



Spirituality & Health

The Soul/Body Connection

Issue: Fall 2000

Love and Marriage: Lessons from the World's Religions

Ann Kathleen Bradley

Because marriage sets the stage for our most intimate contact with another human being, most of the world's religions have offered believers guidance on both the why and how of married life. As the various faith traditions have encountered modern psychology — and one another — some common understandings have emerged about what a marriage means and how to keep it together, but important differences remain.

Christianity

Love is the Most Direct Experience of God

The loving union of Christ and the Church as divine bridegroom and bride underpins the Christian understanding of marriage. The selfless love, concern, and care for others personified in the life and death of Christ serves as the model for all relationships, including marriage. The Apostle Paul's description of love reads almost like a modern marriage manual: "Love is patient; love is kind; love...does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Cor. 13: 4-5, 7)

Religion professor Don Browning from the University of Chicago's Divinity School suggests that respect, forgiveness, an awareness of our own fallibility, and "treating your spouse as a child of God" are Christian principles that can help us define what it means to love — and that modern communication theory is giving us new tools to put them into practice. "Researchers have found that it's not the couples

This touches on:

- [Faith](#)
- [Love](#)
- [You](#)

[✉ Email This Article](#)

Customer service:

- [Subscribe to S & H](#)
- [Renew Your Subscription](#)
- [Give a Subscription](#)
- [Manage Your Account](#)
- [Advertiser Information](#)
- [Writer Guidelines](#)
- [Email the Editors](#)

without conflict who stay together; it's the couples who learn to communicate about the conflict," he says. "People who know how to pay attention to their partner's concerns and show that they're open to change really live out Jesus' injunction to 'love your neighbor as yourself' in the process of their communication. It shows that 'I'm taking you as seriously as I do myself.'"

Christians who do try to practice their faith in the context of marriage realize that conflict can lead us to a deeper dimension of love, says Patrick McDonald, a former Roman Catholic priest who now does marriage and family counseling in Des Moines, Iowa, and has written *Marital Spirituality: The Search for the Hidden Ground of Love* (Paulist Press) with his wife, Claudette. There are many things we must sacrifice in marriage: our unrestricted freedom, our idealized image of ourself and the other person, our hopes for a perfect union. But as Jesus demonstrated, this death experience can be followed by a resurrection — "the discovery that there is a rich mother lode of love that exists beneath all the letting go of things and opens up to us as love runs its course. Nothing transforms a person like a life of love," he says. "The very act of loving is an expression of God's love and connects us with God. And in the end," he adds, "the most direct experience a lot of couples ever get of God is the experience of their own love."

Confucianism

Lessons in Being Human

The family unit and the value of duty are emphasized in Confucian thought — a philosophy that still shapes the lives of most Chinese. *The Book of Mencius*, a Confucian classic, lists five basic relationships and assigns to that of husband and wife the virtue of distinction or differentiation. So the ideal marriage is based on a division of labor, and if each partner plays his or her role well, there will be a harmonious family.

This is important, because in addition to ensuring our immortality through children and grandchildren, the family is where we get our first lessons in being human. "The basic idea in Confucianism is that we are not born fully human... we are born with the potential to actualize our humanity, but it's something we must learn through relationships. The Confucian classics claim that if you don't do well within a family, you

Ads by Goooooogle

[Many Paths to God?](#)

A comparative study of the world religions, are they all the same?
www.EveryStudent.com

[The Next Pope](#)

A look at the challenges facing the successor to John Paul II.
www.foreignpolicy.com

[The Power of Faith](#)

Here's a valuable way to improve your work day!
www.TheHighCalling.org

[Christianity in History](#)

A Blast of Brutal Honesty From the Ridiculous to the Sublime
www.CoffeehouseTheology.com

[Are You a Good Person?](#)

See how You measure up.
www.LivingWaters.com

cannot do well beyond the family — in society," says Chenyang Li, associate professor of philosophy at Central Washington University. "The Western understanding of the self — that I have a fixed, unchanging personality — does not exist in Confucianism. Instead, we are all shaping and reshaping ourselves to achieve harmonious coexistence. If a husband and wife are willing to shape themselves together, to accommodate each other, they can minimize conflict in their marriage. And it's their duty to each other and their children to do so. So you could say that Confucianism is kind of optimistic about human nature and future-oriented — if both of you believe you can change and you keep trying, it will work out."

Buddhism

The Best Monastery for Americans

Buddhism is less optimistic about family life as a vehicle for self-transformation. "Unfortunately, Buddhism is not too big on marriage," says Columbia University Buddhist studies professor Robert A. F. Thurman, author of *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness* (Penguin, 1999). "It's very much a monastic-based tradition. Buddhism teaches that love and marriage help you to form attachments and encourage passions that make it hard to concentrate. So it's a privilege to remain free, to avoid the 9-to-5, raising children, and conflicts with your spouse." Dr. Mark Epstein, a New York City psychiatrist and author of *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*, sees it differently. "Like everything else in Buddhist tradition, the purpose of love and marriage is to be a vehicle for awakening. Buddhism is about investigating all the different self-experiences with the ultimate goal of knowing true reality, knowing self and other — and in an intense emotional relationship like marriage the experience of the self is stretched. When the self and the other get intermingled, it challenges our sense that our identity is fixed, and when we get hurt it makes the illusion of the self very visible. We can have all of these experiences of the self because love and marriage are the intermingling of emptiness and bliss."

Couples who do decide to marry, says Thurman, should see their relationship as an opportunity to support the highest fulfillment of the other by respecting his or her right to pursue personal happiness through spiritual

evolution. "Buddhism sees conflict as an essential aspect of the unenlightened human condition, but believes that we can become truly free of suffering if we can get rid of egotism and selfishness. So in that sense, as Zen master Sasaki Roshi once said, 'The best monastery for Americans might in fact be marriage.'"

Islam

Essential Male, Essential Female

No Muslim would ever call marriage a monastery. Muhammad rejected monasticism outright, along with celibacy, and he also declared that marriage is half of faith, while divorce is the most detested of acts.

"In Islam," explains Imam Yahya Hendi, Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., "both men and women are called *za-wj*, which is also the Arabic word for marriage. It means a pair — but in the sense of two things that are complementary and compatible yet still not the same, still two separate entities. The Koran speaks about God creating us in pairs, and making the night as a completion of the day and the day as a completion of the night. (78:8, 10-11) In the same way, Islam believes that there is an essential male nature and an essential female nature and that they are different. Men and women understand the world differently. Men are likely to have qualities that women don't and vice versa, things each can contribute to the success of the marriage from his or her own perspective, and marriage needs that balance. A man has no right to ask his wife to give up her identity and think the way he does, nor should a woman ask her husband to give up his identity, but both must understand the other. So the prophet Muhammad said, 'Do not attempt to change their nature' — referring to women — 'for that's how they are created.'"

Hinduism

Duty and Desire

Hinduism teaches, for example, that by marrying, couples are fulfilling both a social duty — to their families and the larger society — and a sacred duty. Marriage helps them achieve the four primary goals of life, which are spiritual as well as material: 1) *kama*, the enjoyment of sensual pleasure and fulfillment of

sexual desire; 2) *artha*, the pursuit of material wealth; 3) *dharma*, leading a moral life, and ultimately 4) *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. "It's your *dharma* or sacred duty to enact the role you've been given," explains Rick Jarow, professor of religious studies at Vassar College. "As someone suggested, the Hindu wife may actually be the prototype of the first *bhakta* or religious devotee, because her devotion to her husband is selfless — it's not done out of love in the way we think of it." Michael Nagler, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and longtime student of Sri Eknath Easwaran, recalls a story in the Upanishads in which a husband explains to his wife that "it is not for the sake of the husband that the husband is dear, but for the sake of the Self." In other words, if we can purify our love it can actually lead us to the supreme reality, which consists of pure consciousness. Selfless love is practiced first in the laboratory of the family, and then eventually extended to all."

This is, of course, the ideal, and the fact that most Hindu marriages are still arranged by the families reminds everyone involved that much more than the couple's personal happiness is at stake — they are creating a household that is both the continuation of those two extended families and the social unit upon which society is based.

Judaism

Joy Multiplied

Judaism, too, affirms that husband and wife complete each other. "The Talmud," says Harold Kushner, rabbi laureate of Temple Israel in Natick, Massachusetts, and author of *How Good Do We Have To Be?* (Little, Brown) "teaches that 'a man is not complete without a wife, a woman is not complete without a husband, and the two of them together are not complete unless they bring God into the relationship.'" But the emphasis in Judaism is less on complementarity than on companionship itself as the major purpose of marriage, according to Rabbi Maurice Lamm, a professor at Yeshiva University and author of *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage* (Jonathan David). While acknowledging the command to "'be fruitful and multiply,' to create a family," Lamm says that, "According to Jewish law, the primary reason for marriage is companionship. The Zohar, the basic book of Jewish mysticism, considered a single person just

half of a unit.

The tradition encourages open and sensitive communication between husband and wife as an important key to harmony. "If your wife is little, you should bend down and listen to her," advises the Talmud. In *The Book of Jewish Practice* (Behman House) Louis Jacobs quotes a Talmudic injunction that a husband should avoid wounding words — as well as an unfeeling attitude, and anything that brings tears to his wife. He should also be the last to start a quarrel and the first to make it up. According to Marion Shulevitz, a director of chaplaincy for the New York Board of Rabbis, a rabbinic tradition derived from the Talmud specifies that honest communication and negotiation in marriage must be done face-to-face - and that both sides in any conflict must be fully heard. As Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, the author of *The Book of Jewish Values* (Crown) points out, with real communication we can learn and grow from conflict, because we can come to know ourselves better. But above all a truly companionate marriage "multiplies joy, because two people experience it together, and divides pain, because two people share it," says Rabbi Lamm.

[TOP](#)

[See the current and back issues](#)