

EROTICISM IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND ITS RELATION TO PROPHECY

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by *Dimitris J. Kyrtatas*

“countless couches have I known,
but never recked of marriage”
(Christian) Sibyl, 7.153

1. Thyestean banquets and Oedipean unions: Immorality in early Christianity

Charges of promiscuity, licentiousness or libertinism, often coupled with cannibalism, common in anti-Christian polemic, are perplexing and difficult to explain. Christianity is generally known, if anything, to have restricted sexual practices, forbidden extra-marital intercourse and propagated continence, even to the extent of perpetual virginity. “We are so far from promiscuity”, an early Christian author exclaimed, “that it is not even permissible for us to look with lust”. How can this picture be reconciled with the idea of a community practising “Thyestean banquets and Oedipean unions” ? ¹

Following the Christian apologetic tradition, modern scholars have commonly come up with two, not mutually exclusive, responses: such charges were either due to a misunderstanding of the Eucharistic language about the body and blood of Christ and the appellation of fellow-Christians ‘brothers

¹ Athenagoras, *Legatio* 32.2, 3.1; trans. by W.R. Schoedel, Oxford 1972.

and sisters' (even when they were actually husbands and wives), 'fathers and mothers', 'sons and daughters' or, alternatively, 'heretical' malpractices were attributed to 'orthodox' Christians.² To these two responses, a third may be added, that "such practices were elements of certain types of magic",³ which effectively means that they should be neither taken literally nor completely disregarded - although the important question, whether these practices were actually indulged in or symbolically implied, has still to be faced.

Misunderstandings there certainly were, in plenty, and confusion between 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' (a distinction probably not fully valid until the late second century) was widespread among outsiders; but the *a priori* inclination of modern scholars, evident in the first two alternatives -and possibly in the third as well- to dismiss the veracity of all such accusations against *orthodox* Christians is inappropriate to a historical investigation. The early Christian literature, from the Pauline epistles onwards, amply testifies that sexual excesses, including what in Christian parlance went under the name of fornication (πορνεία) implying also incest (1 Cor. 5) or licentiousness (ἀσελγεία) implying also homosexuality (2 Pet. 2:2, 6), were variously practised in the apostolic communities, not to mention sectarian groups (cf. Rev. 2:14, 20) - which is not to say that such behaviour was not promptly condemned by most Christian leaders. If actual instances of immoral behaviour had to be dealt with seriously and repetitively within the early communities, should the possibility be excluded that they were more common than our (Christian) sources suggest, and/or that pagans and Jews were aware of them also?

The problem has unfortunately been further obscured by two other factors. Firstly, charges of religious immorality, with the Bacchanalia of the year 186 BC being the most notorious case, were a stock in trade theme against several foreign cults in the Graeco-Roman world; sometimes against Roman cults as well.⁴ Interestingly, they were often attributed by orthodox Christians themselves to Christian heretics and to pagans.⁵ Secondly, insignificant though it may appear at first sight, information about Christian promiscuity comes almost exclusively from Christian sources - even though the accusations are normally attributed in these sources to Jews and pagans.⁶ The first factor, i.e. the observation that similar accusations presented in similar formulations were common in the Graeco-Roman world, does not necessarily imply that all such charges were fictitious. People often tend to think of real life in terms of clichés. Information about particular immoral incidents could have been taken as a manifestation of well-known age-old extravagant behaviour - hence the use of clichés. The second factor is more perplexing. True, Jewish and pagan anti-Christian polemic is documented in a very fragmentary and selective manner, as most relevant works were either deliberately destroyed or left to perish. It is, therefore, conceivable that for the absence of authentic Jewish and pagan anti-Christian reports on the moral issue, Christian

² On the ancient tradition see Irenaeus, fragment 12 in Migne, *P.G.*; Athenagoras, *Legatio* 32.5; Justin, *I Apol.* 26.7; Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.7.10-4.

³ S. Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries a.d.", *ANRW* 23/2, Berlin and New York 1980, 1109.

⁴ See R.M. Grant, "Charges of 'Immorality' against Various Religious Groups in Antiquity", in *Christian Beginnings: Apocalypse to History*, London 1983; Aline Rousselle, *Porneia. On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, Oxford 1988, 107-28.

⁵ See Eusebius *H.E.* 7.10.4 and further evidence below.

⁶ Cf. Origen *C. Cels.* 6.27; this observation is made by R. Wilken, *The Christians as the Roman Saw Them*, New Haven and London 1984, 21.

editorial censorship and intentional neglect should be blamed. On the other hand, since Christian authors themselves referred so often to these charges, it would seem unconvincing, not to say absurd, to postulate deliberate censorship of all authentic charges. Jewish and pagan reports, after all, include unfavourable stories about Jesus himself, especially about his birth, but not about the moral conduct of the early Christians.⁷

It is the purpose of the present paper to reconsider some aspects of this problem. Whatever Jews and pagans may have heard or alleged, it will be argued, excessive eroticism was mainly a Christian concern - which partly explains why it is in Christian texts that the charges of promiscuity are encountered. Certain types of religious experiences, and in particular prophetic ecstasy, which was widespread in the primitive churches, stimulate erotic emotions. To cope with these emotions, two reactions at opposite extremes were often (although, of course, not exclusively) propagated: asceticism and libertinism. As for the peculiar and (to us) often unintelligible terms in which such erotic stimuli are presented in the literature, the explanation must be sought mainly in the dominant cultural environment, i.e. in the way people understood what they read about their past, the way authors tended to express themselves, etc. I shall, therefore, commence with some observations on the character of conflicts over moral issues.

2. Practising intercourse like wild boars: Cultural misapprehension

In the first Christian centuries, defending Christian morality meant above all attacking pagan morality. Contrary to the widely-held view, the Christian moral code, with few exceptions, was almost identical with the dominant precepts of the Graeco-Roman world - at least those of the upper classes, influenced as they were by stoicism (and, later, neo-Platonism). Modern scholars, however, have often been misled by the early Church Fathers, who tended to contrast Christian ideals with pagan conduct. The fact is thus overlooked that most pagan practices mentioned and condemned by Christian authors would have been invariably condemned by most pagan moralists as well.⁸ It should not be forgotten that Petronius' *Satyricon*, which is often invoked as evidence of pagan degeneracy, was mainly a parody of common themes in ancient romances which persistently extolled chastity and fidelity.⁹ Furthermore, to exalt Christian virtue, the pagan world was presented by Christian apologists as an integrated whole (which it was obviously not), including old beliefs (often going back to classical antiquity seven or more centuries earlier), poetic or pious inventions (usually Homeric description of Olympian amours), and customs of obscure or foreign, i.e. non Graeco-Roman, cultures (information on which came from a variety of, mostly unreliable, sources). This last category is worth closer examination.

"Those have not escaped our attention", wrote Clement of Alexandria in the late second century, "who are called royal instructors among the Persians; whom in number four, the kings of the Persians select with the greatest care from all the Persians, and set over their sons. But the children only learn the use of the bow, and on reaching maturity have sexual

⁷ Trypho the Jew is presented by Justin as not accepting the charges of the "multitude", *Dial.* 10; neither does Celsus include such charges in his polemic, although Origen mentions them himself in his reply.

⁸ K.J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*, Oxford 1974, 241.

⁹ A. Heiserman, *The Novel Before the Novel*, Chicago and London 1977, 58.

intercourse with sisters, and mothers, and women, wives and courtesans innumerable, practised in intercourse like the wild boars".¹⁰ Origen, writing in the mid-third century, took the same stories for granted and referred to "the Persians' laws which do not prohibit mothers from being married to their own sons or fathers to their own daughters".¹¹ In the early fourth century, the Church historian Eusebius could still repeat that the Persians had been marrying their mothers etc., although he added that in his own days such practices had ceased through the "salutary law of the power of the Gospel".¹² Needless to add that the Persians were never converted in numbers to Eusebius' faith. Such ideas were also incorporated in the Christian Sibyllines. The age of Persian rule was described in them as one of lawless deeds: "For mother shall have her son as husband; son shall unite with mother; daughter lying with father shall sleep according to this barbarian use" - until the Roman Ares takes over charge of mankind (7.43-5).¹³

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It is almost certain that such charges were based on distortions and misapprehension of ancient sources. A good example of arguments drawn from a misquotation is provided in the case of the late second century apologist Theophilus. What Theophilus wished to say was that cannibalism and incest were pagan, not Christian crimes. He gave examples drawn from mythology, philosophy and history. Kronos was a child-eater, Zeus had married his own sister, Hera, Plato had advocated that women should be held as common property by men, Epicurus had recommended intercourse with mothers and sisters. In his 'historical' examples, he gave Herodotus as one of his sources and reminded his readers that "Cambyses slew the children of Harpagus and, after cooking them, placed them before their father as food".¹⁴ It is an open question how many of Theophilus' readers would have noticed that Cambyses was reported by Herodotus to have practised incest, whereas it was Astyages who slew Harpagus' child.

Patchwork reading may have all kinds of curious effects, but the widespread interest in the Persian Magi was not altogether accidental. The diffusion of Mithraism in the late first century AD may have brought to the attention of Greeks and Romans (and, understandably, of Christians) the revival of the Persian cult and the intensified propaganda of the Magi on the eastern borders of the empire.¹⁵

Besides reversing the charges, Christians were also interested in cultural diversities. Tatian, a contemporary of Theophilus, in a work addressed to pagan Greeks, after ridiculing Herodotus, expressed his discontent with the lack of a universal moral law (such as Christianity could provide). "The Greeks consider intercourse with a mother as unlawful", he reminded his readers, "but this practice is esteemed most becoming by the Persian Magi".¹⁶ In the same vein, although only implicitly referring to the Persians, Tatian's instructor Justin had also condemned diversities in law: he knew that "with some, one thing is considered good, another evil, while with others what seemed bad to the former is esteemed good, and what seemed good is esteemed bad".¹⁷

¹⁰ *The Instructor* 1.7, trans. in Ante-Nicene Fathers 2.

¹¹ *C. Cels.* 5.27, trans. by H. Chadwick, Cambridge 1965.

¹² *Prep. Evang.* 11b, trans. by E.H. Gifford, Michigan 1981.

¹³ Trans. in E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher (eds), *New Testament Apocrypha* 2, Trowbridge & Esher 1965.

¹⁴ *Ad Autolyicum* 3.3-6; trans. by R.M. Grant, Oxford 1970.

¹⁵ F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, New York 1956, 15.

¹⁶ *Address to the Greeks* 28; trans. in ANF 2.

¹⁷ *2 Apol.* 9; trans. in ANF 1.

3. The harlot presumes to teach her who is chaste: Education and mythology

If the case of ‘Persian incest’ may serve as an example, then it is reasonable to consider charges of ‘Christian incest’ as leading us a long way from historical facts - especially so, as they were formulated in general and abstract expressions. Some cases of ‘untypical’ behaviour may have been known, recorded in anti-Christian polemic, misunderstood, misquoted and, in the recognisable form of well-known clichés, become the stock in trade slogan of Christian immorality. We seem to depart even further from actual facts when we call to mind the actual wording of this slogan: Athenagoras, a late second century Christian witness, reported that the three charges brought against his co-religionists were “atheism, Thyestean banquets, and Oedipean unions”.¹⁸

We need not concern ourselves with atheism; this was a commonplace charge and could be used against anyone who did not accept and worship the acknowledged gods in the acknowledged way. Christians themselves would accept the accusation: “we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned”, Justin wrote (*1 Apol.* 6). But it is worth paying closer attention to the other two charges, for Thyestean banquets and Oedipean unions were not self-evident expressions to all readers. Both notions derive from Greek mythology and refer to detestable crimes. Plato, outraged with the barbarians who did not accept his own sexual morals, had proposed that the stories of Thyestes and Oedipus should be used as a threat against those who contemplated unrestricted sexual pleasures (*Laws* 838c, 840e). Isocrates had drawn an almost complete map of mythical horrors presented as history: he wrote of “murder of brothers and fathers and guest-friends”; of “matricide and incest and begetting of children by sons with their own mothers”; of “feasting of a father on the flesh of his own sons, plotted by those nearest of kin”; of “exposure of infants by parents, and drownings and blindings” (*Panathen.* 122). Compared to this catalogue, Christian ‘crimes’ were but a small selection. The idea of making use of such myths for moral ends was clearly common among the Greeks. But why should charges against the Christians be formulated in these precise mythological terms. Who could have been the first to employ them and to what end?

Given the nature of our sources, such questions are not easily answered, but the extant evidence seems to suggest a rationale. In replying to the charges, Athenagoras commented that “it is not at all remarkable that (pagans) fabricate stories about us such as they tell of their own gods, (for) they present the sufferings of their deities as mysteries”. In what follows he goes on to say in so many words that it is the pagans, not the Christians, who advocated immorality, by attributing immoral conduct to their deities. “The harlot presumes to teach her who is chaste”, is the résumé of the argument.¹⁹

Whatever the meaning of the rather obscure statement about fabricated stories presented in the form of mysteries, Athenagoras was relating pagan mythology to moral conduct. By adopting a wording which recalled pagan abominations, he could shift from defence to attack. The accusation of Thyestean banquets and Oedipean unions was so extravagant that no pagan was expected to take it literally - and, as it appears, no one ever did. But regarding paganism, it rang bells disquieting for the conscience of the learned.²⁰

¹⁸ *Legatio* 3.1; the same terms are used in a Christian letter of the same period, quoted in Eusebius, *H.E.* 5.1.14.

¹⁹ *Legatio* 32.1, 34.1. Athenagoras’ arguments are exactly in line with those of his predecessor Justin: “ye who charge the guiltless with those deeds which yourselves openly commit” (*2 Apol.* 12).

²⁰ Cf. Grant, “Charges of ‘Immorality’”, 169-70.

Plato and others had used the myths of Oedipus and Thyestes for educational purposes. It is conceivable, therefore, that the first Christian authors who employed these expressions had a Christian rather than a pagan audience in mind. In such a case, Christian moralists would be attributing to outsiders in the form of charges, warnings against some of their brethren. It may be significant that the first Christian reference to “fabulous and shameful deeds” comes from the pen of Justin, who was cautiously attributing them to Christian heretics - naming indeed the Marcionites, who were renowned for their austere morality (*1 Apol.* 26.7).²¹ As a former Platonist, Justin was acquainted with the educational principles of the philosopher and familiar with typical pagan polemic on moral issues (cf. *2 Apol.* 12-15).

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A plausible guess would be that some pagans and/or some Jews may have accused the Christians of immoral behaviour, whether justly or unjustly - the “multitude” mentioned by the Jew Trypho comes to mind here (*Dial.* 10). Christian teachers reversed the charges, but at the same time formulated them in a way that would restrain those of their brethren who were ‘lax’ on moral issues. The story of ‘Christian immorality’ may turn out primarily to be of Christian concern.

4. Take this and eat; this is my body: The theology of atrocity

Repetition often tends to mystify historical material. Reliable accounts can only be expected from first (or close to first) hand reports. Scholars have thus drawn attention to a small number of passages which at least purport to present the personal experience of an author. The fourth-century Christian bishop Epiphanius seems to be one of those few eyewitnesses of libertine practices. In his youth, he claimed, some beautiful women had tried to seduce him into being a participant in their ‘abominable’ religious rites (*Panarion* 26.17.4). The tale is too long to be related in detail, but a few extracts will give the essential information.²²

The sect of the Phibionites or, more likely, a group of Phibionite sympathizers with whom Epiphanius appears to have been acquainted, were members of the Catholic Church in the mid-fourth century. At some point they were detected by the future bishop and expelled, not only from the Church, but from the city as well (26.17.9). The account of their misdeeds begins with the well known formula that they held “their women in common”. After recognising a member of their sect, they would at once give themselves over to feasting; having eaten and drunk lavishly, even when they were poor, they gave themselves over to passion.

The husband will withdraw from his wife and tell her...“Get up, perform the Agape with [make love to] the brother”... After making love in a state of fornication, the woman and man receive the male emission on their own hands. And they stand with their eyes raised heavenward but the filth on their hands, and pray... and offer that stuff on their hands to the actual

²¹ See A. von Harnack, *Marcion. The Gospel of the Alien God*, Durham (North Carolina) 1990, 96.

²² See Benko, “The Libertine Gnostic Sect of the Phibionites according to Epiphanius”, *Vigiliae Christianae* 21 (1967). References to the *Panarion* are made to F. Williams’ English trans., Leiden, New York and Köln 1987.

Father of all, and say, "We offer thee this gift, the body of Christ." And then they eat it and partake of their own dirt, and they say, "This is the body of Christ; and this is the Pascha, because of which our bodies suffer and are made to acknowledge the passion of Christ." And so with the woman's emission when she happens to be having her period -they likewise take the unclean menstrual blood they gather from her, and eat it in common. And "This," they say, "is the blood of Christ."... But though they copulate they forbid procreation. Their eager pursuit of seduction is for enjoyment, not procreation... But if one of them gets caught and implants the start of the normal emission, and the woman becomes pregnant... they extract the fetus at the stage appropriate for their enterprise, take this aborted infant, and cut it up in a trough shaped like a pestle... and each eats a piece of the child with his fingers (26.4.4-5.5).²³

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The first question to be raised is whether the above is a genuine report of an eyewitness. Scholars who have scrutinised the text have observed that most of the details in the Phibionite story have been attested or have close parallels in earlier Christian (and anti-Christian²⁴) literature. Epiphanius' claim to have known these practices personally and the cross-references in other texts have led some "to the painful recognition of the fact that the charges of the pagans against Christians involving immoral sexual rites and murdering of children were not at all unfounded".²⁵ These same considerations, however, could also lead to exactly the opposite conclusion. Epiphanius does not seem to know a single important detail which was not already available to those acquainted with the literature. He may have insisted on his personal encounter with the Phibionites simply to make the story sound credible. It is much more plausible, and indeed it may have been what Epiphanius was actually saying, that by gaining the confidence of some sectarians he obtained access to their books, from which he got his information. In his own words, he understood their "true intent" and was saved from the seduction of some women "very lovely to look at... after reading them and their books" (26.17.8). In the most emphatic way he exclaimed that the things he came to find out about them were *not* things he ever did (26.18.2). In other words, his report was based on what he was told (cf. 26.17.4) and on what he read, not on what he saw or actually experienced.

If it can be established that the bishop had never been an eyewitness, common sense suggests that neither did he report what he read exactly as it was written. His purpose in relating the story in the way he did is revealed in the following words: "I shall not be ashamed", he wrote, "to say what they are not ashamed to do, to arouse horror by every method in those who hear what obscenities they are prepared to perform" (26.4.4, cf.

²³ Cf. trans. in W. Foerster, *Gnosis. A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, Oxford 1972, 318-9. Such accusations had a lasting literary influence. The 7th century Syrian Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, for example, includes in a list of "abominable deeds" the following behaviour: "...and the embryos which the women aborted they ate as if it were some delicacy...", quoted from P.J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, Berkeley 1985, 40.

²⁴ Christians were accused of the kind of cannibalism mentioned in the quotation above by the Mandaeans. In its present form, Mandaean literature should be classified as anti-Christian rather than as Christian-sectarian.

²⁵ Benko, *art. cit.*, 114. Cf. Williams' introduction to *Panarion* xxi. See also the evidence on the theological aspects of the ritual produced and discussed by S. Gero, "With Walter Bauer on the Tigris: Encratite Orthodoxy and Libertine Heresy in Syro-Mesopotamian Christianity", in C.W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, Jr., (eds), *Nag Hammadi Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, Peabody (Massachusetts) 1986, 287-307.

26.3.9). He actually felt “under a kind of compulsion” to give the account he gave, “forced to speak out” (26.3.4, 3.8) - obsessed by his own conceptions, we may add. The painful conclusion is rather that we still have no idea whether the “immoral deeds” were ever practised by any Christians, orthodox or heretic.

The second question to be raised is how this story originated or, to put the question in another way, what its meaning was when it first circulated in the world of the early Christians. It is unfortunate that the books which Epiphanius claimed to have read are not extant. Nor are there any other religious books preserved which call upon their adherents to perform such rites - although there exist Gnostic books, such as the *Pistis Sophia* (381) and *Second Book of Jeu* (100), which forcefully condemn them. However, what seems reasonably certain is that the original story (in whatever degree distorted) referred to a religious rite, quite in line with the manner of expression of the first disciples who were called to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:24-6).²⁶

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The early Christians, almost two centuries before Epiphanius' time, were protesting over the misunderstanding their Eucharistic language was causing: their slaves, they argued, “having nothing to say that would meet the wishes of their tormentors, except that they had heard from their masters that the divine communion was the body and blood of Christ, and imagining that it was actually flesh and blood, gave their inquisitors answer to that effect”.²⁷ Epiphanius, reading the sacred books of the heretics, appears (intentionally or not) to have misunderstood the practices of his opponents in the same way that the pagan slaves had misunderstood the practices of their orthodox masters. The Phibionite story seems to preserve a *distorted* form of a religious rite. “Get up, perform the Agape with the brother”, sounds very orthodox, and there is an orthodox ring in the notion of the murder of an innocent child as well - however repulsively reported. Should we, therefore, regard the whole story as originating from ‘misunderstood’ theological language?

The problem is that although the theological significance of the ‘original’ story seems to be rather obvious, it can not be definitely concluded that no promiscuous acts were ever performed. An obscene theology may have been accompanied by an obscene ritual. Only, if that were so, the motive of the practice could not have been “passion for fornication.” Religious compulsion, not passion would have motivated such acts. After all, as has been claimed, “it is difficult to believe that such a perversion could bring erotic or any other type of pleasure to anybody.”²⁸ It is equally difficult to believe, as Epiphanius claimed, that the Phibionites performed 730 “shameful acts of sexual intercourse” in earnest (26.9.9).

There are further questions to be raised. Even if the whole story told by pagans against Christians (as reported by Christians) or by orthodox Christians against heretics²⁹ was actually based upon a distorted and misunderstood theology, how did this theology originally develop? Furthermore, how did it become so central as to provide a battleground for so many generations? And why do we encounter it even as late as the seventh century, when paganism constituted no real threat?

²⁶ Cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheseis* 6.33, on Manichaean ceremonial eating of figs dipped in semen, which is almost certainly a malicious fiction. On the disgust of men in antiquity at oral contact with semen see J.J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, New York and London 1990, 38, commenting on Artemidorus.

²⁷ Irenaeus, fragment 12; trans. in ANF 1 (as fragment 13).

²⁸ Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, London 1985, 68.

²⁹ Cf. also the accusations of the orthodox bishop of Alexandria Peter against the Arians, quoted in Theodoret, *H.E.* 4.19.

5. As a bride expecting her bridegroom: The mystery of sexual intercourse

Writing against the heretics in the late second century, Irenaeus condemned, among others, those who “yield themselves up to lust of the flesh with the utmost greediness, maintaining that carnal things should be allowed to the carnal nature, while spiritual things are provided for the spiritual. Some of them, moreover”, Irenaeus went on, “are in the habit of defiling those women to whom they have taught the above doctrine, as has frequently been confessed by those women who have been led astray by certain of them, on their returning to the Church of God, and acknowledging this along with the rest of their errors” (1.6.3). Little is really new in this accusation of sexual abuse or in what follows in the next lines. Second Timothy (to which Irenaeus alludes in 1.13.6) referred to those (Church leaders?) who “insinuate themselves into private houses and there get miserable women into their clutches, women burdened with a sinful past, and led on by all kinds of desires, who are always wanting to be taught, but are incapable of reaching a knowledge of the truth” (3:6-7).³⁰ An almost compulsive repetition of similar accounts is to be found throughout the Christian literature. At a general level this is not very surprising: whenever obsession with sexual continence becomes an ideal, extravagances are constantly feared.

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Irenaeus, however, attached a certain type of sexual behaviour to a particular theology and claimed that women had been led astray by those who had taught them such doctrines. The author of Second Timothy, although less clear in his statement, somehow also connected sexual attachment to a teaching process - and indeed one that comes to no culmination. Are we to understand that under certain circumstances strong erotic emotions developed between instructors and (mostly female) disciples? It is to be noted that Irenaeus, after formulating his general statement, went on, in a later chapter, to relate in some detail a particular case which had led him to that conclusion.

The story we are told was supposed to have taken place in the Rhone valley as well as in the district of Asia³¹ at a date close to Irenaeus' own time. The account was incorporated into the works of later heresiologists, including Epiphanius. It is worth going into some of its details, as such details are generally conspicuously lacking. The protagonist of the story was Marcus, presumably a Gnostic, who, if not an actual member of the Catholic Church, was originally in close contact with orthodox clergy. However, he was presented by Irenaeus as “a perfect adept in magical impostures”, by which he had attracted “a great number of men, and not a few women” (1.13.1). Having said that, Irenaeus was concerned exclusively with women, concentrating on reports about the prophetic gifts of Marcus' female disciples. The words used to describe those women are significant, for they were reported to have been “well-bred”, “elegantly attired”, and “of great wealth” (τὰς εὐπαρέφους, καὶ περιπορφύρους, καὶ πλουσιωτάτας) (1.13.3); the Phibionite women who had almost seduced Epiphanius some centuries later were also endowed with attractive figures and faces (εὐμορφότεραι καὶ εὐπροσωπότεραι) (*Panarion* 26.17.8). It appears that Marcus, like other orthodox Christians, was especially successful with upper-class women, whose exclusion from public life “created a pool of available converts”.³²

Irenaeus purported to have preserved the exact formula used by Marcus when addressing his select female disciples:

³⁰ Trans. from the New English Bible, Harmondsworth 1974.

³¹ Although the two areas were far apart, their Greek population, from which the first Christian communities drew most of their members, was in contact.

³² Averil Cameron, “Neither Male nor Female”, *Greece and Rome* 27.1 (1980) 63.

I am eager to make thee a partaker of my Charis, since the Father of all doth continually behold thy angel before His face. Now the place of thy angel is among us: it behoves us to become one. Receive first from me and by me Charis. Adorn thyself as a bride who is expecting her bridegroom, that thou mayest be what I am, and I what thou art. Establish the germ of light in thy nuptial chamber. Receive from me a spouse, and become receptive of him, while thou art received by him. Behold Charis has descended upon thee; open thy mouth and prophesy (1.13.3).

It is clear that the expressions used have a symbolic meaning reminiscent of New Testament equivalents. Christianity, from its earliest stages, and increasingly after the late second century, made use of the mystery language common to many eastern religions. To draw any conclusions from this language about moral conduct would be naive and misleading. As for the prophetic gift, it should be recalled that it was by no means confined to Christians. It may have been something of an embarrassment when enemies of the faith could speak with knowledge about things long past or things to come, but it was an acknowledged fact - if attributed only to evil or unclean spirits (cf. Acts 16:16).

Irenaeus had more to say about the prophetic potentialities of Marcus' female disciples. The first long invocation was only a preliminary; women were not expected to commence prophesying so easily. Further invocations were made whose purpose was, according to the Church Father, to "astound (the) deluded victim".³³ And finally, Marcus would say: "Open thy mouth, speak whatsoever occurs to thee, and thou shalt prophesy". This second try was expected to bring about better results.

She then, vainly puffed up and elated by those words, and greatly excited in soul by the expectation that it is herself who is to prophesy, her heart beating violently, reaches the requisite pitch of audacity, and idly as well as impudently utters some nonsense as it happens to occur to her, such as might be expected from one heated by an empty spirit. (Referring to this, one superior to me has observed, that the soul is both audacious and impudent when heated with empty air.) Henceforth she reckons herself a prophetess, and expresses her thanks to Marcus for having imparted to her of his own Charis.

How did Irenaeus know about all this? Marcus could not have been his exact contemporary. Later in the same chapter, the Church Father referred to male disciples of this Marcus who had gone even further in the same direction, their practices being already well known. Furthermore, the long quotations given by Irenaeus (and there are plenty more later on) were certainly derived from books, not from hearsay. The Eucharistic formulas appear to have been accurate, as they were probably quoted verbatim, but the emotional reactions reported were, in all likelihood, Irenaeus' personal guess, built upon some general information.

There is more in the story with Marcus. Having received the prophetic gift, his female disciples were expected to develop a strong attachment to their spiritual leader.

³³ Cf. E.R. Dodds' comments in *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays*, Oxford 1973, 191-2, who, however, considered Marcus' practices to have been a fraud.

She then makes the effort to reward him, not only by the gift of her possessions (in which way he has collected a very large fortune), but also by yielding up to him her person, desiring in every way to be united to him, that she may become altogether one with him.

The accusation of profit-making was a common charge against Christians as well as between Christian rivals. On the problem of eroticism, Irenaeus felt that further explanations were needed. In order to “insult the persons of some of these women, if not all”, Marcus “compounded philters and love potions”; this was at least the excuse given by the “defiled” women who had returned to the Church (1.13.3-5).

That philters and potions were often used to produce “burning passions” is attested in many sources of the period, especially in the ancient romances.³⁴ But the strong desire felt by Marcus’ female disciples was, apparently, not provoked by drugs. The erotic emotions developed between masters and disciples under conditions of close personal contact aiming at producing uninhibited utterances on the part of the disciples have their modern counterpart: as Freud was to realize, at first, with some horror, his principle of ‘free association’ led his (mostly) female patients to experience (transference) love emotions towards their analyst. What in psychoanalysis is known as wish-fulfilment of unconscious desires has a close parallel in what the early Christians considered prophetic visions. In psychoanalysis, counter-transference, i.e. the unconscious emotional reaction of the analyst, is an acknowledged fact which requires careful consideration. It is conceivable that Marcus and the other early Christian leaders who allowed themselves the experience of a very intimate personal relation with women did not always abstain from ‘acting out’ their own feelings. It is more probable, however, that the idea of carnal intercourse was the obsession of those who observed the close links between such masters and their disciples.

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6. A prophetess who teaches fornication: Prophecy and eroticism

Irenaeus insisted that he knew the details about Marcus and his disciples from some of the women who, after being “defiled” by their spiritual fathers, had returned to the Church. In fact, he mentions just one such case, which is probably quite accurate, as it did not come exactly to culmination desirable for his own purposes. The story goes as follows:

A sad example of this occurred in a case of a certain Asiatic, one of our deacons, who had received (Marcus) into his house. His wife, a woman of remarkable beauty, fell a victim both in mind and body to this magician, and, for a long time, traveled about with him. At last, when, with no small difficulty, the brethren had converted her, she spent her whole time in the exercise of confession, weeping over and lamenting the defilement which she had received from this magician (1.13.5).

If this is the best case Irenaeus could cite to support his generalisations, then it should be noted that the “defiled” woman, having followed Marcus “for a long time” -which virtually excludes the use of drugs- had returned to the Church “with no small difficulty” for the

³⁴ On philters and erotic spells see Winkler, *op. cit.*, 71ff.

brethren. Obviously, the orthodox party had felt greatly embarrassed knowing that a deacon's wife was wandering about with an arch-heretic. Having been won over by the Catholic Church, the woman "spent her whole time" confessing, weeping and lamenting. Irenaeus added that the cause of the lamentation was her defilement, although this was probably his own explanation, or, more accurately, his own expectation.

In his concluding remarks, Irenaeus made a further generalisation:

Such are the words and deeds by which, in our own district of the Rhone, they (the Marcosians) have deluded many women, who have their consciences seared as with hot iron. Some of them, indeed, make a public confession of their sins; but others of them are ashamed to do this, and in a tacit kind of way, despairing of (attaining to) the life of God, have, some of them, apostatized altogether; while others hesitate between the two courses (ἐπαμφοτερίζουσι) and incur that which is implied in the proverb, "neither without nor within;" possessing this as the fruit from the seed of the children of knowledge (1.13.7).³⁵

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The psychological acuteness of this last observation is formidable. Of women -such as the deacon's wife- who had, almost forcibly, been detached from a person for whom they had felt a "burning passion", we could hardly expect a different reaction. It would have been very difficult, even for them, to tell whether their lamentation was over the loss of the love of God or over the loss of their beloved.

We may now go back to the Phibionite story. Epiphanius was so much obsessed with the abominations of the details he gave, that he left their significance in the shadow. In the light of Irenaeus' account, however, it becomes clear that the Phibionite 'sexual' ritual had also as its aim the invocation of the spirit. Through successive sexual unions (real or symbolical), reaching the number 365, and through invocations, the Phibionites would ascend to heaven - or so they thought. Descending in the same manner, and thus reaching 730 "sexual intercourses", they felt as if they had become one with Christ (26.9.6-9, cf. 26.2.2-4). This whole procedure was clearly a mystic experience, equivalent to Marcus' prophetic experimentation.

The disturbances some heretics were causing within the orthodox churches seems to have been due to their strong personal influence. As this influence was closely linked to the grace they could offer, we may wonder whether early Christianity, with its strong prophetic element, was particularly vulnerable to excessive eroticism. Viewed in this way, several New Testament passages strengthen the suspicion that, although early Christianity aimed at restricting sexual practices, in effect it often stimulated strong erotic desire among its adherents. John's Revelation comes at once to mind with its curious information. How could, as we are told, Christians of the holy Church "tolerate" Jezebel, a "woman who claims to be a prophetess, who by her teaching lures (God's) servants into fornication and into eating food sacrificed to idols". This prophetess was even given "time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication" (2:20). Was fornication the price to be paid for the prophetic gift, as seems to be the meaning of an utterance attributed to a (Christianized) Sibyl: "Countless couches have I known, but never recked of marriage" (7.153)?

³⁵ Irenaeus was here playing with the meaning of the word seed (σπέρμα); on the belief of the transformation of the male seed into spirit, see Rousselle, *op. cit.*, 122.

Who were the “false” prophets condemned in Second Peter, “through whom the true way will be brought into disrepute” (2:1-3)? Second Peter had some harsh words to say in this connection: We are told about their “abominable lusts”; we are told that “to carouse in broad daylight is their idea of pleasure”; that “they have eyes for nothing but women, eyes never at rest from sin”; that “they utter big, empty words, and make of sensual lusts and debauchery a bait to catch those who have barely begun to escape from their heathen environment”, and so on (2:10-9). And Jude accused those who transformed God’s blessing into licentiousness, led to it by dream visions (4-8). Such passages could be multiplied, and the persistent question to be raised would always be, how could all these people appear in the midst of a religion which at the same time produced them while being horrified by their practices.

7. Like an excited stallion eager to mount a mare: Sex in the desert

Prophecy and its accompanying ecstatic experiences, which may have provoked preoccupation with sex, did not last long in orthodox Christianity. From the late second century onwards, the few remaining Christian prophets were expelled from the main churches. Some of them, especially the Montanists, who continued to exercise a strong influence, were forced to organize independent communities of their own. The problem of sex, however, did not cease to trouble the orthodox communities. Strange as it may seem at first glance, sexual temptations were most disturbing in the desert, where the Christian ascetics were mortifying their flesh in isolation.

A certain ascetic, we are told in one among many similar stories, was once foolish enough to provide shelter to a wandering woman:

Finding the door open she darted into the cave, and throwing herself at the man’s knees begged him to give her shelter since darkness had overtaken her. He took pity on her, which he should not have done, and received her as a guest in his cave. Moreover, he asked her about her journey. She told him how she had lost her way and sowed in him words of flattery and deceit. She kept on talking to him for some time, and somehow gently enticed him to fall in love with her. The conversation became much freer, and there was laughter and hilarity. With so much talking she led him astray. Then she began to touch his hand and beard and neck. And finally she made the ascetic her prisoner. As for him, his mind seethed with evil thoughts as he calculated that the matter was already within his grasp, and that he had the opportunity and the freedom to fulfill his pleasure. He then consented inwardly and in the end tried to unite himself with her sexually. He was frantic by now, like an excited stallion eager to mount a mare.³⁶

This desert Father, and many others like him, was trapped in a great paradox. He had abandoned civilisation with its grave -as he thought- temptations, yet, while meditating in the desert about the future bliss of the righteous, he felt a passionate attraction for the first woman he came across, such as he would have never experienced in his village or city.

³⁶ Cf. the case of a lover in the *Ephesian Tale* 2.8.2, who was hounding his beloved in a dream like a horse pursuing a mare.

Worse. As we are told by the compiler of these memoirs from the desert, the ascetic had become the victim, not of a real woman, but of his own lustful imagination. The story has a very powerful ending: “But suddenly (the woman) gave a loud cry and vanished from his clutches, slipping away like a shadow”.³⁷ The desert Father had escaped from real women, only to be tempted by the shadows of his own imagination.

According to the compiler, the story was told by a famous and respectable holy man, John of Lycopolis, who had every reason to know better than anyone else about things celestial and mundane, as he was renowned for his gift of clairvoyance. “Everyone who has not renounced the world fully and completely but chases after its attractions suffers from this spiritual instability”, John had claimed. “His preoccupations, being bodily and earthly, distract his mind through the many enterprises in which he is engaged.” The struggle against human passions does not allow one to “see God”. On the other hand, John argued, even partial knowledge of God -and divine knowledge can be but partial- “also attains to the knowledge of all other things. He (who possesses it) sees mysteries, for God shows him them; he foresees what belongs to the future; he contemplates revelations like the saints did; he performs mighty works; he becomes a friend of God, and obtains from God everything he asks” (1.26.8).

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Many Christians reading about their heroes would have thought that the flesh is weak. But why should the flesh become weaker when every effort was made to make it stronger? The evidence suggests that the religious experience, and in particular the experience associated with a strong mental (and physical) strain, stimulates unconscious processes which bring erotic emotions to the foreground. The great effort to see into the spiritual world and to come into contact with the divinity, common in ecstatic prophecy and ascetic isolationism, often brought about results different from, if not contrary to, those the early Christians were aiming at. Instead of detaching themselves from sensual desire, some of them felt ever greater passion for carnal pleasure.

8. All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: The impurity of the human soul

Considering the polemical nature of the extant evidence and the intellectual atmosphere of late antiquity, we may conclude that, in all likelihood, in the early Christian communities no light was ever “upset and extinguished” to allow indiscriminate exchanges of lustful embraces in the “shameless dark”; no infants were ever murdered for ritual or other purposes; no partaking of human seed was ever practised as an act of holy communion. Thyestes and Oedipus did not make their appearance among the early Christians.³⁸ And yet, the problem of sex was real enough, threatening to bring all spiritual efforts to nought.

In a certain way the loose ends of such accusations against the early Christians have a common ground. The story of the ‘Persian incest’ exemplifies that a lasting conflict over an important moral issue could be based on information no one ever cared to verify. By analogy, the story of “Oedipean unions” and “Thyestean banquets” need not have had any

³⁷ *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* 1.33-5; trans. by N. Russell, London and Oxford 1981.

³⁸ All such accusations against Christians and Christian heretics are given in Christian sources. The quotations are from Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.

foundation either. The evidence suggests that the Christians took these notions over from their opponents rather eagerly. It is even conceivable that they invented them themselves for the purpose of edifying some of their brethren. Irenaeus and Epiphanius were clearly troubled with the lasting influence of the “extravagant heretics” within the orthodox communities. The evidence considered suggests that ecstatic prophecy was liberating strong erotic emotions, whereas the case of the desert ascetics demonstrates that, under certain circumstances, obsession with sex could also be a purely orthodox phenomenon, with no pagans, Jews or heretics involved.

Christians did not encounter sex, like Petronius’ heroes, at every single corner of the Roman world; they encountered it in a much more profound way within their own souls. The soul-searching in which they were engaged often reached their innermost thoughts, which -as we now know though they did not- are filled with erotic (including Oedipean) visions. The great paradox was that they were searching for a pure and divine soul to reunite them with their creator and they found instead a soul filled with unacceptable passions.

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The explanation of the desert ascetics was that these visions and passions came from the “evil spirits”, which, like the Hydra of Lerna, multiplied as every single one of them was driven out. The common reaction of the apologists was not to see what was going on in their midst; and what they saw, they projected on to their enemies: it was the Jews who thought they detected immorality in the early Christian communities. It was especially the pagans who thought so, because their own minds were filled with the immoral and impure acts of their gods, presented as mysteries. Some Christians were confident that they had found the real answer. It was the heretics who had been practising lustful acts from the time of the first apostles, as the cases of the deacon Nicolaus, Simon Magus and Cerinthus testified. It was they, and particularly the Gnostics, who had argued in their evil theology that through knowledge they had become “perfect” and that they were “free in every respect to act as they pleased, having no one to fear in anything.”³⁹ This absolute freedom was the freedom for carnal pleasure, to which even some Corinthian Christians had felt they were entitled in Paul’s days (1 Cor. 4ff).

The early Christians were too loyal to invoke, as an example of ‘absolute freedom’, the ‘debauchery’ of some Roman emperors, denounced by Roman historians. But they could invoke the example of absolute monarchs of old (reminiscent of the Roman emperors) - like Cambyses who had felt free to marry his sister. The heresiologists argued that the Gnostic theology of freedom could lead, and indeed led, their adherents to promiscuity, licentiousness and libertinism. According to them, the Gnostics were partaking of the seeds of their evil theology.

Having reached this point in our investigation, we may finally raise one further question: The evidence considered suggests that similar problems arose among various different Christian communities. Should this observation lead us to the conclusion that, in this respect, there was no difference between orthodox and heretic communities?

The orthodox point of view on the problem of “freedom from the law” had been clearly formulated by Paul: “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient” (1 Cor. 6:12). Those who adhered to this reasoning made every effort to disengage themselves from sensual feelings, whenever they occurred. And since, as we have seen, the prophetic experience was to a great extent responsible for unwelcome desires, ecstatic prophesy was considered suspect and gradually abandoned in the orthodox communities. In the fourth

³⁹ Irenaeus 1.13.6.

century, and probably earlier, the ascetics attempted to control their carnal desires by further mortification of the body. In brief, whenever sexual impulses made their appearance in the orthodox communities there was but one official reaction: condemnation.

Some (few) Christian groups, on the other hand, seem to have felt more free to experiment on their feelings; to have taken the risks of the prophetic experience; and to have allowed their curiosity to lead them into the unexplored territory of the unconscious. My final speculation would, therefore, be that, although libidinal emotions are likely to have been experienced in several quarters of the Christian communities, it is mainly among some of those termed heretics that they would have been allowed to determine moral conduct.⁴⁰ The orthodox polemic against such heretics would understandably have been all the more ferocious, as it was simultaneously a struggle against a shared experience. Despite all efforts, the prophetic gift, along with the eroticism it produced, never completely abandoned Christianity, even in its most orthodox expressions. The temptations of the ascetics is adequate proof.

⁴⁰ Chadwick's verdict seems also plausible and sound: "In a word, normal gnosticism did not necessarily provide a more hospitable home for libertinism than orthodoxy" and "Accordingly, my provisional view at present is that there were occasional gnostic groups which mingled erotic elements in their cult; but they were neither typical nor representative"; "The Domestication of Gnosis", in B. Layton (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism* 1, Leiden 1980, 7 and 11.