

Building ^{DCI} Better Dreams

A WORLD OF THEIR OWN MAKING Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values

By John R. Gillis
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THIS BOOK is an historical study backing up an argument. John Gillis's thesis is that we live in a world of myth, composed of symbolic interpretations of ourselves to ourselves, the world we would like to live by rather than the one we live in. While it might be best to scrap all such unrealistic notions, this is impossible because we have a deep need for idealization. What we can do, he writes, is to become aware of the dreamlike quality of our beliefs and "consciously and collaboratively" fashion better myths than those provided by religion and community.

One particular myth that Gillis seeks to refashion is our notion that families in earlier ages were more stable and authentic than ours. He shows that this myth is of recent vintage, concocted by Victorians in the 19th century. And even then it did not reflect the reality of intimate relations, which often were not sanctioned by the church and were subject to frequent family breakups due to death. The old myth has become particularly damaging in our age and is now used by champions of family values, whom Gillis often derides, to

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berate us. We should come together and engineer a more realistic myth.

The new myth would be of a family that is more pliable than Play-Doh. Gillis reports that there are already 200 different kinds of family that Europeans and Americans "now regard as legitimate 'families'." And he declares that "it is time to abandon once and for all the idol of 'the Family' and to validate the great variety of families that people are actually living by." Above all, we should "insist that we keep our family cultures diverse, fluid, and unresolved . . ."

Gillis is a well-regarded historian, the author of the well-received *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present*. He is a powerful narrator, who uses a rich variety of sources to make his case as he examines several specific myths that are interwoven with the mother of all myth, that of the family. He explores the ways we conceptualize time, which leads him to examine age and the cultural framing of

death. In earlier ages, Christians disposed of bodies quickly, and formal mourning was very brief, because they believed in the continuity of life and the afterlife. Today, the aging and anticipated death of our own bodies and of members of our families are a source of existential angst.

Time figures in Gillis's book in another way: He points out that we believe that we should have time for family life but actually have ever less. As a result we are frantically trying to have a relaxed time together, only to be disappointed and disappointing. He cites a telling statistic: 80 percent of Americans told a pollster that they had a family dinner the night before and 46 percent said they had eaten together every night of the preceding week. Observation revealed that only about one third actually had. For Gillis this finding is another piece of evidence that a past myth must be replaced.

And the same recasting is required for

rituals of space. Victorians, like us, yearned for a place of harmony but expected to find it in the community, in church, and in Heaven, rather than in the household. But as the national and religious community weakened, the myth of the family household as a home arose. Public spaces, such as streets and plazas, where communities happen, became merely places to travel from one household to another. But the myth of the home and the reality of the household have become increasingly difficult to reconcile, although they never truly overlapped. We need a less troubling myth.

Once one gains a grip on Gillis's approach, one can practically fill in the rest: The myths of mothers, of fathers, of marriage, are all forms of false consciousness from which reality has moved further and further away. Gillis's view of the forces that drive reality is less explicitly stated but unmistakable. Though not a Marxist, he holds that economic forces largely govern our lives. For instance, he states that we have come to treat time as regimented and hurried because of the needs of the capitalist economy.

Because he treats myths as a form of superstructure suspended over a true reality that is chiefly economic, he misses the sociological argument that the family is required to lay the foundations for the moral upbringing of the new members of society. He does not examine the 200 new kinds of families to establish whether they are able to discharge their social responsibility. One can dispute the argument that the decline of the family is a major cause of our moral decay, but one cannot dismiss it out of hand.

Most important, values are not a fairy tale we tell one another so we will be able to cope with a harsh world. They are the core of our most profound moral convictions. If reality does not match our beliefs, it is the reality that may well need to be refashioned. Granted, retooling reality is a challenging and painful, maybe even an eternal, struggle. And some respecifications of what we value might be called for. However, when all is said and done, we need to labor for what is right, whether or not it is soothing. ■