

What Explains Modern Hostility to the Family?

“Without the family we are helpless before the state,” noted G.K. Chesterton.

The political left, then and now, understands the truth of that line. How else to explain their hostility to the family?

Wait, hostility to the family? Isn't the left always touting its support of “working families,” as well as various modern definitions of families? Yes and yes. So how about this: how else can one explain their hostility toward the traditional nuclear family of a husband, a wife, and children?

Some of Chesterton's contemporaries expressed this same hostility toward the nuclear family. One of them was a woman named Emma Goldman. A committed anarchist, Goldman held out for an ideal society of atomized individuals. As an anarchist, she was also anti-statist to her core.

In 1917, Goldman's anarchism led her to favor the Bolshevik Revolution – until she witnessed the Soviet Union at work. Expelled from the United States during the “Red Scare” of 1919, she was deported to Lenin's Russia. Once there, it didn't take this anti-statist anarchist long before she could see that the Soviet Union was an experiment in totalitarianism, rather than anarchism. She abandoned Lenin's Russia, but she never abandoned her opposition to the nuclear family.

More than that, it never seems to have dawned on her that a society of atomized individuals would inevitably call a powerful state into being.

Of course, Chesterton and the left of his day – and ours – have never been in total disagreement. All parties intuitively

know that humans are different from other living beings. We may not all agree that we are made in the image of God, but we are all quite aware of what Chesterton called a "fact of natural history," namely that we are the only creatures who require an extended period of education.

That "fact," however, is the end of agreement and the beginning of much disagreement. Two questions that provoke considerable difference of opinion spring to mind immediately. What should be the content of a child's education, and who should do the educating?

Chesterton presumed that the parents should always be the primary educators. In making his case, Chesterton reminds his readers that humans are not like the herring. Hmm... we are also not elephants or termites, so what was his point?

Untouched by the "modern stunt" of birth control, the herring lays thousands of eggs in a single day. And why not? After all, the herring doesn't have to bother educating its young, if only because the "duties" of its young are "very simple and largely instinctive."

Here Chesterton might be charged with advancing a mistaken analogy. He contends that the herring as non-educator was evidence of a modern phenomenon, but moderns *are* educators. Once again, it's not a matter of educating or not educating, but of who is doing the educating and what is being taught.

True, Chesterton realized that the male and female herring were quite free to model their union on very modern notions of marriage and divorce. The female herring could say to the male herring, "true marriage must be free from the dogmas of priests; it must be a thing of one exquisite moment." The male herring might reply, "when love has died in the heart, marriage is a mockery in the home."

Chesterton then went on to express his concern that too many parents of his generation were too much like the herring of

any generation.

Well, yes and no.

Unlike the herring, parents do bother with education, but today's parents are inclined to let others do most of the bothering. Chesterton could certainly see this coming. After all, even then parents were too content to leave their children on the "doorstep" of the "State Department for Education and Universal Social Adjustment." In so doing, parents were preparing the way for the role of the family to be taken over by the state.

For Chesterton, all of this was entirely too consistent with the "vague and drifting centralization" of his time. That drift was in the direction of turning the state into a "big, benevolent grandmother." To Chesterton, such a state was little more than a "delusion," and a dangerous delusion at that.

Besides, education was the task of handing down a culture. Chesterton wisely thought that such handing down was best done within families, rather than imposed by the state. All of this is rooted in the tradition of marriage.

Chesterton reminded his readers that a marriage initiated the "only voluntary state" on earth. It was the only real state that "creates and loves its citizens."

If such states were to flourish, if a family remained a family, Chesterton was confident that each of its members could survive "all the vast changes, all the deadlocks and disappointments," which made up "mere political history." If not, trouble loomed.

If the family fails, Chesterton cautioned, "it is as certain as death that the state will fail its members." Who might those members be but the atomized individuals celebrated by the likes of Emma Goldman then and so many others today.

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