

Divorce, Christianity and the transformation of the family

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PORTRAIT of an old woman fingering her rosary beads. Early 18th century. (Ethnography Section, Museums Department - Inquisitor's Palace, Vittoriosa)

DIVORCE has become one of the most popular topics in everyday talk. One can hear people discussing the social impact of divorce in streets, shops, on the buses, at social events and even at home especially, during extended family unions. Some speak in favour, others against.

Those who are still greatly attached to the Church normally speak against the introduction of divorce. Those with a rather lay approach generally tend to favour its being given formal recognition by the state. Yet few realise that the prohibition of divorce by the Church authorities is only one issue in a drive by the early Christian Church to transform kinship patterns among the faithful.

In reality the transformation was only made possible due to the interference of the Christian Church in three basic issues of a general character - marriage and its implications such as divorce, polygyny (marriage to more than one wife), concubinage and marriage to close kin; a general discouragement of remarriage both to close affines as well as to others; the emergence of spiritual kinship with its stress on natural kinship and the gradual disappearance of adoption.

European kinship patterns have been characterised by the presence of

specific features which include consensual unions, love and the central focus on the nuclear family consisting of the husband, the wife and the children. These were all thought to result from the 18th century thanks to the Industrial Revolution but have been rebuked by the historical demographer John Haynal who argued that such characteristics were already present in Europe during the 16th century.

The work of the Cambridge-based historical demographer Peter Laslett followed by other papers from members of the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structures confirm Haynal's hypothesis for Britain. Other studies held in France, like the work by Jean Louis Flandrin, reached a similar result and agreed with Haynal's view.

In the early 1980s Jack Goody, the

eminent Cambridge-based social anthropologist, stretched the argument to include themes like freedom of choice and the role played by love in marriage. Goody concluded that such issues were adopted in the fourth century A.D. when Christianity became the state religion of Imperial Rome and asserted that such features were introduced on both the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean.

Indeed up to the fourth century all Mediterranean societies shared more or less similar customs on issues related to kinship and marriage, permitting polygyny or concubinage; divorce; adoption; marriage among close kin and widow-inheritance. However from the fourth century A.D. onwards - that is, after the conversion of Constantine and the transformation of Christianity from sect to an Imperial



16TH CENTURY painting of Madonna and Child at St Scholastica Convent, Vittoriosa. Christian iconography is women-oriented. The focus is predominantly on the Mary-Jesus dyad.

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