

Thematic Article

The anthropological meaning of marriage: main lines

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Abstract

Marriage is a deeply rooted institution, but today it is in big crisis. In Italy – with regard to 2015, the latest available survey – 194,377 marriages were celebrated (246,613, in 2008), but separations were 91,706 (84,165 in 2008) and divorces 82,469 (54,351 in 2008). It is a trend in line with European data. Is marriage only an "archaeological" residual? Actually, also today the fascination of marriage survives as it is confirmed in many books on the theme and within the media where, even when the marriage takes place between subjects who have experienced the previous failure, it is described as if it were the first and the last. Of course, so many cohabitations out of marriage are related to a change of mentality, but not so deep to reject marriage as public institution. My short contribution (recently I published a book on the issue) aims to support the challenge of love in the perspective of marriage. In my opinion, the mistake about freedom could be the cause of current fragility, and education to marriage could be the possible strategy to face the problem. I start by focusing on the anthropological depth of the institution of marriage, whose recognition supports the motivation to preserve and promote the value of the wedding.

Keywords: marriage, anthropology, educational challenge

Introduction

The Anthropological meaning of marriage

From the lexical point of view, several European languages connect the word "marriage" to generation because of the Latin root (matrimonium). We have clear evidence from linguistic forms related to the woman as "mother" (mater) – for example, Italian and Spanish matrimonio, but also English matrimony – as well as from those that – still from Latin – refer to the reproductive meaning of "man" (like French marriage or English marriage, linked to the verb maritare, coming from mas as "male"). From the historical point of view, both in relation to Latin and Greek civilization, marriage was related to legitimate filiation, as shown by another linguistic comparison, related to the two partners. In fact, the Latin terms sponsus et sponsa ("husband" and "wife") come from the verb spondeo which means "to promise". In Greek, the root of gámos ("marriage") has biological-legal meaning, referring to gambrós that identifies in-law relatives. Anyway, the concern is related to children that must be recognised inside a family. The point is the bond: Latin stresses the mutual commitment of partners, while Greek underlines the role of the clan.

We can deduce that marriage refers to the formalization (at least, to the recognition) of the inter-clan pact through the mixing of bloodlines by generation. It is a very important reference because, referring to the potential birth of the child, identifies marriage as the union of man and woman excluding other forms of cohabitation, such as that between only men or only women. Besides, even among LGBT there are those who reject the assimilation of the homosexual union to marriage.

As the reference to the inter-clan agreement shows, the marriage has also a reference to the merger, recognizable not only in Swedish förbindelse, but also in German Ehe (referred to the legal pact). In fact, already in ancient mythology, "sacred nuptials" are a recurrent reference to the union between the divine and the human world. On the civic-political level, Cicero has the same conviction when he writes that family – for a Roman of that time certainly associated to marriage – is "seedbed of the republic".

Cicero does not refer simply to reproduction (there is marriage even if there are no children), but to the couple-bond as the micro-bond keeping society in unity as community. In fact, one of the most problematic issues related to the crisis of marriage is the eclipse of the public facing the private interest because – from the secular point of view – the marriage means to share in public the private bond between partners. If the essential (public) meaning of the community is no longer recognized, it means that every relationship is assumed as private, consequently the unity of community is at risk.

Here ends my synthetic anthropological investigation. Now I want to focus on what marriage means for love, for human couple love. It isn't wise not to call attention to the "promise" within the Latin verb *spondeo*, at the root of English literary word *spouse*. The same linguistic origin refers Spanish *boda*, coming from Latin *votum*, "vow". It has a clear ethical matrix referring to freedom as a distinctive feature of the person, well reflected by the consensus as the substantial element producing marriage.

Research design and Methods

Love forever: dream or illusion?

I dwelled upon the anthropological meaning of wedding because, if we really want to take up the challenge of the marriage crisis, we must study in depth to determine strong reasons supporting hope and engagement. Today's situation is consequent to the transformation of marriage dream into an illusion: few people really trust that unending love can naturally happen. My point of view is that the marriage root is very deep, coming from the deepest bowels of human nature. In what way is it possible to explore it? Surely literature gives an opportunity to do it because it is the mirror of the human nature. My question is: is it possible to love for ever as sounds in the nuptial promise?

Literary sources, as anthropological testimony, tell us that humanity has always associated marriage to eternity, at least as a deep aspiration. Already an Egyptian inscription, dating back to the middle of the third millennium BC, speaks of endless love. The married couple says:

We desire to rest together. God cannot separate us. (...) Together we will go to the land of Eternity¹.

Where does this deep dream come from? From two fundamental characteristics of human love: totality and perpetuity. Literary sources show that love means "total" attraction, because it embraces the beloved person entirely, as it is often said in the metaphor of "capture". We find it in yet another ancient Egyptian script, still dating back to the "New Kingdom":

My beloved is able to ensnare me,
without being a breeder used to take and tie the livestock.
Her hair
are her net to catch me;
with her eyes,
she makes me her prisoner;
her jewels
are the diadems of my mistress;
with her ring,
she puts her brand on me².

The same idea is in the Song of Songs where the man says, referring to his wife:

You have ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; you have ravished my heart with one of your eyes, with one chain of your neck! (4:9).

Centuries later, nothing changes, as the verses by Indian poet Bhavabhūti (early 8th century AD) proclaim:

¹ Quoted in E. Leospo – M. Tosi, *La donna nell'antico Egitto*, Giunti, Firenze, 1997, p. 10.

² *Letteratura e poesia dell'antico Egitto*, Einaudi, Torino, 1969², p. 446.

Hesitant, uncertain, innocent, damp, immobile, slow,
 the pupils expanding to infinity, larger
 for the intimate astonishment,
 my heart is without defense from the sly looks of the beautiful lady
 with long eyebrows eyes
 it has been captured, dissected, swallowed up and completely
 annihilated³

and the poem by the Arabic poet Gialal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273):

If they ask: "What is love?", you answer: "Give up the will:
 whoever does not escape Freedom is never free!⁴.

The Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet (1902-1963) offers the same thought:

You are my slavery
 you are my freedom
 you are my burning flesh
 like the naked flesh of summer nights
 you are my homeland
 you, with the green reflections of your eyes,
 you, tall and victorious,
 you are my nostalgia
 to discover you inaccessible
 in the same moment
 when I grab you⁵.

I quoted texts of many a cultural origin to show how the inspiration supporting them is universal. I am aware that this aspiration may not correspond with any matrimonial promise. In fact, what I aim to say is not that, by virtue of "totality", "perpetuity" is assured and consequent, but that it is intrinsically recalled from "totality", because the deep nature of the marriage promise corresponds – beyond its objective difficulties – with the deep of the human soul.

"Totality" in space corresponds to "perpetuity" in time, as it is well confirmed by the frequent confrontation between love and death. This is attested by a famous biblical statement in Song of Songs:

love is strong as death (8:6)

echoed by the words of an ancient Japanese text:

Who for the first one used one day
 this word "love"?
 Without any doubt he made a mistake:
 he had to use
 another word: "death"!⁶.

The same idea is in the Arabic poem by Jamil (†701):

My spirit has joined her before we were created,
 and after when we were drops into life, and in the cradle.
 It grew as we became man and woman, and vigorously grew up,

³ *L'universo di kâma. Testi d'amore dell'antica India*, Einaudi, Torino, 2014, p. 146.

⁴ Rumi, *Poesie mistiche*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1980, p. 86.

⁵ N. HIKMET, *Poesie d'amore*, A. Mondadori, Milano, 1995⁵, p. 44.

⁶ *Amore e morte*, in *Le più belle pagine della letteratura giapponese*, Nuova Accademia, Milano, 1957, p. 14.

nor, when we will die, it will be broken our sworn agreement,
but it will survive in every further state,
and it will visit us in the darkness of the tomb and of the grave⁷.

Over a thousand years later, Edgar Lee Master (1868-1950) so speaks:

There is something about death
like love itself!
If with someone with whom you have known passion,
and the glow of youthful love,
you also, after years of life
together, feel the sinking of the fire,
and thus fade away together,
gradually, faintly, delicately,
as it were in each other's arms,
passing from the familiar room –
That is a power of unison between souls
like love itself!⁸.

The call of death could seem strange, but actually it refers to a finality, which strongly intrigues the human being. Under these circumstances, why today it seems so difficult to achieve the dream of "total" and "eternal" love? Certainly, it was never easy, but today it seems too difficult and many people seem to give up. On the contrary, the play *The Jeweler's Shop*, written by Karol Wojtyła, aims to promote hope and engagement because:

Love is no ending challenge (wyzwanie). God himself may challenge us
so that we challenge destiny by ourselves⁹.

The Polish word *wyzwanie*, whose meaning is "challenge", is related to the verb *wyzwalać*, "to free". To "challenge destiny" is the most beautiful description of freedom. By virtue of this original human peculiarity, we aren't restricted to any descriptive "data" (not even referring to the crisis of marriage), because we must recognize that "data" ask for engagement, moral engagement, in order to go beyond and to practice freedom as a "possibility" of facing "facts". Education is the concrete action to that purpose.

Results

Marriage and educational challenge

Obviously, it is not easy to deal with the issue concerning the crisis of marriage, because there could be more possible explications. From my point of view, I offer only one idea because it seems to me particularly suitable to face today's situation.

About forty years ago, Christopher Lasch adopted the Freudian concept of "narcissism" to identify the contemporary human "type" as essentially attracted by the satisfaction of one's needs¹⁰. From this point of view, nowadays affectivity plays generally a compensatory role, so that it is more and more difficult to face conflicts. In fact, the "narcissistic type" always looks for one's satisfaction, for this reason no resilience is possible in facing conflicts, but only frustration. That's why many couples are so weak: in fact, it is common to deal with conflicts in the life of a couple.

From the educational perspective, it is necessary embrace the "exodus paradigm". Within the Biblical history God made a crowd of slaves to become "people" through years spent in the desert (which represents what everyone would like to avoid). It is the most ancient tale about resilience and it teaches to us today that, if

⁷ Text quoted by F. GABRIELI, *Storia della letteratura araba*, Academia, Milano, 1951, p. 119.

⁸ E. Lee Master, *Antologia di Spoon River*, Gulliver, Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna, 1995, p. 105 («William e Emily»).

⁹ A. Jawień [K. Wojtyła], *La bottega dell'orefice*, in K. Wojtyła, *Tutte le opere letterarie*, Bompiani, Milano, 2001, p. 849.

¹⁰ C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Norton, New York, 1979 and *The minimal self*, Norton, New York, 1984

we would only be able to pass through what is negative, we could reach what is good. In the same way, if the couple facing the crisis, is able to pass through it together, it is possible to become stronger as a couple after the test. Obviously, there are too many unpredictable concrete situations, so there is no possible overarching solution to the crisis of marriage, but I think that the narcissistic attitude is – in general – an important factor to take into consideration when facing the issue.

It is necessary to encourage the ability to remove themselves from the centre, that is the opposite of narcissism and its related disposition to seek always and only one's satisfaction. It is necessary to educate toward this kind of behaviour starting at a young age, but the challenge is to make the experience of the governance of one's own needs not "renunciation", but "self-conquest". It could be asked, why someone must engage oneself to give up pleasures. The answer is: in order to promote "self-conquest" as self-esteem.

To reach the goal, it is necessary to reconsider the meaning of freedom. There is a text from the New Testament that seems to be dedicated to us today: "Everything is permitted to me, but not everything profits. Everything is permitted, but I will be under no dominion" (1Cor 6:12). If freedom means to look always for the satisfaction of needs or desires, it becomes pure and simple license and, far from making the person free, it subjects the human being to every kind of wish. Actually, freedom is only a means in order to take care of human dignity, starting from the principle that the human being must always be treated as an end and never as an instrument. For this reason, it is essential to achieve (this is the task of education) the ability to govern oneself, that is to be able only to choose what is at the level of human dignity. That's why, even if everything is "permitted", not everything "profits": only what is good deserves our choice, because we are the "good" to preserve.

Freedom must be considered also from another angle. The most ancient definition of who the human being is, written by Aristotle in his *Politics*, states that it is the "living creature" endowed with *lógos*. What does this association identify? It is not enough to say that the Greek *lógos* means both "thought" and "word"; it is necessary to remember that it comes from the verb *léghein* which means "to gather". In this sense, having the *lógos* means to be able to gather oneself in unity through the thought and in community through the word. Actually, the human being is endowed with *lógos* because – once again – he/she knows how to overcome self-referentiality generated by the aspiration to satisfy only one's needs and he/she knows how to go beyond him/herself not only by communicating something, but above all by communicating oneself.

Through marriage man and woman offer themselves to each other. It is something incomparable to what happens to animals because human affection is able to last a lifetime. Like animals, the human being "suffers" the emotional appeal (the word "affection" come from Latin *affectum*, passive voice of the verb *afficere* that means "to affect"), but unlike animals the human being is not under the dominion of sensuality. Affection refers to passivity, that is the situation consequent to sensitive stimulus producing perceptions, emotions, feelings. In fact, affectivity is rooted within instincts and unconscious: for this reason, it is a relative to achieving satisfaction and pleasure. Speaking of human beings, however, we must be aware of freedom as the human peculiarity. For this reason, human affection is strictly related to the aim to become active and assertive, not only to suffer in the situation. This is the task of education related to affectivity and love: to lead passivity to become active, but coherently with the principle of the human being as an end and not something to use. That's the meaning of being responsible - corresponding, by one's actions, to proper and others' human dignity.

Education starts from human moral originality in order to make it concrete and operative. As regards sexuality, the task is to make man and woman be able to practice it as the highest way to communicate oneself. From this point of view, marriage, as the life status shared forever, is usually the main goal to reach. I think that affective and sexual education must start from the acknowledgement of a human being as a moral creature. It means, to reach the ability to practise reciprocal donation, fully coherent to the human identity as a "living creature endowed with *lógos*".

Throughout human history, literature testifies of this deep desire that can be expressed according to the flesh (in marriage) or according to the spirit (in the consecration through celibacy or by living celibacy as a form of sacrifice). Each one of the two life conditions needs the same competence: to reach self-government in order to be able to make passive affectivity turn into the active capacity to love at the level of human freedom. It is necessary to free affectivity from the consumerist logic. It might seem a goal with no possibility of success, but actually it has its chances. In fact, satisfying needs through the practice of consumption, certainly gives pleasure, but not self-esteem because it makes one increasingly more passive. On the contrary, self-government (what the Greeks called *egkráteia*, the concept to which the quoted Pauline passage refers) not only promotes self-esteem – if it is assertively practiced: not as renunciation, but as conquest – but allows to offer up oneself to a beloved partner, because one can give only what one has.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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