

## Marriage in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism

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Marriage holds a special position in different cultures and religions. Despite differences in the limits and conditions of marriage, religions have many similarities in regard to the issue of marriage. This research paper is a comparative study of marriage in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The findings reveal that all three traditions recognize marriage to have a sacred nature, and they all stress that all sexual needs must be satisfied through marriage. Islam and Judaism encourage marriage, while Christianity has some differences in this respect.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Monasticism.

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### Introduction

Marriage is the natural vocation of a human being, which enables him to achieve peace and tranquility. From the viewpoint of sociologists, marriage and family formation fulfill many functions, such as reproduction, socialization, protection, emotional support, and regulation of sexual behavior.

Alternatively, the functions of family can be examined socially and individually in material and immaterial dimensions. Individually speaking, every human being has a sex drive, which is a primary material need similar to the need for food and water. According to divine religions, satisfying sexual needs is permissible only through marriage.

Moreover, every human being longs for an intimate and affectionate relationship to achieve mental peace. According to sociologists, many people find their most satisfying relationship with their wives, parents,

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children, or other relatives (Bostan et al. 1387 Sh, 86). Socially speaking, marriage is associated with both material and immaterial consequences. The material consequence of marriage is the formation of a population required for a society. Structural functionalism sees population as the primary need of a society; in other words, the first functional factor is characterized by the demographic features of a society. If the population of a society is perished or scattered, the essence of the society will clearly be in danger (Ritzer 1374 Sh, 127). The very first step for the formation of any society is to create the required population. A society facing population decline is in fact heading towards destruction. The immaterial social consequence of marriage is the regulation of healthy social behaviors. As mentioned earlier, marriage contributes to inner peace and leads to spiritual balance in individuals. A society consisting of mentally balanced individuals will have healthier social relations, whereas a society prevalent with mental anxiety and emotional imbalance will give rise to many crimes and disorders.

Marriage traditions vary from culture to culture. All societies—even the very primitive ones—see marriage as an important phenomenon in life, and therefore regulate it with special principles and rulings. Religion also makes marriage a sacrament and introduces special principles for it beyond the natural principles. The current study attempts to comparatively examine the status of marriage in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in order to achieve a deeper understanding of its hidden and manifest layers in the individual and social aspects of human life.

### **Marriage in Islam**

Marriage and family are the most important social institutions. Islam considers marriage to be a “solemn covenant” (Qur’an 4:21) and one of God’s “signs” (30:21). Islam encourages marriage by promising those who intend to get married that “Allah will give them means out of His grace” (24:32-33). Special importance is given to relationships of lineage and marriage: “It is He who has created man from water, then He has established relationships of lineage and marriage” (25:54).

In Islam, marriage is a dear deed to God and is consistent with human nature. Prophet Muhammad (s) says, “There is no foundation built in Islam dearer to God than marriage” (Majlisi 1403, 100:222). Marriage protects faith, so much so that the Prophet (s) said, “When a

man marries, he has protected half of his religion” (Hurr al-‘Amili 1412 AH, 14:5).

Based on Qur’anic verses, Muslim scholars consider marriage to be a natural act with two goals: (1) achieving peace and tranquility, and (2) continuation of the human race (Hamoudi 1432 AH, 27-29). The Qur’an clearly considers marriage to be among God’s signs by which human beings “may dwell in tranquility” (30:21). Some Muslim scholars define the functions of a Muslim family as “acquisition of spiritual perfection, chastity, avoidance of sin, commitment, and responsibility” (Ahmad-Panahi 1385 Sh, 35-37). Others consider the main goal of marriage to be the formation of a family that gives rise to a new generation of healthy and pious Muslims (Elahi and Malakutifar 1389 Sh, 105).

Sexual desire is embedded in human nature. Islam emphasizes the necessity of this desire and God’s wisdom in creating it, and considers marriage as the best way to satisfy it (Elahi and Malakutifar 1389 Sh, 106). Monasticism is therefore impermissible in Islam, and marriage is regarded as a means to reach spiritual perfection rather than an obstacle. Shahid Motahhari argues that sexual instinct is the only desire which affects spirituality positively when satisfied in the right way; therefore, marriage is considered a religiously recommended (*mustahab*) act. He adds that, as experience shows, those who avoid marriage and child-bearing for their spiritual goals demonstrate shortcomings in their personality. Seemingly, man has one aspect of spiritual perfection, which cannot be obtained except through “the school of family” (Motahhari 1370 Sh, 248-49). Marriage contributes to growth and excellence, while celibacy leads to futility and decadence.

### **Age of Marriage**

Marriage, like other natural needs, should be satisfied in a sufficient and timely manner. Nevertheless, in some societies, marriage is sometimes delayed or carried out prematurely, leading to many social and individual problems.

Physiologically speaking, sexual needs arise with physical maturation. In Islam, sexual maturity is a condition for marriage. Imam Sadiq (a) prohibits marriage at an early age, and warns: “If you have your children married at childhood, no affection will arise between the husband and wife” (Hurr al-‘Amili 1412 AH, 20:104). In Islam, the age

of nine is the age of maturity for girls and the age of fifteen is when boys reach maturity. However, in addition to sexual puberty, mental maturity is also necessary for a successful marriage. Family is a small system requiring management and policy, and the couple need a certain level of mental maturity to establish and sustain such a system. Additionally, the family system is an emotional unit and calls for sympathy and intimacy; therefore, the capacity for feelings and emotions is another condition for having a healthy married life. Social maturity is another criterion, which enables desirable actions and reactions between the husband and wife, the lack of which may cause stress and damage (Ahmad Panahi 1385 Sh, 38-40).

While premature marriage is discouraged in Islam, late marriage is also looked down upon. The Prophet (s) says, “If someone whose child reaches the age of marriage is financially able to have him/her get married but does not do so, any sin committed by the child would be recorded for him” (Hindi 1397 AH, 16:442).

Based on the aforementioned issues, scholars argue that although Islam permits marriage at any stage of life, an examination of the goals and functions of marriage reveal that a suitable age for marriage is early youth. The Imams (a) encouraged early marriage (Ahmad Panahi 1385 Sh, 41) and discouraged celibacy (Nuri Tabrisi 1408 AH, 4:155). Overall, many scholars agree that the ideal age of marriage for boys is eighteen and for girls fifteen (Ahmad Panahi 1385 Sh, 42).

### **Conditions of Marriage**

One of the conditions of marriage is the consent and freedom of choice of both parties. In the case of reluctance from either side, the contract is void. This freedom of choice can clearly be seen in the marriages of religious figures, such as the marriage of Fatima (a) to Imam Ali (a) (Motahhari 1359 Sh, 67).

Another condition of marriage is pronouncing the marriage contract (*sigha*). The formula can either be pronounced by the man and woman themselves or by others on their behalf. The *mahr* (marital gift) from the bridegroom to the bride is another obligatory condition for marriage. The Qur’an says, “And give the women [upon marriage] their [bridal] gifts graciously. But if they give up willingly to you anything of it, then take it in satisfaction and ease” (4:4). Therefore, the wife’s *mahr* should be given as a free gift which she can give up if she so pleases.

### **Impediments to Marriage**

Since marriage in Islam has a sacred nature, there are some limitations regarding the choice of spouse. In Islam, marriage between Muslims and pagans is absolutely forbidden. There are also limitations in regard to marriage between Muslims and the People of the Book. Marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man is impermissible. Scholars argue that this ruling arises from Islam's emphasis on women's rights and privileges (Bujari and Parcham 1392 Sh, 23). In regard to marriage between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman, there are various views: some Islamic sects believe that it is permissible for a Muslim man to temporarily marry a Christian or Jewish woman, while others allow for permanent marriage as well.

Marrying one's maharim (that is, one's father, mother, grandparents, siblings, children, grandchildren, aunts, and uncles) is not allowed either.

### **Polygamy**

Polygamy is permissible in Islam under some conditions. The Qur'an says, "And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one" (4:3). According to this verse, a man can marry four women at the same time as long as he can deal with them justly. This justice refers to material issues (food, clothing, shelter, etc.) as well as emotional ones. Since being fair in all these aspects is a difficult task, polygamy is limited.

### **Divorce**

In Islam, any instability in the family system is regarded as reprehensible. The Qur'an says:

And if you fear dissension between the two (husband and wife), send an arbitrator from his people and an arbitrator from her people. If they both desire reconciliation, Allah will cause it between them. Indeed, Allah is ever Knowing and Acquainted [with all things]. (4:35)

In Islamic law, divorce (*talaq*) is the termination or dissolution of the contract of marriage between the husband and wife. It is considered to be an abominable act and is regulated with stringent conditions and procedures. This will reduce the negative social and emotional consequences of divorce for the couple and their children.

According to the Qur'an, when a conflict between a husband and wife is leading to divorce, two arbiters from the relatives of each party have to be appointed to try to reconcile them. Anything that contributes to optimism between the husband and wife and consolidates family ties is desirable in the view of Islam; and anything contributing to its instability is abominated (Makarim Shirazi 1374 Sh, 227). It is important to note that Islam does not declare divorce to be altogether unlawful. Islamic law permits divorce on certain conditions, as "sometimes it is not possible to continue with the marriage and the husband and wife have no other choice than divorce. Islam does not allow divorce unless after the emergence of marital hostility between the husband and wife or when hatred devours them from inside and they set traps for each other" (Sharif Ghoreishi 1386 Sh, 121). Nevertheless, under such conditions when reconciliation is not possible and divorce is seen to be the only solution, morality and justice should not be forgotten.

### **Marriage in Christianity**

The legitimacy of marriage in Christianity comes from the Old and New Testaments. Christianity holds that in the beginning, God created one man and one woman and that the man leaves his father and mother to united to his wife and they become "one flesh" (Genesis 2:25).

In Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, marriage is seen as one of the seven sacraments (Ma'dali 2002, 112-13). Marriage is also considered a sacred act from the Protestant viewpoint. As a sacred act, marriage should take place in the church by a priest with special rituals. In Christianity, marriage is a covenant between husband and wife (*Anzimat al-ahwal* 1997, 56-57) and a visible sign of God's love for humans and a sign of Jesus' love for his followers (Ephesians 5:32).

Despite this, the Church considers marriage a kind of attachment to the material world; accordingly, pure and holy people are those who follow Church orders and remain unmarried. Paul states that monasticism enables one to arrive at union with God through the shortest possible way; however, if a person is unable to preserve himself from sin, then he should get married to avoid adultery (Ma'dali 2002, 114). On the other hand, the Church considers women as a source of temptation and deviation and thereby insists on avoiding them. A woman is viewed as an evil creature; marrying her is allowed only to avoid the greater evil of falling into sin (Motahhari 1379 Sh, 4:18).

Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the essence of Christian life, and communion with him has priority over any other type of social and familial relationship. There are some men and women who avoid the pleasure of marriage in order to pay more attention to the mission of Christ (*Anzimat al-ahwal* 1997, 46). Monastic tradition, which is a symbol of purity and sanctity in Christianity, is against marriage. In Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, priests, deacons, monks, and bishops are not allowed to get married. Marriage—like any other worldly attachment—is viewed as an obstacle to human growth and development, and celibacy is considered to be a way to serve religion. An unmarried person is concerned about the work of the Lord and how he can please Him, but a married person is concerned about the affairs of this world and how he can please his spouse (Corinthians 7:32–33). Jesus Christ and Mary are taken as role models, and since Jesus never married, marriage is allowed in Christianity only in case of necessity and to extinguish the fire of lust.

Overall, both marriage and monasticism are ways to holiness (*Anzimat al-ahwal* 1997, 46). The relationship of husband and wife is compared to that between Christ and the Church. Marriage allows a husband and wife to love each other, just as Christ loved the Church. The secret of marriage in Christianity is this love and affection (*Anzimat al-ahwal* 1997, 56).

### **Age of Marriage**

Since Christian marriage is indissoluble, early marriage is not accepted (Ma'dali 2002, 121). In the Coptic Orthodox tradition, the minimum age required for marriage is seventeen for boys and fifteen for girls. In the Roman Orthodox tradition, no specific age is given, but eighteen for boys and fifteen for girls are considered acceptable. The Catholic Church also gives the age of seventeen for boys and fourteen for girls (Ma'dali 2002, 122-3). In these religious traditions, any boy or girl under the marriage age must obtain his or her guardian's permission before getting married. In the Evangelical Church, however, the contract is void before the age of seventeen for boys and fifteen for girls (Ma'dali 2002, 123).

### **Conditions of Marriage**

One of the fundamental conditions of marriage in Christianity is the mutual consent of both parties (*Anzimat al-ahwal* 1997, 49). Christian

scholars believe that since it is impossible to annul a marriage, mutual consent contributes to further consolidation of parity (Ma'dali 2002, 121).

Another condition of marriage in Christianity is the marriage contract. This contract must be executed in the church and usually in public. The presence of a priest and his execution of the contract is another condition of marriage. In their view, marriage is not complete except by the matrimonial prayer (Ma'dali 2002, 121-30).

### **Impediments to Marriage**

In Christianity, there are thirteen impediments to marriage, four of which are disparity of religious affiliation, the bond of a previous marriage, sacred orders, and blood relationship (*Anzimat al-ahwal* 1997, 49-50).

Based on Mar Paul's message on the conflict between light and darkness and Christ and evil, Christian theologians believe that no relationship is acceptable between the believers in Jesus Christ and non-believers; that is, it is not possible to marry and form a family with someone who has a different religion and rejects the principles of the Church and its sacred beliefs (*Anzimat al-ahwal* 1997, 81). This is an effort by the church to nurture religious children.

The bond of a previous marriage is another impediment to marriage. Since divorce and polygamy are not allowed, one with a previous marriage contract is not allowed to marry again.

Blood relationship is another impediment. Blood relationship in Christianity is the most expanded among divine religions and includes one's father, mother, grandparents, brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

With regards to sacred orders as an impediment to marriage, the Catholic and Orthodox Church are more strict than the Protestants. Although the Catholic Church insists on the celibacy of church leaders, it was possible during some periods of time for Catholic priests to get married. Some believe that celibacy was not mandatory for priests in the first three periods of Christian history, but gradually, extremists came to view any sexual activity between man and woman to be a sin (Baghbani 1385 Sh, 62). In the Orthodox Church, a married man may be ordained to the priesthood but is not allowed to become a bishop. Protestantism in general does not require the celibacy of its clergy and

allows, or even encourages, clerical marriage (Baghbani 1385, 62). Martin Luther spoke out against clerical celibacy and got married himself. Protestantism argues that marriage has priority over monasticism and a pious wife who fears God and loves her family is the best gift from God (Ma‘dali 2002, 115).

### **Polygamy**

Since marriage in Christianity means the union of a man and woman to become one flesh, polygamy is prohibited. The Church views marriage as an inseparable bond and prohibits divorce or polygamy. Remarriage is not allowed except after the death of one’s spouse—and even in this case, not remarrying is considered more appropriate (Corinthians 7:39-40).

Some scholars believe that the prohibition of polygamy has its origin in the laws of the Roman Empire rather than the teachings of Christ. Shahid Motahhari holds the view that polygamy is not prohibited in Christianity. He argues that the Torah, approved by Jesus Christ, recognizes polygamy, and there were people before Christ who had multiple wives. He sees the prohibition of polygamy as having roots outside of Christianity (Motahhari 1368 Sh, 394).

### **Divorce**

The nature of marriage in Christianity is (1) heavenly and divine, and (2) unbreakable, because God creates this sacred bond between the man and woman (Zinati 1384 Sh, 42).

In Matthew we read, “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:31-32). The union of the husband and wife in marriage is like the union of Christ and the Church—they cannot be separated and their holiness is eternal (*Anzimat al-ahwal* 1997, 56).

### **Marriage in Judaism**

In Judaism, marriage is viewed as a religious and spiritual act. God’s first command to humans was marriage: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). A man who does not make any effort to get married is like a person who sheds blood or considers the human image, which is the image of God, to be worthless,

or like the one who caused the Lord to remove Israel from His presence (Anterman 1385 Sh, 225). Accordingly, “a man is allowed to sell a book of Torah and use the money for his marriage, as he is allowed to sell it for the purpose of learning it (Cahan 1382 Sh, 180).

The husband and wife become united in marriage: “A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:42). Marriage leads to perfection and completion, since “He created them male and female and blessed them. And He named them ‘Mankind’ when they were created” (Genesis 5:2).

### **Age of Marriage**

Judaism insists on marriage and considers natural maturation in women and men as the condition for the validity of marriage. Therefore, the minimum age required for marriage in boys and girls are thirteen and twelve respectively (Ma‘dali 2002, 97).

In the case that girls are married to a person before their maturity, their guardian’s consent is required. The guardian’s consent cannot be ignored even after the girl’s maturity, except when she gets divorced or her husband dies (Ma‘dali 2002, 90-91). Ideally, a person should marry by the age of twenty. When a person passes this age and is still unmarried, God curses him by saying: “Let curse come into his bowels and swell his bones” (Bujari and Parcham 1392 Sh, 32). Notably, Judaism prohibits marriage when the husband is unable to satisfy his wife’s needs and provide her comfort (Cahan 1382 Sh,180).

### **Condition of Marriage**

The conditions of marriage in Judaism are (1) satisfaction and sanctity, (2) marriage contract (ketubah), and (3) blessing prayer. The first condition refers to a declaration of consent in the presence of at least two witnesses accompanied by the giving of a marital gift. The ketubah is a binding document of confidence and trust, which details both the husband’s obligations to his wife (including loyalty, nice behavior, and satisfying her needs) and the wife’s obligations to her husband (including the laws of family purity and compliance with religious codes). The amount of the wedding gift, as presented in Deuteronomy, is fifty shekels of silver (Deuteronomy 22:28-29), which would be different in the second marriage (Abu al-Majd 2004, 62). The third condition for a Jewish marriage is the blessing prayer which should be performed in public (Ma‘dali 2002, 97).

### **Impediments to Marriage**

The marriage impediments in Judaism are religion and blood relationship. Principally, Judaism does not allow Jews to marry non-Jews (Ma'dali 2002, 91). A Jewish child should ideally learn the Torah and be raised to be God-fearing (Cahan 1382 Sh, 182), and a non-Jewish wife, no matter how good she is, cannot help a Jewish child to effectively play his role in keeping the heritage of Judaism alive (Boujari and Parcham 1392 Sh, 27). This marriage impediment, however, has been gradually ignored (Ma'dali 2002, 90-91).

Judaism also forbids marriage between certain blood relatives, including one's father, mother, ancestors, brothers, sisters, children, and grandchildren.

### **Polygamy**

Polygamy is permissible in Judaism, and Jews are permitted to marry up to four wives (Ma'dali 2002, 99-100). Revered figures such as Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon had several wives. It was customary for Jews to marry their female slaves, although this required conditions such as the sterility or madness of the first wife, financial ability, and the capacity to uphold justice.

### **Divorce**

Contrary to Christianity, Judaism allows divorce. The authority of divorce is entirely in the hands of the man, who only needs to hand his wife the divorce document in order to complete the divorce. The moment a man decides to divorce his wife, she becomes forbidden to him. Divorce is also allowed for reasons such as the sterility of the wife, adultery, physical defects, and social problems. A man who is getting divorced should pay his wife's wedding gift, unless she has failed in the implementation of Jewish religious laws.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Islam, Christianity, and Judaism view marriage as the only legal way to reproduce and satisfy sexual needs. In the view of these Abrahamic religions, marriage is a religious and sacred act: Islam places great emphasis on it (*mustahab mu'akkad*); Christianity includes it in the seven sacraments; and Judaism views it as a *kiddushin* (sanctification). In all these religions, a marriage ceremony is performed with special rituals, and a specific contract is pronounced in a holy language. The

three Abrahamic religions have specific conditions for marriage, and failing to follow them invalidates the marriage.

Islam and Judaism view marriage as contributing to spiritual growth, and therefore do not accept monasticism. In Islam, a man's love for his wife is in lines with the Prophets' manners and increases faith (Kulayni 1365 Sh, 14:320). Christianity, however, advocates that spiritual growth is elevated by purity from worldly affairs such as marriage. Church leaders should, therefore, avoid marriage.

Islam and Judaism reject celibacy and insist on marriage soon after maturity. Islam sees marriage as a solution for financial problems and encourages the poor to get married by promising them God's blessings. Judaism, however, does not encourage marriage for those who are not financially ready.

Polygamy is an issue faced with many challenges throughout history. Islam and Judaism allow for polygamy under certain conditions, but Christianity absolutely forbids it even in case of the wife's sterility.

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