

SEX, MARRIAGE, AND FAMILY IN WORLD RELIGIONS. Edited by Don Browning, M. Christian Green and John Witte, Jr. Columbia University Press 2006. Pp. 461. \$65.00. ISBN: 0-231-13116-X.

This volume is a product of the Sex, Marriage and Family in World Religions project directed by Don Browning, M. Christian Green and David M. Clairmont at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University. Each of its six contributing authors was a participant in this project, and most are fellows of the Center. The project and this resulting volume are based on certain assumptions. The editors write:

The great public conflicts of our time are partially shaped by differences over who controls sexuality, who defines marriage, who shapes the family, and what actually constitutes a threat to inherited practices. (xviii)

These conflicts, they argue, arise in part due to the impact of globalization and modernization on cultures, but are often exacerbated by misunderstanding between adherents of different religious traditions. (xxi) The editors believe that there are, in fact, more similarities than differences in the teachings of the world religions on sex, marriage, and family issues. (xxii) On the other hand, they see a tendency on the part of modern social sciences to dismiss the role of religions in clarifying and influencing the evolving shape of families, marriage, sexual practices and gender. (xxii) They argue that the world religions have a necessary and significant role to play in a world-wide dialogue about the normative shape these human practices should take. (xii) World religions are capable of providing a positive contribution because, according to the editors, they share common wisdoms that will serve as a basis for constructive dialogue. Moreover, human sexual and familial practices typically arise from the dialectical relationship between religion and culture. (xxii) Religions, they say, may provide “a good deal of the genesis, genius, and generativity of viable and lasting marriage and the family norms. . . .” (xxii)

Based on these assumptions, this volume is a major step toward providing resources for such a world-wide dialogue. People of differing religious traditions gain access to the basic texts of their own and others’ traditions. Graduate and undergraduate classes in comparative world religions will find an efficient resource for comparing religious teachings on human sexuality, the family, gender issues, and the

ritualizing of these practices. The book will be an equally valuable resource for those in the social science disciplines and for all those interested in the interdependent relationship that exists between religions and public laws and policies. For anyone interested in where human families are headed, this volume explains how religions have shaped where human families have been.

Sex, Marriage, and Family in World Religions is organized into six chapters, one on each of six major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Each contributor has selected texts from various points in the historical development of a tradition, as well as some contemporary texts, which illustrate that tradition's teachings regarding family, licit and illicit sexual practices, gender, marriage and other licit forms of sexual union, divorce, celibacy, and the rituals related to these practices. Two organizational aspects are particularly helpful to the non-specialist in world religions. First, each chapter begins with an introductory essay that places the religious tradition in its historical context, explains particular issues as they have developed over time, and describes the choice of texts made by the chapter's author. Second, each particular text, or each grouping of texts within a tradition, is also preceded by a brief explanation of the topic and importance of that text. While the great bulk of each chapter is made up of the texts themselves, these brief explanatory aids are clearly written in highly accessible language; and thus, they are exceedingly helpful.

Of course, any project that attempts to provide the teachings of six complex world religions, each more than a thousand years old and each located in multiple geographic and cultural sites, sets a highly ambitious goal for itself. When the teachings to be presented focus on a topic involving the daily, intimate practices of ordinary human beings, most of whom through most of history were illiterate, the reader is justified in raising some challenging methodological questions. Whose perspective is represented by written texts that have survived centuries of often turbulent history? Luke Timothy Johnson and Mark D. Jordan raise this issue in their chapter on Christianity: "Yet one of the hardest things to decide for the historian is who should be counted into the story." (85) This problem is especially pertinent when the topic is sex, gender, and family. Johnson and Jordan continue: "To preach alternative sexual arrangements makes one a heretic. All heretics, whatever they preach, are often accused of committing sexual indecencies." (85) The obvious danger for those who would look to religious teachings for wisdom on these issues is that it is the views of the dominant, the winners of

history, that become orthodox, worthy of being repeated, copied, and saved for history. Whose experiences and needs have been silenced?

Alan Cole makes a parallel point in his chapter on Buddhism. Given the many variations within Buddhism, he writes that “one should always hesitate before saying anything like ‘the Buddhist position on topic X is simply Y.’” (302) Most of the contributors to this volume of texts are aware that they bring a subjectivity to their task of selecting texts to include in limited space. Yet, a complaint of this reviewer would be that contemporary views of feminist religious scholars are mostly ignored. Given the topic, given the contemporary goal of creating dialogue, this seems like a major omission. It is typically the lives of women that are being defined by these teachings and it is from these feminist scholars that major challenges are being raised in each tradition. The exception to this complaint is the chapter on Islam, by Azizah al-Hibri and Raja’ M. el-Habti, whose interpretation of the Qur’an is clearly influenced by the contemporary work of Muslim women scholars who today challenge centuries of patriarchal teachings and practices.

In his introduction to the chapter on Judaism, Michael S. Berger raises another important question: do written texts represent the actual practices of people in the community? (6) Speaking of the huge amount of literature produced during the Rabbinic period, upon which most medieval Jewish scholarly reflection was based, Berger writes that

we must resist the temptation to use these sources as evidence of contemporary reality[] . . . [because] we currently lack independent corroboration of the relevance of these texts outside of Rabbinic circles. (6)

Alan Cole makes a similar point in his introduction to Buddhism: “As is well known, textual statements regarding practices, especially statements formally made by committed participants, are not necessarily descriptive of either social praxis or belief.” (303) Berger’s and Cole’s warnings bring to mind the insights of Jewish and Christian feminists who warn us that if we take these traditional texts as a reflection of reality, we ignore the ideological bias which produced them. For example, as these texts describe gender, marriage, and licit and illicit sexuality, are they *describing* what people did (norms of community practice) or are they attempting to *proscribe* behaviors that the patriarchal author finds unacceptable? Were first-century Christian women silent in the churches, for example, or were they exercising leadership and moral agency that was being contested by the author of 1 *Timothy*? Adhering to such warnings would significantly change the

way the texts in this volume are used in a contemporary dialogue. It would challenge the description of these texts as central, essential, or authoritative for the adherents of these traditions.

All of the contributors also wrestle with exploring and explaining the social, economic and political contexts in which texts were written. Each recognizes that the shape of religious teachings was influenced by existing social and cultural conditions to one degree or another. Alan Cole makes the interesting point that Buddhist support for the traditional family was due in part to economic reliance by the Buddhist monasteries on an orderly and productive status quo—despite the basic Buddhist teaching that family life with all its earthly demands was a deterrent to spiritual development. Johnson and Jordan discuss the influence on Christianity of Greco-Roman philosophies that distrust sexual pleasure. Berger includes a text from *The Mishnah* which carefully delineates class distinctions in conjugal duties: every day for men of independent means, once a month for camel-drivers! (30) Patricia Buckley Ebbey discusses the role of the state in defining Confucian rules through their incorporation into law codes. (371)

However, if one were to read this book from beginning to end, as I did, there is one over-riding commonality shared by all of these traditions which goes without comment, much less analysis, by editors and contributors alike, with the exception of al-Hibri and el-Habti: sexism, indeed, misogyny. In each tradition, women are owned and controlled by men, given by men to other men, taken by men. In each tradition, women are feared as sources of temptation, or of instability and chaos. In each tradition, women are consigned to a domestic and private sphere of male control. In each tradition, the primary purposes of women are related to the sexual needs of men: procreation and pleasure. Texts are written by men and primarily addressed to men. Specific horrific examples are plentiful: “But if the woman is chaste and decisive and prefers to die rather than be ravished, she will yell in spite of gagging.” (434) “Just as in the state, where women are not allowed to participate in setting policies, so in the family, they should not be permitted to assume responsibility for affairs.” (408) “A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house.” (242) “God made women aware that men are superior to them but the details were left to his messenger to explain.” (183) “So it is that, however demanding one [husband] is as regards his wife [sexually], he sins much less than one who commits fornication even most rarely.” (105) Examples such as these constitute a large portion of these texts. But what was most compelling to this reviewer is

the common assumption, regardless of tradition or text or subject matter, that women are inferior and subordinate to men in all things. How can this commonality among the world's religions on family, marriage and sex go without comment? To paraphrase Christian feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, is there a usable past for women?

This reviewer wishes that the editors had taken up this issue in their introductory essay. Here they claim that marriage and family are under attack by modernization—the cultural spread of individualism and the adoption of short-term and self-interested goals. (xx-xxi) They offer the wisdom of religious traditions in marriage and family, gender and sexuality, as keepers of “something of the genetic code of what marriage and the family have been and can be.”(xxii) They conclude that each tradition values marriage as the core of both family life and social order. (xxii) But they dismiss the unjust, even misogynist character of these marriage traditions, as irrelevant to their major point. (xxiii) Is it? Or is the subordination of women key to the order of family and society as we have known it in human history? How can we, scholars and practitioners of religious traditions, explain the willingness of the most educated and committed men in our traditions to justify the continuing subordination of women—over thousands of years?

Despite my disagreements with the views expressed by the editors in their remarkably brief and clearly written introduction, I find this book to be a highly useful resource. Many of the issues involved in using historical texts for political or ethical insights are well addressed by the volume's contributors. Each chapter successfully provides access to the dominant voices of that tradition. The indivisibility of religion and culture is evidenced as the social and economic bases for religious teachings on sex, family, and marriage are exposed. We are challenged by the better visions of human equality and social well-being contained in these traditions; and we are equally instructed by their failures.

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