
This scholarly anthology, intended for an educated general readership and as a supplement to textbooks in introductory courses on religious traditions, succeeds very well in conveying the richness and depth of the meaning and practice of celibacy in religious traditions worldwide.

Editor Carl Olson’s Introduction ‘Celibacy and the Human Body’ is an interesting overview of what celibacy means in various religious traditions though it does not seem to shape or link his contributors’ monographs. “Celibacy [Olson writes] is not only associated with an ascetic strain within particular religious traditions but it is also a scripted form of violence. … by adopting a celibate lifestyle, one is inflicting the violence on oneself, or in the case of institutional celibacy, the violence is already embodied in the religious institution that demands celibacy as a requirement for membership. By practising celibacy, a person works against the natural inclinations of the human body and its drives, and he or she thereby perpetuates violence on him or herself.”

Despite this negative cast, several contributors tackle the very important (and positive) socio-political and cultural implications of practising celibacy, discussing for example the gender and power issues relating to the Vestal Virgins and early Christian (often reborn) Virgins.

Olson has assembled an impressive cast of contributors and this short review, though allowing only the briefest mention of each essay, is intended to suggest the wide range of scholarship contained in this collection. In ‘Celibacy in the Greco-Roman World,’ Willi Braun explains that though divinities might have unusual sexual inclinations including celibacy, Greeks and Romans saw the sexual act as natural and, when it produced children, even a dignified activity. Nonetheless, deliberate sexual abstinence in the Mediterranean was always “a topic of conversation, proscription, and varied worry” and continued into the Christian era, when “celibacy became a defining bodily and rhetorical mark on which Christians staked their difference.”

Eliezer Diamond’s wryly titled ‘And Jacob remained alone: the Jewish struggle with Celibacy’ concludes that non-mainstream spiritual practice, for example the woman-denigrating Essenes, was the exception. At the same time, he notes that Judaism embraces conflicting values: marriage and procreative sex, but also study and prayer, both best achieved without the distractions of family. The Babylonian Talmud dealt with this contradiction with the resigned “Let it stand.”
In the first of three essays about Christian celibacy, Glenn Holland highlights how chaste women, married, widowed, or single, were accorded considerable respect and civil rights in early Christianity.

Stories of Christian women who refused to marry or, if forced to marry, refused to have sexual intercourse with their husbands, are stories of female independence and self-assertion, even if understood within the context of submission to (a male) God. Virginity is one way a woman might “become male”: in the sense that she could act as an independent authority and source of power (a possibility open only to men in imperial society) within the Christian community.

Christians with a spiritual vocation also strove for ‘perfection’ through self-denial, including of sex. Increasingly, celibacy was mandated for clergy in the west though not the east (it was, however, widely practised in the breach).

Karen Cheatham’s ‘Let anyone accept this who can’ details the growing rigidity of Christian attitudes toward celibacy; Christians were also ordered to fight against lustful thoughts and words, even dreams. Congregations, however, preferred and protected married priests whom they considered less prone to seduce parish women. Christian theology became increasingly sex-negative. Saint Augustine, who had once had a long-term sexual relationship, taught that only marital sex to procreate was sinless. Saint Bridget of Sweden was a perfect example. She had sex just to procreate and, after eight children, convinced her husband to live chastely and was later sanctified.

Darrol Bryant introduces ‘Celibacy and the Protestant Traditions’ by quoting 1 Cor. 7,2 5a: “On the question of celibacy, I have no instructions from the Lord.” Bryant uses Karl Barth’s theology as a lens through which to understand the issue in the Protestant traditions. Despite Barth’s corrective views—i.e. that the Spirit directs some Christians to marry and others to remain unmarried—celibate monasticism was developing and grew to include celibate Anglican nuns and Anglican and Lutheran Benedictine monks. Bryant concludes that in the “either/or thinking” that characterizes the 21st-century discussion, the victim “is the balanced view we might have hoped for, since there are significant issues of gender and sexuality that could have been addressed but do not emerge,” notably the “strong male centrism pervading their thinking.” Female ordination has progressed slowly, and other pressing issues such as sexual orientation and the right of homosexuals to become clergy have split Protestant churches to the foundation.

The second part of the book includes essays on celibacy in Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Shinto, as well as on celibacy among the Yoruba and among native American Indians.