

Women and their Roles in Early Christianity

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Christianity burst onto the scene in the early centuries of the Common Era as a religion of the oppressed and marginalized members of society; the poor, the powerless, and women. In the early days, women found a level of power in Christian communities that they lacked in the Roman Empire at the time, and were instrumental in its success. However, as time went on, women lost the authority that they had had, and were increasingly subjugated and pushed out of important roles.

In the Greco-Roman world, there were more men than women due to a combination of female infanticide and deaths relating to pregnancy. However, more women than men converted to Christianity in its early days, constructing a community with a very different sex ratio. Additionally, a higher percentage of girls would survive infancy in Christianity because it disallowed infanticide, and a higher percent of women may have survived pregnancy due to marrying at a “substantially older age,” and a ban on abortions, which at the time were a “major cause of death among women.”¹

Some attribute the greater authority that women had in Christian communities to the disparity of sexes that contrasted with that of the greater Greco-Roman world. Essentially, since there were more women, it follows that they would have more power—a pattern seen also in Sparta where the sex ratio did not favor men, and women had “status and power unknown in the rest of the classical world.”²

The role of women in early Christianity was explicitly countercultural, even beyond the subversive nature of the religion itself to wider Roman society at the time. Around the time that Christianity emerged, the Roman Empire made marriage mandatory for citizens between the ages of twenty to fifty in order to combat a declining birth rate, meaning that Christian emphasis on celibacy had legal implications.³ Beyond that however, women remaining unmarried or choosing to be celibate within a marriage “became a major

¹ Stark, Rodney, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, 98 & Stark, Rodney. “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women.” *Sociology of Religion* 232, 236.

² Stark, *Reconstructing*, 235.

³ Schenk, Christine, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*, 19.

challenge to the prerogatives and constraints of patriarchal marriage,” the stability of which “came to signify the stability of the body politic.”⁴ Also undermining Roman patriarchal values was the discouragement of Christian widows to remarry. Roman law required the remarriage of widows under penalty of a fine, but if a widow remarried, she lost everything that she owned as it became the property of her new husband.⁵ Christian women, by refusing to remarry, maintained a certain level of autonomy that subverted the social norms of the time.

Women were often the earliest adopters of Christianity in their communities, and they were instrumental in its spread. Pagan husbands of Christian women were a frequent source of converts, largely due to proselytizing within the home— particularly in upper class Roman marriages.⁶ Since women typically converted first, they also tended to raise their children either as Christians or with some Christian influences, such as Saint Augustine’s mother; bringing up a new generation of Christians.

House churches, as well, were often the domain of women. Early Christianity was not a highly open and organized religion; meetings of believers often took place in private homes.⁷ Women largely took on the role of “directing and running” meetings of Christians in their own homes, and those meetings served not only as worship for Christians, but also centers of conversion, “especially when believers and non-believers lived in the same home,” as they often did.⁸ Women were therefore responsible for a large part of the construction of the Christian community before Christianity was allowed public meeting places.

Beyond organizing meetings, women in the early days of Christianity sometimes occupied the role of religious and spiritual leaders. Representations exist of Mary “standing to pray while [...] men prostrated themselves to pray,” implying her spiritual authority over them despite her gender.⁹ That representation is not canonical (it comes from the Gospel of Bartholomew in the third century), but its existence in itself shows an early conception of women in positions of religious power. The same idea applies to passages in the Bible that forbid women to teach men— if women weren’t teaching men, they would not need to be reprimanded for it.¹⁰ And reprimanded they were; several religious leaders in the fifth and sixth centuries complained about and spoke against women supposedly usurping men’s roles in religious ceremonies.¹¹ The involvement of women in officiating ceremonies does not appear to be an isolated, minor occurrence, devoid of endorsement by Church leaders; one denunciation from Pope Gelasius I suggests that at the end of the fifth century, “some women, having been ordained by bishops, were exercising a true and proper ministerial priesthood in a vast area of southern Italy, as well as perhaps in other unnamed regions of Italy.”¹² If women were serving in a sort of priestly capacity, that would suggest that not only

⁴ Schenk, 19, 48.

⁵ Stark, *Reconstructing*, 236.

⁶ Stark, *Reconstructing*, 242.

⁷ Moore, Rebecca, “Women and the Conversion of an Empire,” *Women in Christian Traditions*, 52.

⁸ Moore, 53, 52.

⁹ Kateusz, Ally, “2013 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza New Scholar Award First-Place Winner: Collyridian Déjà Vu: The Trajectory of Redaction of the Markers of Mary’s Liturgical Leadership,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 80.

¹⁰ Schenk, 29.

¹¹ Kateusz, Ally, “She Sacrificed Herself as the Priest’: Early Christian Female and Male Co-Priests,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 53.

¹² Rossi, Mary Ann, and Otranto, Giorgio, “Priesthood, Precedent, and Prejudice: On Recovering the Women Priests of Early Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 84.

certain Church officials, but also the communities that these women were serving accepted the possibility of women leading religious ceremonies— possibly suggesting a legacy of at least some female involvement in local Church activities.

Sometimes, women interested in spiritual leadership would engage in partnership ministries with men where they served as co-priests. Several early Christian artistic representations depict a “gender-parallel priesthood,” including the “two oldest surviving pieces of art depicting people inside a real church.”¹³ A dual priesthood made sense from a practical perspective; to convert the greatest number of people possible, you need access to the greatest number of social spheres possible. Men were “more able, in terms of social acceptability, to speak in public places and proselytize on the streets,” while women could operate more behind the scenes, talking to people in private homes and other spaces from which men were generally excluded.¹⁴

The gender of female martyrs existed in an unusual middle ground for the time. The narratives of their lives emphasized both their “masculine fortitude *and* [underscored] their femininity” (italics not mine) in a Roman society where women were often expected to stick strictly within a feminine and submissive role.¹⁵ Women who faced martyrdom often represented radical departures from the behaviors expected of them, however the retellings of their lives often depicted them “in the most passive, meek, and mild terms—like sacrificial lambs,” as if to balance out the masculine elements of resistance and defiance— as if those elements did not come naturally from her but from the strength of God.¹⁶ Early Christians wanted women who exhibited defiance and strength of will as martyrs, but their upbringing within a deeply patriarchal society left them uncomfortable with women actually exhibiting those traits.

Perpetua, a woman martyred in Carthage in the early third century, dreamed of becoming a man for the purpose of partaking in violence, which paralleled the violence of her martyrdom and the masculine traits that she showed in her preparation for her martyrdom.¹⁷ However, she remained distinctly tied to the feminine aspects of her personality through her role as a mother. On the surface, Perpetua’s actions— abandoning her son, refusing to save herself to save him— make her appear uncaring,¹⁸ however, she shows by asking for him to be returned to her so that she could feed him, that she does in fact have a maternal love for him. Perpetua’s fluctuating maternal feelings and instincts are “poignant examples of the Christian community’s discomfort with a fully masculinized female martyr,” as she can at no point abandon her femininity completely despite masculinity representing the strength of her convictions.¹⁹

As Christianity went from a radical underground movement to the mainstream state religion, the religious roles officially available to women began to dwindle. If the theory about increased power of women being due to sex ratios within Christian communities is in fact true, the same phenomenon can then partially explain their loss of power. When Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, women no longer outnumbered men, meaning that they became subject to the same forces of the

¹³ Kateusz, *Co-Priest*, 54.

¹⁴ Bellan-Boyer, Lisa, “Conspicuous in Their Absence: Women in Early Christianity,” *CrossCurrents*, 53.

¹⁵ Cobb, L. Stephanie, “Putting Women in Their Place: Masculinizing and Feminizing the Female Martyr,” *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*, 92.

¹⁶ Bellan-Boyer, 55.

¹⁷ Perpetua, 10.

¹⁸ Perpetua, 6.

¹⁹ Cobb, 103.

male-dominated society that subsumed them. Additionally, as converting to Christianity became the thing to do in the Roman Empire, many of the converts would maintain the oppressive and patriarchal ideas of Roman society that early Christians had rejected.

Representative of the increasing patriarchal subjugation of women, Benedict and Scholastica were siblings who each formed religious orders in which devoted believers could live an ascetic life with the support of others. The dynamic between the two siblings was distinct from that of the co-priests of the early days of the Church. Scholastica's order, despite being similar to her brother's, was more of a dependent than a partner; it operated under the supervision of her brother rather than being allowed to function independently.²⁰ While Scholastica was responsible for the day to day operations of her convent and still possessed considerable spiritual authority, she was still subject to male oversight, limiting her authority specifically due to her sex.

Christian women, as the religion emerged and for the first few centuries of its existence, enjoyed a level of authority that has since been largely forgotten. Eventually, as the years wore on and Christianity continued to grow in the mainstream, "the radical egalitarianism of [Jesus'] early followers was virtually banished by conformity to social norms and expectations," and women were forced out of religious leadership.²¹

²⁰ Birk, Joshua, "3.2 Emergence of Secular & Religious Orders," 1.

²¹ Moore, 55.

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