

Women's Liberation and Christian Marriage

by Daphne Nash

Any serious analysis of the systematic oppression of women must focus the greater part of its attention on the structure and role of the family. For us in the West the prevailing ideology identifies as central to a woman's task in life the running of a husband-and-family, while for the man, his wife and family belong to the private, 'unimportant' side of life—to his 'spare time'. We are taught to equate marriage with having a family, and a family with the bourgeois nuclear family of two parents and a few children living as a self-contained unit. In this guise the family is justifiably condemned by feminists and some psychologists¹ as the most immediate locus of the oppression of women and children. It has the complex function of underpinning the capitalist economy by being the consumer unit it depends on,² and of perpetuating both itself and the repressive economic and political system by being one of the most influential places (along with school) where children are brought to see themselves and the world in the terms of the prevailing ideology, and thus to become law-abiding citizens.³ On top of this is the severe economic pressure on women to marry, while men can afford not to if they like. Working-class and many middle-class women cannot earn enough to survive on their own.

The means proposed by various feminist analysts for the economic, political, psychological and sexual liberation of women always include the abolition of the nuclear family.⁴ A Christian committed to the struggle for women's liberation must question the point and form of Christian marriage as it is normally expressed. In a period when alternative patterns of living in community are only beginning to develop in the West, it is obviously not going to be possible to do much more than raise these questions and look at them.

Marriage and society

The sacrament of Christian marriage should be a taking up of an

¹E.g. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, London, 1971; Juliet Mitchell, *Women's Estate*, Pelican Books 1971; Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, London (Paladin edition), 1971; R. D. Laing and A. Esterson, *Sanity, Madness and the Family* Pelican Books, 1970; and other works by R. D. Laing.

²On this and other points which I shall be treating from a more specifically feminist standpoint than he did, see Bernard Sharratt, 'Corruption Begins at Home?', *New Blackfriars*, February, 1971, pp. 69-80.

³This lies behind the reasons Mr Michael de Marco, a Bronx Democrat, gave for opposing the proposed bill to make it illegal to discriminate against homosexuals in housing or employment. 'I think that policemen, firemen, and teachers are image builders for our youth. At least I hope they still are.' (*Guardian*, January 29, 1972). Homosexuals in these professions would undermine the image of the 'real' male character necessary for the maintenance of the status quo, at the same time as threatening the 'father-figure' image of policemen, firemen and teachers.

⁴E.g. Germaine Greer, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-238.

activity which is in a vital way creative of a human community, and its transformation into an activity which is creative in some way of a community which does not yet fully exist (the kingdom). Marriage should be a re-expression in this way of whatever sort of creative interpersonal relationship is most necessary for the continued historical progress of a human community. The sheer physical production of the next generation is obviously the first essential, and historically the basic relationship in question has always been some form of male-female union. By the time the Church was organized, monogamous marriage was normal in the advanced Mediterranean countries, and was publicly recognized as necessary for the economic and social well-being of the State. A large-scale reluctance on the part of men to marry meant a threatened loss of future citizens (especially soldiers): so, for instance, at the time of Christ's birth Augustus was offering extravagant rewards and remission of military service to any Roman who would get married and have children. The same connection between marriage (in this case the nuclear family) and the State in modern times is clear from a *Guardian* report (December 31, 1971) on the programme of the Austrian Socialist Party Government for making money gifts to all couples entering their first marriages on or after January 1 this year. The programme 'is not based on a particular need to stimulate marriages—Austria's population grew by an adequate 5.4 per cent between 1961 and 1971—but on the notion that the Government has a responsibility to help newly-weds to establish a household'. Here we have both the identification of marriage and birthrate, and the capitalist state encouragement of the nuclear family. The poorest couples get the biggest gifts for the purchase of 'housekeeping necessities'. The wide range of disabilities suffered over the ages by the illegitimate is further evidence of the importance to the state of preserving the primacy of the family in one particular legal guise.

Since the continuous production of citizens was a preoccupation with any community, women have in our tradition been confined as far as was economically possible to the task of bearing and rearing children. The greater the wealth of the head of the family the more this was the case (culminating in the middle-class family of today). The high rate of infant mortality and of women themselves associated with childbirth (into the 1950s still the largest single killer of women in England) contributed to making the only socially respectable thing for women to do in life to marry and have a family. In most societies there have been religious celibates, and prostitutes; but these have never been allowed to be the normal careers for women. Unmarried adult women who are neither have usually been regarded as the objects of pity (old maids), derision (battle-axes), or even fear (witches). The archetype of the happy woman has throughout our tradition been the wife-and-mother (or Madonna and Child).

Monogamy now means the nuclear family, which has become a

reactionary force in society. This was not always the case: compared with the polygamy of previous communities, the monogamous traditions established by the Jews, Greeks and Romans were an advance. They brought the husband face to face with his only wife all of the time, and this provided a framework within which the status of the wife as property or sign of her husband's wealth could be questioned. When she was able to own her own wealth the subordination of her position became more doubtful. Jesus' preachings on marriage presuppose and commend monogamous union, and were designed to fulfil the liberating potential of that style of marriage.¹ It is worth noting that guerillas in the South Arabian peninsula today are trying to have the traditional polygamy of the area replaced with the more progressive monogamy. The Church adopted this most advanced and also by then well-established style of marriage, and saw in it the paradigm of creative human union in society. Thereafter it imposed it everywhere as the only possible form of Christian marriage. It is time now to question the absolute rightness of this position.

The family myth

Monogamous marriage in the form of the nuclear family, which the Church at present supports, is quite unsuited to the demands of Christian love, as is the possessive ethic which sustains it and the capitalist economy which it in turn sustains.

The nuclear family functions at one level as the shock-absorber for a whole system of structural contradictions in Western bourgeois society. A married woman in such a family is strung between the conflicting beliefs that the Family Unit is all-important and self-justifying (hence the popular phenomena of Christmas fuss, 'family spirit', cult of the Holy Family, family weddings, Keeping Up With The Joneses, the cult of childhood, or the need for Marriage Guidance Councils) and that as an individual she has some rights of her own. ('I have ruined my life for you and the children' is a familiar stage in family rows.) She is also torn between the mythology of her essential equality with her husband preached by both Church and State (marriage is only valid if contracted by the free decision of both partners; it is contracted out of love, and love only exists between equals; the bride signs her own name in the register) and her *de facto* loss of autonomy to him. (She becomes Mrs-her-husband, is no longer taxed as an independent individual, and thus is almost wholly dependent on him economically.)

That the Church has colluded with the State in keeping women in 'their' place in the home is undeniable. (The Pope has deplored the women's liberation movement, and the synod of bishops let us know in December that women's role in the Church is not going to change

¹Bernard Sharratt, *op. cit.*, p. 79; Irene Brennan, 'Women in the Gospels', *New Blackfriars*, July, 1971, pp. 291-299.

at the moment.) Both understand and uphold the important function of the family in preserving and perpetuating ideology.¹ Both have vested interests in maintaining the timeless (anti-historical) myths about women and the family—that there is something wrong with women who don't marry; that a woman will find 'fulfilment' in husband and children; that child-bearing is miraculous and motherhood is beautiful; that the primary purpose of marriage is to bear and rear children. In many countries there are still State rewards for large families (France, for instance), while the Catholic Church still condemns contraception.

This complex of myths, like those about heaven and hell, functions to distract attention from present realities and invites psychological (hence individual) escape into a utopian vision. The myth, in proclaiming the inevitable rightness of the present form of marriage, exercises a profoundly counter-historical force. Symptomatic of the underlying attitude we are supposed to hold is the reference to a woman's wedding day as 'the most important day of her life', and its treatment as the end of the story, after which they lived happily ever after, but had no more adventures. (A far cry, that, from the creative, historical ways of love!)

Marx's famous criticism of religion applies also to these myths about the family, which are not confined to 'religious' people, but are common to the education of all of us in our society. (One could almost substitute the phrase 'the family' for 'religion' throughout this passage.) 'Religion is the general theory of this world; its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal basis for consolation and justification. It is the imaginary realization of the human essence because the human essence possesses no true reality. . . . The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion.'²

This latter demand is one which a Christian must make, and which will mean in the present context an attack on the nuclear family by a struggle for the abolition of the conditions that require it. This is a struggle shared by women's liberationists and socialists alike, and one which must bring into question the point and form of marriage for Christians: in the vast majority of cases in Britain at the moment, marriage is the point of institution of a new nuclear family, and complacency with this state of affairs only enhances the Church's reputation for backing the forces of reaction. Whatever Christian

¹Thus when the Bishop of Derry appealed for restraint on February 2nd he addressed his appeal 'to you all, and particularly to the heads of families. . .'.

²Introduction to *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, in Karl Marx, Early Texts, ed. David McLellan, Oxford, 1971, p. 116.

marriage is, it cannot be the celebration of a dominative, essentially possessive relationship as a prefigurement of the kingdom.

The liberation struggle

The subjection of women by men and the psychological blackmail exercised back on men by women has its roots in the very impossibility of our not treating ourselves and other persons as things at least some of the time. The first effects of sin and death in Genesis, chapter 3, are embarrassed consciousness of the body as a sexual object (3, 7: 'Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked. So they sewed fig-leaves together to make themselves loin-cloths'), and the institution of social rôles for men and women differentiated on the basis of biological function. (3, 16: 'I will multiply your pains in child-bearing, you shall give birth to your children in pain. Your yearning shall be for your husband, and he will lord it over you.' And for the man, 3, 17-19: 'Accursed be the soil because of you. With suffering you shall get your food from it every day of your life . . . With sweat on your brow you shall eat your bread.') The corollary of this is that it will only be with the abolition of sin and death themselves, which are a condition of human community in its present state, that dominative relationships in their various forms (e.g. racial, economic, sexual) will be completely overcome. (Thus Galatians 3, 28: in the kingdom 'there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus'.) That the dominative mode of interpersonal relationship is at its most primitive and deeply rooted in the male exercise of superiority over female is recognized by such socialists as Branka Magaš: 'With the disappearance of female subjugation all other forms of oppression will crumble. This will happen when women are economically independent, and legally and socially equal to men.'¹

In the process of the struggle for the final liberation (or the kingdom), the nuclear family must go, as being the most immediate site of the oppression of women at the moment. But to make its abolition the primary object of attack, or, for that matter, to rely on a change of heart here and now by women (and men) to achieve the desired end (thus, for instance, Tove Reventlow)² is to mistake the means towards, and the result of, a revolution which in abolishing the present system of ownership will also abolish the family that system needed; and in removing the distinctions between a man's work and world and a woman's work and world, will at the same time make meaningless the differential in 'male' and 'female' character traits that supported the previous role distinctions (and which therefore

¹Branka Magaš, 'Sex Politics: Class Politics', in *New Left Review* 66, March/April, 1971, p. 85.

²Tove Reventlow, 'Women and the Liberation of Men', in *New Blackfriars*, July, 1971, pp. 300-304.

seemed 'natural'). There are only such things as 'feminine' virtues in the present order of things. In engaging in activity at a practical level (demands for equal pay, day nurseries for children to free the mother for work, formation of communes instead of boxed living) we must not lose sight of what this is pointing towards. If we do nothing and only talk of the revolution we shall never get there, but if we make the means into ends in themselves we shall not necessarily get there either. Previous feminist campaigns which allowed themselves to be content with the achievement of their nearest aims (for instance the vote) are responsible to a considerable degree for the slow progress and present difficulties experienced by the movement for women's liberation.

One of the most difficult immediate obstacles to be overcome is that of convincing women themselves that they are not naturally inferior to men. Many articulate public women firmly believe that women as a sex have certain 'natural' characteristics—ones (such as woolly-mindedness and house-pride) which if they *were* inherent in women *would* make them inferior. Anyone who doubts this, or thinks the whole women's liberation case exaggerated, should listen to a few editions of BBC radio 4's panel programme 'The Petticoat Line'.¹ It is extremely difficult, even for those married women who are engaged in the struggle for their own liberation, to make progress beyond a limited point. Without a change in the law they are handicapped economically: if they have an income of their own it is taxed more heavily than when they were single, and even if they *must* manage on their own the law is weighted against them. 'A widow who sues for damages for her husband's death is still liable to have her chances of remarrying assessed by the judge if she also claims on behalf of her children' (*Guardian* report, December 22, 1971). Even middle-class women, who are responsible for much of the progress being made at the moment, meet with a discouraging amount of ridicule for the personal efforts they make. They are considered eccentrics and so not to be taken seriously.

This reaction indicates a central point about women's position which must also be overcome before widespread progress is evident.

¹This sort of opinion is of course held by many men. One of the difficulties experienced in the attempt of students of Essex University and miners to co-operate in the miners' strike at the end of January was that the 'recognition of the students' seriousness was qualified by the miners' divided attitude to the women: women en masse were seen as militants; in individual encounters the miners tried with difficulty to assimilate them to their image of women.' (*7 Days*, No. 14, 2-8 February, 1972, p. 17) In the debate on the Anti-Discrimination Bill on January 28th, Mr Sharples, the Minister of State, Home Office is reported by the *Guardian* to have said that 'discrimination did not arise in employment in the vast majority of cases . . . men and women were not competing for the same jobs in a huge field of industry, including heavy engineering, transport, and coal mining. The majority of women were working in jobs which were 'an extension of their traditional domestic role'. . . women wanted jobs in fields such as nursing, food, shops and the social services. A survey published in 1968 showed that the majority of women were satisfied with their jobs.' An extreme point of view on the same topic was that attributed to Mr Ronald Bell (Cons.): 'of course women are inferior. They are second-class citizens and ought to be treated as such.'

Women are trained to be spiritual peasants, conditioned to working only for themselves and their family, and to thinking of other women not as the members of a class they themselves belong to, but as rivals. This individualism is fostered at every turn (e.g. the caricature of the woman jealous of another woman in the same hat, or advertisements for a washing powder that will make *your* children's clothes whiter than your neighbour's); I outlined above how the myths about marriage and the family themselves invite individualist escape. Juliet Mitchell¹ has shown how women working in public find it extremely difficult to see themselves as workers in the same way as their husbands, or to unionize. Even factory work is an extension of their individualist rôles at home. Thus the woman who tries to take steps toward her own liberation is treated as an individual phenomenon. It will only be when women can see themselves as a class and unite for action on a wide scale that they will pose a real threat to the male ascendancy.

The whole point of present political action at immediate and national level is to bring about changes one by one that will eventually make it impossible for the capitalist system to function any longer. Feminists and Christians should be able to agree on that. One of the social and economic structures which is in the early stages of such change is the nuclear family, for such reasons as those outlined above. Alternative forms of community will become established where children will be brought up with attitudes to community and human relationships more and more different from the present ones as time goes on and new structures emerge. The Liverpool Free School is one such move in the right direction.² What constitutes the most important interpersonal relationship for a community's continued progress will in all probability admit of much more variation than at present. In a community without private property, where children are raised in common or by those who want to and are good at it

¹*Op. cit.*, p. 124: 'Ask many a woman whether she wants equal pay and the answer is likely to be "no". "It wouldn't be fair, men do heavier work, we don't want to *take away* from their pay-packet, they are the bread-winners, we work for extras.'" The author treats this subject in some detail on pages 124-131.

²On the Scotland Road Free School see, for instance, John Hoyland, 'Teachers on a Tightrope'; in *7 Days*, No. 15, February 9-15, 1972. The Free School is Britain's first Community school, and has 45 working-class children aged between 9 and 16. There are no rules, compulsory attendance or formal lessons. There are five teachers, four with degrees. 'But we don't regard ourselves as teachers, in that sense. What we are trying to do is to extend the definition of teacher, so that it will include anyone in the area. Lots of the kids at the school get most out of the people in the area. Lots of people come into the school and do a few jobs, and end up teaching the kids. . . . Most of the opposition we get comes from teachers, particularly in this area, and the Catholic Church. The local priest spent his sermon last Sunday criticizing the Free School, though he's never been there. Because we won't teach religion there. But the place is more religious than lots of his schools are. They beat the kids. . . . They indoctrinate them, they control them, they suppress them. . . . I see state education as being inherently elitist, but we started the Free School because we believe you can't have a revolution within the state system. . . . The system is tied to society, and if society says tomorrow, we've had enough of their liberalism, now we'll start teaching other things—the teachers'll jump to it. They're a depressing lot.' In Italy the school of Barbiana had similar success as an alternative, and a similar, liberating effect on the children, in this case peasants. See, on that, *Letter to a Teacher* by the pupils of the School of Barbiana, Penguin Education Special, 1970.

(have a 'vocation'), there will not be the need there has been hitherto for one person to be the 'head' or paterfamilias, and it is for instance possible that the basic unit of a community would be the commune (perhaps half-a-dozen or more adults plus children). In this case, the Church would have to re-think the theology of marriage; it would seem counter-creative in such a case not to allow the sacramental validity of the unconditional commitment of several adults to one another. The Church has existed through several stages of the economic and political advance of history—slave-owning antiquity, feudalism and capitalism. Bound up as it is with the concept of private property, monogamy in one form or another has been the only absolutely necessary form of marriage so far. As the relations of property ownership change, monogamy may be recognized as only one form among others of the creative interpersonal commitment necessary for the well-being of society.

Christian marriage and women's liberation

The exact form the sacrament of marriage will take in a changed society cannot naturally be determined in advance of the appearance of the new structures. One thing we do know about it is that it will no longer happen in the kingdom.¹ Marriage is connected with our present inability not to exercise power over one another. If Christians are going to continue to marry, and to claim for that sacrament the Christian character of scandal and challenge to the established order, then they must examine its point.

I have suggested that the main function of marriage is that of community-building. In the case of Christian marriage this must be a certain sort of community—one based not on the domination of one class or race or sex by another (which is as much as to say based on the failure of communication between its members), but on non-possessive love founded on the actual communication that exists between human beings because it exists between man and God. To take the development of this sort of love or communication seriously involves, among other things, a serious struggle against the oppression of women. Thomas Aquinas explains the sort of love I mean thus: 'Not any and every sort of love can be explained in terms of friendship, but that love which is accompanied by wishing well: I mean when we love someone in such a way that we want his good. If, on the other hand, we do not desire good for the object of our love, but rather desire its good for ourselves (as when we are said to "love" wine or a horse or something like that), it is not the love of friendship, but some sort of concupiscence; for it would be ridiculous to say that anyone was the friend of wine or a horse. However, even wanting the good of the other is not a sufficient account of friendship: a

¹Luke 20.34-5: 'The children of this world take wives and husbands, but those who are judged worthy of a place in the other world and in the resurrection from the dead do not marry because they can no longer die.'

certain reciprocity in loving is also required. A friend is a friend of his friend. Now this sort of reciprocal well-wishing is based on communication of some sort. Since, therefore, mankind does have a certain sort of communication with God, in response to God's communication of his *beatitudo* to us, there should be some sort of friendship based on this communication . . . now the love founded on this communication is charity.¹ (A similar point is made by Paul (Ephesians, ch.5) when he likens the relationship between husband and wife to that of Christ and the Church.) The love required here, in seeking the good of the other, will include that of liberating women from the slavery of their present rôles.

But the attainment of the community which is the full realization of this *communicatio* lies at the end of the struggle for human liberation, which has many stages yet to go through.² It must be the task of those who believe that the kingdom will be arrived at, to do all they can to further the movement in that direction. Every revolutionary movement needs at least some members who are determined to see it through difficulties, who are prepared to give themselves up to the struggle unconditionally, and who can be identified. Those who have received the sacraments of marriage and order share these responsibilities, and the theology of both is in need of development for the same historical reasons. The point of Christian marriage must be to provide the same order of support for the movement towards the kingdom as the family has always provided for the State, but in doing so to challenge and finally subvert the State and all it stands for. At one level this will be a matter of the production and socialization of children, the next generation, in some context other than, and critical of, the nuclear family. But a community at any stage in its development is more than simply the sum of its numbers. Without the present economically determined social pressure on *every* married woman to have children (and for the first time in history conception need not be the nearly inevitable result of sexual intercourse, while at the same time it is questionable whether it is a good thing for the population to rise at its present rate), women will be freed to devote themselves to any of the other important functions in the community, which are now treated as the preserve of men. It is to be hoped that when theology catches up, women will be able also to take a part in the Church's leadership. This public activity will not be a shirking of 'marital duty' on the part of married women. On the contrary, not even the most determined feminists deny that there will continue to be children.³ The point is that child-bearing should no longer be the

¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2.2.q.23 a.1.

²Cf. V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* passim, but especially ch.V.2 ' . . . the transition from capitalist society—which is developing towards communism—to communist society is impossible without a "political transition period. . . ."'

³Though some, for instance Shulamith Firestone, have some extraordinarily imaginative ideas about the ways in which their production may be shared with women by men and machines in the future.

highest achievement of all women, as though women had a biologically determined 'essence' anyway—a deeply counter-creative proposal. It should be the task of married Christians now to find some alternative to the nuclear family (one keeps coming back to communes)¹ as the first step forward, an alternative not based on the dominative and possessive ethic of capitalist society, but on the principles enunciated above by Aquinas. Naturally this will not be fully realized in practice (yet), but unless we start we shall never get there. Only if we take some such steps, and go on from there to struggle at both local and national level for the liberation of all of us from the multifarious oppressions we suffer, will Christian marriage be experienced as the scandal and revolutionary critique of society that it should be, and instead of being the focus of the oppressed condition of women, actually provide a sound basis for the beginnings of our freedom.

Women and Episcopal Power

by Joan Morris

The quasi-episcopal jurisdiction held by abbesses over the 'separated' territories of exempt orders has been presented by some writers of today as an abuse. I am alluding to such authors as Giovanni Mongelli, who has written on the mitred abbesses of San Benedetto, Conversano, Italy, and José Maria Escriva, who has written on the abbesses of Las Huelgas de Burgos, Spain. Both these abbeys, like very many others, received innumerable papal bulls in their favour confirming them in their independence of any bishop and accepting their civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Although many religious orders in Europe lost exemption at the time of the French Revolution, the Abbey of Las Huelgas de Burgos, after a brief lapse of some eight years, continued to be exempt up till 1874. The system was brought to a close by Pius IX in a bull entitled *Quae diversa* addressed to all religious orders in Spain, both men and women. The reason given was that the system was no longer suitable to the changed social conditions.

Such a reason is plausible; but to consider the jurisdiction held by abbesses as an abuse is pure prejudice. Abbesses, like queens or empresses, had a right to rule when their position was officially accepted. Such a system was in keeping with early Christian custom, throughout the feudal period and up to the fall of the nobility at the time of the French Revolution.

¹Bernard Sharratt, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-79; Germaine Greer and Shulamith Firestone have similar observations to make.