

Tumult in the Middle East and Marriage: A crash of civilisations

Almost two decades ago in 1992, political scientist Samuel P Huntington delivered a lecture at the American Enterprise Institute in which he proposed the ground breaking theory that in the future, people's cultural and religious identities would be the primary source of conflict in the post Cold-War world. If the last few weeks in the Middle East are anything to go by, Huntington's theory appears to be gaining ground, but what does tumult in the Middle East and a relatively low key debate in the House of Lords on marriage have to do with one another?

On Thursday, 10th February, several peers in the House of Lords gathered to discuss marriage in the UK. The purpose of the debate was "To call attention to the role of marriage and marriage support in British society 12 years after the report *The Funding of Marriage Support* by Sir Graham Hart; and to move for Papers". Of the eighteen peers present, there were three bishops, one archbishop, two practicing Jewish peers, at least one practicing Christian Lord, two Muslim peers and one Hindu peer present. There was also a mix of political parties represented with several cross benchers in attendance too.

The first thing to iterate perhaps is that the tangible presence of religious peers is not in and of itself cause for concern. The sheer diversity of religious interests in this instance created a very rich debate, in which some surprising points of view, raised principally by Lord Parekh (our Hindu peer present at this debate) and Lords Ahmed and Patel shed light on the dangers of pushing marriage too hard on the political agenda. However, the debate itself was moved by the Bishop of Chester, who in his capacity as a Christian bishop clearly advocates marriage above all other forms of relationship and one does have to ask whether religious interests in general should lead in political forums such as the House of Lords and indeed the House of Commons.

A closer look at the voting records of our practicing peers also adds gravitas to the argument that religious philosophy has no place in parliament; that it is outdated and moreover irrational and even dangerous in its inherent prejudices. The Bishop of Chester consistently [votes against equal gay rights](#), as does [Lord Patten](#), [Baroness Deech](#), [Lord Ahmed](#), [Lord Hylton](#), [Lord Anderson](#) and [The Archbishop of York](#). There are also several peers in this debate that do not declare their perspective on the matter, all of which is unsettling when considering the impact of marriage laws on the gay community and the evolution of our own understanding of the human condition as a nation and as a species.

But perhaps even more puzzling is the use of religious rhetoric in this debate with a view to promulgating marriage. Researching Reform's personal favourite has to be the Bishop of Chester's closing remark in his opening speech, which reads,

"With the indulgence of the House, I will end by quoting one of my favourite verses from the Bible, from the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, in the [King James](#) version: "It is not good that the man should be alone".

The entire quote (part of which the Bishop of Chester elected not to mention) from Genesis (also in the King James version) reads "It is not good that the man should be alone: I will make him a helper suitable for him". The rest of the verse continues on:

“Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought *them* to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.”

Clearly, this hits several nerve endings. One could quite conceivably see women’s rights groups and feminists brimming over with volcanic ire. Likened to beasts and birds may be the least of their worries and being summoned to The Man, also a bone of contention (pardon the pun), but perhaps the most contentious aspect lies in the unspoken second half of the Bishop’s favourite verse, where the Lord God decides to make for Adam a little lady helper. Researching Reform has always valued marriage as a viable form of union but it cannot support a discussion which espouses the same outdated principles which formed the basis for the pressing need to evolve family law with a view to protecting respective parties within unions in the first place.

And whilst several more strange and unusual comments come to pass in this debate, one more worth highlighting is Lord Hylton’s suggestion that “we are in fact living on the accumulated capital of past long-term stable marriages and families”. This rather begs the question then: if these unions were so stable, then why have so many children grown into adults who simply do not feel they can enter marriage?

The answer to this question is complex and unfortunately obfuscated by the unhelpful background noise of the Bible, Torah and Quran in this discussion and also marred by the heavy emphasis on the cost to society of family breakdown, although credit must be given to Lord Parekh on this point who does say “I hope that we can make a better case for marriage than that it reduces costs to the national budget”. Further credit must also go in great part to Lord Parekh, Lord Ahmed (setting aside this Lord’s less than progressive views on gay rights) and Lord Patel addressing the pitfalls of marriage, specifically the forced element that is often present in their respective communities. A cautionary tale for our government, whether intended or not, that trying to force choice is akin to no choice, at all. In a democracy this cannot be acceptable or wise and backlashes will surely follow, as Muslim communities know only too well, often at far too great a cost.

A further sentiment that rears its ugly head throughout this discussion is the cost of family breakdown to the tax payer and the much cited research carried out by the [Centre for Social Justice](#) which makes the case that a lack of marriage in our culture is responsible for all the ills we now see in Britain today. Lord Justice Coleridge’s awkward reasoning also makes a guest appearance in this debate and he is quoted as saying “almost all of society’s ... ills can be traced directly to the collapse of the family life”.

It is understandable that divorce and cohabitation might be mistaken as the villains of the piece, as they are often symptoms of a condition, the state of our state. However, by far the most intelligent research on the matter comes from the [Nuffield Foundation](#) which has gone beyond the superficial symptoms of the problem and has indicated clearly that family breakdown is not the enemy – poor education and standards of living amongst other things are the real drivers behind society’s ills. What this means for government and for us as a nation is clear: sort out the economy and the working culture in England and everything else will fall into place.

But what does this relatively low profile chin wag in the House of Lords have to do with Samuel P Huntingdon's theory on conflict and the recent events in the Middle East? Perhaps nothing, however with the Muslim world tearing down despotic governments, there is perhaps a lesson learned as countries like Egypt begin to look to secular candidates as replacements, having understood that religious governments historically have shied away from democratic tenets as religion by nature is exclusive (Iran is currently experiencing the effects of such a regime). Here, in the West, we are seeing pressure from certain corners to return to more narrow cultural pursuits too, a call made recently by our own Prime Minister who declared that multi-culturalism had failed and went on to suffer [heavy criticism](#) from the international Muslim Community as a result. But as the economic crisis worsens, Britain appears to be becoming more insular despite the spin on liberalism, retreating to its roots, a dangerous step backwards in a world where evolution cannot readily be undone and the questions always, whether it should.

This debate is one such example. Instigated by a Bishop, supported heavily by the religious demographic in the House of Lords (with words of warning being sounded by Muslim and Hindu peers as an interesting aside) and which seeks to dominate an area of private life it has no place meddling in, our very own conflicts within our state seem to grow daily and impact on the outside world and the international community at large. Yet, divorce in and of itself is nothing more than a choice. It is not a sign of failure, or evil. It is not responsible for the suffering in the world nor is it unnatural. For many, it is a way of shutting down a union that has run its course or protecting their children from unhealthy interaction and for others, a way of escaping life threatening situations. It is a choice worth protecting.

We are now in danger of drawing battle lines, both within Britain and without and eroding democracy, which is our first and last line of defence against the real perils that exist and economic uncertainty is the trigger factor setting a series of events in motion. David Cameron did not need to make a speech about the failure of multi-culturalism. It has not failed. It simply a mixed bag of good and bad elements as is found in any society at any one time. All he needed to do, was make the point that peaceful cultural diversity was vital for growth and that our government was committed to fostering the best of Britain – in all its glory.

As the divide between East and West increases and it becomes harder and harder to bridge the gaps, our politicians may wish to reconsider the course of British politics and its role in family life, to move us away from conflict and closer to collaboration and above all, bear in mind the changing nature of religious practice once it enters the political arena. The government should not allow matters of personal belief to interfere with its job, which is what these sorts of discussions do. They frustrate the State's purpose, which is to uphold liberty, freedom of choice and equality and as long as we have religious rhetoric coursing through the veins of our chambers and infusing the system with fallacious fantasy we will never be able to rid ourselves of our meddling priests.