New CSLR Book Shows It Takes a Society to Raise a Family

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By: Mary Loftus

Despite the dismally familiar statistics about divorce rates and broken homes, most Americans see family life as the “loving, playful, caring heart of what makes life worth living, and a society worth living in,” says Emory sociologist Steve M. Tipton, who has joined with Emory legal historian John Witte, Jr. to co-edit a new book about the changing forms and norms of modern families.

*Family Transformed: Religion, Values, and Society in American Life*, published through Emory’s Center for the Study of Law and Religion (CSLR), investigates the current state of modern families, the rapid pace at which families are changing and growing more diverse, and their place in the larger arena of public life. The book is one of several new volumes released in conjunction with the CSLR’s research project, "Sex, Marriage and Family and the Religions of the Book."

"We wanted to explore families as moral dramas, not just collections of statistics or snapshots,” says Tipton. “Families are constantly shaped and reshaped by shifting texts and contexts, traditions and liturgies, laws and customs, within the societies and cultures of which they are parts and products. American families today have grown both more regulated and deregulated, marketized and therapeutized, secularized and sacralized anew."

To widen the conversation around the family table and dig deeper into these paradoxes, this volume brings together scholars from the fields of anthropology, demography, ethics, history, law,
philosophy, primatology, psychology, sociology and theology, who observe the family through the viewfinder of their diverse disciplines to reveal a bigger, more panoramic picture of its drama.

Surprisingly, the news isn’t all bad. For instance, while it’s true that half of all marriages end in divorce, a third of all children are born to single mothers, a fourth of all pregnancies end in abortion, and one in six American children live in poverty, economist Robert Michael makes clear this is not the whole story. For the past 20 years or so, Michael says, about 4 million babies have been born annually, 49 out of every 50 U.S. couples now choose to stay married each year, and two of every three divorced women remarry.

We marry later, have fewer children, and finish parenting earlier in life, note Claude Fischer and Michael Hout. Yet Americans still yearn for lifelong love and prefer the household of a married couple with children to living on their own. More Americans now spend more of their lives in marriage than several generations ago, given longer life spans and better health, pregnancy planning, and infertility treatment. Standards for a good marriage have risen and exits from bad marriages have widened in light of growing values of self-attainment and independence, especially for women, with marriage now more often delayed or broken by choice than blocked by poverty or dissolved by death. Children raised by single parents and families fragmented by divorce have multiplied, but many Americans now spend more years visiting their aging parents, watching their children grow up, and enjoying the company of their spouses.

Emory primatologist Frans de Waal tells the biological story of the “good-natured” family, developed to reduce violent competition over mates, reduce infanticide, and avoid inbreeding. Romance, he says, comes much later in the evolutionary picture.

Demographer Linda Waite and psychologist William Doherty tout the benefits of marriage—its social role in responsible fathering, the superior health of married people, and the data showing that married couples tend to have both more money and more sex than singles. This boost, however, comes only from “good-enough marriages;” unhappy marriages actually make things worse by generating more psychological distress than single life.

The institution of marriage itself is overseen by a quartet of unlikely bedfellows, demonstrates co-editor Witte. As a personal contract, spiritual association, social estate, and natural institution, marriage is jointly, and sometimes tensely, governed by competing claims of authority, including those of the couple, the church, the state, and nature.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, co-director of the National Marriage Project, examines how dating and mating behaviors have changed, illuminating “twentyhood”—the lengthened single life of middle-class young adults who postpone the search for a soulmate until they have left the college campus for the world of work—and the computerized “partner market” that now exists not only for singles, but for single parents and divorcees as well.

Emory anthropologist Bradd Shore explores the paradoxes and contradictions of the modern American family: we have to leave home to make a home of our own; we have to move on to move up in corporate careers that stretch across a nation of nomads; and we
have to work harder and longer to make our domestic dreams come true, even if this leaves us less time at home to enjoy them.

In the beginning, by nature and historically, society comes before the family, explains the sociologist Robert Bellah, and in the end “the family depends on society for its very survival.” The modern nuclear family in particular is too fragile to survive in isolation, he concludes, without the just moral ordering of the larger society. “If we really want to reappropriate the ‘traditional’ family, it will not be the idealized Victorian house with Mom and Dad by the fireside, but the much older idea of the family embedded in community,” as a partnership for the common good.

Among the book’s other contributors are theologian Stephen Pope, sociologist Robert Wuthnow, political ethicist Jean Elshtain, historian Steven Ozment, and theologian and social scientist Don Browning.

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