John Van Engen’s 1986 article, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,” was the first piece of John’s work that I ever read and one that I have taught many times. There, he addressed the way scholarship had turned away from the idea that the Middle Ages were (for better or worse) dominated by the Church and Roman Christian belief, and toward a view that Christianity was only an elite veneer over a substratum of popular belief that remained pre- or non-Christian. Over the more than a quarter century since his account, the field has shifted toward what might be seen as a middle position—yes, Christianity did dominate the medieval Western world, but yes, many intellectual developments connected with “the Church” were restricted to the elite. These polarized views can be reconciled within a framework that now tends to speak of “Christianities,” recognizing not only the local variation across both space and time (Van Engen identified attention to this variation as one of the important post–World War II developments), but also that individual believers could and did interpret Christianity for themselves. To name but a few of the most influential scholars, Caroline Bynum demonstrated that both lay and religious women constructed their own understandings
of the Eucharist and thus of the somatic relation of humans to God; a number of scholars, including Dyan Elliott, have shown that the lines between orthodoxy and heresy, or indeed between sanctity and heresy, could be quite indistinct; Eamon Duffy has argued for a conception of “traditional religion” that represented a deep and shared commitment among late medieval clergy and laity, neither dictated by the former nor ignored by the latter; and Van Engen, among others, has demonstrated the variety of ways of living a Christian life neither within established orders nor in rejection of them.²

Recent historiography, then, has followed the path Van Engen set in 1986 in recognizing that Christianity was central to medieval Europe as a shared language and set of assumptions, “routine” rather than “outlandish,” in which “specifically Christian teachings and practices shaped the cultural milieu of medieval folk both high and low,” although it has also recognized that this shared cultural language encompassed many different modes of life.³ However, while acknowledging its cultural pervasiveness, we need to beware of assuming Christianity directly and deliberatively shaped everything that went on within medieval societies. Indeed, it may be precisely because of its cultural pervasiveness that this assumption is dangerous. Christianity in the Middle Ages was what feminist scholars, taking a term from linguistics, have called an “unmarked category,” that is, the default—like whiteness or heterosexuality in contemporary North America and like masculinity in most societies. Most white people do not notice most of the time that they are white and do not carry out the activities of daily life with whiteness in mind. Straight people don’t seek out a straight bar or a straight bookstore, nor do they look for a wedding planner who specializes in straight weddings, because that is not something they need to think about. Similarly, not everything that Christians do in a predominantly Christian society is necessarily understood by the subject who performs it as a Christian behavior or performance. Even those behaviors and performances that seem to us today to be explicitly Christian were not deliberately Christian.

One of these contested institutions was marriage. The title of this chapter invites the question of what it might mean to Christianize marriage. Philip L. Reynolds interprets Christianization as referring not to “the actual married life of Christians . . . but rather the manner in which
men of the Church understood and regulated marriage.” Here I attempt to move a bit beyond that circle, at least for the later Middle Ages. The orally presented version of this essay claimed to address the question of when marriage became Christian, but that question may be answered in a great many different ways depending on one’s understanding of Christianization. If one interprets it as Reynolds does, “the process by which marriage became differentiated from its non-Christian origins and environment under the influence of Christianity itself,” we see that it was an ongoing process and one that was not complete in the Middle Ages. This chapter instead proposes to examine marriage, which was both an organizing principle of medieval political and social institutions and a governing metaphor of medieval religious culture, as a way of thinking about the question Van Engen posed in 1986 when he noted that it was not only a matter of “whether medieval culture was essentially Christian” but also of “what that might mean.” Van Engen focused on the rituals and practices by which a common structure of Christianity was expressed, particularly baptism and death rituals, but he noted that the process was rather different with marriage: “The result, typically, was an overlay of Christian and other notions of marriage, but to imagine wholly separate and distinct conceptions of marriage competing over centuries is an exaggeration.” In other words, we must think of the Christianization process not as a continuum across which the institution of marriage moved during the Middle Ages, with pagan marriage at one end and Christian at the other, but rather as an ongoing interweaving of aspects of marriage shaped by Christian beliefs and aspects that were not inherently Christian but existed within a Christian context.

There are a variety of ways in which marriage, or any other practice, can be Christian (or mutatis mutandis, pagan, Jewish, or Muslim): because it takes place within a predominantly Christian society, because the rules governing it are controlled by the church(es), because the society understands it as something done at God’s command, because the ritual invokes God or scripture, or because the individuals involved see it as a religious act. This last, of course, is by far the hardest to get at. The second (church control) is what people often think of when they think of Christianization; the words of the ritual are perhaps the most measurable, but the degree to which marriage is generally understood as being for
spiritual rather than temporal purposes is an important key to understanding how “Christian” it is.

Marriage in most societies has been a vehicle for the production of offspring to whom property could be transferred, whether or not the union was approved or sanctioned by a deity or a religious apparatus. In many cultures, any acknowledged offspring of the father may inherit his property; Christian societies, however, drew on both Roman and Jewish traditions in limiting inheritance rights to those born in formal marriage. In ancient Rome—the legal system on which law of the medieval church drew extensively, as did that of many kingdoms—matrimony was an institution into which a man entered in order to beget legitimate children. Roman-law marriage was a legal, contractual relationship, and it continued to be understood this way under Christian canon law. But Roman matrimonium was limited to unions between Roman citizens. Unions between slaves or freed persons, or between a free person and a slave, or even of elites who were not Roman citizens, were defined as outside the institution. Like Roman religion, then, marriage was intimately tied to the Roman civitas.

Although some writing about marriage in pagan Rome referred to divine law, it did not require a religious ceremony. The confarreatio ceremony did involve a sacrifice to Jupiter, but by the time of Augustus it had lapsed and was used only by a few patricians. Certainly the expectation that women would marry could be considered a part of Roman civic religion, and the phrase “Where you are Gaius, I am Gaia,” used in connection with Roman marriages, was associated by some sources with religious ritual. There were also a variety of “small religious rites” which were known mainly by antiquarians. In general, however, when we speak of “pagan Roman marriage,” we mean marriage among pagan Romans, rather than marriage blessed specifically by pagan deities except (among upper-class marriages) through the taking of omens. The handing over of the bride and the dotal witnesses were more important than divine sanction, although still not legally required; what made a marriage legal was consent.

Romans who became Christian tended to include an element of explicitly Christian ceremony to their marriages, seeking a nuptial bless-
ing based on God’s blessing of Adam and Eve.\textsuperscript{10} Initially this may have been a Christian gloss on an institution that in other ways—the betrothal, the marital assigns, the transfer of a woman from her father’s family to her husband’s—remained much the same as in pagan times. Roman marriage was monogamous, at least serially: only one union at a time could produce children who were capable of inheriting. Christianity brought changes in the kind of sexual behavior demanded of men within marriage—women were expected to be faithful to one man in both systems—but the process of marriage formation, like many other aspects of late antique Christian society, drew heavily on local law and custom, and in much of the Christian West that law and custom were Roman.\textsuperscript{11} The biggest change Christianity brought to Roman marriage, the idea of indissolubility, was quite slow to be accepted, although it was part of a package of Christian ideas about marriage that, as we shall see, the church promoted.

The idea of the nuptial blessing may have come in part from the Jewish tradition. Whether marriage in the Second Temple period should be called Jewish in the modern sense or Judaean—that is, when the Greek \textit{iudaios} or Latin \textit{iudeus} came to be religious labels as opposed to ethnonyms—is arguable.\textsuperscript{12} Certainly the culture of the region of Judaea and its diasporic communities had distinctive customs. The community that shared these customs also shared a belief in a deity and the scriptural law he granted, but the extent to which there was divine involvement in their early marriage customs—whether a benediction was used at weddings and whether people understood themselves to be fulfilling a spiritual obligation as well as a familial one—is not clear. A strong pro-marriage religious stance appeared in Palestinian rabbinic literature, which emerged after the destruction of the Second Temple—God decrees everyone’s marriage partner before birth, it is a religious obligation to arrange marriages for one’s children, the betrothal is called \textit{qiddushin} or “sanctification”—but this may have been influenced extensively by Greek and Latin writings, including Stoic defenses of marriage. Babylonian sources (the other rabbinic tradition) put more emphasis on marriage for the prevention of sin than on the commandment of procreation.\textsuperscript{13} The rules for marriage involved witnesses and a \textit{ketubah}, or contract, not performance in a particular holy place or by a religious authority. The
Hebrew Bible prescribes no particular ceremonies, and surviving documents from the Jewish community at Elephantine from the fifth century BCE are concerned purely with economic arrangements.

Blessings to be said on the occasion of a marriage appear in the Talmud; they are probably not an innovation of that time, but Michael Satlow argues that they were an attempt to “Judaize” marriage, in the sense of giving it more religious content than it had had in the Second Temple period. However, the blessings said at the marriage feast, like the Christian benediction of marriage, did not create the marriage. A marriage was Jewish or Christian because it belonged to that community, rather than because of the theology or practice involved: it was the parties who engaged in it and the legal rules they followed, rather than the ceremonial aspects, that made it Jewish or Christian. Indeed, prior to 388 CE, if Jews and Christians married each other, even though such marriages were forbidden by both communities, they were valid under civil law. By the central Middle Ages in Jewish communities, the combined ceremony of betrothal (qiddushin/erusin) and marriage (nisuin) was often performed at the synagogue. It certainly was distinctively Jewish and was considered as fulfilling religious precepts; the line between what belonged to communal custom and what had to do with belief may be even harder to draw here than for Christianity.

For Christianity, certainly, the inclusion of a blessing in the marriage ceremony—whether it followed a Jewish pattern or was grafted onto a Roman one—was more than just a minor addition to an existing institution. In the eyes of Christian thinkers, marriage became no longer only an institution for the legitimation of reproduction or the creation of family alliances, but also the only way of permitting sexual activity and a way of creating a shared life of devotion. Ironically, it may have been the late antique emphasis on Christian asceticism and sexual renunciation that created the need for a Christian theology of marriage. Where renunciation was the ideal, there was a risk that those who could not or did not live up to it might despair of being good Christians, so it was necessary to reassure the married that there was an alternate Christian mode of life that allowed for sexual activity. The extent to which this idea of Christian marriage was internalized is uncertain, but within the Christian empire there was certainly the option of taking marriage seri-
ously as a Christian institution. Although Tertullian and other thinkers claimed that virgins were the true brides of Christ, Augustine of Hippo came to expound the position that married people were not to be disregarded as Christians.\textsuperscript{18}

Augustine’s treatise \textit{On the Good of Marriage} (401) was in one sense a reaction to his own work and that of others on virginity. Around ten years before, Jerome had written his highly influential \textit{Against Jovinian}, in which he refuted the work (now lost) in which Jovinian had suggested that marriage could be as virtuous as virginity. Augustine too wrote in praise of virginity (and, later, of chaste widowhood), but he felt the need also to defend marriage as not just a lesser evil—a remedy against fornication or adultery—but as a positive good in itself. This was a relatively early work of Augustine’s, shortly after the completion of his \textit{Confessions}. It also arose from a pastoral impulse to explain to ordinary Christians that they could lead a Christian life without rejecting the society in which they lived it. Between 419 and 421 he wrote another treatise on the subject, “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” which emerged in a somewhat different theological context, his controversy against the Pelagians. Augustine wrote for a married layman, Count Valerius; he was not as open as he had been earlier about the possibility of sex being a good thing within its proper marital context.\textsuperscript{19} However, even though continence was a greater good than marriage, marriage was still good for three reasons: procreation and mutual fidelity, which were natural goods, and the sacramental bond created by the “law of piety,” which did not disappear even in case of adultery or divorce.\textsuperscript{20}

It was the third good, the \textit{sacramentum}, that was particular to Christianity; yet, for Augustine, it was not incompatible with Roman forms of marriage. A Christian bond could very easily coexist with the desire to link families and pass property to heirs. The events of Augustine’s own life, as he told it in his \textit{Confessions}, undoubtedly shaped his view. His mother, Monica, had planned a marriage for him with a girl of appropriate family, and although Monica was a Christian—as was Augustine by the time he wrote about it—it is quite clear that this young woman was selected for him not so that he would have the opportunity to participate in a Christian institution or sacrament, but so that he could perpetuate the family. When Augustine discussed his concubine in his \textit{Confessions},
he said not that their union was nonsacramental or not divinely sanctioned, but that it was not legitimate. He explained that marriage was a pact *(foederatum)* for the sake of offspring, contrasting it with other types of unions that were for the sake only of lust. This is a very Roman view and does not require Christianity. He did, however, make arguments that prefigured the high medieval theologians’ and canonists’ theories about consent making marriage; in other words, the sacrament of marriage did not necessarily require any ritual or performance. He wrote in *On the Good of Marriage* that even if two people come together to satisfy their lust rather than for the purpose of procreation, as long as it is their intention to remain faithful and not engage in intercourse with anyone else, “doubtless without absurdity it can indeed be labeled a marriage.” He went on to suggest that a concubine, “should she maintain sexual fidelity with [her partner], and after he takes a wife she gives no thought to marriage herself and steels herself to refrain utterly from such sexual intercourse, I should not perhaps readily presume to call her an adulterer.” If her goal was not the satisfaction of lust but the procreation of children, “she is to be ranked higher than many matrons.” Dyan Elliott has suggested that he may be obliquely describing his own concubine here and suggesting that from her point of view, she participated in a Christian marriage, even though he did not.

This passage suggests that fidelity creates the sacramental nature of marriage, even though it can also be considered a separate “good.” Augustine here marks a major change in comparison to Roman marriage: the expectation of fidelity from the husband as well as the wife. The Jewish tradition had also condemned men’s infidelity, but there was no male equivalent of the *sotah* ritual for the detection and punishment of adulterous women. The same would be true in Christian societies: throughout the medieval and indeed the early modern and modern periods, we see adultery by men taken less seriously in practice than adultery by women. When it is taken seriously, upon close examination most cases turn out to be men who adulterate other men’s marriages, that is, men who have sex with married women, not married men who have sex with women not their wives. Nevertheless, Christianity did innovate in promoting at least a notional equality in the degree of sinfulness that male and female adulterers incurred (and also male and female premarital for-
nicators, although fornication was less sinful than adultery). This was expressed not only by Augustine but also by Ambrose, who wrote that only single men and not married men should have concubines, and the Council of Toledo, which ordered much the same thing. Augustine went further than he had previously in suggesting that mutual fidelity was good not only in that it prevented both parties from committing fornication, but also in the bond that it created.

Augustine assumed that the good of marriage most obvious to his audience would be that of *proles*, offspring, as in pre-Christian Roman society. But one might argue that Christian marriage actually came to run counter to the goal of begetting offspring because of its emphasis on indissolubility. In ancient, late antique, and early medieval Jewish society it was entirely permissible for a man to divorce a wife who was barren or, in some societies, to take an additional wife. Far from encouraging chaste widowhood, if a man died childless, *balakha*, or rabbinic law, required that his nearest male relative (even if already married) marry the widow or else ritually release her, and the first child born from the marriage would be accounted the child of the decedent. Islam at one time encouraged, and still permits, men to marry up to four wives and have children with all of them. Christianity turned against these practices. Without following Jack Goody in considering the minimizing of potential heirs a conspiracy by the church to accumulate more property, we can note that Christianity, while condemning contraception, never put so great a value on marital fertility as to allow the dissolution of a barren marriage, let alone forbid the formation of one.

Goody argued that the church discouraged strategies for the creation of heirs by prohibiting divorce, plural marriage, marriage between relatives, and adoption. While medievalists agree that he went too far in attributing a coherent organization and purpose to the church’s regulation of marriage, it is clear that from at least the ninth century on, and with more success from the twelfth, the church was claiming authority over the institution. Georges Duby suggested that “two conceptions of marriage clashed in Latin Christendom about the year 1100. It was the climax of a conflict resulting in the introduction of customs that have lasted almost up to our own day.” The two conceptions to which he referred were indissoluble, church-sanctioned marriage on the one hand
and lay-controlled, dissoluble, dynastic marriage on the other. As Duby
acknowledged, the tension between church and magnates began long be-
fore the twelfth century, although neither group was unanimous or con-
sistent; individual cases often involved one group of lay magnates and
their ecclesiastical allies against another. A number of marriage cases in-
volving the Carolingian royal family, such as the marriages of Lothar II
and those of Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald, for example, involved
men of the church on both sides of the controversy. This has often been
read as an indication that “the church” did not have a consistent marriage
policy at that time, or that lay magnates were successfully preventing the
church from seizing control, but it can equally be read as an indication
that lay magnates knew that whatever they did about their own or their
children’s marriages, they needed to acquire the sanction of the church
for it in some way, even if that meant the approval of their own tame
clergy rather than of Rome. In the sense that there was a broad accept-
ance that the church could govern the terms of marriage—as discussed
above, one of the common meanings of “Christianization”—we may
suggest that marriage was Christian long before the twelfth century, and
the spate of legislation about it from Carolingian councils (and even
Merovingian ones) indicates that the church saw itself as in a position to
legislate about it, even if this legislation tended to be roundly ignored.
Nor did the twelfth century bring an end to controversies over clerical
versus lay control of marriage. In later cases—the most famous, of
course, being that of Henry VIII—lay magnates knew they needed the
backing of the church to do what they wished, but they put considerable
pressure on churchmen to provide that backing.

What did change in the twelfth century were the detailed rules sur-
rounding marriage, which were substantially clarified. Marriage was a
major point of discussion among canon lawyers and theologians in the
first half of the twelfth century, from Ivo of Chartres’s emphasis on the
consent of the two parties rather than their families, to Gratian’s distinc-
tion between *matrimonium initiatum* and *matrimonium ratum*, to Peter
Lombard’s treatment in the *Sentences*, with its definitive enunciation of
the consent theory. Peter Lombard also argued, although he did not
originate the argument, that marriage represented the union of Christ
with the church, expressed through a sacramental physical union: “Since
therefore marriage is a sacrament, it is also a sacred sign of a sacred thing, that is to say, the conjunction of Christ and the Church. . . . As, therefore, between spouses there is a conjunction according to the consent of souls and according to the mixing of bodies, thus the church is coupled to Christ by will and by nature.28 And, as the theology of the sacrament and the legalities of marriage were elaborated, they could not be trusted to laypeople. Though Gratian and the Lombard disagreed on some points, by the third quarter of the twelfth century the decretals of Alexander III solidified the latter’s position. Alexander’s statement of the law on marriage formation and indissolubility, as well as the impediments to marriage, remained normative for the rest of the Middle Ages, although there was of course disagreement among churchmen on how to apply it in practice.

The church also “christened” marriage through extensive use of marital language and imagery in a wide range of contexts, which would have led the general community to understand marriage as a Christian institution. Close and indissoluble relationships were described—in sermons, treatises, and biblical commentaries—as marriages: the relation between a bishop and his church, between Christ and the church, between the soul and God. The use of marriage as metaphor, of course, brought with it connotations other than closeness: it implied an unbroken sacramental bond, but also a hierarchical ranking of the two parties. By putting forward a familiar relationship, marital language gave people a point of reference for understanding relationships that required a more complex understanding. David d’Avray has argued that the use of marital language for the relation between Christ and the church would have elevated marriage in the eyes of laypeople and helped lead them to view it sacramentally.29 While both processes—the sacramentalizing of marriage and the familiarization of Christian theology—were likely going on, the use of the everyday to explain the transcendent looms somewhat larger than the use of the transcendent to elevate the everyday. Marital language was also frequently used, as Dyan Elliott has shown, for relations between holy men and holy women. This helped to normalize the celibate by placing them within the context of an institution in which most medieval people participated or at least expected to participate. But the frequent references to spiritual unions that were spiritually, although

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not biologically, fruitful did more than normalize celibacy. It celebrated it in a way that devalued carnal marriage: everything that carnal marriage could do, spiritual marriage could do in a higher and more virtuous way. Thus, while people may have been led to an understanding of marriage as Christian through its use as a metaphor for other relationships that were nothing but Christian, it is not so clear that it changed the terms in which ordinary people thought about their own marriages—or that, if it did change them, it did so in the direction of assimilating them to (rather than emphasizing their contrast with) the more spiritual ones.

Through law, sermons, hagiography, and other means, then, the medieval church laid claim to marriage. Marriage was promoted as the universal state for those who had not vowed a religious celibacy. There remained, of course, those who did not or could not marry, but the church claimed fairly successfully to be able to determine who these were, that is, which unions should be recognized as marriage and what penalties should be assigned for those who entered them wrongly. Yet the body of rules articulated in the twelfth century did not entirely control the marital behavior of the public over the subsequent centuries. People were pushed to marry—by their families or their lords—in ways that could coerce consent. They self-divorced in the absence of a formal way of breaking up a marriage, often simply by leaving or being left by their partner, and remarried even though this was forbidden. Dowry was not required in theory to make a legal or sacramentally valid marriage, but it continued to be required in practice.

Medieval Christian sources give us a coherent theory of marriage put forward by celibates, but we have little about marriage written by the married, except for married couples who agreed to live chastely (and even then, it is rarely in their own words). We have plenty of people who rejected marriage for Christian reasons, but no way of knowing how many people entered it for Christian reasons. Indeed, one of the few important twelfth-century writers on marriage to be married herself—Heloise—considered it more honorable to be called “friend” (amica, often translated as “mistress”) rather than “wife,” and claimed that she would rather be Abelard’s whore (meretrix) than the wife and imperial consort (imperatrica) of a Roman emperor. She said that “the name of wife may have the advantages of sanctity and safety, but to me the sweeter
name will always be lover [*amica*] or, if your dignity can bear it, concubine [*concubina*] or whore [*scorta*].”

Heloise rejected marriage in favor of an unconstrained love, while others rejected it for a love of God alone, but none of the rejecters stressed the Christian aspects of the marriage they rejected. There is, in fact, remarkably little evidence until the time of the Reformation that individuals had a Christian purpose in their marriage; thereafter, we get former monks or nuns who chose to marry, or women who chose to marry priests. And even then—except for the rare woman such as Katharina Zell, who wrote about her decision to marry a priest and claimed that she did it deliberately for the good of the church—we do not know whether the choice to marry was a statement about belief or simply due to the fact that this new mode of Christian life required a spouse, for support in the case of a woman, for household management in the case of a man.

During the Middle Ages, the closest we can get in terms of evidence of laypeople having Christian beliefs in mind when they chose to marry is often a grudging acceptance that marriage is something under the jurisdiction of the church. We can see this in the later Middle Ages with regard to the role of publicity in marriage. Christian culture inherited the idea that publicity was essential to a marriage from the Romans: there was nothing fundamentally Christian about it. In Roman law the fundamental difference between a wife and a concubine was the presence of *maritalis affectio*, marital affection or intent, but publicity was an important part of the latter: wishing and intending to be married involved holding oneself out publicly as married.

The church also pushed publicity consistently, in part because the enforcement of indissoluble monogamy required the clear identification of unions as marriages. The church also related requirements for the payment of dotal transfers, which were not new, to publicity. The requirement of dowry or reverse dowry in order to validate the marriage might seem to be contrary to the principles of Christian marriage, which stressed personal consent rather than the familial consent demonstrated by a financial contribution. But the importance of *dos* was evidentiary. It was part of the publicity surrounding a union. In the later Middle Ages, where a dowry could be shown to have been negotiated, a woman would have a much easier time making a plausible case that the relationship was