

# Religion and the Family

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson looks at religion and the family to try and identify the source and structure of the values, morality, and ethics that serve to bring them into closer relationships. You'll see that the roles within families, society, and religion often mirror each other and can, therefore, be mutually supportive to varying degrees. The character and strength of this relationship depend on how these values are perceived and applied in the broader realm of society and culture. Specifically, the lesson will cover:

1. Aristotle
2. Confucianism
3. The Symbiotic Relationship

## 1. Aristotle

There are several roots of the modern notions of family. One is the biological family unit or the natural structure of relations. Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, saw the “oikos,” or the family, as the ground for many other human structures, endeavors, and projects.

The first commitment that stems from this state of nature is the “philia,” the affection and love between husband and wife. It is a spousal friendship. The deep moral, ethical, and loving foundation of this relationship allows this unit to hold together and prosper. The key part of this is what Aristotle called “philautia,” or self-love. This is the principle of being able to experience the pleasure of one's own virtuous life. By doing so, a person is able to discover true virtue—present and active—in another person's life.

Some interpretations of Aristotle understand the natural inequality of the genders to be overcome by the filial force, along with certain rational virtues, which are shared and held in common. For Aristotle, this forms the basic support of the family unit, which then reveals a structure of authority that can be confidently moved and extended into other foundational parts of society, such as towns, cities, larger political systems, et cetera.

## 2. Confucianism

This understanding of family and society, in relation to virtuous ethics, was also an important element of Confucianism around 500 BCE. Confucius believed that filial piety, or respect and love for parents and their authority, was a key virtue. It was therefore the strongest model to be followed for the structure of civil, political, and social life. An orderly structure for society depended on this parallelism between family order and political hierarchy.

Both Confucianism and the Aristotelian model philosophy—as ethical, political, and, in a certain sense, spiritual ordering systems—depended upon individual commitments to these values. These philosophies have historically had a big influence on many religions of the world. Both of these philosophies have impacted how many envision the structure of family roles in society.

The traditional normative structure of marriage in these philosophies generally promotes monogamy and specific gender roles within a family. This value is still prominent in many modern religions. It is important to note that different religious traditions have historically supported other family structures of marriage, such as polygamy or inter-familial marriages among cousins. Furthermore, some religious institutions support families with same-sex partners and/or gender nonconformity while others, even within the same religion, do not.

---

## 3. The Symbiotic Relationship

Family is the reference system of values that supports a child’s movement into society and the available structures for growth, learning, and education. This includes all the scales of political life and religious involvement.

Often a particular religion is part of a family ethic. This provides mutual support for both institutions. Religion reinforces family values, and the family itself reinforces the religious structure by providing members and practitioners of the religion. This is an example of a **symbiotic relationship**.

Religion maintains family stability by espousing these values and norms, and by laying out roles and duties with respect to husband, wife, children, and elders that are represented in a family.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Symbiotic Relationship

In biology, a relationship in which two organisms simultaneously serve each other’s physical needs; any relationship in which two parties benefit from their interactions over a period of time.



### SUMMARY

**Aristotle** stated that the process of love and virtue extending out into society begins with the “oikos,” or the family. This exchange of love and virtue is modeled on the idea and the reality of spousal love and friendship. **Confucianism** also saw the structure of the family as a building block for society, because it embodied the fundamental virtues of love, respect, order, and authority. There is a **symbiotic relationship** between the family and religion. Spiritual and religious institutions support family values by

offering roles and functions that give life to these values. Family virtues and values give life to certain religious principles.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY TED FAIRCHILD FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. Please see our [Terms of Use](#).



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Symbiotic Relationship**

In Biology, a relationship in which two organisms simultaneously serve each other's physical needs; any relationship in which two parties benefit from their interactions over a period of time.