

Church – all such practices were either banned or at least discouraged.

One must recall that early Christianity attracted a following among the urban poor, the oppressed (especially the slaves) and women. Conversion meant the full commitment of the faithful to the Christian ideals. Yet during these early years the Fathers of the Church had little to say on the subject of marriage and the family. The Church was mainly concerned with marriage as an institution only in order to defend it.

St Augustine of Hippo was the strongest defender of monogamous marriage against the various Christian sects of his times notably the Manicheans, the Gnostics, the Montanists and others who condemned marriage for an ascetic ideal. Yet, on the whole, the early Church preserved the Roman forms and customs of marriage. Thus relations between parents and children or husband and wife remained very similar to pagan practices in this period. The major notable difference was that from its inception Christianity objected very strongly to abortion and infanticide.

Soon after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, matters changed. The Church began to condemn marriage to close kin, divorce and concubinage. At the same time adoption was strongly discouraged even though neither Roman law nor the Jewish Talmud were against such practices. Rather, such attitudes were widely practised throughout the empire.

Hence brother-sister marriage seems to have been a relatively common feature in Roman Egypt while the Levirate – where a widow marries her first husband's brother – was normal among the Jews.

One finds reference to marriage to half-sisters in the Old Testament, and adoption was a standard practice among the Ancient Romans. The same applies to divorce. This had been allowed by the Ancient Greeks, Mosaic Law and even in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, the Civil Code of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian the Great (483-565) who also built the magnificent church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (modern Istanbul).

Why would Christianity prohibit such habits? The teachings of Christ were clear about the matter. According to the Gospels one should not love one's parents more than God. Besides, the control of marriage was the only way pagan practices could be transformed.

Michel Verdon argues that by systematically discouraging remarriage, the Church surreptitiously drew a wedge within the family (couple and children). Widows who could not support themselves could hardly expect support from close kin or affines who would press them to remarry. By discouraging remarriage, the Christian Church could only isolate and strengthen the mother-child relationship. At the same time, by declaring the impossibility of plural marriage and divorce, it also stressed the husband-wife relationship.

Nevertheless the two were kept separate. This explains why Christian iconography is women-oriented. Saints Mary and Joseph are rarely represented alone, as a couple or as a family. The focus is predominantly on the Mary-Jesus dyad. Therefore kinship is rooted in the mother-child relationship the 'most natural' of relationships.

This leads to the superior value early Christianity placed on virginity and chaste widowhood. In ancient times marriage meant that women were selling their freedom and enslaving themselves. The reason was that in circumstances where reproduction was not controlled, women do not have equal access to labour opportunities, to wealth and means of production, so that women were above all child-bearers and child-carers.

This is precisely where Christianity struck, and why it had such an appeal for women. It offered women an ideal life free of child-bearing and child-rearing, and free of their subordination to reproduction and thus to men. The Christian Church was thus offering a fundamental freedom to choose whether to marry or not. No other society had offered this freedom to all its members irrespective of sex or wealth.

Ancient Rome gave rights to its female citizens to choose a spouse but Christianity went a step further, giving everyone the more basic right to live within or without marriage. This saw the growth of assistance to widows, the development of female monasticism the extension of marriage prohibitions to a wide range of close kin, to affinal

and spiritual kin as strategies to achieve this aim.

Christianity gave a choice to women. They could marry or remain chaste. But once women chose marriage, the Church advocated submission to their husbands and married men could count on the clergy to back up their authority over their wives. At the same time women could count on the clergy not to be coerced into marriage or remarriage or into marrying someone they objected to.

All such strategies encouraged a shortage of inheritors and the land of the rich widows who never remarried went to the Church. Reassessed ethnographically from the point of view of its specificity, and of its practices which developed in the fourth century, the Christian development of marriage and the family appears to be first and above all a strategy of female emancipation.

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ST MARGARET OF CORTONA, by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727-1804) – Fine Arts Museum, Valletta



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