

Love an emotion that transcends religion

by Charita M. Goshay

Nearly all faiths have something to say about love, marriage and romantic relationships. From Muslims to Protestants to Buddhists, religious-based groups have definite ideas on how their faith offers ideal guidelines for lasting love.

DOOMED DESIRE - This etching from a German Bible published in the 1860s depicts Samson and Delilah, a pair of ill-fated lovers whose story can be found in the Book of Judges. Perspectives on romantic relationships vary among different faiths. CNS Photo.

The Rev. Anthony Salveggio, an adjunct professor at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh and author of the book, "What the Bible Teaches About Marriage" (Evangelical Press, \$14), said the Scriptures encourage open communication and kindness in relationships, and that marriage should be an example "that shows the image of God to the world."

"I wrote the book in response to the situations I was witnessing in my own congregation," he said. "I'm also a pastor in a college town, so I see the blessing and distraction that love can be."

Pointing to the Bible's "Song of Songs," which focuses on a romantic relationship, Salveggio said love can be dangerous if not kept in its proper context.

"In it, a woman reading poetry says it's dangerous to awaken love before its proper time; it can be a sleeping giant," he said. "She also describes loves as having a power like death. It's an incredible, primal human emotion that can become obsessive."

Salveggio said the idea is nothing new.

"Love can make you do irrational things, particularly when you see a rival to your affections," he said.

"Even people who are incredibly intelligent (can) do things that seem kind of insane to us. ... King David is a classic example of a love triangle. He saw Bathsheba and became obsessed. It led to murder, the loss of his (infant) son, the destruction of his own family. Those ripple effects are the things I see in my job as a pastor."

Muslim scholar and lecturer Raeed Tayeh said the Koran sets clear guidelines for relationships and behavior.

"Men and women are warned against being unchaste," he said. "Marriage is prescribed as the only legitimate romantic relationship that is allowed. The Koran, and by extension the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, defines the general role of the male and female in society, both roles being equal, but different. The male is primarily responsible for putting food on the table and keeping the family safe, while the woman's primary role is to make sure the household is functioning properly.

"Given these roles, it is then up to men and women to decide how much responsibility they want to share. The Prophet, as busy as he was, used to help out with the housework from time to time, and he had a major hand in the rearing of his four daughters. It is all about balance and fairness.

"(My wife) has an advantage over me in that whatever money I bring in, according to Islam, she has a right to it, but whatever money she makes is hers alone, and I do not have a right to it."

Rob Eagar said his first marriage lasted only six months. Today, Eagar is a relationship expert and author of the book "Dating With Pure Passion" (Harvest House, \$12).

"As Christians, the Bible talks about God living inside of us, that God is love," he said. "That means we have a source of love to offer someone else. That's different than what most other religions teach. ... It's comforting as a Christian to know that I have a source of love within me. It takes a lot of pressure off me to be the perfect husband. It's more about learning to let God love through us."

Eagar, who has been remarried for seven years, admits he ignored some red flags in his first.

"One mistake I made, looking back, I didn't do a good enough job examining character," he said. "Instead, I followed my emotions. As long as we were having fun, everything was OK. You want to have fun; love and romance are meant to be exciting. Romance attracts and bring people together, but character keeps them together."

SELFLESS LOVE

"One of the primary guidelines in Buddhism regarding relationships is that of loving-kindness," said the Venerable Shih Ying-Fa, abbot of Cloudwater Zendo in Cleveland. "The Buddha once said to treat all older women as you would your mother, all middle-aged women as you would your sister and all younger women as you would your daughter."

The same, Ying-Fa said, applies to men. "This means that we treat all with great love, respect and kindness. This is a most reasonable way to conduct one's self in a romantic relationship."

Ying-Fa said Buddhists are encouraged to develop a "compassionate heart," while achieving nonattachment.

"The deep experience of feeling as others feel produces a response which never produces harm in any way," he said.

Regarding nonattachment, he said, "This does not mean that we utterly dismiss our emotional connections, but rather that we actively engage in releasing our own cravings, both overt and subtle. Attachment to one's self, commonly called 'ego-attachment,' often causes our loving relationships to become increasingly one-sided."

Ying-Fa said Buddhists also are instructed to be careful with love, "lest it become selfish and egotistic."

"It is possible to love someone so much that they are actually stifled by that love," he said. "Such a relationship, which is actually dominated by the love of one's self, can produce catastrophic results."

"The rule of thumb in Buddhism is simply this: 'Do my actions create suffering of any kind or do they lead to the cessation of suffering?'"

Tayeh said "romantic" relationships and sexual behavior prior to marriage generally are prohibited in Islam.

"Islam does not deny that men and women are attracted to one another," he said, "But it gives them a proper outlet that protects them from diseases of both the heart and body, and guarantees them rights as spouses."

"When people date, there is no responsibility involved, no guaranteed rights. Whereas in marriage, an actual contract is signed that signals acceptance of rights and responsibilities."

MUSLIM MYTHS

Tayeh said that contrary to popular belief, a Muslim woman is not the "property" of her husband.

"In fact, traditionally, Muslim women should not change their last names, as their identity of being 'the daughter of so and so from the family of so and so' is preserved," he said.

Because they are discouraged from dating in the traditional sense, how do Muslim singles get to know one another?

"Muslim kids ask me that all the time when I lecture on this topic around the country," Tayeh said. "What I tell them is that where religion leaves off, culture picks up. In Africa or the Middle East, families may arrange for young men and women to meet in their presence and go through an elaborate courtship process."

A dilemma arises, Tayeh said, when the culture violates one's religion. In his own case, Tayeh said he met his future wife, Ruwaida Salem, at work.

"We were co-workers for four months before it hit me that she was the woman I wanted to marry," he said. "So I mentioned it to her and asked her for permission, not for marriage, but to call her father so that the issue could be formally explored."

Tayeh noted that under Islamic principles, "neither a man nor a woman should be forced into marriage."

Always chaperoned, Tayeh said he and his fiancée focused their conversation on their goals for marriage and life.

"We talked about what was most important for the longevity of a marriage first," he said. "Luckily, we were compatible, and there was chemistry there, and when our families agreed, we began the process of marriage."

During their engagement, Muslim couples can visit or talk on the phone, Tayeh said, but are not to be alone in order to avoid temptation. He said some communities now provide supervised outlets where singles can explore matrimonial prospects.

"They're sort of like church mixers, but without the dancing," he said.

There also are Muslim-sponsored Web sites where singles can search for a spouse.

Salveggio said one reason the divorce rate among Christians is virtually equal to that of others is, "The church doesn't talk about human romance, human sexuality except in negative sense," he said.

"'Thou shalt not.' We don't talk to people about how to live a redeemed, Christ-like marriage. The church always focused on sex and romance in negative terms, rather than the blessings of marriage. Sexuality is a gift of God to be enjoyed in the context of marriage, not something dirty. We should learn to love that gift."

Tayeh said Islam permits divorce under unavoidable circumstances, but "The Prophet said, 'Among lawful things, divorce is the most hated by Allah (God).'"

Islam permits men, but not women, to as many as four spouses, but men are not encouraged to get married to more than one wife. Tayeh said the phenomena is very rare, but it is often blown out of proportion when discussions of Islam occur.

"The guidelines are very strict," he said. "For instance, a man must treat each spouse equally when it comes to providing for them and spending time with them. If he can't treat them equally, then marrying more than one wife is forbidden."

Tayeh said one reason a man might marry more than one wife is if his first wife cannot have children. Instead of divorcing her, he is permitted to marry another woman so that he may have children.

"This may not be ideal, but it is better than the first woman being abandoned or cheated on," he said.

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