Ancient Religious Texts Advise on 'Modern' Family Issues

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By: Mary Loftus

*Sex, Marriage, & Family in World Religions* (Columbia University Press) reveals that ancient religious texts are surprisingly explicit about such “modern” family issues as divorce, adultery, property rights, and conjugal manners.

The book is one of several new volumes from the research project, “Sex, Marriage and Family and the Religions of the Book,” conducted by the Center for the Study of Law and Religion (CSLR) at Emory University.

A collection of writings and teachings from the Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions chosen by leading scholars of each religion, the book spans several thousand years. Readings are drawn from mythic, theological, and legal texts: the Qur’an, the Bible, the I Ching, the Book of Common Prayer, the Kamasutra, the Analects of Confucius, the sermons of John Calvin, the Dead Sea Scrolls, legal codes of the Qing Dynasty, and a contemporary Episcopalian liturgy.

"We are trying to fill the gaps so that current debates about contentious marital and family issues can be better informed. There are a lot of false impressions out there that need to be overcome," said editor Don S. Browning. “Religions are never without internal tensions—people dealing with the same text and founding figures continue to debate among themselves about what it means. We have impressions of religious traditions based on one
strand of interpretation without even knowing about other historically prominent strands."

Browning, Alexander Campbell Professor Emeritus of Religious Ethics and the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago and CSLR senior advisor, edited the book with M. Christian Green, a lecturer on ethics at Harvard Divinity School and CSLR senior fellow, and John Witte, Jr., Jonas Robitscher Professor of Law and CSLR director.

Broad commonalities among the religions are summarized in the book’s introduction—all the traditions have tended to be patriarchal, to celebrate marriage as a public contract and religious commitment, to include an exchange of property in the marital contract, to guarantee certain marital rights, and to emphasize family continuity and intergenerational obligations.

Nearly all the religions also “shared the idea that sex had to be confined to marriage, since it was going to lead to children and quickly,” said Browning. “Early forms of contraception were not very reliable.” Sex outside of marriage resulting in offspring would inevitably lead to questions of legitimacy and responsibility for the children, he added.

But there were major differences apparent as well: Confucianism and ancient Judaism permitted concubines; Christianity sometimes idealized sexual abstinence even in marriage; Islam, as well as some Christian sects, allowed polygamous marriages.

The personal is not usurped by the philosophical, as the influence of social context and changes over time are vividly illustrated within each tradition. One short story takes the reader into the negotiations between the impoverished parents of a young Hindu bride in present-day India and those of her potential husband, who are financially better off. The girl steadfastly counts the blooms on a nagalinga tree while the parents take part in a complicated battle of strategic compromise.

Interestingly, says Browning, early Christianity and Islam were more progressive in some ways in the treatment of women and children than later expressions of the religions, which were influenced by political and economic interests.

“Ninth-century Islam was more conservative and systematically patriarchal than earlier Islamic teachings, and the same with fifth-century Christianity,” he says. “Eighteenth-century English law protected men’s property rights unlike anything early Christianity ever thought of. There was a lot of misuse of biblical quotes to justify what they were doing. These things get all mixed up and the nuances get lost. It takes a lot of scholarship to put it all in context.”

Traditional sacred texts were also unexpectedly liberal in some areas. The Qur’an says that a divorce “is only permissible twice, after that, the parties should either hold together on equitable terms, or separate with kindness. It is not lawful for you (men) to take back any of your gifts (from your wives) . . .”

Fathers were expected to be directly involved with childrearing, with the father-son relationship in Confucianism being even more important than that between husbands and
wives, and with the father being the primary “teacher and provider” in the Abrahamic
religions.

Various responsibilities regarding sex were spelled out, with husbands and wives
expected to fulfill the conjugal rights of marriage in mutually acceptable—and
pleasurable—ways.

“Procreation was viewed as a divine mystery and mandate in the early texts of these
traditions,” says Witte, “a way for men and women to participate in the creation itself,
indeed to be co-creators of a sort.”

The Kamasutra, perhaps the most well known ancient treatise regarding erotic love, was
originally composed in Sanskrit around the third century in Northwest India, and contains
advice on methods of seduction, various sexual positions, and how to treat all the wives
in a harem equally.

A Hadith recounts a surprisingly pragmatic interchange between the man of a disloyal
wife and the Islamic Prophet Muhammad: A man came to the Prophet and said, “My wife
does not repel the hand of any man who touches her.” He said, “Divorce her.” The man
then said, “I love her.” He said, “Then enjoy her.”

Even the practices of foreplay and mutual satisfaction seem to have been encouraged in
early Islam, as in a text from the twelfth century recounts the Prophet saying to “kiss and
touch” one’s wife until she “has the same desire you have” and “wait for her until she is
satisfied.”

“Sex was not a topic of popular public discourse back then,” says Browning, “but it was
talked about in sacred texts often very explicitly, and there was instruction on these
matters by religious leaders. Judaism and Islam were very frank and quite positive about
sex within the framework of marriage. Christianity was a little more mixed.”

Several of the texts call for adulterers to be flogged or shunned, and many passages make
clear that a woman’s allure can be dangerous: “Never sit at table with another man’s
wife, or join her in a drinking party, for fear of succumbing to her charms and slipping
into fatal disaster,” reads Ecclesiasticus.

All the religions make a distinction between children born inside and outside of wedlock;
children born outside of marriage are stigmatized. Under Jewish law, for instance, a
mamzer (bastard) could never marry another Jew. Within marriage, however, children
were almost universally considered “sacred gifts,” carrying forth the family name and
lineage as well as the community’s religious traditions, culture, and language. All the
traditions emphasize that stable marriages and families are essential to the well being of
children.

“Even the Buddhist tradition, which would seem from one standpoint to be renouncing
the world [by encouraging detachment], actually supported very complex arrangements
between the monastery and the monks’ families. The families would support the
monasteries, and the monks would pray for and get merit for their families. It ends up
being very affirming, in spite of the philosophical teachings of Buddhism that seem to
suggest it was uninterested in children, marriage, and family. The text is one thing, but
putting those texts into social context and seeing how they operate in daily life is another—life lived on the ground looks different,” Browning says.

Taking a slower, deeper look at where we came from, says Browning, is a necessary counterbalance to the swiftness with which we now live. “We should try to understand ourselves a little bit better,” he says, “as well as the other guy.”

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