

Inter-faith column #6 – Feb 2023 – On Love and Marriage  
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Our contemporary celebrations of St Valentine's Day – with chocolate and roses and cards showing cupids with bows and arrows -- usually on romantic love, but most of that has little to do with St Valentine's own life and death as a Roman martyr from the third century C.E. His story does provide an opportunity for exploring the relationship of love within marriage, because one of the main reasons for St Valentine's martyrdom was connected with love and marriage. At that time, the Roman army was short of volunteers, and the emperor, thinking that unmarried men made better soldiers, banned marriage. As a priest, Valentine valued marriage more than military and love more than law, so he continued to marry couples secretly, an act which prevented men from entering the military service but also got Valentine eventually killed.

Valentine's association of marriage with love was somewhat unusual at the time. Indeed, as Stephanie Coontz points out in her book, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, for most of human history, 'love' considerations in marriage came far behind practical issues such as providing healthy and consistent sexual relationships (which would produce offspring and cohesive family groups) and legal frameworks for property and inheritance issues. Even in the Bible, passages which speak of marital *love* are few and far. Within the Hebrew scriptures, the few 'love' marriages are overshadowed with difficulties: Isaac and Rebecca had a compatibility problem; Jacob and Rachel's story had many complications, and while Hosea loved Gomer unconditionally, she was a prostitute who rejected Hosea's love.

Most of the love spoken about in the Bible concerns either God's love (or love for God) or our responsibility to love others as ourselves. The passages which speak of marital love are mostly confined to New Testament letters (1Peter 3.7-12; Eph 5.33; Col 3.19), all of which speak of a husband being commanded to love his wife, and the Song of Solomon, which combines erotic and romantic love. It's interesting to note that the Song of was rejected by many early religious leaders, though it was eventually accepted as an allegory of God's love. Only recently has love been considered the main objective of marriage, and some would argue that concept emerged from a Christian theology of love as being the bedrock of all healthy relationships.

When we look at love and marriage in other faith traditions, we find a variety of approaches, though most, as with Christianity, have not considered love and marriage automatically connected. Below are a few of the insights included in my book, *Interfaith Marriage: Working for World Peace at the Most Intimate Level*.

In Buddhism the concept and practice of 'lovingkindness' is essential for well-being, and the marriage relationship provides fertile ground for its development. Having a *kalyana-mitra*, a good or beautiful friend, is important for helping a good Buddhist develop lovingkindness; having such a person as a spouse can be a great encouragement to implement love and kindness, as well as faithfulness and harmony, at the most intimate level. A similar concept is found in the Baha'i Faith, where marriage is seen as a commitment based on love, trust, loyalty, and faithfulness. Developing those traits within the marriage relationship provides a happy and healthy home which can then provide the same for the larger community.

In Islam, marriage is expected of all adults, because active sexual relations are considered essential for one's well-being, and marriage allows sexual relationships to happen in a safe and regulated manner. That is not to say that Islamic marriage is all about sex. Indeed, a verse from the Qur'an (30.21) says that God created spouses 'for you to live with in tranquility: He ordained love and kindness between you.' As with Christian love, this love within marriage is to reflect God's love.

Hinduism considers procreation, particularly having a son, as an essential element of one's own spiritual progression and of one's family (the family being considered more important than the individual in Hindu society). It is through continuing the family line that one contributes to the upward (or downward) cycle of rebirth by which one's ancestors and descendants are able to gain ultimate release (*moksha*) from the endless cycle of suffering (*samsara*). Procreation, then, becomes the main purpose of marriage, and the practice of arranged marriage has the welfare of the whole family in mind when seeking appropriate spouses for young adults. In that respect, 'love marriages' are still frowned upon by traditional Hindu society, on the assumption that young persons are too inexperienced to make such life-choices on their own. It's also assumed that love will *follow* in the marriage as the couple learns the give-and-take that happens within a long-time committed relationship.

In each of these traditions, we see mature love developing out of long-term faithfulness, a relationship that marriage ideally fosters. These traditions also separate this mature love from an immature relationship based on lust that strives only to conquer what it sees as physically or emotionally attractive in the other. That's not to say that there is no appreciation for sexual desire or gratification in the various faith traditions, only that the sexual element is not the ultimate aim but a way through which mature love might develop. Perhaps that's what St Valentine had in mind when he put his life on the line to promote marriage and marital love.