RESOURCE LIST FOR CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

Legalization of Marijuana

The Union - The Business Behind Getting High Spanish subs
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enLHDwWKt0c

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>For legalization</th>
<th>Against legalization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Causes cancer</td>
<td>Not true – similar to tobacco in that most people smoke it, but marijuana does not deliver harmful carcinogens</td>
<td>Cancer isn’t the issue with marijuana – it is still a very powerful, mind-altering drug and precaution (and prevention) is necessary. Many people didn’t think tobacco was harmful either 60 years ago and look what we’ve learned – too late for many smokers!</td>
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<td>Is addictive</td>
<td>Habit-forming, but not addictive; at least not as addictive as tobacco, alcohol and caffeine (and these are all legal)</td>
<td>More teens in treatment for marijuana than any other drug. Society does not need another habit-forming or addictive drug, especially one that appeals to minors!</td>
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<td>Is a “gateway” drug</td>
<td>Nothing inherent in marijuana that would push a user to hard drugs – people use hard drugs because of life problems – that’s not the fault of the drug!</td>
<td>The more familiar people are with any drug, the more people will want to experience the same or higher levels of ecstasy – if marijuana cannot satisfy, people will turn to harder drugs. Even if marijuana is not a “gateway” to harder drugs, it is harmful enough by itself not to legalize the sale and distribution of to people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Causes laziness</td>
<td>Look at all the successful people who have used or currently use marijuana – President Clinton, VP Gore, Governor Ventura…</td>
<td>Look at all the “successful” people who have used or currently use marijuana (!) – and also consider that many “successful” people who use marijuana are in the “more creative/less structured” positions in society (i.e.</td>
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<td>**Prohibition leads to organized crime and worse societal</td>
<td>**Prohibition of alcohol lead to the rise of crime lords like Al</td>
<td>**Once you permit a drug, you’ll never be able to prohibit it</td>
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<td>conditions**</td>
<td>Capone in the early 1900s</td>
<td>regardless of its damaging effects on the individual or society</td>
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<td>– lesson learned from Prohibition and society’s inability to</td>
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<td>stop the sale and distribution of alcohol. Better to keep</td>
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<td>something illegal than to legalize and try to undo – you can’t</td>
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<td>put the cat back into the bag!</td>
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<td><strong>Prohibition means that the sale of the drug is unregulated</strong></td>
<td>**Alcohol and tobacco are regulated and actually more difficult</td>
<td>**Since the drug is illegal and unregulated, it is all the more</td>
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<td>for teens to purchase than marijuana! Government can not only</td>
<td>important to make sure that the sale of the illegal drug is</td>
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<td>regulate, but also tax the sale of the drug. If government is</td>
<td>prohibited, especially the sale of the drug to minors. The</td>
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<td>not safeguarding the sale of these drugs and preventing minors</td>
<td>argument for regulation is really an argument for prohibition.</td>
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<td>from obtaining, that effort is left to illegal drug dealers who</td>
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<td>are concerned only with money and not with the well-being of</td>
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<td>minors.</td>
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<td><strong>Useful for medicinal purposes</strong></td>
<td>**Marijuana is a medical wonder drug – pharmaceutical companies</td>
<td>**While there are valid arguments for the medical benefits of</td>
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<td>do NOT want to legalize marijuana because it would significantly</td>
<td>marijuana for a very small segment of society with extreme</td>
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<td>and severely cut into their pocketbooks! Marijuana is a plant</td>
<td>medical conditions, this in no way can be parlayed into a</td>
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<td>that can be grown cheaply and used by those who need it without</td>
<td>discussion about the legalization of this drug for</td>
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<td>having to pay the outrageous prices of “legal” drugs that don’t</td>
<td>recreational use as well. Sixteen states have already</td>
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<td>work as well.</td>
<td>legalized marijuana for medicinal purposes and other states may</td>
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<td>do so if they so desire.</td>
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Do We Really Want a 'Needle Park' on American Soil?
Prevention, not legalization, is the key to winning the war on drugs.
By JOSEPH A. CALIFANO JR. AND WILLIAM J. BENNETT

The Global Commission on Drug Policy, a 19-member panel chaired by former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, has declared America's "war on drugs" a failure with "devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world." In a report released in early June, the commission recommended "far reaching changes including . . . decriminalization and experiments in legal regulation."

Not surprisingly, the report has led to increased calls for the legalization of drugs as a panacea to end the violence and criminal-justice costs of current U.S. drug policies. Just last week, Reps. Barney Frank (D., Mass.) and Ron Paul (R., Texas) introduced a bill in Congress to remove marijuana from the list of federally controlled substances, leaving it up to the states to decide if they want to legalize it.

But legalization is no panacea. Without question, abuse and addiction involving all substances (tobacco, alcohol, illegal and controlled prescription drugs) is the nation's top health-care and criminal-justice problem, filling our hospitals and crowding our courts and prisons. But making illegal drugs more readily available is hardly the answer.

Legalization will only make harmful substances cheaper, easier to obtain, and more socially acceptable to use. The U.S. has some 60 million smokers, 20 million alcoholics and alcohol abusers, and 21.2 million illicit drug users (over seven million of whom are addicts). If illegal drugs were easier to obtain, this latter figure would rise sharply. Moreover, more readily available drugs will increase criminal activity. Most violent crimes, such as murder, assault and rape, occur when the perpetrator is either on drugs or drunk, and a high percentage of property crime involves people seeking money to buy drugs and alcohol.

Approximately 30% of our federal and state health-care spending is attributable to the use and abuse of addictive substances including tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA) estimates the total financial cost to taxpayers to be $500 billion annually. The human misery is incalculable. Increased use of illegal drugs will increase these costs and this misery.

A Medicaid patient with drug and alcohol problems costs $5,000 to $15,000 a year more in health-care costs than one without such problems. Most Medicaid hospital patients readmitted within 30 days are those with drug and alcohol problems. Do states, crushed financially by Medicaid costs, want to increase the number of Medicaid patients abusing and addicted to drugs and alcohol?
The notion that taxing sales of marijuana and drugs like cocaine and heroin will provide a windfall for our public coffers is also illusory. For every $1 of taxes collected from the sale of tobacco and alcohol, we incur $9 in state and federal health-care, criminal justice and social-service costs. These costs will skyrocket if legalization becomes the norm, draining our public coffers at an even more alarming rate.

Legalization in other countries has had disastrous results. In the 1990s, Switzerland experimented with what became known as Needle Park, a section of Zurich where addicts could buy and inject heroin without police interference. Policy makers saw it as a way to restrict a few hundred legal heroin users to a small area. It soon morphed into a grotesque tourist attraction of 20,000 addicts that had to be closed before it infected the entire city.

In the Netherlands, where marijuana can be bought in "coffee shops," adolescent use, citizen anger and international irritation have soared. Responding to the outcry from its own citizens and from other countries, the Dutch government has reduced the number of marijuana shops, limited the amount that can be purchased, and raised the age of legal buyers to 18 from 16. This May, the Dutch government also announced that it will prohibit tourists from purchasing marijuana at coffee shops by the end of this year (in part, it said, to curb criminality and drug trafficking).

Here in the U.S., facing an onslaught of angry citizens whose neighborhoods were overrun with marijuana users, the Los Angeles City Council last year closed 437 of the thousand or more "medical marijuana" shops that opened after California's medical-marijuana law passed in 1996.

Sweden offers an example of a successful restrictive drug policy. Faced with rising drug use in the 1990s, the government tightened drug control, stepped up police action, mounted a national action plan, and created a national drug coordinator. The result: Drug use is a third of the European average.

We strongly support greater emphasis on prevention and public-health initiatives to reduce drug use, especially among children and teens. This is a war that has to be fought on all fronts, from prevention and treatment to law enforcement and interdiction. But legalization, a policy certain to increase illegal drug availability and use among our nation's children, hardly qualifies as sound prevention. The facts are indisputable: 20 years of CASA research shows that a child who reaches 21 without using illegal drugs is virtually certain never to do so.

Sadly, we've shown little capacity to keep our two legal drugs, tobacco and alcohol, out of the hands of children and teens. There is little reason to believe that we can legalize drugs like marijuana, cocaine and heroin only for adults and keep them away from our children and teenagers.

At the end of the day, we must remember one thing: Drugs are not dangerous because they are illegal; they are illegal because they are dangerous.

Mr. Califano is the founder and chairman of The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse. Mr. Bennett was secretary of education during the Reagan administration, and the first director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy during the George H.W. Bush administration.
Poverty

Exploring America’s Poverty Assessment
by Here's Life Inner City on Monday, October 4, 2010 at 9:28am

The percentage of Americans living in poverty in 2009 rose to 14.3%, up from 13.2% in 2008. This is the highest rate since 1994. This means that a total of 43.6 million (1 in 7) Americans were below the poverty line (the poverty line is drawn at $22,050 per year, or $1,838 per month).

This disturbing increase in the past year is certainly indicative of the increasingly dire economic situation and the effects of the downturn on American families. But, aside from shedding light on the effects of economic distress, the recently published statistics have placed a spotlight on the potential inadequacy of the criteria used by the government to develop these numbers.

According to critics on both sides of the political isle, there are many problems with the way the poverty rate is compiled. The poverty threshold was originally developed in the 1960s based on the assumption that families spent one-third of their income on food. The rate also takes into consideration family size and age of family members. Five decades after its inception, changes in spending patterns are not reflected in the rating.

Today, families spend an average of 12% on food, while the cost of housing takes up a much larger portion of income. In 2006, half of renters and a third of homeowners spent at least 30% of income on housing, and 25% of renters and 14% of owners spent half of their income on housing (NY Times).

The current cost of living metric does not factor in these proportions and leaves out many substantial costs such as medical, child care, education and transportation. Additionally, it doesn’t factor in non-cash government assistance such as food stamps, housing subsidies and low-income tax credits. Income taxes are not factored into a household’s spending power, as poverty is calculated based on pre-tax annual income.

Interestingly, geographically-based variations in cost of living are not considered either. Critics claim that this may lead to increasing underestimation in urban areas with above average costs of living. Additionally, the Census does not calculate a person’s assets and liabilities. This means that home equity and savings are not considered, nor are the increasingly burdensome debts many Americans hold. Steven Crawford and Shawn Fremstad of Reuters summarize this point:

“As Nobel laureates Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, along with economist Jean-Paul Fitoussi, write in their new book Mis-measuring Our Lives, “Income and consumption are crucial for assessing living standards, but in the end they can only be gauged in conjunction with information on wealth.” This point is just as relevant to poverty measurement as it is to other measures of living standards.
Beginning next year the Census will publish figures that take into account the costs of medical care, transportation and child care as well tax credits in supplemental data (however, the official poverty rate will not change).

Another area of contention comes into play when discussing millions of 25-34 year olds who are also left out of the official count. As the New York Times reports, though 40% of the 5.5 million in this age group who live at home fall below the poverty line of less than $11,121 per year for a single person, they are not included in the official numbers of Americans in poverty. Why, you ask? Because these individuals live at home or with family members.

While some believe that the American government undercounts the actual poverty rate, others feel that the rate is higher than it should be. These individuals believe that people who are not truly poor are often included, because public programs like food stamps, government insurance and other “in kind” benefits are not factored into the poverty level. Some also claim that the Consumer Price Index used to calculate cost of living does not factor in the low prices at many big-box stores.

There are also concerns that the indicators we use to look at poverty overlook the long-term improvements in living standards since the 1960s. For example, in 1960 only 12% of the population had air conditioning, and only 8% of Americans had completed four years of college.

While there is surely debate, what everyone seems to agree on is that the current measures of poverty in America are flawed. Perhaps more comprehensive data being collected for next year’s supplemental poverty measure will be the first step in developing a more accurate standard for assessing American poverty. What do you think?

Here’s Life Inner City does not endorse the opinions presented in the documents, web sites, etc. we link to, nor do we endorse the organizations to whom we may refer/link to. All material is presented on this blog for the purposes of education and igniting discussion.

The Problem of Persistent Poverty
by Heres Life Inner City on Monday, August 2, 2010 at 6:57am

Last week we shared that 2,692 children are born into poverty in America every day, and these children often face heightened risks of criminal behavior in the future. This notion is corroborated by a recent Urban Institute study.

The U.S. Catholic’s News Service published an article covering the study on Thursday, highlighting some of the key findings and statistics. The Urban Institute found that 49 percent of children born into poverty will remain poor for half or more of their lives. Financial instability throughout childhood can lead to the same issues in adulthood, according to the article.

The study then applies that statistic demographically, claiming that 31 percent of white children and 69 percent of black children born poor will remain poor for a significant amount of time. Overall, 37 percent of our nation’s children will face poverty at least once.
Additionally, the U.S. Catholic article offers a solution for these at-risk children — the percentage can be reduced by intervening to help single moms, the article said. The author spoke with Lisa Sheehan, the director of Maryland’s St. Ann’s Infant and Maternity Home. According to Sheehan:

“We try to have the girls see that there is a bigger world out there… There is a cycle which starts with these teen mothers coming from unstable backgrounds and then mothering children who are then raised in the same situation.”

The home seeks to encourage the women to complete a high school or college education or to obtain a job to break out of the cycle. This is done in hopes that these women will find a better life for themselves and their children.

At Here’s Life Inner City, we want to offer wholistic help to families in poverty – ministering to the body, mind and spirit. We have both youth and adult development programs to help children and families find God’s love and hope no matter what circumstances they find themselves in.

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Compassion for the Poor is Meaningless Unless it’s also Effective
Published on June 1, 2011 by Jennifer Marshall

‘Budgets are moral documents.” So religious voices, rightly, have reminded us in recent months.

Now, Catholic and Protestant leaders have launched an initiative called “Circle of Protection” to make federal antipoverty spending untouchable in the ongoing conversation about how to save future generations of Americans from crushing debt.
“As Christians, we believe the moral measure of the debate is how the most poor and vulnerable people fare,” argues a statement on Circle of Protection’s website. “Funding focused on reducing poverty should not be cut.”

Protecting the status quo, however, isn’t in the best interest of the poor. Americans spend a trillion dollars a year on more than 70 federal antipoverty programs, double what we spent in the late 1990s. Meanwhile the poverty rate has remained largely unchanged since 1970, and intergenerational dependence on government welfare is common.

The measure of our compassion for the poor should not be how much we spend on federal antipoverty programs. Compassion must be effective.

We ought to define success by how many escape dependence on welfare to pursue their full potential as human beings. To measure our commitment to the poor by the number of dollars spent on antipoverty programs is to diminish human dignity.

Why should we flatten poverty to a merely material problem? Why should we delegate our personal responsibility for the poor to impersonal government programs?

In reality, we know that poverty in America goes far deeper than lack of material resources. Research shows poverty is linked strongly to the absence of a father in the home.

Single mothers head more than 70 percent of the nation’s poor households with children. The poverty rate for these households would drop by roughly two-thirds if the mother married the father. Tackling this kind of poverty is much more complicated than simply designating yet more federal tax dollars.

Budgets are indeed moral documents. But they are morally complex documents. As in so many areas of life, more than one principle is at stake. In solving the budget crisis, we need to account for serving the poor. Yet we also have to account for our overall stewardship of resources, commitment to the next generation, protection of national security, and respect for the proper roles of family, civil society and various levels of government.

These and other principles were highlighted in an exchange between Rep. Paul Ryan, chairman of the House Budget Committee and chief architect of a spending plan to salvage our fiscal future, and Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Protectors of the status quo, including some Catholic leaders, have targeted Ryan, himself a professing Catholic. In an April letter to Dolan, the Wisconsin congressman explained that his intention in the budget resolution was to better serve all Americans, especially the needy.

“Nothing but hardship and pain can result from putting off the issue of the coming debt crisis, as many who unreasonably oppose this budget seem willing to do,” Ryan wrote. “Those who represent the people, including myself, have a moral obligation, implicit in the Church’s social teaching, to address difficult basic problems before they explode into social crisis.”
If the nation’s leaders do not solve the budget crisis, Ryan wrote, the poor and vulnerable would be the hardest hit.

Dolan thanked Ryan for his attention to the values in Catholic teaching: fiscal responsibility; the role of the family; human dignity; concern for the poor and vulnerable; and “subsidiarity” — the idea that higher levels of authority should respect those closer to the situation to exercise proper care.

As to how these principles should be implemented, “people of good will might offer and emphasize various policy proposals,” Dolan acknowledged. “The principles of Catholic social teaching contain truths that need to be applied.”

Over the last half century, America has relied on one application of the poverty-fighting principle: redistributing resources through the welfare state to overcome material hardship. This may have raised the material standard of living for the poor, but it hasn’t raised the standard of true human flourishing.

And that approach has put us on an unsustainable path of runaway spending, leaving leaders such as Ryan with a serious stewardship challenge. It’s time for a new approach to serve the needy.

The good news? Americans can reconcile these multiple moral concerns in the budget debate, as shown by Ryan’s plan and others — including The Heritage Foundation’s “Saving the American Dream” proposal.

Getting serious about our moral responsibility to future generations should make us more earnest about better serving the poor. Let’s secure the safety net for those truly in need, and make sure it doesn’t entangle people in government dependence.

Jennifer A. Marshall is director of the DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at The Heritage Foundation.
First appeared in The News Tribune

Marriage Shows the Way Out of Poverty
Published on November 12, 2010 by Jennifer Marshall

For years, the slogan “Stay in School” has communicated an anti-poverty message to young people. Now it’s time for an even more important poverty-fighting theme: “Get Married.” Every student knows that dropping out of high school will hurt her chances of succeeding in life. Major media, public education campaigns and government programs have told her so.

But does she know that having a baby outside marriage will put her and her child at serious risk of living in poverty? Last year, poverty in America grew more than ever before in the 51 years that the U.S. government has tracked the poor, the Census Bureau reported Sept. 16. The total climbed by 3 million to 44 million — or one in seven Americans.
The search is on for solutions. Regrettably, too little of the conversation is turning to the principal cause of child poverty: the collapse of marriage.

Waiting until marriage to have children is the second of three “golden rules” for avoiding poverty that researchers identified over the years: (1) graduate from high school; (2) marry before having children; and (3) get a job.

Actually, being married is even more significant than graduating from high school for avoiding poverty. Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at The Heritage Foundation, shows this in a new paper, “Marriage: America’s No. 1 Weapon Against Child Poverty.” By contrast, typical responses to poverty call for more spending on government programs. Far from helping poor Americans escape dependency, however, massive increases in welfare spending over the past four decades have entrenched poverty across generations.

Proponents of a government solution also cite lack of quality education and decent-paying jobs. True, inner-city schools often are appallingly sub-par, but ever-increasing spending hasn’t significantly improved educational quality and opportunity for those who need it most.

And although the bad news on poverty in part reflects increased joblessness during the recession, the economy doesn’t explain the undercurrents trapping millions in persistent poverty. Three of every four Americans defined as poor — 35 million of the 44 million total — are poor during economic booms, Rector notes.

Government anti-poverty programs fail because such persistent poverty is not primarily material. It’s about relationships and behavior. Even in good times, fatherlessness and lack of work trap the underclass.

Unwed childbearing has risen from 6.3 percent of all births in 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty, to more than 40 percent today. As Rector shows, these single-parent families with children are six times more likely to be poor than are married couples with kids. Put differently, marriage lowers the probability of child poverty by 82 percent.

So why have we ignored the obvious? After all, marriage has been the standard in every human society.

“Marriage is the way societies provide a map of life and norms about behavior,” researcher Kay Hymowitz says.

Role models and explicit messages create norms in society. That’s why it’s troubling to see the emergence of a “pattern of family non-formation,” as scholar Heather MacDonald describes it.

Hymowitz and MacDonald, both affiliated with the Manhattan Institute, were among leaders invited by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights to participate in a conference recently in Washington, by addressing the topic of “The Role of Family Structure in Perpetuating Racial and Ethnic Disparities.” In minority communities, the collapse of marriage has become especially
Acute. More than half of Hispanic children are born to single mothers, as are seven out of 10 black children.

Among Hispanics, families headed by unmarried parents are three times more likely to be poor. For blacks, these families are five times more likely to be poor. Meanwhile, the growing trend is “multi-partner fertility”—an antiseptic term to describe the relational mess of women having children by more than one man.

The Commission on Civil Rights deserves credit for tackling a subject too long considered off-limits. With lives at stake, America cannot afford to ignore these plain facts any longer.

How can we restore a cultural consensus on marriage and reduce child poverty? Rector suggests seven ideas. Among them: Policymakers should reduce anti-marriage penalties in welfare programs. Welfare offices and federally funded birth control clinics should provide facts about the value of marriage in fighting poverty.

And, in low-income neighborhoods and schools with a high proportion of at-risk youth, public education campaigns should teach the benefits of marriage.

If we’re asking fathers not to walk away from their children, Americans must not walk away from the difficult task of restoring a culture of marriage.

Jennifer A. Marshall is director of the DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at The Heritage Foundation. First appeared in the Union Leader.
Spread of Radical Islam

MANIFESTO: Together facing the new totalitarianism

After having overcome fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism, the world now faces a new totalitarian global threat: Islamism.

We, writers, journalists, intellectuals, call for resistance to religious totalitarianism and for the promotion of freedom, equal opportunity and secular values for all.

The recent events, which occurred after the publication of drawings of Muhammed in European newspapers, have revealed the necessity of the struggle for these universal values. This struggle will not be won by arms, but in the ideological field. It is not a clash of civilisations nor an antagonism of West and East that we are witnessing, but a global struggle that confronts democrats and theocrats.

Like all totalitarianisms, Islamism is nurtured by fears and frustrations. The hate preachers bet on these feelings in order to form battalions destined to impose a liberticidal and unegalitarian world. But we clearly and firmly state: nothing, not even despair, justifies the choice of obscurantism, totalitarianism and hatred. Islamism is a reactionary ideology which kills equality, freedom and secularism wherever it is present. Its success can only lead to a world of domination: man’s domination of woman, the Islamists’ domination of all the others. To counter this, we must assure universal rights to oppressed or discriminated people.

We reject cultural relativism, which consists in accepting that men and women of Muslim culture should be deprived of the right to equality, freedom and secular values in the name of respect for cultures and traditions. We refuse to renounce our critical spirit out of fear of being accused of “Islamophobia”, an unfortunate concept which confuses criticism of Islam as a religion with stigmatisation of its believers.

We plead for the universality of freedom of expression, so that a critical spirit may be exercised on all continents, against all abuses and all dogmas.

We appeal to democrats and free spirits of all countries that our century should be one of Enlightenment, not of obscurantism.

12 signatures

Ayaan Hirsi Ali  Chahla Chafiq  Caroline Fourest  Bernard-Henri Lévy
Irshad Manji  Mehdi Mozaffari  Maryam Namazie  Taslima Nasreen
Salman Rushdie  Antoine Sfeir  Philippe Val  Ibn Warraq
The Shariah Threat
by Kathy Jessup

A judge refuses a protection order for a woman raped by her Muslim husband, ruling the man’s abuse is allowed under Shariah law.

A cartoonist is in hiding after a tongue-in-cheek “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day” promotion earned her a fatwa death order for violating a Shariah edict banning drawing the Muslim prophet’s image.

A Shariah-compliant investment fund is camouflaged as a charity and funnels more than $12 million to finance Hamas suicide bombers.

Not exactly shocking in some Muslim countries where strict adherence to centuries-old rules, based on Islamic teachings, shines a spotlight on stonings and beheadings.

But these occurred recently in the United States.

Now “honor killings,” publicly funded accommodations for Islamic prayer and billions in Wall Street investments linked to potentially dangerous terror activities are raising political and constitutional questions in America.

Can or should Shariah law co-exist with the Judeo-Christian foundations of U.S. jurisprudence and the Constitution? Will imposition of Islamic-based edicts, enabled by so-called religious tolerance and political correctness, open the door to radical forms of the religion in Western democracies?

A growing number of states are drafting constitutional amendments to prohibit state judges from applying Islamic or international law in deciding cases. But even the 70 percent of voters who passed Oklahoma’s measure in November hasn’t settled the issue for Sooners.

When the director of the Oklahoma chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) challenged the amendment in court, a federal judge granted a preliminary injunction, ruling the amendment could be interpreted to single out Shariah law and discredit Islam, violating the First Amendment.

WHAT IS SHARIAH LAW?

Shariah (meaning “path” in Arabic) codifies the words, practices and teaching of Islam’s Prophet Mohammed, serving as a guide/law for everything from Muslims’ family and religious practices to financial transactions.

Several hundred years after the death of Mohammed, the prophet’s model living practices were assembled into the hadith, initially melding Islam and local customs. Various hadiths eventually developed into four schools of Sunni thought and one that guides Shiites. Each differs in the degree they draw from the Koran, Islamic thought and community practices.
Shariah identifies five hadd offenses, serious charges resolved by an Islamic judge. They are unlawful sexual intercourse (adultery or sex outside marriage), falsely accusing unlawful sexual intercourse, consuming wine (sometimes all alcohol), theft and highway robbery.

Punishments ordered for hadd crimes by conservative Shariah schools—stonings, executions, amputations and beatings—shock Western sensibilities. However, Ali Mazrui, of the Institute for Global Cultural Studies, says less severe penalties are more typically imposed.

Still, Islam has not uniformly banned so-called “honor killings,” genital mutilation, pre-teen marriages, polygamy, and divorce and inheritance rules that undercut the standing of women. Testimony from non-Muslims and even Muslim women is given less weight than that of Muslim men.

The size of a country’s Islamic population and its level of religious orthodoxy typically influence the degree to which Shariah law is inculcated in national legal codes.

Conservative Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Yemen and Iran declare Islam the official religion and Shariah the source of law. In more secular Muslim countries where Islamists are the minority, Shariah has gradually gained legal legitimacy through local customs. Other countries, including Turkey and Azerbaijan, enforce separation of state and religion, sometimes resulting in political clashes.

Some countries operate a dual system where Shariah is applied to family law, while secular statutes govern criminal cases. For example, Britain introduced Shariah tribunals in 2008 that apply Islamic law to inheritance, marriage and divorce disputes where the parties all agree to the jurisdiction.

SHARIAH AND THE UNITED STATES

In 2009, Dalia Mogahed, an Obama administration adviser on Muslim affairs, told a British television audience that the West misunderstands Shariah law, calling its perceptions of Islamic tenants “oversimplified.”

But deaths, abuse and threats involving Muslim women in the United States and Canada have put a Western face on facets of Shariah that had been cloaked in long-standing Middle East practices.

Pakistani-born Muzzammil Hassan was convicted in February for beheading his wife inside the Buffalo, N.Y., television studio the couple had created to promote Islamic cultural understanding. Jurors didn’t buy Hassan’s story that he suffered spousal abuse and killed his wife in self-defense. Hassan had been served with divorce papers the week before, and his children testified he had been the abuser in the couple’s relationship.

In 2008, a New Jersey judge ruled Shariah permitted a Moroccan man to rape his Muslim wife, despite state law making it a crime. The New Jersey Appeals Court overturned that decision and
remanded the case, finally allowing the woman to get a restraining order against her husband while she sought a divorce. The appeals court decision said neither Shariah law, giving a husband physical authority over his wife, nor Muslim beliefs on the role of women provided the man an exemption from criminal intent under U.S. statutes.

“[T]he [trial] judge determined to except defendant from the operation of the State’s statutes as a result of his religious beliefs,” the appeals judges wrote. “In doing so, the judge was mistaken.”

Irfan Aleem went to a Pakistani embassy and performed talaq in 2007, exercising Shariah provisions that he said allowed him to divorce his wife Farah by proclaiming his intention three times. Although married several decades earlier in Pakistan, the couple had lived in Maryland for 20 years. Irfan said Shariah allowed Farah no claim on a lucrative pension he would receive from his job with the World Bank.

Maryland judges didn’t agree, ruling the Shariah practices were “contrary to public policy of this state.” The decision set aside the divorce Irfan had quickly proclaimed and afforded Farah a right to claim marital property in a Maryland divorce.

The deaths of at least 10 women in the United States and Canada have been linked to so-called Islamic “honor killings” in the last seven years.

In 2004, a 14-year-old girl who had been raped in Newfoundland was strangled by her father and brother to “restore the family honor.” A 20-year-old daughter of Afghan parents was shot dead in 2006, allegedly because she had moved in with her fiancé before their wedding. The killer was her brother.

In Ontario, a 16-year-old was stabbed to death in 2007 by her father while her mother held her down. The teenager had reportedly fought with her parents over wearing a hijab, a Muslim head covering. In another Canadian case, three teenage girls were drowned in their father’s car in 2009. Also found dead was their father’s first wife, who relatives say he never divorced. The father, his current wife and the girls’ 18-year-old brother were all charged with first-degree murder. Relatives told the media the killings were precipitated by one daughter’s dating decisions.

A Muslim father in Texas shot his two teenage daughters, Amina and Sarah Said, to death in January 2008. The murders allegedly were prompted by the girls having “unsanctioned boyfriends.” Later that year, a Pakistani man beat his 25-year-old daughter to death in Atlanta, reportedly because she opposed her arranged marriage.

Rifqa Bary, an Ohio teenager, made headlines in 2009 when she fled to Florida and foster care, saying she feared she would be the victim of a Muslim “honor killing” for her decision to convert to Christianity. She continued her religious choice a year later when she turned 18.

In a situation much like the 2008 Muslim assassination order against Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, Seattle cartoonist Molly Norris went into hiding at the FBI’s recommendation last spring after her “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day” hit Facebook. A Seattle newspaper said
Norris is “essentially wiping away her identity” in reaction to a fatwa urging her killing issued by Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical Muslim cleric connected to the Fort Hood killings, the attempted Christmas Day airline bombing over Detroit and the failed Times Square bombing.

And in February, radical Muslims announced plans to take their demand for American Shariah to the White House, calling for thousands of Islamists to rally on Pennsylvania Avenue March 3. But just hours before the rally was scheduled to begin, its organizer, British Muslim cleric Anjem Choudary, called it off, alleging the cause had been “distorted by the media.”

Choudary said the demonstration was merely “postponed until we gather even more Muslims;” no new rally date was announced.

In an online video statement, Choudary said Muslims are obligated to implement Shariah law “immediately, wherever we are in the world,” and he said America can reverse “poverty, child abuse, rape, robberies, theft, crime and anarchy-type scenarios” only after the United States embraces the Islamic code for living. In the meantime, Choudary predicted “the dollar will soon lose its status.”

“We believe the whole of the world must be under Shariah,” Choudary said. “America is not blessed by God. The American dream has become a nightmare.”

Other elements of America’s Shariah debate are more nuanced. Some, like CBSNews.com’s political reporter Brian Montopoli, believe Shariah fears are “overblown at best,” and Jeffry Goldberg, The Atlantic’s national correspondent, said, “A Martian takeover of New Jersey is more likely than the imposition of a caliphate, or of Muslim law, on America.”

Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for CAIR, says the enjoined Oklahoma amendment is “an indication of growing anti-Muslim sentiment.” Hooper said CAIR has “not found any conflict between what a Muslim needs to do to practice their faith and the Constitution or any other American laws. We are, in fact, relying on the Constitution as our last line of defense.”

But conservative Jewish blogger Pamela Geller delivers an aggressive “creeping Shariah” warning: “It’s a drip, drip, drip, drip, drip. [In] the mosqueing of the workplace where you’re imposing prayer times on union contracts, non-Muslim workers have to lengthen their day. It’s wrong.”

Consider the political reaction Americans would have seen if these Muslim accommodations had instead been made for Christians:

- The Christian Science Monitor reported a California elementary school made accommodations when it absorbed Muslim students from a shuttered charter school, including revising its instructional schedule to add a 15-minute “recess” after lunch to allow Muslim students to pray in a separate room. The school district’s attorney defended it, saying “the Muslim faith requires specificity of prayer obligations … that most other religions do not,” a claim questioned by even some Muslims. Pork also was removed from school-lunch menus, according to media reports.
• In Massachusetts, where a firehouse was ordered to take down a “Merry Christmas”
greeting, public middle school students took a “cultural diversity” field trip to a local
mosque, where the boys participated in Islamic prayers while girls were excluded.

These public school incidents are not isolated instances.

“Starting about two years ago, school attorneys have been asking more and more
questions about accommodations for Muslim students,” said Lisa Soronen, senior staff
attorney for the National School Boards Association.

• Four Christian evangelists attending a July Muslim cultural festival in Dearborn, Mich.,
were arrested for “disorderly conduct to ensure they did not provoke violence from others
attending,” according to a Detroit media report. The four said they were attempting to
engage in a dialogue about faith. Shariah law prohibits Christians from engaging
Muslims about Christianity.

• The University of Michigan-Dearborn, where about 10 percent of students are Muslim,
spent $25,000 to install two foot-washing stations on campus to accommodate ablutions
before Islamic daily prayers. The university said it is one of about 18 U.S. higher
education institutions providing the unusual facilities, calling its decision “a reflection of
our values of respect, tolerance, and safe accommodation of student needs.”

The Michigan Civil Liberties Union mounted no challenge, saying the foot baths have “no
[religious] symbolic value.”

“They’re in a regular restroom and could be just as useful to a janitor filling up buckets, or
someone coming off the basketball court as to Muslim students,” said Kary Moss, MCLU
director.

• Thomas More Law Center, a conservative, public-interest law firm headquartered in
Michigan, is challenging the constitutionality of federal bailout money to investment firm
AIG, claiming AIG’s involvement in Shariah-compliant financing violated the First
Amendment’s Establishment Clause. A federal district judge in Michigan ruled that
despite the fact the bailout gave the federal government an 80 percent ownership in AIG,
there was no evidence the government’s money had funded “religious indoctrination.”
And if there were evidence, the court said the $153 million of federal bailout money used
to support Shariah compliance was an insignificant portion of the total $47.5 billion the
government provided AIG.

That ruling is being appealed.

THE POWER OF MONEY

Conservative author Dick Morris says airplanes may have taken down the Twin Towers, but he
predicts Shariah-compliant investing of billions in Western financial markets has the potential to
“hijack our institutions, our social policies and ultimately our values in the name of Islamic rule.”

Huge oil profits and unease with their own Middle Eastern financial institutions brought Islamic investors to Wall Street in the 1990s in search of special funds that would meet Shariah restrictions. But it was complicated turf for bankers who knew investing but not Shariah.

Enter Sheikh Muhammad Taqi Usmani, a former Pakistani Shariah Appellate Court justice, hired by Dow Jones in 1999 to help establish a process that could attract trillions of investment dollars, generating handsome commissions and agency earnings.

In just a decade, most major U.S. and European investment firms have retained Shariah advisors and paid them millions. Those advisors assure Muslim investors their gains are not connected to interest charges, pork farming, alcohol, pornography or Western defense industries—all activities prohibited by Shariah.

But are those adviser fees—paid to highly placed Muslims—or the billions of dollars in “donations” financial institutions must contribute to specified Islamic “charities” in exchange for an investment’s Shariah stamp of approval actually bankrolling deadly extremist activities? Morris followed the money in his 2009 book “Catastrophe,” reporting that the U.S. government shut down at least three of the largest charities for financing terrorism.

In a 2008 article titled “Jihad Comes to Wall Street,” Alex Alexiev, vice president for research at the Center for Security Policy, called Shariah-compliant investing “an essential part of radical Islam’s efforts to insinuate itself into Western societies in order to destroy them from within.”

It’s also been a bumpy road for some of those hired consultants. Dow Jones severed ties with Usmani after the Center for Security Policy detailed some of Usmani’s writings, including one that urged Muslims living in the West to “conduct violent Jihad against the infidels at every opportunity.”

The CSP identified another paid Shariah investment advisor, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

According to Morris, Shariah-compliant funds must donate a small percentage of annual earnings to Islamic charities designated by the advisory boards. Those amounts are not inconsequential. For example, a typical 2.5 percent contribution can amount to billions of dollars.

And if a Shariah-compliant fund is found to have earnings from an outlawed investment activity, the advisors can “purify” those gains by donating more to the approved charities. Morris calls some of the charities “thinly veiled fronts for terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah.”

Is the lure of trillions of dollars from Muslim portfolios strong enough to open civil law to expanding Shariah influences?
Consider Great Britain where, just a few years ago, then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown said he wanted London to become the world’s Islamic-finance capital. Britain’s most senior judge subsequently proclaimed the country’s Muslims can use “Islamic legal principles” as long as the punishments and divorce rulings comply with English law.

According to Morris, that’s already made U.K. Muslims eligible for extra benefits if they have more than one wife, even though polygamy—allowed under Shariah law—is illegal in Britain.

**TOLERANCE: AN ASSET OR A WEDGE?**

Janet Levy, a prolific writer on Islam and national security, asks why Islam “is sacred, supreme and beyond reproach” in the United States, while other religions are “freely criticized, lampooned in cartoons and denigrated in artwork?” She concludes America is already embracing de facto Shariah law.

“Our uniquely American virtues of tolerance and freedom have worked against us to produce intolerance and oppression,” Levy says. “This has led to the stealthy introduction of Shariah law and a climate in which criticisms of Mohammed and Islam are no longer possible without serious repercussions.”

Are political correctness and moves to cool the osmosis of the American melting pot fundamentally changing us? Is the arena of ideas—where Americans have historically tested competing beliefs—being shut down so as not to offend?

Recall 1960 when Americans considered it fair game to question Democrat John F. Kennedy about whether he would look first to his Catholicism or to the Constitution in making presidential decisions. Former Massachusetts Republican Gov. Mitt Romney’s Mormon faith has come under scrutiny during his political campaigns, sans shouts of profiling.

European nations that have led the West’s embrace of Shariah law have recently begun to retreat from their policies of “multiculturalism,” suggesting failure to maintain a single national identity has actually cultivated Islamic extremism in countries like Britain.

In a February speech at the Munich Security Conference, British Prime Minister David Cameron argued European “multiculturalism has been a failure” that’s fostered Islamic extremism, adding that the West has been “cautious, frankly even fearful” of standing up to it.

“We have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values,” Cameron said. “This hands-off tolerance has only served to reinforce the sense that not enough is shared. … What we see—and what we see in so many European countries—is a process of radicalization.”

Something also gets jumbled in the translation when East/West cultures talk about democracy and its relationship with religion.
In 2008 polling conducted by the University of Maryland’s Program on International Policy Attitudes, 82 percent of Egyptians said a democratic political system should govern their nation. At the same time, 73 percent said they supported stronger application of Islamic law in Egypt.

Of those, 68 percent said Egypt’s government should apply Shariah law to regulate moral behavior; 64 percent supported using traditional punishments like stoning for adulterers; 62 percent want the government to police women’s dress; and 59 percent said Shariah rules should be used to provide for Egypt’s poor.

So what does this all mean for Shariah in America?

The U.S. Constitution does not assign superiority to a particular religion. However, the idea that liberty is man’s God-given—not government-granted—right is a Judeo-Christian principle. America is exceptional because the people—regardless of how or whether they embrace God—allow government limited power.

America does not vest all authority in a theocratic government, where law and even daily life is dictated by a single religious code. But that does not mean the United States is Islamophobic, says New Jersey blogger George Berkin.

“[S]upporting the [Oklahoma amendment] does not make one anti-Islamic. But not being anti-Islamic does not mean that we should not insist that American legal principles—not foreign ones—apply here.”

Kathy Jessup is an award-winning, veteran journalist in Michigan whose writing career has focused on government, politics and criminal justice.
The 'Five Pillars' of Islam are the foundation of Muslim life:

- **Faith or belief in the Oneness of God and the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad;**

  The testimony of faith is saying with conviction, “La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadur rasoolu Allah.” This saying means “There is no true god (deity) but God (Allah), and Muhammad is the Messenger (Prophet) of God.” The first part, “There is no true god but God,” means that none has the right to be worshipped but God alone, and that God has neither partner nor son. This testimony of faith is called the Shahada, a simple formula which should be said with conviction in order to convert to Islam. The testimony of faith is the most important pillar of Islam.

- **Establishment of the daily prayers;**

  Muslims perform five prayers a day. Each prayer does not take more than a few minutes to perform. Prayer in Islam is a direct link between the worshipper and God. There are no intermediaries between God and the worshipper.

  In prayer, a person feels inner happiness, peace, and comfort, and that God is pleased with him or her. The Prophet Muhammad said: {Bilal, call (the people) to prayer, let us be comforted by it.} Bilal was one of Muhammad’s companions who was charged to call the people to prayers.

  Prayers are performed at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and night. A Muslim may pray almost anywhere, such as in fields, offices, factories, or universities.

- **Concern for and almsgiving to the needy;**

  All things belong to God, and wealth is therefore held by human beings in trust. The original meaning of the word zakat is both ‘purification’ and ‘growth.’ Giving zakat means ‘giving a specified percentage on certain properties to certain classes of needy people.’ The percentage which is due on gold, silver, and cash funds that have reached the amount of about 85 grams of gold and held in possession for one lunar year is two and a half percent. Our possessions are purified by setting aside a small portion for those in need, and, like the pruning of plants, this cutting back balances and encourages new growth.

  A person may also give as much as he or she pleases as voluntary alms or charity.

- **Self-purification through fasting; and**

  Every year in the month of Ramadan, all Muslims fast from dawn until sundown, abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations.
Although the fast is beneficial to health, it is regarded principally as a method of spiritual self-purification. By cutting oneself off from worldly comforts, even for a short time, a fasting person gains true sympathy with those who go hungry, as well as growth in his or her spiritual life.

- **The pilgrimage to Makkah for those who are able.**

The annual pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Makkah is an obligation once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially able to perform it. About two million people go to Makkah each year from every corner of the globe. Although Makkah is always filled with visitors, the annual *Hajj* is performed in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. Male pilgrims wear special simple clothes which strip away distinctions of class and culture so that all stand equal before God.

The rites of the *Hajj* include circling the Kaaba seven times and going seven times between the hillocks of Safa and Marwa, as Hagar did during her search for water. Then the pilgrims stand together in Arafa and ask God for what they wish and for His forgiveness, in what is often thought of as a preview of the Day of Judgment.

The end of the *Hajj* is marked by a festival, *Eid Al-Adha*, which is celebrated with prayers. This, and *Eid al-Fitr*, a feast-day commemorating the end of Ramadan, are the two annual festivals of the Muslim calendar.
Deterioration of Marriage and the Family

'Mother,' 'Father' Changing to 'Parent One,' 'Parent Two' on Passport Applications

By Todd Starnes

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Read more: http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/01/07/passport-applications-soon-gender-neutral/#ixzz1ToypU9bN

The words "mother" and "father" will be removed from U.S. passport applications and replaced with gender neutral terminology, the State Department says.

"The words in the old form were 'mother' and 'father,'” said Brenda Sprague, deputy assistant Secretary of State for Passport Services. "They are now 'parent one' and 'parent two.'"

A statement on the State Department website noted: "These improvements are being made to provide a gender neutral description of a child’s parents and in recognition of different types of families.” The statement didn’t note if it was for child applications only.

The State Department said the new passport applications, not yet available to the public, will be available online soon.

Sprague said the decision to remove the traditional parenting names was not an act of political correctness.

"We find that with changes in medical science and reproductive technology that we are confronting situations now that we would not have anticipated 10 or 15 years ago,” she said.

Gay rights groups are applauding the decision.

"Changing the term mother and father to the more global term of parent allows many different types of families to be able to go and apply for a passport for their child without feeling like the government doesn’t recognize their family,” said Jennifer Chrisler, executive director of Family Equality Council.

Her organization lobbied the government for several years to remove the words from passport applications.

"Our government needs to recognize that the family structure is changing,” Chrisler said. "The best thing that we can do is support people who are raising kids in loving, stable families.”

But some conservative Christians are outraged over the decision.

"Only in the topsy-turvy world of left-wing political correctness could it be considered an ‘improvement’ for a birth-related document to provide less information about the circumstances of that birth,” Family Research Council president Tony Perkins wrote in a statement to Fox News Radio. "This is clearly designed to advance the causes of same-sex ‘marriage’ and homosexual parenting without statutory authority, and violates the spirit if not the letter of the Defense of Marriage Act.”

Robert Jeffress, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, agreed. "It’s part of an overall attempt at political correctness to diminish the distinction between men and women and to somehow suggest you don’t need both a father and a mother to raise a child successfully,” said Jeffress. "(This decision) was made to make homosexual couples feel more comfortable in rearing children.”

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Chrisler recounted the day she and her female partner tried to get her twin sons passports.

"Even though my partner was their legal mother, had adopted them after I gave birth to them, she still had to put her name in the father field, and that is both discriminatory and makes us feel like second-class citizens," she said.

Sprague said she would not use the word discriminatory to describe the old passport form.

"I would prefer to use the word imprecise," she said. "It just didn’t capture the reality of their situation. Clearly, we want to be sensitive to the feelings of other people, but we are also very conscious of our need to introduce the greatest degree of precision to the process."

Perkins, meanwhile, accused the State Department of disrespecting the law and called on Congress to "take their oversight rule very seriously and intervene in both these circumstances."

The new gender-neutral passport application will be rolled out in February.

New 'Non-Traditional' American Families

By Kate Rice

Gina Smith and Heidi Norton of Northampton, Mass., have two sons. Norton is their biological mother, and Smith adopted them.

They live in a community in which there are several gay- or lesbian-headed households, but when they travel, they meet families with no experience with gay families and sometimes encounter clumsy questions.

While they may not fit the mold of what many Americans consider a typical family, they are a contemporary American family. There is no single typical American family anymore.

"We're in the midst of a major change in the way families and marriage are organized," says Stephanie Coontz, a college professor and author of The Way We Never Were, American Families and the Nostalgia Trap and The Way We Really Are, Coming to Terms With America's Changing Families. "It's distressing, because all of the rules we grew up with no longer work and so we're having to learn new ways of thinking about families."

Smith and Norton, both 39, head a family that helps others rethink their ideas of what a family is. When they're asked about themselves and their sons, Avery, 7, and Quinn, 3, they assume that questions are well-intended and that the clumsiness simply means that the questioner doesn't have the vocabulary to deal with the situation.

"What's worked for us is stepping into the void and giving people some language to use," says Smith. "We would say things like, 'Avery is a very lucky boy who has two moms who love him,' so we just give them that language."

The 1950s Myth

Most children these days have buddies whose families are very different from their parents'. In fact, they quite possibly are growing up in such a family.

"Family is both a belief and a practice," she says.

When she asks her students at Oregon State University, where she is a professor of human development and family sciences, if they think their family will be a mom, a dad, and children, most raise their hands.

But practice is far different. When she asks if they come from a family like that, only a few put their hands up.

Americans have to deal with the great myth of the 1950s, an era in which 60 percent of families consisted of a breadwinning father and a stay-at-home mother. But this model was actually a 15-year-aberration, fueled by post-World War II prosperity and a GI bill of unprecedented generosity that funded the education of returning war veterans, according to Coontz, a professor of family and history at Evergreen State College, Olympia, Wash., and co-chairman of the Council on Contemporary Families (www.contemporaryfamilies.org) The council's mission is to publicize the way the family is changing and to cover the consequences and implications of those changes.

Coontz says that for most of history, families have been co-provider families, with husband, wife and often children, all working to provide for the family.

"The fact is that families have always been diverse, and they've always been in flux and we've always been worried about it. As far back as colonial days people were complaining that the new generation of families was not like the old one," she says.

No Single Model

The 21st century child-rearing family can take any number of forms.

There's the 1950s model, one that is shrinking in number. An exact count is hard to come up with, but experts believe it's probably under 25 percent. Statistics show that today the majority of couples both earn income.

Demographers estimate that only 50 percent of children will spend their entire childhood in a two-parent, married couple biological family, according to Coontz.

Increasingly common are blended families, couples with children from previous marriages as well as the current marriage. Then there are single parents, families with adopted children, gay families with adopted children or biological children, foster families, grandparents raising grandchildren, and so on.

Absent a single, cookie-cutter family model, the best definition of a healthy family is one that provides or performs certain core functions. These include basics such as food, shelter and economic support, according to Liz Gray, associate professor and family therapist in human development and family sciences at Oregon State University in Corvallis.

But a family does much more, providing love and affection, a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging. Families also provide a worldview or a spiritual belief that can help make sense of the world, as well as rules and boundaries for appropriate behavior and skills for dealing with the world.
More than a decade ago, Gray co-authored Nontraditional Families: A Guide For Parents (http://www.cyfernet.org/parent/nontradfam.html), which remains a highly useful piece for parents today. Looking back, Grey says she would never use the term "nontraditional," because today, those "nontraditional" families have become the norm.

Like any parents, Smith and Norton love to talk about how their family came to be, says Smith, and often handle curiosity by simply telling the story. Children had been part of each woman's life plan even before they met and fell in love 13 years ago, so it was only natural that they have children together. Smith says most people are accepting of their contemporary family.

"If you present yourself as comfortable with who you are as family, they'll take their cues from you," she says. She finds that the fact that she and Norton have such respect for themselves that others approach them and their sons with that same respect.

Tips: How to Deal

If you encounter a family that might once have been called nontraditional but aren't sure how to handle it, experts recommend first that you show respect no matter the others' family structure. Your children will closely follow your actions and their responses will mirror yours, as well.

Some more of the experts' recommendations are below.

Look at your own family, your brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors. Odds are, you'll see a variety of family structures. That will give you an idea of what your children are encountering in school, and give you a way to discuss the issues with them.

Draw maps of families and extended families to help children understand family structure. Talk about it. Let children draw their own maps or pictures of families, then listen to what they have to say about it.

Your child has a friend whose family structure is one you're uncomfortable with. What do you do? Deal with it as though you were moving to a new neighborhood, suggests David Tseng, executive director of Parents, Families and Friends of Gays (www.pflag.org) in Washington, D.C. Be polite, respectful and curious to learn about others in a healthy and constructive way. It's important to recognize that your unspoken response influences your children as much as your spoken one.

Sometimes, you may disapprove of the family structure of one of your children's classmates. Mark Merrill, president of Family First, a non-profit research and communications organization (www.familyfirst.net) headquartered in Tampa, Fla., defines a family as any relationship of marriage, blood or adoption — but he limits that to heterosexuals. At the same time, he recognizes the reality of gay families. His response: "We are supposed to love everybody." And love, in Merrill's book, is not an emotion that leaps unsummoned from the heart. It is a decision to treat others, even those whose lifestyles you don't accept, with kindness and thoughtfulness and serve them in ways that are best for them.

Make a concerted effort within your own extended network of work colleagues and of friends to focus less on those who are like you and more on the diversity. "You want to be clear and deliberate about letting your kids know that this is America, this is the diversity of it and not to make a big deal of it," says James Morris, former president of the
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (www.aamft.org) and assistant professor of marriage and family at Texas Tech University in Fredricksburg.

August 04, 2011

How to Be Happy Though Married: Advice from an Expert

At first glance, it seemed like strange advice from a man who has devoted his career to helping couples get together: Don't get married, he says.

Dr. Neil Warren, a Christian psychologist and founder of the online dating service, eHarmony, says he is shocked at new statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau. As he recently wrote in the Huffington Post, for the first time in America's history, “fewer than half of the households in the United States are married couples.” Is marriage becoming obsolete, like horse-drawn carriages and typewriters?

Not at all, according to Warren: Studies reveal that most people want to get married and stay married. They just can't seem to figure out how to go about it. This is why Warren recommends that of the 2 million couples who planned to get married this year, “several hundred thousand...should reconsider, postpone their weddings, or not get married” at all. Why? Because they simply aren't compatible.

Why are people having so much trouble finding the right person? Warren says it's because learning how to choose the right partner in life has been given short shrift in our culture. People often marry simply because they're attracted to each other. What they don't realize is that happy marriages are built on “highly informed and carefully reasoned choices,” along with commitment and hard work after the knot is tied, Warren says. He's right, of course. But there's another factor at work. Marriage itself has been redefined, at least in the minds of modern couples.

A generation or two ago, engaged couples, influenced by their Judeo-Christian heritage, viewed marriage as a relationship situated within a larger context. This context included their families, places of worship, and communities. Vows were taken seriously, and most couples -- understanding the importance of stable marriages for their children -- went into marriage with a strong commitment to staying wed for life.

But today that's all changed. While we're much freer to marry whom we choose, modern couples view marriage as a private affair, of no concern to anyone but the participants. Many brides and grooms go into marriage knowing they can easily get out when the attraction wears off or they find someone new. And without the bonds of religion, there is little to keep the couple together when the going gets tough, and it will get tough sooner or later.

Dr. Warren is right: Couples need to choose their spouses much more carefully if they hope to be happy. But they shouldn't stop there. Once they begin to think about weddings, they should turn to their churches for marriage classes. In particular, they should take a test called PREPARE, which helps them understand how compatible they really are. Some couples who take the test end up breaking their engagement -- rightly so, because PREPARE predicts with 90 percent accuracy which couples will stay happily married.

You and I need to make sure that we, our kids, and grandkids understand the true meaning of marriage, despite what our culture is say or teaching. Understanding what marriage is really all about is the best guarantee that they will marry well, and give them the best chance of living happily ever after.