

The Indispensable American Family

In August 1884, Washington Gladden, possibly the most famous Christian preacher in the America of his day, wrote an article in *The Century Magazine* on “Three Dangers” besetting the welfare of the nation he loved. Of the first and third dangers he named, intemperance and gambling, I have little to say here. I will note that Dr. Gladden concedes that alcohol may be used well, even for conviviality, though he himself did not drink.

More challenging to our moral callousness is that he includes, under gambling, speculation on the stock market: “To say that gambling in margins is as bad as faro or roulette is a very weak statement; it is immeasurably worse. It is far more dishonest. The gambler in margins does his best to load the dice on which he bets his money.”

In our time, said gambler has connections to federal bureaucracies that govern the lending of hundreds of billions of dollars. The housing market collapse is a dreadful case in point.

But it is the second of the three dangers that I will discuss here, “those unsocial forces that make war upon society by assaulting the family.”

Gladden was a *liberal* churchman, one of the fathers of the Social Gospel, and it is as such that he speaks. “The monogamous family,” he says, “formed by the union of one woman with one man, and by the increase of children born to them, is the structural unit of modern society.” He is deliberate about every word. Society is like a physical organism, which is composed not of separate particles, but of organized cells.

So, too, “the modern social organism is composed not of

individuals, but of households." Far from being primitive and atavistic, the family, he says, is "a late product of the social evolution," and "it is by most philosophers admitted to characterize that society whose type is the highest and whose foundations are the firmest."

Whom does he call upon to support this assertion? Not John Wesley or Jeremy Taylor, but the liberal economist Walter Bagehot and the agnostic ethicist Herbert Spencer.

"Tribes in which promiscuity prevails, or in which the marital relations are transitory," says Spencer, "are incapable of much organization . . . Only when monogamic marriage has become general and eventually universal, only when there have consequently been established the closest ties of blood, only when family altruism has been most fostered, has social altruism become most conspicuous."

Of Roman boys bred to become Roman men, Bagehot notes, "they were ready to obey their generals because they were compelled to obey their fathers; they conquered the world in manhood because as children they were bred in homes where the tradition of passionate valor was steadied by the habit of implacable order."

It is not that Gladden wants Americans to become Romans. The family is indispensable, he says, "for the cultivation of the moral qualities that fit men for association with one another," as it is "a training-school in which discipline and the habit of subordination and the unselfish sentiments and habitudes are acquired. Without these virtues society is impossible, and there is no school for the cultivation of these virtues that compares with the monogamous family." Indeed, "an increase of the proportion of the people who do not live in families means an increase of public peril, a decay of social virtue, a diminution of the common weal."

We need but look at the moral squalor of American cities, and

the bewildering sexual and familial chaos wherein millions of American children are supposed to find their way to moral clarity and order, to see that what Gladden says here is true.

It is the kind of truth, too, that hardly admits of argument. Someone may tell me that we ought to live in open sewers, because filth and disease are subversive; or that we ought to cut ourselves with razors, because razors are edgy. What response can you give to him? He has placed himself outside of moral reasoning entirely.

What caused Reverend Gladden to worry about the American family in his time? For one thing, the dreadful surge in divorces.

From 1860 to 1878, in the commonwealth of Massachusetts, he says, divorces rose from 243 to 600, while the population had increased only 45 percent. The census figures from 1880 show that Massachusetts had a population of 1,783,085. Taking that figure as a fair estimate of the population in 1878, that means that there was one divorce for every 2,972 people. A scandal, that.

I can hardly imagine what Gladden would say to our figures now. In 2018, the population of the United States was 327.2 million, and there were 780,000 divorces. That gives us one divorce for every 402 people. The rate is between *seven and eight times as high* as what Gladden thought warranted some serious attention.

Of course, what I have called the “index of social dissolution” is much higher still. For in our time, many people do not bother to marry at all, but still have children, of whom 40 percent are now born out of wedlock. So if we included as “marriages” all those sexual liaisons that last longer than two years and that produce at least one child, our “divorce” rate would be as Mount Everest is to Mount McKinley: unimaginable, to what is hardly imaginable.

Asking what the reason is for this state of things, Gladden points to two developments, one of them economic and one of them moral.

The economic cause was clear: young men and women by the millions were leaving the country to work in industrial mills in the populous towns and cities, where they were “thrown together rather rudely in their work,” living in boarding houses that “afford them none of the restraints of a home.” Its moral cause he attributes to the “popular social philosophy, which during the last quarter of a century has greatly exaggerated individualism . . . Most of our talk has been of rights, not much of duties or of services; and the consequence is a disinclination to assume the responsibilities and to make the sacrifices involved in the family relation.”

In our time, we cannot even talk about the sexes as such, since every individual claims the right to make up his own biology, his own “identity,” even his own pronominal system. Gladden would have seen this correctly as the height, or rather a deep sinkhole, of the antisocial. And women, whom Gladden and many a friendly liberal viewed as the heart of a people’s moral sensibility, lead the charge to ensure that we will not return to anthropological realism; nay, that a professor at a college, whose calling is to search for truth wherever he may find it, shall lose his very employment if he should even begin to discuss the matter.

I think it would be a fine and enlightening thing to read the works of American liberals before that sharp turn toward secularism we find in the wake of the Great War. Enlightening, and not comfortable.

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