

From the Minister's Desktop

Few people know the name Philippe Ariès. In 1960, this French demographic historian published a book^{1[1]} that would change the minds of many--particularly many intellectuals and public policy makers--about the nature of the family. Ariès “discovered” a new field of study, the “social history of the family”. Ariès was not concerned so much with family as a “description of manners or the nature of law,” he was concerned with the family as an “idea.”

In his book, Ariès suggests that the family is primarily an idea, meaning it is more a social construct, invented and reinvented in various times and places, than an identifiable, more or less universal reality. Moreover, he holds that the “idea” of family is relatively recent, born “at a time when the family had freed itself from both biology and law to become a value, a theme of expression, an occasion of emotion.” [p.10] Not only is the family a “new idea,” it is a bad idea, a socially oppressive idea. Ariès held that even parental affection for children was both a modern and a bad idea. As one commentator put it, parental affection according to Ariès is “a sentimental by-product of bourgeois life.” The family grows from the same social sources as racism and class distinctions. It is an institution that is intolerant of variety and insists on uniformity. [p. 415]

“As one reviewer recently remarked, ‘Coming at the start of the 60s, Ariès’ bold characterization of the close-knit, nuclear family, not as the fundamental building block of society, but as a comparatively recently evolved structure of oppression was eagerly taken up.’”^{2[2]}

This view of the family took hold of the minds of many educated Americans. It had a great influence on the academy and the media. Currently it finds descendants in the popular view that there are “many different kinds of families,” none qualitatively or morally or even functionally better than the others. Many people have come to think of the nuclear family as an arbitrarily defined social arrangement with no apparent advantage over any other kind of social arrangement. And this kind of thinking extends far beyond family theory. It is widely held about any value-laden social arrangement. Most social commentators have come to embrace the idea, springing from the work of Ariès and those who followed his lead, that all values are arbitrary. For many, the idea of “human nature” itself seems like a social invention, a variable and evolving construct of certain social choices.

There are two problems with Ariès’ work. First, he was wrong. Second, his wrong headedness has become accepted as irrefutable truth by large numbers of people. The result has been not only a devaluing of the family, but an even more general moral relativism in which all traditional human institutions (and human nature itself) are viewed with deep suspicion.

In the decades following Ariès’ groundbreaking book, many scholars have shown how misguided and mistaken Ariès’ conclusions were. Yale University Press has published a three volume series, *History of the European Family*, which shows Ariès’ notion that the family changed radically in the early modern period is simply groundless, as is his idea that parents did not show affection for their children before the modern era (that children were simply “little

^{1[1]} *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, 1960: Librairie Plon, Paris, published in English in 1962 as *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Translated from the French by Robert Baldick.

^{2[2]} Mars Hill Audio Journal, Volume 63, July/August, 2003, Side 1.

adults”). But, like so many other revisionist studies of late, Aries’ mistaken views have shaped much of our current social and political program.

The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan showed how the breakdown of the nuclear family had devastated large urban African American populations in the United States. But Aries’ view of the family as oppressive and destructive had taken deep root, and Moynihan’s conclusions were either written off as simplistic or reactionary and no attempt was made to reverse the destruction of this basic and constructive human institution among African Americans. More recently, a strengthening of nuclear families among that population has shown positive social outcomes. In spite of the evidence that strengthened families are a good social investment, the idea of the family as an oppressive instrument of social control still holds broad sway.

There should be a difference between descriptive social science and prescriptive measures. The idea currently abroad that there are “many different kinds of families,” is certainly descriptive. No one would want to further burden single parents or persons in other kinds of relationships by making them seem like villains or destroyers. Anyone with responsibility for the welfare of others, particularly children, should be helped and supported and, insofar as they contribute to the good of the other, commended. But describing should not be confused with prescribing. To prescribe for health is not just to describe current conditions. The nuclear family is not just an “idea,” it is in fact the fundamental building block of a healthy human society, not just now, but always.

One night, after an ecumenical service, I found myself helping with the dishes in the kitchen of the Antrim (New Hampshire) Baptist Church. I was both young and a stranger in that kitchen, and I knew enough to do what I was asked. Busy with my task, I was able to listen in on the conversation of some of the women of the church who were visiting as they continued to see that the clean up was accomplished.

“Why don’t you remember, Helen, your Charlie and us were the only married couples on our whole road in 1929!” said one. And Helen agreed. She remembered that. I was a little surprised, though on reflection there were several roads in my own village where people were pretty well along in non-traditional cohabitation of various kinds and durations. Some seemed to have worked out pretty well while I had seen more than a little trouble from others. But the point is, these observations are descriptive of a particular social situation at a particular time: 1929 or 1969.

At All Souls, the pastoral leadership does not subscribe to the views of the family of Phillippe Aries or his disciples. The nuclear family is a fundamental institution for human and humane society. But it is not necessarily a Christian institution. Certain families can be oppressive and obsessive and destructive. Just because a family is formed does not mean that it cannot use both the grace and judgment of the Gospel. Clearly, it is hard to get around both the teaching of Torah and of Christ, that “a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.” This kind of family, and the devotion of a man and a woman to each other in marriage was certainly the biblical ideal. All the talk about polygamy in the Old Testament has a feeling of stories told about the “old days.” And even in the Old Days it had its problems! More typical are the kinds of families we encounter in Mary and Joseph and their children, Jesus and his brothers and sisters.

Our ministry at All Souls is supportive of the family. This is no secret and it is no recent development! We also seek to minister with and to persons who live and struggle and thrive alone or as single parents.

With all our energy and striving, we are still a Christian church. Christians have always been somewhat ambiguous toward biological and worldly families. In the Gospel, Jesus says he has come to set family members against each other, to bring division, and not peaceful complacency.

Retro is in these days. It seems almost everyone looks back with a fond nostalgia, longing for old days. We often forget that those days had their own share of hardship and evil. The 50's couldn't have been so keen if the 60's were their natural fruit! We need more balanced memory, a better historical sense, and a forward glance instead of a backward longing.

All Souls will continue to support families. We will try to give sound education and good example to the young. We will seek to support the spiritual and psychological needs of beleaguered parents. We will continue our ministry to families through Church school, educational groups, and in services of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and funeral.

While we recognize the family as fundamental to society and not a system of oppression nor a merely arbitrary institution, we also acknowledge the limitations of biological families. Sometimes divisions and separations are necessary -- even healthy. We will continue to challenge our members to look beyond all that seems "natural" to the "supernatural" obligations, promises, and hopes that are ours in Christ.

One of the signs for our time is a church that exists as a community of trust and fidelity at once broader and deeper than other human relationships. We are for family life to be sure, and sound family values, but we are the family of Jesus Christ, that great pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We keep our eyes fixed on him, giving form and substance to our hope expressed in Henry Lyte's great hymn: "When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me."

Above all these times call for the fruits of the Christian life: patience, forgiveness, hope and love. We must try to discern the leading of Christ's presence among us. We must earnestly pray that the mind of Christ might be our own mind.

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