

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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15 December 2012

### *The State of the Family in Western Civilization*

That the family is the bedrock institution of civilization is a given. But what constitutes a family is now being debated and increasingly the state is taking over more of the family's function. As a Christian, it is difficult for me to see this as a positive development; in fact, I believe it is one of the most worrying developments of the postmodern era. For that reason, I want to focus on the state of the family in this *Perspective*. But, first permit me an introductory comment: God created three fundamental institutions through which He does His work and through which He channels common grace blessings—the family, the state and the church. Each one has clear stewardship responsibilities and, if they are followed, God's blessings follow; if they are not, dysfunction results. The state, for example, is not to raise children; if it does, there will be serious consequences. The church is not to judge or punish criminals; if it does there will vigilante justice. The state is not to fulfill the Great Commission; that is the church's responsibility. So, given these foundational comments, what is the state of the family?

- First, a few comments on blatant aberrations that are obviously damaging the family. **(1)** Cohabitation has increased in the US by more than 1,500 percent in the past half century. In 1960, about 450,000 unmarried couples lived together. Now that number is more than 7.5 million. More than half of all marriages are now preceded by cohabitation. The sexual revolution and the availability of birth control explain this development but there is also the brute fact that “sharing the bills” makes it cheaper to live together. But as clinical psychologist, Meg Jay, points out, couples who cohabit before marriage tend to be less satisfied with their marriages and more likely to divorce than couples who do not. She calls these negative outcomes the “cohabitation effect.” Jay demonstrates that cohabitation is more about “sliding than deciding.” Moving from dating to sleeping over to sleeping over a lot to cohabitation can be a gradual slope, one not marked by rings or ceremonies or even sometimes a conversation. Couples bypass talking about why they want to live together and what it will mean. And, as Jay also shows, “One thing men and women do agree on, however, is that their standards for a live-in partner are lower than they are for a spouse.” The consequence? A superficial and shallow view of the single most important institution on earth. **(2)** French President François Hollande recently called for the abolition of homework! This rather shocking announcement was actually part of a much broader set of education reforms for France, despite significant evidence that homework has a positive effect on learning and achievement. For example, Duke University's Harris Cooper, Jorgianne Civey Robinson and Erika A. Patall (based on research conducted between 1987 and 2003) found that students who were required to do homework outperformed those who did not. But, despite the evidence that homework is an effective educational tool, Hollande's desire to eliminate homework has more to do with ideology than student achievement. He desires to equal the playing field in education for all students. Poor children, he believes, are less likely to get parental help for homework and thus requiring homework merely widens

the already existing achievement gap. In fairness to Hollande, he hopes to neutralize the elimination of homework with longer school days. In effect, the students will spend less time at home, where the seeming inequity exists. But as theologian Albert Mohler observes, the inequity actually begins even earlier, for “Parents who talk to their children and, even more importantly, read to their children, give their children a priceless head start. Parents who spend time with their children and are involved in their school work, offering encouragement and accountability, increase that advantage. Involved and engaged parents give a child a priceless advantage.” Common sense also tells us that if there are two parents, there is greater opportunity for the child to be encouraged, supported and helped. The breakdown of the family must be viewed as a major cause of the inequity Hollande is seeking to solve. In fact, he is seeking the solution in the state—not the family. One could even say that he seeks to so control the child’s life and education that he is making children wards of the state. He is, in effect, as Mohler argues, “proposing the state as the answer to inequities it cannot possibly resolve, and marginalizing or subverting the family in the process.” If the family is failing and there are social inequities as a result, the state moves in to solve the problem. But that will not work. We once again see that the fundamental problem of the human condition is not political, social or economic; it is spiritual. When humans ignore the clarity of God’s design and purpose, there will be catastrophe. François Hollande’s idea about homework is not a solution but evidence of the fundamental problem itself.

- Second, when one adds the growing embrace of same-sex marriage in Western Civilization, what should be the Christian response to this crisis of the family? The answer is to go back to first principles. Western Civilization’s accommodation to equality, equity and personal autonomy forbids drawing arbitrary lines when it comes to family and marriage. But the crucial question is how we define arbitrary, and the only way to draw reasonable lines is to ask two questions: What is marriage and why does it matter? Marriage is a uniquely comprehensive union, involving a union of heart and mind and, perhaps most importantly, a bodily union made possible by the complementarity so evident in how the male and the female body is made. As a Christian, I believe that it is a self-evident truth that God designed the human race male and female and that His further design is the formation of a complementary union. As Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson and Robert P. George have argued: “Marriage is inherently extended and enriched by procreation and family life and objectively calls for a similarly all-encompassing commitment, permanent and exclusive. In short, marriage unites a man and woman holistically—emotionally and bodily, in acts of conjugal love and in the children such love brings forth—for the whole of life.” Therefore, marriage law shapes behavior by “promoting a vision of what marriage is and requires. Redefinition will deepen the social distortion of marriage—begun by policies such as ‘no-fault divorce.’ As marital norms make less sense, adherence to them erodes.” The crisis today is that sex and marriage are viewed only as means to emotional satisfaction and selfish fulfillment. As this re-definition has accelerated based on filling autonomous needs with little or no commitment, the state has moved in. As Girgis, Anderson and George have shown, “Marital norms serve children, spouses, and hence our whole economy, especially the poor. Family breakdown thrusts the state into roles for which it is ill-suited: provider and discipliner to the orphaned and neglected, and arbiter of custody and paternity disputes.” Conjugal marriage is not only rooted in God’s Creation Ordinance, it is the foundation for social stability, reasonable government and economic health. We have lost our way as a

civilization and, as a civilization, we are now paying dearly. Our crisis is not only social, economic and political; it is theological. The protective function of the family as defined in the Bible is our only hope: The mutual obligations of husband and wife, in a relationship of fidelity and joy, give committed boundaries and protections for everyone—men, women and children. This then produces social and economic stability—something the state will never produce. May God in His mercy enable our civilization to re-awaken to His ideal for marriage and the family. It is our only hope!

See Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson and Robert P. George in the *Wall Street Journal* (21 November 2012); Meg Jay in the *New York Times*, “Sunday Review” (14 April 2012); and Albert Mohler in [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (3 and 6 December 2012).