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# Marriage on TV

MARY E. HESS

**W**hat do communities of faith need to know about marriage on TV? First, most representations of marriage on television emphasize it as a way to personal satisfaction and growth. If communities of faith are serious about expanding this understanding of marriage, we must see our efforts as forms of cultural intervention. The goal is not merely to replace “bad” images of marriage, but thoroughly to refashion the whole way in which marriage is perceived culturally. This new perception is needed both inside and outside the church.

Second, television invites our sympathetic identification with the emotional resonances of relationality, but rarely helps us see the patterns of practice that put television at the heart of contemporary relationships. We need to uncover and retrieve, to discover and invent patterns of practice that hold in creative tension both the mythic and the parabolic elements of marriage. We cannot do that in isolation from television and other forms of popular practice. Far from avoiding such engagement, we ought to welcome it as a further opportunity to witness to the love that God gives us in the person of Jesus Christ, who comes to us as the essential example of one who creatively holds together the mythic and the parabolic.

## WHAT IS THERE AND WHAT IS NOT

Robert Kegan, a noted developmental psychologist and adult educator, ar-

*While it is important for teachers of religion to consider how television portrays marriage, it may be even more important to consider how we use television and how we help people engage the media with critical perception. People of faith need to do a cultural intervention, providing a deep and sustaining vision of what marriage can be over time and in connection with community.*

gues that learning involves three dynamics: confirmation, contradiction, and continuity. In part, this observation points to the necessity of entering into a person's reality before attempting to walk anywhere new with them. We must "confirm" the meaning-making in which they are engaged if we are in any way to attempt to challenge it. Ultimately, however, constructive learning that leads to grounded, centered, and transformative change does not occur if there is not also continuity that connects the place to which a person has come through their learning to the place from which they came.<sup>1</sup>

I introduce this dynamic because I think the single most salient issue having to do with marriage on television in relation to Christian community is that the surrounds of popular culture that we inhabit support primarily one understanding of marriage. If we are interested in supporting a different understanding—or at least a more expansive one—we cannot simply pronounce a new definition and assume that it will somehow magically become part of people's ways of making meaning. Rather, we need to acknowledge the world that all of us experience and from there point out the contradictions that popular representations—both "religious" and "secular"—admit.

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*"we can learn something about the impact of television  
by considering the ways in which specific kinds of  
television shows treat marriage"*

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Even asking the question, "What does marriage look like on television?" does not lead to simple answers. Increasingly, television is very narrowly targeted. What can be viewed during early prime-time hours on the major broadcast networks in the United States differs from what can be seen on late-night television, or early morning children's television, or cable channels aimed at adolescents. It does little good to take one episode of a television show and use it to make broad generalizations about what people will perceive about marriage from it. On the other hand, we can learn something about the impact of television by considering the ways in which specific kinds of television shows—specific genres, to use the term loosely—treat marriage.

Most television viewers watch television through the lens of genre without ever being conscious of their interpretive framework. Within seconds of flipping to a specific channel people "catch" what they are viewing, recognizing it through the conventions of its genre. You know that you are watching television news because of the anchor sitting in front of a newsroom, or the voiceover of a particular quality and generic accent that is narrating the images in front of you, or the typeface that

<sup>1</sup>For an extensive introduction to Robert Kegan's theory, see *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). For his excellent description of the developmental demands of marriage in contemporary contexts, see *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), particularly his chapter entitled "Partnering."

declares “live.” Similarly, you know you’ve happened upon a commercial by the speed of the images, or their ideal quality, or perhaps the headline print that signals some exceptional element of the product. Soap operas are generally recognizable from the basic nature of their sets and music, sitcoms from their canned laugh track, and so on.

Perhaps less evident to viewers are the ways in which specific genres shape meaning through narrowing the range of images presented or through focusing attention in specific ways. It is this characteristic that is so pertinent to the question of what marriage looks like on television. Television news, for example, is driven by several constraints unique to its genre. Is the issue to be covered “news”? Are there appropriate images available to illustrate the issue? Is there some kind of conflict that lends itself to telling both sides of the story?

Marriage as an institution is not by itself news. Statistics concerning the break-ups of families can be, particularly if they are controversial and thus provide a natural opportunity for portraying “both sides” of an issue. Specific marriages might be newsworthy, particularly if they provide an opportunity for glimpsing celebrities or mark some kind of anomaly (marriage between two people of the same gender, for instance). When there is widespread consensus that marriage in general is a good thing, it is the finding that *contradicts* that consensus that is newsworthy. Similarly, attempts to build public policy in support of marriage are rarely newsworthy unless there are clear opponents—as in the case of the proponents of heterosexual marriages who are put up against those who would make civil blessing of marriage open to same-gender couples. Marriage—like many other social issues—makes an appearance on the news primarily in terms of its anomalies. Viewers tend to assume that television news reporting is “objective” in some way, without understanding the ways in which its very structure and format limit its ability to present complex ideas. It is crucial that we learn to ask not only how marriage is represented, but also what is left out in the representations that we encounter.

Sitcoms, on the other hand, rely heavily on viewer familiarity with a set of stock character types. Since most sitcoms are of the half-hour variety, viewers must be able to enter them quickly. Story lines are generally reduced to formulae that reproduce dominant notions of familiar roles. Ironically, the most complex and positive portrait of marriage currently available on a television sitcom may well be that of Homer and Marge Simpson (*The Simpsons*). It is specifically this characteristic of the genre—an ability to weave stories from archetypal characters—that can lend authenticity to and evoke truth from particular sitcoms.

Prime-time dramas, particularly those with season-long narrative arcs (*Once and Again*, *NYPD Blue*, *The Sopranos*, and so on) have more room to provide complex images of marriage. The relationship of the president and first lady on *The West Wing*, for example, illustrates intimacy in ways that are more than sexual, and belonging in ways that stretch beyond simply belonging to each other. That por-

trait of a specific marriage is clearly embedded in a whole host of institutions that both press against it and support it. But here, too, there are constraints. Television producers have traditionally been skittish about engaging religion, so shows like *Nothing Sacred* (a drama that aired during the 1997-98 season), which portray marriage as having a sacred element, are very rare.

Then there are the genres that would seem to have very little to do with marriage at all. The *Survivor* series and its imitators, for instance, which purport to be about displaying “real” people in “intense” situations, would, on the face of it, appear to have nothing to do with marriage. They do, however, represent various kinds of competing commitments and the emotional struggles that go along with them. In many ways they provide a safe space in which viewers can play with particular experiences and “try on” feelings without any of the accompanying relational risks.

Reality television actually has a lot in common with another standard genre, the television talk show. From the relatively pleasant and civil dialogue of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to the vastly more outrageous antics of *The Jerry Springer Show* and its copycats, these shows all invite viewers into a consideration of questions that lie at the heart of intimacy and belonging in our current cultural contexts. Here, though, the largeness of the questions is met with a very narrow range of answers. Even on the *Oprah* show, which regularly invites family and marriage therapists to help participants deal with difficult questions, the broader institutional issues that lie beneath these questions are rarely invoked, let alone critically engaged. Instead, individual growth is most often educed as the primary response to marriage dilemmas.

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*“for television, marriage is fundamentally about individual personal satisfaction”*

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It is this underlying assumption—that marriage is fundamentally about individual personal satisfaction—that threads its way through most television representations. Portraying marriage as a sacrament, as a vocation, or even simply as an important institution for the well-being of families is, if not entirely absent from television, at least highly marginalized. Thus, it is crucially important for communities that wish to promote a different understanding to recognize that their efforts have to be framed as cultural interventions. It is not enough simply to pose an alternative. Following Kegan, we will have to enter into the meaning space that perceives marriage in this particular cultural way and highlight the contradictions to which such a frame of meaning inevitably gives rise in order to promote any kind of refashioning of such ideas. Then we will have to support patterns of engagement that sustain the new visions, including engaging television and other forms of mass media.

Anyone who has been married for any length of time knows on some level that sustaining a relationship cannot be done in purely individual terms, isolated

from social supports. When we marry, we marry into a whole host of related meanings and people. Part of what is so compelling about many television representations of marriage—*The Simpsons* would be a good example—is that they use the conflicts that inevitably arise within marriage as fodder for drama, for humor, and so on. The stories in which we live create enormous opportunities for the storytellers of television to invite us into their spaces.

These shows do not, however, help us see the ways in which this underlying view of marriage—as a path towards individual fulfillment—is so impoverished. The stories are compelling, and we share them as ways to help us narrate our own lives, but they rarely support our “metacognition” in relation to them. In much the same way that a television commercial invites our sympathetic identification with the concerns of a bride on the way to the altar, but then matches that concern to the consumption of a specific product, television shows more broadly tap our sympathetic resonances but rarely invite our critical perception.

#### CONCENTRATING ON PATTERNS OF PRACTICE

Television shows invite our sympathetic identification with the emotional resonances of relationality, but they rarely help us see the patterns of practice that put television at the heart of many family contexts. Television highlights stories, but it has its most interesting impact on us through our practices.

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*“the impact of television on a specific marriage can be assessed more accurately by asking how the partners in that marriage use television than by what specific shows they watch”*

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I have argued in other contexts that it is our practices around mass media that are most fundamental in perceiving their impact, rather than their explicit content.<sup>2</sup> The impact of television on a specific marriage can be assessed more accurately by asking how the partners in that marriage use television than by what specific shows they watch. In other words, if a specific family has five members and their household has five television sets, it is likely that a lot of television viewing takes place in isolation. However, if a family has five members, but only one television set, it is much more likely that there are regular arguments about television. Given the busy and stressful nature of many families’ lifestyles, it is easy to imagine why the former alternative might be “easier,” but it is the latter—which provides natural opportunities to discuss the ideas and images that are shown—that promotes critical engagement. It is one thing if a couple or family regularly watches television together and uses it as a catalyst for conversation and engagement, and

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, Mary Hess, “From Trucks Carrying Messages to Ritualized Identities,” *Religious Education* 94/3 (1999) 273-288, or “Media Literacy as Support for the Development of a Responsible Imagination in Religious Community,” in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, ed. Daniel Stout and Judith Buddenbaum (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 2001) 289-311.

another if television is a mechanism by which they avoid each other and difficult conflicts, subsuming their feelings through vicarious engagement.

Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, in their book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, point to the intricate connections between narrative and ritual. They note that “ritual is embodied expression, and narrative springs from the human imagination....Rituals shape our stories, and our instinct to perceive life as a narrative urges us to rehearse that narrative through our bodies.”<sup>3</sup> Although they do not write explicitly about the role of television in our culture, I think it is self-evident that television is a storytelling medium. What Anderson and Foley’s observation helps me to underline, however, is that our practices surrounding television are just as critical to its meaning for us as any explicit stories it offers.

Television, through its stories or its images, rarely invites engagement with its role in our lives. This “screen” through which we see so much of the world around us is most often invisible to us. It slides away, disappears, is present only to the extent that a window frame is visible as access to the outside world. Most Western countries besides the United States, and increasingly others as well, highly value media education. Yet this kind of learning—which helps us to “see the screen”—is only rarely part of U.S. educational frameworks.

If we take seriously Kegan’s point about “confirmation, contradiction, continuity,” as well as Anderson and Foley’s recognition of how practices shape our stories, then intervening culturally to reshape and revision our understandings of marriage will require us to intervene in the practices we use with television. To do this, we have to begin to see the window frame, the role that the screen itself plays in our lives, and engage that screen constructively. That does not mean getting rid of the screen, although “TV fasts” can be effective consciousness raisers, but rather becoming more intentional and critical in our engagement with it.

At the same time that we engage our television practices, however, we must also intentionally and critically engage marriage within explicitly religious settings. For many people marriage may well be one of the only remaining contact points with religious institutions. There is still something quite powerful about the ritual of a wedding, powerful enough to devote whole industries to its “correct” fashioning. Just as Anderson and Foley observe that narrative and ritual are intimately connected and yet distinctly different, they also point out that ritual and narrative are modes in which both the mythic and the parabolic are expressed:

The double function of myth is this: to resolve particular contradictions and, more important, to create a belief in the permanent possibility of reconciliation....Parabolic narratives show the seams and edges of the myths we fashion. Parables show the fault lines beneath the comfortable surfaces of the worlds we build for ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998) 27.

<sup>4</sup>Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, 14.

Communities of faith often settle for the “mythic” end of marriage, particularly during the wedding ritual, lifting up only the most reconciling and ideal elements of marriage. Rarely do we build into our public rituals authentic elements that narrate the difficulty and pain involved in marriage. This practice has the unfortunate effect of leaving couples with little connection to a community that might help support them as they live through the painful paradoxes of marriage, not to mention an air of dishonesty about religious rituals in general.

In popular culture, on the other hand, there are myriad examples of the parabolic nature of the institution of marriage. Regardless of the television genre, powerful forces are regularly illustrated as being at work within marriages to pull them apart. Whether it is boundary-breaking sexuality, economic stress, gender inequalities, or painful parenting disputes, there are plenty of illustrations of parabolic institutional forces challenging marriage, but little support for understanding the complexity of the mythic that is possible—particularly institutionally—in marriage. The dilemma is two-fold: How do we help institutions—particularly religious communities—witness more directly to the parabolic elements of marriage, and how might we help people immersed in the parabolic representations of the institutional character of marriage find some room for the mythic that is authentic and honest? In both instances it is the *institutional* nature of marriage that is at issue. This should perhaps not be surprising, since sociologists have been describing for quite some time the deep skepticism that people hold for institutions in the U.S. context.<sup>5</sup>

One key would be to find both the mythic and the parabolic existing in creative tension. It may be that television shows that are able consistently to hold these two together—like *The Simpsons*—are successful precisely because they do so. Similarly, it is clear that religious communities whose ritual celebrations embrace both the mythic and the parabolic achieve an honesty and integrity that lends powerful authenticity to their witness.<sup>6</sup>

I am reminded here of the results of a study of people who maintained enduring commitments to the common good, noting several elements shared by people with such commitments, one of which was what the authors termed a “responsible imagination”:

Their practice of imagination is responsible in two particular ways. First, they try to respect the *process* of imagination in themselves and others. They pay attention to dissonance and contradiction, particularly those that reveal injustice and unrealized potential. They learn to pause, reflect, wonder, ask why, consider, wait.... They also learn to work over their insights and those of others so that they “connect up” in truthful and useful ways. They seek out trustworthy communities of confirmation and contradiction.

<sup>5</sup>See especially Robert Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

<sup>6</sup>This conclusion is threaded throughout Anderson and Foley’s book; see also, Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

Second, they seek out sources of worthy images. Most have discovered that finding and being found by fitting images is not only a matter of having access to them but requires discretion and responsible hospitality—not only to what is attractive but also to what may be unfamiliar and initially unsettling....[U]nlike many who seek escape from the potent tension this act of holding requires, these people live in a manner that conveys a third and essential power: the courage to turn and make promises, the power of a responsible imagination.<sup>7</sup>

The claim that marriage is a commitment to the common good is a core belief in many religious traditions. The book by Daloz et al. points toward a particular way to support marriage in a media culture: helping our congregants to develop and sustain a responsible imagination about marriage, particularly in its institutional elements.

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*“I am hungry for positive role models of marriage partnerships that have thrived amid daily struggle, that have endured beyond inevitable disillusionment”*

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I—and others of my generation like me—am hungry for positive role models of marriage partnerships that have thrived amid daily struggle, that have endured beyond inevitable disillusionment. But it is not simply images or representations for which we yearn; we seek also a deep and sustaining vision of what marriage can be over time and in connection with community. A Christian understanding of marriage as sacrament, or of marriage as vocation, makes the process and institution of marriage a symbol of the love Christ bears so directly to humanity.<sup>8</sup> This is a powerful vision within which to be shaped; it offers a compelling alternative to the more popular but also more impoverished notions currently afloat in our cultural stew.

When our experiences contradict the meaning frames with which we are surrounded, when we struggle with the dishonesty of public rituals or with the inadequacy of a church’s response to our needs, it is only the deeper wisdom of a community’s witness to life borne through death that is sustaining. That wisdom shines forth in both directions. When Christians witness to the sacramental nature of marriage, extolling it as a sign of Christ’s presence in the world and thus a symbol of God’s love for us, that description rings true in both mythic and parabolic terms. In recognizing our brokenness and inability to connect and love, we paradoxically also witness to the possibility of intimacy and belonging. Honesty about these experiences—whether engaged through television representations or religious rituals—strengthens our ability to imagine responsibly, and thus to sustain

<sup>7</sup>Laurent Daloz et al., *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996) 151-152.

<sup>8</sup>One such articulation that I find particularly compelling is Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen’s “Pastoral Letter on the Sacrament of Matrimony” (Elizabeth, NJ: Pastoral and Matrimonial Renewal Center, 1982).

our commitments. It is this kind of cultural intervention that we need to develop and sustain if “marriage on TV” is ever to be a phrase that means more than simply images on television. Engaging the institution of marriage *could* help us speak profoundly to our patterns of practice surrounding television, so that “marriage” would truly have something to say “on” television. ⊕

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