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The End of Marriage in Scandinavia: Is America Next?

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The background to Kurtz's research is the claim made by advocates of same-sex marriage that the legitimization of homosexual relationships poses no threat to the institution of marriage. Nonsense, responds Kurtz. "Same-sex marriage has locked in and reinforced an existing Scandinavian trend toward the separation of marriage and parenthood. The Nordic family pattern—including gay marriage—is spreading across Europe. And by looking closely at it we can answer the key empirical question underlying the gay marriage debate. Will same-sex marriage undermine the institution of marriage?" Kurtz is ready with an answer to his own question: "It already has."

Of course, the concept of gay marriage did not begin the process of family disillusion and the destruction of marriage in Scandinavia. Kurtz, whose report appears in the February 2 edition of *The Weekly Standard*, explains that the recognition of gay marriage has "widened the separation" between marriage and parenthood, further undermining the institution of marriage. "Instead of encouraging a society-wide return to marriage, Scandinavian gay marriage has driven home the message that marriage itself is outdated, and that virtually any family form, including out-of-wedlock parenthood, is acceptable," he explains.

Just how bad is the situation in Scandinavia? A recent study published by Harvard University Press indicates that some young married couples in Scandinavian countries are reluctant even to admit that they are married. Since the cultural expectation is cohabitation, marriage has become something of an embarrassment for the minority of young couples who have formalized their relationship through either a secular contract or a sacred covenant. That represents a moral transformation of awesome importance, for it represents the reversal of millennia of moral wisdom.

Kurtz gets to the point quickly: "Scandinavian marriage is now so weak that statistics on marriage and divorce no longer mean what they used to." The fact is that divorce rates are in a precipitous decline in Scandinavian nations. Does that sound like good news? To the contrary—a couple must first get married before they can divorce. By definition, the end of marriage also means the end of divorce.

Throughout Scandinavia and much of Western Europe, marriage and parenthood are being separated in both concept and practice. Those who insist that marriage is a moral requirement for the bearing of children are considered odd and out of date.

For the last twenty years or more, the trend has been toward young couples cohabitating through the birth of their children and staying together for at least several years after the children are born. This is a marked distinction from the pattern in the United States, where unmarried parents tend to be alone rather than in any stable partnership with the other parent.

For this reason, divorce becomes a much less useful category for understanding the health of family life. As Kurtz reports, in Scandinavia “what counts is the out-of-wedlock birthrate, and the family disillusion rate.” Family disillusion is the separation of birth parents after the birth of the child. “Because so many Scandinavians now rear children outside of marriage,” Kurtz explains, “divorce rates are unreliable measures of family weakness. Instead we need to note the rate at which parents (married or not) split up.”

Those statistics are further evidence of the breakdown of family life in Scandinavian countries. Without the moral, social, and legal obligations of marriage, couples are free to separate at will.

As a team of three respected Danish sociologists explained, “Marriage is no longer a precondition for settling a family—neither legally nor normatively.... What defines and makes the foundation of the Danish family can be said to have moved from marriage to parenthood.” But, as a matter of social policy, parenthood without marriage simply does not produce the kind of stability necessary for the successful raising of children.

Scandinavia has been the center of cultural liberalism in Europe for decades now. Soon after World War II, those nations moved toward a general acceptance of the welfare state and the separation of public morality from Christian roots. Some historians point to the rather “thin” Christianity that marks many of the Nordic countries. By any measure, Scandinavian cultures are far more secularized than the other [largely secularized] nations of Europe—but those other nations are catching up.

The dominance of secularism means the explicit rejection of Christian morality and the loosening of all sexual morality. Kurtz traces this pattern with a specific concern for the separation of marriage and parenthood.

In his words, “In Sweden, as elsewhere, the sixties brought contraception, abortion, and growing individualism. Sex was separated from procreation, reducing the need for ‘shotgun weddings’. These changes, along with the movement of women into the workforce, enabled and encouraged people to marry at later ages. With married couples putting off parenthood, early divorce had fewer consequences for children. That weakened the taboo against divorce. Since young couples were putting off children, the next step was to dispense with marriage and cohabit until children were desired.”

Sound familiar? “Americans have lived through this transformation,” Kurtz acknowledges. “The Sweds have finally drawn the final conclusion: If we’ve come so far without marriage, why marry at all? Our love is what matters, not a piece of paper. Why should children change that?” Someone had better answer that question.

The question points to the most important social value of marriage as it produces the context for the raising of children and the perpetuation of the human race. For millennia, humans have assumed that children need the stability, social legitimacy, and moral nurture of married parents. Only in recent years has that fundamental assumption been questioned—and the legitimization of unmarried parenthood has been a social disaster of massive proportions.

The Scandinavian picture is, we must acknowledge, somewhat different than the American model. Given the Scandinavian dependence upon the welfare state, inter-generational and extended family relationships are far less important to individual well being. Since the government supplies a basic level of economic support, young couples—including their children—do not require or expect support from the extended family.

The welfare state comes with its own incredibly high costs. Even as the Scandinavian economy is breaking under the strain of excessively high taxation, the welfare state demands higher and higher taxes in a never-ending cycle of dependency, spending, and governmental growth.

Since parents must spend so much time in the workplace, children spend a large amount of their time under the supervision of governmental or quasi-governmental caregivers.

How does all this relate to gay marriage? Kurtz demonstrates that the acceptance of gay marriage has accelerated the separation of marriage and parenthood and the breakdown of family stability. As he argues, “Gay marriage is both an effect and a cause of the increasing separation between marriage and parenthood.” This separation among heterosexuals has allowed gay marriage to become a conceivable reality. “If marriage is only about a relationship between two people, and is not intricately connected to parenthood, why shouldn’t same-sex couples be allowed to marry?”

Once gay marriage enters the picture, “That change cannot help but lock in and reinforce the very cultural separation between marriage and parenthood that makes gay marriage conceivable to begin with.”

Kurtz is careful to argue that gay marriage did not emerge in a vacuum nor did it begin the breakdown of family life in Scandinavia. Nevertheless, his research is a significant counter to the arguments made by homosexual activists such as William Ekridge, Jr. and Andrew Sullivan.

Once marriage is redefined to include same-sex relationships, an already weakened institution is virtually dissolved into meaninglessness. When marriage is reduced to one lifestyle option among others, it can also be redefined to mean anything a society might consider legitimate at any moment.

For nearly a half-century, the nations of Western Europe and North America have been engaged in a massive process of social experimentation. These societies have embraced an official secularism and have accepted a worldview that amount to some form of moral relativism. Once the most basic institutions of society are delegitimized and reduced to mere options, a force as strong as human sexuality breaks out from cultural confines and leads to a radical acceleration of social change.

This is precisely what is being experienced even now in the United States, with Massachusetts moving at lightening speed towards homosexual marriage and other states poised to take similar action. Homosexual activists are counting on this momentum to be virtually unstoppable. Of course, their push for homosexual marriage opens the flood gates for other experiments in human sexuality and other demands for normalization.

Or as Kurtz warns, unless something unexpected changes the picture, the Nordic present is America’s future. The same process of secularization is evident in America—though delayed by as much as a decade from Scandinavia.

“Americans take it for granted that, despite its recent troubles, marriage will always exist. This is a mistake,” Kurtz asserts. The forces that lead to the dissolution of marriage in Scandinavia are active in all Western cultures.

Americans who wonder what the acceptance of same-sex marriage would mean for society do not have to turn or resort to speculation—they can just look to Scandinavia. We will protect and defend heterosexual marriage as our social norm, or we will see marriage disappear all together.

