

NATIONAL REVIEW

Marriage and Adoption

Traditionalists do not slight the latter

By: Ramesh Ponnuru – May 6, 2013

I had not thought that there was anything new to say in the debate over same-sex marriage. Credit, then, to Esquire writer Tom Junod, who advanced a novel thesis a day after the Supreme Court concluded hearing oral arguments in two same-sex-marriage cases. He argued that opposition to same-sex marriage has become a “war on adoption,” which he takes personally as an adoptive father (married to a woman).

The opponents, he accurately notes, routinely hold up the biological family — a mother and father raising the children they conceived together — as an ideal. In doing so they insult and even threaten his own family. Ross Douthat, of all people, is cited as one of the anti-adoption warriors, specifically called out for writing that “the share of children living in married households with both their biological parents” is a “meaningful indicator of family solidity.” A view like that one, writes Junod, “dooms our marriage and our family to second-class status.”

Walter Olson, a libertarian writer and activist for same-sex marriage — and also a friendly acquaintance from whom I’ve learned a great deal over the years — echoed Junod’s argument, calling his essay “powerful.” The campaign against same-sex marriage, Olson wrote, “is resulting in the belittlement of non-biologically-based family forms — and among the targets to suffer collateral damage are adoptive families whether straight or gay. . . . Any parental structure other than a married biological mother and father, it is now argued, should be presumed to inflict damage on kids.”

I think adoption is a wonderful thing and admire people who have adopted children. In this respect, I am, I think, like almost everyone else, including almost all opponents of same-sex marriage. Yet there is an important sense, is there not, in which adoptive families are not ideal? Unlike the raising of children by biological parents, adoption is always a response to less-than-ideal circumstances, for example to the unreadiness, unfitness, or death of the biological parents. You do not have to have any desire to belittle adoptive parents to say that where such conditions do not exist we should not favor adoption.

And studies have found that adopted children do slightly worse than children of married biological parents on a range of variables. Adopted children appear to have higher-than-average rates of behavior problems in schools and psychological difficulties, for example.

It’s not necessary to read or believe such studies, though, to agree with Douthat: He is not only right, but obviously right, to think that the percentage of children living with their biological parents tells us something about a society’s health. If 50 percent of children in a society were living with adoptive parents, for example, we would conclude

that that society was recovering from some deep trauma.

If more children were being raised by biological parents who were married to each other, more of them would have a better shot at a good life. Most of the time, when people say or think such things, they do not have in mind same-sex couples or adoption: They are thinking instead about single parenthood and divorce. The social science is much clearer that children tend to do worse when raised by single parents than that they do worse when raised by same-sex couples. That doesn't mean that we should think of single parents, or divorced parents, or their families as having "second-class status." But neither should we let our fear of being taken to be belittling them prevent us from facing the truth.

The following three propositions are logically compatible with one another: 1) Society has an interest in raising the proportion of children in intact biological families. 2) Adoption should be encouraged. And 3) the government should recognize long-term same-sex unions as marriages. The way to reconcile the first and second views should be obvious: It's better for kids to be adopted than to languish in foster care or in overseas orphanages, or suffer unfit biological parents.

The first and third could be reconciled by arguing that official recognition of same-sex marriage won't actually reduce the proportion of children being raised by their biological parents but will confer benefits on the children who are being raised by same-sex couples. This isn't a convoluted position: Every supporter of same-sex marriage I have ever met believes it will have exactly these effects. For similar reasons, someone who thinks that the intact biological family should remain our social model, and be strengthened as such, could favor letting gay couples adopt and even encouraging them to.

It may even be that there is nothing that we can or should do to raise the proportion of kids in intact biological families. Nobody has advanced policies that would clearly reduce the rate of unwed childbirth at an acceptable cost. It's not clear how the culture can be changed to encourage heterosexuals to marry before having children. Pessimism on this front, however, does not invalidate the goal.

I take the core concern of thoughtful opponents of same-sex marriage to be that it makes it harder to explain, to a culture that has lost sight of the fact, that kids generally do better with their biological mother and father raising them; that it makes it harder to advance cultural or political proposals that just might strengthen that family structure without being treated as a bigot; that it formally repudiates the biological-family ideal. A thoughtful supporter of same-sex marriage, it seems to me, should not want the triumph of his cause to have that social meaning.

Junod and Olson have not discredited that concern of the opponents. With the best will in the world, as far as I can tell, they have illustrated it.