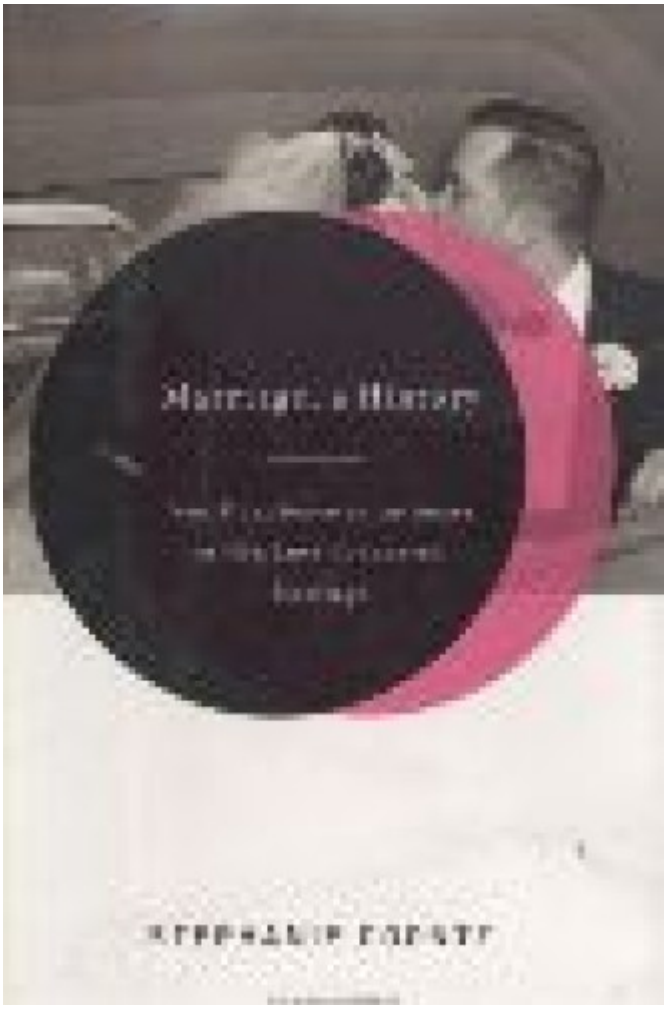
After the loving

By Don Browning in the February 7, 2006 issue

In Review



Marriage, a History

Stephanie Coontz
Viking

The central message of Stephanie Coontz’s history is that marriage is in big trouble. In fact, it is about to collapse, she says, and there is little anyone can do about it.

The forces disestablishing marriage in Western societies are so overwhelming and intractable that all efforts to stop or slow the decline will appear moralistic and coercive to the general population. Therefore, Coontz would probably say, neither churches nor the marriage education movement nor the government should do much to try keep marriage from moving toward the margins of our personal and social lives.

Coontz starts with the refreshing acknowledgment that the message of her earlier books was wrong. In *The Way We Never Were* (1992) and *The Way We Really Are* (1997), she developed the familiar thesis that families are changing but not declining—and that, furthermore, they are not changing nearly as radically as religious conservatives and the popular press would lead us to believe. There have always been lots of fatherless children (fathers have always died in wars and from illness and have frequently deserted their wives and children). Fathers in the past were mean to their children, and husbands often beat their wives. Mothers often died in childbirth, were overworked or were depressed because of the patriarchal men in their lives. Therefore, contemporary increases in the number of divorces, nonmarital births and fatherless children are just new wrinkles on perennial problems of life.

In *Marriage*, *a History*, Coontz announces that something new is happening that her first books did not take into account. The institution of marriage is in trouble after all. Marriage is no longer a central feature of modern life. In the future, fewer people will marry, more people who marry will divorce, more people who marry will do so later in life, more people will cohabit, fewer people will have children, more people who have children will do so outside of marriage and more people will want to form informal unions of various kinds and experiment with reproductive technologies outside of either marriage or heterosexual unions.

Because of these trends, some commentators believe that marital sexual unions will become increasingly private matters. They argue that marriage should therefore be delegalized—that is, it should lose its status as an institution that is of interest to the state and subject to its sanctions and protections. Proponents of this view believe that the state should take no interest in who is having sex with whom, no interest in what legal scholar Martha Fineman calls the “sexual family.”

Coontz does not go that far, but she does think that marriage is being disestablished; it is coming to be only one among several ways to organize human

sexuality. Marriage is becoming little more than an option—a lifestyle choice like whether to drive a Ford or Chevrolet or whether to take a train or bus.

Why is this happening? Coontz's answer, which is both insightful and problematic, has to do with the triumph of love. For the first time in history, culture and social circumstance induce and permit people to get married for love.

For Coontz, love is a mixture of sexual gratification, interpersonal comfort and interpersonal fit. Modern people are now free to marry someone who is simultaneously a soul mate and an exciting sexual partner.

Coontz acknowledges that people in the past wanted both friendship and sex from their marital partner, but in reality it was necessity, economics, politics and the gaining of good in-laws that were the dominant motivators of marriage. Now women no longer marry to gain a breadwinner, nor do men marry to get a good cook and housekeeper. Nor do couples now choose each other to elevate their social status or to develop tribal and national alliances. They get married for love—and love, Coontz claims, is a fragile reed on which to build a marriage. With love come disappointments, frustrations and failures. Hence, marriage will move to the sidelines of modern life. Love alone is the death of marriage.

This account is partly right and partly wrong. Coontz agrees, with good reason, with historians such as Edward Short, Carl Degler and Lawrence Stone that beginning about 200 years ago, with the rise of Enlightenment individualism and the forces of modernization and industrialization, couples increasingly had the freedom, social space and reinforcing cultural values to be both less financially dependent on each other and more self-regarding in their values. This made love and sexual satisfaction more central in shaping the reasons for marriage.

Coontz's argument seems to work, however, only because she exaggerates the distinction between love and the economic, kinship and social-networking elements of marriage. In her narrative, marriage is either all necessity or all love. Many other modern interpreters of marriage have made the same mistake, and so have many people in American churches, who are tempted to join with Coontz and insist that couples get married for reasons of love alone. Economic, kinship and network issues and even the desire to have children are sometimes seen as contaminations of the purity of marital love. Churches often use the language of sacrament and covenant to bless and sanctify extremely narrow views of love that are not far from what

Coontz describes. Such a view of marriage is neither good theology nor an accurate view of what marriage—and marital love—has been about.

However, there is a lot of information in this book that people should know. Coontz ranges widely over the cultures and societies of the world, discussing a great variety of marriage practices. She ranges so widely that there is at times a “gee whiz” quality to the book. She shows the difficulty of even defining marriage. If you think marriage has always entailed sexual fidelity between a husband and wife, think again. Eskimos share their spouses sexually, and their children often have warm feelings toward their parents’ lovers. Some Tibetan brothers in isolated mountain areas share the same wife, allegedly without jealousy. In Botswana co-wives of polygamous men see each other as allies rather than competitors. Whereas Western wives often say, “A woman’s work is never done,” in Botswana co-wives say, “Without co-wives, a woman’s work is never done.”

But Coontz’s tendency to search the cultures of the world for examples with which to shake up a provincial view of marriage misses the point. Many of these exotic practices are dead or on the defensive. The major question should be, How did the grand consensus come about that influenced the construction of marriage in Western democratic societies? Here Coontz’s analysis is informative but incomplete.

Her narrative of the development of marriage goes like this: Once upon a time in hunter-gatherer societies, relatively egalitarian unions between men and women formed that were generally procreative and unencumbered by property and structured hierarchies. In the move to agricultural societies, marriage became the vehicle for creating stable kinship groups that would control land and exchange goods.

For much of human history, then, marriage and kinship were ways to wealth, power and respectability. This was true to some extent even for the poor within the limits set by feudal landlords and slave owners. But for the rich and for royalty, it was true to the point of being an obsession. In a very interesting chapter, “Playing the Bishop, Capturing the Queen,” Coontz is at her best as she chronicles the wild maneuvers of European royalty as they tried to protect their holdings and amass political power and fortune by arranging marriages with royal families of foreign provinces and nations.

Where coontz falls short is in explaining the unique marriage system that began to take shape in Western societies between the 12th and 17th centuries. The continued uniqueness of this marriage system may have had something to do with the economic and political success of Western democracies. Of crucial importance is the fact that the Roman Catholic Church took a stand against political marriages that were arranged against the will of the couples involved. Catholic canon law declared that the mutual consent of the couple, rather than the will and manipulations of powerful parents, was the defining essence of marriage.

The church put polygamy on the defensive as well, especially among ruling elites. This helped to democratize marriage by making more women available to poorer men rather than allowing wealthy men to hoard females in their harems. Families became smaller and more companionate. Rather than women always marrying older men, the age of the husband and wife became closer, and marriages occurred later in life. After working for a few years outside the home, often as servants to other families, young couples formed their own households rather than returning to live with parents in family compounds or under the same roof. All of these shifts in the Western marriage and family system have been well documented over the last 40 years in the research of Cambridge University social historian Peter Laslett and his colleagues.

Although Coontz alludes to these shifts, she misses some of the crucial reasons they came about. Mainly she argues that they were the result of social-systemic changes such as emerging commercial life, early capitalism and nascent industrialization. Societies became more fluid, patriarchal families lost control and young people earned incomes beyond the parentally controlled farm or craft. All of this is indeed part of the story of the emergence of modern marriage in Western democracies, but Coontz downplays the role of religion in this radical and unique transformation.

Scholars such as Max Weber, Alan Macfarlane, Steven Ozment, Jack Goody and Laslett would all say that elements of Judaism, early Christianity, Roman Catholic canon law and the Protestant Reformation—of both Luther and Calvin—provided much of the religiocultural value system that fueled this revolution in marriage. Coontz gives scant attention to these sources. Furthermore, she gives no attention at all to Genesis 1 and 2, which informed the marriage traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In a book of 430 pages, the role of Judaism gets no discussion whatsoever, early Christianity receives little more than two pages, and Luther and the Protestant Reformation appear on a meager three pages. Augustine and

Aquinas, two of the greatest theorists of both Christian and Western marriage, appear nowhere in the book. Peter Lombard, who crafted the crucial Catholic canon-law emphasis on marital consent, gets only a few words. Calvin, who extensively influenced the city of Geneva's marriage law in both church and civil courts and subsequently the shape of marriage in Calvinist countries throughout the world, is not mentioned.

Building on the Catholic emphasis on the importance of free marital consent, Luther and Calvin developed further the covenantal understanding of marital commitment, elevated the status of women, emphasized the freedom of young adults to choose their partners, helped make marriage more companionate and established marriage as a civic institution regulated by secular law yet also blessed and given meaning by the church. These beliefs and values interacted with early capitalism and the emergence of the nation-state to give us the Western marriage system that Laslett describes and most of us assume.

Although Coontz neglects the role of religion in shaping Western marriage, she is on to something when she says that reducing marriage to romantic love and sexual satisfaction will contribute to its near collapse, if not its death. The last chapters of her book document the present decline of marriage through the disconnection of childbirth and child-rearing from marriage, the rise of cohabitation, and the increase in single people living their lives and organizing their sexuality outside of publicly identifiable relationships, whether marital or nonmarital.

Coontz errs in overemphasizing the inevitability of her marriage scenario. Even today marriage has powerful social and economic dimensions. Economists and social scientists such as Gary Becker, Linda Waite, Steven Nock and Robert Michaels are uncovering once again the economic and health benefits of marriage and demonstrating what kinfolk such as grandparents, uncles and aunts contribute both to marriage and to the children born to marriages. They are also revealing what marriage contributes to the common good and explaining why, as both Luther and Calvin understood, it should be an interest of the state. We learn these things experientially when divorce contributes to the poverty of children and of mothers and when dual-income parents become frantic without the support of kin.

Many experts both within and outside of the church think that there is much we can do to help couples and modern societies learn to hold together genuine covenantal love (a much stronger concept than that of romantic love) with the economic,

kinship, networking and child-rearing aspects of marriage. But such a cultural work requires focused effort by couples, religious institutions, the state, the law and our entire educational system.

Coontz is fatalistic in her predictions about the triumph of love at the expense of all the other goods of marriage. The great Christian theorists of marriage, such as Augustine, Aquinas and Luther, had multidimensional understandings of those goods. Sacramental or covenantal love was central to marriage, but mutual helpfulness (the economic aspect of marriage), children, sexual exchange and the values of kinship were emphasized as well. The theorists developed a view of marital love that integrated these diverse goods and held them together. To accomplish this, love must be thick and strong. It must be sacramental and covenantal as well as interpersonal and communicative. Sacramental and covenantal love can include the romantic and the sexual, but the romantic and sexual alone are not large enough to encompass the sacramental and covenantal.

Christians should clarify their own understanding of marriage. They should not, in the name of love, reduce marriages to the thinness of what sociologist Anthony Giddens calls “pure relationships”—that is, relationships of affection and sexual satisfaction unencumbered by work, children, the necessity of earning a living or the responsibility of contributing to the world outside the couple. The church can help the rest of society recapture a more muscular view of love as well. The first step would be a reconstruction of the history that has formed our marital traditions. We need to do this not only for the Western tradition but for the other major religiocultural traditions as well.

Besides undertaking this cultural retrieval, Americans need better socialization into the ways of marriage. The marriage education movement, both within and outside the church, is worthwhile. Couples in Western societies who are free to select each other without being limited by the dictates of parents and society and who are free to work out their life trajectories together must be able to communicate with respect and justice. Marriage communication is about more than just love and sex. It is about how to make a living, who will work when and where, whether to have children, who will care for the children, how to relate to in-laws, how to relate to the community and how to organize political commitments.

Marriage is work, and the reconstruction and revitalization of marriage will be a great cultural task. Coontz is right that couples can’t make it on their own in today’s

society. Government, the market and the law need to support marriage. Because needy children deserve support no matter who raises them, the state, the business community and the law should support them wherever they are located—whether with single, married, divorced, cohabiting, same-sex or foster parents. Christianity has never absolutized marriage. Nor has it ever said that marriage is a means to salvation. But it has always had a deep investment in marriage as a highly important good and in maintaining the integrity of the institution—that is, the integration of covenant love with its other classic goods.

Neither the church nor society should accept Coontz's account of marriage or her anemic response. She tells us to simply relax and accept the disestablishment of marriage while asking law and government to stand ready to pick up the pieces for children, women and even men as best they can. Both church and society should and can do more than this.