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Between Poverty And The Pyre. Moments In The History Of Widowhood

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PAUPER OR PATRONESS

The widow in the Early Christian Church

Jan N. Bremmer

For my mother-in-law, Mrs E. V. Bartlett

After viewing the world of the widow in Ancient Israel, we now turn to the widow in the Early Christian church. We will not attempt here to present an exhaustive study but will concentrate on a few questions: what role did widows play in the rise of Christianity,¹ how did the increasing institutionalization of the church alter their position, and, last but not least, how did the growing stress on asceticism influence the place of widows in the early church? An analysis of the position of the widow can also show something of the enormous changes which took place gradually and virtually unnoticed in the Roman Empire under the increasing influence of Christianity. Greeks and Romans had always been very negative about old women,² and permanent widows were usually older women.³ To what extent did Christianity make a difference in this respect?⁴

JESUS AND THE FIRST PALESTINE CONGREGATIONS

We start in Palestine, with the New Testament.⁵ As the previous chapter of this volume shows, the life of widows in Ancient Israel was in no way easy. Whereas in the Ancient Near East women were entitled to inherit, the Jewish law made no such provisions. Consequently, the fate of the widow was a harsh one, as also appears from the constant appeals in the Old Testament for widows to be looked after. The fact that Jahweh especially was held responsible for the care of widows strongly suggests that human care was rather

deficient. It probably was not very different in the time of Jesus. In the first century of our era women generally were in many ways not highly regarded by the Jewish males of Palestine, and widows least of all.⁶

It is against this background that we have to analyse the activities of Jesus. Such an analysis is not that simple, since the sources, origins and milieu of the canonical gospels are still heavily debated.⁷ Moreover, the interest in women in general, and widows in particular, varies from gospel to gospel. Widows occur only twice in *Mark*, which is generally considered to be the oldest gospel, but not at all in *Matthew*, who closely follows him, or in *John*, who seems to have used the same source as Mark. According to Mark, Jesus, during his teaching in the temple, once lectured the scribes because they 'devour widows' houses'. He also negatively contrasted the rich, who contributed much money to the treasury, with the poor widow who gave two mites, 'her last penny' (12:40-4). In *Mark*, then, Jesus seems to use the widows in a positive way in his teaching, but he does not engage in personal contacts with them.⁸

With Luke it is different. He was the author of a history of the earliest Christian church from the birth of Jesus to Paul's enforced stay in Rome. His work, which probably dates from the end of the first century, was originally meant as a whole, but already at an early date it was divided into two parts, of which the first was classified as one of the gospels.⁹ Of all the evangelists Luke pays the most attention not only to women but also to widows. He is the only one to mention the prophetess Anna, a widow of about 84 years (2:36-8), and, unlike Matthew and John, he also mentions Mark's story about the poor widow (21:1-4). It is only in his gospel that Jesus quotes the visit of the prophet Elijah to the Phoenician widow of Zarephath in order to illustrate the universality of his message (4:26), and relates the parable of the widow and the unjust judge to demonstrate the effect of continuous prayer (18:1-8). Finally, he shows us Jesus resurrecting the only son of the widow at Nain (7:11-17). This attention to widows and the prominent role Luke assigns to women during the crucifixion and resurrection suggest a great interest on his part in women in the movement of Jesus.

The participation of women among the followers of Jesus was unparalleled in the traditional Jewish culture of that time. Admittedly, women could support rabbis materially but they could never become their pupils, unless they married one.¹⁰ On the other hand, women have frequently been interested, and visibly involved, in

movements outside the religious establishment from antiquity to the present day. We cannot, of course, treat alike the appeal of all these movements, such as the following of Adonis, the movement of Jesus, the Valentinian gnostics, the Cathars, Labadists, Shakers, Mormons and Moonies. A proper analysis of the involvement of women in sects requires a study of their numerical influence, the prevailing ideas about women, and the social position of women within such movements.¹¹ In the case of Jesus such an in-depth study is hard to carry out, but women seem to have constituted a significant part of his followers. Jesus himself opposed divorce and opened up the possibility for women to act independently from their families. He also seems to have cultivated intellectual relationships with women. This is often an underrated factor, but many indications suggest that intellectual intercourse was an important factor in the appeal of Early Christianity to women of the upper classes.¹² Even though Jesus reduced the distance between men and women, they remained still unequal, none of the apostles being a woman.¹³

Why did Luke pay so much more attention than Mark to women as travelling companions of Jesus? Was it because the role of women aroused resistance in the early church?¹⁴ That would be too negative an approach to the social background of Christianity in the time of Luke, as seen in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Epistles* of Paul. These documents show that women occupied an important position in the first congregations and that widows were objects of care and even of dispute. By stressing their place in Jesus's life Luke may well have wanted to encourage the identification of women and widows in the early church with their very first predecessors.

Even though we do not hear of widows among Jesus's first followers, they were certainly present in the very first Christian congregation in Jerusalem. According to Luke (*Acts* 6), there soon arose a dispute between the 'Hellenists' and the 'Hebrews' (which means to say between those Jews who spoke Greek and those whose language was Aramaic)¹⁵ because the widows from the first group felt themselves neglected in the daily ministrations. Unfortunately, Luke gives no further particulars so that it is hard to determine exactly who these widows were. It is possible that some of these women had returned from the Diaspora to die in Jerusalem; the Greek grave inscriptions of Jerusalem reveal relatively many names of women.¹⁶ We may assume that the majority of these widows were old, since the Jews of the first century were not against remarriage, and young widows would have been less of a problem for the first

congregation. We also hear of poor widows during the activities of Peter when he raises a wealthy woman, Tabitha, in Joppa. She had made coats and garments for widows, who showed them to Peter when he came to the upper chamber where the deceased was laid out (*Acts* 9:36–43).¹⁷ From these two rare passages it appears that from the very beginning of Christianity widows were objects of care and – not to be forgotten – a cause of further organization of the congregation.¹⁸

THE GREEK WORLD

The picture becomes more detailed as soon as ‘missionaries’ spread the gospel outside Palestine. In the beginning, the followers of Jesus were most successful in the Greek world, the area to which we will therefore now turn. In his first epistle to the Corinthians, which Paul wrote about AD 50 at Ephesus (*1 Cor.* 16:8), he discussed a number of questions which were put to him. One of these concerns marriage and virginity. From his answer it appears that several young widows were members of the Corinthian congregation and that their most important problem was the question whether they were allowed to remarry. For Paul this constituted no problem, even though he thought it better not to do so (*1 Cor.* 7:8f., 39f.).

It is highly interesting to note that remarrying was a problem at all because, like the ancient Jews, the ancient Greeks did not oppose the practice.¹⁹ In Classical Athens, the city for which we are best informed, remarrying was absolutely normal. This is also apparent from the comedies written by Philemon and Menander entitled *The Widow*, where a wedding would surely have been ‘the happy ending’.²⁰ This does not, however, mean that every widow actually remarried, since 65 per cent of Athenian widows seem to have remained unmarried and this number is typical for the whole of pre-industrial society.²¹

Besides remarrying, there also existed other ideals. In Euripides’ tragedy *Trojan Women* (l. 668), Andromache decries a woman who takes a new lover, and in his *Suppliants* (l. 1059) Euadne jumps on the pyre out of love for her husband Kapaneus. Yet these women are typical of the adventurous tragedian and hardly reflect the ruling values of Athenian society. Admittedly, the second-century traveller Pausanias (ch. 2.21.7) is able to mention by name the very first woman who remarried after the death of her husband: Gorgophone, the daughter of Perseus. She, though, is not mentioned before the second

century and so the notice need not be very old. In any case, remarrying was not a problem for the Greeks in the time of Pausanias because he mentions that in Naupaktos widows visited the temple of Aphrodite to beg for a new marriage (ch. 10.38.12). The question of the Corinthian congregation, then, seems to point in the direction of a more problematic attitude towards sexuality, such as we find with Paul himself. On the other hand, it is possible to think of a Roman influence on this point in this former Roman colony,²² since not to remarry was a respected, if little practised, ideal among the Roman upper classes (see below, p. 38).

Widows are also briefly mentioned as a source of concern in the epistle of *James* (1:27), but the most interesting passage occurs in 1 *Timothy*, one of the pastoral epistles ascribed to Paul, which was probably written in Asia Minor around AD 100. This letter shows that the congregations in Asia Minor had been able to recruit a considerable number of women from the higher classes, who liked to flaunt their complicated hairstyles, jewels and expensive clothes (2:9). These women also wanted to give religious instruction and such a self-confident attitude tallies with the social position of these women from the urban élite. Compared with classical times, such women occupied a much more important position in public life; even among the Hellenistic Jews women had advanced considerably – sometimes even to become head of the synagogue. Although these women in no way threatened the position of their wealthy husbands in public life, the small Christian congregations may have felt their financial power. That is perhaps why the male author of 1 *Timothy* thought it necessary to impress upon women their (modest) place, just as pagan philosophers continued to preach the ideal of the virtuous and modest wife, whose most important role was to be pious and quiet.²³

Among these wealthy women there were several widows, and their number was sufficient for ‘Paul’ to dedicate a long passage to their position (1 *Tim.* 5):

- 3 The church should take loving care of women whose husbands have died if they don't have anyone else to help them.
- 4 But if they have children or grandchildren, these are the ones who should take the responsibility, for kindness should begin at home, supporting needy parents. This is something that pleases God very much.
- 5 The church should care for widows who are poor and alone in the world if they are looking to God

for his help, and spending much time in prayer; 6 but not if they are spending their time running around gossiping, seeking only pleasure and thus ruining their souls. 7 This should be your church rule so that the Christians will know and do what is right.

8 But anyone who doesn't provide for his own relatives when they need help, especially those living in his own family, has no right to say he is a Christian. Such a person is worse than the heathen.

9 A widow who wants to become enrolled as a widow should be at least sixty years old and have been married only once.

10 She must be well thought of by everyone because of the good she has done. Has she brought up her children well? Has she been kind to strangers as well as to other Christians? Has she helped those who are sick and hurt? Is she always ready to show kindness?

11 The younger widows should not become members of this special group because after a while they are likely to disregard their vow to Christ and marry again. 12 And so they will stand condemned because they broke their first promise. 13 Besides, they are likely to be lazy and spend their time gossiping from house to house, prying into other people's business. 14 So I think it is better for these younger widows to marry again and have children, and take care of their own homes; then no one will be able to say anything against them. 15 For I am afraid that some of them have already turned away from the church and been led astray by Satan.

16 Let me remind you again that a widow's relatives must take care of her, and not leave this to the church to do. Then the church can spend its money for the care of widows who are all alone and have nowhere else to turn (tr. *The Living Bible*).

In many ways this passage can be considered a key passage in the study of the social position of the widow because in addition to its ideology it presents a fine illustration of the most important variables which play a continuous role all through history: young/old, poor/rich, with/without children, with/without relatives.

In talking about enrolment 'Paul' naturally dismisses the young widow: by her behaviour she is too high a risk for the young church and that is why she had better remarry. The remaining widows have to satisfy a number of conditions before they can be 'enrolled'. They

must be widows of 60 years and older, widows, then, who have unmistakably passed the menopause.²⁴ They must also have performed works of charity and practised hospitality. These conditions clearly imply that these widows cannot have been very poor – exactly what might be expected in the strict class society of the ancient world. But what does it mean to be ‘enrolled’? Were these ladies already members of the clergy? Did they already constitute the ‘order of widows’ about which we hear so much in the next century (see below, pp. 40, 43)?²⁵

Later developments may sometimes, if only rarely, be discerned in earlier, less explicit texts. No passage from the earlier second century yet mentions explicitly the ‘order of widows’, although the ‘enrolment’ in 1 *Timothy* 5 presupposes that at that time Christian congregations already knew of older, exemplary widows who were an object of special honour. This probably appears also from a somewhat later letter by Bishop Ignace of Antioch. When on his way to Rome to face execution, he was able to send a number of letters from the Troad. In addition to exhortations to the church of Smyrna (6:2) and its bishop, Polycarp (4:1), not to neglect the widows, he ends his letter to Smyrna (13:1) with a greeting to ‘the families of my brothers with their wives and children, and to the virgins who are also called widows’. Since virgins did not yet constitute a separate category in the time of Ignace,²⁶ this passage also seems to point to exemplary widows who had renounced sexuality and, therefore, deserved to be mentioned separately. We also read of older widows playing a special role in offering prayers in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* (19–21),²⁷ which seems to have originated in Asia Minor at the end of the second century. To conclude, in the Greek world we do not yet find a real ‘order of widows’ in this period, but the older, more respectable widows already occupied a special position in the early stages of the church.

The concern for widows is also found in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* (4), which probably originated in Asia Minor in the middle of the second century, where a father sold his possessions and ‘brought the price to the widows’, after Paul had resurrected him and his son. In the *Acts of Peter* we hear of a certain Marcellus who was the ‘refuge’ of all the widows in town (8). Peter heals some blind, old widows (21), and when he has resurrected the son of a senator, the mother wants to distribute some of her property to her newly freed slaves, but Peter tells her to distribute the remainder among the widows (28). In the apocryphal *Acts of John*, which probably

originated around AD 150 in Egypt, John heals the old women of Ephesus. According to the author of these *Acts*, from these women, of whom many will have been widowed, only four were healthy (30–7).²⁸

Not every Christian, though, was pleased with the special treatment of widows, which so strongly contradicted prevailing values. The anonymous author of a popular *Apocalypse of Peter* (9, tr. Ch. Maurer), which perhaps originated in Egypt about AD 135, understood this negative feeling well and therefore included in his description of Hell the following warning passage:

In another place situated near them, on the stone a pillar of fire (?), and the pillar is sharper than words – men and women who are clad in rags and filthy garments, and they are cast upon it, to suffer the judgment of unceasing torture. These are they which trusted in their riches and despised widows and the woman [with] orphans . . . in the sight of God.

On the other hand, widows were surely not always as pious as ‘Paul’ in his epistle to Timothy had wished. In a fragment of the *Acts of John*, the apostle is pictured being surrounded by widows and old women, who lived off alms from the church. When they accused John of keeping back the majority of the gifts he had received and of enriching himself at their expense, he miraculously changed hay into gold . . . which he subsequently hid in an inaccessible place.²⁹

Finally, the special position of widows did not go unnoticed among those outside the church. In a book which he wrote around AD 165 about the self-immolation of the philosopher Peregrinus, the pagan satirist Lucian mentions that in prison he was visited by ‘old crones, widows and orphans’, categories typical of the most vulnerable in ancient society (ch. 12). Lucian clearly satirizes their prominent position among the Christians, but he did not realise that he was witnessing a slow revolution in the ancient value system, which would soon develop into a tidal wave.

THE ROMAN WORLD

Unlike the Greeks, the Romans respected widows who did not remarry after the death of their husband, and the woman with only one husband, the so-called *univira*, was greatly praised.³⁰ Yet practice was different, and in the first century BC, the century for which we are best informed, the Roman élite divorced and remarried with a frequency which looks highly modern; young widows too remarried

where possible.³¹ If, however, the more well-to-do among the latter preferred to remain unmarried, they were able to do so, since the Roman heritage system was much more favourable to women than the Greek one. Yet legal and social pressure was such that remarriage was the norm, both for widows and widowers.³²

Widows played an important role in the visions of Hermas, a member of the Roman congregation, in the first half of the second century.³³ Hermas's *Shepherd* shows that despite the presence of many wealthy members the early Roman house-churches still knew a great number of persons in need, especially widows; the evidently great supply of widows may well explain why Hermas's visions did not disapprove of remarriage after the death of a husband. In his visions the members of the congregation are continuously exhorted and admonished to support widows. Moreover, evidently not all money collected from the congregation reached its intended goal. This must explain why Hermas saw in his visions a mountain with snakes and other wild animals, which were meant for those deacons who had embezzled money destined for widows: some of the deacons, who did the day-to-day work of charity while the bishop had the final responsibility, clearly lived in style at the expense of the congregational funds.³⁴ Around AD 170, however, the financial situation of the Roman congregation had clearly improved and Soter, the then bishop of Rome, could extend his works of charity even to passing Christian brothers and sisters.³⁵

From the first western church order, the *Traditio Apostolica*, which is traditionally ascribed to a certain Hippolytus in Rome around AD 215,³⁶ it appears that at that time Roman widows were still in need of charity; in fact, around AD 250 Bishop Cornelius proudly mentioned that the congregation supported 1500 widows and other needy persons.³⁷ According to the church order, widows occupied an important position in the church, but they could not become members of the 'order of widows' by the laying on of hands, only through prayer: clearly they were not properly ordained (ch. 10). Their main duty seems to have been frequent fasting and praying, together with the virgins, who also constituted a separate group (ch. 23). The continuous necessity of charity is illustrated by the requirement that new members of the church, the catechumens, were only admitted to baptism if they had supported the widows (ch. 20). Clearly, though, some members did not give the widows their proper due, whereas others apparently showed too much interest in them: gifts for widows had to be handed over to them the

very same day (ch. 24), and members of the congregation were only allowed to invite older widows to dinner: they had to leave the house before nightfall (ch. 30).

In addition to Rome, we are also reasonably well informed about Carthage, the largest city after Rome in the western half of the Mediterranean. The writings of Tertullian (c. AD 160–220) are especially informative in this respect. In the two books of his treatise *Ad uxorem*, ostensibly addressed to his wife but in fact meant to benefit the Carthaginian church as a whole, he discusses the problem of remarriage of the younger widow after the death of her husband. He points out that the motives for remarriage are often very pedestrian, such as sexual attraction, ambition, greed and fear of a lower status (1.4.6) – again, those addressed are clearly the more well-to-do widows. We should clearly not underestimate the wealth of these widows because a century later a widow, Lucilla, could secure the election of one of her servants to the bishopric of Carthage through a massive gift of alms for the poor, although, incidentally, the money never reached them.³⁸

According to Tertullian, widows should also preferably remain widows and in particular not remarry with pagan husbands (2.1.4). In order to remain good widows, they had to avoid lazy, gossipy, inquisitive and dipsomaniacal friends (1.8.4). He evidently quotes here ‘Paul’s’ instructions to Timothy, but subtly leaves out the verse about the remarriage of young widows! Naturally, there were also poor widows who had reason enough to look for a new husband. Tertullian severely dissuades them from remarrying and says, with an allusion to the feeding of the prophet Elijah by ravens (1 *Kings* 17), that God is still ‘an educator of ravens’ (*De exhortatione castitatis* 12.2; *De monogamia* 16.3). One doubts whether ravens were enough.

Although Tertullian later became much stricter on this point (*Adversus Marcionem* 1.29.4), he still did not exclude remarriage completely. Yet he did advise widowers to remain unmarried and rather than marry a wealthy lady they should choose one, or even more, spiritual wives from among the widows, ‘whose beauty exists in faith, trousseau in poverty, distinction in age’ (*De exhortatione castitatis* 12). Naturally, Tertullian hoped to kill two birds with one stone: widowers would remain unmarried and poor widows would receive financial support. Yet we may wonder how widowers received this advice.

Tertullian also presents us with the first, more detailed information about the ‘order of widows’. Widows over 60 who had married only

once and raised children had the official duty to comfort, advise and support other women; their motherhood made them better qualified as advisers. As a sign of their dignity, these widows were allowed to sit in the front of the church next to the bishop, elders and deacons. It is hardly right, therefore, when Peter Brown writes about this 'order': 'most of these were helpless creatures, destitute old ladies only too glad to receive food and clothing from the hands of their clergy'. None of the admittedly rare notices we have gives any reason to think that prominent widows in the church were not also prominent in the world.³⁹

SYRIA AND EGYPT

Rules similar to those in the Roman *Traditio Apostolica* can also be found in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. This is a contemporaneous Syrian church order which was originally written in Greek but of which only translations, e.g. Latin and Ethiopian, have survived. Fortunately, though, an important part of the original order was incorporated into a later church order, the *Constitutiones Apostolicae* (see p. 43),⁴⁰ in which widows occupy a much more important position than in the West. Admittedly, a second marriage is considered to be illegitimate, the third a case of lack of self-control, the fourth a case of whoring, but despite these firm ideas the order was realistic enough to allow young widows to remarry. Again we find the widows as objects of charity, but the order also warns against greedy widows (*Const. Apost.* 3.7.3). Moreover, the order abounds with exhortations to prevent women making too many social calls. The widow should keep in mind that she is an 'altar of God'. This comparison of the widow with an altar was rather popular in Christian literature, but whereas earlier authors compared the widow with an altar in order to stress that she is also in need of 'sacrifice' (charity), this order stresses that 'an altar of God does not wander around but always remains in one place' (viz. inside the house: *Const. Apost.* 3.6.3).⁴¹

A different, but not less important point of concern was the gossiping of the widows – a subject which deserves a closer analysis.⁴² It is well known from sociolinguistic and anthropological research that gossiping is a typical criticism which men make of women; men themselves consider that they never gossip but always discuss important matters.⁴³ Unfortunately, we do not know exactly why gossip is so often negatively spoken about, but recent research among

Muslims in Spanish Morocco can give us some idea. In these Spanish enclaves women often discuss the behaviour of the males and their evaluations include tales which make some men more moral and respectable than others. In this way gossip can indeed lead to friction within and between families and sometimes to outbursts of unrest. We may assume that the early Christians were also afraid of unrest and that it was for that reason that they so often warned strongly against gossip. In any case, the letter from 'Paul' to Timothy shows that gossip was already giving the early Christians cause for concern.⁴⁴

The remarks regarding visits by widows to other women seem important evidence for the sociability of the women of that period. Admittedly, the daily life of women of the higher classes in later imperial times is not very well documented, but more attention to the Christian texts can shed some additional light in this respect. Other passages of the *Didascalia* also point to mutual visits by women. According to the church order a bishop sometimes does better to choose a deaconess (see p. 43) as his assistant because she has better access to houses in which both Christian and non-Christian live (*Const. Apost.* 3.16.1). This 'networking' of women must have been an important key to the success of the Christian mission,⁴⁵ since we hear hardly anything about preaching in public in the first centuries of Christianity.⁴⁶ The fact that the great majority of the early Christians were female will also have been the result of these pastoral visitings; Manichaean women worked as missionaries in a similar way.⁴⁷ Indeed, there is a growing awareness among sociologists of religion that 'social networks are crucially important in giving people opportunity to cultivate their contacts with small religious movements'.⁴⁸

Despite all the exhortations, widows did function as members of the Christian clergy, if lowly ones; they were even allowed to join the 'order of widows' at the age of 50. It is also striking that the widows of the Syrian *ordo viduarum* seem to have had more authority than those in the West. Of course, they had to pray and perform good works, but they were explicitly forbidden to instruct or to baptize: evidently, in a number of cases they had appropriated these tasks.⁴⁹

Instruction by widows also took place in Egypt because the Alexandrian church father Origen (c. AD 185–254) continuously stresses that widows should only instruct women and in no way officiate in the company of men. His objections seem to indicate an

important position for widows in Egypt and this impression is confirmed by an Egyptian church order, the so-called *Canones Hippolyti*, which probably dates from the years AD 336–40. According to this order widows should not be ordained, but they held a prominent position regarding prayer (ch. 32), visiting the sick, fasting (ch. 9) and the handing out of alms to orphans and the poor (ch. 5); despite all these different duties they were not allowed to become part of the clergy.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in the East widows seem to have occupied a more important position than in the West.⁵¹

Considering the independence of widows in these regions and the clerical objections to their preaching, it is not surprising that in the beginning of the third century AD the Syrian clergy instituted a new order, that of the deaconesses, which in the church orders received full clerical support.⁵² According to the *Didascalia* the deaconesses, not the widows, were allowed to give instruction. About a century later the widows are still mentioned in the *Constitutiones Apostolicae*, a church order from about AD 380, but their role appears to have declined considerably: they received communion after the deaconesses and the virgins (*Const. Apost.* 8.13.14). The deaconesses were even preferably chosen from the virgins, and widows were considered only if virgins were unavailable (*Const. Apost.* 6.17.4). A remark made by John Chrysostom, around AD 400, shows that in his time the 'order of widows' no longer existed.⁵³

THE CHRISTIAN EMPIRE

The rise of the deaconesses did not mean a flagging of attention to the widow in the fourth century.⁵⁴ On the contrary. Two new developments were the cause of a completely new situation. First, the Roman Empire received its first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great (AD 313–35),⁵⁵ and the Christians gradually took over the political power in the Empire. Second, the place occupied by sexuality in the life of Late Antiquity changed considerably due to the rise of asceticism and the increasingly negative attitude of the Christian clergy towards the body. Although the emperors directed their attention to the here and now and the clergy was more interested in the life hereafter, both authorities would repeatedly come into conflict, not least over the position of the widow.

From these two new developments the rise of asceticism is still difficult to explain. The most important study of this problem is undoubtedly Peter Brown's fascinating and subtle *The Body and*

Society, of which I may perhaps summarize the main lines as follows.⁵⁶ With Paul a negative appreciation of sexuality starts to come to the fore in Christianity, because in his eyes marriage was no more than 'second best'. This stress on abstention remains an important current in Christianity, even though it does not immediately become the dominant one. In this respect the choices made by the cultivated urban centres clearly differed from those of the radical communities in the hinterland of Syria and Asia Minor. Towards the end of the third century, though, we see the birth of a sort of compromise, by which the majority opts for a more puritan lifestyle while a small minority completely renounces sexuality. In the fourth century the 'admired few' of the various geographical areas realise this attitude towards sexuality in rather different ways. In Egypt the spiritual élite leaves the village community and proceeds to live in the desert where it combats the lusts of the flesh and, perhaps even more, the desires for food.⁵⁷ In Cappadocia and Pontus the 'admired few' remain in the city but it is especially women who 'steal the ascetic show'. In the West, Ambrose elevates virginity to an absolute ideal, also for the clergy, and Augustine puts the crown on this development by suggesting that sexual renunciation is *always* to be preferred, even though only a few will be able to practise such a mortification of the flesh. All others should cohabit only in shame and without joy.

In the end, according to Brown, the Christians were not obsessed by the body; on the contrary, they had lost all interest in it. In the ancient world, the body was 'a link in the great chain of being', the link between the sphere of the natural and that of the supernatural. For the Christians the body was gradually reduced to something of no importance and unworthy of attention. It was the will which became the final goal of purely introspective attention. Brown expresses this development also in social terms: people turned away from the city, and everything and everybody turned the gaze inwards.

Brown's book is the best we have about the thought and practice of Late Antiquity regarding sexuality, yet it is not wholly satisfactory because it does not take into account sufficiently the political takeover by the Christians and because any theoretical reflection is absent. Nowhere does Brown give us any clear idea as to which factors directed this development. By concentrating on the Christian evidence Brown also neglects important testimonies of late antique thinking concerning sexuality, such as the ancient novel. A definitive and more satisfactory explanation will surely have to begin with philosophical groups, such as the Stoics and Epicureans, which had

already started to reflect about the body in earlier hellenistic times. Subsequently, developments in Rome will have to be taken into account. The French ancient historian Paul Veyne has explained the development towards a more affectionate relationship between husband and wife in the Roman upper class as deriving from the political changes occasioned by the rise of the monarchy.⁵⁸ That may well be too one-sided an explanation, but it certainly seems probable that the loss of political influence caused the higher classes to spend more time in the private sphere; for different reasons a more affective relationship also developed among the lower, urban-centred, nuclear families of the western Empire.⁵⁹ Other factors to be taken into account are the indications of a more restricted attitude towards the body already visible before Constantine, such as the prohibition of homosexual prostitution, the growing resistance against bigamy, abortion and the exposure of babies; in addition the institution of legal marriage was extended to the whole of the Roman Empire and the importance of marital harmony received increasing attention. Perhaps we should connect these developments with the growing pressure by hostile tribes and governments on Rome's frontiers. In short, a theory about the birth of ancient asceticism will have to take into account a great variety of factors.⁶⁰

However this may be, the stress on an ascetic attitude towards sexuality caused church fathers not only to publish frequently on the advantages of virginity but also to show an intense interest in widows *tout court* in the last decades of the fourth century and the first decades of the fifth.⁶¹ This is an important shift in comparison with earlier centuries. If, when writing about widows, earlier authors employed distinctions, such as young/old, poor/rich or with/without children, now these variables started to lose their relevance and widows became important independent of age, social status or number of children. Numerous letters, pamphlets and treatises now became directed to widows with the advice not to remarry but permanently to renounce sexuality. We can find this advice in the works of all important church fathers from the period around AD 400: Ambrose (c. 333–97) in Milan,⁶² John Chrysostom (c. 350–407) in Antioch and Constantinople,⁶³ Jerome (c. 347–420) in Rome and Palestine,⁶⁴ and Augustine (354–430) in North Africa.⁶⁵ All these males praised widowhood and virginity highly but they praised virgins most of all. This is also illustrated by the frequent allusions to the last verse of Matthew's parable of the sower: 'But some fell on good soil, and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty and even a

hundred times as much as he had planted' (13:8, tr. *The Living Bible*). Initially, the yields had been referred to widowhood, virginity and, understandably in times of persecution, martyrdom. In the second half of the fourth century references to martyrs had gradually lost their relevance and they were replaced, naturally in last position because those who had married were valued less than those who had not, by those who married. After the virgins, widows now gained the sixtyfold reward.⁶⁶

Even though the church fathers wanted to promote the importance of widowhood, they did not agree at each and every point. Whereas Jerome considered remarrying widows hardly better than whores (*Ep.* 123), the later Augustine was much less rigid in his views.⁶⁷ One of his letters, which was discovered only recently, is typical of him. It dates from the last years of his life and is therefore one of the very last testimonies regarding widowhood in the period we have studied. Augustine's letter is an answer to a request for advice by a deacon named Felix. A widow, Innocentia, had promised God that her dying daughter would remain a virgin forever if she should recover. The girl did indeed recover, but the mother started to have regrets and wanted to dedicate herself to God instead of her daughter. Augustine resisted her wish and advised the mother not to remarry (apparently she was still young enough) and to try persuading her daughter to remain a virgin. Yet he was not a fanatic. If the daughter felt unable to continue in the unmarried state, she should marry – and Augustine refers to 'Paul's' epistle to Timothy in support of his views. Although Augustine, then, was no longer an extremist in this period of his life, he left no doubts about his own values. If the daughter remained a virgin, she would be ranked above the widow; if the widow remarried, the non-remarrying widow would be ranked above the married woman.⁶⁸

Was this propaganda for sexual renunciation a question of rhetoric, or did the exhortations of the church fathers really have an effect upon the social reality? The question can be answered if we start from an important change in the position of widows which was caused by the 'takeover' of the Christians. Already before his definitive victory over his rival Licinius in AD 324, Emperor Constantine decided in AD 320 that non-married men and women should have the same rights as those who married. These measures partially lifted the marital legislation of Emperor Augustus, who had forbidden adultery and given certain privileges to married couples.⁶⁹ Upper-class widows could now remain unmarried without having

to pay any penalty for their choice. Constantine's consideration for widows is also illustrated by another law in which he determined that owners of houses in which counterfeit money was produced remained punishable if they lived in the neighbourhood, but should the house owner be an innocent widow she would be exempt from punishment.⁷⁰

Widows seem to have made ample use of the liberty offered them by the emperor, since males evidently tried forcing them to remarry through rape. This must have been the reason that in AD 354 Emperor Constantius forbade the abduction of holy virgins and widows in the severest of terms. In AD 364 Jovian, the successor of Julian the Apostate, even made approaching women with less than honourable intentions liable to capital punishment. Evidently, much pressure was brought upon widows because in AD 380 Emperor Theodosius thought it necessary to issue an edict prohibiting the forcing of widows to remarry. An episode from the life of the church father Basil the Great (c. 330–79) shows that the measure was in no way superfluous. The bishop had taken into his house a young widow who had refused to remarry. Subsequently his house had been searched on the orders of an *assessor* (a sort of assistant) of a judge and he himself had been dragged to court, where he was threatened with a severe flogging. When this became known in the town an enormous riot developed in which women played a prominent role by using their hairpins as weapons, and it was only through Basil's intervention that the lynching of the judge was prevented. In AD 420 the penalty for raping virgins was relaxed and limited to confiscation of property and exile, widows no longer being mentioned – a fine illustration of the rise and decline of the attention given to widows.⁷¹

Some widows were unable or unwilling to resist the pressure to remarry but solved the problem in an ingenious manner. Jerome relates that wealthy widows sometimes married socially inferior husbands, who in this way became totally dependent on them. These husbands, according to Jerome, were even unable to protest if their wives had lovers: if they did they would be thrown out without mercy (*Ep.* 127.3). Other wealthy widows preferred to remain unmarried and were indeed very pleased at being able to do so. Jerome has again given a lively picture of their manner of living. If you saw them on the street in their carrying-chairs, preceded by a crowd of eunuchs,⁷² you would think, he claims, that 'they haven't really lost husbands but are looking for them'. And he adds scornfully that these widows are visited in their houses by the clergy, who kiss them

on the forehead and stretch out their hands – not to bless but to receive money. He ends his vignette with the words: ‘because they have experienced the authority of their husbands, they prefer the license of widowhood; they call themselves chaste and ‘nun’, and after a copious dinner they retire to dream of the apostles’ (*Ep.* 22:16).

Widows did not only use their liberty to remain unmarried nor did they always try to maintain it by marrying a socially inferior partner.⁷³ In an edict which was read out in the churches of Rome on 30 July 370, the emperors decided that clerics were forbidden to visit the houses of widows. The cause of this prohibition is apparent from another ruling: the clergy were not allowed to accept gifts or legacies from these women. In AD 390 it was decided that women could only become deaconesses if they were at least 60 years old (with an appeal to ‘Paul’s’ letter to Timothy) and had legal heirs.⁷⁴ Widows were only permitted to leave money to their own family, not to ‘a church, a cleric, or the poor’. Curiously, the law was withdrawn after two months: evidently, the church had put forward powerful protests. But why had it been necessary to issue the law at all?⁷⁵

The measure was certainly not superfluous from the point of view of the male members of the Roman upper class because the letters of Jerome clearly show that rich senatorial widows not only regularly refused to choose new husbands but also frequently used their fortune for the benefit of the church and the poor, and thus injured the financial interests of their own aristocratic families. Fabiola built a guesthouse for travellers in Ostia (*Ep.* 77:10); Paula spent so much money on the poor and a monastery in Bethlehem that she robbed her own children of their inheritance and, instead, left them with large debts (*Ep.* 108); Furia was encouraged by Jerome to give all her possessions to the Lord (*Ep.* 54), and Marcella would have given all she had to the poor if her mother had not objected (*Ep.* 107).⁷⁶ Other widows supported important clerics with their wealth: Olympias benefited not only the church father Gregory of Nyssa but even the patriarch of Constantinople, Nectarius.⁷⁷ In a way these wealthy widows had taken over the role of the male aristocrats, who had always been accustomed to establish and consolidate their positions within the ancient cities by making gifts and initiating large building projects. In contrast to this male euergetism, these widows directed their attention to the poor and monks. They did not build baths, temples or theatres but monasteries and guesthouses for the poor.⁷⁸ These activities, however, subverted the family fortunes of the high aristocrats and, not surprisingly, the emperors attempted to protect

their political supporters against the erosion of their fortunes by means of edicts.⁷⁹

Yet it was not only the male aristocratic élite which felt unhappy about the widows. The behaviour of these wealthy women, who received priests at home and even gave religious instruction to males, as Jerome relates in the case of Marcella (*Ep.* 127),⁸⁰ must also have disturbed certain clerics. It is indeed precisely in the early 380s that we find a Roman priest, Ambrosiaster, deploring the possibility of a one-sided divorce which Julian the Apostate had allowed women and stressing that women should be submissive to males in general and bishops in particular.⁸¹ And in the first decade of the fifth century, Palladius mentions various wealthy widows who were clearly enemies of John Chrysostom in Antioch.⁸² These all-too-independent women evidently constituted a direct threat to the authority of the patriarchal priests in the East and the West.

CONCLUSIONS

What can we now conclude from our study? First, that we must be careful using the term 'widow' without any further qualifications: until the end of the fourth century the church continuously distinguished between old/young, rich/poor, and with/without children. Second, the widow was an important source of attention for the Early Christians, whose stress on charity resulted in many widows joining the early church. Third, the accession of widows probably translated itself into extra attention being given to widows in *Luke*, both in his gospel and in *Acts*. Fourth, because of their numbers the widows could exploit their position by requesting access to the clergy. Fifth, an unforeseen consequence of so many widows joining must have been a considerable strengthening of the church organization: the 1500 widows of Pope Cornelius simply could not have been well looked after without an efficient organization. Sixth, when more and more people joined the church, widows lost their numerical influence and were no longer needed as patronesses; moreover, in order to undermine their position the clergy instituted a new order, that of the deaconesses, which in the course of time outstripped that of the widows.

Finally, we have seen that at the end of antiquity a revolution had taken place within the traditional system of values. Where old women had once been the object of scorn and mockery, older widows especially could now fill important positions in the church.

Moreover, whereas Greek and Roman women were once expected to marry and to remarry, if not in theory then certainly in practice, it was now sexual renunciation and the refusal of marriage which gained social prestige. This new attitude clearly offered the wealthier women an unprecedented liberty. Widows of the lower classes, on the other hand, who had not hitherto received any attention or esteem, now became, if they remained unmarried, the object of a flood of praises among the leading intellectuals of the time. Never was the position of the widow so high in the western world as in this short transitional period between antiquity and the Middle Ages.⁸³

NOTES

- 1 The subject has not occasioned much literature, but see C.H. Turner, *Catholic and Apostolic: Collected Papers*, (ed.) H.N. Bate (London and Oxford, 1931) 316–51 (first published in *The Constructive Quarterly*, September 1919); A.V. Nazzaro, 'La vedovanza nel cristianesimo antico', *Annali della Faciltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell' Università di Napoli* 26 (1983–4) 103–32; idem, 'Figure di donne cristiane: la vedova', in R. Uglione (ed.), *Atti del II convegno nazionale di studi su la donna nel mondo antico* (Turin, 1989) 197–219; B. B. Thurston, *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis, 1989).
- 2 See J.N. Bremmer, 'The Old Women of Ancient Greece', in J. Blok and P. Mason (eds), *Sexual Asymmetry: Studies in Ancient Society* (Amsterdam, 1987) 191–215.
- 3 For a short, instructive overview of the widow in the ancient world see P. Walcot, 'On Widows and their Reputations in Antiquity', *Symbolae Osloenses* 66 (1991) 5–26.
- 4 My study is also a contribution to this important question, which is posed by R. MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary* (Princeton, 1990) 142–55, 327–35. MacMullen does not discuss the widow.
- 5 For a more general overview, which rightly starts with the position of Jewish women in the time of Jesus, see M. Alexandre, 'Early Christian Women', in P. Schmitt Pantel (ed.), *A History of Women in the West I* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1992) 409–44, 527–38.
- 6 Palestine: see most recently L. J. Archer, *Her Price is Beyond Rubies: The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine* (Sheffield, 1990); A.-J. Levine (ed.), 'Women Like This': *New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* (Atlanta, 1991); N. Fernández Marcos, 'Exégesis e ideología en el judaísmo del s. I. Héroes, heroínas y mujeres', *Sefarad* (Madrid) 53 (1993) 273–88; P.W. van der Horst, *Hellenism – Judaism – Christianity. Essays on their Interaction* (Kampen, 1994) 73–95. *New Testament*: G. Stählin, 'chera', in G. Kittel (ed.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 9 (Stuttgart, 1974) 428–54.

- 7 For the sources, milieu and intentions of the gospels see the balanced survey by H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London and Philadelphia, 1990).
- 8 Cf. M. Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium* (Altenberge, 1989).
- 9 Cf. F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas I* (Zürich and Neukirchen, 1989) 13f. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 337 dates Luke even after the turn of the first century.
- 10 Cf. B. Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge, 1984) 117.
- 11 As is rightly stressed by M. de Baar, "En onder 't hennerot het haantje zoekt te blijven." De betrokkenheid van vrouwen bij het huisgezin van Jean de Labadie (1669–1732)', *Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis* 8 (1987, 11–43) 15.
- 12 Cf. J.N. Bremmer, 'Why did Early Christianity Attract Upper-Class Women?', in A.A.R. Bastiaensen, A. Hilhorst and C.H. Kneepkens (eds), *Fructus centesimus: Mélanges G.J.M. Bartelink* (Steenbrugge and Dordrecht, 1989) 37–47.
- 13 Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 125–31.
- 14 As is argued by B. Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge, 1988) 157.
- 15 Cf. M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (London, 1983) 1–29. For the complicated issue of the language situation in Palestine in Jesus's time, see M. Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London and Philadelphia, 1989); G. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 4 (Macquarie, 1989) 5–40.
- 16 Cf. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 16.
- 17 Stählin (note 6 above) 440 wrongly concludes from Peter's calling of 'the saints and widows' (9:41) after his resurrection of Tabitha that the widows in Joppa already constituted a separate order.
- 18 H.G. Kippenberg, 'The Role of Christianity in the Depolitization of the Roman Empire', in S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany, 1986) 261–79, 527–32, considers the organization of the weak an important factor in the rise of the Christian bishop.
- 19 Greeks: B. Kötting, *Die Bewertung der Wiederverheiratung (der zweiten Ehe) in der Antike und in der frühen Kirche* (Opladen, 1988) does not even discuss Ancient Greece. See in general also I. Weiler, 'Witwen und Waisen im griechischen Altertum: Bemerkungen zu antiken Randgruppen', in H. Kloft (ed.), *Sozialmassnahmen und Fürsorge: Zur Eigenart antiker Sozialpolitik* (Graz and Horn, 1988) 15–33 (not very informative); better, L.-M. Günther, 'Witwen in der griechischen Antike – zwischen Oikos und Polis', *Historia* 42 (1993) 308–25.
- 20 The exception confirming the rule was that the bride of the highest Athenian magistrate, the *archon basileus*, had to enter marriage as a virgin (Demosthenes 59.75).
- 21 Athens: W.E. Thompson, 'Athenian Marriage Pattern: Remarriage', *Calif. Stud. Class. Ant.* 5 (1972) 211–25. Number of widows: T. Gallant, *Risk and Survival in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1991) 27. For the age

- of marriage see R. Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* (London, 1991) 148–51.
- 22 Cf. D. Gill, 'Corinth: A Roman Colony in Achaea', *Biblische Zeitschrift* 37 (1993) 259–64.
- 23 Upper-class Greek women: see most recently R.A. Kearsley, 'Women in Public Life', in S.R. Llewelyn (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, vol. 6 (1992) 24–7. Jewish women: see the bibliography in Bremmer, 'Why did Early Christianity', 41 n.11. Pagan philosophers: S. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford, 1991) 185–97.
- 24 In ancient Athens the famous lawgiver Solon only considered 60-year-old women as really old: Demosthenes 43.62. We find the same age limit also in the apocryphal *Acts of John* 30.
- 25 This has often been postulated; see most recently the surveys by Thurston, *The Widows*, 44–55; W. Venter, 'The Position of the Widow in the Early Church according to the Writings of the Apostolic Fathers', *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* (published in Johannesburg) 72 (1990, 11–29) 13–5.
- 26 Cf. R. Metz, *La consécration des vierges dans l'église romaine* (Dissertation, Strasbourg, 1954) 43–8.
- 27 J.-D. Kaestli, 'Fiction littéraire et réalité sociale: que peut-on savoir de la place des femmes dans le milieu de production des Actes apocryphes des apôtres?', *Apocrypha* 1 (1990, 279–302) 300 persuasively argues that the *seniores* in *Pet.* 19–21 are not 'old men' but 'older widows'. Date: P. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen, 1989²) 99.
- 28 S.L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale, 1980) 70–94, implausibly concludes from the prominence of widows that they were the authors of the apocryphal *Acts*.
- 29 Cf. E. Junod and J.D. Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis I* (Turnhout, 1983) 114f.
- 30 *Univira*: M. Lightman and W. Zeisel, 'Univira: an Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society', *Church History* 46 (1977) 19–32; Kötting (note 19 above), 15–9; idem, *Ecclesia peregrinans I* (Münster, 1988) 245–55; P.W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* (Kampen, 1991) 103–5; Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 232–7.
- 31 Cf. J.F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law & Society* (London, 1986) 50–6; K.R. Bradley, *Discovering the Roman Family* (New York and Oxford, 1991) 156–76; Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 500f.
- 32 M. Penta, 'La viduitas nella condizione della donna romana', *Atti della Accademia di Scienze Morali e Politiche di Napoli* 91 (1980) 341–51; Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 500–2; J.-U. Krause, 'Die gesellschaftliche Stellung von Witwen im Römischen Reich', *Saeculum* 45 (1994) 71–104.
- 33 For the most recent dating of *Hermas* see N. Brox, *Der Hirt des Hermas* (Göttingen, 1991) 23f. The mention of widows in Clement (1 *Clemens* 8.4), a bishop of Rome who lived at the end of the first century, is clearly derived from the Old Testament and cannot be used as an indication for the position of widows in the church of that time.
- 34 Cf. *Vis.* II.4.3; *Mand.* IV.4 (remarriage), VIII.10; *Sim.* I.8, V.3.7, IX.26.2

(deacons) and 27.2 (bishops); Justin Martyr, *Apology* I.67.7 (deacons); M. Leutsch, *Die Wahrnehmung sozialer Wirklichkeit im 'Hirten des Hermas'* (Göttingen, 1987) 73f., 135, 161.

- 35 Cf. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV.23.10. Leutsch, *Die Wahrnehmung*, 246–51 rightly stresses that these data are unfortunately insufficient to reconstruct the size of the Christian congregation in the city of Rome.
- 36 Recently serious objections have been raised against both the accepted time and place of origin of the church order. I still follow the traditional ascription but the matter deserves further investigation, cf. M. Metzger, 'A propos des réglemens ecclésiastiques et de la prétendue *Tradition Apostolique*', *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 66 (1992) 249–61 (with further bibliography); see also P. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (London, 1992) 80–110.
- 37 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI.43. For the importance of charity for the development of the Christian church in Late Antiquity, see P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, 1992) 78–103.
- 38 Cf. B.D. Shaw, 'African Christianity: Disputes, Definitions, and "Donatists"', in M.R. Greenshields and T.A. Robinson (eds), *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Religious Movements: Discipline and Dissent* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter, 1992, 5–34) 25f.
- 39 Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* 9f.; *Ad uxorem* 1.4.4; *De exhortatione castitatis* 11; *De pudicitia* 13, cf. G. Schöllgen, *Ecclesia sordida? Zur Frage der sozialen Schichtung frühchristlicher Gemeinden am Beispiel Karthagos zur Zeit Tertullians* (Münster, 1984) 305–7. P. Brown: *The Body and Society: Man, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988) 147.
- 40 Cf. M. Metzger, *Les Constitutions Apostoliques* I–III (Paris, 1985–7) I, 15 (bibliography). For important observations on the original shape of this church order see G. Schöllgen, 'Die Kapiteleinteilung der syrischen Didaskalie', in *Tesserae: Festschrift für Josef Engeman: Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, Suppl. 18 (1991) 373–9.
- 41 Cf. C. Osiek, 'The Widow as Altar: The Rise and Fall of a Symbol', *The Second Century* 3 (1983) 159–69.
- 42 For a first discussion of gossip in antiquity see V. Hunter, 'Gossip and the Politics of Reputation in Classical Athens', *Phoenix* 44 (1990) 299–325.
- 43 For an interesting sociolinguistic approach see D. Tanner, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York, 1991²) 96–122.
- 44 Muslims: E. Evers Rosander, *Women in Borderland: Managing Muslim Identity where Morocco meets Spain* (Stockholm, 1991) 211–27 (with thanks to Marjo Buitelaar). The classic study of gossip is M. Gluckman, 'Gossip and Scandal', *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963) 307–16. See also Pia Holenstein and Norbert Schindler, 'Geschwätzgeschichte(n): Ein kulturhistorisches Plädoyer für die Rehabilitierung der unkontrollierten Rede', in R. von Dülmen (ed.), *Dynamik der Tradition* (Frankfurt, 1992) 41–108, 271–81.

- 45 Reports, though, about the influence of aristocratic women on the conversion of their husbands have to be carefully scrutinised, cf. K. Cooper, 'Insinuations of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy', *Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992) 150–64; H. Sivan, 'Anician Women, the Cento of Proba, and Aristocratic Conversion in the Fourth Century', *Vigiliae Christianae* 47 (1993) 140–57.
- 46 Cf. R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven and London, 1984) 25–42.
- 47 Cf. A. Henrichs and L. Koenen, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 44 (1981) 308.
- 48 J.A. Beckford, 'Socialization in Small Religious Movements', in L. Laeyendecker *et al.* (eds), *Experiences and Explanations: Historical and Sociological Essays on Religion in Everyday Life* (Leeuwarden, 1990, 139–59) 144. There is a growing interest in social networks in Early Christianity; see the studies collected in *Semeia*, no. 56 (1992).
- 49 For widows in the *Didascalia* see R. Gryson, *Le ministère des femmes dans l'Eglise ancienne* (Gembloux, 1972) 65–75; A. Faivre, *Naissance d'une hiérarchie: Les premières étapes du cursus clerical* (Paris, 1977) 131–5. For preaching women see also Gregory of Nazianze, *Ep.* 5.4; *Patrologia Graeca* 37.1546.
- 50 Origen: Gryson, *ibid.*, 53–64, but note the convincing objections of Thurston, *The Widows*, 96 against Gryson's all too sceptical approach. *Canones Hippolyti*: R.-G. Coquin, *Les canons d'Hippolyte* (Paris, 1966); Faivre, *Naissance d'une hiérarchie*, 73.
- 51 In the *Testamentum Domini*, a Syrian church order of the second half of the fifth century, widows still occupy a very important position; see Faivre, *Naissance d'une hiérarchie*, 106–10.
- 52 A.G. Martimort, *Les diaconesses* (Rome, 1982); J. Ysebaert, 'The Deaconesses in the Western Church of Late Antiquity', in G.J.M. Bartelink *et al.* (eds), *Eulogia: Mélanges Antoon A.R. Bastiaensen* (Steenbrugge and The Hague, 1991) 421–36.
- 53 John Chrysostom, *Patrologia Graeca* 51, 323D.
- 54 See G. Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1993).
- 55 In the fourth century the influence of the emperor on conversions increased dramatically: M.R. Salzman, 'Aristocratic Women: Conductors of Christianity in the Fourth Century', *Helios* 16 (1989) 207–20.
- 56 Brown, *The Body and Society*; add to his bibliography H. Cancik, 'Zur Entstehung der christlichen Sexualmoral', in A.K. Siems (ed.), *Sexualität und Erotik in der Antike* (Darmstadt, 1988) 347–74. Important reviews are A. Cameron, *The Tablet*, 22 April 1989; F. Naerebout, *Leidschrift* (Leiden) 7 (1989) 85–99; F.E. Consolino *et al.*, 'Sessualità, castità, asceti nella società tardoantica. Una discussione a proposito del libro di Peter Brown', *Riv. di Storia e Lett. Rel.* 28 (1992) 105–25; C. Kannengiesser, *Religious Studies Review* 19 (1993) 126–9 (with additional bibliography).
- 57 See also J.N. Bremmer, 'Symbols of Marginality from Early Pythagoreans to Late Antique Monks', *Greece & Rome* 39 (1992) 205–14.
- 58 P. Veyne, *La société romaine* (Paris, 1991) 88–130 ('La famille et l'amour sous le Haut-Empire romain', *Annales ESC* 33, 1978, 35–63).

- 59 See the innovative study by B. Shaw, 'The Cultural Meaning of Death: Age and Gender in the Roman Family', in D.I. Kertzer and R.P. Saller (eds), *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven and London, 1991) 66–90.
- 60 For Veyne and the development towards asceticism see also my observations in Bremmer, 'Why did Early Christianity', 44f.
- 61 For a list of all fourth-century treatises on virginity see Th. Camelot, 'Les traités "De virginitate" au IV^e siècle', *Etudes carmélitaines* 31 (1952) 189–97. The literature on the problem is immense, but see in addition to Brown especially A. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1991) 165–81; M. van Uytvanghe, 'Encratisme en verdrongen erotiek in de apocriefe "apostelromans": Omtrent de christelijke problematisering van de sexualiteit', *Handelingen der Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis* 45 (1991) 175–94 (with an excellent bibliography).
- 62 Ambrose, *De viduis*, cf. A.V. Nazarro, 'Il *De viduis* di Ambrogio', *Vichiana* 13 (1984) 274–98 and 'Metafore e immagini agricole del *De Viduis* di Ambrogio', *Vetera Christianorum* 28 (1991) 277–89.
- 63 John Chrysostom, *Oratio ad viduam juniorem*, cf. the modern edition with translation and commentary: Jean Chrysostome, *A une jeune veuve: Sur le mariage unique*, (eds) B. Grillet and G.H. Ettliger (*Sources Chrétiennes* 138 (Paris, 1968)); the sermon *Vidua eligatur* (*Patrologia Graeca* 51, 321–38) on 1 *Tim.* 5:9, and the fifteenth sermon on 1 *Tim.* 5:11. For Chrysostom's ideas about sexuality see also E.A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston and Queenston, 1986) 229–64.
- 64 Jerome, *Epp.* 54, 123; E.A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends* (New York and Toronto, 1979) 1–34.
- 65 Augustine, *De bono viduitatis*. It is distressing to note that this treatise was still being reprinted in 1951 to offer comfort to German war-widows, cf. A. Maxsein, *Aurelius Augustinus: Das Gut der Witwenschaft* (Würzburg, 1952) vii.
- 66 For a detailed discussion of these allusions see A. Quacquarelli, *Il triplice frutto della vita cristiana: 100, 60 e 30 (Matteo XIII – 8, nelle diverse interpretazioni)* (Rome, 1953); P.F. Beatrice, 'Il sermone "De centesima, sexagesima, tricesima" dello Ps. Cipriano e la teologia del martirio', *Augustinianum* 19 (1979) 215–43; N. Adkin, 'Athanasius' *Letter to Virgins* and Jerome's *Libellus de virginitate servanda*', *Rivista di filologia e di istruzione classica* 120 (1992) 185–203.
- 67 For the later Augustine's views about sexuality see R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990) 57–62; see also K. Thraede, 'Zwischen Eva und Maria: das Bild der Frau bei Ambrosius und Augustin auf dem Hintergrund der Zeit', in W. Affeldt (ed.), *Frauen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter* (Sigmaringen, 1990) 129–39.
- 68 Augustine, *Ep.* 3*, tr. R.B. Eno, *St. Augustine: Letters Volume VI (1* – 29*)* (Washington, 1990) 31–7.
- 69 On the (lack of) effectiveness of this legislation see Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 294–8; see also E. Fantham, 'Stuprum: Public Attitudes and

- Penalties for Sexual Offences in Republican Rome', *Echos du Monde Classique* 10 (1991) 267–91.
- 70 *Codex Theodosianus* (CTh) 8.16.1 (marriage), 9.21.4 (counterfeit money).
- 71 Cf. CTh 3.11.1 (380), 9.25.1 (354), 2 (364, also mentioned by Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.3), 3 (420); J. Evans-Grubbs, 'Abduction Marriage in Antiquity: A Law of Constantine (CTh 9.24.1) and its Social Context', *Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989, 59–102) 76f. Basil: Gregory of Nazianze, *Or.* 43.56f.
- 72 Note also his advice in *Ep.* 130.13 on which eunuchs to take on as servants.
- 73 For the liberty which Christianity offered to women see also L. Cracco Ruggini, 'La donna e il sacro, tra paganesimo e cristianesimo', in Uglione (note 1 above), 243–75.
- 74 I note in passing that an 'order of widows' is no longer mentioned. We may therefore conclude that the order had apparently also disappeared in the West, the region probably aimed at in this edict.
- 75 CTh 16.2.20 (370), 16.2.27, 28 (390); see also R. Lizzi, 'Una società esortata all' ascetismo: misure legislative e motivazioni economiche nel IV-V secolo d. C.', *Studi Storici* 30 (1989) 129–53.
- 76 For these women see J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome* (London, 1975) 91–9 (Marcella and Paula), 191 (Furia), 210–2 (Fabiola); more recently, E.A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton, 1992) 26–30; S. Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis: prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Stuttgart, 1992); C. Krumeich, *Hieronymus und die christliche feminae clarissimae* (Bonn, 1993).
- 77 John Chrysostom, *Life of Olympias* 4.
- 78 Male euergetism: P. Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism* (London, 1990). Female: Ch. Pietri, 'Evergétisme et richesses ecclésiastiques dans l'Italie du IVe à la fin du Ve s.: l'exemple romain', *Ktema* 3 (1978) 317ff.; F.E. Consolino, 'Santo o patrono? Le aristocratiche tardo antiche e il potere della carità', *Studi Storici* 31 (1990) 969–91; K.J. Torjesen, 'In Praise of Noble Women: Asceticism, Patronage and Honor', *Semeia*, no. 57 (1992) 41–64.
- 79 Cf. the important study by J.W. Drijvers, 'Virginity and Asceticism in Late Roman Western Elites', in Blok and Mason (note 2 above), 241–73; A. Giardina, 'Carità eversiva: le donazioni di Melania la giovane e gli equilibri della società tardoromana', *Studi Storici* 29 (1988) 127–42.
- 80 Jerome himself also opposed these teachings but had no objections to women teaching each other. For a balanced appraisal of Jerome's attitude towards women see A. Arjava, 'Jerome and Women', *Arctos* 23 (1989) 5–18.
- 81 Cf. A. Arjava, 'Divorce in Later Roman Law', *Arctos* 22 (1988) 5–21; D.G. Hunter, 'The Paradise of Patriarchy: Ambrosiaster on Woman as (not) God's Image', *Journal of Theological Studies* 43 (1992) 447–69.
- 82 Palladius, *Dialogus de vita s. Joannis Chrysostomi* 5, cf. A.-M. Malingrey, 'Vierges et veuves dans la communauté chrétienne d'Antioche', *Roczniki Humanistyczne* [Lublin] 27 (1979).
- 83 Versions of this chapter were given in the spring of 1992 to the Groningen Ancient History Seminar, which was organized by Wim

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