

Feature Article: JAF1323

A RECONSIDERATION OF ROMANTIC LOVE

by Rob Whitley

This article first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 32, number (2009). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Romantic love has always stimulated a brisk trade. Belgian chocolates, vintage claret, redolent bouquets, designer clothes, and weekend getaways have never come cheaply. But contemporary society differs somewhat from times past inasmuch as the *search* for romantic love has become big business, propelled mostly by young people. In an effort to find Mr. or Miss Right, young people can consume a whole array of dizzying products that promise, in one way or another, invaluable assistance in the quest for romantic love. Dozens of Internet dating services vie for their trade—all shorn of the sadness and stigma that used to pervade the local newspaper's somewhat seedy lonely hearts column. While conducting one-stop shopping for books or music on amazon.com, the Internet surfer can simultaneously visit the many variants of "www.love.com." These sites offer an alluring promise of one-stop love. Within minutes you could be talking live to your life partner. If this is not sufficient, why not sign up for one of the burgeoning speed-dating events, where instant intimacy is promised at the ring of a bell? The enduring and expanding nature of these dating services is a testament to their popular appeal in the twenty-first century.

It is not only dating services that are exploiting a gap in the market (or should that be *gap in the heart?*). Chronicling the quest for romantic love is the core theme of the most popular money-spinning television programs of the past decade. What do shows such as *Friends*, *Sex in the City*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Ally McBeal* have in common? An intense focus on romantic love and relationships. The archetypal protagonist in these shows, like Carrie from *Sex in the City*, is characterized as someone conducting an interminable (and highly painful) quest to find "the one." While on the surface these characters are portrayed as sassy, successful, resourceful, and self-confident, the viewer cannot help but feel that deep down these fictional characters experience an ultimately unsatisfying emptiness in their lives. Character traits valorized in these shows (such as assertive individualism, self-centered materialism, and professional achievement) do not seem to fill up this void—hence the continuous questing.

Why are these shows so popular? Perhaps young people, and young women in particular, see a mirror image of themselves in these characters. Perhaps these shows portray (and simultaneously construct) a particularly crippling postmodern malaise afflicting the young. This malaise is caused by exceedingly high internal and external achievement expectations combined with a (often self-imposed) grueling work schedule and a pervasive sense of impermanency regarding that most desired endpoint—a rewarding and enduring romantic relationship. Jesus famously said to His disciples, “Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and ye shall find” ([Matt. 7:7 KJV](#)). The characters in the popular TV shows are asking but not receiving, seeking but not finding—a recipe for anomie and frustration.

It is not only TV shows that portray, construct, and create these current cultural conditions. Books that depict individuals juggling career, friendships, romance, and the like are particularly popular among young people. So much so that this genre has even been given a name, an abominable one at that—“chick-lit.” Stroll into any Main Street bookstore today and the garish gaudy covers of such garrulous books are often placed in a position of prime prominence. Contained therein, one can find irreverent tales that chronicle an individual’s madcap quest for romantic love in a confused and discombobulating world. *Bridget Jones’s Diary* may be the “chick-lit” book sans pareil—so popular it was made into a film. But it is not only fiction that is greedily consumed by young people hungry for vicarious experience of someone else’s quest for romantic love. Self-help books that deal with love, marriage, and relationships now take up colossal sums of shelf space in the local bookstore. Books with jarring titles, such as *The Rules*; *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*; and *He’s Just Not That into You* remain bestsellers, and continue to spawn many variants on the same theme. All this is symbolic of the contemporary fixation of twenty and thirty-somethings to quest obsessively for the obtaining and maintaining of romantic love.

Is this obsessive questing so different from times past? It is, actually, a new phenomenon. It is new in terms of (1) the restless nature and lengthy time span of the questing itself; (2) the ephemeral endpoint of the questing (romantic love); and (3) the wider societal context in which all this is occurring. The contemporary fixation with romantic love (and male/ female interpersonal relationships in general) comes at a time when the relationship par excellence—marriage—appears to be under severe threat.

It is my contention that there is, paradoxically, a causal association between the increasing fixation on the quest for romantic love and high rates of divorce and marital dissatisfaction. This is all related to rapidly changing, disconcerting and disorienting sociocultural conditions. I argue that a revival of core Christian values may help stabilize and reorient individuals and couples (young and old—we are

all affected by this discourse) to live harmoniously with themselves, with their surrounding community, and with God.

IT IS NOT GOOD FOR MAN TO BE ALONE

The US Census bureau recently announced that, for the first time, married households are now a minority in the United States. Depending on whose statistics one believes, it is now predicted that roughly thirty-five to forty-five percent of marriages taking place this decade will end in divorce within fifteen years of the wedding. A heart-wrenching consequence of such phenomena is that thirty-seven percent of American children grow up with only one of their biological parents present in the household—the highest figure in the western world.¹ This mirrors trends in other countries. In Canada, the marriage rate is declining, with thirty-six percent of marriages expected to end in divorce by their thirtieth wedding anniversary. Marriage rates are also falling across most of Europe, with a concomitant increase of divorce and cohabitation. Though there are now more than ever a congeries of books, films, Web sites, and experts devoted to the topic of love and relationships, humanity seems to be getting worse rather than better at love and, in particular, marriage.

These figures have caused alarm bells to ring across Christendom. After God, Christians believe most firmly in love (See 1 Cor. 13). Loving God and loving thy neighbor are the two essential precepts of Christian teaching. Christians have a divinely inspired duty to propagate love and to defend love. Love can only exist in relationship as is demonstrated *in excelsis* by the selfless, absolute, and eternal love exchanged between all three members of the most Holy Trinity.

For all the mindless and shallow secularist attacks on the accuracy of the assertions made in the Book of Genesis, the Lord God's statement that it is not good for man to be alone is one of the most timeless truths irrefutably supported by scientific and experiential evidence. We instinctively recognize that solitary confinement is one of the cruelest punishments that can be inflicted on a fellow human. One of the founders of the discipline of sociology, Emile Durkheim, made his name by systematically discerning that suicide rates were much higher among single and childless people than married couples or families. Social scientists have invented bland jargon such as "social support" or "social capital" to describe how meaningful inter-relationship between people leads to better health, higher educational success, and greater quality of life. All this is encapsulated in English designer and writer William Morris's famous phrase, "Fellowship is life, the lack of fellowship is death."

Marriage (and the family) has been, quite rightly, considered by Christian and non-Christian alike to be one of the main vehicles of love and fellowship. Marriage, or I should say a good marriage, is

the antidote to God's declaration that it is not good to be alone. Christians believe that a good marriage allows for the blossoming of love—not only between the two partners involved, but between them, any resultant children, extended family, the wider community, and God Himself.

Whereas Christians tend to value marriage for all the reasons outlined above, secularists are now questioning whether marriage is an institution that can, or indeed should, survive. This is especially the case among fundamentalist adherents of "women's liberation" who perceive marriage as a ball and chain confining women to lives of suffering and drudgery. Other secularists see marriage as an archaic institution (as they see the church), a bourgeois convention that has no place in the "progressive" modern world. In this so-called progressive world, secular individualism is valorized. Emotion-driven choice and freedom to do what you want when you want, regardless of its moral value, is extolled over any "old-fashioned" notions of duty and obligation to the enduring institutions that have supported the development of western civilization, such as church, family, and society.

As can be seen, there are varying discourses surrounding love and marriage in contemporary society. Though many secularists rail against marriage, the popularity of Internet dating and fictional accounts of romantic questing indicate that for most people (young and old), a fulfilling and rewarding marriage is considered a crucial goal of ultimate intrinsic value. Christians must capitalize on these desires as opportunities to help perpetuate the love of God among his creatures. Christians must evaluate the romantic longings of a restless generation positively, as evidence of mankind's longing to love and be loved. Christians must articulate a truly Christian voice in the context of these competing discourses on love and marriage. One way of ensuring that this voice is spoken in a clear, commanding, and convincing manner is to become acquainted with the social history of marriage as an institution.

From such an analysis, we can learn the lessons of history (including biblical history), applying timeless insights gleaned from such an analysis to the situation plaguing restless and questing people, especially the young, in our contemporary postmodern societies.

THE THREE FORMS OF MARRIAGE

Some social historians, studying the span of human history, have posited three phases in the development of the institution of marriage.² These three phases (or forms) are (1) arranged marriage; (2) companionship marriage; and (3) romantic marriage. It is a matter of intellectual debate whether these are technically phases, representing discrete historical time-periods, or whether they are simply forms that have coexisted within most human societies past and present. It is not the purpose of the article to get bogged down in such tangential theoretical discussion. My position is that these forms of marriage

coexist in present-day America, and probably have co-existed in most human societies. I would contend, however, that proportions of people falling into the three categories have changed significantly over time, and we are now in an era where an idealized form of romantic love/marriage predominates. I argue later that this is to the detriment of individuals involved and society as a whole.

The first phase, or form, of marriage to discuss is arranged marriage. This is often considered to be the predominant form of marriage in premodern and feudal times in Europe. In present-day America it is often associated with immigrant families from the Indian Sub-Continent.³ In this form of marriage, choice of marriage partner does not lie solely with the two individuals concerned and is not motivated by existing romance or sexual attraction. It is instead heavily influenced by tradition, parental preferences, religious considerations, economic interests, and social relations. Romance and love is considered to be mainly a *consequence* of marriage rather than a cause. The binding function of this form of marriage refers not only to the two individuals concerned; it refers to wider connections of land, blood, family, religion, and deity. In feudal Europe, royalty and the ruling classes would often engage in arranged marriages. This was motivated by the cementing of alliances, the preservation of bloodlines, and maintaining land and property in “desirable” hands. Despite resulting in many happy marriages, arranged marriages began to be ridiculed by eighteenth-century writers and artists. William Hogarth’s comical caricatures illustrate the mutual dislike shared by some individuals unwillingly condemned to these marriages. Authors such as Henry Fielding and Jane Austen mercilessly satirize the marital aspirations of the emerging middle classes to marry their daughters to dim-witted but land-owning aristocracy.⁴

Though Western Christians might consider arranged marriages to be an affront to highly prized values of choice and free will, it should be noted that arranged marriages are often seen in Scripture—Genesis 24 describes the “arranged” marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. Even Adam and Eve could be described as an arranged marriage. In these cases, God and social exigency shape circumstances so that individuals are drawn together in order to conduct the Lord’s work as a unit. But the groom does not have agency over the selection of his bride. External forces are more powerful determinants. It should also be noted that arranged marriages in present-day society have a lower divorce rate than other forms of marriage. Driven less by intense dyadic emotion and more by external dynamics, arranged marriages should not be dismissed out-of-hand as unwholesome by Christians.

Arranged marriage generally passed out of fashion in the Victorian era, where choice became valorized over tradition and duty. Arranged marriage was superseded by what is known as companionship marriage, an idea finding much favor among the middle-class of the day, and still a common form of marriage in the present. Companionship marriage was based less on external criteria,

such as land and kinship unions, and more on a quiet friendship founded on shared temperament, common values, and mutual interests.

Like arranged marriage, companionship marriage is found in Scripture. Elkanah and Hannah were in a companionship marriage that led to the birth of the prophet Samuel and their shared concern that his life be devoted to the Lord (see 1 Sam. 1–2). Ruth and Boaz may be another example of such a marriage (Ruth 4). A prototype of companionship marriage is found in many of Charles Dickens’s novels, where characters, such as David Copperfield, find companionship with women of similar values, interests, and temperaments. In his classic book *The Four Loves*, Christian writer C. S. Lewis constructed a convincing argument that Christians should implicitly base their marital decisions on models of companionship love. Lewis argued that affection (*storge*) and friendship (*philia*) were more important foundations for Christian marriage than erotic (or romantic) love. Companionship marriage remains popular among Christians, and may be highly prevalent among the older generations.

Modern-day secular society (and many Christians), however, has enthusiastically embraced what in times past was considered a distinctly minority form of love/marriage: romantic love.⁵ This is a supposedly intense and passionate union of two individuals with no external anchors; a union that is hypothesized to “complete” the other—a meeting of minds, providing emotional safety, spiritual security, sexual satisfaction, and social support in the face of the blooming and buzzing confusion of everyday life.⁶ This form of love, what C. S. Lewis would label as *eros*, is represented in popular thought by Romeo and Juliet. In this model, the intense and passionate experience of romance is considered to be the only desirable route to marriage. Tradition, family ties, religious considerations, and parental preferences are considered irrelevant inertial drag for those engaging in romantic love and wanting to consummate their intense experience as a romantic marriage. Romantic love is mainly a secular concept, though it is also expressed in Scripture. The Song of Solomon could be considered an extended poem on the topic of romantic love and an example of romantic marriage from the Old Testament could be that of Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 29).

All three forms of marriage outlined in this article exist in contemporary secular society. Romantic love (leading to romantic marriage) has become the most coveted and alluring, especially among young people. Romantic love is consistently portrayed in popular culture as a singleton’s route to individual salvation—the most desirable and enviable state in which a young person can dwell. Companionship love (and marriage) is often considered a poor relation of romantic love among the young: a second-best option reserved for those who cannot obtain romantic love. Arranged marriage is

often considered by young secular Anglo-Americans as positively retrograde and reserved for those from “primitive” or “backward” non-Western cultures.

ROMANTIC LOVE IN SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

Relationships based on romantic love, whether marital or nonmarital, are becoming increasingly invested with exceedingly high expectations. The “significant other” (more awful social science jargon) is commonly expected to provide complete and often exclusive moral, mental, spiritual, sexual, and emotional satisfaction to the other partner. The significant other is expected to fill the “God-shaped void” so accurately described by Augustine. The couple becomes the community, and is expected to provide functions that are generally shared among many in the two other forms of marriage.

Where the satisfactory provision of these functions is deemed wanting within the dyad, there is a whole range of secular sources that often pronounce impending doom for the couple: relationship experts, self-help books, psychologists, and counselors to name but a few.⁷ Some of these sources suggest techniques in which the relationship can be brought up to the (increasingly higher) benchmark, generally involving further consultation of relationship “experts.” Others suggest a termination of the relationship. When the rewards of the relationship are not meeting these high expectations, they suggest it is time to cut one’s losses and run.

Since external criteria have become increasingly redundant in romantic love relationships, this option can generally be followed with greater ease than in the two earlier phases (or forms) of marriage. Even the presence of children, a church community, loving in-laws, or vows before God are considered no more than complicating detritus that can be swept away so the individual can exercise their “right” to “cut and run.”⁸

The pervasive nature of notions of romantic love, and the increasingly expressed search for salvation through such love, could be considered by devout Christians as bordering on the idolatrous. Are young people making idols out of their “significant others”? I think that would be a harsh judgment, and rather than pondering such rhetorical questions, we Christians would be well advised to understand the socio-cultural context in which young people are currently exercising choices vis-à-vis love and marriage.

The world is a very uncertain and unpredictable place. No one knows what is around the next corner. The credit crunch and heavy recession took most of us by surprise, and has led to deep feelings of insecurity, instability, and impermanence. Likewise, 9/11 changed the world, the nation, and the

individuals therein forever. Feelings of fracture and fragmentation consequent on those dreadful events still play on the minds of all citizens. Everyday life has become profoundly rickety, marked by solicitude and doubt. We live in what sociologist Anthony Giddens famously calls a “runaway world.” In parallel, institutions that used to give meaning and purpose to life have lost influence due to processes of secularization and individualization; these include the church, the extended family, and the local community. The world of work, which in times past often provided an anchoring sense of community, stability, and belonging, has become callously cut-throat and competitive. Rising to the top of the greasy pole involves interminable working hours and intense pressure that inevitably takes its toll, with many suffering from severe stress, fatigue, depression, burnout, and exhaustion. All these factors coalesce to provoke enduring feelings of anxiety, uneasiness, and fear.

In addition to uncertainty, the modern world is becoming a place of infinite possibility and choice, this being perhaps the most poisoned chalice offered to young people today. College or not? What to study? Where to study? What career path? Where to live? Who to date? Who to marry? Kids or not? Now or later? Young people have become their own inquisitors, putting themselves on the rack as they agonize over these questions. This self-interrogation (generally accompanied by interrogation from interested others) can evoke intense worry. Failure to provide concrete and socially legitimate answers can lead to guilt and/or even social ostracism.⁹ Not only young people, but all of us are anxious about the present and we fear the future. To where do we fly in the face of this fear? What is the answer to these insidiously invasive anxieties?

Romantic love and marriage have been raised onto a pedestal as an appropriate refuge—a community of two providing an unparalleled antidote to the egregious and ferocious nature of the modern world. The comfort and repose posited to derive from a romantically based marriage is often considered the only adequate refuge from modern life. Romantic love brings salvation from the assorted slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Or does it? Obviously, romantic love might temporarily serve this function for some people. The societal shift toward a high valuation of romantic love/marriage, however, in parallel with the shifting sands in the nature of society itself, may be throwing unbearable burdens on young people entering or living in the world of coupledness. This prompts reflection and reconsideration of the valorization of romantic love, something alarmingly prevalent in modern society, and consideration of alternatives. This reflection and reconsideration, I contend, is the duty of Christians.

ROMANTIC LOVE IN SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

Relationships based on romantic love, whether marital or nonmarital, are becoming increasingly invested with exceedingly high expectations. The “significant other” (more awful social science jargon) is

commonly expected to provide complete and often exclusive moral, mental, spiritual, sexual, and emotional satisfaction to the other partner. The significant other is expected to fill the “God-shaped void” so accurately described by Augustine. The couple becomes the community, and is expected to provide functions that are generally shared among many in the two other forms of marriage.

Where the satisfactory provision of these functions is deemed wanting within the dyad, there is a whole range of secular sources that often pronounce impending doom for the couple: relationship experts, self-help books, psychologists, and counselors to name but a few.⁷ Some of these sources suggest techniques in which the relationship can be brought up to the (increasingly higher) benchmark, generally involving further consultation of relationship “experts.” Others suggest a termination of the relationship. When the rewards of the relationship are not meeting these high expectations, they suggest it is time to cut one’s losses and run.

Since external criteria have become increasingly redundant in romantic love relationships, this option can generally be followed with greater ease than in the two earlier phases (or forms) of marriage. Even the presence of children, a church community, loving in-laws, or vows before God are considered no more than complicating detritus that can be swept away so the individual can exercise their “right” to “cut and run.”⁸

The pervasive nature of notions of romantic love, and the increasingly expressed search for salvation through such love, could be considered by devout Christians as bordering on the idolatrous. Are young people making idols out of their “significant others”? I think that would be a harsh judgment, and rather than pondering such rhetorical questions, we Christians would be well advised to understand the socio-cultural context in which young people are currently exercising choices vis-à-vis love and marriage.

The world is a very uncertain and unpredictable place. No one knows what is around the next corner. The credit crunch and heavy recession took most of us by surprise, and has led to deep feelings of insecurity, instability, and impermanence. Likewise, 9/11 changed the world, the nation, and the individuals therein forever. Feelings of fracture and fragmentation consequent on those dreadful events still play on the minds of all citizens. Everyday life has become profoundly rickety, marked by solicitude and doubt. We live in what sociologist Anthony Giddens famously calls a “runaway world.” In parallel, institutions that used to give meaning and purpose to life have lost influence due to processes of secularization and individualization; these include the church, the extended family, and the local community. The world of work, which in times past often provided an anchoring sense of community, stability, and belonging, has become callously cut-throat and competitive. Rising to the top of the greasy

pole involves interminable working hours and intense pressure that inevitably takes its toll, with many suffering from severe stress, fatigue, depression, burnout, and exhaustion. All these factors coalesce to provoke enduring feelings of anxiety, uneasiness, and fear.

In addition to uncertainty, the modern world is becoming a place of infinite possibility and choice, this being perhaps the most poisoned chalice offered to young people today. College or not? What to study? Where to study? What career path? Where to live? Who to date? Who to marry? Kids or not? Now or later? Young people have become their own inquisitors, putting themselves on the rack as they agonize over these questions. This self-interrogation (generally accompanied by interrogation from interested others) can evoke intense worry. Failure to provide concrete and socially legitimate answers can lead to guilt and/or even social ostracism.⁹ Not only young people, but all of us are anxious about the present and we fear the future. To where do we fly in the face of this fear? What is the answer to these insidiously invasive anxieties?

Romantic love and marriage have been raised onto a pedestal as an appropriate refuge—a community of two providing an unparalleled antidote to the egregious and ferocious nature of the modern world. The comfort and repose posited to derive from a romantically based marriage is often considered the only adequate refuge from modern life. Romantic love brings salvation from the assorted slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Or does it? Obviously, romantic love might temporarily serve this function for some people. The societal shift toward a high valuation of romantic love/marriage, however, in parallel with the shifting sands in the nature of society itself, may be throwing unbearable burdens on young people entering or living in the world of coupledness. This prompts reflection and reconsideration of the valorization of romantic love, something alarmingly prevalent in modern society, and consideration of alternatives. This reflection and reconsideration, I contend, is the duty of Christians.

ROMANTIC LOVE RECONSIDERED

To start, a defining factor of romantic love is the emphasis on the exclusive mutuality of the couple. The partnership is meant to act as a moat defensive against the misery, hardship, adversities, and suffering that have always afflicted the human condition. This has led to extremely high expectations regarding the provision of love, support, assistance, and renewal within the dyad. The two previous phases (or other forms) of marriage were not endowed with these expectations. Life was then faced with an armory of protection that may have centered on the spouse, but also included the extended family, friends, the wider community, trade unions, religious organizations, other fraternal associations, and last but certainly not least, God. The prevalent idea that the partners in the dyad should be mutual saviors is a development peculiar to post modern society and its notions of romantic love.

Now many young people are at a further disadvantage, given that a large number are geographically dislocated from their own family and community of origin. The absence of these protective structures where people are known and loved means that the expectations (or hopes) invested in romantic love relationships become amplified beyond rationality. As such, younger people are looking at their romantic relationships as their everything, something that squares an ever-more dizzying circle, the exclusive compensation for wider estrangement and their chronic uncertainties about the present and the future. Built on such stony ground, it is not surprising that many passionate romantic attachments quickly fracture and fall flailing into the sinking sands. Those that survive are frequently punctuated with frustrating disappointment and bitter dissatisfaction, as the “significant other” is unable to act as an adequate counterweight to pervasive feelings of uncertainty and estrangement. When high expectations are not met, high costs are incurred on the parties concerned.

Relationships based on romantic love can have further costs. They may be uncompromisingly possessive or marked by a burning jealousy. This is partially understandable, given that the “significant other” may be the only anchor of certainty in the person’s life. This inward-focused emotional intensity, however, can lead to neurotic anxiety and intense demands for childlike affection. And lest it be alleged that victims are being blamed, it should be readily acknowledged that the occupational system and wider societal structures can hinder the formation of deeply rooted, loving, companionship styles of relationships.

All love, but especially romantic love, sets high standards of devotion and loyalty, values that are often disparaged and demeaned in our competitive, cut-throat culture. When the younger generation is socialized to believe that flexibility and fungibility are the keys to the acquisition of employment and individual advancement, how can they be prevented from transposing such an attitude to the private realm? Increasing individualism, encouraged by the educational and economic system, lessens sense of obligation to others and the subsequent enactment of Jesus’ commandments to love God and neighbor. Instead of Jesus’ commandments, or Paul’s notion that we are members of one body sharing in the promise of Christ, Polonius’s amoral maxim, “To thy own self be true,” becomes the clarion call to a generation. Maybe the Arch bishop of Canterbury is correct when asserting that the moral fallout from the credit crunch will change our competitive culture for the better.

Given this sociocultural situation, should we be surprised that such amoral, competitive instincts burrow their way into marital and loving relationships? Is it any wonder that many romantic love connections, once they fail to live up to their unreasonably elevated expectations, quickly disintegrate into mutual recrimination and the intended infliction of pain on the other? Romantic love has a lot to

answer for, and as society becomes increasingly ephemeral and unstable, is there any hope that young men and women can form lasting and meaningful marital relationships with each other on the basis of love, concern, and mutual respect? The answer to this is Yes, but this may require a paradigm shift away from romantic love. This I contend is the clear message that Christians should be articulating in the public as well as the private arena.

A VIABLE CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVE?

Teaching young people and society in general that there are other models of love and marriage beyond those seen on *Sex in the City* is a start. Each of these models has strengths and weaknesses, and Christians should advocate a hybrid model of marriage that combines the most moral and healthy aspects of arranged, companionship, and romantic marriage. We must reject notions that there is a hierarchy of marriage with romantic love at its zenith and arranged marriage at its nadir. In such an endeavor, we can build on C. S. Lewis's precept that people need reminding rather than instructing.

In practice, this hybrid model of marriage may look like an outward-focused version of companionship marriage that blends a strong (but realistic) sense of romance and even some sense of an "arranged marriage." What does this mean in practice? The romance between Isaac and Rebekah, and Ruth and Boaz, kept these relationships alive, and allowed the bearers to go forth as ambassadors of God. These relationships were sanctioned by the local moral community, but they were outward rather than inward focused. The retreat into the private realm, a phenomenon so characteristic of romantic love, is exactly that—a retreat, an abandonment, a failure to respond to the Lord's call to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons" (Matt. 10). It is tantamount to a refusal to confront the suffering endemic in the world today, and a failure to embrace the promise of the Holy Spirit that gives us strength and fortitude. A movement toward this outward-focused companionship marriage is a movement toward a love that has ends beyond self-consumption, a love that has many anchors extending beyond itself. This outward-focused companionship marriage, with its healthy doses of Song of Solomon-type romance, can envelope the lonely and needy, whether they are elderly relatives, isolated strangers, underprivileged children, or whoever is in need of love and attention. Feeding the lambs and tending the sheep (John 21) connects the couple and also binds the partners to the wider world. True liberation from the egregious aspects of postmodernity does not lie in further privatism. This simply deepens the more unsavory aspects of secular culture, such as further isolation and alienation.

True liberation lies in harnessing our restless energy toward positive purposes and worthy causes beyond the dyad. Such a reorientation realigns the balance of the couple, moving the center of

gravity beyond itself to the wider community. If followed in numbers, such a movement would shift the balance of society, from an army of retreating, somewhat defeatist secularized couples to a Christian vanguard, inspired and engaging with today's culture to build the Kingdom. We are all familiar with the strength and morality of couples living out such love. Numerous examples come to mind — aging grandparents opening their homes to all and sundry, energetic church couples embracing the weak and weary, new parents becoming politically active in their local communities. These ranks need to be swollen. Not only is such a model good for society as a whole, it will likely be good for the individuals involved as well. Shorn of the intensity and high expectation of romantic love, this new hybrid model of love may preempt the bitter disappointments associated with romantic love. This could put a brake on the already abominable divorce rates.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, it should be noted that humans are restless precisely because we are looking for a man (or woman) to fill what Augustine called the gaping “God-shaped void” in the human heart. The love offered by God, as witnessed through His creation of a fruitful universe, and more latterly through the ministry and crucifixion of Jesus (brilliantly described by Paul in I Corinthians 13 and Romans 5) is the only love that can fill such a hole. Jesus wisely commanded us to “seek ye first the Kingdom of God,” not seek ye first a romantic partner. This should be self-evident to Christians, but we often lose sight of this in a secular culture that considers romantic love as the ultimate achievement and a glorious identity-giving status symbol.

C. S. Lewis labeled this holy love of God as *agape* (or *caritas*), a love that is overflowing despite many unlovable qualities in the object of love (e.g., mankind). When we allow such a love to enter our hearts and fill our soul, we can better love our neighbor as ourselves, and better love a specific other as husband or wife. The new commandment, just like marriage, is most easy to enact when we respond energetically to God's unfathomable love for us. One can never say of God that “He is just not that into you.” Likewise, one does not need to subscribe to an Internet dating service in the search for God. Over and above the capricious and contingent concerns of worldly romance lies a magnificent and ultimate love that we should strive to return and, in our own imperfect manner, emulate—the love of God.

Rob Whitley, Ph.D., is a medical anthropologist specializing in mental health working out of Dartmouth Medical School, New Hampshire. He frequently speaks and writes on the intersection of science (social and physical), society, and religion.

notes

- 1 For more detail, see Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, "The State of Our Union: Sex without Strings: Relationships without Rings," The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, June 2000.
- 2 Interested readers are referred to the works of Christopher Lasch and Philip Rieff for further discussion of these issues.
- 3 Arranged marriage should not be conflated with forced marriage. Forced marriages involve physical coercion, severe intimidation, and sometimes overt violence. Arranged marriages rely more on external social and cultural dynamics (or pressure) that are often considered normative from the perspective of those involved.
- 4 Readers are referred to Squire Weston in Fielding's classic Tom Jones.
- 5 In times past, romantic love was also often considered no more than a transient affliction, leading to inevitable sadness, sickness, and heartbreak for those involved. See Portia's lamentations in The Merchant of Venice.
- 6 Sociologists such as Robert Bellah and Anthony Giddens have given convincing evidence on the causes and consequences of the rise of this form of love/marriage in secular society.
- 7 It is superfluous to mention that this is also a significant part of the "love (questing) industry" and quite a money-spinner for those involved. Divorce and relationship dysfunction is good for the "psy-"industry.
- 8 This "right" often exercised, often turns out to be a considerable burden. The man or woman runs solo back into a world where he or she is again alone searching for romantic love. Again, he or she has the sole and singular responsibility for finding a new partner, this time with failure and cynicism added onto the layer of anxiety that besets those questing in the postmodern world. Liberation has a psychosocial price.
- 9 I know talented undergraduate students who have wanted to devote part of their life to caring professions such as nursing or teaching, but have been aggressively dissuaded from doing this and redirected to occupations considered to have more cultural or financial cache, e.g., Wall Street or Capitol Hill.