

CALGARY HERALD

Saving institutions to save a country

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Columnist Andrew Coyne once wrote he was "for gay marriage before gays were," but those "people of goodwill who worry where it will all lead" were just as deserving of respect. David Blankenhorn is such a person of goodwill, a liberal Democrat, a former student of noted academic Michael Ignatieff, and most recently, the author of *The Future of Marriage*.

After a meeting with an individual advocating for gay marriage, he faced a crisis of conscience. He asked himself: "Had I really thought the issue through? Maybe I hadn't. Maybe I should." The result is *The Future of Marriage*, a compassionate and compelling defence of marriage as an institution today, in history and across cultures.

Agree or not, it initiates a discussion framed by the right questions. Blankenhorn is critical of the tone of marriage debates across America. He writes, "(f)or sheer cultural illiteracy and intellectual vacuity, nothing can top the debate over the meaning of marriage taking place in the U.S. in the early years of the 21st century." Clearly, he was not present for the all-Canadian round -- which bounced between mud-slinging and Hallmark card slogans during "debates" on Parliament Hill.

Blankenhorn treads carefully into this intellectual vacuum, systematically laying a framework for how marriage began. Marriage marked progress in civilization toward modernity. It allowed for a better way of living when "the clearest alternatives to marriage appear to have been prostitution and informal cohabitation."

Yet if marriage in ancient Sumer was progress, why doesn't gay marriage simply build on that?

The answer lies more with the word "institution" than "marriage." An institution is something that "creates and maintains rules, including rules for who is, and is not, a part of the institution . . . A social institution creates public meaning . . . it exists to solve basic problems and meet core needs."

What problem does marriage solve? "The problem is that humans are divided into males and females and they reproduce sexually," writes Blankenhorn. "The need is for a shared life between the sexes and for the successful raising of children," he concludes.

In short, today the commonly held view is that we need to bridge the gap between homosexuals and heterosexuals. Blankenhorn says the divide is actually between men and women.

Marriage emerged to bridge that divide, for the purpose of child rearing. Marriage then, "in nearly all human societies is socially approved sexual intercourse between a woman and a man, conceived both as a personal relationship and as an institution, primarily such that any children resulting from the union are -- and are understood by the society to be -- emotionally, morally, practically, and legally affiliated with both of the parents."

For some, this explanation is not enough -- and that's the rub. For them, no defence of institutional marriage will ever be. The whole book is based on the defence of an institution.

But recent Canadian history suggests the demise of many of Canada's greatest institutions: the Canadian flag was revamped in 1965, Dominion Day ("what's that?") -- lost in 1982, the Canadian military's diminishing role ("aren't we peacekeepers?") -- the Anglican Church disappearing, the significance of the Crown on the wane. Clearly, Canadians can accept a whole lot of de-institutionalization without taking to the barricades. Blankenhorn is somewhat aware of this when he says, "(by) far the biggest problem is the widespread refusal to respect or even acknowledge the institutionality of marriage. It's as if we have forgotten what a social institution is." As if? In Canada, we almost certainly have.

The intellectual disconnect goes further: Not to pick on the erudite Coyne, but in another sphere of debate, he stands resolutely in favour of tradition. When Prime Minister Stephen Harper said: "Quebecers form a nation within a united Canada," Coyne eloquently mourned "(the) hollowing out of the national idea . . ." But it is the very impulse that allows Canada's elite to both hollow out the nation at a political whim and hollow out the institution of marriage -- also at a political whim. That history matters, that nations are carefully nurtured over centuries and that the institution of marriage has existed in much the same form for millennia -- these are parallel notions.

Not today, however. Got a new definition of Canada? Or marriage? Hey -- why not?

Blankenhorn defends marriage as a secular, cross-cultural, child-friendly institution. Find a copy of *The Future of Marriage*, read it -- and lend some thought to marriage as such, without any adjective at the front. Let's hope we can restore knowledge and interest in at least one of our cherished institutions. The future of Canada may depend on it.

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