


# Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion



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*Edited by*  
Serinity Young

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rately venerated previous generations through ancestor worship. A woman gained status and power primarily through her husband. Marriages among the imperial family were arranged for the purpose of powerful allegiances and dominance. Wives in certain ways participated in this power, but often the mother and sisters of the emperor wielded more influence than did the wife of the regent. Women who married into the educated elite did so through arrangements made by their fathers. Women in these positions shared more of the power with their husbands. But in so doing they were required to personify the honor of their family by demonstrating chastity and virtue.

Men often had more than one wife. Women's roles, therefore, could fall into several categories. These included wife; secondary wife, who might be a younger relative of the wife and who was legally married to the husband; concubine, whose function was similar to that of the second wife, except that she was not officially married to the husband during periods where the law prescribed monogamy; and second wife, a subsequent wife after divorce or the death of the first wife.

Traditionally, little or no choice existed in the selection of mate. After marriage, at the onset of which the woman went to live in the home of her husband, she enjoyed little personal freedom. The extreme pressures under which many women lived led to an expectation of high suicide rates among them.

The Communist Family Law of 1 May 1950 set forth new guidelines for marriage in modern China, although it essentially codified a change in attitudes that had already begun in the early part of the twentieth century. The new law sought to undo the hierarchical attitudes both between the sexes and between the generations, in which the parents decided upon their children's marriage partners. Marriage was now to be based solely on love, and the exchange of money, whether as a dowry or as bride-price, was prohibited. Even as early as 1931, the state officially withdrew its financial support of ancestor worship, which has been foundational to the Confucian-based familial hierarchy.

Although contemporary China has radically changed its political structure, and the large extended family as an idea has disappeared with the imperial families that fostered it, marriage continues as a priority in contemporary China. In certain ways, the face of the family has changed completely, as in the "one couple, one child" mandate. In addition, it has become increasingly necessary for spouses to live apart because of employment; in 1998 an estimated fifty million people were living in this situation. However, in what may seem to be a natural holdover of ancient allegiances to family, the law requires adult children to care for their aging parents. Even under such changing circumstances, however,

the single person—whether male or female—continues to be an unusual exception in Asian cultures.

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CONSTANTINA RHODES BAILLY

#### In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Marriage in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has traditionally been based on a heterosexual contract in which a person secures sexual and reproductive rights to the body of another person. Procreation, kinship, and transfer or conservation of property have all been core issues in marriage in each of these traditions to varying degrees in different times and places.

#### JUDAISM

Heterosexual marriage in Judaism is the normative state for adult men and women, based on the example of Adam and Eve in Genesis. The first divine commandment after creation is to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28); later in the narrative, companionship is added to the advantages of the male-female bond (Gen. 2:18). For the Hebrew prophets, marriage is a potent metaphor for God's relationship to Israel (Hos. 2:21–22; Isa. 61:10, 62:5; Ezek. 16).



Although these prophetic texts clearly reveal a monogamous expectation for the marital state, polygyny was known and acceptable in Judaism until the eleventh century C.E., when Rabbi Gershom b. Judah banned it for Jews of the West (Ashkenazim). For Jews of the East (Sephardin), polygyny continued to be permitted except in those countries where it was prohibited by civil law, although this practice was restricted by the requirement that each wife be provided with equivalent levels of material maintenance and conjugal attention. Concubinage, the keeping of an unmarried woman by a man who acknowledges her offspring as his own, occurs in the Bible (and occurred sometimes in medieval Judaism also), but most rabbinic authorities prohibit the practice today. A married woman is forbidden to have sexual relations with anyone besides her husband.

Throughout Jewish history certain marriages have been prohibited, usually based on consanguinity and affinity (Lev. 18, 20), and endogamous marriages within the Jewish group have always been strongly preferred. Fruitfulness, from Biblical times, has been a sign of blessedness, and barrenness of shame and favor withheld by God. After ten years barren marriages may be dissolved; in earlier times a man could take a second wife.

Rabbinic Judaism frowns upon singleness and celibacy (Kid. 29b; Yeb. 63a-64a) and views sexual desire as the source of creativity and drive in human beings (Gen. Rab. 9:7).

Jewish marriage is a sacred relationship, expressed in the term *Kiddushin*, derived from the Hebrew word for "holiness." In Jewish marriage the wife is consecrated to her husband and forbidden to cohabit with anyone else (Kid. 2a-b), but he may cohabit with other women as long as they are not married. The husband acquires exclusive rights to his wife's sexuality and reproductiveity, though he also incurs the obligation to satisfy her need for food, clothing, and conjugal activity. Divorce, which may be given only by the husband, is permitted but discouraged. Both parties may remarry after a divorce. Whether or not there is a formal Jewish divorce decree, a man is permitted by Jewish law to remarry and father more children, but without this decree, called a *get*, his first wife may not. Under Jewish law the children born to a woman who cohabits with another man while she is still technically married to her first husband are branded *mamzerim*. According to the Bible, *mamzerim* and their offspring for ten generations are banned from the community of Israel (Deut. 23:2); they may not marry other Jews or participate in ritual activities.

Abuses of the husband's exclusive right to grant divorce have, in modern times and among Orthodox



Bride and groom joined in marriage by a rabbi, depicted in illustrated medieval Biblical manuscript (Biblioteca Palatina, Parma Italy)

Jews, created an abused class of women called *agunot*, or "chained" women, whose husbands refuse to give them a Jewish divorce decree. In earlier times social pressure from rabbinic authority or within the tightly knit Jewish community was enough to encourage the husband to free his wife. Today, Orthodox Jewish feminists are challenging Orthodox rabbis who have been reluctant to censure men who withhold the divorce decree out of spite or in order to coerce the wife to capitulate on contested issues of property division or child custody.

#### CHRISTIANITY

Catholic marriage is seen as a permanent bond between members of a legally competent, baptized heterosexual couple with the primary purpose of bearing and raising children within the Catholic Church. Divorce is not permitted. In the New Testament, Paul encourages wives to be subservient to their husbands in Jesus' name (Eph. 5:22), and even in the modern period Catholic wives are seen as having their highest vocation expressed inside the home; any public activity by



women should enable them to "join in stemming the tides which threaten to engulf the home," as Pope Pius XII wrote in his 1945 encyclical.

Most Protestant Christian churches allow remarriage after divorce or the death of a spouse, as do Eastern rite Catholics. However, for Roman Catholics, marriage is the seventh sacrament and the symbol on the earthly plane of the heavenly unity between Christ and the Church. The marital union is consecrated by a permanent sacrament that the bride and groom administer to and receive from each other, as they acknowledge their mutual consent to enter into the state of matrimony. For Catholics the symbolic reality of the unity of Christ and Church as expressed in the unity of husband and wife is permanent until the death of one of the marriage partners. Catholic marriage is conceived as being exclusive and permanent. Therefore, concubinage, which is considered adultery, is officially forbidden.

Not everyone is obligated to enter the marital state, according to Catholic doctrine. Anyone, male or female, is free to withhold the power of their bodies to generate offspring by refraining from marriage. But once marriage is freely chosen, then the sacramental joining of the couple signifies that they have entered into a marriage contract that consists of yielding permanent and exclusive power over their bodies to their partner with the specific view of engaging in procreative acts. Catholic theologians regard marriage as a vocation, to which the majority of human beings are called by God.

Within the Abrahamic traditions, the practice of celibacy is an almost exclusively Catholic institution. Beginning in the New Testament, virginity is presented as an earthly expression of the heavenly state (Luke 20:36, Matt. 22:30, Mark 12:25) and a powerful means of worshiping God. Celibacy in Catholic canon law is a freely undertaken renunciation of marriage in order to practice perfect chastity and dedication to God's service. Celibacy and consecrated virginity are considered even higher vocations than is the vocation of marriage (1 Cor. 7:26-35). Although married male clergy were permitted in early Catholicism in the Roman rite and are so even today in the Eastern rite at the lowest hierarchical levels, all Roman Catholic clergy today must be celibate. For women, virginity and the consecration of one's life to God transcends physical motherhood as a vocation, representing as it does a public affirmation of God's transcendence and the primacy of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 19:11-12).

The Protestant Reformation abolished celibacy, terming it a human institution and not divinely decreed. In 1522, several years after his break with the Catholic Church, Martin Luther condemned celibacy and was

himself married on 13 June 1525. Although John Calvin did not condemn it, in 1561 he wrote that celibacy was not to be preferred over the married state.

Christian feminists today are focusing on the mutuality of the marriage bond that has been traditional in their religion, emphasizing individual personal and sexual fulfillment more than the primarily procreative emphasis of earlier times.

## ISLAM

In Islam the extended family is the central economic, social, and political unit, and marriage, with its profound impact on family relationships, is the peak experience of an individual's life cycle. Marriage in Islam is regarded as a universal obligation, the appropriate state for every mentally and physically competent person. Temporary celibacy is advocated by some in Islamic mystical traditions as a way of purifying oneself and enhancing self-control and spiritual receptivity. Permanent celibacy, however, is viewed by Muslims as a violation of the Qur'an and was rejected by the prophet Muhammad.

Marriage in Islam is a bilateral contract between the bride's family or guardian and the groom. The bride's consent is generally required, although, in the case of a virgin, silence may be taken to signify consent, and some interpretations allow her to be coerced into her first marriage. All women are expected to be virgins the first time they marry. Islamic law sets no minimum age for the marriageability of either men or women, though civil laws in some areas do. Also required in Islamic marriage is the cooperation of the bride's guardian and the payment of a bride price, called *mahr*, for the rights that the husband acquires over the wife. Often the contract stipulates that only part of the bride price is to be paid upon marriage, the remainder to be paid to the wife in the event of divorce. Marriage does not result in community of property between husband and wife, and the woman retains ownership of her bride price. The husband is obliged to maintain the household and support his wife in a particular manner befitting her status or she may demand dissolution of the marriage. If the wife is not obedient and prepared to meet her husband's conjugal needs, she loses her claim to support. A husband is forbidden to take vows of celibacy.

Pre-Islamic society permitted temporary marriage in which a man and woman cohabit for a fixed period mutually stipulated in a marriage contract. At the end of the stipulated period, the husband declares the divorce formula and the marriage is over. Some Muslims adduce Qur'anic evidence that Muhammad permitted his devotees to contract temporary marriages, termed *mut'a*, especially on lengthy expeditions (4:28). After the prophet's death, this practice was prohibited by the



early caliph Omar, who regarded it as fornication, although some factions of Islam still permit it today.

Islamic marriage is endogamous within the community of believers, based on Qur'anic stipulation (2:200). According to some interpretations, Islamic men may marry women of other "scriptural" religions such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians (5:7), though Muslim women may marry only Muslim men. In general practice marriages are made within the even narrower confines of tribe, clan, and extended family and are frequently arranged by the bride's male relatives or another intermediary.

Marriages are forbidden among certain degrees of affinity and consanguinity (4:26-28), though often the preferred marriage is of a daughter to her father's brother's son, who, in some Islamic circles, must renounce his right to marry his paternal cousin, termed a *bint amm*, before she can be betrothed to another suitor. This form of marriage serves to build the extended family and ensure loyalty to the father's house. Polygyny is permitted in Islam, though the Qur'an stipulates that a man may marry no more than four wives and must undertake to treat them equally (4:3).

Divorce is permitted in Islam, and remarriage after divorce is common for both men and women. Both men and woman have the right to initiate divorce, but it has generally been the prerogative of the male. He can do this by simply pronouncing a formula stating his intention, although civil law in different regions often requires more procedural formality. The woman receives that portion of her bride price that was reserved, in her marriage contract, for payment in case of divorce.

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DIANE M. SHARON

## Martyrdom

*Martyrdom*, from the Greek *martyria*, meaning "witness," connotes the death, understood by those who champion it as a willing death, of an individual on behalf of a belief or principle. Its earliest emergence in the West occurs in the Apocrypha to the Hebrew Bible, in the account of the persecutions of the Jews by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes at the beginning of the second century B.C.E. Already these early sources display the particular magnetism of gender in the context of martyrdom: the texts emphasize the heroism of a mother and her seven sons, in terms that underline the outrage the reader should feel at the suffering and heroism of women and children (2 Macc. 7:20ff). The peculiar narrative magnetism of female suffering recurs in a variety of religious contexts: the persecution of Fātimah and her sons, for example, serves as the foundation myth for Shiite Islam.

The conjunction between the perceived heroism of unjust suffering and the narrative magnetism of female suffering raises important theoretical issues. The social meaning of acts of religious heroism can shift dramatically according to the socially constructed connotations imposed by the gender of the agent (Saiving, 1992). Thus, self-sacrifice would have a different meaning for women—assuming a social context in which women are exhorted to engage in self-abnegating behaviors—than it would for men. Where gendered social constraints play a coercive role, as in the case of sati, the self-immolation of Hindu widows, it may be impossible to uncover the "voice" or intention of the woman in question; and the interpreter is left to adjudicate among the assertions of