



CELIBACY  
AND  
RELIGIOUS  
TRADITIONS

Edited by  
**CARL OLSON**

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*This book is dedicated to the memory  
of Louise and Warren Eisenhower for  
their love, hospitality, and good cheer*

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## Preface

This book is intended for an educated general readership and for use in college courses. It is also intended to be a supplement to other texts in introductory courses in various religious traditions, because the issues raised by its essays play pivotal roles in many cultures. Moreover, the chapters in this book are intended to introduce students to the role of celibacy, or a lack of it, in various religious traditions, and the contributors present the rationale for its observance (or not) within the context of each tradition. Scholars writing about religious traditions that do not advocate celibacy for its followers call attention to exceptions to this general trend and what lessons can be learned from the absence of celibacy from a culture.

This book grew from my own teaching of courses in various religions (such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Taoism, as well as Native American Indian and African religions). During the course of my teaching, I was not surprised to discover that students are very interested in topics related to human sexuality. Celibacy provides a way to discuss a topic directly related to human sexuality. It also is a way to learn something valuable about the worldview and value system of particular religious traditions.

Using the expertise of scholars in various religious traditions encompassing East and West, ancient and modern, moribund and living, this collection of essays addresses certain questions such as the following: Why do some members of a religious community decide to maintain a celibate style of religious life? Is celibacy

a prerequisite for religious office or status? Are there different contexts within a given religious tradition for the practice of celibacy? Are there gestures or actions that can replace the absence of sexual activity? What is the symbolic significance of celibacy within a particular religious tradition? Besides such questions, these chapters will also address issues about the symbolic significance of celibacy, its function within a religious tradition, its connection to the acquisition of power, and the physical or spiritual benefits of celibacy. In addition to addressing implications for the practice or nonpractice of celibacy within various traditions, this work will enhance our understanding of spirituality, and contribute to our knowledge of asceticism in the East and West.

In a collaborative work of this nature, I need initially to thank the contributors from all over the globe for their hard work, insights, creativity, and willingness to share their knowledge with a wider audience. At Oxford University Press, my gratitude goes to Cynthia Read and others at the press for their faith in and support for this project, such as Meechal Hoffman for her early work on this book and Christine Dahlin for steering it through the production process. This book marks the fifth time that Margaret Case has served as my copyeditor, and I am deeply in her debt. When some contributors were tardy, Peggy helped to keep me sane. I am also thankful to my colleague Glenn Holland for coming through in the clutch, and I am delighted that we could work together on a writing project after being together for so many years at the college on the hill. Finally, I want to extend my thanks to President Richard Cook and Dean Linda DeMerritt of Allegheny College for moving the college forward and allowing me to continue to do what I love. Finally, I want to thank Richard and his wife, Terri, for their many contributions to the college and specifically for his help with my work by offering me a humanities chair. Richard's decision to retire from the college creates a huge gap that we hope will be filled by someone as talented and successful in the near future.



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**Oyeronke Olajubu** is a senior lecturer at the University of Ilorin in Nigeria. She has published essays in European, American, and African journals, and chapters for books on such topics as Yoruba religion, gender, feminism, culture, and other topics. She has also published a book entitled *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*.

**Patrick Olivelle** is the chair of the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is also professor of Sanskrit and Indian religions and holder of the Jacob and Frances Sanger Chair in the Humanities. His work has covered the ascetical traditions of India. Among his major

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**Carl Olson** is professor of religious studies at Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania, where he has held the National Endowment for the Humanities Chair; the Teacher-Scholar Professorship of the Humanities; and a visiting fellowship at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. He is now a permanent fellow of Clare Hall. He has published many essays for journals, books, and encyclopedias, and he has served as review editor for many years of the *International Journal of Hindu Studies*. He has published a couple of books on method and theory, a couple of books on comparative philosophy, and most recently *The Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction*; *Original Buddhist Sources: A Reader*; *The Many Colors of Hinduism: A Thematic-Historical Introduction*; and *Primary Hindu Sources: A Sectarian Reader*.

**John Powers** is a reader in the Faculty of Asian Studies at Australian National University. He is the author of more than sixty articles and fourteen books, including *History as Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles versus the People's Republic of China*. He specializes in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist history of ideas.

# Celibacy and Religious Traditions

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# I

## Celibacy and the Human Body: An Introduction

*Carl Olson*

It is biologically natural for human beings to engage in sexual relationships for the procreation of the species, impelled by motives of lust, pleasure, enjoyment, comfort, companionship, relaxation, or a combination of these drives and needs. Upon reaching adolescence, it is not unusual to experience sexual urges due to chemical changes within one's body that for some people can be overwhelming and difficult to control. Many societies channel this sexual energy into early marriage, for the welfare of the social fabric. Due to the dangers associated with sexually transmitted diseases, especially the deadly scourge of AIDS, contemporary governments have encouraged programs of sexual abstinence or protected sex as preferable ways to prevent such hazards. Certain religious organizations have advocated lifelong celibacy for spiritual reasons, whereas some religious traditions that oppose the practice in general allow for instances or exceptions to the prevailing ban on celibacy.

Being subject to sexual urges presupposes that one is embodied, and our bodies are necessarily embedded in the world. The embodied nature of our sexual drives is, of course, equally true of celibacy. In fact, a discussion of sexuality and celibacy presupposes a conceptual grasp of the human body as a sensitive substance with the ability to produce both pain and pleasure. In addition to being a sensitive substance, the body projects a visible, tangible image of itself in space and time. The body can also transform itself into a sign that functions in a self-referential way and as a referent for

others by means of its ability to acquire meaning. If a symbol can be understood as a particular type of sign, the body can be said to symbolize a bridge that connects nature and culture.<sup>1</sup> As a sign or symbol, the body can be an ambivalent entity from a cross-cultural perspective, even as it possesses the potential to embody and reveal cultural values and attitudes.

During the latter half of the twentieth century there has been an acute philosophical interest in the human body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance, in his work *Phenomenology of Perception* discusses human bodies as organisms capable of perception. The human body and the perceived world form a single system of intentional relations that form correlations, implying that to experience the body is to perceive the world, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the body and world form an inseparable, internal relationship. Mary Douglas, an anthropologist, views the body as a metaphor for reality and a symbolic system, whereas Michel Foucault concentrates his focus on the body as a product of a relationship between power and knowledge. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who are influenced by Merleau-Ponty and second-generation cognitive science, point to the role that the body plays in conceptualization, which is only possible through the body: "Therefore, every understanding that we can have of the world, ourselves, and others can only be framed in terms of concepts shaped by our bodies."<sup>3</sup> Mark Johnson, on the other hand, argues that the human body is in the mind, in the sense that structures of understanding are essential to meaning and reason. But he also explores how the body is in the mind, or how reason and imagination have a bodily basis. He thinks that our bodily, social, linguistic, and intellectual being are interconnected in complex relationships that constitute our understanding of our world.<sup>4</sup> From another perspective, there is also a sense in which one can speak about the history of the body, most clearly evident in the aging process, which demonstrates that the body experiences changes.

In addition to being a sign, symbol, metaphor, mode of conceptualization, and having a history, the body is also flesh, which can express a lustful nature that manifests as threatening and dangerous unless it is controlled and regulated by social processes. Since the body is associated with uncontrollable and irrational passions, desires, and emotions, celibacy is an excellent example of exerting discipline and control upon the human body: "Disciplining is a technical operation designed to form and to fix aptitudes in a body, thus augmenting the body's powers, increasing its functional efficacy. . . . Disciplining makes bodies docile—adapted to instrumental layouts and productive, and also tractable. It makes bodies function as elements that can be programmed and maneuvered."<sup>5</sup> Sexual urges do not cease until weakened by old age, disease, or afflictions associated with medication for high blood pressure or diabetes, and

celibacy is often part of a pattern of actions undertaken to control and discipline the body.

The decision by an embodied person to engage in heterosexual or homosexual activity is not only a personal and mutual action but also a social one. Since sexual relations occur within a social context, the human body may in this sense also be thought of as the result of numerous social and cultural practices, behaviors, and discourses, which operate to construct the body as a social artifact.<sup>6</sup> In summary, although our body is biologically given to us, it is socially constructed.

If the human body and sexuality are inherently social, the same thing can be stated about celibacy, although its observance can differ according to individual volition (for example, whether it is elected or imposed) and temporality (for example, whether it is temporary or permanent). For the aspiring Catholic priest, Hindu ascetic, or Buddhist monk, celibacy appears to be an antisocial choice, but such a momentous and personal decision enables the male or female to enter into a new social order and construct a new identity and status. An understanding of celibacy can thus be a useful way to view the significance of the human body and desire within a social context. This book demonstrates how the practice of celibacy differs cross-culturally and historically within different religious traditions, highlighting exceptions to the general ethos of each tradition.

## The Nature of Celibacy

Celibacy is commonly understood as entailing a vow to abstain from all sexual relationships. Such a vow or intention does not necessarily mean perpetual virginity, because a person could have been married or simply have engaged in sexual relations before taking a vow to remain celibate. Celibacy does not require a vow, however, when it is forced on a person because of social or religious circumstances, such as being on a religious quest, participating in a hunting expedition, or observing a religious ritual.

Within the Western context, celibacy originates from the Latin term *caelebs*, which means “alone or single.”<sup>7</sup> The implications of being alone are a bit misleading, because choosing to be celibate might make a person a member of a community of other celibates. In Hinduism, celibacy is called *brahmacarya*, which is practiced by an ascetic and by a student (*brahmacārin*), which suggests that for a Hindu celibacy is practically synonymous with being a student. These definitions of celibacy from East and West are indicative of cross-cultural differences; the Indian ascetic can choose to live alone or in a group of other