



A History of Celibacy : From Athena to Elizabeth I, Leonardo Da Vinci, Florence Nightingale, Gandhi and Cher

Elizabeth Abbott

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Joan of Arc was one. So was Sir Isaac Newton. A monk vows to be one. A prisoner has no choice. History tells of many avowed celibates, and today's society reflects a renewed interest in celibacy. But what causes people to give up sex, the very activity that drives, fascinates, troubles, and delights so many of the rest of us? Elizabeth Abbott's exploration of celibacy debunks the traditionally held notion that celibacy is a predominantly religious concept of little concern to the secular world. Chosen or imposed for myriad reasons, celibacy actually is a practice that reveals a host of telling insights about our sexual desires and drives, as well as our changing attitudes toward religion, gender, and physical health. "A History of Celibacy" humanises celibacy through the ages, from the vestal virgins of ancient Rome who were entombed alive if they broke their vows, to contemporary athletes who 'conserve semen' to enhance their game. While most people associate institutional celibacy with Catholicism, Abbott shows how virtually every culture and religion through history has incorporated it in some form. Her examples range from Judaism's rules regarding abstinence during menstruation to Hinduism's forced celibacy for widows. Written from a feminist perspective, the book paints a dual portrait of celibacy as both emancipator and enslaver of women and the poor. Yet the book's focus is not solely on women. It recounts for instance the forced castration of Italy's young male sopranos, and tells why impoverished Chinese boys and men became eunuchs for the Emperor. The extremes to which people will go to abstain from sexual activity or to prevent others from having sex is an intriguing thread through a serious book.

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