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Adrian Thatcher
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PART I

Living together as a theological problem

CHAPTER I

A guide to living together

Christian theology is necessarily a human, intellectual endeavour which *listens*. It believes that God has spoken decisively in Christ, and that God's Word is yet able to be heard in every generation. Listening, therefore, is a primary virtue in theology. But Christian theology and ethics must also listen to the understanding diligently provided by other, more secular, intellectual endeavours. The word of revelation may be heard there too. Only when theology performs the double act of listening to the voices of its traditions, and the voices surrounding those traditions, is it able to make connections between Christian faith and ordinary life, and perhaps to indicate humbly how the gospel of Christ may be capable of touching and transforming it. Perhaps there is no ethical problem where this double act is as apt as in the case of cohabitation. People in many parts of the world now live together before marriage, after marriage, and instead of marriage, in numbers which have been increasing remarkably for the last thirty years. Sociologists, ethnologists and demographers have made valiant attempts to track, chart and perhaps explain this unprecedented shift in family formation. The results are available for theologians (and everyone else) to study and deploy. The whole of the present chapter is an attempt to listen to secular authors as they describe and explain cohabitation.

By 'a guide to living together' is meant an attempt to provide a detailed sketch of an increasingly common social and sexual practice, in order to bring it into a theological focus. It takes the form of 25 propositions or statements about living together which are intended to shape the theological treatment that the practice receives

in the rest of the book.¹ Readers eager to plunge straight into the theological analysis and to discover the core concepts presented by this study should at least skim these propositions before proceeding to chapter 2 (a summary of the argument of the rest of the book is found at pages 74–5). The propositions are offered as assertions which, given the state of current research, are probably true. ‘Probably’ registers the *caveat* that the pace of the social changes marked by the rise of cohabitation presently appears inexorable and data become redundant quickly. Hypotheses which were presently accepted when the bulk of the research for this part of the book was done (1999) may look inadequate when it is read. Nearly half of the statements (first section) attempt a description of some of the characteristics of cohabitation, followed (in the second section) by some unfortunate consequences and (in the third section) some attempts at explanation. Finally, after this depressing read, there is some good news about cohabitation (fourth section). Inevitably there is some overlap between sections.

COHABITATION: SOME FEATURES

1. In many countries more people enter marriage from cohabitation than from the single state.

Most definitions of cohabitation assume the notion of a ‘heterosexual couple who are not formally married to one another living in a sexually intimate domestic relationship under the same roof’.² A British definition assumes a cohabiting couple is ‘a co-resident man and woman, living together within a sexual union, without that union having been formalised by a legal marriage’.³ These definitions are insensitive to homosexual couples because the alternative of marriage is unavailable to them. Cohabitation before marriage is an incontrovertible trend. This represents an alarming change over the last 25–30 years. In many states in the USA, ‘until

¹ Since writing this ‘Guide’ I have come across Patricia Morgan’s *Marriage-Lite: The Rise of Cohabitation and its Consequences* (London: Institute for the Study of Civil Society, 2000), which reinforces several of the empirical claims advanced here.

² Gordon A. Carmichael, ‘Consensual Partnering in the More Developed Countries’, *Journal of the Australian Population Association* 12.1 (1995), 51.

³ John Haskey, *Trends in Marriage and Cohabitation: Population Trends 80* (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1995), p.6.

recently' (i.e., 1994) cohabitation for the unmarried was actually illegal.⁴ Between 1970 and 1980 in the USA, Census Bureau data record a tripling in the number of cohabiting couples, to over 1.5 million, and a further increase of 80%, to 2.9 million couples, between 1980 and 1990. However, these are only the official statistics. So strong are the reasons for concealing cohabitation from the authorities (possible loss of social security, child custody, lack of social acceptability, among others) that the actual number of cohabiting couples in the USA in 1990 was between 3 and 8 million.⁵ Clearly this is a broad guess. During that decade, the sharp decline in the numbers of people marrying (not just for the first time) did not lead (at least in the United States) to an increase in single-ness or single-households, because people who eventually marry were living together instead.⁶ In this respect there has been little change. The numbers of people living together may be changing little: the change is found in the type of arrangements they choose.

The trend towards cohabitation before marriage has been registered in many countries.⁷ France may be typical of countries to report, in the mid-eighties, that the 'tide of early marriages' which peaked in mid-century had receded, leaving 'a delayed marriage trend' in its wake. As a consequence, there was said to be 'an expanding life-space in early adulthood where informal premarital unions may flourish'. 'Informal cohabitation generally amounts to a form of "partial marriage" with reproduction actively delayed or avoided.'⁸ This author was confident that

⁴ Monica A. Seff, 'Cohabitation and the Law', *Marriage and Family Review* 21.3–4 (June 1995), 149.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 144, citing J. Duff and G.G. Truitt, *The Spousal Equivalent Handbook* (Houston: Sunny Beach Publications, 1990).

⁶ Larry L. Bumpass, James A. Sweet and Andrew Cherlin, 'The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (November 1991), 913, 924. And see Arland Thornton, 'Cohabitation and Marriage in the 1980s', *Demography* 25.4 (November 1988), 497–508.

⁷ For an analysis of European trends, see Duncan Dormor, 'Marriage and the Second Demographic Transition in Europe – A Review', in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *Celebrating Christian Marriage* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002).

⁸ Elwood Carlson, 'Couples Without Children: Premarital Cohabitation in France', in Kingsley Davis (ed.), *Contemporary Marriage: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Institution* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1985), p.113. For later confirmation of the trend see also H. Leridon, 'Cohabitation, Marriage, Separation: An Analysis of Life Histories of French Cohorts from 1968 to 1985', *Population Studies* 44 (1990), 127–44.

cohabitators would eventually marry. 'These informal unions', he wrongly opined, 'will continue to be transformed into traditional marriages'.⁹ By the mid-1970s, a majority of couples marrying in Geneva, Switzerland, had lived together before marriage and in Sweden and Denmark 'informal cohabitation' had become 'all but normative'.¹⁰ In the countries of Southern Europe (e.g. Italy, Spain) cohabitation has yet to become widespread. If informal cohabitation is extended to include individuals who identify as a couple, are sexually intimate, but retain separate residences, the numbers will be much greater. In France this practice has been named 'semi-cohabitation';¹¹ in Finland and the Netherlands (and doubtless elsewhere), it is 'living apart together' (LAT).¹² Similarly, the 1991 census in Britain showed that more people, especially young people, are 'living alone', yet many of these 'may only do so for part of the time, or may indeed live separately but be in permanent relationships'.¹³

A recent study in Britain confirms more people enter marriage from cohabitation than from the single state. A comparison between first partnerships of two cohorts of women in Britain who were born in the two specific periods 1950–62 (the 'pre-Thatcher cohort') and after 1962 (the 'Thatcher cohort') confirms that 'the primary difference between the two cohorts is that cohabitation is a much more important route into first partnership for the Thatcher cohort. By their 26th birthday, over half of the Thatcher cohort had entered cohabitation, compared with one-quarter of the earlier cohort.'¹⁴ In Canada, cohabitation is said to have been

⁹ Carlson, 'Couples', p.128.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.114, 119. And see J. Trost, 'A Renewed Social Institution: Non-Marital Cohabitation', *Acta Sociologica* 21 (1978), 303–15.

¹¹ Catherine Villeneuve-Gokalp, 'Vivre en Couple Chacun Chez Soi', *Population* 5 (September–October 1997), 1059. Within this sub-group, there is to be found 'une cohabitation intermittente' and 'une cohabitation alternée' (1059–60).

¹² J. Hoffmann-Nowotny, 'The Future of the Family', in *European Population Conference 1987, Plenaries* (Helsinki: Central Statistical Office of Finland, 1987), pp.113–200.

¹³ Economic and Social Research Council, *Population and Household Change, Research Results 1–13* (1997–8), no.7, 'One Person Households in England and Wales and France', p.1.

¹⁴ John Ermisch, *Pre-Marital Cohabitation, Childbearing and the Creation of One Parent Families* (Colchester: Working Papers of the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change, No.95–17, 1995), p.3. The conclusions are based on data drawn from the British Household Panel Study. See also Jonathan Gershuny and Richard Berthoud, *New Partnerships? Men and Women in the 1990s* (University of Essex: Extracts from the Research Programme of the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change, June 1997), p.3.

‘an irrelevant phenomenon’ prior to the 1970s.¹⁵ The 1981 census reported over 700,000 cohabiting couples: by the time of the 1991 census, that figure had risen to 1.4 million, or 10% of all couples.¹⁶ Similar ‘spectacular trends’ have been recorded in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Netherlands, France, Austria, West Germany, Australia, New Zealand¹⁷ and Japan.¹⁸ There has been a longer tradition of informal consensual unions in some countries in South America, especially in the Caribbean basin where they are more common than legal marriages.¹⁹

2. Cohabitors are as likely to return to singleness as to enter marriage.

Whereas increasing numbers of people arrive at marriage via cohabitation, it is less often realized that increasing numbers of cohabitors *do not marry their partners at all*. By 1985 it had been noticed that in the USA more cohabitors aged 23 and under were returning to singleness than ‘upgrading’ (so to speak) to formal marriage. ‘For men, nearly two-thirds of all cohabiting relationships were terminated within two years of the initiation of the cohabitation; 40 percent were terminated by union dissolution within two years and another 23 percent were terminated because the partners married.’²⁰ For

¹⁵ David R. Hall and John Z. Zhao, ‘Cohabitation and Divorce in Canada: Testing the Selectivity Hypothesis’, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57.2 (May 1995), 421.

¹⁶ Ibid.: based on D. Larrivee and P. Parent, ‘For More and More Canadians, Common-Law Unions Make Good Sense’ (Census of Canada article series: 1993). Zheng Wu puts the figure of cohabiting couples at 11%. See Zheng Wu, ‘Premarital Cohabitation and Postmarital Cohabiting Union Formation’, *Journal of Family Issues* 16 (March 1995), 212–33.

¹⁷ Summarized in detail by Carmichael, ‘Consensual Partnering’, 54–9. See also A.K. Blanc, ‘The Formation and Dissolution of Second Unions: Marriage and Cohabitation in Sweden and Norway’, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 49 (1987), 391–400; and Gigi Santow and Michael Bracher, ‘Change and Continuity in the Formation of First Marital Unions in Australia’, *Population Studies* 48 (1994), 475–96.

¹⁸ Joy Hendry analyses ‘the modern Japanese practice of living together’ in her ‘Japan: Culture versus Industrialization as Determinant of Marital Patterns’, in Davis, *Contemporary Marriage*, p.215. While it ‘reflects Western influence’ (p.214), it also reflects more liberal (but still patriarchal) attitudes to sex in Japan and it has premodern precedents.

¹⁹ United Nations, *Patterns of First Marriage: Timing and Prevalence* (New York: United Nations, 1990).

²⁰ Thornton, ‘Cohabitation’, 504. These conclusions were based on a panel study drawn from records of White children born in the Detroit metropolitan area in July 1961. They were all aged 23 at the time of the research.

women, '60 percent were terminated within two years; 23 percent were terminated through union dissolution and 37 percent through marriage of the partners'.²¹ As the age of cohabitation rises, so does the proportion of them marrying, to between 50 and 60%.²² Only in the late 1980s did it become clear that both of the conventional ways of viewing cohabitation, as informal marriage or as 'the last stage in the courtship process', were seriously misleading.²³ Instead cohabitation was compared with the single life and found to be more like it in several respects.²⁴ In particular, about two thirds of a research sample (of nearly 13,000 cohabitators) did not have immediate marriage plans, exploding the conventional interpretation that cohabitation is equivalent to being engaged. Conversely, the authors of the study concluded that 'cohabitation for most is a convenient living arrangement for single individuals not ready to make long-term commitments'.²⁵ Slightly later, but large-scale, research in Britain confirms a similar trend. Results from the Economic and Social Research Council show 'evidence that the outcomes of cohabitation may be changing. Earlier cohorts seem to have been more likely to view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage ... Younger people, however, are more likely than older ones to end cohabitation through separation than through marriage.'²⁶

3. Cohabitation has weakened the connection between marriage and parenthood since the 1970s.

A startling discovery was made in the early 1990s which has enormous consequences for family formation well into the third millennium. Jane Lewis and Kathleen Kiernan postulated two major changes in Britain with regard to 'reproductive behaviour' in

²¹ Ibid.

²² Linda J. Waite, 'Cohabitation: A Communitarian Perspective', unpublished paper, University of Chicago (January 1999), 5; Larry Bumpass and James Sweet, 'National Estimates of Cohabitation', *Demography* 24.4 (1989), 615–25.

²³ Ronald R. Rindfuss and Audrey VandenHeuvel, 'Cohabitation: A Precursor to Marriage or an Alternative to Being Single?', *Population and Development Review* 16.4 (December 1990), 705.

²⁴ The 'respects' studied were childbearing and marriage plans, employment and educational activities, and the cohabitators' own self-identification (ibid., 708–21).

²⁵ Ibid., 711.

²⁶ Economic and Social Research Council, *Population and Household Change*, no.1.

the previous 30 years.²⁷ The first was a widespread separation of sex and marriage which happened in the 1960s. The second was a widespread separation of marriage from parenthood, which happened in the 1980s, gathered pace in the 1990s, and ‘has given rise to moral panic about lone motherhood’.²⁸ The key to both changes is the declining importance of marriage. According to this thesis when an unmarried couple conceived in the 1960s, they generally married. In the early 1970s, when an unmarried couple conceived they generally either married or had an abortion. Living together as a prelude to marriage (aptly named ‘nubile cohabitation’), ‘began in the 1970s’. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, an unmarried couple upon conception opted increasingly for an abortion or an illegitimate birth. The 1990s has seen a confirmation of this trend. But in the 1990s 70% of women marrying for the first time had cohabited before marriage compared with only 6% in the late 1960s. Cohabitation is therefore ‘inextricably linked’ both to the decline of marriage and the increase in childbearing outside it.²⁹

The weakening connection between marriage and parenthood may be an international trend. Gordon Carmichael risked the generalization (in 1995) that in many of the ‘more developed countries’ the ‘transition to parenthood is held to be a major catalyst to the conversion of cohabiting unions into marriages’.³⁰ But cohabiting unions are not always converted into marriages. Most of the data used to support the claim were collected in the 1980s, and the extent of the separation of marriage from parenthood may have been insufficiently appreciated then. The pattern just described within Britain clearly fits trends from the USA and other countries. The ingredients are simply stated. They are: an increase in sexual activity without reference to marriage which has been charted extensively; a rise in the age of first marriage (currently 29 for men and 27 for women in the UK); the increasing availability of reliable

²⁷ Jane Lewis and Kathleen Kiernan, ‘The Boundaries Between Marriage, Nonmarriage, and Parenthood: Changes in Behavior and Policy in Postwar Britain’, *Journal of Family History* 21 (July 1996), 372–88. And see Jane Lewis, *Marriage, Cohabitation and the Law: Individualism and Obligation* (Lord Chancellor’s Department Research Secretariat, 1999), p.10.

²⁸ Lewis and Kiernan, ‘Boundaries’, 372. ²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Carmichael, ‘Consensual Partnering’, 75.

contraception; increasing recourse to abortion when contraception fails or is unused; and the vanishing stigma attached to cohabitation. Couples *desiring* children may simply not see the advantages of marriage in either personal or economic terms.

4. Some people choose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, not as a preparation or ‘trial’ for it.

A hint of this discovery was dropped earlier when it was noted (proposition 2) that people who leave a cohabiting relationship are as likely to return to singleness as to enter marriage. However, there are more disturbing trends to unearth about the endings of cohabitations. Many of these cannot be satisfactorily explained by couples who abandon plans to marry. They never had such plans. They chose cohabitation because it was an *alternative* to marriage.

Kingsley Davis offered a candid explanation for the extent of cohabitation in the USA (in the mid-1980s) which had little to do with marriage. He thought it was ‘an ephemeral pairing based on sexual attraction’. Cohabitation allowed ‘young people *considerable postponement* of marriage without loss of a convenient sexual partnership’.³¹ He ruled out the likelihood that cohabitation was a ‘trial marriage’, since revised divorce laws allowed disillusioned marriage partners, discovering apparent incompatibility after the wedding, to extricate themselves from marriages without difficulty. Rather, cohabitation was characterized by a sexual freedom which might be more tellingly compared with that of adultery and the keeping of mistresses in earlier times. There was little thought of marriage in the intentions of most cohabitators.

Some researchers in the USA have shown that the very publicness of a wedding ceremony symbolizes a transition which many unmarried couples are, at least initially, reluctant to make. The ceremony is itself an expression ‘of the long-term commitment between partners’.³² The reluctance to enter into the deeper commitment

³¹ Kingsley Davis, ‘The Future of Marriage’, in Davis (ed.), *Contemporary Marriage*, p.38 (emphasis added).

³² Robert J. Willis and Robert T. Michael, ‘Innovation in Family Formation: Evidence on Cohabitation in the United States’, in John Ermisch and Naohiro Ogawa (eds.), *The Family, the Market and the State in Ageing Societies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p.10.

of marriage was for some respondents due to doubt about whether they wished to marry *at all*. Insofar as the cohabitation was a ‘trial’, it was not a trial which aimed at assessing partner compatibility for future marriage, but a trial for assessing whether the state of living together was to be preferred to the state of remaining single.³³ Others were thought to be combining the pleasurable aspects of living together with the shunning of ‘the commitment and permanence associated with marriage and the family’.³⁴ Others regarded cohabitation as a trial-marriage. They were conscious of the extent of divorce, anxious to avoid ending their marriages through divorce, and believed that living together first was an acceptable and effective way of testing compatibility.³⁵

5. ‘Trial-marriages’ are unlikely to work.

A clear majority of young people in the USA ‘agreed’ or ‘mostly agreed’ with the statement, put to them in 1991–5, that ‘[i]t is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along’.³⁶ This growing belief may be rooted in the near universal aspiration of people intending marriage that their unions be durable and happy. On an optimistic assessment of these arrangements, known as the ‘weeding hypothesis’, only ‘those cohabiting couples who find themselves to be well suited and more committed to marriage go on to marry’.³⁷ The rest weed themselves out or are weeded out by the experience. However, the extent of the support for living together as a ‘trial’ for marriage is not justified by its success in securing the goods sought. It seems rather to rest on a set of dubious cultural myths. Evidence

³³ David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage: A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research* (The National Marriage Project, New Jersey: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1999), p.4.

³⁴ Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, ‘Cohabitation’, 722.

³⁵ Willis and Michael, ‘Innovation’, pp.10–11. Research was carried out in 1986 when the link between cohabitation and marriage was considerably stronger (and cohabitation less normative) than it is today.

³⁶ Popenoe and Whitehead, *Should We Live Together?*, p.4.

³⁷ See Lynda Clarke and Ann Berrington, ‘Socio-Demographic Predictors of Divorce’, in John Simons (ed.), *High Divorce Rates: The State of the Evidence on Reasons and Remedies, Vols. 1–2* (Lord Chancellor’s Department Research Secretariat, 1999), vol.1, p.16. See the sources cited there.