

WHY BE RELIGIOUS? FOR THE SAKE OF TRUE MARRIED LOVE

by the Rev. N. Bruce Rogers

What religion does for us is to raise our sights, elevating us out of our merely natural selves to a vision and life of interior purpose and meaning. Practiced daily, religion ennoble every aspect of life and deepens our relationships—with the Lord and with each other. This is true not only of our ordinary relationships with each other, but of our special relationships as well. One of these is the relationship between married partners. If the most intimate relationship human beings can experience is with the Lord, the next most intimate is the relationship they can experience with a married partner. There is no other human relationship quite like it. Its potential for a mutual exchange of sympathy and warmth, for understanding and union in thought and will, for trust, confidence and mutual support, for interior, spiritual friendship, surpasses anything that any other relationship can offer. No one can love a man so well or so devotedly as his wife, and no one can love a woman so well or so tenderly as her husband.

Yet, as in all things, people are not naturally wise when it comes to marriage. They are prone to make mistakes, before marriage and after. Outward qualities are frequently regarded as more important than inward qualities. Temporary goals divert attention from deeper, more lasting ones. And selfish and worldly desires inevitably assert themselves, drawing the sight downward and away from the essential character of marriage. Anyone can fall in love. The trick is not in the falling, but in the rising—in rising to the requirements of love, to the kind of wise commitment that makes real love possible. Nobody automatically rises to that commitment. Human nature is naturally quite foolish, driven by passions that do not uplift and confused by notions that do not teach. It is only too easy for us to lose sight of what real love is all about, and to substitute romantic fancies, founded more on what we hope to get than on what we commit ourselves to give.

The Lord said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this will all know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34). The course of history is strewn with the ruins of marriages in which married partners failed to love each other. In the final analysis, this is because husbands and wives failed to learn what real love is, the kind of love of which the Lord spoke—His own love for mankind, reflected in human love in those who become His disciples.

It takes a disciple of the Lord to learn that love, because it does not come naturally. To truly love requires us to be able to transcend ourselves, to rise beyond the here-and-now of our natural lives and characters, to set our sights on a vision from above, and to commit ourselves to living that vision, despite all the natural distractions and defects that mortal flesh is heir to.

To live that vision demands that we live the life of religion. It is the function of religion to teach us that vision, and to encourage us in it, to warn of pitfalls and our tendency to error, and to lead us to the goal that we seek, despite our natural blindness in spiritual things and our preoccupation with ourselves and the things of this world.

The association of married love with the life of religion comes from the fact that both have to do with love, and both have to do with wisdom. To be religious is to learn to love, to love as the Lord loves us, unselfishly, and with steadfast commitment. And it is also to learn to become wise, to become wise as the Lord is wise, with clarity of vision in what is good and right in providing for the happiness and welfare of another.

A man who would love a woman, and a woman who would love a man, must learn to love unselfishly and with steadfast commitment. And they must learn to love wisely, with clarity of vision, in order to provide for the happiness and welfare of the other. It is this responsibility that a man undertakes when he becomes a husband (if he is truly to become a husband) and that a woman undertakes when she becomes a wife (if she is truly to become a wife). The achievement is possible through religion and the life of religion, which provides both the vision and the motivating power necessary to sustain the vision, in theory and ultimately in actual practice.

The Lord said, “What God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6). God joins married partners together when together they learn to live from Him, when—through religion—they learn to transcend their natural selves, to form a bond of mutual love and wisdom gained in living according to His precepts. It is, then, through religion, that a woman is transformed into a wife, and a man into a husband, inwardly as well as outwardly, in an image and likeness of Him who made them to be thus united from the beginning.

Texts: John 13:34-35; Matthew 19:6