HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Peter N. Stearns, Ph.D.

THE FAMILY IN HISTORY – Postclassical Period

Contents

The Impact of Religious Change
Buddhism
Christianity: Western Europe
Orthodox Christianity
Islam and Family
Islam in South Asia
Family Patterns in sub-Saharan Africa and the impact of Islam
Pre-Columbian Americas

Impact of Religious Change

Background Three major threads help, very loosely, define the postclassical period in world history from the fall of the great empires until the 15th century. First, more complex societies emerged in additional regions, and some borrowed characteristics from neighboring, more established centers – as Japan did from China. This process could include changes in family organization. Second, interregional trade expanded, providing new spurs to commerce and some manufacturing. This major change had less obvious relationship to family forms, though growing prosperity and some urban growth may have had an impact; additional wealth in some cases was used to support new limits on women's activities, as with Chinese foot binding in the cities. Third, the major missionary religions spread more widely and of course Islam developed anew after 600 CE. Buddhism began to gain influence in China and through it Korea and Japan, while also expanding in southeast Asia. Christianity, gaining converts within the failing Roman empire from the 4th century onward, spread northward in both western and eastern Europe. Islam spread rapidly through the Middle East and North Africa, soon converted much of central Asia, created a new religious minority in India, and reached into southeast Asia and subSaharan Africa.

Religious impact Each of the missionary religions had its own approach to family life, as discussed in subsequent chapters. And of course religion had already helped shape family life particularly in India and with Judaism. A few general points can be ventured. First, the missionary religions, like Hinduism previously, created a certain tension with family life at least for some people: was there a higher loyalty, a deeper pull, outside the family for those who wished to maximize their contact with the divine or prepare for later salvation in the next life? In creating major monastic movements, both Christianity and Buddhism provided some people, both men and women, an alternative to family life. The Sufi movement in Islam might inspire a similar higher spirituality. None of this undermined the family for most people, but it did introduce a new factor.

Gender All three of the missionary religions argued that men and women were spiritually equal; in the case of Christianity and Islam, they had souls, with Buddhism they shared in participating in the divine essence. This factor was much clearer than had been the case with Hinduism and Judaism, which were more explicitly patriarchal. However none of the religions worked for greater gender equality in most aspects of life, including religious officialdom, though the gender differentials varied. This too was an interesting tension that may not have affected families in general, but it could inspire a certain degree of confusion over more traditional gender distinctions. Certainly for some individuals, and perhaps particularly for women, the existence of institutions that provided opportunities for a life independent from marriage was an important innovation.

Children All three of the missionary religions frowned on infanticide, based again on a belief that each individual had spiritual value. The Prophet Muhammed attacked the practice most explicitly, but Christian leaders were also clearly opposed. There is every indication that, as a result, infanticide did decline in the regions where conversions spread most widely. This obviously raised the question of what families were

to do if they had more children than they could readily support. Again at least with Christianity and Islam, efforts to expand charity might play some role here, creating religious institutions that might, however reluctantly, receive orphans but also children abandoned by their parents. Finally, the missionary religions might provide new ways for parents to talk to their children about death; evidence from Christian Europe during the postclassical period shows how many children, dealing with their own illness or that of siblings, referred to beliefs in heaven and in joining the family of God.

Education The missionary religions all sought to spread their versions of religious truth through some new types of schools. Islam was most energetic here during the postclassical centuries. Most people remained illiterate still; religious training might involve at most memorizing some oral prayers and beliefs. But the need to provide some formal schooling for some children (disproportionately but not exclusively boys) did increase, as did opportunities for fathers to decide whether their sons were talented enough to move into higher levels of education. This was not an entirely novel feature of family life – it had already loomed large in Judaism – but it could have some impact, even though most children remained committed to their duties for the family economy and in-family job training.

Conclusion It would be unrealistic to press the general impact of the religious expansion on family life too far; the individual religious trajectories were far more important, creating some major new divisions in family types and patterns. None of the religions, whatever their views in principle about the highest spiritual attainments, seriously weakened family life, and most gave the family new ritual support. Often, as we will see with Islam, they intertwined with earlier regional traditions in their interaction with family life.

Study questions

1. What were the three missionary religions and how might they have new kinds of impact on family life?
2. What were the implications of the rise of monasteries and convents for family life? Were they more significant for women than for men?
3. Why did infanticide decline under religious guidance?

Further reading

Gordon Babst, “The Family and Religion,” in AW Durant and SI Jones, eds., *Church-state issues in America today,* v. 2 (Praeger, 2007)

Carle Zimmerman, “Family and Religion,” *Social Science* 48 (1973)

Paul Vermeer, “Religion and Family Life: an overview of current research and suggestions for future research,” *Religions* (2014), 402-21

Buddhism

Renunciation In launching his own spiritual journey, the Buddha, born into a wealthy family, renounced not only riches but family itself, abandoning his wife and children. An early Buddhist writing described the feelings of a renunciant when his family did visit: “He feels no pleasure when she (the wife) comes, no sorrow when she goes; him I would call a true saint released from passion.” The notion that family entanglements were a distraction from the goals of personal enlightenment remained an important strain in Buddhism through the classical and postclassical periods and beyond. This was why almost all the Buddhist monastic movements insisted on celibacy.

Overall approach Buddhism was the only major religion not to provide an explicit religious endorsement for family, a belief that forming and maintaining families fulfilled a religious duty and formed part of the divine plan for mankind. It contrasted in this respect not only from Christianity and Islam, but also from Hinduism, Judaism, and even Zoroastrianism. Family life could be construed as one of the deceiving miseries of human life. An early Sutra thus intoned, “Leaving behind son and wife, and father and mother, and wealth and grain, and relatives, and sensual pleasures to the limit, one should wander solitary as a rhinoceros horn.” Statements about the dangers of family life were common in Buddhist writings, focused not only on the concerns family involvement could generate but also on the desires involved. Women

were sometimes warned about the risks of childbirth. Even for the majority of Buddhists who continued to form families, the notion of higher and separate spiritual goals might affect degrees of commitment.

Impact on family forms Because Buddhism had no elaborate family policy, it tended to adapt to whatever family forms already prevailed in the regions the religion penetrated – which meant that there was tremendous diversity among Buddhist families. In a few cases, this included acceptance of polygamy, though in general Buddhist families were monogamous. In other cases, Buddhist monks maintained active families alongside their religious commitments (this seems to have been particularly common in postclassical Japan). Monks in monasteries in India often made regular contributions to their parents. In some cases also, whole families made a commitment to spiritual renunciation together. In other instances wives made every effort to support their husbands when the latter decided on a path of renunciation, maintaining some semblance of family contact. Buddhism overall was a very flexible religion, with many specific variants, and family variety was a clear consequence. At the same time, this same flexibility prompted widespread acceptance of patriarchal family structures.

Relevant principles This said, some features of Buddhism had more general applicability to family conduct, and these began to be codified in writing during the later phases of the classical period and beyond. Respect for elders was one such precept. Buddhists urged submission to the wishes of parents, particularly fathers, and in this respect worked to stabilize family life in fairly traditional terms. General precepts of nonviolence, honesty and consideration for others had obvious applicability to family behavior – though we have no decisive evidence of the extent to which these principles affected actual behavior. (One of the really intriguing challenges in comparative family history involves speculation on whether some cultures inhibited, or promoted, family violence more than others; unfortunately clear data only emerge in recent times.) Obviously also, Buddhism could inform family life even when worldly renunciation was not involved, as parents instructed their children in principles ranging from abstemious behavior to the importance of contributing to a local monastery. Mothers played a considerable role in this kind of moral instruction. Finally, as with Hinduism, many Buddhists set up small family shrines, where family members could pray and meditate.

Childhood Buddhist parents In practice organized a variety of rituals to protect their children from harm, some of them taken over from Hindu forms. Many children attended Buddhist schools, and certainly were regaled with stories of the religion's saints. Opportunities in Buddhist schools may have been particularly important for girls. Some youngsters, identified as spiritually gifted, were sent into monasteries or convents at an early age. On the whole Buddhists tended to oppose child marriage, believing that parties should be able to offer informed consent.

Tensions in China The spread of Buddhism to China raised particular problems, given the contrast with the strong existing Confucian commitment to the primacy of the family and procreation. Many Confucianists actively opposed Buddhist conversions and the establishment of celibate monasteries as inimical to the family and its social obligations. This ultimately played a role in the decisions of the Tang dynasty, by the 9th century, to turn against Buddhist activities, though a strong Buddhist minority survived. At the same time Buddhists themselves offered compromise. Buddhist passages (imported from India) such as "the wife consoles the husband" were shifted to "the wife reveres the husband", along with "the husband controls the wife". References in Indian Buddhist writings to kisses and passion were simply deleted. A Buddhist term for morality was altered to read "filial submission and obedience". A number of stories highlighted the tensions that could erupt when a child (particularly a daughter) defied parental order and joined a Buddhist group. At the same time, some Chinese husbands (not themselves active Buddhists) reported some delight when their wives participated in Buddhist meetings, for it distracted the women from potential contests for power within the family and made paternal control easier. All this tends to highlight Buddhism's flexibility and regional specificity when it came to family life, and the fact that it did not break through traditional patterns in any systematic way.

Study questions

1. Why it is difficult to identify a Buddhist family type?
2. What were the main Buddhist concerns about family life?
3. How might Buddhism come to terms, at least in part, with established Chinese family values?

Further reading

Liz Wilson, "Buddhism and Family," *Religious Compass* 8 (2014)

Liz Wilson, ed., *Family in Buddhism* (State University of New York Press, 2013)

Jose Cabezon, ed., *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender* (State University of New York Press, 1992)

Christianity: Western Europe

Cultural geography Christianity spread to many regions, and not all versions of the religion were the same, even before the advent of Protestantism in the West. This first exploration deals with impacts in Western Europe from late Roman days into the 16th century, even though during the first half of this period Orthodox Christianity in Eastern Europe was in many ways more significant. Historians have zeroed in on some particularly interesting, possibly decisive, effects of Catholic Christianity, against which other versions (and, later, Protestantism) can be compared.

Basic approach Christianity maintained from Judaism a strong emphasis on the family as a divinely ordained institution, with important collective obligations (not aimed at the happiness of individual members). Priorities showed clearly in the unusually strong opposition to divorce.

Tensions Families played a vital role in the early church, often centering religious services. However Jesus offered a somewhat ambivalent view of family, encouraging many initial followers to abandon their families in service of religious truth – an approach reminiscent of Buddhism. The apostle Paul, himself unmarried, also encouraged followers to avoid the distraction of marriage if possible. This ambivalence would be maintained in a sense in Catholic doctrine. On the one hand, marriage was a sacrament, providing divine sanction for the formation of the family. On the other hand, the holiest state, maintained by priests as well as monks and nuns, was one of celibacy. In practice some Christian families experienced the tension themselves, as a husband or wife might pull away to join a religious institution.

Sexuality Ambivalence was on full display concerning sexuality. On the one hand, the Christian family was urged to procreate. Jewish regulations aimed at protecting family sexuality were fully installed, including the commandments against adultery and coveting a neighbor's wife. Sexuality before marriage was strongly reproved, and most Christian communities worked hard to discourage it, with group-oriented rather than individual courtship practices as well as parentally-arranged marriage. In principle masturbation was also considered sinful, though there is no way to determine the practical impact of this approach. Sexuality, in other words, was both essential and dangerous. And of course many individual Christians, from ascetics who flourished in the early centuries to members of monastic orders, deliberately shunned sexuality altogether. Christianity also discouraged earlier practices of concubinage in the upper classes, which both expressed the hostility to unregulated sexuality and reinforced the institution of monogamy.

Homosexuality Western Christianity was firmly opposed to homosexuality, here too incorporating a Jewish tradition. This dramatically reversed patterns that had prevailed in the classical Mediterranean, forcing most homosexual liaisons underground for many centuries. There is some debate over when this policy was established – early in the Church or a bit later – but it seems to have intensified by the 12th century.

Gender Christianity departed from Judaism with regard to the spiritual position of women, granting them equal footing in religious services. And the revered image of Mary, as mother, permeated Christian culture at various points. Yet male superiority was maintained, including a longstanding belief that women were the more likely sources of sin, particularly in their potential for sexual temptation. It is simply not clear whether the Christian approach to gender had any particular impact on ordinary families, in terms of tempering assertions of male superiority. There is considerable evidence concerning the frequency of domestic violence in Christian Europe during the postclassical period. On the other hand, one relevant feature of the religion was a belief, in principle, that marriages should be contracted only with the consent of both parties. This did not inhibit the prevalence of arranged marriages orchestrated with the economic or political interests of the family in mind – with the inevitable result that some women,

particularly, were saddled with older or objectionable partners. However the practice of child marriage was probably somewhat less common in Christian societies than in some other cultures. Finally, the position of widows was often precarious, as they frequently were under the control of sons or other male relatives for access to any property and usually discouraged from remarriage.

Childhood: a debate One of the first great works in the history of childhood, Philippe Aries' *Centuries of Childhood* (orig. 1960, tr. 1962) contended that childhood was not a formally recognized stage in premodern Europe. Possibly because of the need for diligent child labor, children with adult qualities were particularly valued. This thesis provoked a considerable backlash, from historians who found varied evidence concerning the care and affection that parents expressed for children in the postclassical period. As the dust settled, it seemed likely that an accurate picture lay somewhat in between. Adults were concerned for children; they enjoyed watching children play and participated directly; they lamented the loss of a child. On the other hand, a certain degree of fatalism, given high levels of mortality, entered in as well. And children were sometimes allowed to make decisions, for example about jobs and apprenticeships, as if they were adults; in England, a 12-year-old was even elected to the medieval parliament at one point. Boundary lines were less sharp than they would become in later periods.

Children Images of children were common in Christianity, from the baby Jesus to Christ's reaching out to children. The opposition to infanticide has been noted. At the same time, Christian families maintained many traditional practices, including a preference for sons (though this may have been slightly less pronounced than in some other societies). Belief in original sin was a potential complication: children were seen as born tainted until purified by baptism, and this might encourage unusually strict disciplinary practices. American Indians, for example, noted the unusual reliance on spanking among European colonists. Efforts to encourage Christian education long contended against the widespread need for children's labor.

Kinship and innovation Arguably the most important change that Christianity introduced into family life centered on kinship. While Christian families maintained kinship ties, the religion downplayed their importance as part of the effort to change the balance between family loyalties and religious devotion. Furthermore, the Catholic Church imposed some very clear limits on marriage among kin, particularly limiting selection of cousins. Incest taboos, in other words, were extended more widely. Many scholars – particularly, anthropologists – have seen in this a fundamental distinction from "Oriental" family traditions, promoting greater individualism and ultimately the other trappings of modernity. These are big claims that go beyond an assessment of family history, and probably they took shape over an extended period of time. There is little sign of unusual individualism in European personality types during the postclassical centuries. (Note that, discussed above, Christian definition of core family was not really individualistic, an interesting complication.) But the claims deserve serious attention, at least over the longer haul; they may link to more measurable cultural changes in the West later on.

Kinship and family Whatever the larger consequences, it is clear that marriage among close relatives fairly quickly declined in Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. By the postclassical period reliance on large kinship networks, and even knowledge of extensive kinship ties, had also declined – particularly outside the aristocracy. European families remained patrilineal, but the mother's near relatives might remain important as well. Most important, the reduction of kinship emphasis increased reliance on the nuclear family (and therefore also on husband-wife interaction) or a narrower definition of the extended family. Large family compounds, with many collateral relatives, were uncommon. These changes would generate further redefinitions in the early modern period, with the rise of what is commonly called the "European-type family", discussed in chapter 17.

Study questions

1. What aspects of family life were not deeply altered by Christianity?
2. Did Christianity encourage basic redefinitions of gender relations in the family?
3. What were the key complexities in the Christian approach to sexuality?
4. Why does the Christian approach to kinship seem particularly important in introducing wider change in European society?

Further reading

Rosemary Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Beacon Press, 2000)

David Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Margaret Mitchell, *Early Christian Families in Context* (Erdmans, 2003)

Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1988)

Jack Goody, *Family and Kinship in Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1983)

Orthodox Christianity

Research gaps It is generally conceded that less work is available on family history in Eastern Europe, at least until more recent centuries, than is true for the West. It is not clear as a result, for example, whether distinctive Christian ideas about kinship were as salient in the East. Certainly the Byzantine aristocracy developed elaborate kinship ties by the 11th century, but this was not entirely dissimilar to kinship patterns among Western aristocrats. One scholar however argues that kinship definitions became more rigorous in Byzantium, among other things generating an early use of last names (in the aristocracy).

Comparative issues Not surprisingly, Christian practice in Eastern Europe, increasingly separate from those of the West, diverged in several particulars. Divorce was not as rigorously forbidden, though it was frowned upon, as was remarriage. Women had more secure rights to property, and those in the aristocracy might exercise considerable political authority (though this occurred in the West as well). As in the West, brides brought dowries into arranged marriage, but they did not lose all ownership rights in the process. Marriage practices picked up on older regional traditions and involved more elaborate ceremonial parades than was true in Western Europe – though the sacramental quality of marriage was shared between the two branches of Christianity.

Celibacy Eastern Christianity insisted just as firmly on celibacy for monks and nuns as did Western practice. Some monasteries in Greece took elaborate precautions to keep women at a distance (in one case, fortifications were strengthened after a band of prostitutes sought entry). But priests were not required to be celibate – this, along with disputes over papal authority, was one of the big divisions that contributed to the Schism between the two churches in the 11th century. Whether this distinction placed less strain on ordinary family life, lessening the tension between family and spiritual goals, is unclear. Certainly the family was deeply cherished as a religious institution, with strong support as well from the Byzantine state. The codification of Roman law early in the Byzantine imperial period helped clarify rights and roles for family members.

Childbirth Despite some valuation of celibacy, most married women were eager to have children and, as in many premodern societies, often resorted to magical practices (along with prayer) to promote pregnancy. Punishments for abortion were severe in the Byzantine Empire, and church leaders also condemned any attempts at contraception.

Childhood Roman law also set some parameters for childhood, including age of adulthood but also age of sufficient maturity to allow marriage (12 for girls, 14 for boys). Children under 7 were exempt from punishment for certain crimes. Parents were strongly encouraged to provide some education, though social class and urban-rural differentials persisted. Recent work has emphasized the tension between high child mortality and expressions of “anguish” – another common theme for the postclassical centuries generally.

Gender issues in early Russia Gender power structures may have been particularly explicit in the Russian aristocracy, though this may have had less to do with religious conversion than regional tradition. Into the time of Peter the Great, fathers carried a small whip to the wedding ceremonies of their daughters, which they ritually handed over to the groom as a symbol of transfer of power. Peter abolished the practice.

Conclusion Historical work on families in East European history in the postclassical period suggests that Christianity introduced some less sweeping changes than was true in Western Europe, though many approaches were shared including the religious sanctification of marriage.

Study questions

1. How might different policies toward priestly celibacy have affected family life?
2. What are some important questions that might guide further analysis of family history in postclassical Eastern Europe?

Further reading

Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot, eds., *Becoming Byzantine: children and childhood in Byzantium* (Dumbarton Oaks, 2009)

Shaun Tougher and Leslie Brubaker, eds., *Approaches to the Byzantine Family* (Ashgate, 2013)

Nathan Leidholm, *Elite Byzantine Kinship* (Arc Humanities Press, 2019)

Islam and Family

Basic features The family was deeply valued in Islam, with few of the tensions that cropped up in Christianity and especially Buddhism. A variety of the principles and rules specified by Islam were directed at family life, including regulation of sexual behavior. At the same time, Islam adapted to some prior traditions in the Middle Eastern region, though some of these adaptations were not carried into other Islamic domains. Families should encourage individuals to see themselves as part of a wider community, ultimately extended to the whole Islamic faith.

Extended family Extended family forms were emphasized, based on patrilineal descent, often with co-residence of many generations. In principle and often in fact, older family members were greatly valued. It was considered a gift of Allah to be able to care for an older parent or relative. Extended families were seen as providing the greatest stability and affection. As the Qur'an said, "Your Lord has commanded that …you be kind to your parents. If one of them or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them a word of disrespect…and act humbly to them in mercy."

Children In contract to Christianity, Islam held that children were born in innocence. (This was the basis for the efforts to prevent infanticide or the sale of children.) The Qur'an emphasized the importance of providing for children if a marriage dissolved or if parents died, insisting on appropriate treatment for orphans ("clothe them, and speak kindly to them"). Young children were considerably indulged, with little gifts and treats and ample opportunity for play. Expressions of grief at the death of a child were common – beginning with the Prophet himself, who wept openly at a funeral. Parents had the responsibility of developing children's spirituality. Mothers launched the inculcation of basic precepts, while fathers would introduce the child to the mosque. During the postclassical period Islam promoted a network of what today would be called primary schools, *Maktabs,* which focused mainly on promoting memorization of passages in the Qur'an. This might or might not include some training in literacy. But there is no question that literacy gained ground during these centuries, possibly reaching the highest levels in the world at that point (some estimates go as high as 30% of the population). While girls had far more limited educational opportunities, and often depended on home tutoring for any instruction, a few clearly benefited and even became teachers in their own right. (One male scholar reported having several dozen, very skilled, female teachers.) Physical discipline was common in the schools, though some Muslim educators cautioned against its negative effects and urged greater attention to children's individual aptitudes. For boys who did well in school, and with paternal support and encouragement, an array of secondary schools, or *madrasas,* existed in the major cities, where further success could lead to jobs as government or religious officials or, more rarely, to further achievements in scholarship. The variety options should not distract from the fact that for most children, particularly in the countryside, participation in the family economy represented the most important obligation.

Slavery and the family Slavery remained important in the Islamic Middle East, with many people purchased or captured from various parts of Europe and Africa. At the same time, Islamic authorities

struggled with the dilemma of ownership of people, particularly when the slave were themselves Muslims. Manumission was encouraged, and efforts were extended not to disrupt the nuclear family by selling off a parent or child. As in the classical period, slaves themselves did various jobs, even in the bureaucracy and military, which could also provide opportunities for some family life.

Gender Muhammed took explicit pride in the reforms he introduced in Arab tradition, toward the greater valuation of women, beyond the efforts against infanticide. Arranged marriage continued to be the norm, with the family of the bride contributing a dowry; but in contrast to many other societies, wives continued to have ownership rights, for example if the marriage dissolved. And girls had property rights as well as boys in any family inheritance – though their portions were only half as large. Still, property considerations gave women a level of security in family life that was arguably absent in Christianity, with particular implications for widowhood. Divorce was also possible. Here too, however, arrangements were unequal. Men could divorce fairly readily (and sometimes did), while the procedure was far more cumbersome for women. Finally, Islam allowed for polygamy (up to three wives), if a man could support them (this was not a relevant option for most ordinary families). In the wealthiest households, including those of many Islamic rulers, wider networks of concubines often developed. All of this adds up to a mixed picture. The patriarchal family remained clearly intact: as the Qur'an noted, "Man has authority over women because of what god has conferred on the one in preference to the other."

Veiling Gender patterns in Islamic families in the Middle East were further complicated by the spread of the practice of veiling and the promotion of considerable family seclusion for respectable women. This was not at base a requirement of the faith itself. Muhammed had urged veiling for his wives, to prevent them from being bothered in public, even as he encouraged considerable independence in other respects. Veiling itself long predated Islam in the Middle East. During the postclassical centuries it unquestionably became increasingly common in many families – though not the peasantry, where women's physical labor remained vital – and was widely associated with piety.

Sexuality Islam did not introduce the tensions into sexuality that were so prominent in Western Christianity. There was no special premium placed on chastity, and indeed extensive reproduction was encouraged as a religious obligation. As the Prophet said, "when one of you has sex with your wife, it is a rewarded act of charity". To be sure, individuals might choose to avoid sexual entanglements. A number of pious women, particularly in the more spiritual Sufi movement, chose that path, but there was no wide institutionalization of the practice. Sexual pleasure was a valid enjoyment, and husbands were urged to make sure of their wives' satisfaction (including recommendations of foreplay). Only anal intercourse or sex during menstruation were clearly forbidden. At the same time, Islam was even more explicit than Christianity in its efforts to confine sexuality to marriage. Premarital sex and extramarital sex were both strongly forbidden. Harsh punishments, included stoning, awaited adulterers (both male and female), though in fact Islam urged forgiveness and reconciliation when possible. Rape was frequently handled through efforts to arrange marriage with the rapist. Though in principle Islam insisted on the need for consent to marriage, in fact it accommodated the regional tradition of frequent child marriage, particularly for girls – another way to discourage premarital sexual activity. While some Islamic references cautioned against too much sexual zeal for both husbands and wives, Islamic rules against contraception and abortion were less severe at that point than was true for Christianity. Still, there was no question that the primary purpose for sexual activity should be procreation, within the marriage.

Conclusion Islam generated a powerful framework for family life, with many features that proved impressively durable. The framework was different from that of the other missionary religions, though with many features shared particularly with Christianity; and there were important accommodations to some prior traditions.

Study questions

1. How did the Islamic approach to kinship compare to that of Western Christianity?
2. Why do many Muslims, and many historians of Islam, argue that Islam provided a far better family framework for women than Christianity did?
3. What were the main complexities in the Islamic approach to sexuality?

Further reading

Avner Gil'adi, *Children of Islam: concepts of childhood in medieval Muslim society* (St. Martin's, 1992)

Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo* (Princeton University Press, 1992)

Judith Tucker, "Gender in Islamic History," in Michael Adas, ed., *Islamic and European Expansion* (Temple University Press, 1993)

Adel Wahad Bouhdika, *Sexuality in Islam* (Routledge, 2007)

Islam in South Asia

Background Islam initially spread only gradually into South Asia, and it never displaced Hinduism as majority religion. Over time, however, and particularly when some regional empires were established by Islamic conquerors, a larger Islamic minority developed during the postclassical centuries and beyond. Interactions between Muslims and Hindus, though often tense, could have significant impact on family life, particularly in the northern part of the subcontinent. Some Hindus reportedly objected to some Muslim family practices, for example veiling, and the severity of Muslim costumes for women was not widely adopted even by Islamic families, which continued to prefer more colorful clothing. However, because both Islam and Hinduism were patriarchal at base, while also relying heavily on patrilineal extended families some overlap and sharing proved possible. This occurred over an extensive period of time, but began in the postclassical period.

Property One exchange affected many Muslim families: an increasing adoption of the Hindu practice of passing control of the family dowry over to the husband. Both religions featured arranged marriage and provision of dowry by the family of the bride, but obviously Islam had created important protections for wives in the process. These now tended to erode, with the result that many Islamic men in South Asia became – and remain today – as fiercely protective of their claims over dowry as their Hindu counterparts.

Purdah At least as important was the gradual assimilation of Islamic habits of women's seclusion into the patterns of many upper-class Hindu families. Here was a dramatic, if very gradual, change resulting from the impact of Islam. The practice of what was called purdah is clear enough: Upper-class homes established a separate room or section for adult women in the family, elaborately decked out so that their activities would be concealed. Women were restricted from venturing outside the home and wore face coverings for any gathering or excursion. While Hindu women did not accept the veil, they draped scarves over parts of their faces to achieve a similar effect. There is real dispute about when and why purdah developed. Some scholars find origins in traditional Hinduism, well before the arrival of Islam. Almost certainly however Islam's arrival extended the process. Some contend it expanded at that point to protect respectable Hindu women from seizure by Muslim conquerors (at least, such was the fear), and there is evidence that Muslim rulers urged it on their women to prevent interaction with Hindus. These factors highlight the rise of the Delhi sultanate, a major regional invader state, in the 13th century as the key turning point, prompting mutual defensiveness. On the other hand, social status considerations entered in quickly, and the practice became a sign of female respectability and upper-class standing for Hindus and Muslims alike in the northern part of the subcontinent. It was on this basis that the practice would gain ground further in the Mughal period, beginning in the 165h century (even though some Mughal rulers, with Muslim concern for women in mind, actually opposed it.

Differences Hindu and Muslim families by no means aligned entirely. Hindus did not in the main accept polygamy nor did regional Hindu rulers accumulate large groups of concubines, as occurred in the Middle East. Muslims did not accept special Hindu practices like sati (developed only in some Hindu areas in any event), because it deeply offended the notion of spiritual equality between men and women. The two religions developed separate systems for those children who went to school, though religious sponsorship was involved in both cases. Specific family rituals varied, and on the whole Muslims did not adopt the Hindu preference for particularly elaborate weddings. Nevertheless, Hindu-Muslim interactions (despite mutual suspicion) engendered some real syncretism when it came to family life, and particularly to gender arrangements – with the changes largely to women's detriment.

Study questions

1. What are the major issues in interpreting the development of Purdah?
2. What facilitated some Hindu-Muslim agreement on family practices in India from the postclassical period onward?
3. What key differences remained between the two religious sectors, on family patterns?
4. Some authorities argue that, today, families in the Middle East and South Asia are having more trouble adjusting to changes in gender relations than their counterparts in East Asia, despite the fact that East Asia, too, has a deeply patriarchal tradition. Do earlier differences in family structure between the two regions support this argument?

Further reading

Zinat Kauser, *Muslim Families in Medieval India* (Samaki Prakashan, 1992)

Bal Ram Nanda, ed., *Indian Women: from Purdah to modernity* (Stosius/Advent Books, 1990)

Family Patterns in sub-Saharan Africa and the impact of Islam

Basics Sub-Saharan Africa is a vast region, with many different ecological zones and population groups. The considerable spread of Bantu peoples promoted some more general features, but the fact is that family styles varied considerably on the subcontinent by the postclassical period. In general, however, the African family stressed extended links and the importance of kinship networks. Knowledge of kin formed an important part of the oral education of young people. Extended families served as the basis for the family economy, and provided security for various family members. For example, when an adult brother died leaving a widow (and her children), another brother was frequently expected to marry, and care for, the woman. Larger clusters of kin frequently formed powerful clan ties, sometimes concentrating on a particular economic niche such as merchant activity.

Patrilineal and matrilineal Many groups in Africa highlighted matrilineal descent, and followed up by organizing households around maternal kin. In these situations, where husbands migrated to wives' kin, relationships between fathers and sons in law became crucial, to an unusual extent. But other groups were patrilineal. In these cases the kinship groups tended to be more extensive than in matrilineal, though the emphasis on kin was common to both frameworks. In many cases children were taught to use the terms father and mother for uncles and aunts as well as biological parents. In patrilineal families, groupings of several nuclear families under a common father was regarded as the standard form.

Polygyny This form of polygamy was more extensive in Africa than in any other region, particularly of course in patrilineal groups. While chieftains took many wives, even commoners often had two or three. The system was tied to a distinctive agricultural economy. While men were responsible for key tasks, such as clearing land, more agricultural work was done by women than was common in other regions. A man with more wives could handle more land. Correspondingly, many wives welcomed additions to their ranks, who could share in the expected labor.

Marriage Many African groups emphasized dowries brought by husbands to the wife's family, sometimes involving cattle or other basic agricultural goods. Westerners sometimes criticized this practice as "buying" a wife, but really it was a standard arrangement designed to provide support to families while establishing a firm economic base to a new marriage –only the obligations involved a distinctive gender balance compared to practices in Europe and Asia. The practice does provide another suggestion that women played a somewhat more active role in many African families than was true elsewhere. While patriarchal arrangements predominated, they were often loose enough to give women opportunities to participate in marketing activities and even, in some regions, acquire political power as reigning queens.

Children Children were welcomed into African communities with ceremonies such as naming rituals. In one group mothers were expected to bring the umbilical cord to the ceremony, and if it floated when placed in water the child was regarded as legitimate and accepted. In some cases children lived primarily with an aunt or uncle rather than biological parents. This highlighted the unusually serious family roles assigned to members of the extended group. Again, great variety described specific arrangements. While intense emotional ties between parents and children were not emphasized, there were many signs of

affection. The extended family was the primary source of education, as most African groups relied primarily on oral instruction rather than formal schooling.

Islam As Islam spread to some populations both along the East African coast and in key West African kingdoms during the postclassical period, it long has a rather less significant impact on family arrangements than was true in South Asia – even as Islamic piety increased in other respects. Arab travelers to West Africa, notably the famous Ibn Battuta, noted with dismay that women were freer in their social interactions with men, as well as more brightly clothes, than Middle Eastern standards called for. Strict domestic confinement was largely rejected. Islamic rules on women's rights to property were however more congenial with African patterns, though in some regions the rules were reworked to provide equal inheritance. Gender patterns in African Muslim families did change with time, though more after 1600 than in the postclassical period itself, as Middle Eastern habits of dress and modesty gained greater purchase.

Female Circumcision In parts of northeastern Africa, traditions of female genital mutilation had developed before the rise of Islam, as an extreme method of attempting to assure sexual fidelity by reducing or eliminating the capacity for pleasure. The practice became deeply ingrained as a badg e of female respectability, and a precondition for readiness for marriage. For many in the region, the practice also became associated with fidelity to Islam, providing additional religious sanction – a cultural package that would remain powerful in the region into modern times.

Conclusion Most sub-Saharan Africans remained polytheist well after the postclassical period, even in West Africa. Islam in that sense simply added to the considerable regional diversity in family forms. And Islam itself was readily compatible with features such as patrilinearity and polygyny. The most obvious new tension it could introduce concerned women's family roles and contexts.

Study questions

1. What were the most distinctive features of African polygyny?
2. What were some of the distinctive features and responsibilities of African kinship systems?
3. How did common African gender patterns suggest some modifications of Islamic family practice?

Further reading

Cheryl Johnson-Oden, *Women and Gender in the history of Sub-Saharan Africa* (American Historical Association, 2007)

Esther Hicks, *Infibulattion: Female Mutilation in Islamic Northeast Africa* (Transaction, 1996)

Yizenge Chondoka, *Traditional Marriages in Zambia: a study in cultural history* (Mission Press, 1988)

Pre-Columbian Americas

General Societies in the Americas developed without contact with developments in Afro-Eurasia until 1492, though some of the family forms independently created bore similarities to structures elsewhere. Substantial destruction of pre-Columbian cultures complicate the evidence available concerning family life. However, some striking findings have emerged, offering opportunities for comparison but also a grasp of some of the family traditions that would later be challenged in the European colonial empires. All the major pre-Columbian civilizations relied heavily on family formation, but interesting differences in family styles emerged as well.

Mayan culture What we know about families in Mayan societies corresponds to many familiar features of agricultural society: a family had 5-7 children on average, child labor was vital to the family economy; schooling was available only to the noble class. (Interestingly, noble offspring were subjected to a special procedure that elongated their skulls, making their social status quite visible.) Arranged marriage predominated, and there were both nuclear and extended family arrangement. Often, a man was required to live with his wife's parents for a set period, providing labor, later setting up a household near his father

and paternal kin. Extended families often shared facilities such as kitchens. Divorce was rare but did occur; widows were expected to wait at least a year before remarriage, but this could then occur.

Child sacrifice and discipline Later in Central America, and particularly under Aztec rule, religious rituals sometimes involved child sacrifice. These rituals became common among Mexica people from the 14th to 16th centuries, and in one case (based on recent discovery of remains in Mexico City) involved as many as 140 children. Priests removed the hearts of the vicitims while still beating, offered as a sacrifice to the gods, and then decapitated the body. The whole process was meant to assure the continued existence of humanity. (Child sacrifice also developed in the Andes, though at a lower rate.) Not surprisingly, there is considerable debate about the meaning of these practices. Some argue that they served as population control (much like infanticide, but with far more ritual involvement). Others see them as helping to provide group identity and/or reinforce social hierarchy; in some cases, prisoners of war may have been used, another facet, as conquering groups sought to demonstrate their power and control. Spanish conquerors professed shock as the evidence they found, usually seeking to conceal it by building over the remains; this formed part of a strong, and often misleading, narrative of Christian superiority. Other traditional disciplinary practices were also singled out, such as exposing children to the smoke of burning chile peppers as a punishment for misbehavior; there is no way to determine the frequency of harsh measures given the tendency to exaggerate "native" cruelty.

Aztecs Aztec family forms replicated early patterns in Central America in many respects. Marriage age may have been a bit younger (18 or so for women, 22 for men). Marriages were often conditional, involving a trial period to determine compatibility; a couple could decide to separate after they had a first child (another practice that would shock the Spanish). Children were seen as gifts of the gods, but were expected to be strictly obedient. Most families were monogamous but some polygamy or concubinage occurred in the upper classes. Divorce was not legally recognized, but spouses could petition the courts for legal separation on grounds of domestic abuse, laziness or infertility on the part of the wife, or economic failure. Property would be divided based on what each party brought to the marriage. Both genders could hold property, but inheritance usually (not invariably) favored sons.

Incas Andean civilization came to rely heavily on relationships and attachments among extended kin, with some resemblance to patterns developed In Africa. Words for father and uncle, mother and aunt, brother or sister and cousin were the same, with relationships based on patrilineal descent. Many small families units would be part of a common kin group, or *ayllu,* and almost all marriages were arranged within this group. Elders in the kin group helped allocate property to assure economic viability for individual families. Because there was no writing system, formal education was limited even for children of the nobility, but there was some instruction in this group concerning religion and group history (as well as training for warfare and use of the *quipu* record-keeping system).

Conclusion The Americas also included many hunting and gathering or other agricultural groups, with varied specific family practices and traditions, many featuring considerable gender equality in family and group governance. The Iroquois emphasized matrilineal kinship, with family groups sharing a longhouse with a Clan Mother at its head. Cherokee families were also based on matrilineal clans. Many indigenous groups identified and valued "second sex" individuals whose sexual identity differed from biology at birth – another custom that would prompt indignant response from European colonists later on.

Study questions

1. What are the most plausible explanations for the practice of child sacrifice? How much does the practice reveal about overall attitudes to children?
2. What were the main differences in family structure between the Andes and Central America?
3. What aspects of pre-Columbian family life reflected standard features of agricultural societies?

Further reading

L. Baudin, *Daily Life of the Incas* (Dover, 2011)

M.E. Moseley, *The Incas and their Ancestors* (Thames and Hudson, 2001)

Susan Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1995)

Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (Facts on File, 2006)

Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan* (Cambridge University Press, 1987)