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Religious Influences on the Life Cycle and the Maintenance of Environmental Balance

10.1 The chances of conception

Monasticism and the celibacy of priests, monks and nuns clearly reduce the rate of conception in a community and may even determine whether a particular population expands or contracts. Buddhist monasticism has similar effects. In Outer Mongolia the number of celibate lamas has been associated with the slow growth of the population (Dondog 1972, 52–4). Some religious beliefs have led to practices which have terminated the possibility of conception. The upper-class male members of the Skopsi in nineteenth-century Russia castrated themselves. This sect, which started in 1770, expected the millennium when their numbers reached 144 000 as mentioned in the book of Revelation (7: 4; Conybeare 1921). Similarly, the separation of male and female Shakers precluded births. Those who wanted to conceive would have left their communities. However, since female members were often those seeking refuge from male mistreatment, this may have been infrequent.

In some cases a combination of socio-religious factors may have kept the birth rate low where mechanical birth control was not an option. Many believed their ancestors wanted their families to continue, so they restricted births to provide the children who were born with a better chance of survival. Most pre-industrial societies have prolonged breastfeeding since there are no special infant foods, and they maintain a social embargo on sexual intercourse during this period to prevent a further pregnancy which would jeopardize the existing infant. The Koran specifically encourages breastfeeding (Sura 2: 223). This practice
delays the resumption of menstruation so whether or not intercourse takes place, the chances of conception are lower than for women who do not breastfeed their babies. The post-partum taboo on sexual intercourse among the Mekranoti Indians of Brazil was 36 months prior to 1955 and fell to 25 months after 1965 (Werner 1983, 227–45).

Hinduism has a dichotomy of approaches towards sexual activity. On the one hand, wandering sadhus generally take vows of poverty and celibacy, and depend on householders for their support. Towards the end of life ordinary Hindus are required to detach themselves from worldly concerns, although this applies as much to diet as to sexual abstinence. The devout Hindu, in conformity to phases of the moon and especially to religious days, might well refrain from sexual activity for 120 days annually (Chandrasekaran 1952, 73–9). Such abstinence, however, is less common among the young. On the other hand, much Hindu art is highly sensual, as exemplified by the sexual acrobatics depicted in the sculptures on the outside walls of the temples at Khurajah.

One cause of low birth rates among the higher-caste Hindus is the age disparity between husbands and wives who historically were married off before or very near to their menarche. Thus many were widowed and unable to remarry while still virgins or even in their teens. So Hindu India has always had large numbers of higher-caste widows for whom remarriage is impossible. It was less difficult for those lower down the religious scale because they were needed as farm labourers (Dandekar 1959). Many pre-industrial cultures allow for the widow to be inherited by a brother-in-law as the original marriage made her the legal property of her husband’s family. Judaism also permits levirate marriage including the right of the brother-in-law to allow the widow to marry out. Christianity has no restriction on the remarriage of widows and Islam permits it once the widow has menstruated four times.

Buddhism regards celibacy as an ideal. It discourages any form of attachment to worldly affairs from indulgent eating to sexual intercourse, and it luridly describes the latter as resembling coitus with a snake’s mouth. All men, including those of the Thai royal family, spend some time as monks. Well over 5 per cent of the fecund male population are celibate at any one time. Widowed Burmese, for instance, show a disinclination to remarry. However it is possible to buy very explicit fertility amulets within the precincts of Bangkok temples.

Islam has no celibate ideal even for acknowledged mystics. It positively encourages sexual intercourse in marriage, specifically at night following the daily Ramadan fast. There are no periods in which