

HUMANISM AND THE CEREMONY OF MARRIAGE

by Khoren Arisian

I. The human function of ceremony is to bind people together backwards and forwards in time, and thus provide emotional and historical anchoring for individuals at significant junctures in their lives. Ceremonies, like music, are essentially expressive—they may be celebratory or commemorative, they may be exhilarating or sobering, and their forms are legion. Above all, ceremony usually connotes some kind of ritual, an ordering of events, for two or more people; in this sense ceremony is inherently social; it confirms community, its past, present and future value. In a century when human community has often been lost or eviscerated, ceremony can take on an added, even poignant importance, for it serves as a reassuring signpost amidst an often shifting landscape.

The excesses of the Industrial Revolution actually helped generate the conditions out of which the socialist challenge arose in the 19th century. Industrialism caused traditional kinship groups to unravel, leaving in its wake the smaller, more vulnerable nuclear family unit. Among its many promises socialism held out the vision of a restored human community. Even the death-of-God theme initially sounded by Nietzsche can be seen as metaphorical shorthand for the widely experienced sense of the loss of community in the West.

II. The ceremony under consideration here is that of marriage within a Humanist perspective. A wedding is merely the public inauguration of a marriage, it does not guarantee that the mutual commitment of two people will necessarily last a lifetime.

Insofar as marriage signifies making public—and therefore legal—what has hitherto been a private intent, the ceremony is not for the couple alone. It also has significance for the witnessing assembly. Indeed, just as a memorial service offers something of a preview of one's own death, reminding us of our own shared mortality, so also does a marriage service enable those in attendance to reflect upon and reassess the state of their own current relationships, marital or otherwise.

The 20th-century drive for equality is an assault upon entrenched power and privilege, a rebellion against oppression, whatever its nature. This drive has manifested itself among many women all over the globe as a conscious resistance to further patriarchal claims. In America particularly, where feminism is perhaps most advanced, incremental changes in the relationships between women and men binds fair to transform the sexual, cultural, political and moral landscape and climate. It is a continuing revolution whose final outcome defies prediction.

Marriage was perhaps the last formal institution of Western culture to undergo radical change. In the postwar era such change did not begin to emerge visibly until the end of the tumultuous decade of the 1970s. And this development could not occur until more and more women took the measure

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of their historic subordination to the male sex and began asserting their equality and worth.

It is precisely the equality and worth of both partners to a marriage that a Humanist wedding ceremony announces. On this view marriage is not a merger of personalities but an opportunity for two people to create a synergistic relationship in which the whole is greater than the sum of its dual parts. Marriage, in short, not only celebrates community, by definition it creates it anew and is a perennial shield against loneliness. Getting married-choosing a lifetime mate-is perhaps the biggest single decision one makes. Marriage therefore is not to be entered into lightly. Ideally, it should be premised upon temperamental affinity between two people. Absent such affinity, even extensive agreement on values may not suffice to sustain the union indefinitely.

All relationships require work, but if the partners to a marriage are so ill-matched that they have to work hard at it all the time, they will be exhausted rather than enhanced by the experience. In that case the whole is less than the sum of its parts, and the marriage is in trouble: real community is not being generated.

Mature individuals who finally choose to marry each other are, of course, emotionally wed long before the actual ceremony that acknowledges their commitment. No mere service of matrimony, however, creates a marriage, only a mutual commitment can do that.

Every marriage is thus a sacramental event, whether the external trappings are elaborately liturgical, or plain or secular. Whenever two people commit themselves unconditionally to each other's welfare as moral equals they are in fact making a premiere spiritual declaration. Marriage is also a contract in the eyes of the law. And today specific pre-nuptial agreements are sometimes spelled out beforehand in order to obviate subsequent misunderstandings; such agreements do not mean that a finite limit is being placed on the duration of the marriage. Nonetheless marriage is no longer the sure thing that it once was believed to be, and such precautions are a recognition of life's infinite contingency.

Society retains a profound interest in controlling sexual relations, therefore its preference for a stable family system is strong. Monogamy will doubtless always be preferred by most people because it potentially offers greater security and greater sexual and emotional efficiency than any other living arrangement for a couple. This does not mean that all kinds of other companionate arrangements cannot continue. Indeed, they will not only continue, they will proliferate in the years ahead.

Marriage is pre-eminently a social convention. Sex and love, by comparison, are biological and emotional phenomena. Marriage is society's effort to co-opt and channel the energies resident in love and sex. Civilization itself is a formal legal exercise in controlling nature.

Let it be admitted that in the interests of order, society brainwashes people. In the 1950s if you loved someone, you were supposed to get married forthwith. Sex was located in reference to marriage, it was "pre-marital." However, we now recognize that sex and love are autonomous forces. Love may entail sex, but sex may not necessarily entail love, and neither necessarily leads to marriage.

Friendship based on temperamental affinity is the cornerstone of any long-lasting relationship. In marriage, when intimacy is added to friendship, the likelihood of its success is greatly increased. A Humanist perspective on the ceremony of marriage will properly take these and related matters into account.