

## DIVORCE AND PSYCHOSOCIAL CHANGE

The thought of a psychiatrist being invited to the Catholic Theological Society to talk on the subject of divorce is electrifying. It does suggest to me that anything which I might have to say is already anti-climactic. I shall not charge your program committee with McLuhanizing<sup>1</sup> and I shall not make the assumption that I am being utilized in an Inventory of Effects. I shall doggedly go on and discuss some of the information and ideas which I have on the subject.

There are some indications in the psychiatric literature that divorce is related to mental ill health.<sup>2</sup> Quite frequently in the psychotherapeutic situation we encounter patients who suffer from serious distortions in their thinking and affect which lead them to threaten or sue for divorce. Sometimes, unfortunately, psychotherapy itself has been charged with precipitating divorce. I remember one wag, at a psychiatric convention, advising anyone undertaking psychoanalysis to first take out divorce insurance.

I shall briefly review and illustrate some postulates which are of use to psychiatrists and have some reference to the problem at hand.<sup>3</sup>

Behavior often arises from motivation which is not clear or understood. "Unconscious" forces might move in partner selection to the choice of a woman like, or unlike, mother. The woman whose mother was divorced might seek to justify her mother by getting a divorce herself. Conversely a woman might move toward divorce influenced by the marital steadfastness of the "martyr" mother whom she "unconsciously" hated.

Ambivalency is illustrated by the woman who appears to insist that her husband be a man and be strong, yet she acts as if she wants him to be submissive and to fail.

<sup>1</sup> M. McLuhan-Q. Fiore, *The Medium is the Message* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> A. Blumenthal, M.D., "Mental Health Among the Divorced," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, V.16, n.5 (May, 1967), pp. 603-08.

<sup>3</sup> E. Griffith, *Marriage and the Unconscious* (Secker and Warburg; 1957).

Symbols take on at once ludicrous and tragic meanings. We read in the papers, of divorces arising over unwashed dishes, or failure to put out the cat. Freud, in all his glory, never dreamt of symbols such as these.

I think that most psychiatrists hold that men are often free and capable of choosing, but that in many really important situations this has limited application. He may really not have the choice of arguing with his wife at a given moment—this is especially so if there is a mother-in-law in the picture. We do believe in a rather wide range of application of psychic determinism in love and marriage. One modern text of theology has pointed out that in the future it will probably be agreed that man is not as rational as the theologians have thought, nor as irresponsible as the psychiatrists seem to believe.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps some of you are acquainted with the writings of Baudelaire<sup>5</sup> in which he speaks of the gentler sado-masochism in which alternately the partners take on the roles of victim and punitor. I particularly relished his use of the term "solicitous executioner," that is, the hangman who carefully adjusts the loop and knot and says, "Now, that feels comfortable, doesn't it?" before the trap is sprung. This is the kind of thing which, one way or another, has a great deal to do with actions for divorce.

A more modern and technical manual on the *Games People Play* has been written by Berne.<sup>6</sup> One of these games is "If It Weren't For You, How Happy I Would Be." Berne interestingly points out what he speaks of as a transactional neurosis. In this case it turns out that Mrs. White, contrary to her complaints, is being protected from her fears by her husband's forbidding her to do what she only thinks she wants. Of course, for one reason or another people really do grow tired of some games and seek new ones.

Divorce sometimes simply offers the opportunity for gratification of jealousy and vengeance. Love triangles are regarded as symptomatic of pre-existing marital discord rather than as the causes of

<sup>4</sup> J. Ford-G. Kelly, *Contemporary Moral Theology*, Vol. 1 (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> C. Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals* (Cambridge University Press, 1949).

<sup>6</sup> E. Berne, *Games People Play* (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

marriage breaking apart.<sup>7</sup> Divorce, and threats of divorce, offer potential for neurotic transactional game playing.

In my opinion, overall psychosocial changes are of more importance in the increasing problem of divorce than the narrower area of psychopathology. Let us reflect for only a few moments upon the subtler and perhaps more vulgar changes which have occurred in our overall social situation, and which bring about different sanctions, even into the home. It is only a few years ago that the mother of the young bride, or the mother of the young wife, would say to her, "my dear, you must put up with it, remember marriage is forever. The woman was born to suffer. This is a man's world. You have to put up with things. Offer your suffering up as a prayer, etc." Today, grandmother is more likely to say to the young mother, "I wouldn't put up with it for a minute! He has no right to treat you that way. If you're not going to do something about it, I will! You should see a lawyer. If the Church won't give you a divorce you have to think of yourself! Is the Church going to take care of your babies? Don't get pregnant anymore! Don't be a fool! Women don't have to put up with men like that, etc." It is idle to say that these attitudes and sanctions are irrelevant. We are dealing with the here and now man or woman, who is deeply influenced, pro or con, by this kind of urging. We are not concerned with a theoretical man or woman, nor with homo philosophicus, but with this individual little 20th century person. It is not enough to say that the young woman, above depicted in the second time period, should be able to dismiss her mother's exhortations. It is equally irrelevant to say that no good grandmother would talk that way to her daughter. It is really not fair to take the position that the girl was twenty-one when she married and was a high school graduate and she, therefore, knew what she was doing at the time. The truth of the matter is probably that in some way she knew what it was to get married, but that in a lot of ways she did not know what it was to get married at all and she certainly had no idea what it would be to be married to this man, so she had really very limited ability to enter into this particular marriage, in our structure.

There have been many expositions of the broad social changes

<sup>7</sup> R. Forreger, "The Love Triangle in Marriage and Divorce," *Mental Hygiene*, V.50, n.2 (April, 1966), pp. 199-204.

occurring in the last century. In general the tremendous facilitation of transportation and communication underly these changes. Increasing urbanization has resulted in relative confinement of living space. This, coupled with high mobility, has minimized parochialism and families have become "nuclear" rather than "extended." Generally young married couples live with their children. Just the two generations are present. Grandparents, on the whole, no longer live with their offspring, and the influence of elders is otherwise lessened by earlier and compulsory retirement.

Riesman pointed out the movement of the dominant emotions of group psychology from shame, through guilt, to anxiety.<sup>8</sup> Fear of social ostracism has long since given way. This was once a main deterrent to divorce. The question "Is it right or wrong?" carries much less weight than it once did. The question underlying modern anxiety is "How am I doing?" Individuals and families look not to their elders but to peer groups. Anxiety is accepted as inevitable. One is expected to encounter it, analyse its reasons and adopt appropriate tension reducing measures.

Family relationships are subjected to constant scrutiny. Personality profiles of husbands and wives have been computed and scaled by Harrower and others. Marital incompatibility is not regarded as a scandal at all. Indeed, the reduction of intolerable personal dissatisfaction introduces divorce as an immediate and ponderable alternative.

Democratization and egalitarianism lead to an emphasis on the samenesses rather than the differences in people.<sup>9</sup> The differences between the sexes are acknowledged on the physical level, but psychosexual differentiation is, on the whole, minimized. The age of marriage is lower. Conception control is available. Women generally have their babies early and reenter the work force, after they have raised their children, often in their early forties. The dependency of women becomes less and their essential biological involvement with the continuation of the species appears to become optional and subject to

<sup>8</sup> Reisman, Glazer, and Denney, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> J. Maritain, *Les Droits de l'Homme* (New York: Maison Francaise, 1942).

control.<sup>10</sup> The general position of women has changed radically, or so it seems, contemporaneously. She is now regarded as man's equal and encouraged to believe this herself.

Psychosexual differentiation is to a considerable extent denied, and in some psychoanalytic circles the term is being dropped because it implies a biological engenderment of difference. A new term "gender role formation" has begun to be used as implying more social roots and cultural development. I regret that psychiatry is not as frank as theology. I have yet to see a book entitled *Speculative Psychiatry*. It is not true that there are not real psychological differences between men and women. It is a subject in which I am intensely interested. I consider males on the whole more motor, doing and acting and women as sensory, receiving and reacting. By extension, and this is admittedly speculative, we might consider such attitudinal potential as creativity—male, performance—male, participant observation—female, appreciation—female, obviousness—male, frankness—male, directness—male, hiddenness—female, obscurity—female, mystery—female, pretending—female. The male's capacity for knowing, understanding and appreciating the other is less than the female's. The intuitive capacity of the female to know and understand the other is greater than the male's.

These concepts have interesting possibilities and an exploratory potential in the study of paranoid illness, homosexuality and marital discord.

Finally, I shall take the opportunity here ingenuously to say something of what I would like to see theologians and canonists think of on the matter of divorce. I have read Father Pospishil's book.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting, certainly, but I do not favor Church divorce at all. I believe in the biological necessity of marriage in its essential marks of permanency, exclusivity and prolixity.

I have a fond sentimentality for Mother Church's wisdom and goodness even if she is old-fashioned, and even if I often contend and argue with her. I imagine we are all determined in our love for our mothers by our experiences with her. My experiences happen, on the

<sup>10</sup> S. DeBeauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Philosophical Library, 1948).

<sup>11</sup> V. Pospishil, *Divorce and Remarriage* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).

whole, to have been favorable and affectionate. There are those I know who have had other kinds of experience. I know that the growth period of the child is very extended by comparison with other animals. Roughly, children require eighteen years to mature. If a couple have a few children it adds up to about a lifetime. There should be institutional and sacramental sanctions for permanency, exclusivity and prolixity.

There are practical points, however, which in my innocence and ignorance I would bring to your minds. I think the shame-makers are out, or should be. It does not seem to me that it is the Church's job to shame anybody anymore, or to encourage anybody to hold others in shame. I saw recently an old lady who told me that she had not spoken to her brother for thirty years because he divorced and married outside the Church. I hope and believe that that kind of thing is finished. Secondly, I would like to see people who are really irresponsible not to be made to feel guilty.

There are undoubtedly hundreds of thousands, and perhaps millions of people in this country who probably do not have within themselves the capacity to enter into a lifelong, exclusive relationship with one person of the opposite sex for purposes of having children. They just can not do it, try as they might. I would not care, really, to try and pick out an individual and tell you that he is entirely incapable of entering such relationship. I might be required at times to give an opinion on this kind of thing and I shall do the best that I can, but I do not regard my judgment in this matter as much better than the usual judgment of an expert, which is in reality an educated guess. Yet I knew deeply and basically that there are hundreds of thousands and, perhaps, millions of people who, in view of the existing social attitudes and in view of the sanctions operative in society and operative among their friends and relatives, are in reality incapable of so relating exclusively, permanently and in prolixity. Again, I cannot prove this to you except to appeal to the fact that there are indications from the general statistics of the country, including Catholics, that this is the case. We cannot say simply that it should not be this way, that this is the trouble of the times and that therefore we should hope and pray that things improve and that men get back their senses and the social structure be rebuilt so that the people will be better able to do what they should do.

I think that all of us have a very real job to deal with the here and now people who get into frightful and impossible marital situations. I do not know if the marriage courts can meet it in any way without promoting all sorts of floods of applicants and I know that this might lead to terrible problems. I do personally have the opinion though that the people who are married and civilly divorced and remarried and who are therefore deprived of their participation in the sacraments and living in physical contiguity with Our Lord as members of his Mystical Body, and who suffer from that want, psychologically, socially, emotionally and spiritually of such belonging—well, it is not only too bad, it is really terrible. It does not seem to me that it is their fault. These are good little people, they love God, they want to be with Him, they need Him. They are told they are living in sin; they believe that they are cut off from the Church and they can only come back in some kind of an emergency. There is something very, very sad and wrong here. I do not know whether it is a matter for the courts to decide, or some other kind of broad reconsideration of the status of these people. I know that you and your colleagues and the bishops are seriously concerned as shepherds and pastors.

I really do not know what a psychiatrist can do in these matters except to be of some kind of encouragement while at the same time presenting the problem from our own point of view. I know you know as much about all this and very much more than I do. Personally, I really do not think it can be resolved by too much of a concern for order, but really by a very deep and liberal reconsideration of the laws of God with man, who is both rational and irrational.

Even in the case of morally mature men and women (and I am sure that some people are sometimes this) civil divorce and remarriage will occur. I think this is sinful, but I humbly before you wonder if anything can be done about the "state of sin" or the "living in sin" question. I am just asking, of course. There is no harm in asking, is there?

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