

Marriage – What Difference did Christianity Make?

In modern popular debate, marriage has often been seen as an ancient institution based on patriarchal structures and supported by religious authorities, in the West by Christianity and the authorities of the Church. In spite of awareness that marriage customs and rules have undergone historical change, it has generally been taken for granted that Christianity mainly enforced already existing ancient traditions and customs in society. The aim of this paper is to look at what evidence we have for changes that can be attributed to the Christian tradition, and how these changes can be explained.

Since Christianity is itself a product of historical development, and not an ideology independent of its historical context, there was no well-defined Christian understanding of and practice in regard to marriage from the beginning of Christianity in the first century A.D. Instead, Christian marriage traditions were formed on the basis of the social and historical setting of Early Christianity and became fairly fixed in Western as well as Eastern Christian tradition only towards the end of the 8th century (Rubenson, 2007). To speak about the differences to marriage related to the emergence of Christianity, we must compare marriage views and regulations in the non-Christian late Roman empire with established Christian tradition in about 800 A.D. (Hunter, 1992).

To isolate changes due to Christianity from those due to economic, social and political developments, we need to restrict ourselves to the points where there is a clear tension between specific Christian ideals and Roman traditions, and where Church authorities were seen to have promoted change. This is much clearer in relation to the fundamental issues of what marriage means and how it is legally construed, than in relation to views on gender and sexuality, or social and economic patterns of households in general. What we are looking at is marriage as a socially institutionalized and legally regulated union of a man and a woman, including their responsibilities for their children.

The basic thesis I will argue here is that there is a fundamental difference between the laws regulating marriage in the later Roman Empire in about 200 A.D., that is, before the impact of Christian tradition, and the laws in the established Christian Germanic and Byzantine empires in the Early Middle Ages in about 800 A.D. Second, this difference is strongly related to fundamental Christian ideas promoted by Christian authors and authorities. I am well aware of the fact that laws and ideals are not

Professor Samuel Rubenson

Centre for Theology and Religious

Studies, Lund University, Sweden

E-mail: Samuel.Rubenson@teol.lu.se

CAS Fellow 2006/2007



the same as social reality. However, although only slowly and partially, the underlying Christian interpretation of marriage led to basic changes in the understanding of and finally also to practices in relation to marriage.

Roman marriage

Under Roman law, marriage was restricted to free Roman citizens. In other words, slaves and non-Romans could not be married and thus did not share in any of the privileges or responsibilities connected with marriage (Treggiari, 1991). In Latin, marriage was called *matrimonium* (from *mater* = mother), indicating that it was the status of the woman and the children she bore that changed in marriage as she became a married woman and the mother of her husband's children. She now shared her husband's social status, the children she bore were his children, and any sexual relationship with a Roman citizen who was not her husband was adultery. The man was not a married man, but a man with a wife. His status did not change and he had no obligation to remain sexually faithful to his wife. Marriage was strongly supported by the state in order to promote the bringing up of children who could be charged with official duties and thus uphold the state and guarantee succession. There was no formal act to be married or to be divorced. Any man and woman who were old enough, were Roman citizens, and lived together with marital affection and the intent to bring up children were considered married. If they separated, the marriage had ceased to exist, independently of who took the initiative and why (Reynolds, 1994, 44–49).

Marriage in the Christian empires

Although the last remnants of the exclusion of slaves from marriage did not disappear until the 10th century, we have evidence of Christian authors opposing the limitation of marriage to free citizens already from the 3rd century (Reynolds, 1994, 159–162). In the early Christian communities, there were free citizens as well as slaves. As long as the Christians were an occasionally persecuted minority, loyalty to the group was generally stronger than to social class. Although the growth of Christian communities gradually reintroduced social differentiation, it was difficult to deny basic equality between all believers. Moreover, slaves could not be exempted from the moral obligation of sexual fidelity that was part of Christian ethics.

Beginning already in the first centuries A.D., Christians began to think of marriages as instituted by a formal act blessed by the Church (Stevenson, 1983). A formal wedding finally became required in the East in the 9th century. Although generally accepted much earlier, formal weddings were not required until the 16th century in the West.

These changes are related to a more general and fundamental change in perspective. Jewish tradition and Biblical texts made the early Christians regard the couple as a unit forged by God and their common offspring as part of the work of the Creator. Man and wife no longer had individual rights and responsibilities and no longer belonged to different families, but became one unit established by the sexual union that could not easily be dissolved again (Rordorf, 1969).

According to the strict Jewish tradition promoted in the New Testament, a marriage could only be dissolved as a result of adultery, i.e. of sexual infidelity on the part of the wife. This inequality between man

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and wife was, although biblical, regarded as problematic by the dominant Christian authors. Gradually, male and female infidelity became legally equivalent, although the specific penalties differed (Reynolds, 1994, 173–226). In the West, sexual equality was finally interpreted to mean that neither wife nor husband had the right to divorce even in case of infidelity. In the East, the right to divorce was maintained for the man as well as for the woman.

Summary

The basic changes in the understanding of marriage introduced by Christianity can be said to have been:

- a) social equality in respect to marriage rights;
- b) gender equality in respect to demands for sexual fidelity;
- c) rights of children to their father.

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