

**“THE NATURAL FAMILY IN AN
UNNATURAL WORLD”**

**A LECTURE FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL
SCIENCE, MOSCOW LOMONOSOV STATE UNIVERSITY**

**MOSCOW, RUSSIA
OCTOBER 16, 2013**

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It seems clear that the family system of the whole of what we once called Christian Civilization is in crisis. Historically low birth rates, the rapid spread of cohabitation, the legal dismantling of the institution of marriage, the early sexualization of children, and climbing divorce are signs of a fundamental challenge to the life of the home.

Powerful voices within the European Union and North America actually welcome these changes, as signs of liberation. They favor the Swedish model of social democracy, where the old socialist dream of dismantling the family has finally been achieved. They praise the leveling of the sexes, and the disappearance of potent labels such as “husband” and “wife,” “mother” and “father.” They celebrate the deconstruction of marriage as a meaningful cultural and legal structure with claims of its own

on society and individuals. They frown on monogamous heterosexuality, and affirm all the alternatives. They relish the elimination of independent homes, once rich in function and loyalties, to be replaced by governmental structures and the sole bond of the individual to the state. They seek the essential collectivization of children.

As determinists of the neo-Marxist sort, these same voices also claim to be in the vanguard of history. They believe that the material forces of post-industrial society require this evolution of a new form of living: a post-family model which reconciles the atomistic individual with the total state. In pursuing this ideology, they have openly and deliberately sacrificed the natural order, building an unnatural world in its place.

Those who defend the historic family must now face a daunting truth. To create a Culture of the Family for the 21st Century, it is not enough simply to defend the old ways. The language of the 19th and 20th centuries – which talked of tradition or the “traditional family” and praised inherited ways – will no longer work. The dominant post-family vision easily triumphs over such antiquated language.

Instead, I believe that we need a new vocabulary that looks forward rather than backwards, one that excites with positive ideals rather than lectures about the “good old days,” and one that trumps the historical

determinism of the socialists with an appeal to the truths found in nature and nature's God.

I believe that this can be done by focusing on the phrase, "the natural family." We are now engaged in a battle over the meaning of words: because words convey ideas and ideals. In May 1998, a Working Group of the World Congress of Families met in a Second Century B.C. room in the ancient city of Rome, to craft a definition of this term; namely:

The natural family is the fundamental social unit, inscribed in human nature, and centered around the voluntary union of a man and a woman in a lifelong covenant of marriage for the purposes of satisfying the longings of the human heart to give and receive love, welcoming and ensuring the full physical and emotional development of children, sharing a home that serves as the center for social, educational, economic, and spiritual life, building strong bonds among the generations to pass on a way of life that has transcendent meaning, and extending a hand of compassion to individuals and households whose circumstances fall short of these ideals.

This definition, I assert, builds on both history and science. In expanding on this phrase, I want to highlight recognition of the natural family in five ways: as part of the created order; as imprinted on our natures; as the source of bountiful joy; as the fountain of new life; and as the fortress of liberty.

First, **PART OF THE NATURAL CREATED ORDER**

Modern debates about marriage and family frequently pit the partisans of Biblical revelation against the advocates of science and evolution. As I see it, the story of Scripture and science’s evolutionary narrative actually wind up in surprising agreement over the origin and nature of the human creature.

People of biblical faith—Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike—find the origins of the family chronicled in Genesis 1 and 2. Here, God establishes marriage as an unchanging aspect of His creation, essential to the very foundation of the divine order:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”....
Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh¹

These passages affirm marriage as both sexual (“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”) and economic (the phrase regarding “fill the earth and subdue it”). In addition, they cast marriage as monogamous, rather than polygamous.

What does science teach? The founders of modern anthropology also held that marriage is an unchanging institution, universal in its basic elements and common to all humanity. As Edward Westermarck explained a century ago: “Among the lowest savages, as well as the most civilized races of men, we find the family consisting of parents and children, and the father as its protector.” Marriage bound this family system together, uniting “a regulated sexual relation” with “economic obligations.”²

Certainly there were differences in the marriage systems of distinct human cultures. However, the fundamental marriage bond did not change. As a later anthropologist, George Murdock, wrote in his great 1949 survey of human cultures: “The nuclear family is a universal human social grouping.” He added: “[a]ll known human societies have developed specialization and cooperation between the sexes roughly along this biologically determined line of cleavage.” Murdock emphasized that:

Marriage exists only when the economic and the sexual are united into one relationship and this combination only occurs in marriage. Marriage, thus defined, is found in every known human society.³

In short, his work pointed to marriage as natural, necessary, and unchanging.

Contemporary evolutionary scientists agree. In a meta-analysis for the American journal *Science*, for example, paleo-anthropologist C. Owen

Lovejoy argues that “the unique sexual and reproductive behavior of man”—not growth of the cortex or brain—“may be the [key to] human origin.” The evolutionary narrative indicates that the pairing-off of male and female “hominids” into something very much like traditional marriage reaches back about three to four million years ago. As Lovejoy concludes:

...both advances in material culture and the Pleistocene acceleration in brain development [came after] an already established hominid character system, which included intensified parenting and social relationships, monogamous pair bonding, specialized sexual-reproductive behavior, and bipedality. [This model] implies that the nuclear family and human sexual behavior may have their ultimate origin long before the dawn of the Pleistocene.⁴

In short, the invention of “marriage” and social “fatherhood” were the vital steps in human evolution. On key points, the Biblical narrative and the scientific record agree: From our very origin as unique creatures on earth, we humans have been defined by heterosexual monogamy involving “marriage” and “fatherhood” and by the special linkage of the reproductive and the economic, a linkage in which two become one flesh. According to the scientists, the evolution of marriage occurred only once, at the beginning when “to be human” came to mean “to be marital.” Other cultural variations surrounding marriage are simply details. Any “change” is the mark of cultural strengthening or weakening around a constant human model.

Second, the natural family is **IMPRINTED ON OUR NATURE AS HUMANS**

While the main current of Western philosophy and social science rushed toward Marxist and Freudian forms of understanding in the late 19th and 20th centuries, a dissenting school of sociology offered an alternate analysis. The first of these dissenters was the French sociologist, Frederic Le Play, active in the 1870's and 1880's.⁵

Le Play argued that human behavior did not follow the theoretical schemes of his liberal and socialist contemporaries. Rather, he identified and sought to explain the close relation between what he called the stem family and historical examples of a stable, creative prosperity. This stem family, he insisted, was something more than the nuclear dyad of husband and wife; it also embraced extended kin as meaningful, and often guiding, forces in human development. He argued that this family form, “by a remarkable favor of Providence has within its very structure the beneficent qualities of the individual and those of association.”

Three 20th Century American sociologists based their efforts on the legacy of Le Play: Carle Zimmerman; Pitirim Sorokin; and Robert Nisbet.

Carle Zimmerman, Professor of Sociology at Harvard University,

wrote *Family and Civilization* in 1947. In describing the prospects for family reconstruction, Zimmerman embraced Le Play's concept of the stem family, relabelling it the domestic family. He showed that it was a pattern of life recurring throughout time and across the globe. Indeed, he insisted that the domestic-type family was, in practice, a viable option for any age, since it was in full harmony with human nature. A domestic-family system develops, Zimmerman said, "among all people who combine the benefits of agriculture, industry, and settled life with the commonsense idea of defending their private life from the domination of legislators, from the invasion of bureaucrats, and from the exaggerations of the manufacturing regime."

Zimmerman's colleague in Harvard's sociology department during the 1930's and 1940's was Pitirim Sorokin, born and educated here in Russia and expelled by the Bolsheviks in 1921. I am sure that you know him well. As with Zimmerman, Sorokin sought to understand and synthesize great changes over time.

In his book, *The Crisis of Our Age*, Sorokin emphasized the linkage of mounting social turmoil to the shrinkage of family size and the loss of family functions, most notably education.

Sorokin was fully aware, though, that the resulting structure could not stand. The family's loss of meaningful tasks—the move from a “domestic family” structure toward an atomized “sensate” structure—would result in social decay, mounting crime, declining fertility, and growing state coercion merely to hold the crumbling social edifice together. The only feasible course was to replace “the withered [and sterile] root of sensate culture” by a new cultural order. As he put it:

A transformation of the forms of social relationship, by replacing the present compulsory and contractual relationships with purer and more godly familistic relationships, is the order of the day.... Not only are they the noblest of all relationships, but under the circumstances there is no way out of the present triumph of barbarian force but through the realm of familistic relationships.

The remedy would be difficult, he acknowledged, but it was the only hope for salvaging life from the darkness.⁶

The third great American sociologist in this tradition was Robert Nisbet, whom I counted as a friend and mentor. He is best known as the author of the books *The Quest for Community* and *The Twilight of Authority*.⁷

Speaking for the whole intellectual tradition founded by Le Play, Nisbet offered a passage of profound importance. “It should be obvious,” he

says, “that family, not the individual, is the real molecule of society, the key link of the social chain of being. It is inconceivable to me that either intellectual growth or social order or the roots of liberty can possibly be maintained among a people unless the kinship tie is strong and has both functional significance and symbolic authority.”⁸

Third, we need to see **THE NATURAL FAMILY AS THE SOURCE OF BOUNTIFUL JOY**

The most remarkable, and perhaps the most desired, human emotion is joy. While happiness can in certain circumstances be something of a steady state and where ecstasy is the nearly painful passion of a moment, joy delivers an intense and exultant experience that can last for hours, or days, before it settles into an inner peace.

While “joy” is a difficult thing to quantify, social science has long affirmed that the bonds of family, the interconnectedness of marriage and children, serve as the surest predictors of life, health, and happiness. Perhaps this is the meaning of Tolstoy’s famous phrase in the novel *Anna Karenina*, “happy families are all alike.” In his classic 1897 study, *Suicide*, sociologist Emile Durkheim tied the “social integration” promoted by marriage and the presence of children to low suicide rates.⁹ The relationship remains strong,

to this day. Recent study of “the very happiest people” shows them to be “enmeshed” with others as members of strong social groups. Even among youth, “[t]he very happy people spend the least time alone and the most time socializing.” More notably, “Marriage is robustly related to happiness”¹⁰ as is the presence of children.¹¹

Fourth, the natural family is also **THE FOUNTAIN OF NEW LIFE**

Here, on this statement’s opposite side, we meet the essential family crisis. In terms of population, the Western World is aging, and perhaps dying. I am sure that you are broadly aware of the numbers that point toward depopulation. A number of factors, or causes, lie behind this dramatic change. I want to focus on two, specifically....

First, Australian demographer John Caldwell emphasizes the role of mass state education in generating fertility decline. Based on research in Africa and Australia, he argues that state-controlled schooling serves as the driving force behind the turn in preference from a large to a small family and the reengineering of the family into an entity limited in its claims. Briefly explained, public education authorities actively subvert parental rights and authority, substituting a state morality. Children learn that their futures lie with the modern State rather than the pre-modern family. As Caldwell

summarizes, “it...has yet to be [shown]...that any society can sustain stable high fertility beyond two generations of mass [state] schooling.”¹²

A second way to understand depopulation is through the value-revolution which swept the Western world after 1965, marked by a retreat from religious faith. As Belgian demographer Ron Lesthaghe has shown, recent negative changes in family formation and fertility reflect a “long-term shift in the Western ideational system” away from the values affirmed by Christian teaching (specifically “responsibility, sacrifice, altruism, and sanctity of long-term commitments”) and toward a militant “secular individualism” focused on the desires of the self. Put another way, secularization or the retreat from religion emerges as a cause of contemporary fertility decline.¹³ In Western & Central Europe, the new “tolerance” of alternate lifestyles comes close to excluding parenthood even as an option.

These observations so highlight the developments needed to reverse fertility decline, namely: building an intellectual and organizational infrastructure that is forthrightly pro-natalist; developing public policies that would support the mothers of young children in their homes; restoring effective parental control over the education of their children; and launching a counter-revolution in values under the natural family banner.

Finally, the natural family is **THE BULWARK OF LIBERTY**

The campaigns against marriage mounted by the Nazis and the Bolsheviks, just as the new assaults on marriage launched by left liberals and socialists, reveal a common truth: The first targets of any oppressive, totalitarian regime are marriage and family. Why? The English author G.K. Chesterton explained the reason in his powerful 1920 pamphlet *The Superstition of Divorce*:

The ideal for which [the family] stands in the state is liberty. It stands for liberty for the very simple reason.... [that] it is the only....institution that is at once necessary and voluntary. It is the only check on the state that is bound to renew itself as eternally as the state, and more naturally than the state.... This is the only way in which truth can ever find refuge from public persecution, and the good man survive the bad government.¹⁴

Or, as Chesterton argued in *What's Wrong with the World*:

It may be said that this institution of the home is the one anarchist institution. That is to say, it is older than law, and stands outside the State.¹⁵

A VISION

The future of our civilization lies in the hands of the young, those born over the last three decades. Most of you here today fall into that category. You are the children of a troubled age, a time of moral and social disorder. You were born into a culture dominated by self-indulgence and

cynicism. Any better future must start with a vision. In our book *The Natural Family*, co-author Paul Mero and I offer such a vision, with which I summarize and close:

We envision a culture that understands the marriage of a woman to a man to be the central aspiration of the young. This culture affirms marriage as the best path to health, security, and fulfillment. It affirms the home built on marriage to be the source of true political sovereignty. It also holds the household framed by marriage to be the first economic unit, a place rich in activity. This culture treasures private property in family hands as the foundation of independence and liberty. It encourages young women to grow into wives, homemakers, and mothers. It encourages young men to grow into husbands, homebuilders, and fathers. This culture celebrates the marital sexual union as the unique source of human life. These homes are open to full quivers of children, the means of generational continuity and community renewal.

Joy is the product of persons enmeshed in vital bonds with spouses, children, parents, and kin. A vital familial culture features a landscape of family homes and gardens busy with useful tasks and ringing with the laughter of many children. It regards parents as the primary educators of their children. It opens homes to extended family members who need special

care due to age or infirmity. This culture views neighborhoods, villages, and townships as the second locus of political sovereignty. It requires a freedom of commerce that respects and serves family integrity, as well as a nation-state that regards protection of the natural family as its first responsibility.¹⁶

There is, I believe, strength and new opportunity in the language of the “natural family.” They can be used to build a better social order, a true 21st Century culture of the family, one in harmony with our human nature, and one that will welcome and protect the children.

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- ¹ Genesis 1:27-28; 2:24 (Revised Standard Version).
- ² Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage: 5th Edition* (London: Macmillan, 1925): 26-37, 69-72.
- ³ George Peter Murdock, *Social Structure* (New York: The Free Press, 1965 [1949]): 1-8.
- ⁴ C. Owen Lovejoy, "The Origin of Man" *Science* 211 (Jan. 23, 1981): 348. Emphasis added.
- ⁵ For the seminal work, see: Pierre Guillaume and Frederic LePlay, *Le Reform Sociale*, Vol. 1, Book 3 (Tours: A Mameetfils, 1887): chapters 24-30.
- ⁶ See: Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1941); also Pitirim Sorokin, *The American Sex Revolution* (Boston: Porter Sargeant, 1956).
- ⁷ Robert Nisbet, *Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order & Freedom* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1990 [1953]); and Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 260.
- ⁹ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1951).
- ¹⁰ Martin E.P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002): 55-56.
- ¹¹ For example, see: Myriam Khlal, Catherine Sermet, and Annick LePape, "Women's Health in Relation with their Family and Work Roles: France from the early 1990s," *Social Science and Medicine* 50 (2000): 1807-25.
- ¹² John C. Caldwell, *Theory of Fertility Decline* (London and New York: Academic Press, 1982): 324.
- ¹³ Ron Lesthaeghe, "A Century of Demographic and Cultural Change in Western Europe," *Population and Development Review* 9 (1983): 411-35.
- ¹⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *Collected Works: Volume IV: Family, Society, Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987): 256.
- ¹⁵ Chesterton, *Collected Works, IV*, pp. 67-68.
- ¹⁶ Adapted from: Allan C. Carlson and Paul T. Mero, *The Natural Family: A Manifesto* (Dallas, TX: Spence, 2007): 12-13.