

# *Peril or Progress?*

## *Interpreting Changes in Family Life*

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*Bryce J. Christensen* directs the English Language Study Center at Southern Utah University. His first contribution to *Modern Age* (Summer 1985) was entitled "What Perishes When Literature Teachers Publish." In the following essay, which delineates and interprets changes in American family life, Christensen insists that an alarming decay is taking place. For Christensen the false culture of progress, in particular, renounces those abiding principles, and virtues, of fidelity, devotion, and selflessness which are the foundations of marriage and family life. The social vision of most progressivist intellectuals today, he adds, is mainly informed by political ambitions and agenda: "The road they call progress leads not to strong family life but tends rather toward an ideologically engineered utopia." His illustrations and comments are bound to disturb readers. Clearly, neither his judgments nor his warnings can be dismissed or ignored.

FEW ASPECTS OF American culture have changed more dramatically during the past forty years ago than family life. The divorce rate (per 1000 married women) has more than doubled, while the illegitimacy rate (as a percentage of total births) has climbed more than 600 percent. Meanwhile, the marriage rate (among women ages 15 to 44) has tumbled by more than 40 percent, and the overall fertility rate has languished below replacement level since the early 1970s (a demographic reality temporarily hidden by increased longevity and immigration). During the same period, employment among married women with young children has quadrupled, putting more than 2.5 million children under the age of five in day-care centers every weekday.<sup>1</sup>

No one disputes the trends. All agree that children, homemaking mothers, and intact marriages are rarer now than they were four decades ago, and that unmarried mothers, divorce lawyers, and childless couples are more common. But anyone who attempts to interpret or to evaluate these changes will soon find himself embroiled in a heated controversy. For though political philosophers, sociologists, and cultural commentators share the same set of social data, they disagree sharply in their interpretation of those data. Bitter and acrimonious, this disagreement brings into collision two utterly incompatible interpretations of recent family change: (1) American family life is in an alarming decay, a decay at once cause and consequence of a pro-

found cultural and moral crisis; or (2) American family life is in an exciting transition, a transition essential to the realization of social, political, and sexual possibilities long repressed by domestic traditions.

Making the case for the first and darker interpretation of recent changes in family life is a group of scholars calling themselves the Council on Families in America. In 1995 this group (including such prominent figures as the legal scholar Mary Ann Glendon, sociologists David Popenoe and Norval Glenn, historians Martin Marty and Allan Carlson, and political scientists Jean Bethke Elshtain and William Galston) published a manifesto lamenting the nightmarish social consequences of the unraveling of family life in America. "The steady displacement of a marriage culture by a culture of divorce and unwed motherhood," the Council asserted, has entailed "insupportable social costs," especially evident in "the deteriorating well-being of children." In elevated rates of poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, psychological illness, delinquency, and adolescent suicide, Council members list the sorry consequences of our national epidemics of divorce and illegitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

Yet we need not look far to find well-credentialed defenders of the second, more optimistic interpretation of recent family trends. "Good riddance to the family," says sociologist Judith Stacey, who regards the family as the repository of repressive patriarchal traditions and who sees a more enlightened and open society emerging as old family patterns die.<sup>3</sup> In the same spirit, David Schulz and Stanley Rodgers compare recent changes in thinking about the family to advances in the theories of physics, likening those who are concerned about "the survival of the nuclear family" with nineteenth-century physicists unable to outgrow the primitive conception of "the atom as the elemental building block of the uni-

verse." Those with a progressive attitude about family life, argue Schulz and Rodgers, will share with modern physicists the concepts of "relativity" and "interdependence."<sup>4</sup>

An aggressive relativity characterizes the views of researchers Mary Jo Bane and George Masnick, who criticize those who encourage "resistance to changes in our households and families" for their "genuine lack of understanding of what is happening and why." "A deeper level of understanding," they write, "will help us break down resistance."<sup>5</sup> Writing from a similar perspective, sociologist Stephanie Coontz accuses defenders of traditional family life of falling into "the nostalgia trap." Coontz lauds the "expanded tolerance for alternative family forms and reproductive arrangements" made possible by recent social changes, changes which she also praises for giving women greater legal, educational, and economic freedom.<sup>6</sup> This kind of feminist hopefulness also animates Elizabeth I. Nybakken and Joseph M. Howes, who interpret recent changes in family life as the overdue triumph of "the core value of individualism," as "young women ...claim the same rights as their brothers for self-improvement—including the right to be both economically and psychologically independent."<sup>7</sup>

The gulf separating those who view recent changes in family life with alarm from those who view these same changes with satisfaction and hope will not be bridged by new statistics, new data, or new empirical evidence. For every trend, study, or finding cited by those distressed by recent changes in family life is quickly reinterpreted by those pleased by these same changes. *Divorce rates have skyrocketed.* Today's young people are simply unwilling to be trapped in a mistake; most of those who divorce are moving out of bad unions into better, more fulfilling ones. *Putting young children in day care puts parent-child bonds at risk.* Day

care teaches children precociousness and autonomy. Besides, even a limited amount of quality time with a fulfilled mother is better than around-the-clock care from an unemployed, unfulfilled mother. *Illegitimacy leaves young boys confused about their social identity and young girls unprepared to make lasting commitments.* Poor, unemployed fathers are often abusive. Social workers and school teachers can act as inspiring male role models for fatherless children without exposing them to such risks. *Family breakdown is fostering juvenile crime.* Youth from alternate family forms will feel less resentment and anger towards society as acceptance towards these forms grows and prejudice fades. In any case, we at least can see some evidence of our success in jettisoning deplorable gender stereotypes in the way crime rates are shooting up more rapidly among young women than among young men.

And so the fruitless debate continues. Sober observers may well marvel at the patience of those on the pessimistic side and the Panglossian ingenuity of those on the optimistic side.

But why, we may wonder, do so many who give evidence of normal or even superior intelligence persist in interpreting recent changes in family life as a reason for hope? Such persistence derives in part from a strong cultural bias favoring a type of historical thinking well-exemplified in the work of Macaulay, Froude, Lecky, and others now collectively known as the Whig historians. For these writers—as for the defenders of recent changes in family life—the grand theme of history is *Progress*.

Perhaps the premier Whig historian, Thomas Babington Macaulay, identifies the theme of his *meisterwerk*, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second* (1849-86), as “the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement.”<sup>8</sup> In an earlier work, Macaulay anticipates this theme with

warm enthusiasm as he rejoices at the way in which a

...wretched and degraded race have become the greatest and most highly civilized people that ever the world saw ... [a race which] have carried the science of healing, the means of locomotion and correspondence, every mechanical art, every manufacture, everything that promotes the convenience of life, to a perfection which our ancestors would have thought magical, have produced a literature which may boast of works not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us, have discovered the laws which regulate the heavenly bodies, have speculated with exquisite subtlety on the operations of the human mind, have been the acknowledged leaders in the career of political improvement.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of progress, as cultural historian Robert Nisbet has pointed out, has benefited Western civilization by lending “strength to human hope and to individual desire for improvement.”<sup>10</sup> But Herbert Butterfield nonetheless delivers a justified indictment against an insistent emphasis of progress which leads to intellectual dishonesty, as self-congratulatory writers massage the evidence into “a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.”<sup>11</sup> It is this kind of tendentiousness which causes Macaulay impatiently to dismiss all those who “talk of degeneracy and decay” as they “compare the age in which their lot has fallen with a golden age which exists only in their imagination,”<sup>12</sup> just as it now causes the enthusiasts of progress to pour contempt and ridicule on those disturbed by recent changes in family life.

But such contempt and derision cannot long hide the implausibility of *progress* as an interpretive gloss upon recent changes in family life. In the first place, we have no reason to look for any cultural development deserving the label *progress* in an age in which, as Nisbet

observes, “egocentric and hedonistic elements” are destroying reverence for the sacred and undermining respect for “the past, as represented by ritual, tradition, and memory.”<sup>13</sup>

The false cult of progress thus holds little appeal for those who understand that every generation must safeguard and renew the same heritage of perduring principles—fidelity, devotion, selflessness—which undergird marriage and family life. Originating from that God who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8) and who is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 90:2), these moral principles stand among the Permanent Things. The fight for these principles thus constitutes part of the broader cultural struggle to which Professor George A. Panichas summons us as he warns against ideologues who have “renounced the old principles of wisdom, synonymous with the abiding One, so to speak, in favor of experiment and change, in their relativistic values.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the promises of such ideologues, mortal men and women will never progress beyond these old principles to new and better ones derived through modern politics or social theory.

The existence of abiding principles does not preclude all possibility of cultural or social progress. But the existence of such principles does mean that all authentic progress must be rooted in what Nisbet calls “the greatness and indispensability of the past.”<sup>15</sup> The indispensability of the past for true progress is well illustrated in a recent book not about family life but about theoretical physics. In *The Equation That Changed the World*, physicist Harold Fritsch depicts an imaginary meeting between seventeenth-century physicist Isaac Newton and his twentieth-century successor, Albert Einstein. During this meeting, Einstein explains his theories to Newton in such a way that Newton not only accepts them as valid but is soon applying

them himself with great relish. Of course, Newton never had such a conversation with Einstein, but Fritsch’s portrayal of that conversation is plausible and convincing. It is indeed hard not to believe that Newton would admire the “great elegance” of Einstein’s formulae and would regard the physics Einstein developed as “interesting and wonderful,” a marvelous enlargement of his own attempts to find a scientific explanation of the cosmos.<sup>16</sup>

In Newton’s imagined response to Einstein’s work we see one of the characteristics of genuine progress: real progress transcends the efforts of predecessors in the field yet remains true to their fundamental goals. And though imaginary, the conversation which Fritsch depicts between Einstein and Newton reflects the fundamental and very real accountability of modern practitioners of any discipline to their predecessors.

When our concern is not celestial physics but rather family life, the predecessors in the field are our own ancestors. What were their goals and hopes? Is it possible to see in recent family trends the fulfillment of those goals and hopes? My mind balks at the difficulty of convincing my ancestor Karen Nielsen Jorgensen, who lost her fisherman husband in a terrible storm off the coast of Fyan, Denmark, in August 1842, and subsequently had to raise seven children alone, that the divorce revolution has improved society. Nor when I survey the other names on my family tree—the Johansens, the Jensens, the Angells, the McArthurs, the Johnsons, and (of course) the Christensens—do I see many likely to accept the argument that our social world of illegitimacy, divorce, day care, and cohabitation represents an improvement over their world of enduring marriage and loving child rearing.

Most readers who know much of their own ancestors will likewise conclude

that the new social patterns of recent decades, and the New Morality used to justify those patterns, represent the betrayal, not the fulfillment of our ancestors' hopes and strivings. One of my own ancestors, my paternal grandfather, William Christensen lived long enough (he died in 1974) to applaud the kind of technical progress which allowed him as a young man to fly the English Channel (cotton in his ears to block out the engine noise) and as an old man to watch Neil Armstrong take steps on the moon. However, he also lived long enough to witness the emergence of a new type of marriage, far more ephemeral and fragile than the enduring union into which he entered with Florence Johnson in 1928. Unlike the new type of aircraft, the new type of wedlock did not satisfy his criteria for progress. Greater strength and happiness in marriages; more industry, honesty, and filial affection among children; more courtesy, circumspection, self-discipline, and thoughtfulness among suitors—these are social developments my grandfather and most of our ancestors would recognize as fulfillment of their hopes for the future, as genuine progress.

Unfortunately most intellectuals now waving the banner of progress do not aim at fulfilling our ancestors' hopes. They join with Stacey, Schultz, Coontz *et al.* in justifying and even glorifying recent changes in family life. Their social vision is not informed by the virtues cherished by most of our ancestors. Rather, it is informed by political ambitions. The road they call *progress* leads not to strong family life but tends rather toward an ideologically engineered utopia.

The prevailing contemporary concept of *utopia*, however, differs markedly from that developed by Saint Thomas More when he coined the word, for the perfect society to which he gave that name rested upon strong religious faith and abiding

marital and family ties. Most philosophers we now regard as *utopians*—from Plato to Bellamy to Skinner—evinced a political ambition which displaces rather than expresses religious faith. Borrowing a phrase made famous by critic T.E. Hulme in another context, we may even interpret the utopian impulse, in most of its manifestations, as a kind of “spilt religion.” In the spilt religion of utopians, the worshipper adores not God but instead the image (never fully embodied) of a politically perfected society. In this false religion, the quest for progress becomes the idolater's rebellious journey away from God.

This rebellion manifests itself invariably in a rejection of traditional family life. So whether we turn to Plato's *Republic*, Campanella's *City of the Sun*, Deschamps' *Le Vrai Systeme*, Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Morris's *News from Nowhere*, or Skinner's *Walden Two*, we find plans to weaken or abolish wedlock and to take children out of the hands of reactionary amateurs (*i.e.*, their own parents) and to put them into the hands of ideologically prepared experts.<sup>17</sup> Laden with oppressive traditions, overloaded with irrational emotions, family ties must be severed—or at least attenuated—so that rational, psychologically liberating, and politically enlightened patterns can be instituted. Men will no longer divide their loyalties between the state and the family. Women will develop their talents outside the home, thus bringing new energy and intelligence to the workplace and the public forum. Children will escape the superstitions of their fathers and the smothering emotions of their mothers. Everyone—men, women, and children—will be spared the weight of family duties and the inevitable guilt of lapses in performing those duties. These constitute the hopes of those who repudiate the family for the sake of utopia. Even if those now justifying and glorifying recent changes

in family life do not proffer any well-developed utopian blueprints for future social evolution, their repudiation of traditional family ties still springs from recognizably utopian hopes.

The utopian desire to escape domestic guilt without repentance and without divine redemption deserves particular scrutiny. It is no accident that the Lord instructs Adam and Eve in their marital and family duties at the very time He expels them from Eden into the fallen world of death and sin (Gen. 3:16-19). Since God establishes marriage and commands the bearing of children *before* the Fall (*cf.* Gen. 2: 23-24 and Matt. 19: 4-6), we may not legitimately suppose (as a few modern theologians have) that family responsibilities are a punishment visited upon mankind because of the partaking of the Forbidden Fruit. Rather, God has given us the family, not the utopian state, as the divinely ordained social pattern in which we find strength and comfort as we confront the trials and perplexities of a fallen world. Without God's intervening grace, the family alone cannot deliver us from these perplexities. Yet God commands us to live within marital and familial bonds so that He can bless—and challenge us—within those bonds, as we learn the godly attributes of fidelity, patience, longsuffering, and devotion, and as we seek the heavenly gifts of the spirit necessary to honor our parents, teach our children, assist our siblings, and cherish our spouse.

Yet with Luciferian arrogance, utopians attempt to regain the innocence and immortality of the Garden by repudiating the very commandments God gave Adam and Eve concerning family life in the Garden and at their expulsion. The spokesman for B.F. Skinner's utopian community, who admits that he "like[s] to play God," boasts that his society, "in which there is no failure" (and no families), represents "rather an improvement

on Genesis."<sup>18</sup> Likewise trying to improve upon Genesis, New Left theorist Herbert Marcuse seeks to advance the cause of utopia by directing readers' attention away from the scriptural focus on the fatal consequences of the Fall. Theologians, Marcuse warns, "betray the promise of utopia" whenever they summon us to metaphysical reflection on death. Because death constitutes "a token of unfreedom, of defeat," contemplation of the subject "stifles 'utopian' efforts" and so reinforces "a repressive civilization." As Marcuse explains, we will foster "the gratification of freely developing individual needs" within a "nonrepressive" social order only after we effect "the disintegration of the institutions in which private, interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family."<sup>19</sup>

The impiety and the folly of trying to create an ideal society by discarding wedlock and family life are obvious to devout Christians or Jews, whose intellectual vision is informed by Scriptural truths. But even in the cautionary fiction of secular writers we can see that the utopian assault on the family takes us to hell, not back to the garden. Readers will look in vain for a paradisiacal garden or for a nonrepressive society in, for example, the brilliant anti-utopian novel *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin. Divining the central utopian aim, Zamyatin prompts the poet R-13 to characterize the objective of the family-destroying One-State which dominates social life in the novel as that of making people "innocent and simple-hearted as Adam and Eve" before they chose "to break the ban [on partaking of the Forbidden Fruit] and get a taste of ruinous freedom."<sup>20</sup> It is not innocence in the Garden, however, that Zamyatin's utopians actually create as they destroy marriage and family life; rather, it is sterility and dehumanization in a society which systematically extirpates love, liberty, and imagination.

Fortunately, other gifted secular writers—including Orwell (1984), Huxley (*Brave New World*), and Burgess (*The Wanting Seed*)—have also written powerful novels exposing the evil wrought upon the human spirit by the utopian attack on the family. Though lacking the authority of sacred writ, these novels develop their theme with an imaginative power which inoculates readers against the ubiquitous but false claims now made by the idolaters of utopian progress. The power of such anti-utopian fiction indeed fosters hope that, over time, those now hailing the disintegration of the family as evidence of progress towards utopia will lose their credibility and their audiences, as more and more observers recognize how much we need the family and how poorly governmental, therapeutic, or commercial surrogates perform its functions.

Even with no evident help from the great anti-utopian novelists, a growing number of scholars and writers now reject the sophistry of those who interpret recent changes in family life as progress. Consider, for example, the stunning *mea culpa* of *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry, who confessed in 1995 that his support in the 1970s for liberalized divorce laws had been fundamentally misguided, as he acknowledged that despite his “worthy goals,” easier divorce has in reality meant “economic insecurity for women, increased isolation for men, and sadness, rage, and neglect for children.”<sup>21</sup> Or consider the unlikely intransigence of prominent liberal sociologist Sara McLanahan in the face of strong feminist criticism of her work documenting the vulnerability of children growing up in female-headed households.<sup>22</sup> Or consider the improbable evolution of David Blankenhorn from liberal community organizer into the author of a jeremiad against our national

epidemic of fatherlessness.<sup>23</sup>

Despite such heartening recoveries of sanity, the evils of divorce, illegitimacy, cohabitation, day care, and childlessness continue to multiply in many areas of the country. And many persuasive, well-positioned voices continue to call these developments *progress*. But sooner or later ugly realities poke through the deceptive rhetoric. Such realities now confront millions in the divorce court, in the single-parent home, in the welfare office, in the abortion clinic, and in the juvenile detention center. Very few of those directly affected will interpret these ugly realities as evidence of progress toward an ideal society. As they recoil from these ugly realities, some will even begin to reflect on the beliefs and the principles which enabled our grandparents to make marriages last and children virtuous.

More than two thousand years ago, the prophet Malachi warned of a day in which the earth would be smitten with a curse unless the Lord turned “the heart of the fathers to their children” and “the heart of the children to their fathers” (Mal. 4:6). Those who have taken up the rhetoric of *progress* in justifying and glorifying recent family changes find little time for reflecting on the beliefs of “the fathers” (a term most would denounce as reactionary and sexist). But as ugly realities make it increasingly difficult to interpret recent changes in family life as progress, more and more people will turn towards the fathers, *our fathers*, still speaking to us if we have ears to hear. For modern America, turning our hearts to our fathers, and so recovering their family ideals, may offer the only hope of averting a great curse, the only hope of fostering new social developments that will genuinely deserve the label of *progress*.

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