“Meliorē cupiditate detentus”: Christian self-definition and the rejection of marriage in the early Acts of the Martyrs

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Christians and the “civitas terrena”: married martyrs

The Christian attitude towards marriage and sexuality in the early Acts of the Martyrs¹ should be understood as part of the Christian attitude towards the religious aspects of ancient society. It is generally accepted that the earliest persecutions were chiefly caused by the pagan belief that the Christians jeopardised the “pax deorum” by refusing to worship the gods of the polis or the community they were supposedly a member of². Sacrifices and pagan cults in general were thought to buy off the goodwill and protection of the gods. By participating in the community-cults citizens secured the well being of their communities. By refusing to participate, the Christians in a sense withdrew from society because from the pagan point of view, atheism and anti-social behaviour went hand in hand. Christians were of course opposed to the religious aspects of ancient society, to paganism. But to a certain degree they were also opposed to society as such, even if it had been possible to separate ancient society and pagan cults. The eschatological fever of the first Christian communities resulted in numerous writings teaching the Christians to live in the world, but not to be of the world. To live in the “civitas terrena” but to focus on “the polis to come” (Hebrews 13, 14).

¹ Although the widely used edition of the Pre-Nicene Acts of the Martyrs, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* by Herbert MUSURILLO (Oxford, 1972) is certainly not flawless, it does offer a workable compromise between an unscientific “collectors-mania” and a destructive hypercriticism (cf. WALTER BERSCHIN, *Biographie und Epochenstil im lateinischen Mittelalter. I. Von der Passio Perpetuae zu den Dialogi Gregors des Grossen*, Stuttgart, 1986, p. 39-40, nr. 7 commenting on some modern collections: “Die neuen kritischen Sammlungen nähern sich bedenklich der Null-Linie.” Musurillo retained 28 texts: 15 in Greek and 13 in Latin, and four Latin versions of Greek originals. The edition with Italian translation by A. A. R. BASTIAENSEN (ed.), *Atti e passioni dei martiri. Scrittori Greci e Latini*, Milano, 1987, 1990(2) offers only 12 texts but includes the late fourth century *Peri Stephanon Hymnus XIV* by Prudentius as the “passio Agnetis”. Of course, the same goes for the *Dasius-passio* included by Musurillo. See the series of articles by J. BREMMER & J. DEN BOEFT, “Notiunculae martyrologicae” in *Vigiliae Christianae*, esp. “NM I”, *VChr* 35, 1981, p. 43-56 and “NM IV”, *VChr*, 45, 1991, p. 105-122 on the Bastiaensen-edition. In 1995, G. W. BOWERSOCK, (*Martyrdom and Rome*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 41, note 1) wrote about Musurillo: “an unreliable work, which a new edition prepared by A. Birley will soon replace.” But this new edition was not available to us.

² See G. E. M. DE STE. CROIX, “Why were the early Christians persecuted?” *Past and Present* 26, 1963, p. 6-31.

This attitude towards the saeculum resurfaces in the early Acts of the Martyrs. The Christians we encounter often refuse to identify themselves in the traditional manner. Their social identity has shifted entirely from being a member of the polis to being a member of the Church. This is why, during interrogations, they refuse to answer questions regarding their name, descent and social status correctly. Stubbornly and to the ever-increasing frustration of the judges they answered to all such questions with a simple: "Christianus sum". The principle is expressed in the acts of the martyrs of Lyon and Vienne (1, 20; p. 68) with regard to the interrogation of Sanctus: ὥστε μὴδὲ τὸ ἴδιον κατεπειν ὄνομα μήτε ἔθνους μήτε πόλεως ὅθεν ἦν μήτε εἰ δοῦλος ἢ ἐλεύθερος εἶη ἀλλὰ πρὸς πάντα τὰ ἐπερωτώμενα ἀπεκρίνατο τῇ ῥωμαϊκῇ φωνῇ· Χριστιανός εἰμι (i.e.: "Christianus sum"). Τοῦτο καὶ ἀντὶ ὀνόματος καὶ ἀντὶ πόλεως καὶ ἀντὶ γένους καὶ ἀντὶ παντὸς ἐπαλλήλως ὠμολόγει, ἄλλην δὲ φωνὴν οὐκ ἤκουσαν αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔθνη. When Conon (4,1-2; p. 188) is asked "πόθεν εἰ ἡ ποίου γένους τυγχάνεις, ἡ τί τὸ ὄνομά σου; he refuses to state his name, but he answers: Πόλεως μὲν εἰμι ἐγὼ Ναζαρέθ τῆς Γαλιλαίας, συγγένεια δὲ μοί ἐστιν πρὸς Χριστόν.³

In the passio of Carpus, Papyrus and Agathonica (set in the reign of Marcus Aurelius), this alternative social self-definition leads to an affirmation of a spiritual Christian family and of a spiritual offspring. At first, Carpus had answered the standard questions regarding his name and social status with the statement that his first and most distinctive name was "Christian": Carpus was only his name "in this world". (2-3; p. 22, r. 6-7) After some preliminary questions about the social status of the second character, Papyrus, the judge asked him: Τέκνα ἔχεις; The martyr replied with a certain sense of pride: καὶ πολλὰ διὰ τὸν θεόν. The magistrate had not sensed the irony of the answer, but someone from the crowd shouted to explain what the martyr had really meant: Κατὰ τὴν πίστιν αὐτοῦ τῶν Χριστιανῶν λέγει τέκνα ἔχειν. Questioned about the reasons for his "deceitful" answer, Papyrus explained in his defence that the true offspring was the offspring according to the faith⁴. After this, the proconsul grew tired of semantics, and briefly enquired whether Papyrus was by now willing to sacrifice.

During the torture and execution following Papyrus' refusal, a woman from the crowd got carried away. In the words of the text, she saw the glory (δόξα) of the Lord, as Carpus had while he was being tortured. With a loud voice she declared that she was prepared to throw herself on the pyre. The unanimous crowd tried to dissuade her from this voluntary martyrdom. One of the arguments they used to convince the woman was probably also the reason the judge had inquired about Papyrus' offspring. The crowd told her: ἐλεῆσόν σου τὸν υἱόν. But Agathonica replied: Θεὸν ἔχει τὸν δυνάμενον αὐτὸν ἐλεῆσαι, ὅτι αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ πάντων προνοητής. ἐγὼ δὲ ἐφ' ὀπάριμ. She threw off her cloak and jumped into the fire⁵.

³ The remark by Musurillo (p. 189, nr. 4) "It is noteworthy that a man with such a historic Greek name should have come from Nazareth..." seems somewhat to have missed the point, when one considers that Conon was a gardener in Pamphylia and one remembers the second part of his answer. See also the *Passio Carpi, Papyli et Agathonicae* 3, p. 22: Τὸ πρῶτον καὶ ἐξαιρετὸν ὄνομα Χριστιανός. For the "christianus sum" as a hagiographical cliché, see also Hippolyte DELEHAYE, *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires*. SH 13b, Bruxelles, 1966, p. 184. Jan BREMMER, "Christianus sum. The early Christian martyrs and Christ," in G. J. M. BARTELINK (ed.), *Eulogia. Mélanges offerts à A. A. R. Bastiaensen*. Steenbrugge, 1991, p. 11-20 treats the theme from an existential and religious point of view.

⁴ *Passio Carpi*,... 28-32, p. 26, r. 2-7: Θέλεις μαθεῖν ὅτι οὐ ψεύδομαι ἀλλ' ἀληθῆ λέγω; ἐν πάσῃ ἐπαρχία καὶ πόλει εἰσὶν μου τέκνα κατὰ θεόν.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-44 (43-44 quoted), p. 26, r. 30 – p. 28, r. 1-6. The Latin version has made a few alterations. Here, the events are dated "tempore Decii imperatoris" (1, p. 28). The voluntary martyrdom has disappeared (cf. the repeated condemnations by orthodox church leaders. G. E. M. DE STE. CROIX, *o. c.* (nr. 2), pp. 21-4 gives a good survey of the sources; more recently BOWERSOCK, *o. c.* (nr. 1), § 4, "Martyrdom and suicide," pp. 59-74) Agathonica is now simply brought before the judge together with two other martyrs. In addition, she now has at least one extra child, and both the crowd and the judge use the child-care-argument: 6, 2; p. 34: "Turba vero clamante et dicente ad eam: Miserere tibi et filiis tuis, proconsul dixit: Respice in te, et miserere tibi et filiis tuis, secundum quod clamat turba." Her answer (6, 3), however, remains more or less the same: "Filii mei deum habent qui eos custodit."

This text illustrates how the exemplary Christian – and the martyr still is the exemplary Christian par excellence – whether male or female, should prefer his or her spiritual group-adherence and "life-goal" to the natural family and the parental instinct. The non-Christians in the passio are presented as totally Diesseits-oriented conformists: they simply fail to understand the higher vocation of the Christian faith. This antithetical Christian self-definition will be repeated in a great number of texts. For Christians, the ties of the faith take precedence over all possible family-ties. The example was after all given by Christ himself, who (according to Mk. 3, 34-35⁶) ignored his natural mother and brothers, explaining that his "brother and (...) sister and mother" are "whosoever shall do the will of God." Papyrus was only interested in his children κατὰ τὴν πίστιν. Agathonica seems to have applied the words of Paul (1 Cor. 7, 29: "that both they that have wives, be as though they had none") to having children. In both cases, "the earthly affairs", are consciously ignored in favour of a complete identification with a religious movement focussed on the hereafter⁷.

In two passiones of bishops, Phileas of Thmuis and Irenaeus of Sirmium, we find the same theme of spiritual parenthood linked to the rejection of spouse and children.

Irenaeus, the bishop of Sirmium (Pannonia), had already been tortured once when his family-members begged him to save his own life by obeying the order to sacrifice. "Hinc pueri pedes eius amplectentes dicebant: Miserere tui et nostri, pater. Inde uxor lugens vultum et aetatem eius precabatur."⁸ Irenaeus was not impressed by the tears and laments of his friends and family-members. "Sed (...) meliore cupiditate detentus, sententiam Domini ante oculos habens quae dixit 'Si quis me negaverit coram hominibus, et ego negabo eum coram patre meo qui est in caelis' (Mt. 10, 33), omnes ergo despiciens nulli eorum respondit." (3, 3; p. 296) The Matthew-passage seems to be chosen to illustrate that only the heavenly family, Christianity as a transcendent social category, is relevant to the martyr: Irenaeus could not be bothered with the care for his wife and children: he had made the right choice and concentrated on what was really important. The earthly worries have been forgotten, he is "melior cupiditate detentus" and, disdainfully, he even refuses to answer the members of his earthly family.

The prefect Probus thought Irenaeus could use a couple of days to reconsider. The second attempt by the judge sets out as a lecture by Irenaeus about the way a Christian can win the true, eternal life by loosing his earthly life. Probus then changes his strategy and asks (4, 5-7, p. 296-8): "Uxorem habes? Irenaeus respondit: Non habeo. Probus dixit: Filios habes? Irenaeus respondit: Non habeo. Probus dixit: Parentes habes? Irenaeus respondit: Non habeo. (6) Probus dixit: Et qui fuerunt illi qui praeterita flebant sessione? Irenaeus respondit: Praeceptum est domini mei Iesu Christi dicentis, Qui diligit patrem aut matrem aut uxorem aut filios aut fratres aut parentes super me, non est me dignus. (7) Itaque ad Deum in caelum adspiciens et ad

⁶ English translations are from *The Bible. Authorized King James Version*, R. CARROLL & S. PRICHETT (ed.), Oxford & New York, 1997.

⁷ See however the remark by Stuart G. HALL, "Women among the early martyrs," in Diana WOOD (ed.), *Martyrs and martyrologies*, Studies in Church History vol. 30. Oxford, 1993, p. 1-21; (here: p. 8) that the charity of the early Christian communities "would do God's work for Him." On the reverse movement see now: JOSEPH HELLERMAN, *The ancient church as family*, Minneapolis MN, 2001.

⁸ *Passio S. Irenaei ep. Sirmiensis* 3,1, p. 296. Musurillo chooses the reading "inde uxores lugentes... precabantur." ("Then the married women urged him to yield...") and rejects Ruinart's conjecture mentioned on p. 296, nr. 3 and p. 297, nr. 4 "Or perhaps 'his wife', following a suggestion of Ruinart." It seems more logical that, after his children, his wife also gives an "acte de présence." Furthermore, the reading that deals with non identified married Christian women, can not explain why the prefect Probus asks about Irenaeus' uxor; filii and parentes a little further in the passio (4, 5-6, pp. 296-298) in exactly the opposite order of appearance as in 3, 1: "Advenientes vero parentes eius... hinc pueri... inde uxor (or uxores)..." and why the prefect asks again "Et qui fuerunt illi qui praeterita flebant sessione?" (4, 6, p. 298) The correct reading is "uxor" and the version with "uxores" is to be understood as a late-antique attempt ("uxores" is the dominant reading in the manuscripts with an occasional "matres" as alternative) to turn an early-fourth century married bishop into a widower.

eius promissiones intendens, omnia despiciens nullum parentem absque eo se nosse atque habere fatebatur." So, once again, the anti-familial tendency of the Christian martyr is legitimised by a gospel-text. It is interesting, by the way, that the *passio* quotes the more comprehensive and severe Luke-text (14, 26), whereas the parallel in Matthew (10, 37) does not mention "uxor" or "parentes"⁹.

The pagan prefect confirms the good reputation of the judges in the so-called authentic Acts of the Martyrs. He tries to save the bishop's life for a last time, by insisting that he should sacrifice, if not for his own sake (Irenaeus was still a young man), then for the sake of his children. But once again Irenaeus refuses and the judge is left with no alternative¹⁰.

The acts of Phileas, bishop of Thmuïs (Egypt), are not only written at roughly the same time (304-306), they also include a number of almost verbal parallels with Irenaeus' rejection of his family. The Latin version is more complete than the original Greek text, published for the first time in 1964 from a papyrus fragment¹¹. The interrogation of Phileas develops into a philosophical and theological discussion, but the text also contains a short passage concerning Phileas' responsibility towards his wife and children. The prefect Culcianus questions the bishop about the existence of the *συνείδησις* (the moral awareness, the conscience). When Phileas acknowledges its existence, Culcianus then asks him why he doesn't follow his conscience in the case of his wife and children¹². Phileas answers that the *συνείδησις* towards God must come first, and he quotes Deut. 6, 5 "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, with all thy soul and with all thy might." This inspires Culcianus to ask Phileas exactly what god he is talking about and the discussion is brought back to a more philosophical level. Phileas also used a philosophical exemplum in his own defence. His own behaviour, his care for his soul runs parallel with the behaviour of the pagan sage and "martyr" par excellence: Socrates. "Phileas respondit: Non sacrifico. Animae meae parco. Quoniam non solum Christiani parant animae suae verum etiam et gentiles, accipe exemplum Socratis. Cum ad mortem duceretur, adstante ei coniuge et filiis, non est reversus sed promptissime casum suscepit."¹³

The prefect treats Phileas with a lot of respect. He was clearly a rich and respected citizen. Because Phileas' brother was actually a friend of the prefect, he was even prepared to release the bishop without further ado. Phileas refuses, but Culcianus tries to bring him back to reason for a last time¹⁴. He draws the bishop's attention to the sorrow he is causing his wife: "Misera uxor tibi intendit." (6, 1;

⁹ MUSURILLO (p. 299, nr. 7) identifies the quote as Mt. 10, 37 and refers to Lk. 14, 25. The exact opposite would have been correct. The Luke-quote can be explained by its more radical content, but the appearance of a wife in the *passio* could be seen as a simpler explanation. This is by the way an additional reason to print "uxor" i. s. o. "uxores" on p. 296, 3, 1, cf. the note above.

¹⁰ *Passio Irenaei* 4, 8, p. 298: "Vel propter filios sacrifico" and 4, 9: "Consule tibi, iuuenis." Irenaeus answers that God can save his children and tells the judge to simply do his job so he can observe the Christian willingness to die for their faith. When Probus wants to throw Irenaeus in the river without further torture, the bishop screamed in protest and a now clearly angry judge has him beheaded first. The early acts often portray the pagan judges as fairly reasonable and willing to come to some kind of compromise. For the contrast with the diabolical portrayal of the judges in the later *passiones*, see DELEHAYE, *o.c.* (nr. 3), pp. 178-179.

¹¹ See VICTOR MARTIN, *Papyrus Bodmer XX: Apologie de Philéas évêque de Thmouis*, Cologny-Genève, 1964.

¹² *Acta Phileae* 143-149, p. 338: Κουλιανὸς εἶπεν· Διὰ τί τὴν πρὸς τοὺς υἱοὺς καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα σου συνείδησιν οὐ φυλάττεις; Φιλέας εἶπεν· Ὅτι ἡ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν συνείδησις... προάγει πάντα. Cf. 3, 3, p. 346: "Culcianus dixit: Quomodo ergo quae ad filios tuos et coniugem conscientia est non custodis? Phileas respondit: Quoniam quae ad Deum est conscientia eminentior est."

¹³ *Acta Phileae* 4, 2; p. 348; the Greek text of this passage is offered in BASTIAENSEN (*o. c.* nr. 1), p. 295.

¹⁴ Social status of Phileas (Greek acts: r. 181-189; p. 342 - Latin 5, 1; p. 348) As was said earlier, Culcianus wanted to free Phileas without further ado (5, 4; p. 350). He was also willing to believe Phileas' lawyers when they said that Phileas had already sacrificed earlier in the council-chamber (5, 5; p. 350). He immediately agreed with their suggestion to postpone the trial (6, 2; p. 350). But time and again Phileas replied that his lawyers were not expressing his personal view: that he refused to sacrifice and that he was prepared to die immediately. Even after Phileas was sentenced to be beheaded, his

p. 350) The bishop replies that Christ is the saviour of all, and that his decision to die a martyr's death is final. In a dramatic scene all those present throw themselves as supplicants at his feet: "Advocati et officium una cum curatore et cum omnibus propinquis eius pedes ipsius complectebantur rogantes eum ut respectum haberet uxoris et curam susciperet liberorum. ille velut si saxo immobili unda adlideretur, garrientium dicta respuere, Deum in oculis habere, parentes et propinquos apostolos et martyres ducere." (6, 4; p. 350) So, once again, a martyr rejects his natural family in favour of a spiritual sense of belonging, here represented by the traditional champions of Christianity: the apostles and the martyrs.

Herbert Musurillo thought that the martyrs rejected their family because they wanted to spare the other members further suffering¹⁵. It is not very clear what Musurillo meant by this. Maybe he was talking about the suffering felt by family members while they were watching or were being forced to watch the torture of their husband, father or child. This argument could be supported by the *passio Irenaei* where the martyr was indeed tortured in front of his family. Furthermore, this text explicitly offers a causal connection between this spectacle and the pleas by the family to sacrifice¹⁶. In Phileas' case however, the family is equally rejected, although any form of torture is clearly out of the question. We have seen that, for personal and social-political reasons, the judge treats the bishop with a lot of respect and benevolence.

A second possible explanation is that the martyrs tried to speed things up both for themselves and for their family. This could be why they avoided showing a normal interest let alone a normal affection for their wives and children. They might have thought that any trace of affection could have inspired the judges to use the loved-ones in repeated attempts to persuade the arrested, attempts that could only become increasingly painful for all parties involved. This seems a very acceptable psychological motivation, but we have found not one explicit example of this scenario in the couple of hundred Acts of the Martyrs that survive from Late Antiquity. The *passio Perpetuae* is a text where an affective concern on the part of the accused for his or her family members, is combined with pleas "pro lapsu" by one of these members. But in this text, the judge even had the family-member (the father) forcibly removed from the court¹⁷.

Another possible interpretation of Musurillo's explanation would be that the martyrs were trying to protect their relatives from a possible arrest. This is certainly wrong. From the Acts of the Martyrs and also from other sources documenting the persecutions it has become very clear that in most cases the authorities limited their actions to an almost symbolic number of arrests. Fellow Christians (both relatives of the arrested Christians and other fellow believers) seem to have interacted with the future martyrs without difficulties. They visited them in prison, encouraged them in the courtroom, but were almost never arrested although it must have been fairly obvious that they were also members of the investigated group¹⁸. Before the first general sacrifice order issued by the imperial government, by Decius (249-250), the

brother, one of the lawyers, shouted that Phileas wanted to appeal against the sentence. And even then Culcianus was prepared to come to a compromise, but again the martyr refused every possible escape-route. (8, 1-2; p. 352)

¹⁵ In the introduction to his text edition, p. XLIII-XLIV on Irenaeus of Sirmium: "Irenaeus denies he has a wife and children, by a strange interpretation of the words of Jesus, perhaps to spare them further suffering."

¹⁶ *Passio Irenaei* 3, 1; p. 296: "Advenientes vero parentes eius, videntes eum torqueri precabantur eum."

¹⁷ References here will be to the new critical edition by Jacqueline AMAT, *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité, suivies des Actes*. SC 417, Paris, 1996; here: 6, 5; p. 124.

¹⁸ In the *passio Perpetuae* deacons bribed jailors to give the martyrs a better treatment (3, 7; p. 110). The deacon Pomponius was apparently present during the interrogation and could be sent to her father immediately (6, 7, p. 124). The prisoners were allowed to have unlimited visitors and even to dine with them (16, 4; p. 160), etc. Think e.g. also of Origenes' visits to support the martyrs: he kissed them in prison (EUSEBIUS, *H.E.* VI, 3) or Antony who encouraged the martyrs during the reign of Maximinus (ATHANASIUS, *Vita Antonii* 46). In none of these cases extra arrests are reported, the exception being voluntary martyrs who actively provoked their arrest.

Christians were never systematically sought out and prosecuted. The persecutions were almost always sporadic, local and temporary outbursts, in most cases started by the local population. The government got involved because they wanted to channel the unpredictable spiral of violence before the violence was turned against secondary, and socially-politically less irrelevant, targets. There was no need to wipe out entire Christian communities: the number of executions merely had to be sufficient to function as a symbolic lightning rod¹⁹.

By quoting the Bible, the acts of the martyrs we have treated so far offer religious reasons for the rejection of the family. The radical passages in the New Testament where family life, marriage and children (sexuality in its relational and procreative aspect) are rejected can be explained by the eschatological fever of the first communities²⁰. For the individual martyr, facing his or her end after a relatively conformist life, this fever regains relevance: earthly concerns such as family or possessions are a burden to the Christian who is already expecting the privileges that await him as a martyr in the hereafter. The persecutions in general had a direct impact on the apocalyptic content of early Christian thought concerning the hereafter²¹, but they also enhanced the eschatology-related anti-family viewpoints of early Christianity. These texts confirm the perpetuation of the world-denying alternative group definition of early Christianity in general and, more specifically, of the martyrs who were on trial. Nevertheless, it is important to remark that the four texts we have treated so far present Christians, both laymen and clerics, who were married and had children. These Christians conformed *de facto* to the existing marriage-morals and only expressed their rejection when they were forced to choose between apostasy and death, between their family and Christianity.

The "Passio Perpetuae"

A similar attitude, be it with important shifts of emphasis, can also be found in the second oldest Latin martyr text, the famous *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*²². Vibia Perpetua, a twenty two years old catechumen was arrested in

¹⁹ Think e.g. of the persecution in Lyon and Vienne in 177. The affair escalated from social exclusion (1, 5; p. 62 – Christians denied access to public places and driven from their homes) to mass hysteria. Christians were beaten up and dragged through the streets by an angry mob (1, 7) It all ended in a trial. In this exceptional case, the authorities used pagan servants as informers to round up Christians (1, 14; p. 64-66). But it is clear from the rest of the *passio* that Christians who were not arrested, maintained contact with their arrested fellow believers (e.g. confessores who survived the arena - 2, 2; p. 82) without being bothered. And of course, there must have been Christians left in Lyon and Vienne to write this report and send it to the other churches. See G. E. M. DE STE. CROIX, *o.c.* (nr. 2), pp. 8-16.

²⁰ See Marc VAN UYTFANGHE, *Stylisation biblique et condition humaine dans l'hagiographie mérovingienne (600-750)*, Brussel, 1987, "La base biblique et les inflexions postbibliques: le mariage et la sexualité," pp. 175-192; e. g. p. 175-176: "De toute évidence, la principale motivation néo-testamentaire du célibat et de la chasteté fut d'ordre eschatologique," with numerous further references. ELIZABETH E. CLARK, "Antifamilial tendencies in ancient Christianity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, 1995.3, 356-380 gives a brief survey of the eschatologically inspired antifamilialism in the New Testament (pp. 358-360) and then analyses how it was (p. 360) "separated from its eschatological grounding by ascetically inclined patristic writers of the fourth and fifth centuries, who no longer believed that the 'end' would come any time soon."

²¹ For the appearance of apocalypticism in times of crisis (like persecutions) as "a general rule" in the history of the early Christian views on the hereafter, see Brian E. DALEY, *The hope of the Church. A handbook of patristic eschatology*, Cambridge, 1992, p. 1 and *Id.*, "Apocalypticism in early Christian theology," in Bernard MCGINN (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism. Vol. 2: Apocalypticism in Western History and Culture*, New York, 1998, pp. 3-47 quoting a. o. Eusebius, *H.E.* VI, 7 that persecutions inspired eschatological writings.

²² The Amat edition (*cf.* nr. 17), p. 51-66 contains a brief outline of the historical debate on the primacy of the Greek or Latin version and adduces new arguments to conclude in favour of the Latin *passio* (p. 66): "La traduction grecque est quelque peu postérieure à la *Passio* latine, sans qu'il soit pour autant possible de préciser sa datation." JAN N. BREMMER, "Perpetua and her diary: authenticity, family and visions", in: WALTER AMELING (ed.), *Märtyrer und Märtyrerakten* (Altertumsw. Koll. 6), Stuttgart, 2002, pp. 77-120; CAROLYN OSIEK, "Perpetua's husband", *JECS* 10, 20002, pp. 287-291.

North-Africa, in 203, together with three male catechumens and a female slave Felicitas. The *passio* presents Perpetua as follows: "Vibia Perpetua, honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta habens patrem et matrem et fratres duos, alterum atque catechumenum, et filium infantem ad ubera."²³ Perpetua, who is also presented as the author of the central ego-document (2,3; p. 106)²⁴, describes her great concern for her baby. The anti-family tendency in this text lies in the complete absence of a husband-figure (see, already, the list of her family members we quoted earlier) and also in the disobedience of a daughter towards her father.

In the opening scene of the autobiographical part of the text, Perpetua has to confront her father for the first time. "Pro sua affectione" (3, 1; p. 106), the father tries to persuade her to sacrifice. Perpetua uses Socratic dialectic on her father. She asks him whether an "urceolus", a small jug, standing in the room can be called anything other than an "urceolus". She then concludes that by the same semantic logic she can only be called a Christian. Her father goes wild when he hears the word "Christiana" and he seems to be on the verge of poking her eyes out, but eventually, he leaves without further ado, "victus cum argumentis diaboli" (3, 3). A few days later, Perpetua and the others are incarcerated in the worst part of the jail: a frightening experience for a rich young lady who had never experienced such darkness. She was not prepared for the claustrophobic heat of an overpopulated prison or the harassment by the guards. But above all, Perpetua writes (3, 6): "novissime macerabar sollicitudine infantis ibi." By offering bribes, deacons manage to obtain a better place and a better treatment for the future martyrs. Perpetua is relieved that she is once again able to breastfeed her weak and almost starving baby and she expresses her concern when she asks her mother and her brother to take care of her son²⁵. But Perpetua continues to suffer from the concern for her child. The pain of being separated from her child only goes away when she receives permission to keep the baby with her inside the prison (3, 9, p. 110): "et usurpavi ut mecum infans in carcere maneret; et statim convalui et relevata sum a labore et sollicitudine infantis, et factus est mihi carcer subito praetorium, ut ibi mallet esse quam alicubi." Whether this detail of maternal concern is the true expression of one of Perpetua's emotions or a piece of convincing fiction by another (male?) author²⁶, is not really important from our point of view. It is clear that, when Perpetua is forced to choose between her feelings as a mother and her obedience to the heavenly Father as a Christian, she does not hesitate for one second.

Just before the official hearing, her father appears for the second time and starts making emotional appeals. He concludes that not one of her relatives will be able to go on with their lives when she dies, but this is especially true for her little son who is still breastfed: "aspice filium tuum qui post te vivere non poterit. Depone animos, ne universos nos exterminet." (5, 3-4; p. 120) In this scene, the normal gender-hierarchy is turned upside down. The father, the Roman *pater familias*, gets on his knees for his daughter and kisses her hand. "Et lacrimans me iam non filiam nominabat sed dominam."²⁷ The traditional submissiveness of the woman, especially

²³ *Passio Perpetuae* 2, 1-2; p. 104-106 (ed. Amat); the Greek version has (*ibid.*): μετ' αὐτῶν δὲ καὶ Οὐίβια Περπετούα, ἥτις ἦν γεννηθεῖσα εὐγενῶς καὶ τραθεῖσα πολυτελῶς γαμηθεῖσα τε ἐξόχος. Αὕτη εἶχεν πατέρα καὶ μητέρα καὶ δύο ἀδελφοὺς, ὧν ὁ ἕτερος ἦν ὡσαύτως κατηχοῦμενος.

²⁴ The chapters 3 till 10. It is generally accepted that she actually wrote this part herself: *cf.* P. DRONKE, *Women writers of the Middle Ages. A critical study of texts from Perpetua († 203) to Marguerite Porète († 1310)*, Cambridge, 1984, p. 1.

²⁵ *Passio Perpetuae* 3, 8; p. 110: "ego infantem lactabam iam inedia defectum; sollicita pro eo adloquebar matrem et confortabam fratrem, commendabam filium."

²⁶ G. W. BOWERSOCK, *o. c.* (nr. 1), p. 34 with further references (note 32) for the debate on this question.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5, 5; p. 112. Musurillo's translation is not entirely correct "he no longer addressed me as his daughter but as a woman." The real antithesis is the submissiveness of a "filia" towards her father and the power of the female martyr which is expressed in this hagiographical text by a scene where a father calls his daughter "domina", "dame, mistress". For the gender-aspects, see JUDITH PERKINS, *The suffering self. Pain and narrative representation in the early Christian era*, London & New York, 1995, p. 107.

of a daughter towards her father, is transformed by the "virtus" of martyrdom into a position of dominance. Perpetua becomes "une grande dame", a "domina"²⁸.

Perpetua deplors the fact that her father is the only member of her family who is not rejoicing at her "passio." (5, 6; p. 120-122) After a vain attempt to convince her father that the divine omnipotence and benevolence are at work in her martyrdom, he departs "contristatus." But the next day, during the interrogation of the prisoners in the forum, the father is once again present. When the judge asks Perpetua whether she is a Christian, the father intervenes with a combination of boldness and pathos (6, 2; p. 122): "et apparuit pater ilico cum filio meo et extraxit me de gradu dicens: Supplica; miserere infanti." The procurator, Hilarianus, agrees with the father: "Parce, inquit, canis patris tui, parce infantiae pueri. Fac sacrum pro salute imperatorum." (6, 3; p. 124) But Perpetua refuses abruptly and merely confirms that she is a Christian. This concludes the interrogation as far as the procurator is concerned. The father, however, continues to try and persuade Perpetua, so Hilarianus has him thrown on the floor and beaten with rods.

Perpetua not only defies the authority of the state but also that of her father. The daughter, or the virtue of the female martyr, determine the course of the events and, as Judith Perkins remarked in her analysis of the interaction between suffering, power and gender in the *Passio Perpetuae*: "again a father is subordinated because of a daughter's actions"²⁹. However, her stubborn refusal to obey her father and the procurator does not imply that she has become insensitive to the pain of her father. "Et doluit mihi casus patris mei quasi ego fuissem percussa; sic dolui pro senecta eius misera." (6, 5; p. 124) Although Perpetua rejected the argument of her responsibility towards her child and was condemned "ad bestias" as a Christian, the ego-document continues to express her concern for the well being of her baby. "Tunc quia consueverat a me infans mammas accipere et mecum in carcere manere, statim mitto ad patrem Pomponium diaconum, postulans infantem. Sed pater dare noluit. (8) Et quomodo Deus voluit, neque ille amplius mammas desideravit neque mihi fervorem fecerunt ne sollicitudine infantis et dolore mammarum macerarer." (6, 7-8; p. 114) God has taken care of "His" martyr and her child. Perpetua no longer needs to worry about the nutrition of her child. Neither mother nor child had to endure any physical discomfort because of their sudden separation³⁰.

At this stage, the virtue of Perpetua unfolds completely. She is granted the gift of vision, takes care, through her prayers, of her little brother in the afterlife, and inspires in one of the prison wardens a fascinated admiration that will eventually lead to his conversion³¹. When her father tries to make her choose for this life, for the fourth time, there is absolutely nothing that can make Perpetua change her mind. Her father pulls his beard and throws the hair on the floor. He throws himself on the floor, and utters "verba quae moverent universam creaturam." Perpetua does not even mention her refusal: "ego dolebam pro infelici senecta eius." (9, 2-3; p. 134)

²⁸ For the "virtus" of the martyrs, cf. 9, 1; p. 132: the conversion-story of the guard Pudens ("intellegens magnam virtutem esse in nobis"; δύναμιν μεγάλην). The fight against the Egyptian (the devil of course): 10; p. 134 aff.; especially 10, 7; p. 136-138 where she will see herself in a completely different gender-role, for in her dream she will quite simply become a man to fight the Egyptian: "et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus". We would like to add that this apparition of the devil has no sexual connotation whatsoever, as opposed to fights with the devil in later hagiographical texts.

²⁹ Perkins, *o. c.* (nr. 27), p. 107.

³⁰ The following chapters (7-8) contain her dream vision of Dinocrates, her little brother, who (probably) died of skin cancer. Her prayers cured the boy in the hereafter and quenched his thirst by providing for the water he could not reach earlier. E. R. DODDS, *Pagan and Christian in an age of anxiety*, Cambridge, 1965, p. 53 suggested to interpret this passage as a subconscious projection of the concern for her own child on another child that is saved by her good cares from disease and malnutrition. If this analysis is correct (and we find it very acceptable) these chapters illustrate an additional aspect of Perpetua's motherly concern.

³¹ Cf. 7, 2; p. 126 - 8, 4; p. 132 (visions and prayers); 9, 1; pp. 132-134 and 16, 4; p. 160 (conversion of the guard).

The other woman amongst the prisoners, Felicitas, was eight months pregnant when she was arrested. Since pregnant women were not put to death, Felicitas was afraid that she might not be executed together with her fellow-Christians "et ne inter alios postea sceleratos sanctum et innocentem sanguinem funderet." (15, 2; p. 154) Her "conmartyres" were reluctant to leave her behind alone, and everyone started to pray for an early birth. Immediately after the prayer, the labour pains started and Felicitas gave birth to a daughter in prison. In this case too, the *passio* expresses a certain concern about the fate of the child left behind by the female martyr: "ita enixa est puellam, quam sibi quaedam soror in filiam educavit." (15, 7; p. 158)

A few aspects of this text are perhaps relevant to our subject here. First, there is the noted absence of Perpetua's husband, who was presumably also the father of her child, and, to a lesser extent, the absence of the father of Felicitas' child. The second aspect is the pudicitia Perpetua displayed in the course of her fight against a wild cow.

We will start with the latter aspect. Perpetua and Felicitas were condemned to fight wild animals. To amuse the public, and to offer an exciting spectacle, an animal of the same sex as the female martyrs was chosen and the women were brought into the arena naked, "clad" in nets. The crowd however was upset when they saw that one was an attractive young girl and that the other was a young woman who had given birth so recently that milk was still dripping from her breasts. As a result, Perpetua and Felicitas got their clothes back and were put in front of the "ferocissima vacca". (20, 1-3; p. 170-172) Perpetua was thrown on her back when the cow hit her with her horns. Her tunic was torn open, but even when she was facing death, the "matrona" Perpetua, put her decency first: "et ubi sedit, tunicam a latere discissam ad velamentum femoris reduxit pudoris potius memor quam doloris." (20, 4; p. 172) This scene echoes the sacrifice of Polyxena in the *Hecuba*³². The comparison between Perpetua and Polyxena suggests a parallel between the courage of these two women who refused to beg for their lives or to compromise themselves in any other way in front of an unjust enemy³³. It also gives Perpetua's action a thoroughly ancient aristocratic pudicitia-flavour: the virtuous woman is the woman who shies away from the look of men.

In Euripides' play, the virgin Polyxena had lamented over her life that would end without a wedding and without a groom³⁴. But in the case of the two Christian mothers Perpetua and Felicitas there is no mention at all of husbands, or fathers of their children. Revocatus is sometimes seen as the husband of Felicitas. Stuart G. Hall interprets "conserva eius (2, 1; p. 104) in this way: it "plainly means that she is his matrimonial partner in so far as slaves may be such"³⁵. The Greek version however simply has "σύνδουλοι" (ibid.) which can hardly be interpreted as referring to their "married" state as slaves, but simply means that they were both slaves, as

³² Cf. MUSURILLO, p. 129, nr. 19. That the echo was "heard" by the ancient reader is very acceptable since the *Hecuba*, together with the *Orestes* and the *Phoeniciae*, was standard school reading during the Roman period (cf. W. SCHMID & O. STÄHLIN, *Geschichte der Griechischen Literatur*, I.3, München, 1961, p. 473) The messenger Thalthybius describes how Polyxena offered herself with denuded throat and bosom to the sword of Neoptolemus. When he cuts her throat, she does not forget her decency towards the Greek army: ἡ δὲ καὶ θνήσκουσα ὅμως πολλὴν πρόνοιαν εἶχεν εὐσχήμων πεσεῖν, κρύπτουσα ἃ κρύπτειν ὅμματα ἀρσένων χρεών. (vv. 568-570, ed. J. DIGGLE, Oxford, 1984, p. 365.)

³³ We should not forget that Polyxena's motivation is completely "diesseitig". She wants to die because (this) life has nothing to offer her and because she, who was the daughter of a king and should have been the wife of a king, was brought back to the shameful state of a slave or a housemaid. (vv. 342-377) There is no longing for a life after death but only a complaint about ending her life without a groom or a wedding party (v. 416; cf. SOPHOCLES, *Antigone*, v. 806-816). Her refusal to beg for her life (notwithstanding her mother's, Hecuba's advice, who plays in the Polyxena-part of this tragedy a role similar to Perpetua's pragmatic father) is motivated by weariness of life and royal pride.

³⁴ Cf. the preceding note.

³⁵ HALL, *o. c.* (nr. 7), pp. 6-7. See also FRANCA ELA CONSOLINO, "La donna negli Acta Martyrum," in UMBERTO MATTIOLI (ed.), *La donna nel pensiero cristiano antico*, Genova, 1992, p. 95-117 who talks of Revocatus and Felicitas as "coniugi": p. 100.

opposed to the other catechumens³⁶. Neither the Latin, nor the Greek version offer any additional evidence that Revocatus was the father of Felicitas' child. He is never referred to as the father and has no input whatsoever concerning the fate of the child. Perhaps the father was simply not known, or perhaps it was another slave who did not have the means or the will to interact with the imprisoned Christians.

In the case of Perpetua two out of three of these explanations are unthinkable, but here too, there is no mention of a husband-father. Perpetua is not presented as a young widow, whose husband had died shortly after the conception of the child. Our only information reads that she was "matronaliter nupta." (2, 1; p. 104) One could take the list of family members in the second half of that sentence "habens patrem et matrem et fratres duos, alterum aequae catechumenum, et filium infantem ad ubera" (2, 2; p. 106) as an exhaustive list implying that she did *not* have a husband anymore. This would be the easiest explanation but why then is Perpetua never called a widow? As Dronke already mentioned, one would expect the first half of the sentence to read something like "nuper viduata"³⁷.

If we can assume that the husband was still alive, why then is the man absent from this *passio*? He is never referred to, either by Perpetua herself in her emotional diary ("most importantly" as Brent D. Shaw added³⁸), or by the author of the frame story of the *Passio*. Clearly, this absence of the husband-father already puzzled late antique readers of the *Passio*. The shorter and later version of the Perpetua-story known as the *Acta* has added her husband, as Jacqueline Amat noted (p. 266): "sans doute parce que son absence a étonné le rédacteur"³⁹.

The author of the *Acta* clearly felt the need to fill in the blanks. Possible doubts about the relationship between Revocatus and Felicitas are settled: she is now explicitly called "soror eius" (1, 1; p. 278). The problem of the identity of the father of her child, and of his absence, are equally solved (5, 3-4.7; p. 284): "Proconsul dixit: 'Virum habes?' Felicitas respondit: 'habeo quem nunc contemno.' Proconsul dixit: 'Ubi est?' Felicitas respondit: 'Non est hic.' (...) 7 Proconsul dixit: 'Miserere tui, puella, et sacrificia ut vivas; maxime quia te infantem in utero habere video.' Felicitas respondit: 'Ego Christiana sum, et haec omnia mihi propter Deum contemnere praeceptum est.'"

The (very short) interrogation of Perpetua in the *Acta* contains no mention of her husband. But he is suddenly present in court and has their child with him (6, 1; p. 284): "Audientes vero parentes eius, pater et mater, fratres et maritus simulque cum parvulo eius, qui erat ad lac, venerunt." This alteration clearly corresponds to the expectations of the public concerning the responsibility of a Roman father for his child. But the *Acta* remain faithful to the *Passio* where the interaction between the characters is concerned. Her husband is now present, but as a silent witness. It is still *her* father who does all the talking. Her husband is simply inserted in the list of people she should feel responsible for according to her father (6, 2; p. 286): "miserere et fratribus tuis, et huic infelicissimo viro tuo, certe vel parvulo huic qui post te vivere non poterit." The emotional bond between mother and child as described in the

³⁶ Cf. the comments by J. AMAT, *o. c.* (nr. 17), p. 193.

³⁷ DRONKE, *o. c.* (nr. 24), p. 282-3. AMAT, *o. c.* (nr. 17), p. 30 concurs: "Serait-elle veuve? C'est peu probable."

³⁸ B. D. SHAW, "The Passion of Perpetua." *Past and Present* 139, 1993, p. 3-45; here: p. 11; see also p. 25: "It seems most probable then that her own husband was frankly hostile to her decision to become a Christian..." and p. 35-36.

³⁹ There are two basic versions of these *Acta*, a longer and a shorter one, referred to as *Acta I* and *II* by Amat. Amat has dated them quite late (p. 271): "il ne saurait guère être antérieur au V^e siècle" but we will discuss them shortly to illustrate the contrast with the authentic *passio*. The even shorter version known as *Acta II* has a very short interrogation scene of the women but this scene contains no mention either of Felicitas' pregnancy (although the child will be born in prison: 8, 1; p. 300) or of Perpetua's child (5; pp. 296-298). But, here too, her husband is present in court (6, 1; p. 298): "venientes autem parentes eius pater et mater, fratres et maritus eius cum parvulo filio." The proconsul urges Perpetua to have pity on her parents or at least to respond to the cries of her little child. Perpetua still rejects her child: "Pater vero eius, iactans infantem in collum eius... Beata vero Perpetua proiciens infantem..." (6, 5-6; p. 298).

Passio has been deleted. Perpetua now physically rejects her own child (6, 5-6; p. 286): "Pater vero eius iactans infantem in collum eius et ipse cum matre et marito tenentes manus eius et flentes osculabantur dicentes (...) At illa proiciens infantem eosque repellens dixit: 'recedite a me operarii iniquitatis quia non novi vos.' (Mt. 7, 23)"

At least this text proves that it is not an anachronism to be puzzled by the absence of husbands-fathers in the *Passio Perpetuae*. Peter Dronke is a good starting point for the modern discussion on this topic. He listed five possible reasons for the absence of Perpetua's husband but found it virtually impossible to decide between them⁴⁰. We have already discussed the possibility of a deceased husband as the least likely. If we can assume that Perpetua's husband was in fact still alive, the remaining options depend upon our view of the reliability of the textual tradition and of the relationship between text and reality. The first possibility is then that the man was mentioned in the original text, but that he was deleted from it. In that case, the *Acta* preserved an original version of the events in stead of adding a husband to the narrative. The *Passio* deleted the husband. This is of course a mere hypothesis by Dronke, but taken as a hypothesis, it could have happened either in an early or in a later stage of the tradition (the oldest manuscripts are probably from the tenth century). But why would this have happened? Dronke suggested that the husband might have been unsupportive, that he was either a pagan or a conformist Christian urging Perpetua to sacrifice. This seems an insufficient reason to delete the husband. We should only also ask ourselves why Perpetua's father wasn't deleted from the document? One could hardly call him supportive. Another possible reason is that the copyists deleted the husband due to the increased importance of virginal martyrs. Saints were no longer expected to interact with a husband⁴¹. But why then wasn't the child deleted as well, why was Perpetua presented as "matronaliter nupta" and why was Felicitas still presented as pregnant? Maybe the numerous clashes with her father were originally clashes with two different characters: her father and the father of her child. This merely shifts the problem to: why wasn't her father deleted and all the scenes transferred to her husband?

If we assume that the version of the text we have is a reliable copy, and that the husband never was mentioned by its author(s), then there are other possible explanations. The "most rational" solution according to Dronke, was that the husband was simply out of town the whole time. In our view, this would explain why the husband is not a character in the *Passio*. It might even explain why the author of the frame story omits any mention of the husband: in the *Passio* her father doesn't mention the husband either, e.g. in his list of persons she should feel emotionally responsible for. But his physical absence can not explain why the ego-document written by Perpetua never mentions him. Perpetua focuses all her emotional energy on her child, on her dead little brother and on her own father. A young mother, "matronaliter nupta", arrested, imprisoned and about to be executed while her husband was out of town, could reasonably be expected in any age and time to have missed her husband. All this seems to point in the direction of another explanation, an emotional or psychological explanation as the most reasonable one. It is also the one that Shaw found "most probable"⁴². Perpetua had her own personal, emotional and psychological

⁴⁰ DRONKE, *o. c.* (nr. 24), p. 282-283. JOYCE E. SALISBURY, *Perpetua's passion. The death and memory of a young Roman woman*, New York & London, 1997, p. 8 summarizes these possibilities. See also AMAT, *o. c.* (nr. 17), p. 30-31 and p. 193, note on "matronaliter nupta".

⁴¹ The *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, highly popular though not always highly orthodox pieces of hagiography from roughly the same period as this text, usually present the husband as the main opponent of the female martyr. The *Passio Perpetuae* is quite extraordinary in that the female Christian martyr has her father as the main opponent, and not her fiancé or husband as in those apocryphal acts. Maybe the authors or the copyists of the *passio* wanted to avoid offering too close a parallel with these texts. For the basic scheme and a short survey of the individual apostle-acts, see RICHARD I. PREVO, "Early Christian fiction," in J. R. MORGAN & RICHARD STONEMAN (ed.), *Greek Fiction. The Greek novel in context*, London & New York, 1994, p. 239-254; here: pp. 243-251.

⁴² Cf. *supra* nr. 38.

reasons to omit the husband and these reasons can also explain his absence in the frame story. Perpetua and her husband were no longer together. The husband does not appear because he did not want to be associated with either Perpetua or Christianity. As Jacqueline Amat remarked: "La solution la plus vraisemblable, c'est que ce mari mystérieux s'est retiré de la famille. La conversion de sa femme, et même d'une partie de sa belle-famille, a pu le pousser à fuir une situation dangereuse. Que personne ne mentionne cet abandon, c'est là discrétion et dignité"⁴³. But is it very likely that a Roman father, divorced or not, would leave his child with an imprisoned mother? This is even highly unlikely if the husband was violently opposed to the religious fervour of his former wife. It has always been assumed that the child had to remain with Perpetua because she was still breastfeeding it, but there must have been enough "nutrices" around to solve that problem. Also: could the mother simply put the child under the custody of her family members, of her father when the father of the child was still alive?⁴⁴

So we would seem to need a combination of explanations. The husband must have been both unwilling to associate with Perpetua and his family in law, and he must have been physically unavailable to his own child. It would seem then that he had fled, physically fled a dangerous situation, leaving behind both his Christian wife and his newborn child. This would explain both his absence as a character and his absence as an emotional link between Perpetua and this life, both in her own view and in the view of her remaining relatives.

In any case, the absent husband cannot simply be explained by anti-familial tendencies. The *Passio Perpetuae* shows us a Roman woman with a genuine affection for her child. The absence of her husband can be explained as a deliberate and even understandable silence both from the part of Perpetua and from the part of the author of the frame story. As in the other texts we have discussed so far, her rejection of married life is a rejection of life, not because life as such or marriage as such should be denied any value, but because remaining true to the faith is deemed more important than remaining married and/or alive.

Celibacy and martyrdom

The early Acts of the Martyrs also mention a number of Christians who lived as celibates. We have three texts where Christian celibates are only shortly mentioned. The *passio* of Marianus and Iacobus (written shortly after 300) talks about two bishops, Agapius and Secundinus, who inspired the actual martyrs of the *passio*⁴⁵. The text introduces them as "ambo spiritali dilectione concordēs, alter et carnalis continentiae sanctitate." (3, 1; p. 196) The problem is of course: what does "carnalis continentiae sanctitas" mean exactly in this period? Does it mean the bishop had remained a virgin, or should we understand it as a reference to his chaste marriage-life and a controlled attitude towards riches and pleasures?⁴⁶ Without additional information this is impossible to say.

A second text (also from North-Africa) is just as short, but much clearer. Felix, the bishop of Tibiua, is sentenced to death by the notorious proconsul Anullinus.

⁴³ AMAT, *o.c.* (nr. 17), p. 31.

⁴⁴ A similar problem could be raised in connection with the newborn child of Felicitas that was entrusted to "quaedam soror" who raised the child as her own. (15, 7; p. 158) Clearly this child must have been considered the legal property of whoever owned Felicitas?

⁴⁵ The text gives no details about the personal life of its actual subjects: Marianus and Iacobus, a deacon and a lector, travelling through Numidia.

⁴⁶ For the meaning of "continentia" we can refer to HENRY CHADWICK, *RAC* 5, s.v. "Enkrateia," Stuttgart, 1960, col. 343-365. For the evolution of the "sanctus"-concept, see of course the essay by Hippolyte Delehaye, *Sanctus. Essai sur le culte des saints dans l'antiquité*. 1954 (= 1927), SH 17 and the recent synthesis by MARC VAN UYTFANGHE, "L'origine, l'essor et les fonctions du culte des saints. Quelques repères pour un débat rouvert," *Cassiodorus* 2, 1996, pp. 135-188.

Felix says a little prayer of thanks and concludes his life with a short "curriculum vitae" (30; p. 270): "Felix episcopus elevans oculos in caelum, clara voce dixit: Deus, gratias tibi. quinquaginta et sex annos habeo in hoc saeculo. virginitatem custodivi, evangelia servavi, fidem et veritatem praedicavi."

The *passio* of the Carthaginian martyrs Montanus and Lucius (set in the reign of Valerian but possibly written at a later date) contains yet another short, indirect indication of the Christian virginity-ideal. In his last speech, just before his execution, Montanus derides the idol-worshippers, encourages heretics to return to orthodoxy, and presses his fellow Christians to remain steadfast and follow the (his?) examples of courage. For the female virgins too, he had an edifying message (14, 6; p. 226-228): "virgines quoque singulas admonebat ut sanctitatem suam tuerentur."

It gets more interesting when we consider the *passiones* that used virginity and marriage as a more or less central element in their narrative.

The oldest of these texts, the *Passio Ptolemaei et Lucii*, is quoted by Justin Martyr († 165) in his second apology (II, 2). Justin refers to the case as an illustration of the unjust accusations Christians have to endure from immoral pagans. From our perspective the text is especially interesting as an illustration of the Christian ideal of a chaste marriage and of the antithetical Christian self-definition as a morally outstanding minority in a world of licentious and immoral pagans. An unnamed woman (γυνή τις; r.1, p. 38) from Rome, married to an equally anonymous dignitary, was converted to Christianity. She gave up her licentious way of living and decided to take σωφροσύνη as her guide. She also tried to convert her husband and threatened him with the prospect of eternal fire for all those who do not live in accordance with the principles of modesty and true reason⁴⁷. The spouses estranged from each other and the woman thought a marriage was no longer possible due to the unconquerable moral differences. At first, a divorce was avoided by her relatives who advised her to be patient. The husband left for Alexandria, but when news about his misconduct reached her, she gave him the repudium. The man should have rejoiced because his wife had stopped having affairs with servants and "hirelings", had stopped drinking and even tried to get him on the right path⁴⁸. But he merely reversed the charge. He probably argued that this was a "divortium sine causa". Casually, he also mentioned that his "ex" was a Christian. Apparently this was not enough to alarm the authorities, because the wife sent a "supplicatio" to the emperor, and she remained free. The husband then tried to vent his anger at the expense of a third party, and through his relations in military and legal circles, he managed to have the man who converted his wife to Christianity, Ptolemaeus, executed⁴⁹.

This very short text (two pages in the edition by Musurillo) contains, as it were "in nucleo", a treasure of Christian ascetical themes. First of all, there is the theme of the conversion. Christianity as a "Neuheiterlebnis" enables individuals to break radically with a past they find unsatisfying. As Paul had already done in his *Letter to the Romans* 1, 24-27, paganism is put on a par with licentiousness and unclean desires, whereas Christianity is defined as temperance and a liberation of desires. This theoretical antithesis makes a compromise between paganism and Christianity totally unthinkable. And this particular text shows us that the Christian woman considered living together with her husband as totally out of the question, once it

⁴⁷ *Passio Ptolemaei et Lucii* 2, p. 38: ἐπεὶ δὲ τὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ διδάγματα ἔγνω, αὐτὴ ἐσωφρονίσθη καὶ τὸν ἄνδρα ὁμοίως σωφρονεῖν πείθειν ἐπείρατο, τὰ διδάγματα ἀναφέρουσα τὴν τε μέλλουσαν τοῖς οὐ σωφρόνως καὶ μετὰ λόγου ὀρθοῦ βιοῦσιν ἐσεσθαι ἐν αἰωνίῳ πυρὶ κόλασιν ἀπαγγέλλουσα.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 7: δέον αὐτὸν χαίρειν ὅτι ἂ παλαι μετὰ τῶν ὑπηρετῶν καὶ τῶν μισθοφόρων εὐχερῶς ἔπραττε, μέθαις χαίρουσα καὶ κακία πάσῃ, τούτων μὲν τῶν πράξεων πέπαυτο, καὶ αὐτὸν τὰ αὐτὰ παύσασθαι πρᾶττοντα ἐβούλετο.

⁴⁹ For the legal aspects of the case, see MUSURILLO, p. 39, nr. 1 with further references. The Lucius of the *passio* is a Christian who, during the trial openly protested that Ptolemaeus was convicted, not because he was guilty of any crime ("adultery, licentiousness, murder, theft of clothes, robberies, etc.") but because of the ὄνομα Χριστιανοῦ (16, p. 40). The city-prefect suspects Lucius "is one of them" and Lucius' confession immediately brings about his conviction.

had become clear that the man was not interested in her conversion-attempts. Christianity did not come to send peace but the sword. "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." (Mt. 10, 34-36; cfr. Lk. 12, 51-53) Christianity as "a domestic trouble-maker" ⁵⁰ was already at work in the *passio* of Perpetua where the conflict was one between generations, but here the Christian religion clearly incites discord between spouses.

Furthermore, the *Passio Ptolemaei et Lucii* already contains all the basic narrative themes of the (predominantly later) Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. In a linear chronology, the narrative elements could be summarised as follows. We have a rich, pagan couple. The woman is converted by a male Christian teacher. Her conversion causes the woman to break with her husband and reject the existing pagan sexual morality. The husband then tries to get his revenge through his relations in high circles and punishes the male Christian teacher. What is missing, is the miraculous aspect that allows the Christians to escape from several attempts on their lives, and the crypt-erotic elaboration of the attraction between the converted woman and the male teacher ⁵¹.

The *passio* of Potamiaena and Basilides is preserved by Eusebius (*H.E.* VI, 5) but was probably written between 205 and 210. The interrogation, torture and death of Potamiaena, and the conversion of the soldier Basilides are not interesting from our point of view, although Musurillo (p. XXVIII) calls the *passio* unique "in so far as it is the first mention of boiling pitch being used." Actually, the only interesting passage is the introduction: Potamiaena appears to have been one of those early Christian house-virgins who chose an ascetic life-style within the framework of their natural family ⁵². She lived together with her mother, Marcella (perhaps a widow), and became quite famous in Alexandria, not only because of her martyrdom, but also because of her struggle for physical purity and her virginity, "threatened" by numerous potential lovers (1, p. 132, r. 4-5): *μυρία μὲν ὑπὲρ τῆς τοῦ σώματος ἀγνείας τε καὶ παρθενίας, ἐν ᾗ διέπρεψε, πρὸς ἐραστὰς ἀγωνισαμένης*. Although, naturally, she was very beautiful and intelligent, the *passio* does not yet include physical attacks on her virginity, by the different marriage-candidates, or by the judge and/or his assistants. Neither does the original text mention a causal connection between her virginity-ideal and her arrest. That is exactly what Palladius will do when he inserted an alternative version of this *passio* in his *Historia Lausiaca*. He ascribes her arrest to a pagan "conspiracy" against her physical integrity ⁵³. The old *passio* does mention the

⁵⁰ DODDS, *o. c.* (nr. 30), p. 116.

⁵¹ See PREVO, *o. c.* (nr. 41). For the erotic elements, we can refer to J. D. KAESTLI, "Les principales orientations de la recherche sur les actes apocryphes des apôtres" in F. BOVON & M. VAN ESBRÖEK (ed.), *Les actes apocryphes des apôtres. Christianisme et monde païen*, Genève, 1981, p. 49-67; here: p. 65.

⁵² The best known "house-virgin" is of course Macrina who was immortalized by her brother Gregory of Nyssa. (Pierre MARAVAL (ed.), *Vie de sainte Macrine*, SC 178, Paris, 1971) See also Susanna ELM, *Virgins of God*, Oxford, 1993, p. 374. Elm, however, does not refer to the origin of the Potamiaena-passage in Palladius.

⁵³ Palladius has an alternative version in the third chapter of his *Historia Lausiaca* (ca. 420 A.D.; G. J. M. BARTELINK (ed.), *Historia Lausiaca. Vite dei santi II*, Milano, 1974, pp. 24-26). It is presented as a story that Isidorus of Alexandria had heard directly from Antony. The changes Palladius introduced are typical of the growing influence of the novel-like anti-sexual erotics in the Christian biographical literature: first of all, Potamiaena is no longer an independent virgin who lived with her mother and rejected respectable marriage candidates. She is now the slave of a pagan master who had tried to seduce her in a number of ways. (3,1; p. 24: *ὡραιότατη κόρη ὑπῆρχε παιδίσκη τινός· ἦν πολλαῖς λιπαρήσας ὑποσχέσασιν ὁ ταύτης δεσπότης ἀναπεῖσαι οὐκ ἠδυνήθη*.) The mother has disappeared in Palladius' version. The reason for Potamiaena's arrest is here directly linked to her virginity-ideal. She is turned in by her frustrated master. By bribing the judges, he tried to obtain that her life would be spared if she would, eventually, comply with his sexual desires. (3,2: *ἐὰν συνθῇται μοι τῷ σκόπῳ, ἀτιμώρητον αὐτὴν φύλαξον*.) The increased passivity and dependence ascribed to Potamiaena

feelings of hatred expressed by the pagan crowd: when the soldier Basilides takes her away to be executed, he is forced to hold off an angry crowd, that tries to harass her and shock her by shouting scurrilous remarks ⁵⁴. It is not unthinkable that this passage echoes a pagan hostility against the Christian virginity-ideal, although the context seems rather to point to an angry reaction to her insulting remarks regarding the pagan cults (2, p. 132, r. 11-13). In that interpretation, the crowd apparently thought that scurrilous remarks constituted the most effective strategy to affect or hurt "the wallflower" Potamiaena.

The three "pure and venerable women" from Thessalonica – Agapa, Irena and Chiona – who "were fulfilled by the Holy Gost" and "had clothed themselves in virtuousness", are not house-virgins in the ecclesiastical sense of the word, although they were three unmarried sisters still living at home. When the tetrarchic persecution started, they fled to a nearby mountain and, in the course of their action, they left behind birth-town, family, property and other possessions. (1, 2; p. 280) Their activities were centred on prayer, so their bodies dwelt on a mountain, but their souls resided in heaven. (1, 3; p. 280) In fact, their flight from persecution brought them in a situation that could be called analogous to the way of life of the anchorites ⁵⁵. Nevertheless, this theme is not really worked out, since the following sentence already mentions their arrest. And, together with four other girls, they are brought before the prefect. Agapa and Chiona are immediately executed, the five others are taken to prison *διὰ τὸ νέον τῆς ἡλικίας* (4, 4; p. 286) ⁵⁶ Irena is called before the prefect for a second time, after some Christian books were discovered in her home. Irena denies that any member of her family had been aware of these concealed writings. She argues that the sisters had considered their own family-members (who had apparently remained pagan) as their worst enemies. They even had been afraid of being turned in ⁵⁷. The theme of Christianity as an element of domestic disruption is here accompanied by a new theme: the brothel as an element of torture for Christian virgins, and the miraculous preservation of their chastity. Irena was put naked in the state brothel, but she miraculously preserved her purity. No one dared to approach her, or even to address an insulting word to her ⁵⁸. So the female martyr was simply burnt alive.

by Palladius in the first part (a passivity and a threat to her chastity with probable erotic connotations for the ancient reader, in light of the traditions of the ancient novel) is structurally contrasted by the torture scene with the boiling pitch in the second part of § 3. Here the boiling pitch is no longer poured over her body drop by drop; it is Potamiaena herself who asks to be let into the barrel centimetre by centimetre, as an illustration of the endurance Christ gives to his followers (3, 3-4, pp. 24-26).

⁵⁴ *Passio Potamiaenae*... 3, p. 132, r. 16-17: *ὥς δὲ τὸ πλῆθος ἐνοχλεῖν αὐτῇ καὶ ἀκολάστοις ἐνυβρίζειν ῥήμασιν ἐπειράτο*.

⁵⁵ The persecutions as a *praeparatio* for asceticism or asceticism as a continuation of the heroic time of the martyrs is a motif that has attracted the attention of numerous modern researchers. It is not impossible that Christians who took to the mountains or the deserts to hide from the authorities, learned to value this way of life and continued to live in this manner after the persecution had ended. Fundamental reading is still M. VILLER, "Le martyre et l'ascèse", *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 6, 1925, 105-149 *passim* but here especially pp. 115-117. Interesting source-material was also collected by A. VÖÖBUS, *History of asceticism in the Syrian Orient. Vol. 1: The origins of asceticism. Early monasticism in Persia*, CSCO 184, Leuven, 1958, p. 148.

⁵⁶ Amongst these five, was also Eutychia, who was already taken to prison in 3, 7 because she was pregnant. Eutychia had testified that her husband had died seven months earlier. The prefect asks two times how it is that she got pregnant if her man had died. The text contains no elements concerning the stage of her pregnancy or concerning the medical ideas of the prefect, so the passage should probably be interpreted as Musurillo suggested, as "merely a tasteless form of wit" (3, 6-7, p. 284 and p. 285, nr. 13.)

⁵⁷ Cf. 5, 4; p. 288: *τοὺς ἰδίους ἐχθρῶν χειρόνας ἡγήσάμεθα μήπως κατηγορήσωσιν ἡμῶν*.

⁵⁸ The conviction: 5, 8, p. 290: *... εἰς πορνείον στήναι γυμνὴν κελεύω*. The miraculous rescue 6, 2, p. 290. Bowersock, *o. c.* (nr. 1), p. 53-54 refers to the horror of the spectators upon seeing a naked Perpetua and Felicitas. "Similarly the meager evidence for punishment by prostitution suggests that the civic interest in such exploitation of female martyrs may have been less than Roman officials anticipated."

In a text that is also dated to the early fourth century, the *Acta Pionii*, we find the same theme, but without the miraculous rescue. One of the fellow martyrs of the presbyter Pionius, Sabina, had smiled when Pionius had encouraged his prosecutors to convert to Christianity by threatening them with the prospect of the eternal fire. The pagans reacted furiously, because the smile was presumably inspired by an anticipated unholy glee. They tried to spoil Sabina's good spirits by threatening to put her in a brothel (8, 6, p. 146): Σὺ μὲν ὃ οὐ θέλεις μέλλεις πάσχειν· αἱ γὰρ μὴ ἐπιθύουσαι εἰς πορνεῖον ἵστανται. Whether the threat was really carried out is not clear since the rest of the *passio* deals exclusively with Pionius' fate.

The brothel-motif appears as an extra theme in the Christian self-definition. The way the pagan threat was put into words seems to indicate an awareness of the Christian sensitivity concerning this subject. Of course, we should never forget that even the "authentic" Acts of the Martyrs, and therefore also the pagan dialogues in those acts, were written by Christians. The Christians of the early fourth century used these texts to present themselves as the victims of the intolerantly licentious pagans.

Conclusion

Christianity was a movement that offered an alternative social identity. Christians were no longer (primarily) members of the "earthly polis" and they were supposed to reject all its aspects at least at a theoretical level. This is expressed in all the texts about married martyrs (Perpetua, Papyrus, Irenaeus and Phileas). Confronted with their family (parents, spouses and children) they reject their earthly ties and obligations. They choose for their "spiritual" family and for the obligations connected to their Christian social identity. In daily life, there is no mention of a problematisation of sexuality (nor for clerics, nor for laymen), but in the crisis-situation of the persecutions other priorities prevail.

We have also found a number of texts where the celibate life is shortly mentioned (Marianus, Felix and Montanus), and an equal number of texts that have made the rejection of sexuality and the family into a narrative element. (Ptolemaeus, Potamiaena and Agapa). Here we have found analogies with the basic scheme of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the appearance "in nucleo" of the motif of the rejected "lover" as the reason for an arrest ("virginitas"-martyrium) and the brothel-motif as a threat to the physical integrity of the Christian virgins (also, in a sense, present in the *passio Pionii*).

In conclusion, we can state that the early acts and *passiones* express an anti-theoretical Christian self-definition. The Christians are presented as virtuous and detached; the pagans as licentious and conformist. In addition, the texts, seen as a corpus, already contain all the elements of the Christian anti-sexual erotics we will find in the later, so-called "epic" *passiones*: the rejection (by married people) of marriage and children, the rejection of marriage-candidates in favour of the virginity-ideal, the pagans as licentious individuals, the revenge of frustrated marriage-partners or pagans who react in an intolerant way upon the Christian refusal of other, sexually linked activities, the threat of deflowering in the brothel and the miraculous preservation of chastity.

In the post-nicene acts and *passiones* these elements will be combined into a very complex and paradoxical mixture of themes. Martyrdom equals eternal life. Virginity equals death of the desires. Choosing for the earthly life implies eternal death; and giving in to licentiousness means the "death" of virginity. One only has to link the horizontal lines to get the "diesseitige" association between Eros and Thanatos. The number of virgin martyrs will increase dramatically, but in the early Acts of the Martyrs, marriage and sexuality in general are not rejected as bad or contrary to the faith. It is only in times of crisis that the martyr should be "*melior*e cupiditate detentus."

SUMMARY

In the early Christian Acts of the Martyrs marriage and sexuality are rejected as part of the ties that bind the individual to society, to this world. Although a great number of martyrs were married and had children, the crisis situation of the persecutions revived the eschatologically motivated rejection of the family we find in some New Testament writings. This is why several early martyrs deny having spouses or children "after the flesh". The stock answer "Christianus sum" in interrogation scenes has a similar motivation: the Christians reject their normal social identity and present themselves solely as members of a Jenseits-oriented religious group. But a few early Acts and *Passiones* of celibate martyrs already offer all the elements that can be found in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and will be elaborated in the so-called "epic" virginity-passiones.

ABRÉGÉ

Le refus du mariage et de la sexualité dans les Actes des Martyrs authentiques doit être lié au refus des liens qui rattachent l'individu à la société, à ce monde-ci. Un nombre considérable des martyrs sont présentés comme mariés, comme des parents, mais la crise des persécutions a revitalisé le refus de la famille qui, dans les écrits du Nouveau Testament avait une motivation d'ordre eschatologique. C'est la raison pour laquelle un bon nombre des martyrs niaient même devant les juges ou devant le public d'être mariés ou d'avoir des enfants. La réponse stéréotypée de 'Christianus sum' avait une motivation analogue. Les chrétiens reniaient leur identité sociale normale: ils voulaient se présenter uniquement comme les membres d'un group religieux axé sur l'au-delà. Mais dans ce même corpus on trouve aussi des textes sur des martyrs célibataires qui contiennent déjà tous les éléments qu'on retrouve dans les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres ou dans les passions tardives dites épiques, en combinant martyre et ascèse sexuelle, virginité et persécution.