in the past thirty or forty years so far as these matters of cohabitation, illegitimacy and so forth are concerned. Not only are the statistics considerably more reliable than those for past centuries; intrinsically, if there have been changes in the past thirty or forty years to marriage and the family, that would seem to me to be both more urgent and more important than establishing what was common in past centuries.

The present

Clearly, in the past thirty or forty years a man's sexual condition has been transformed, as compared with what was common in previous centuries, in this regard: if contraception fails, he has improved his chances that a baby he does not want will be aborted - or reduced the chances that the baby he does want will be born. Making abortion legal in 1967 brought abortion out into the open. But making it legal did not just make it open. It transformed the meaning of abortion for men.

We don't know how many illegal abortions were brought into the open in 1967. It's a fair assumption that the same numbers of men whose child was aborted before 1967 would have all appeared in the statistics by, say, 1971. Where the man had not committed himself to mother and child by marriage, there were 60,000 abortions in 1971. Let us say that these 60,000 abortions had simply been brought out into the open. It was generally assumed by abortion's exponents (and hardly argued) that the birth pill would render the need for abortion rare. Legality was therefore a matter of common sense and common humanity. But by 1981 there were 70,000. The increase was then dramatic. The 1981 figure of 70,000 rose to 130,000 by 1991, before falling back to 120,000, *double* the 1971 figure. Whatever was common in previous centuries, abortion became much more common *between 1971 and today*.²

I'll take another set of figures that throw light on men's conduct now - not as compared with what was common in past centuries, but as compared with what was common 150, 100, 50, 20, 10 years, yes and even five years ago. The record of babies being born without their father having married their mother first began to be collected systematically in 1836. From then until the early 1960s, even in war-time, the ratio of men not marrying the mother of their child by the time the baby was born fluctuated only two or three percentage points above and below 7 per cent. But by 1984 the rate had suddenly risen from this century-long norm of well under 10 per cent to 17 per cent. In the mere ten years since 1984 it has doubled again.³ Where the mother was aged under 20, the ratio of biological fathers not marrying the mothers before their child was born was by present-day standards still only 20 per cent in 1961. Now it is 86 per cent.⁴

Previous centuries

Let me be a little less philistine for a moment and glance at these celebrated “previous centuries”. Lawrence Stone is a writer whose work on the family is well known and much quoted. He finds his expected place of honour in the Church of England’s Working Party’s Report *Something to Celebrate*, though not on this subject. Yet if we look at what he actually wrote, we find that in Elizabethan rural England the ratio of children whose fathers were *not* married to their mother, to those where fathers *were* when the child was born, was not over 30 per cent as it is today. It was, he tells us, under four per cent. The rate dropped sharply in Puritan England. It was still under two-and-a-half per cent in the 1720s. Stone tells us that “it then took off.” There was a “remarkable rise”, a “striking increase” between the 1760s and the 1780s, he writes. To 30 per cent? To 20 per cent? To 10 per cent? No, from 4.5 per cent to 6 per cent.⁵ That these are underestimates I do not for one moment doubt. But these are the figures that Stone supplies. Yet he is still the authority quoted in 1995 - he is not responsible for that - to support the case that “nothing much has changed”.

Stone’s figures refer to a time when contraceptive technology was poorly developed. The conception/fornication ratio must have therefore been very high compared with today. We have had the modern sheath since 1928. We have had the contraceptive pill since 1961. The technology which allows sexual intercourse without conception is now highly effective, widely known, weakly tabooed, and available without embarrassment to both sexes.

The dramatic reduction in the conception/fornication ratio - that is the whole purpose of contraception - makes the rise in the figures of pre-marital *births* an index also of the increase in pre-marital sexual intercourse, in men’s freedom to fornicate. Yet in its determination to assure us that nothing much happened, *Something to Celebrate* concludes that sexual intercourse before marriage was “not markedly lower” in 1800 than it is today.⁶ What a remarkably untenable assertion to round off a monumentally irrelevant point! What has 1800 got to do with the extraordinarily swift transfer of men’s sexuality *since the mid-1950s* from the sphere of public morality to private decision - *except falsely to normalize the notion of pre-marital intercourse* as historically stable and biologically unalterable?

The Report expresses grave concern that the incidence of “early sexual activity” among young people is increasing.⁷ That is a curious thing for a Report to the Synod to say. When is sexual activity among young people not early? When they have been “helped to a mature understanding of sexuality”? When is that mature understanding achieved? When they have had six, or twelve, or twenty lessons on responsible sex? When they are ready to cohabit? When he is sixteen and she is fourteen? As in the Sherlock Holmes story, the most significant thing is that the dog didn’t bark: the Report says “early sexual activity”; it does not say “sexual activity before marriage”.

For a short time the recent and sudden expansion of fornication, without conception, did not matter so much in one respect. Penicillin had greatly reduced the danger from venereal disease. But venereal disease has come to matter again. The burdens that once rested on the Pope and virginity, and then briefly on Sir Alexander Fleming and the VD clinic, now rest upon the National Safety Council and the condom, and we all hope that the two of them will prove to be up to the job.⁸

Cohabitation

The Report says, from its beloved “historical perspective”, that cohabitation, too, has always existed.⁹ Of course it has. But the Report’s historical perspective, which seeks to normalize cohabitation, is very seriously distorted. Cohabitation is the replacement of public announcements of mutual fidelity and public obligations, by obligations and relationships of trust privately undertaken and privately abandoned. What has made a person publicly a “married person” has varied from time to time. Sometimes it has been the fact of sexual intercourse having taken place. Sometimes it has been simply the statement in front of witnesses that the women took the man and the man took the woman as spouse. It was not until 1753 in this country that the old formless common-law marriage was replaced by formal marriage after a public Church ceremony. From then on, no marriage existed if the main statutory formalities were not followed.

But to argue from that, that most or many people were not married and simply cohabited before 1753, is to misrepresent or misunderstand the situation completely. Without the current formalities of the registry office or church

wedding they were fully committed to life-long monogamy, with no chance of divorce. They could not marry anyone else during the lifetime of their spouse. With consummation or the *sponsalia per verba de praesenti*, the man, legally and in community opinion, became the husband. For the lifetime of his wife, and the period of dependency of any of his children, he was irrevocably subjected to all the legal requirements of guardianship, maintenance, and so on. Any child of his wife was deemed to be his, without the community having to concern itself with contestable issues of the paternity of the child of a married woman. The essential element was legally-governed and community-sanctioned life-long monogamy - whether brought into existence by proven or claimed sexual intercourse; by the exchange of consents; through the ceremony and sacred vows required by the Church; or by compliance with statute law.

Marriage is increasingly being preceded by this much freer association of cohabitation. Whatever may be the true picture for times for which we have no reliable data, the much more reliable data of the past thirty years show a great expansion in men's freedom to live with a woman without marrying her first. Of those women under 30 years of age who first married in the years 1965-69, only 3 per cent had cohabited with their future husband. Among those marrying for the first time 1970-74 the rate had suddenly quadrupled to 12 per cent; and by 1985-89 it had quadrupled again to 51 per cent. By 1991, 12 per cent of all men aged 25-34 were cohabiting.¹⁰ A sense of the extreme rapidity of men's recent liberation from marriage as a condition of living with a woman, and an indication of future trends, is provided by the figures on 16-19 year-olds. Among 16-19 women living in "unions" in Great Britain, 13 per cent were cohabiting by 1980. But this proportion tripled 1980-86 (1986 = 42 per cent), and increased almost five-fold 1980-89 (1989 = 62 per cent).¹¹

Divorce

In 1947, after the strains put upon marriage by the war, 29,000 petitions for divorce were filed by men. But then the rule of life-long monogamy was believed to have reasserted itself at a stable level of observance. By 1950 the figure of 29,000 was halved, and throughout the 1950s it stabilized at about 13,000 men a year applying for a divorce. But in the 1960s the figure rose again to the level that had been reached as the result of wartime conditions.

When the law was changed under the 1969 Divorce Reform Act the number of men seeking a divorce rapidly rose to four times the old steady figure of 12,000 or 13,000 petitions a year to 50,000 a year. In 1993 in England and Wales there were more than 95,000 divorces in families where there was one or more children under the age of 16, affecting 176,000 children.¹²

Lawrence Stone states that “it looks very much as if modern divorce is little more than a functional substitute for death”.¹³ Divorce, conceived as a deterministic demographic necessity, replaced widowhood as the path of release from the new long life-time of marriage. But losing a parent through death is in its consequences very different from losing a resident parent by divorce. The equivalence of dissolution by death in the past and dissolution by divorce today is at best a very bold historical assumption. Certainly on today’s evidence, having a widowed mother, or being made a widow or widower, are quite different in their effects from having divorced a spouse or having a divorced parent.

With extremely rare exceptions, research studies show that the average child of divorced parents is worse off than the average child whose parents are still married. A leading researcher in the field described the surge in divorce in recent years as a “children’s holocaust”. He retracted the description as unscientific. Of course it is. But when grasping for two words to sum up his impressions from his research, these were the two he used. Children have been the victims of the decreased ability of parents to live together under the same roof. As compared with at least several preceding generations, they are not expected, and do not expect themselves, to attempt to do so. As part and parcel of that, the old common-sense means of maintaining a *modus vivendi* for the sake of domestic peace have been rejected where they have not been forgotten - including means of keeping quarrels between the parents, when they occur, away from the children.

The children of divorced parents do worse than the children of undivorced parents. But would the children of any particular pair of divorced parents have been *still worse off* if their parents had remained together, openly quarrelling and fighting? That is a very difficult problem to solve by reference to empirical data. Undeterred by that stubborn difficulty, pro-divorce advocates frequently speak as if the facts *were* established. Children, they claim, are better off with divorced parents than with parents in a state of conflict.

Researchers have only recently begun to look at this particular question, getting as close as they can to an answer by comparing the children of married parents *who are in a state of conflict* with children of divorced parents. Their findings are that the children of the married parents in conflict, while doing worse, of course, than the children of harmoniously married parents, do better than the children of divorced parents. "Staying together for the sake of the children" (in recent years discredited by "experts" who have not been able even to pretend that they had any hard data to support their case) turns out to be supported as a sound proposition for the children by the limited data that have so far made their appearance.¹⁴

The family *is* breaking down

The proposition that death in the past, and divorce now, both made marriages last in practice about the same length of time sounds more plausible. Stone's version of it is frequently repeated uncritically, as it was in *The Guardian* Weekend Special a few weeks ago. "Lamentations over the collapse of the family in England are exaggerated, based upon a failure to realize that in the past death was as important a cause of the premature dissolution of the family as divorce is today." The family in the past, according to *The Guardian*, was accordingly like today's family "a loose association of transients".¹⁵

But in spite of its popularity, the argument, that families were broken as quickly by death in the past as they are by divorce today, depends upon an elementary demographic error. It is true that the expectation of life *at birth* was much lower in the past than it is today. In the 1870s the expectation of life for a man at birth was only 41 and for a woman only 45. In 1900 in England it was still only 44 for a man. It is now 73.¹⁶ But the relevant figure is not the expectation of life *at birth*; it is the expectation of life *at marriage*. Expectation of life at 20 first appears in the *Statistical Abstract for the U.K. 1912-26*¹⁷; and the first figure supplied is that for 1871. A man aged 20 could expect to live, not until he was 41, but until he was 59. A man who reached the age of 25 or 27, a more usual age of marriage, could expect to live beyond the age of 59. People in all centuries have married on the assumption, and (contrary to the impression now created by the anti-family lobbies whose views finally dominate *Something to Celebrate*) very frequently in the hope, that their spouse had a good chance of living out a life-span of three-score years and ten.

In the face of these momentous developments, *Something to Celebrate* concludes that family life is not disintegrating.¹⁸ If anything and everything is a “family”, then of course that statement is correct. No matter what happens *empirically*, it can always be kept correct by continuously shifting the *definition* of what constitutes a family. But if they mean child rearing within the home with a father and mother in a permanent marriage, it makes one wonder what would have had to happen to the figures, before disintegration - perhaps even just a little bit of disintegration here and there - would have been recognized by the Working Group as a fact of the past forty years.

Economic factors

These changes in the family as formerly defined have had important consequences. Some of them are generally judged to be beneficial. Nearly everyone has a keen interest in our having a buoyant economy. In the past forty years, with a stable population and therefore potentially a stagnant size of market for consumer goods, the breakup of the population into ever smaller units has come as a Godsend to industry and services.

A never-married mother and her non-cohabiting boy friend require not one but two dwellings. Even if they are cohabiting, the technicalities of State benefit provisions very often mean that he has to have a house as well as the mother to make sure that they jointly receive as much money as is obtainable. A divorced couple now need a house each, a refrigerator each, their own carpets, curtains, CDs.

No one planned the Divorce Reform Act 1969 with that in mind. Quite the contrary. The predominantly stated and no doubt, in many cases, genuinely meant intention and expected result was to stabilize the institution of marriage, to strengthen and solidify it, by ridding it of several thousand accumulated and few thousand future failed ones.

But from the economy’s point of view, the sooner we are all in our own houses, each and every solitary one of us with our own full range of household amenities and equipment, our own three-quarter-empty packets of stale biscuits to throw out and fresh supplies bought, the better.

Similarly, the successive international campaigns for “children’s rights” (as currently exemplified by the European Convention¹⁹), by weakening the control of parents over their children generally, make the child economically a more powerful force as a consumer making claims on the parent’s income. The intention is to protect children from slavery and sexual abuse, not to boost the market in *Judge Dredd*, *Batman Forever* or *Caspar the Friendly Ghost* spin-offs. But that is the desirable macro-economic effect.

No capitalist plotted the downfall of the Christian family (I use that term, as it is still valid until November 1995, when perhaps many other arrangements will be entitled to the label according to the Church of England’s Synod). But you can be sure that if the economic consequences had been as severely detrimental to the economy as they have been in practice beneficial to it, much more attention would have been paid to any adverse effects in other directions.

This includes the greater attention that would have been paid to the long-term adverse effects on the economy itself. With the erosion of the obligation on men to take responsibility for their children within the context of a permanent common home, their motivation to improve their skills and adjust to the requirements of efficiency come to depend more on themselves as self-regarding individuals, and less on their responsibilities as husbands and fathers for the long-term well-being of their family. This is already quite apparent in the so-called gender-gap in the schools. From being about equal in O-level days, by 1994, 48 per cent of girls achieved five A-C GCSE passes, but only 36 per cent of boys. Female students are now making better use than male students of the opportunities of sixth-form colleges and colleges of further education.²⁰

The fall in the crime figures 1993-94 and 1994-93 is currently being celebrated. In fact nothing brings out the dramatic speed and enormous *growth* in crime, coincident with the release of boys and men from sociological fatherhood, more decisively than these recent *falls*. In the mid-1950s under half-a-million crimes a year were committed *in total* (1955 = 462,000). The cause for celebration is that the *fall* of 1993-95 is considerably in excess of half-a-million. *The Times* reports that the fall of 570,000 to a total of 5.1 million crimes is “the largest two-year drop since records began”.²¹ What a misleading

remark! Such a large fall is only possible because the absolute figure has grown so much. There could not have been such a large fall in any of the two years prior to 1955 without almost wiping out the crime figure, and in any two years before 1940 without wiping it out altogether (1938 = 283,200). The fall in the annual figure for violent crime “for the first time since 1946” is celebrated. It is a fall to 301,000 *violent crimes alone*, far more than the annual total for *all* crimes, year by year and decade by decade, before the Second World War.

Of course the *growth of crime* (much more doubtfully the growth of drug-taking) can be checked by more and more resources going into *external* surveillance and control in the form, for example, of cameras and large police operations against targeted criminals. But there is no conceivable pool of additional external resources of money, technical devices or personnel that can pull back the current 5.1 million crimes today to the uniformly low figures of forty years ago and before.

The figures in those days were kept low by *cultural* work in families, neighbourhoods, schools, Sunday Schools, churches, political parties, and the press, to which external “law and order” were peripheral, as they always must be and always have been, in all societies.

Unfortunately, it is far, far easier for schools, Sunday Schools, the churches, political parties and the media to destroy, than it is for them to create a culture. But the first step to restoring a decent culture must be at least to stop attacking and dismantling it; and for the Church to take a lead in doing so, instead of belatedly following the fashion of the cultural deconstructionists. The deconstructionists do not require any more help from the Church in what they are doing. They have already by and large changed public opinion in their favour, as can heard in almost any popular lyric, seen in almost any television programme, and discerned from every current social-science survey that deals with these topics.

Family breakdown and the young

Concern with the drastically reduced role of men in relation to their children, and with the long-term *cultural* effects specifically of *these* changes in soaring crime rates 1955-93 among our boys and young men, and the enormous

looming problem of general, normal and legalized drug consumption (again, predominantly by boys and young males) would have been expected to have come from the Church.

But the Church seems to have put itself in the lead of those who wish to remain in a state of denial. *Something to Celebrate* says that the empirical findings show that “some” children growing up in lone-parent families “fare less well physically, psychologically, economically and socially than children that live with both their birth parents”. (The Report says “*birth* parents”, not “*married* parents”. Yet it is *marriage* that sets the divide for the average child's life chances.) The problems of “some” children, of *some* children, brought up by lone parents include poor health, behavioural difficulties, low achievement at school, psychiatric illness, and more involvement in alcohol abuse, other drug abuse and in crime.

Although the list is correct, the implication of this flaccid remark is entirely misleading. It does not need any “research” to tell us that only *some* children from alternative households suffer these disadvantages, and therefore - the intended implication - that *some* children from alternative households do *not* suffer these disadvantages. No one is so ignorant that he does not already know that *some* children from any broad category of circumstances whatsoever fare as well or better than *some* children from any other circumstances whatsoever. Some children of mothers who do not know who the father is, and who cohabit with a series of boy friends, do better than some legitimate children brought up to adulthood by both their married natural parents. That is the result of the immense unfathomable complexity of the genetic inheritance and formative social (not to mention spiritual) experiences of any particular person. Research *is* needed to tell us *what the proportions are* of disadvantaged children from alternative households as compared with disadvantaged children from the homes of their two married parents.

The Report does not attempt to present any research that contradicts the findings that the life chances of children do vary systematically according to the household arrangements of their parents. The research that could be quoted is very thin on the ground.

Smoke screen

It gets round the difficulty in the following way, characteristically using the smoke screen that “some people say” what the Report wants to emphasize. “Others challenge”, it writes, “the wisdom of taking these findings *at face value* [italics added].”

First, the Report says, “There are many kinds of lone-parent households” and “it is very difficult to make generalizations”. Of course it is “very difficult to make generalizations”. A great deal of difficult, long-lasting research work has had to be accomplished. Overwhelmingly results have shown both that a generalization can be made of the general category of absent-father households, and that there are important differences within the general category. The children in the general category of absent-father households have lower average scores on the given tests than those in the general category of married two-parent households. The children of the married father who has died reach higher scores on measured criteria than other groups within the category. These are the difficult generalizations.

The *easy* generalization is that made by the Working Party, which says or implies, that it is “very difficult to make generalizations” - therefore we will assume that research enables us to make *none*. The *easy* generalization is that which says that churches, political parties, university researchers, foundations, voluntary organizations, social-policy bureaucracies and so forth, can ignore the *institutional* implications of these research findings, and can act on the basis of the enormous and easy generalization that there are no *life-chance* differences that matter to the child between being brought up in one household structure rather than another.

Secondly, the Report to the Church of England Synod says, “It is argued that factors other than lone parenthood as such may be producing the adverse results”. The example the Report gives is the greater frequency of poverty in father-absent families. The father-absent family is indeed much worse off in the average case than the married family. Over half of all *married* families with dependent children enjoy a gross income of more than £350 a week (56 per cent). Only 9 per cent of *fatherless* households with dependent children have that income. At the other end of the scale, only 5 per cent of *married* couples with dependent children have less than £100 week gross. Nearly half

of all *fatherless* households have less than £100 a week gross - in the cases where the fathers never married the mothers, and the mothers married no one else, the figure is 60 per cent.²²

The lone parent's poverty as compared with the two-parent family is intrinsic to lone parenthood. The greater frequency of poverty is due to the fact that instead of two potential earners there is only one potential earner who, because of the child, is restricted in the employment opportunities available.

The State

The Report assumes that the State can and will make up the income deficiencies, and advocates that it should do so. I am a member of the Labour party. With Professor A. H. Halsey, I am the author of a book on its pre-1970s' philosophy.²³ But I have a far keener sense than the Working Party, apparently, that the level of income, and the distribution of income, have become far less crucial, since the poverty levels of the 1930s were left behind, in determining and explaining the conduct of boys and young men in this country. I seem to have a far keener sense that the State is not duty-bound to financially support conduct that threatens the society's foundations.

As a Labour party member I seem to have a far keener sense, too, that until and unless the State does do what the Working Party wants it to do, the lone-parent household remains disadvantaged by its structural characteristics. I therefore have extremely little sympathy with the Working Party's implicit logic, that the normalization of the father-absent household is a state of affairs *not* inferior to the normalization of the married-couple family, because *if* the State at some future date could be persuaded to eliminate the income differences between the two categories, *then* the father-absent household would not be inferior in the provision of material welfare for children. A song we used to sing as boys mocked the Salvation Army: "You will eat, bye and bye, in that wonderful world beyond the sky; there'll be pie in the sky, bye and bye."

A third reason for not taking the research findings at face value is that they refer to averages. Therefore, the Report to Synod says, some households in the worse performing category are performing relatively well, some

performing relatively badly. Is there any one so inexperienced and ignorant that he does not take this elementary and banal point about an average totally for granted? The research findings of course consist of averages and distributions, and that means that households at the *better* end of the *worse* distribution out-perform the households at the *worse* end of the *better* distribution.

It is in the area of overlap that the decisions of *individuals* are made. When they are made consciously and rationally in the interests of the children, one or both parents calculate that they will be moving their own children from the worse end of the better distribution to the better end of the worse distribution. The Report introduces the phrase “both-and” to describe its policy. It clearly means, *both* the married family *and* any other private arrangement of consenting adults that happens to involve the procreation and care of children. The emphasis is on relationships. Relationships are good in so far as they express the qualities of love, faithfulness, commitment and mutual responsibility.²⁴ These and their opposites are *possible* under any private arrangement or within any structure. Therefore, the Report argues, we need not concern ourselves with the question of which arrangement or which structure.

The institutional order

But historically the Church has been concerned with *the effect upon the institutional order* of such personal decisions that serve the interests of the individuals concerned, and therefore with *the consequences for many other people in the society and for posterity*. As Oakeshott put it, human life is a gamble. But while the *individual* must be allowed to bet according to inclination (on the favourite or on an outsider), society always has to back the field. The individual might win or lose. If he loses and is penitent, he may hope to fall back into society’s forgiving arms. For a *society*, on the other hand, the penalty is a chaos of conflicting ideals, and the disruption of the common life within which, and only within which, a proportion of individuals can do risky things without too much damage to themselves or others.²⁵

Pastoral care is only possible in a society which keeps a clear head, so to speak, about the distinction between it and the maintenance of well-founded structures of grace, as the Church used to call them. The indispensability of

both the institutional *and* the pastoral was once summed up in the old religious aphorism, “Hate the sin, love the sinner”. But in strictly mundane terms, too, that is the only useful “both-and” approach for maximizing the life-chances for most children.

In its usual “even-handed” style that results in the relatively harmful private arrangement as well as the relative benign institution coming out of the analysis criticized but intact, the Report is able to conclude that it would be “foolish to ignore all the evidence” of poorer outcomes for children outside the home of their married natural parents (which for all practical purposes is exactly what it does). “But it would be equally foolish,” the Report continues, “to ignore the evidence from experience of many parents doing an excellent job for their children and the many children from lone-parent households who have developed into mature stable adults.”²⁶

Nothing to choose

This, then, is the Report’s logic. The evidence is that children do better on the average in the homes of their married parents. But the evidence is also that some children do well under other household arrangements. Ignoring evidence is foolish. (I agree with that!) The Report’s syllogism continues: ignoring the one body of evidence is as foolish as ignoring the other body of evidence. *Therefore it follows* that there is nothing to choose from the State’s or the Church’s point of view between the married family and these other arrangements. Amazing!

Of course a proportion of fatherless households by choice, and a still higher proportion of fatherless families by misfortune, do an excellent job. It would be pure prejudice to assume that any particular parent was a good one or a bad one, merely on the basis of a place inside or outside the category of marriage. But it is sheer obscurantism to maintain that lone parenthood of choice or misfortune, or the private arrangement of cohabitation, *under past, current, or politically or socially attainable conditions in the near future*, are as beneficial for children in general as the institution of married parenthood.

No relatively benign institution should be demoted because of some people’s inability to distinguish between the differences of the characteristics of a

group not defined by its conduct on the one hand, and the characteristics of any particular member of that group on the other.

Evasion, confusion and one element of clarity

By using its splendidly evasive verbal formulations the Working Party gives the impression that different household types are after all empirically equivalent, in spite of the face value of all the research that shows decisively that they are not. As they are empirically equivalent, then they are, of course, also morally equivalent. As they are morally equivalent, they are also equivalent in terms of public policy. "Should a family policy operated by Government seek to favour one family form rather than another?...We do not find this acceptable."²⁷ If they are empirically equivalent, morally equivalent, and politically equivalent, they are theologically equivalent. Cohabitation, for example, is therefore no longer for the Working Party (and if its case is accepted in November then shortly also for the Synod and for the Church of England) "living in sin". The "first step" the Church should take is to abandon the phrase.²⁸

Something to Celebrate is a Report with four elements. The **first** consists of (i) exhortations to act with Christian love to all people; (ii) an unexceptionable insistence that no one should be pre-judged because he or she belongs to any particular non-behavioural category, but as Martin Luther King said, all should be judged by the content of their character; and (iii) a call to bear the burdens of pastoral care, whether the origins of the distress lie in misfortune or choices of life-style. The **second** element reflects the Rowntree Foundation's heavy input, with its emphasis on current material poverty in the provenance of contemporary expressions of anti-social and self-destructive male conduct, and the role of the taxpayer in ameliorating the former and thereby mitigating the latter. The one is in the mainstream of Christian charity. The other, emanating from a Charity (and therefore itself non-political), nevertheless feeds directly into today's opposition politics. The one is quite uncontroversial. The other lies well within the polite boundaries of the English party system.

Of the **third** and **fourth** elements, one corrodes the other until almost nothing remains of it. Right in the middle of *Something to Celebrate* is a theological chapter with no empirical content. It lies therefore outside my professional scope. But as a layman I can see that its clarity and straightforwardness lifts it

like a cliff above the morass of manipulation of the English language of most of the rest. This chapter does indeed celebrate the family of pre-marital abstinence, intra-marital continence and peace, life-long fidelity and trust, and children brought up within the security of their parents' own loyalty and mutual support in the face of all difficulties. There's hardly a sentence that would be out of place in *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II's restatement of Roman Catholic family theology. Scattered through the document are other occasional strong statements in favour of this kind of family.²⁹ They could be quoted extensively to satisfy the most conservative evangelical Protestants that the Report is pro-family as they would understand the term. No doubt they will be.

But the Report would have more fairly represented the direction of its thrust and its final message if this candid and clear statement, free of linguistic charlatantry and academic sloth, had been put at the beginning of the Report, and the other chapters then explicitly lined up to leach from it everything of its meaning and force.

The clever-silly philosophical intelligentsia

Outside of Chapter 5, almost all favourable references to the family, its centrality to Christian values, our duty to support and succour it, are to be understood as the family "in its many forms". Never-married mothers, cohabiting unions, remarried couples, and so on, are equally valid private life-styles for a Christian, brought up limpingly in the rear by the private life-style of the "married couple who marry only once".³⁰ Attacks on the family, by contrast, usually carry the clear implication that they are directed at the socially and religiously buttressed family of life-long heterosexual monogamy.

There is nothing remotely original about this decisive **fourth** element, which finally gives the Report its fundamental message and its concrete recommendations to the General Synod. It's this year's fashion with the clever-silly philosophical intelligentsia, than whom no one is sillier, or more terrified with being out of step with the latest fad that labels itself *avant garde*. It is a dreary repetition of post-modernism's phraseology and dogma, known or unbeknown to its authors, without, to use Zygmunt Bauman's phrase,³¹ post-modernism's genuine "zest and glee" in the celebration of the downfall of

any institution, the deconstruction of any social order, and the living-out of any personal, especially sexual, fantasy. It is post-modernism's thin gruel, made palatable to Bishops by the ever-so faint odour of sanctity.

The failure to face up to the part played by the *sudden* and unprecedented weakening of married fatherhood in the *sudden* emergence of the problems of drug use and crime among boys and young males on this generation's unprecedented scale is particularly sharp among the academic social intelligentsia. What an unparalleled tragedy it would be if they were to be finally joined by a Church whose evasive insinuations that "we cannot assume that a particular shape of family is God-given" mean in plain language that it has nothing to add to what the secular world has already proclaimed raucously on its own behalf; a Church whose favourable references to "the family" are always to be understood as the family of any person, or group of persons living together by mutual consent, who have some responsibility for children, all forms of which are equal as a way in which "God's blessing is bestowed"; but a Church whose sneers are reserved mainly for what it calls the cereal-box family of the 1950s, that is, the family of pre-marital chastity, of one woman and one man joined in fidelity in bringing up their own children within a life-long marriage.

A collapsing church

Were that to happen, I fear that one day one of my great-grandsons might be heard asking his father Robert or his father Max about a historical English curiosity that was dismembered at the end of the twentieth century by poor philosophy backed up by self-serving pressure groups: "Do you its former pride recall, or ponder how it passed away?"

Notes

- ¹ Working Party of the General Synod Board for Social Responsibility, *Something to Celebrate: Valuing Families in Church and Society*, London: Church House Publishing, 1995, p. 205.
- ² OPCS, *Social Trends 25*, London: HMSO, 1995.
- ³ OPCS Monitor 28 June 1995.
- ⁴ *Annual Abstract of Statistics 1995*, London: HMSO, 1995.
- ⁵ Stone, L., *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977, pp. 612-13.
- ⁶ p. 22.
- ⁷ p. 214.
- ⁸ The National Safety Council, with the support of the Prime Minister, John Major, organized 7-14 August 1995 as 'National Condom Week'. It distributed a poster to 2,000 health and welfare centres featuring the Pope wearing a building-site helmet and the words purportedly pronounced by him, 'Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt always wear a condom'. The NSC's director-general defended the poster on the grounds that 500,000 people contracted VD each year, and 10,000 had died of sexually-transmitted diseases in the UK since 1982. *The Times*, 5 August 1995.
- ⁹ pp. 110-11.
- ¹⁰ Bridgwood, A., and Savage, D., *General Household Survey No. 22 1991*, London: HMSO, 1993.
- ¹¹ Kiernan, K. and Estaugh, V., *Cohabitation, Extramarital Child-bearing and Social Policy*, London: FPSC, 1993.
- ¹² OPCS, *Marriage and Divorce Statistics 1993*, London: HMSO, 1995.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹⁴ Cockett, M., and Tripp, J., *The Exeter Family Study*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994. On divorce in the United States see Wallerstein, J. S, and Blakesee, S., *Second Chances: Men, Women and Children after Divorce*, London: Bantam, 1989.

¹⁵ Smith, J., 'Repenting at Leisure', *The Guardian*, 8 July 1995.

¹⁶ OPCS, *Mortality Statistics General, 1992*, No. 27, London: HMSO, 1994; and OPCS, *Annual Abstract of Statistics 1995*, London: HMSO, 1995.

¹⁷ London: HMSO, 1928.

¹⁸ p. 209.

¹⁹ Council of Europe, *Draft European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights*, Directorate of Legal Affairs: Strasbourg, 18 July 1995.

²⁰ 'GCSE and GCSE A-level in England 1994', *Statistics of Education*, London: HMSO, 1995.

²¹ 28 September 1995.

²² OPCS, *General Household Survey 1993*, HMSO, 1995.

²³ Dennis, N., and Halsey A. H., *English Ethical Socialism: St. Thomas More to R. H. Tawney*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

²⁴ p. 206.

²⁵ Oakeshott, M., 'The Tower of Babel', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, London: Methuen, 1962, pp. 59-60.

²⁶ p. 46.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 45-46, and p. 160.

²⁸ p. 117.

²⁹ e.g., p. 118.

³⁰ p. 159.

³¹ Bauman, Z., *Post-modernity: Chance or Menace?*, Lancaster: Centre for the Study of Cultural Values, 1991, p. 5.

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