

SEXUALITY & EARLY CHRISTIANITY PANEL DISCUSSION

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The topic of our panel presentation is Sexuality & Early Christianity, which turns out to be both a vast and complex area of consideration. The readings which were suggested include selections from Ellenberger, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* by Elaine Pagels and *When Women Were Priests* by Karen Tarjesen. Other books which were brought into the discussion include: *The Ministry of Women In The Early Church* by Roger Gryson, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity* by Ute E. Eisen, *Gregory the Great; Perfection in Imperfection* by Carole Straw, *Sacramental Theology* by Herbert Vorgrimler and *Witches & Neighbors* by Robin Briggs, as well as Canons from various pastoral and ecumenical councils and analysis of a number of patristic writers.

We decided early in our discussions to limit our considerations to the Western Church because the Eastern and Orthodox Churches had divergent approaches to such matters as priestly celibacy. We also decided to define the early Church within the boundaries of the first to seventh centuries, concluding with the papacy of Gregory I. Furthermore, we decided to focus more on sexuality rather than gender issues within the power structure of the church, but the topic came up on several occasions, which we will summarize in a while. We had some stimulating discussions and very divergent opinions about a number of matters within this topic area. The deliberations were always cordial, somewhat animated and certainly dichotomous. We were able to hold the tension, not of opposites but of distinctions.

Discussions began with a citation from Elaine Pagels: “ Early Christianity was impacted by a multitude of influences, : Jewish and Pagan, Greek and Roman, as well as Manichean. In less that one hundred years Augustinian thought became the accepted belief even though some of Augustine’s ideas “Would have baffled most of his Christian predecessors.” While some of the panelists were following Pagels argument along theological lines, others were considering it along socio political lines. In a brilliant analysis, one of the panelists made the following observation:

In its early days, the Church attracted “marginal” people (poor, slaves, etc.). The Church was identified with freedom from the oppression of the Roman state authority. However, when the Church became the State religion, it attracted “socially acceptable” people. As the state religion, it became associated with state authority, and Augustine's writings (especially those revolving around original sin and the absolute necessity of redemption through the Church) were used to bolster a state power = Church power equation. I believe that this shift is what was being referred to as ideas from Augustine that "would have baffled most of his Christian predecessors", not his view on sexuality per se.

Regarding gender and power issues within the early Church, the description of Karen Tarjesen of the division of labor within the Graeco-Roman world seemed to basically satisfy everyone. Tarjesen's analysis was that in the Graeco-Roman world, the woman's domain was the domestic realm, while that of males was the "polis" or city. As long as Christianity was an "underground" phenomena, the impact of women was considerable within the domestic milieu in which the Church developed. After the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, the Church emerged into the public arena and became pretty much the domain of males. There is iconographic evidence, from the ninth century, of an *Episcopa* "female bishop", which is a bit enigmatic. According to Eisen (203), this is an honorific title used for bishop's wives, but in Theodora's case, she was the mother of Pope Paschal I—which may or may not be an honorific title in that sense. At any rate, because of the prevailing cultural mores, female clergy never caught on, with the exception of a few heretical sects.

The thornier issues revolved around the quote from Pagels regarding Augustine. While Pagels cites no references to substantiate her claim, it resonated with the experience of some panel members. However, it was pointed out that contemporary experience is not colored by the influences of the early Church, but more by the consequences of Jansenism (a 17th century heresy) that influenced the Irish seminary system and consequently was exported to the United States by the large influx of Irish clergy in the late nineteenth through the middle of the twentieth century.

According to the canons of the various pastoral and ecumenical councils, the writings of the popes, particularly Gregory I, there is no written evidence that Augustinian thought about sin and sexuality "became the accepted belief" of the early Church. While celibacy was considered a higher form of spirituality, sexuality was never condemned within the context of marriage. Such Manichean notions were condemned as heresy by the Church. However, marriage wasn't considered a true "sacrament" until the twelfth century, when it is mentioned as a sacrament at the council of Verona (1184). One can infer from that a disdain for sexual activity from the standpoint of a largely, but not exclusively, celibate clergy.

While unpopular, contemporary teaching of the Church is in conformity with that expressed in the early Church—that the primary purpose of sexual activity is for the creation of life, but it is also useful for curbing concupiscence. In his approach to spirituality, Gregory I used a schema of spirituality through carnality and back again. In other words, treat sexuality as a spiritual act—not merely carnal.

Beyond that, we were unable to achieve any particular consensus regarding sexuality and the early church. Each of us maintains somewhat differing viewpoints, and we invite your discussion and comments.

Bibliography

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