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# RELIGION - THE FAMILY

By Harry Jivenmukta

All religions support the institutions of marriage and family. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between the society's need for families and the religious viewpoint of families. This is because religion and society are interlinked but both support families for different reasons.

Society supports families and family units because the primary interest of society is stability. All societies require a stable social network so that people feel they belong and can then contribute to the well being and prosperity of the society that they belong to. Furthermore, within the family there needs to be a hierarchy, a mini society, so that it is clear who is in charge and responsible. We can see the traditional family unit as husband and father, wife and mother, children. Traditionally, the husband (and father) is in charge, with the wife and children following his lead. Today, these traditional ideas of family are breaking down and with it, the whole validity of religions which support this idea.

Religions support families for different reasons than society, although the practical effect is very similar. Christianity and Judaism, for instance, tells us that God made Adam, and then Eve. Eve was made out of the rib of Adam. There is no direct mention, in the Bible, that women are inferior to men, but this idea that Eve was made out of the rib of Adam, or that Eve was made after Adam, was interpreted as meaning that man is more important than woman. It was also Eve who tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, and thereby placed woman as the primary cause of sin. Religions for hundreds of years have reflected these ideas by placing man in charge of the family, and requiring women to obey their husbands because on their own they might stray into sin. The main problem with the Bible viewpoint (for feminists) is that it was written by men.

Marriage and family in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, are also encouraged by religions. Hinduism and Buddhism, however, distinguish between the ordinary masses and the devout. Very religious people remain celibate, neither marrying, or living in traditional family type units. In Sikhism, marriage is encouraged for everyone and is seen as one of the building blocks to enlightenment. All of the Sikh Gurus who reached marriageable age did marry, and had children.

The practical effect of marriage is to give stability to society and allow the growth of spiritualism. The negative effects, however, is that family structures in some societies lead to the oppression of women, and though these societies may claim to be religious, there is no religious text which declares the inequality of women.

## Questions

1. Why do religions generally support the institution of marriage?
2. Why do some holy people choose not to get married?
3. Is there any difference between the reasons society supports marriage and the reasons religions support it?

In **Islam** the Qur'an considers the marital bond to rest on 'mutual love and mercy,' and the spouses are said to be 'each other's garments.'

**Hindu** ceremony: The date is fixed only after careful astrological calculation; the bridegroom is conducted to the home of his future parents-in-law, who receive him as an honoured guest; there are offerings of roasted grain into the fire; the bridegroom has to take hold of the bride's hand; he conducts her around the sacrificial fire; seven steps are taken by bride and bridegroom to solemnize the irrevocability of the unity; both are, in procession, conducted to their new home, which the bride enters without touching the threshold.

**Jewish** ceremony: Marriage involves a double ceremony, performed together in modern times but separated in ancient times by a year. First is the betrothal (erusin), which includes the reading of the marriage contract (ketubba) and the giving of the ring with a declaration, 'Behold you are consecrated to me by this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel,' accompanied by certain benedictions. This is followed by the marriage proper (nissu`in), consisting of the reciting of the seven marriage benedictions. The ceremony is performed under a huppa, a canopy, that symbolizes the bridal bower.

## Questions

1. Using a similar length write a short piece each on the marriage ceremonies in Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism below.

**CHRISTIANITY:**

**ISLAM:**

**SIKHISM:**

Most religions support monogamy, although Islam in particular, allows polygamy. Monogamy means to have only one spouse. This needs to be clarified because there is a difference between monogamy and serial monogamy:

- z Monogamy means to have only one partner in the whole of one's life,
- z Serial monogamy means that someone can marry again if their partner dies or leaves and never returns.

In traditional Hindu society, a woman would never marry again if her husband died. In fact, some women performed 'Sati' and threw themselves onto the burning funeral pyre of their husband and died with him. The idea behind Sati is that the souls of both partners would be united forever. There is no religious foundation for this. Hinduism clearly states that the soul leaves the body at the point of death. The funeral would take place later and therefore anyone throwing themselves on the pyre could not be united with the soul which died earlier. Hindus also believe that future lives depend on actions performed in this life and not on the relationships formed.

In Sikhism and modern Hinduism and Buddhism, women often marry again if their first marriage ended in divorce, but seldom marry if their partner dies. Men find it easier to re-marry after the death of their spouse.

In Islam men can have up to four wives at any one time. This is written in the Qur'an, but its beginnings are socially based. At the time of Mohammed, there were about four women for every man. This was because of war which had claimed the lives of many men at that time. Obviously, this could cause social problems, including affairs, and lead to immorality. It was decreed that a man could have up to four wives but that the residences of each wife should be separate. This meant that a man would have to be fairly well off to even marry a second time, and also safeguarded women's interests to some degree.

## Questions

1. What is polygamy?
2. What is the difference between serial monogamy and polygamy?
3. Is it fair that Islam allows a man to have four wives but not a woman to have four husbands?

Celibacy, or Bhramacharaya, as it is known in Indian based religions is a fairly common theme in most religions. The roots of celibacy have very little to do with not having sex, but were originally based around a self study of the human body by saints who spent their lives in spirituality.

The findings of many saints was that the body receives a certain amount of energy each day from the food we eat and the sunshine we receive. The body uses this energy in various ways. Some is used to propel the body, (muscles), some is used to fulfil the internal functions of the body, (digestive organs etc.). A small amount of energy is used by the senses and some by the brain.

The saints believed that energy came in different qualities. The energy for muscles, for instance, was very coarse. The energy used by the senses or the brain was very fine. The saints believed that the amount of energy a body received each day was limited. In order to experience spiritual fulfilment in meditation it was necessary to convert energy from one use to another. Spiritual energy was the finest of all. It was not simply a case of transferring muscle energy to spiritual energy. What needed to be done was to transform coarse energy into finer energy.

Imagine distilling a large amount of liquid in order to extract a small amount of pure liquid from it. That is what the saints believed had to be done. Coarse energy could be transformed into finer spiritual energy but a large amount of coarse energy would only produce a tiny amount of the pure energy required in meditation. The saints thought that the easiest way to conserve energy was to limit the amount of physical activity which was not essential. Sex and sexual drive is responsible for a major drain on physical energy. The saints did not believe that people should not have sex, just that they should limit their sexual activity. After all, sex is a natural process, and the saints of ancient times believed that nothing which is natural should be denied.

Today, the original reasons for celibacy have been largely forgotten. Celibates believe that sex is somehow bad, or leads to moral confusion. If the saints of ancient times are right, these people are wasting their time if they do not understand how to transform the energy they are saving into spiritual energy.

## Questions

1. Why do some people choose celibacy?
2. Do modern celibates understand why celibacy is useful? Why else might celibacy be an advantage?
3. How can a person transform coarse energy into finer spiritual energy?

There are two main positions regarding birth; the one which sees the new born child as absolutely new, and the one which sees the child as millions of lives old.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam do not believe in reincarnation. A baby is born absolutely fresh and new. It has incredible potential and the whole world is waiting for it. The child will grow up and fulfil its desires. This birth is a once in a lifetime opportunity. This new life has the chance to become close to God by leading a good life or to fall into the deepest hell if it lives a particularly bad one.

Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism believe that a new baby brings with it thousands if not millions of previous lives. When a person dies, if there are any unfulfilled desires left in that person, he or she will have to be reborn (not necessarily a human birth) to fulfil those desires. The birth of the baby means many things. **The baby chooses the family it is born into.** This point is very important indeed to understand. If a person is re-born to fulfil the desires which were left unfulfilled then the spirit (soul) has to choose a satisfactory family to be born into. The family may choose to have a baby, but it is not the family's choice which unfulfilled spirit will enter the foetus. That is why many people seek the help of holy men and women to find out the best time and state of mind to conceive a child; so that they might give birth to a baby with the spirit of an advanced type.

The purpose of life is entirely different depending on which position you take. If you do not believe in re-birth then this life is all there is. The whole potential of a person has about 70-80 years to unfold. That is why (some people find it incredible) people in the West go charging around at an incredible pace. If you believe in re-birth there is no need to rush. If not in this life, then the next will do. That is one reason why people in India are so laid back and relaxed, (and technologically backward and slow). These are not derogatory statements. They are a real reflection of why different cultures do things in different ways. Christians do not look to the holy men before starting a business. A Hindu in India wouldn't think of starting a business without first consulting the stars or holy men for an auspicious time.

## Questions

1. How does Christianity see birth?
2. How can '**The baby choose the family it is born into?**'
3. How does the purpose of life change if you believe in re-birth?

The Judaism-Christian-Islam tradition believes that once a person is dead the soul waits for the day of judgement when God will judge each person. Depending on what sort of life the person lived, God will either cast him or her into hell, to suffer for eternity, (or perhaps a little less), or allow him or her into heaven to live forever in peace. This tradition believes that there will be a Judgement Day. On this day, the world will end and all the people who ever lived will be judged either one way or the other.

The place in which a person is buried is very important, and relatives maintain the grave carefully. The body is 'laid to rest' until Judgement Day. Most people in this tradition bury their dead, although cremation is becoming more popular, especially with Christians.

The Hindu-Buddhist-Sikh tradition is very different. They believe that the soul departs from the body at the moment of death. The body thereafter is of little consequence. People do cry and are attached to the physical form that is left behind, and like other traditions they do remember the physical body of the person. The body is usually cremated and often the ashes are cast into a river.

The soul leaves the body the instant the person dies. The soul travels to another realm, (you can imagine it as a spiritual level, or perhaps like the difference between when you are awake and when you are asleep.) If there are any desires left in the person at the point of death, then the person has to be re-born. It does not matter how pious or religious the person might have been in life, if there is even one desire left he or she must return. People in this tradition spend their whole life preparing for death. Many of them say:

**The purpose of life is to learn how to die.**

## Questions

1. Do you think that anyone has a soul? Explain.
2. How does the Hindu view of death differ from that of Judaism?
3. What is the difference between resurrection and re-birth?

## **Chuang-tzu's attitude toward death.**

Life and death are but one of the pairs of cyclical phases, such as day and night or summer and winter.

**'Since life and death are each other's companions, why worry about them? All beings are one.'**

Life and death are not in opposition but merely two aspects of the same reality, arrested moments out of the flux of the universal mutations of everything into everything. Humans are no exception; "they go back into the great weaving machine: thus all beings issue from the Loom and return to the Loom."

Death is natural, and people ought neither to fear nor to desire it.

## **Judaism**

The biblical view of man as an inseparable psychosomatic unit meant that death was understood to be his dissolution. Yet, although man ceased to be, this dissolution was not utter extinction. Some of the power that functioned in the unit may have continued to exist, but it was not to be understood any longer as life. For most of the biblical writers this existence was without experience, either of God or of anything else; it was unrelated to events. This concept of death along with belief in the possibility of occasional miraculous restorations of dead individuals to life, provided a foothold for the development of belief in the resurrection of the dead body at some time in the future.

## **Indonesia**

In modern societies, death is regarded as instantaneous; it is not so in some other societies, where it is held to involve a slow change, a passage from the visible society of the living to the invisible one of the dead. During the period of decomposition the corpse is sometimes treated as if it were alive, provided with food and drink, and surrounded by company. Some groups, the Indonesians, for example, attached mystical importance to the disintegration of the body, collecting and carefully disposing of the liquids produced by decomposition, sometimes mixing them with rice to ingest them.

## Questions

1. Explain Chuang-tzu's view of life and death.
2. Write a short summary of how the following see death:
  - z Christians,
  - z Sikhs.

In only one of the major religions do women have an equal opportunity, and can enjoy all the privileges the same as men: **Sikhism**. It is common to see Sikh women in all Gurdwaras (Sikh temples), they may lead the congregation in singing hymns or Kirtan (music and singing), and have the same rights to baptism as men. Women do not, however, tend to become priests, although there is no religious block to them doing so. Sikh history includes women generals leading the Khalsa armies into war.

**Christianity** is a liberal religion and there are more women Christians than men. The problem facing women in Christianity is that they are blocked from becoming priests in many of the denominations, including Roman Catholic. Only recently have women been allowed to become priests in the Church of England, and feelings were so high that many people left the church to join different ones. The official position from the Vatican still restricts women in many ways including priesthood, contraception, and birth control.

The **Muslim** position on women has been very confused. Muslims are adamant that all the restrictions placed on women are for the benefit of the women themselves. In Islam women live separate spiritual and social lives from men. It is rare to see women going to a Mosque; they usually pray at home. Islam requires women to be dressed modestly, but in many Muslim states this has been interpreted as full veiling from head to foot. Islam gave women more rights in inheritance and property, and also clarified the marriage position which meant that women were treated better than before the time of the Qur'an. Today, however, the position of women in Islam is generally thought to be much less free than in all the other religions. Some Islamic countries interpret the Qur'an in more liberal terms.

Most people agree that the position of women in religions generally are very poor. The religious texts were written long ago, and at that time these positions were revolutionary because women often had no rights at all. Today, it seems that all religions are out of touch with the way women should be treated. Even in Sikhism, although there are no religious restrictions on women, there are still some social barriers.

## Questions

1. Find out more about the position of women in Sikhism.
2. Are they really equal with men in religious terms?
3. How does Islam see the role of women?

*Women and men are different not only in their physical shapes and functions, but in their spirituality. Ancient saints, who were sincere in their spiritual search, and were not influenced by society and politics came to a dramatic conclusion which has been suppressed even until this day.*

*Women are more spiritual than men.*

*These saints meditated on how men and women were different. If you can imagine a wheel, men are on the outside edges, going very fast. Women are more towards the centre. The ancient saints saw life as a wheel, the point in life being to slow down and eventually get to the very centre where there is no movement at all. Men traditionally did the outer duties like working, politics, fighting, hunting, etc. Women traditionally did the inner duties like being the centre of the home, the anchor of the family. In social terms women suffered inequality but in religious terms this central role took them closer to their essence.*

*You can see the evidence of this even today. There are more women believers in every religion than men. The saints also found that women were more suited to spirituality because of their temperament. In order to become enlightened a person has to be able to receive God. Men are more competitive in their attitude and want to conquer or struggle with ideas. Women find it easier to receive, to listen and to understand matters of the heart.*

*The reason why women have not been able to gain a dominant role in the administrative parts of religious organisations is precisely because they are not aggressive. All religious texts have been written by men (perhaps a few percent of some texts by women). Men have been the priests, the prophets, the law makers. But surprisingly, many more women become enlightened than men. Whilst men grapple with the outside world, women have been able to quietly enter deep states of realisation of God. Men find it very hard to meditate because their concern is always with trying to get more - more positions in the church, more votes, more followers.*

*Today, when women are becoming more forceful and claiming their rights, their social position has improved radically but their religious ability has declined. It is not possible to have both. Being aggressive socially shuts the door to enlightenment because what is required in religion is not assertiveness but passivity. Look even at men who are very religious. There is a sense of passivity, almost femininity about them.*

## Questions

1. What do you think of the opinion expressed above?
2. Why don't women write religious texts or become religious leaders according to the position expressed above?

In most religions there are situations where divorce is allowed. The problem with divorce however goes back to the institution of marriage. Most religions see marriage as a holy union of two people. Couples 'swear before God' to stay together for the rest of their lives. Most people get married in a religious ceremony and this is seen as more than simply a contract. The problem then arises when the couple want to break a holy union. Divorce is seen by some religious people as an attack on God because the couple having taken solemn oaths now discard them as if they were meaningless.

The reality of divorce is that it is increasing in virtually every nation in the world, and is happening because people have different and developing ideas about what marriage and relationships generally should be about. Religious texts, meanwhile, are static because once written they cannot be changed without causing incredible upheaval and possibly wars. Some nations overcome this difficulty by saying that marriage and divorce laws are civil and not religious matters.

**Islam** has a very clear position regarding divorce, allowing it to be instigated by either the man or the woman. The reality is, however, that it is more difficult for the woman to divorce her husband because often women rely on their husbands socially and economically.

In **Christianity** divorce happens perhaps easiest of all because most Christian nations have marriage and divorce as a civil rather than religious concern.

**Sikhism** has no guidance on divorce but Sikhs usually follow the civil law of the land in which they live. The problem with divorce, in religious terms, is more than the break up of two people. Marriage is seen as an institution which protects the morals of society. Marriage ensures that sex is legitimised, and that children born of a couple have more chance of a good upbringing. The break down of marriages is feared because it might lead to greater immorality.

Today, more people live together rather than get married than ever before.

## Questions

1. In what circumstances is divorce acceptable in religious terms?
2. What do high divorce rates tell us about the institution of marriage?
3. Do religions have any positive things to teach us about relationships?

