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L. J. "TESS" TESSIER

Virginity

The state of virginity appears frequently in the history of religions as an indication of being set apart from others or from the human condition in general. Whereas virginity is a natural feature of the lives of prepubescent children, adults who are capable of sexual intercourse but choose to avoid it set themselves apart from their peers. The adult virgin's nonparticipation in the sexual acts that foster the perpetuation of human society marks her or him as a special being with a special relationship to the social world.

Being disengaged from the network of social ties that come with sexuality and marriage, the adult virgin is often depicted as a being who is more at home in the natural world than in the social world of humans. In the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, dating to around 1600 B.C.E., the virginal Enkidu wanders naked, living among the animals as a man of nature until seduced by a courtesan. After his seduction, Enkidu's animal companions flee from him, and he finds he has lost his former agility and speed. Having been humanized through his introduction to sexuality, Enkidu becomes the companion of King Gilgamesh.

VIRGINITY AS A TEMPORARY STATE

Temporary sexual renunciation appears commonly in the history of religions as a means of consecration to be undergone by women and men when moving from the profane to the sacred (before entering a temple, for example, or performing a religious ritual). Likewise, virginity is often a prerequisite for contact with the sacred. Thus virginity was required of the priestesses of many of the cults of Greco-Roman antiquity. Virginity played a central role in the Roman cult of Vesta, goddess of the hearth, whose undying flame symbolized the continuity of the Roman family and the state. As Sara Pomeroy (1975) has noted, the Vestal Virgins belonged to no man and thus to everyone, thereby instantiating the collective.

The *Kumāris*, or living virgin goddesses, of Nepal perform today a sacred role similar to that once played by the Vestal Virgins. Young girls chosen from among the Newar population of the Kathmandu Valley are formally installed in office as living incarnations of the Hindu goddess Durgā. The *Kumāris* are venerated until signs of impurity (such as menstruation or loss of teeth) indicate that the goddess has departed. Like the Vestal Virgin, the *Kumari* is free to marry after leaving office; most, however, remain single (Allen, 1975). Although the majority of the living goddesses of Nepal are worshiped only at the local level, one *Kumari* is the center of a national cult. Living in seclusion in a special building close to the old palace in Kathmandu, the royal *Kumari* of Kathmandu is venerated as a source of royal power by the king of Nepal, government officials, and the nation at large. The Nepalese cult of the living virgin goddess has its roots in the Hindu custom of venerating prepubescent girls as temporary incarnations of the divine. During the annual festival of Durgā-Pūjā in October and occasionally at other times, young girls are worshiped by Hindu families throughout India and Nepal as living forms of the goddess.

Like prepubescent Hindu girls, unmarried Muslim women who make their virginity conspicuous are commonly exalted as maintainers of family honor. Most Islamic scriptural sources deem sexual desire "natural" for both women and men; permanent virginity is there-

In Kathmandu, Nepal, young girls are chosen to become *Kumāris* (living virgin goddesses). This young girl is considered to be the living incarnation of the goddess Durgā (Alison Wright/Corbis).

fore rare in Islamic cultures. Thus, while Muslim brides should be virgins, virgins should (in due time) be brides.

VIRGINITY AS A PERMANENT CONDITION

One of the remarkable developments in the history of women in late antiquity is the enthusiastic pursuit of sexual asceticism by large numbers of early Christian women vowed to permanent virginity. Feminist scholars suggested that virginity allowed women the opportunity to escape narrowly conceived social roles and exercise forms of autonomy and power otherwise unavailable to them (Clark, 1981; Fiorenza, 1983; McNamara, 1976; Rouselle, 1988; Ruether, 1979). Through sexual abstinence, women were able to control wealth, obtain education, and exercise leadership in their communities. Virginal women were said to become "male" or even transcend gender distinctions altogether; the abolition of a female nature considered inferior to that of men was a major motive for women who practiced sexual abstinence (Castelli, 1991; Harrison, 1990; Meyer, 1985).

Although the New Testament contains the roots of an ascetic ideology supportive of virginity as a lifelong practice (for example, Paul's exhortations to early Christian communities to follow his example in leading a celibate life), it was not until the Christianizing of the Roman Empire in the fourth century of the common era that the image of virginity as the ideal Christian life became widespread. Asceticism replaced martyrdom as a means of achieving Christian perfection. Serving an important ecclesiastical function as symbols of the true church and an economic function as patrons who built monasteries and supported ascetic communities, virginal women of the fourth and fifth centuries won considerable admiration for their sexual abstinence. Church fathers dedicated both treatises and personal letters to the task of praising female virgins and convincing women to renounce marriage. Fourth-century encomiums on virginity promise women liberation from the burdens of marriage and motherhood. Instead, the virgin is offered a sublime erotic fulfillment in the form of a celestial union with Christ as the divine bridegroom (Castelli, 1986). In this celestial union, virginal women were said to possess a spiritual fecundity resembling that of Mary, the virginal mother of Jesus.

VIRGIN BIRTH

Some of the oldest references to virginity are to be found in accounts of the birth of culture heroes and deities. The exceptional nature of such figures is often signaled by the unusual circumstances of their conception and birth. Conceived by their mothers through a variety of nonsexual means such as the ingestion of certain foods, contact with water, wind, and rays of the sun, or simply by means of a wish, heroes and deities enter into the world in an extraordinary manner that corresponds to their extraordinary qualities. The Greek hero Perseus, for example, was conceived when Zeus visited his mother Danae in the form of a shower of gold. The mother of the Hottentot ancestor-god Heitsi-Eibib conceived through the ingestion of a certain sap-filled grass. The Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, according to one legend about his birth, came into being when his mother swallowed a precious stone. According to another legend, it was the breath of an Aztec god upon his mother's body that led to Quetzalcoatl's conception. These few examples indicate the variety of forms that supernatural conception can take.

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See also **Birth and Rebirth; Celibacy; Chastity; Durgā and Kālī; Saints; Sexuality; Virgin Mary.**

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Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary is the principal symbol of female holiness and power in the Christian tradition. Very briefly mentioned in the New Testament as the mother of Jesus and witness to his death, the contours of the symbol of Mary have been filled in by generations of popular devotion, theological speculation, and political and pastoral manipulation. The Apocryphal Gospel of James (mid-second century) contributed some of the most enduring legends about her, including stories about her Davidic lineage, her childhood dedication to virginity, her marriage to a widower with sons, the trial by which she and Joseph proved that they never had sexual relations, and the doubt of Salome whose hand fell off after touching Mary's virginal, postpartum womb. Even though this text was condemned in the Western church, its emphasis on the perpetual virginity of Mary and its attribution to Mary of many characteristics associated with Jesus would be echoed in later developments.

Although the cult of the Virgin has served the interests of ruling constituencies, as when the empress Augusta Pulcheria (399–453) promoted veneration of Mary as Theotokos (Mother of God) as part of her program of institutionalizing her imperial power, popular veneration of Mary can be traced to as early as the third century, including some practices that suggest the syncretization of the Marian piety with the worship of the pagan goddesses. From the mid-eleventh century, veneration of the Virgin exploded in new forms of prayer, scriptural exegesis, song, art, pilgrimage, drama, church dedication, and social organization (in confraternities dedicated to Mary), all of which were marked by new emotional expression of personal intimacy with the mother of God. Hundreds of stories circulated in oral and written forms celebrating Mary's miraculous intervention in the lives of her devotees, stories in which themes of