

ISSUE 5

Did Christianity Liberate Women?

YES: Monique Alexandre, from "Early Christian Women," in Pauline Schmitt Pantel, ed., *A History of Women in the West, vol. 1: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* (Belknap Press, 1992)

NO: Karen Armstrong, from *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West* (Anchor Press, 1987)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of religious history Monique Alexandre argues that there were a variety of roles for women—including prophetess, widow, deaconess, donor, and founder—that indicated a more liberated status for women in the early centuries of Christianity.

NO: Professor of religious studies Karen Armstrong finds examples of hostility toward women and fear of their sexual power in the early Christian Church, which she contends led to the exclusion of women from full participation in a male-dominated church.

When we look at the past, we can either focus on external events and actions or concentrate on the somewhat elusive attitudes of long-dead historical subjects. In the readings that follow, we have a choice of which approach to accept.

In determining whether or not Christianity liberated women, it is necessary to decide what liberation means. If a relatively powerless group is held in high regard by those in power, for example, will they feel liberated regardless of whether or not they play public roles? Or is it the public roles that create a feeling of liberation, even if the group in question feels hostility from the power structure? Granting that both acceptance and prominence combine to produce genuine liberation, which (if either) can be absent and still permit us to use the word *liberation*?

With this issue—as with others—we must beware of bringing our own value systems into the past. The real challenge is to try to imagine how early Christian women regarded their own status in the new religion. Were they accepted by some leaders and rejected by others? Did freedom of action make them oblivious to the attitudes of those who feared and hated them? From what we are able to learn by reading existing documents, did the women of the early Christian Church feel liberated from the more patriarchal world of first-century Palestinian Judaism? And, regardless of how they felt, does

our assessment of their status merit the conclusion that Christianity liberated them?

Before the Christian Church became institutionalized and before a theology was clearly defined, early converts acted out of personal conviction, and they put their religious fervor to work in making the world a better place. Remember that in the early centuries Christians were persecuted by the Roman occupying forces because they refused to worship the emperor. In Palestine, Christianity was an underground religion until the early fourth century, when the Holy Roman Emperor Constantine made it the state religion. Outside the Palestinian world, missionaries rapidly made Greek converts so that Gentile, or non-Jewish, Christians would outnumber Jewish ones by the third century. Many of the women you will read about in the following selections lived in the Greek-speaking world, which was the first to accept Christianity in large numbers.

Only recently have women been admitted to the clergy in Protestant Christianity, and they are still excluded from the Roman Catholic priesthood. Can we find the seeds of this exclusion in the attitudes of the past as well as the historic precedents of women filling significant roles?

In the selections that follow, Monique Alexandre notes that the Christian Church maintains that it has been a consistent defender of the dignity and worth of women, especially their religious calling or vocation. Although others have charged the Christian Church with contributing significantly to the oppression of women, Alexandre warns us not to read the present controversies concerning women's roles in religious and secular life back into the early history of the Christian Church. That must be judged, she maintains, on its own terms. Karen Armstrong finds that modern culture is uncomfortable with sex, and she traces the roots of hostility between men and women to the early days of Western Christianity. The Eastern Church—what is today the Russian and Greek Orthodox branch of Christianity—which split with the Western Church in an act of mutual excommunication in 1054, is judged by Armstrong as less misogynistic, or less inclined toward the hatred of women.

YES

Monique Alexandre

EARLY CHRISTIAN WOMEN

JEWISH WOMEN IN THE CHRISTIAN ERA

In Palestine during the time of Jesus women, excluded from public life, were expected to conform, as wives, mothers, and housekeepers, to the model of the "virtuous woman." When they left home, they wore veils. Men maintained a prudent silence, as Josi ben Johanan admonished them: "Do not speak much with a woman." This precept was glossed as follows: "Do not speak much with thy own wife, say the sages, much less with thy neighbor's wife." Whence this maxim: "He who speaks too much with women invites evil, neglects the study of the Law and will end in Gehenna." Only princesses and common women, particularly in the countryside, were exempt from this ideal reclusiveness. In Alexandria, Greek custom reinforced Jewish moral teaching: "While outdoor life is suitable for men in time of peace as well as war," for females "domestic life and diligence in the home are best. Maidens, cloistered within the home, must not venture further than the door of the gynaeceum. Grown women may not venture further than the door of the house."

At age twelve or even sooner girls passed from their father's authority to their husband's. If Jewish women could be divorced not only for "something shameful" but, according to Hillel's interpretation, for nothing more than immodesty or a disagreeable appearance, they also enjoyed exceptional rights when it came to divorce. The *ketouba*, or marriage contract, carefully specified the amount of the dowry due the husband, but this same amount had to be repaid to the woman in case of divorce. The wife retained ownership of certain property of her own, of which the husband became the usufructuary. The token to be paid in case of separation or death of a spouse was also specified. A woman's testimony was not admissible evidence in court, according to Flavius Josephus, "owing to the frivolity and temerity of the sex." The Talmudic treatise *Nidda* specified how long women were to remain excluded from society because of contagious impurity following menstruation, other loss of blood, and childbirth (forty days after the birth of a boy, twice as long after a girl).

From Monique Alexandre, "Early Christian Women," in Pauline Schmitt Pantel, ed., *A History of Women in the West, vol. 1: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* (Harvard University Press, 1992). Copyright © 1992 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted by permission of Harvard University Press. Notes omitted.

Because of this destructive potential the participation of women in religion was also restricted. Women were exempt from pilgrimages to Jerusalem at Passover, Simchas Torah, and Succoth and excluded from the morning and evening Sh'ma (the prayer "Hear, O Israel! the Lord our God, the Lord is one"). These positive religious precepts thus did not apply to women, but many negative precepts did. Thrice daily the pious Jew repeated this prayer: "Blessed be God for not making me a Gentile... for not making me a peasant... for not making me a woman, because women are not required to observe the commandments."

At home women were responsible for dietary and sexual purity but played little religious role in the strict sense. True, they enjoyed the privilege of lighting the sabbath candles and baking the sabbath bread, and it was their task to wash and dress the bodies of the dead and to mourn their passing. But blessings and prayers were reserved for men.

Polytheism had its goddesses and priestesses, but monotheism boasted hereditary priesthood, from which women were excluded more stringently than ever during the time of the Second Temple. Flavius Josephus described "the unbreachable barriers that protect purity... four concentric porticoes, each with its own particular guard according to the law... Anyone could enter the outer portico, even strangers. Only menstruating women were barred. The second portico was open to Jewish men and their wives, so long as they were free of all taint. The third was open to male Jews, spotless and purified. And the fourth was open to priests wearing their sacerdotal robes. As for the Holy of Holies, only the chief rabbis in their special robes could enter."

Gone were the days when women tended "the door of the tabernacle."

Women were not required to attend synagogue for sabbath readings and sermons, which were already common at the dawn of the Christian era. Even if present, they did not count toward the *minyan*, the minimum number of men necessary for public prayer. "Out of respect for the congregation," they could not be called upon to read. They probably sat in a separate section of the synagogue, although the archaeological evidence is not very clear. Perhaps they were separated from the male congregation by a low wall, such as that described by Philo in his accounts of sabbath meetings of the Therapeutae in Alexandria.

But there may be another side to the story. Bernadette Brooten has examined nineteen Greek and Latin inscriptions dating from the first century B.C. to the sixth century A.D. and from various sites in Asia Minor, Italy, Egypt, and Palestine. In them women are designated as heads of synagogues (*archisynagogos/archisynagogissa*), leaders (*archegissa/arche*), elders (*presbytera/presbyterissa*), mothers of the synagogue (one Latin inscription reads *pateressa!*), and even priestesses (*hieria/hierissa*). These honorific titles are similar to those applied to men, and there is evidence as well of donations made by women. Clearly women were generous givers, and wealthy, prominent women did have influence, particularly in Asia Minor and Italy. But did they have religious duties in the synagogue?

Women were exempt, or excluded, from the study and teaching of the Torah, which, following the destruction of the Temple, became more than ever the central focus of Judaism. In the first century A.D. Rabbi Eliezar, who was married to the learned Ima Shalom, never-

theless said that "to teach Torah to one's daughter is to teach her obscenities." To be sure, the statement was controversial. But legendary traditions pertaining to Ima Shalom and Beruriah, the daughter of Rabbi Hanania ben Teradyon, martyred under Hadrian, and wife of Rabbi Meir, and who was said to be "capable of reading three hundred traditions of three hundred masters in a winter's night," were apparently exceptions that confirm the rule. And was not the fate of Beruriah an object lesson? For all her defiance of the rabbis' low opinion of women's intelligence, she was almost seduced by one of her husband's students and committed suicide out of shame.

To be sure, Jews honored the memory of the "Mothers" of *Genesis*: Sarah, Rachel, and Rebekah. They honored the seven prophetesses of old, especially Miriam, Deborah, judge of the people, and Huldah under King Josiah. They exalted the women who had freed the people of Israel: Esther, the widow Judith, chaste wives like Susannah who triumphed over calumny, and martyrs like the mother of the Maccabees. Yet not even the brilliance of these figures can blind us to so sweeping a condemnation as Flavius Josephus': "Woman, the Law says, is inferior to man in all things. Hence she must obey not force but authority, because God has given power to man."

WOMEN OF THE GOSPEL

With the gospel texts a marked change occurred. The genealogy of Joseph, "the husband of Mary," in Matthew is unusual for a biblical text in that it names four atypical women: Tamar, the foreign woman who, with face veiled and by means of prostitution, deceived her father-in-law in order to perpetuate the

lineage; Rachab, the Jericho prostitute, who ensured Israel's survival upon entering the Promised Land; Ruth the Moabite; and the woman "that had been the wife of Urias," the beloved of David, Bathsheba, whose sin was pardoned by the birth of Solomon.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke emphasize the virginity of Mary, who is made pregnant by the Holy Spirit as foretold by Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Joseph's dream, the adoration of the magi, the flight to Egypt in Matthew and even more prominently in Luke, the announcement, the visitation, the nativity, the announcement to the shepherds, the presentation in the Temple, Jesus lost and found among the Doctors—all these are narrative fragments that were ripe for further development, which they received in the second-century Apocrypha, especially the Protoevangelium of James. All the new episodes—Anne's encounter with Joachim, the childhood of Mary and her presentation at the Temple, her wedding with Joseph, the virgin birth and the incredulity of Salome, the midwife whose desiccated hand is healed—encourage Marial piety and the ideal of virginity. They also furnished future Christian iconography with a rich supply of images. In Luke the figures of Elizabeth, the sterile woman who becomes the mother of John the Baptist, and Anne, the prophetic widow who heralds the deliverance of Israel, accompany the central figure of Mary, with her "fiat" of submission and "magnificat" of exultation in weakness. Subsequent allusions to Mary are rare, as religious bonds took precedence over ties of blood, but such episodes as the marriage at Cana and Mary standing at the foot of the cross

with the beloved disciple of Jesus left an indelible mark on Christian memory, as did Mary's presence among the apostles praying for Jesus after the Ascension. The earliest allusion to Mary is in Paul: "God sent forth his Son, made of a woman." The importance of this feminine role in the theology of the Incarnation is clear.

Jesus' relations with women seem to have been remarkably free, given the reserve that Jewish custom in his day required. He is received by Martha and Mary, neither of whom is married, and demonstrates his friendship by resurrecting their brother Lazarus. When his disciples find him talking to a Samaritan at Jacob's well in Sichem, they "marvelled that he talked with the woman. Yet no man said, What seekest thou? or, Why talkest thou with her?" Barriers were broken down in the most surprising ways. Jesus preached to foreign women like the "schismatic" Samaritan and healed even the daughter of a Canaanite. The traditional hierarchy was overturned in favor of the despised: "The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you," Jesus tells the high priests and elders of the Temple. In a well-known passage he forgives the many sins of a woman who "loved much" because she, to the horror of the Pharisees, is willing to anoint his feet with ointment. The pardon granted to the adulterous woman and the disarray of her male accusers can be seen in the same light. So can the message to the Samaritan woman who has been married five times and is now living as a concubine. Even female impurity is transcended: a bleeding woman touches the hem of Jesus' cloak and is cured. He also takes pity on the poorest of women, the widows protected by the Law: he resurrects the only son of the widow of

Nain, as Elijah before him had resurrected the son of the widow of Sarepta. The poor widow who casts in "two mites" is praised more than the rich men making their gifts to the temple treasury.

The identity of the "saved" women who followed Jesus out of Galilee varies with the source. In Luke, after the passage about the anointment, we read: "And the twelve were with him. And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance." It is a diverse group of women that sets out with Jesus on the road in defiance of custom. In all the lists Mary Magdalene comes first. Unlike the Twelve, these women have not received an explicit call, nor are they dispatched on clear missions. Yet in contrast to the abandonment of Jesus by the disciples, the presence of the women is emphasized—at a distance according to the Synoptics but near the cross according to John. As was customary in Judaism, the women are present when Jesus is wrapped in his shroud, and it is they who prepare perfumes and fragrances for anointing the body. Matthew names Mary Magdalene and the other Mary; Mark, Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, and Salome; Luke, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, mother of James; and John, only Mary Magdalene.

All four versions break with Jewish custom by making women, and particularly Mary Magdalene, witnesses to the resurrection and responsible for informing the disciples. To be sure, masculine incredulity is apparent in Mark and Luke. But the special place of women, who are

the first to see the resurrected Christ, is therefore all the more significant, especially in the celebrated *Noli me tangere* scene in John. Memory of that special role would be preserved in prayer and imagery....

The Charisma of Prophetesses

Although the institutional place of women was strictly limited and women, in keeping with Jewish custom, were excluded from positions of authority, they played a more important charismatic role. In Luke three women—Mary, Elizabeth, and Anne—are reminiscent of the prophetesses of the Old Testament. The early Christian community experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy." A passage in the Acts alludes to Paul's visit to the home of Philip the Evangelist, one of the Seven, who "had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy." In the congregation of Corinth men and women both prayed and prophesied. But while men were enjoined to bare their heads, women were required to keep theirs covered as a sign of power (*exousia*), dignity, and decency, and out of respect "for the angels" present as mediators of human prayer. Thus the order of creation was respected, with man enjoying priority over woman and interdependence in the Lord. This complex passage is still a matter of debate among exegetes.

Already true prophetesses were distinguished from false. In Revelations there is a denunciation of Jezebel, a woman of Thyatira "who claims to be a prophetess" and teacher. The gift of revelation would continue to flourish for a long time to come. In the second century Justin spoke

of "Christian men and women who receive gifts from the Spirit of God." In 203 in Carthage the martyr Perpetua experienced visions. But these gifts were difficult to control, and heretical sects could lay claim to them as readily as the orthodox. When the Montanists made such claims in the second century, the Church began to play down the importance of prophecy, particularly among women....

WIDOWS AND DEACONESSES IN THE CHURCH

In the Church hierarchy the bishop was the dispenser of the sacred word and sacraments. He was assisted by priests and deacons. As the distinction between clergy and laity grew increasingly rigid, women were allowed a place in the ecclesiastical institution, but a limited one. In both east and west widows took on a spiritual and charitable role that gradually became confounded with the growing women's monastic movement in the last thirty years of the fourth century. At certain times and in certain places, mainly in the east, deaconesses who fulfilled a variety of functions were invested with ministries until roughly the tenth century. Here too feminine monasticism eventually subsumed these roles.

Widows. Along with orphans, the poor, the sick, prisoners, and strangers, widows had been portrayed as people in need of assistance in Christian text from I Timothy 5:16 onward. A portion of the Sunday collection was set aside for them. In Rome in 251 Bishop Cornelius counted 1,500 widows and paupers receiving aid from the Church. In return, the recipients of such aid were covered by certain special precepts in "apostolic" texts. Thus

Polycarp wrote to the Philippians: "May they be wise [*sophronousas*] in the faith they owe the Lord, intercede constantly for all, avoid calumny, slander, false witness, love of money, and all evil, in the knowledge that they are the alter of God."

But, as already in I Timothy 5:5, one group of widows stood out: those who pledged themselves to remain continent, to join an order (*tagma ton cheron, cherikon; ordo viduarum, viduatus*). This ideal of chaste renunciation at first seemed to make these widows a model for virgins, with whom they were sometimes associated. Ignatius referred to "virgins called widows." Other reports mention a similar confusion. Soon, however, the luster of virginity would outshine that of widows, not only in merit but also in competition for precedence within the Church.

Did widows have a place among the ecclesiastical orders? Tertullian in passing says that they did. But Hippolytus of Rome, in his third-century *Apostolic Tradition*, noted that widows of long standing could, after a period of probation, "be instituted by speech [and] joined to others but not ordained." No hand was to be placed on such a widow, because she was not making an oblation and had no liturgical services to perform. The widow was not ordained but instituted (*kathistatai*) for prayer, which was for everyone. Most of the texts state that a widow, in order to be instituted, had to have been married only once (Greek: *monandros*; Latin: *univira*). Her profession and vow of continence had to be irrevocable. For Basil of Caesarea breaking this vow meant excommunication. The age of admission was set at fifty or sixty, though it was not always respected.

Foremost among the obligations of the widow was prayer; I Timothy 5:5 had established this principle, and Hippoly-

tus had followed it in *Apostolic Tradition*. We find it too in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a compilation that probably originated in Syria in the third century. When ordered to do so by a bishop, widows were supposed to pray at the bedside of the sick, lay on hands, and fast. The asceticism of the widow's commitment was further emphasized in *Apostolic constitutions*, a late-fourth-century compilation from Syria or Constantinople. Prayer was to be coupled with fasting and vigils on the model of Judith.

In both the *Didascalia* and the *Constitutions*, however, the limits of widows' activities were carefully circumscribed. They were subject to the authority of bishops and deacons. Without express orders, no widow was permitted to visit any person's home for the purpose of eating, drinking, fasting, receiving gifts, laying on hands, or praying. The inner life came first: widows were the "altar of God" and must prove themselves to be just as solid as an altar. They were *cherai* (widows), not *perai* (sacks used by mendicants). They were to pray at home and go out to help others. They were at first advised, then ordered, not to perform baptisms. They were denied the right to teach, especially about Christ's passion and redemption. At most they were permitted to repeat elementary answers to basic questions: Christians must not worship idols, there is only one God. Such warnings suggest that women, instead of devoting themselves to prayer, may have been encroaching on territory that male clerics considered their own private preserve.

Deaconesses. Second-century texts offer no clear evidence concerning women's service to the Church. In Hermas' *The Shepherd* the woman representing the Church proposes that one copy of her

book be sent to Clement, who will circulate it to other cities, and another to Grapta, who will alert widows and orphans. In a letter to Trajan, Pliny speaks of *ancillae... ministrae* whom he has subjected to torture in Bithynia. The Latin word may correspond to the Greek *diakonos*, but we are told nothing about what services these women might have performed. Pliny is contemptuous, seeing in their religion nothing more than "an absurd, extravagant superstition." His contempt may have been heightened by the humble status of these female slaves, who had been invested with official responsibilities by a community consisting of "many people of all ages and walks of life and of both sexes... in the cities, towns, and countrysides infected by this contagious superstition." Like Blandina in Lyons in 177 and Felicity in Carthage in 203, who were also slaves but without official religious functions, these victims of torture were notable for their courage. Note too the confidence of this *ekklesia* of mixed composition.

In the third century the *Didascalia Apostolorum* defined the status of the female deaconess (*he diakonos, gyne diakonos*) in the east. In the ecclesial typology the bishop was said to be in the image of God; the deacon, of Christ; the deaconess, of the Holy Spirit; and the priests, of the Apostles. The bishop named deacons to perform certain necessary tasks and deaconesses to serve women. The number of deacons and deaconesses depended on the size of the congregation. The deacon's duties were extensive and included assisting the bishop, especially during the celebration of the Eucharist, and maintaining decorum in church. By contrast, the deaconess' duties were limited to the service of other women: "Let a deaconess anoint the women" during

baptism. "And when the woman being baptized emerges from the water, let the deaconess welcome her and teach her how the seal of baptism is to be preserved intact in purity and sanctity." Furthermore, "a deaconess is necessary to visit pagan homes in which there are female believers, and to visit women who are sick, and to wash those who are recovering from an illness." The *Didascalia* stressed the importance of this apparently new ministry by pointing out that Christ was served by deaconesses: Mary Magdalene, Mary, daughter of James and mother of Josiah; the mother of the sons of Zebadiah; and others....

Women enjoyed power as donors and founders. They played a role in the transition from ancient euergetism to Christian charity, church assistance of the poor, and monasteries. Some were obscure, like those who donated inscriptions in honor of their husbands. Others stood alone: "In virtue of her vow, Peristeria has made the mosaic in the nave" of the Stobi basilica; Matriona too was mentioned as the donor of a mosaic.... Aristocratic donors in the east and west were celebrated by their ecclesiastical biographers. After doing penance for a divorce followed by remarriage, Fabiola (died 399) founded the first hospital (*nosokomion*) in Rome, where she took care of the sick and the aged. She was generous to clerics, monks, and virgins throughout Italy. Upon her return from Jerusalem with Pammachius, who became a monk after the death of his wife Pauline, Fabiola founded a hostelry for travelers (*xenodochium*) at Porto Romano.

The generosity of widows had long been an important source of wealth for the Church. Porphyry accused Christians of "persuading women [to distribute]

their fortunes and their property among the poor," reducing them to beggary. When Melania the Elder left Rome for a pilgrimage to Egypt, she brought with her a casket containing 300 pieces of silver and gave it to Pambo, a hermit. She supported orthodox deportees in Jerusalem and later founded there a monastery, where, according to Palladius, she and Rufinus received "all who come to pray: bishops, monks, and virgins, edifying them and aiding them from their resources... They gave gifts and food to the clergy of the city." ...

Most important of all, women's power from the inception to the final victory of Christianity lay in the communicative character of their faith. It was easier for women than for men to free themselves from the social and political constraints of the ancient city, and often women seem to have been in advance of men from the same family. Their influence at home encouraged others to convert, so

that women played a crucial role in the transmission of the faith. In 2 Timothy I:5 we read: "I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice." ...

Women also led the way to still greater religious commitment. After obtaining a cure for Evagrius and restoring him to his anchoritic life, Melania the Elder returned to Italy from Jerusalem. There "she met the blessed Apronianus, a most worthy man, who was a pagan. She taught him the catechism and made him a Christian. And she persuaded him to remain continent with his wife, his niece Avita. While her counsel she fortified the resolve of her granddaughter Melania and her husband Pinianus and taught the catechism to her daughter-in-law Albina, the wife of her son. Then, having persuaded them all to sell what they possessed, she took them back to Rome and showed them how to live a noble and serene life."

NO

Karen Armstrong

THE RESULT: EVE

From almost the earliest days of Western Christianity, men started to see women as sexually dangerous and threatening, and in the grip of this fear they started a process which would eventually push women away from the male world into a separate world of their own. This might at first seem an odd development: neither Jesus nor Paul had pushed women away, but had worked closely with them and granted them full equality with men. However, later books of the New Testament, particularly the First Epistle to Timothy, which was probably written at the beginning of the 2nd century some sixty years after Paul's death, have a very different message. By this time Christianity is coping with the Gentile world of the late Empire and its terrors of sexual excess. A fear of sexuality had changed official Church policy toward women:

I direct that women are to wear suitable clothes and to be dressed quietly and modestly without braided hair or gold and jewellery or expensive clothes; their adornment is to do the sort of good works that are proper for women who profess to be religious. During instruction, a woman should be quiet and respectful. I am not giving permission for a woman to teach or to tell a man what to do. A woman ought not to speak, because Adam was formed first and Eve afterwards, and it was not Adam who was led astray but the woman who was led astray and fell into sin. Nevertheless, she will be saved by childbearing, provided she lives a modest life and is constant in faith and love and holiness.

—(1 Timothy 2:9–15)

When Paul had told the women in Corinth to keep quiet in Church, there was no hint of sexual disgust, nor was there any idea that women were potentially wicked (they just have to remember their place!) In 1 Timothy we have something different and sinister. Woman is not just inferior, she is wicked also, because of Eve. Eve fell into sin first and led Adam into sin. This is a theme which will recur again and again in the writings of the Early Fathers, and is also a deeply sexual idea.

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The author of 1 Timothy begins his remarks about women with directions about the sort of clothes they should wear. Glancing through the works of the Fathers, it is extraordinary how much time they devoted to writing about women's dress—a concern that should have been beneath them. Diatribes about the way women load themselves with jewelry, cake their faces with makeup and douse themselves with perfume crop us with extreme frequency. One of the first was written by Tertullian in the 3rd century. In a treatise written to his "best beloved sisters" in the faith, Tertullian glides from affection and respect to an astonishing attack:

If there dwelt upon earth a faith as great as we expect to enjoy in heaven, there wouldn't be a single one of you, best beloved sisters, who, from the time when she had first "known the Lord" and learned the truth about her own condition, would have desired too festive (not to say ostentatious) a style of dress. Rather she would have preferred to go about in humble garb, and go out of her way to affect a meanness of appearance, walking about as Eve, mourning and repentant, so that by her penitential clothes she might fully expiate what she has inherited from Eve: the shame, I mean, of the first sin, and the odium of human perdition. *In pains and anxieties dost thou bear children, woman; and toward thine husband is thy inclination and he lords it over thee.*¹ And do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—*

that is death—even the Son of God had to die. And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunics of skins.

—(On Female Dress, I:i)

It is exactly the same complex of ideas that we find, less clearly articulated, in 1 Timothy: female appearance, Eve, childbirth. It seems at first sight strange that this enormous attack—each woman is completely responsible for destroying men and crucifying Christ—should start and finish with something as apparently unimportant as women's clothes. What prompts Tertullian's virulent attack is pure irrational fear. As the treatise goes on, we see that it is wholly about sex. Woman is as much of a temptation to man as Eve was to Adam, not because she is offering him an apple but because she is offering the forbidden fruit of sex. She can cause a man to lust after her just by walking around looking beautiful. "You must know," Tertullian insists, "that in the eye of perfect Christian modesty, having people lusting after you with carnal desire is not a desirable state of affairs but is something execrable" (II, ii). He is thinking of Jesus' words when he said that a man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. Jesus was not making a particular issue of lust here, but was illustrating his admirable religious insight that mere external conformity to a set of rules is not enough for the truly religious man. It is the attitude in his heart that counts, not a meticulous performance of burdensome commandments. Tertullian twists this potentially liberating idea into a truly frightening view of the moral world. "For as soon as a man has lusted after your beauty, he has in his mind

already committed the sin which his lust was imagining and he perished because of this, and you [women] have been made the sword that destroys him" (II, ii). A man's lustful glance may be entirely involuntary, but he still perishes. The woman is guilty of destroying him just as Eve was guilty of destroying Adam. She may have had absolutely no intention of tempting him—she may not even realize that she has caused any lustful thoughts at all, but she is still guilty. Both the man and the woman have sinned even though what happened was quite beyond their control.

Tertullian is quite clear that women are to blame: "even though you may be free of the actual crime, you are not free of the odium attaching to it" (II, ii). This means that, far from dressing up and making herself look pretty and desirable, a woman has a duty to look as unattractive as she possibly can:

... it is time for you to know that you must not merely reject the pageantry of fictitious and elaborate beauty, but even the grace and beauty you enjoy naturally must be obliterated by concealment and negligence, because this is just as dangerous to the people who glance at you. For even though comeliness is not to be censured exactly, because it is certainly a physical felicity and a kind of goodly garment of the soul, but it is to be feared, because of the injury and violence it inflicts on the men who admire you.

—(II, ii)

This is an oft-repeated theme for Tertullian. In his treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins*, it surfaces in a particularly disturbed form. St. Paul had said that women had to wear veils in Church "because of the angels." Here he was referring to the legend of the "Sons of God," the "angels" who

lusted after earthly women and came down from heaven to mate with them.

For if it is "because of the angels"—those beings of whom we read as having fallen from God and from heaven because of lusting after women—who can presume that it was bodies already defiled and relics of human lust which the angels yearned after, but that rather that they were inflamed for virgins, whose bloom pleads an excuse for human lust?... So perilous a face, then, ought to be kept shaded, when it has cast stumbling stones even so far as heaven. This face, when it stands in the presence of God, at whose bar it already stands accused of driving the angels from their heavenly home, may blush before the other angels who didn't fall as well.

—(*On the Veiling of Virgins*, VII)

There is something extremely unpleasant here. It is not simply the view that sex always defiles a woman, so that afterward she is merely a "relic of human lust," a memory of a shameful act. There is also a horrible leering prurience about unsullied virgins being especially lust-worthy, and there is a real terror in the idea that a woman's beauty is so dangerous and powerful that it can even cause angels to abandon heaven and fall irretrievably into sin. If even angels are not safe from a woman's beauty, then what hope is there for mere men? A woman must keep her "perilous" face hidden. She must disguise her beauty, or she will destroy men just as surely as Eve destroyed Adam. Already, years before Augustine would finally formulate for the West the doctrine of Original Sin, the emotional trinity which exists at the heart of that doctrine has been formed in the Christian neurosis of Tertullian: woman, sex and sin are fused together in his mind indissolubly. The only hope for man is

that women hide themselves away—veil their faces from man's lustful eyes, hide their beauty by disfiguring themselves and make themselves ugly and sexless in the penitential garb that befits each woman as an Eve.

Christian men were told to inhabit a separate world from women. When Jerome wants to defend his friendship with the noble Roman lady St. Paula, who became one of his staunchest disciples, he stresses the fact that he was scrupulous about keeping away from women:

Before I became acquainted with the household of the saintly Paula all Rome was enthusiastic about me. Almost everyone concurred in judging me worthy of the highest office in the Church. My words were always on the lips of Damasus of blessed memory. Men called me saintly: men called me humble and eloquent. Did I ever enter a house of any woman who was included to wantonness? Was I ever attracted by silk dresses, flashing jewels, painted faces, display of gold? No other matron in Rome could dominate my mind but one who mourned and fasted, who was squalid with dirt, almost blind with weeping. All night long she would beg the Lord for mercy, and often the sun found her still praying. The psalms were her music, the Gospels her conversation: continence was her luxury, her life a fast. No other could give me pleasure, but one whom I never saw munching food.

—(Letter xiv: To Asella)

For Jerome the only good woman is a sexually repulsive one. Paula has made herself "repellent." When Jerome went to visit her, he felt disgusted by her and his virtue was quite safe. He was in no sexual danger. Paula herself would have been delighted by this appalling description; she was only one of the

new breed of Roman ladies who were taking up the ascetic life and mutilating themselves physically and spiritually in this way. This pattern of mutilation is one that recurs in all sorts of psychological and physical ways among the women of Western Christianity. By telling a woman that she should not be physically attractive if she wanted to consort with men and still be virtuous, Jerome and his like were deeply damaging the women who obeyed them.

If a woman is not repulsive then she must be isolated and ostracized. In his letter to Nepotian, a young priest, Jerome tells him that he must be careful to keep himself away from women, even the most innocent and virtuous women, unless they are sexually repellent:

A woman's foot should seldom or never cross the threshold of your humble lodging. To all maidens and to all Christ's virgins show the same disregard or the same affection. Do not remain under the same roof with them; do not trust your chastity. You cannot be a man more saintly than David, or more wise than Solomon. Remember always that a woman drove the tiller of Paradise from the garden that had been given him. If you are ill let one of the brethren attend you, or else your sister or your mother or some woman of universally approved faith. If there are no persons marked out by ties of kinship or reputation for chastity, the Church maintains many elderly women who by their services can both help you and benefit themselves, so that even your sickness may bear fruit in almsgiving.... There is a danger for you in the ministrations of one whose face you are continually watching. If in the course of your clerical duties you have to visit a widow or a virgin, never enter the house alone.... Never sit alone without witnesses with a woman in a quiet place.

If there is anything intimate she wants to say, she has a nurse or some elderly virgin at home, some widow or married woman. She cannot be so cut off from human society as to have no one but yourself to whom she can trust her secret.

—(Letter lii)

Merely sitting with a woman or letting her nurse you is to put yourself in grave danger. Women, therefore, have to be shunned, even if they are in trouble and need help. A woman is to be avoided and left alone in a world which is quite apart from men.

It becomes part of the advice that is given to your aspirants of both sexes who want to lead virtuous Christian lives. Men are to shun women, and women are urged to withdraw from the world and take themselves off into a separate and totally female existence. Inevitably that will be maiming, even without the fasting and the deliberate physical mutilation that the woman is urged to undertake in the name of physical penance. Simply by being deprived of the realities of the male world, by being deprived of education and normal activity, women were only being able to function in half the world. However, the most destructive thing of all was the sexual disgust which drove women into their separate worlds. There is a continual process of repulsion which we have already seen in Tertullian, a process which is neurotic and probably not even conscious. You begin speaking lovingly to your "best beloved sisters" and you end up castigating "Eve." Jerome has exactly the same reaction. Here he is writing to a young girl who has written asking for his advice about the Christian life. Jerome urges her to lock herself away from the world. Simply by walking around she will inspire male

lust, however virtuous she is. In fact, virtue itself can turn a man on:

What will you do, a healthy young girl, dainty, plump, rosy, all afire amid the fleshpots, amid the wines and baths, side by side with married women and with young men. Even if you refuse to give what they ask for, you may think that the asking is evidence of your beauty. A libertine is all the more ardent when he is pursuing virtue and thinks that the unlawful is especially delightful. Your very robe, coarse and sombre though it be, betrays your unexpressed desires if it be without crease, if it be trailed upon the ground to make you seem taller, if your vest be slit on purpose to let something be seen within, hiding that which is unsightly and disclosing that which is fair. As you walk along your shiny black shoes by their creaking give an invitation to young men. Your breasts are confined in strips of linen, and your chest is imprisoned by a tight girdle. Your hair comes down over your forehead or over your ears. Your shawl sometimes drops, so as to leave your white shoulders bare, and then, as though unwilling to be seen, it hastily hides what it unintentionally revealed. And when in public it hides the face in a pretence of modesty, with a harlot's skill it shows only those features which give men when shown more pleasure.

—(Letter cxvii)

It is not surprising that Jerome doesn't let himself near women, because this letter shows him to be sexually obsessed and one of the great voyeurs of all time. He has obviously studied women minutely, and is pruriently eager to pick up each and every movement, every mannerism. He is even excited by the creaking of a woman's shoe. Watching a woman walk down the street, he immediately imagines her underwear; his eyes are

skinned to catch a glimpse of her white shoulders. It is taken for granted that she is teeming with lust. Every movement, intentional or unintentional, is a sign of her "unexpressed" sexual desire. What Jerome is doing is over-sexualizing women because of his own sexual repression. *He* is rampantly frustrated so he tells women that *they* are sexually insatiable. He has forgotten here that he is writing to a good little girl, who has asked him for advice. He is so lost in his fantasy that by the end of the paragraph he is comparing her to a harlot. In just the same way Tertullian begins by calling his readers "best beloved" and ends by calling them "Eve." Christian love for women easily modulates into sexual hatred.

Woman then is man's deepest enemy. She is the harlot who will lure a man to his doom because she is Eve, the eternal temptress. Just as Original Sin comes to be linked with sex, so woman is Eve because she is sexual. Jerome's pathological disgust with sex is shown in his letter to Furia, who had written to seek his advice about getting married again:

The trials of marriage you have learned in the married state: you have been surfeited to nausea as though with the flesh of quails. Your mouth has tasted the bitterest of gall, you have voided the sour unwholesome food, you have relieved a heaving stomach. Why would you put into it again something which has already proved harmful to you. *The dog is turned to his own vomit again and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.*

—(2 Peter 2:22)

What must Furia have felt like when she received this letter? Again she seems to have been a virtuous woman, a genuine

and enthusiastic Christian, but because of her sexuality she would have been made to feel foul and sinful. Jerome is clear that she is sexually obsessed and voracious. As a widow she must be inflamed by the "pleasures of the past." The widow "knows the delights that she has lost and she must quench the fire of the devil's shafts with the cold streams of fast and vigil." Jerome sees a woman as having such strong sexual cravings that if she dresses attractively she is crying out for sex, her "whole body reveals incontinence." Again he sees her as luring poor unsuspecting men into sex and sin. Woman is Antichrist:

What have rouge and white lead to do on a Christian woman's face? The one simulates the natural red of cheeks and lips, the other the whiteness of the face and neck. They are fires to inflame young men, stimulants of lustful desire, plain evidence of an unchaste mind. How can a woman weep for her sins when tears lay her skin bare and make furrows on her face? Such adorning is not of the Lord, it is the mask of Antichrist.

—(Letter liv)

Reading this one might assume that Jerome is writing about prostitutes whose garish makeup advertises their availability. In fact here, as elsewhere, he was writing about ordinary Roman matrons who used frequently to wear cosmetics at this time.

This hostility and fear of women's sexual powers we see again and again. Augustine sees danger even in the virtuous women of the Old Testament, sometimes with ludicrous results. Trying to come to terms with the sex lives of the Patriarchs, he presents Abraham and Isaac copulating with their wives dutifully but with enormous distaste, in

order to obey God's command to found the Chosen Race. They would far rather have abstained. Abraham, Augustine says, had to go on copulating with his wife Sarah for years before he managed with God's help to conceive his son Isaac. Abraham, who seems to have been a highly sexed man, would have read all this with considerable bewilderment. Isaac, Augustine continues, was more fortunate. The Bible only mentions his having sex once, and he was lucky enough to produce the twins, Esau and Jacob, straight off so he never had to do it again. When he came to Jacob, however, who had twelve sons, Augustine is in a bit of a quandary. This looks like zeal in excess of duty. However, he decides that Jacob would gladly have followed the example of Isaac and only had sex once in his life, but his two wives, Leah and Rachel, kept pestering him because of their excessive lust and sexual greed, forcing the holy Patriarch to abandon his high ideals. Yet Rachel and Leah are good women. For Augustine, as for his predecessors Jerome and Tertullian, all women, however virtuous, are men's enemies. "What is the difference," he wrote to a friend, "whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman" (Letter 243, 10).

There is no room for this enemy in the male world. Indeed, there is no room for her at all in God's plan. Augustine seems puzzled about why God made women at all. It is not possible that she was a friend and helpmate to man. After all, "if it was good company and conversation that Adam needed, it would have been much better arranged to have two men together, as friends, not a man and a woman" (*De Genesis ad Litteram* IX, v, 9).

The only reason he made women was for the purposes of childbearing. Luther shared this view. The only vocation he could see for a woman was to have as many children as possible, so that all the more people could be led to the Gospel. It didn't matter what effect this might have on women: "If they become tired or even die, that does not matter. Let them die in childbirth—that is why they are there." There was no other way that a woman could help man. Her place was "in the home" (the famous phrase was actually coined by Luther). There was no place for her in the male world of affairs. Similarly Calvin, who is virtually the first Christian theologian to speak favorably of women, might insist that woman *was* created to be a companion to man and that marriage was instituted by God precisely for that companionship, but his Geneva was entirely male dominated, and women's role as a companion was confined to the domestic female world of the home. Protestantism shared fully the misogyny that the Fathers had bequeathed to the Catholic Church. When Lutherans at Wittenberg discussed the question whether women were really human beings at all, they were not discussing anything new. Theologians had always been perplexed about women's place in God's plan. Thomas Aquinas was as puzzled as Augustine had been about why God had made her at all and decided that woman was a freak in nature:

As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indis-

position, or even from some external influence.

—(*Summa Theologica*, IV, Part I. Quaest. XCII, art 1, 2)

It does not help that Aquinas decides that womankind in *general* is human. The "individual nature" of women is a defect, an idea he picked up from Aristotle's biology. The norm is the male. Every woman is a failed man.

* * *

Women are therefore emotionally excluded from the male world, for all that Paul had originally insisted upon sexual equality. Even now that we are breaking into the male preserves we still tend to feel ill at ease in it. Recent surveys show that college women are even more afraid of success today than they were when Betty Friedan did her original survey in the early 1960s. Dons at Oxford and Cambridge have complained about the quality of women who are gaining admission to the colleges that used to be all-male. They have asked schools to stop sending them girls who are polite, efficient and well-behaved, and instead send them students who will argue with them

as aggressively as the boys do. Breaking into the male world is not simply a matter of opportunity. It is a question of attitude on the part of both men and women. Women are still ambiguous and fearful in these new male worlds that have recently been opened to them. They are still maintaining their guilty apologetic stance. For centuries they have been excluded not simply because they were supposed to be inferior but because they inspired sexual fear and disgust in men. Marilyn French's novel *The Women's Room* puts this humorously when she imagines the male world of Harvard terrified to admit women in case they drip menstrual blood all over this pure male preserve. Where Moslems have traditionally locked their women into harems inside their homes because they owned and valued them, men in the Christian West have locked their women outside their lives because they hate them, exiling women to a lonely, separate world.

NOTES

1. Genesis 3:16. Tertullian quotes God's words to Eve after the Fall.