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Marriage on the Rocks in Europe

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The Christian Science Monitor offers a report that confirms once again what many observers have noted — that marriage is fast disappearing as a normative social institution, especially among the young in Europe.

According to reporter Peter Ford, “Across Europe, the number of children born to unmarried couples has risen sixfold over the past 35 years to nearly 1 in 3 of all babies, altering the face of the European family beyond recognition - and beyond recall - say demographers and social analysts.”

More:

“Marriage is no longer considered an indispensable preliminary to welcoming a child” found a recent French parliamentary report on the family, which noted that “free unions” have become much more common - and not just for very young people.

In Germany, a recent Federal Statistics Office survey reached similar conclusions: only 38 percent of women and 30 percent of men see marriage as a necessary part of living together.

In Britain, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found in 1999 that cohabiting couples accounted for 24 percent of the men living in any kind of partnership and 25 percent of women - double the rates prevalent in 1986.

“People these days don’t expect their marriages to last, so they think ‘why get married in the first place if weddings are expensive and divorce complicated?’” says Dr. Brierley, whose organization provides information to help British church leaders make informed policy decisions.

And where there are cohabiting partnerships, there are babies. “One of the important engines behind the rise in non-marital childbearing,” said the ONS study of European trends, “is the rise in cohabitation that has occurred, particularly since the 1980s, in many European countries.”

As one commentator correctly noted, nothing less than a change of heart on this question will reverse these trends. No such change of heart appears close on the horizon.

The demographers note that non-marital unions break up at rates far higher than marriages. Thus, the current trend points to even more children with single parents — a cause of concern to all governments.

If marriage is not the normative arrangement for men and women to come together in sexual and reproductive couplings, the entire society bears the consequences. Of course, the society at large is also complicit in allowing these trends to develop in the first place. Every society regulates sexual behavior in some way. The only question is how and to what degree such behavior is to be socially regulated. Europe’s experiment with deregulating marriage is not encouraging, nor are the results surprising.

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