

Sacrificing the Family: Christian Martyrs and their Kin

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Like all creeds which claim the *total* allegiance of the individual ...
early Christianity was a powerful divisive force.
E.R. Dodds

One of the many complaints brought against Christians by the second-century polemicist Celsus was that in their zeal for gaining converts Christian evangelists of low estate habitually ensnared young children of better background and turned them against their non-Christian fathers. Only they, the Christians, knew the proper way to live and to find true happiness, and so they encouraged the respectable young to disregard, and even to rebel against, their pagan fathers and the foolish views their fathers held. Children's teachers (*didaskaloi*) they likewise attacked:

In private houses also we see wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who would not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters. But whenever they get hold of children in private and some stupid women with them, they let out some astounding statements as, for example, that they must not pay any attention to their father and school-teachers, but must obey them; they say that these talk nonsense and have no understanding, and that in reality they neither know nor are able to do anything good, but are taken up with mere empty chatter. But they alone, they say, know the right way to live, and if the children would believe them, they would become happy and make their home happy as well. And if just as they are speaking they see one of the school-teachers coming, or some intelligent person, or even the father himself, the more cautious of them

flee in all directions; but the more reckless urge the children on to rebel. They whisper to them that in the presence of their father and their schoolmasters they do not feel able to explain anything to the children, since they do not want to have anything to do with the silly and obtuse teachers who are totally corrupted and far gone in wickedness and who inflict punishment on the children. But, if they like, they should leave father and their schoolmasters, and go along with the women and little children who are their playfellows to the wooldresser's shop, or to the cobbler's or the washerwoman's shop, that they may learn perfection. And by saying this they persuade them.¹

Celsus' remarks imply that proselytising Christians of the second century were seriously undermining the conventional relationship between father and child in Roman society—that they were subverting a crucial element of traditional Roman family life. Fathers at Rome had always been expected to look to the well-being of their children, to provide for them and to prepare them for adulthood, and this obligation prevailed wherever Roman culture established itself. In elite circles, of which most is known, it was the father's duty to ensure the continuation of the family name and cult, and to see to the maintenance of family success in the public domain. Fathers were particularly expected to look to the education of their sons and to contract suitable matches for their daughters—which is not to say that daughters might not be well-educated as well—and presumably elite fathers set standards for the rest of society. There is some evidence to suggest so. In return, children were expected to show their fathers dutiful obedience and respect, to assimilate and later replicate the family ideals their fathers inculcated in them, and to care for them—and their mothers—in old age. Roman culture was fundamentally patriarchal, with the *pater* always the uniquely dominant head of his household, exercising an authority (*patria potestas*) unique to Roman culture. And while within the Roman Empire as a whole in Celsus' day other family traditions than those of Rome were obviously to be found—Greek and Jewish traditions for instance—nowhere was the Roman paradigm of

¹ Celsus in Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.55 (trans. Chadwick 1953: 165–166). On the date (late second century probably) and identity of Celsus, see Chadwick 1953: xxiv–xxix; he is known only from Origen; for discussion see Wilken 1984: 94–125. As observed by Harnack 1908: 396, Origen does not deny the truth of Celsus' claim about children and women, 'He simply declares that they were all the better for it.' On the importance of women in Christian evangelism implicit in Celsus' text, see MacDonald 1996: 109–114.

patriarchy seriously at odds with other social and cultural norms. If, consequently, Christians were assaulting the bond between father and child, they were in a sense threatening the very foundations of society.²

To think of early Christians as subverters of the family seems a strange, if not preposterous, idea. From a very early date in their history Christians appropriated the language of the family to characterise the new community they set out to construct—they were all for example ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ in Christ—which suggests both that they recognised that the family was the fundamental building block of their society, and that they wished it to remain so. Moreover, certain forms of early Christian teaching, as seen in the injunctions of the New Testament ‘household code’ tradition especially, offered prescriptions for behaviour within the family that if anything worked to reaffirm and strengthen traditional ideals: ‘Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter towards them. Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they should become discouraged’ (Colossians 3.18–21; cf. Ephesians 5.22–25; 6.1–4; 1 Peter 3.1, 7). Yet a rationale for attacking conventional family structures could easily be found, if one were needed, in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, which in a manner completely different from that of the household code tradition subordinated the interests of family to the spiritual development of the individual: ‘For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law... He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me’ (Matthew 10:35, 37); ‘For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’ (Luke 12:52–53; cf. 14.26; Mark 10:29–30; Gospel of Thomas 101). From this perspective, the individual’s spiritual progress was so important that nothing was to impede it, and if this meant abandoning family members

² On the traditional familial obligations of fathers and children in classical society, as well as something of the lived reality, see variously Rawson 1986; Dixon 1988: 26–28; Golden 1990; Eyben 1991; Treggiari 1991: 125–160; Strauss 1993; Reinhartz 1993; Yarbrough 1993; Pomeroy 1997: 141–160; Parkin 2003: 205–216; Rawson 2003. Some evidence: Bradley 1991: 105–124. *Pater*: on the distinctiveness of *patria potestas* in Roman culture, see for a vigorous statement Cantarella 2003.

or severing familial bonds, such was the price that had to be paid. In the end, therefore, the activities of which Celsus complained were based on ideas that were not just subversive: they were revolutionary, harbouring the potential to disrupt conventional familial structures over much of the ancient Mediterranean world.³

Was that potential ever realised? Certainly the various forms of asceticism with which the history of early Christianity is associated are likely, by their very nature, to have had an impact on the traditional ideology and patterns of family life—the development of monastic communities, for instance, which provided alternative social arrangements for their members, or marriages in which Christian men and women abandoned sexual relations, presumably to the detriment of biological reproduction. In this essay, however, I want to consider the relevance to the question of a different innovation in imperial Christian history, namely the rise of martyrdom, the early records of which have much of interest for family studies under the high Roman Empire. The pre-Constantinian records of martyrdom, the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* as they are generally known, provide very vivid, even dynamic glimpses of family relationships and especially of families in turmoil. So it is the association between Christianity and family disruption that the documents reveal that will form the main object of my concern. What I want to illustrate is that through the vehicle of martyrdom Christianity promoted familial discord in a way that was new, and not at all part of Roman family experience in the pre-Christian epoch.⁴

³ Cf. Barclay 1997: 74: ‘Celsus reacts with the outrage of a man whose cultural assumptions are greatly threatened.’ On Jesus’ hostility to the family in the canonical Gospels, see Wilson 1992: 86, 254; for the paradoxical development of how (and simultaneously) early Christianity embedded itself in conventions of family life, see Barclay 1997: 75–78; and for various perspectives on the metaphorical use of family language by early Christians, see Aasgaard 1997 and Sandnes 1997. For the practical effects of Christian ‘brotherhood’, see Meeks 1986: 121–122, and on the replacement of the natural family by the Christian family, Meeks 1986: 125–126 (his concept of ‘deep resocialization’ [129], however, minimises from a pagan perspective the revolutionary character of what was involved). Bowersock 1995: 44–45 relates the development of Christian family language to the ‘spiritual family’ concept inherent in ‘ancient philosophical and rhetorical schools,’ though this seems a forced connection to me. On the anti-familial character of the Gospel of Thomas, see Uro 1997.

⁴ On Christian asceticism in its various forms, see for example Frend 1984: index s.vv. ‘Ascetics’; ‘Monasticism’; Clark 1986; Brown 1988 (above all); Clark 1993: 94–118; MacDonald 1996: 127–182. Records of martyrdom: standard collection in Knopf-Krüger-Ruhbach 1965 and, with English translation, Musurillo 1972. In what follows I

Christian martyr acts are a unique type of evidence, the result, on the one hand, of the cult of everlasting glory through death for the faith some early Christians followed, and, on the other hand, the willingness of Roman authorities to execute men and women whose lack of religious, and hence political, loyalty to Rome was legally demonstrable. Whether they owe anything to a putative Christian invention of martyrdom is more open to question.⁵ Chronologically they extend from the early second century to the early fourth century, while geographically they record events (or apparent events) from many regions of the Empire but especially from North Africa and Asia Minor. Invariably, too, they reflect events (or apparent events) which took place in the cities of the Empire. Their historicity has long been a matter of controversy. The documents vary a great deal in form and content, and are evidently the creation of Christian authors or redactors whose purpose was to extol martyrdom. As such they are overladen with fanciful embellishments and fictional elements. But many appear to derive either from records of trials held by Roman provincial governors when Christians were accused or suspected of contravening imperial edicts compelling them to participate in Roman religious rites, or else from reports of executions from people who had witnessed them.⁶ To this extent, therefore, whether in the form of trial

quote the translations of Musurillo and for the sake of convenience use his English titles for individual martyrologies. Familial discord: the disruptive potential for family life of early Christianity has long been noted (see for example Harnack 1908: 393–398; Dodds 1970: 115–116 [from which my epigraph is taken]; Lane Fox 1987: 423–424; Meeks 1986: 22–23, 129; MacDonald 1996: 111, and Barclay 1997: 73–75 [with special reference to the New Testament]; cf. Shaw 1993: 22; Nathan 2000: 48–51; Bremmer 2002: 93); but I know of no extended modern treatment of the topic. Hopkins 1999: 115 sees ‘internal conflict within the family’ as a manipulable theme in the ‘new genre of Christian literature’ the martyr acts represent (the ‘new genre’ is ambiguously contested by Bremmer 2002: 78–80).

⁵ Everlasting glory: see Lane Fox 1987: 439–441. Invention of martyrdom: Bowersock 1995. The martyr acts show in some cases that their authors were familiar with earlier models of resistance to authority akin to if not identical with Christian martyrdom, in particular the models of Socrates and the Jewish Mother of the Maccabees and her seven sons who died horrible deaths resisting the persecution of the Jews by the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV. But the degree of similarity between the earlier models and the Christian accounts is disputed; see Boyarin 1999.

⁶ For an argument that martyrdom does not appear in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) until the Book of Daniel (and only then under Hellenistic influence), see Brettler 2002; for a firm statement on the existence of a Jewish-Greek tradition of martyrdom from the second century BC to the second century AD (at least), see Rajak 1997; and for a discussion of how Christian martyrdom both resembled and differed from examples of heroic

summaries, epistles to Christian congregations or extended narratives, the records are likely to reflect a factual substratum in most cases. Here, however, the issue of factual authenticity is less important than the assumptions the documents make about the general norms of family life and the specific forms of family conduct martyrdom provoked. The records of martyrdom mirror, and derive much of their historical plausibility from, the idioms of urban, civic life in the second and third centuries. Consequently what they assume about family life must also bear a close relationship to conventional social reality, no matter what the factual accuracy of particular martyrdom episodes. Similarly the family events recorded, no matter whether literally true in all cases, must be allowed a claim on historical plausibility since the original audiences of the martyrologies had to find them convincing. The *Acts* were intended to confirm the faith of those who read or heard them by inspiring admiration for, if not emulation of, the heroes who had given their lives for their belief in Christ. That purpose could hardly have been achieved had the factual record their authors described been anything but recognisably credible, in principle, to the documents' audiences.⁷

death in the Roman tradition, see Straw 2002. In my view connections between Christian martyrdoms and earlier models cannot be denied, but the stress placed on self-sacrifice as a hopeful means, if not a guarantee, of achieving a blessed afterlife (in contrast, say, to the Jewish tradition of 'dying for the Law' identified by Rajak 1997) distinguishes the Christian accounts from their predecessors. The Jewish martyrs of 4 Maccabees (Eleazar, the Mother of the Maccabees and her seven sons) are represented as finally standing 'before God's throne, enjoying a life of blessedness' (Rajak 1997: 40) and the Maccabean accounts certainly show some interest in eternal life (e.g. 2 Maccabees 7.9, 7.36); but the hope of resurrection is only one of several motivating factors controlling the Maccabean martyrdoms according to van Henten 1997; cf. Droge & Tabor 1992: 75–76, 156; see also Lane Fox 1987: 436–437. On the pagan tradition of noble deaths, which to my mind have to be firmly distinguished from Christian martyrdoms on eschatological grounds, the material in Musurillo 1954: 236–246 remains very useful. Much might depend of course on the definition of martyrdom adopted. That provided by van Henten & Aevermarie 2002: 3 ('a martyr is a person who in an extremely hostile situation prefers a violent death to compliance with a demand of the [usually pagan] authorities') seems to me to neglect the eschatological motivations and concerns evident in the Christian accounts. On the historicity and character of the Christian martyr acts at large, see variously Delehaye 1966 (originally published in 1921): 15–131; Frend 1965; Lane Fox 1987: 419–492 (an outstanding account); Bowersock 1995: 23–39; Hopkins 1999: 114–123. On the role in Christian trials perhaps played by provincial governors' personal religious views, note Rives 1996.

⁷ From a family history standpoint the story of the Mother of the Maccabees cannot be regarded as anticipating the episodes of familial disruption of concern here: there is no familial discord in the story at all.

To turn then to the records in detail, a beginning can be made with a case of divorce at Rome in the middle of the second century. It followed a Roman woman's conversion to Christianity, and the consequent growth of a religious rift between the woman and her husband. The case is reported in the *Martyrdom of Ptolemaeus and Lucius*, which is an extract in fact from Justin Martyr's *Second Apology* (2.2 [cf. Eusebius, *HE* 4.17]). The Roman woman did not herself become a martyr. So her divorce cannot be said to have been due to the desire for a swift translation through death to a blessed afterlife. But as a prelude to the main theme the case is immediately valuable for showing the impact on marriage that one partner's conversion to the new religion could have. The husband and wife (they are never named) were dissolute characters who for most of their marriage engaged in all sorts of immoral and scandalous behaviour. But when the wife heard the teachings of the Christian Ptolemaeus she converted and gave up her wicked ways. Subsequently she tried to convert her husband too, but when he rejected her overtures she thought it would be wrong to continue to live with him, and so began to contemplate divorce. Those close to her, however, relatives it seems, advised her to remain married in the hope that eventually the husband would reform, and the woman acquiesced. But after reports arrived that the husband, on a visit to Alexandria, was behaving worse than ever, she 'repudiated' and left him, 'not wishing to become an accomplice in his crimes and injustices by remaining in wedlock with him, sharing his bed and board.'⁸

Divorce was common in Roman society, at least among the upper classes. The causes were multifarious: immorality of one sort or another, on one side or the other, or sometimes the demands of politics. This instance of divorce certainly depended, from the wife's point of view, on the husband's unacceptable behaviour, which apparently included (though this is only implied) sexual misconduct. But his behaviour had not been problematical before the wife's conversion, when she too had taken 'pleasure in drunkenness and every sort of vice.' Yet her standards of propriety suddenly changed, and the case suggests, therefore, that the new religion could become an unantici-

⁸ For the date of the episode, see Barnes 1968: 515; cf. Musurillo 1972: xvi-xvii. The case is very speculatively discussed by Grant 1985 and MacDonald 1996: 205-213; cf. Millar 1977: 562-563; Evans Grubbs 1995: 245-246. Lane Fox 1987: 423-424 regards it as symptomatic of others that never came to public attention. Bremmer 1989 offers speculations on why upper-class women were attracted to Christianity, assuming too confidently in my view that the divorcing woman here was of elite status; Clark 1993 provides a more nuanced view.

pated source of friction in a marriage, as one partner converted but not the other, and that it could create grounds for the termination of a union by unexpectedly changing the rules and the understandings that had previously governed a given marriage. In this case there is no way of judging the protagonists' competing moral stances, of knowing how wicked the husband was or how morally transformed his wife became: Justin's account is obviously tendentious. But the wife's conversion unquestionably led to marital conflict, as she first formed the intention to divorce and then acted on it, and the conflict was not resolved quickly: for the husband challenged the divorce, on the grounds that his wife had left him without his consent; she appealed to the emperor, successfully; and he finally sought revenge by persecuting the unfortunate agent of his misfortune, the Christian teacher Ptolemaeus. None of this could have happened without the initial experience of Christian conversion.⁹

It is possible, moreover, that the divorce affected a wide circle of kin, not just the spouses. If it was indeed relatives who advised her to stay with her husband when the woman first considered divorce, the advice given offers a hint, at a minimum, of a threat the prospect of divorce raised before a broad family group which the group as a whole wished to eliminate. There are Roman precedents, certainly, for the extensive family's perception of a widespread problem that at first involved only two of its members and its consequent open expression of concern. However, when the woman acted unilaterally and invoked the law to her personal advantage—*repudium* was the appropriate legal if perhaps uncommon recourse for a wife affected by her husband's shameful behaviour—she acted against the interests of the wider circle of kin, and her actions are likely to have had unsettling repercussions for its members. Those repercussions depended again in the first instance on the spread of the Christian message. A Christian audience would of course have been expected to applaud the woman's actions. But on a dispassionate view conversion to Christianity emerges here as a catalyst of family turmoil when an individual's preoccupation with the spiritual suddenly altered the rules of comportment within marriage, and the impact was felt by both the marital partner and the wider family circle.¹⁰

⁹ On causes of divorce, see Treggiari 1991: 461–465. On the presentation of appeals to the emperor by private citizens, see Millar 1977: 537–549.

¹⁰ Precedents: Bradley 1991: 186–191. *Repudium*: Treggiari 1991: 436–437, 438–440.

Next a case of fraternal strife. In the *Martyrdom of Marian and James*, an account of the condemnation and execution of a Christian *lector* and deacon in North Africa in the mid-third century, the incidental history of a certain Aemilian is recounted. This man was a Christian of equestrian rank aged close to fifty who had lived a life of chastity (note the asceticism) and had recently been imprisoned for his faith. In prison he fasted and prayed. He also—as martyrs often did—had a vision, a report of which in his own words the *Martyrdom* preserves. In the dream Aemilian encountered his brother, a pagan who was ill-disposed to him because of his Christian beliefs. The two conversed, antagonistically, the brother continually taunting Aemilian and asking ominous questions, Aemilian responding spiritedly and, in the end, triumphantly:

Led out of prison...I was met by a pagan, my own brother in the flesh. Very inquisitive about our affairs, he asked in a taunting voice how we were getting on with the darkness and the starvation of prison.

I replied that the soldiers of Christ even in a dungeon enjoy the most brilliant light, and in their fasting have the satisfying food of God's word. When he heard this, he said: 'You may be sure that a capital penalty will await all of you who are kept in prison, if you stubbornly persist!'

But I was afraid that he had made up a lie to trick me. Wishing to confirm my prayerful desire, I asked: 'Truly, shall we all suffer?'

But he assured me once again: 'You are threatened by bloodshed and the sword. But what I would like to know,' he said, 'is this: Will all of you who despise this life receive equally the reward of heavenly gifts without distinction?'

'I am not capable,' I replied, 'of passing judgement on so weighty a matter. Lift your eyes for a moment,' I said, 'to heaven, and you will see a countless host of flashing stars. Does every star shine with the glory of equal light? And yet all share the same light.'

In his probing way he still found a further question to ask. 'If there is some distinction,' he said, 'which of you are higher in meriting the goodwill of your Lord?'

'As a matter of fact,' I said, 'there are two who are superior to the rest, but their names may not be told to you and are known only to God.'

Finally when he began to press more sharply and to be more annoying with his questions, I told him: ‘Those whose victory is slower and with greater difficulty, these receive the more glorious crown. Hence it has been written: *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.*’¹¹

Christian audiences will doubtless have been cheered by the way Aemilian overcame (as he must) his brother’s assaults on the faith. But again on an unbiased view what really emerges in this exchange is a pitiful illustration of how the new cult had driven a wedge between two men who were no longer able to maintain the fraternal bond that was their birthright. In Roman ideology the bond between brothers was very close indeed—even if allowance had to be made for the fratricidal legacy of Rome’s founder—providing a model, it has been said, for all sorts of other social relationships, between friends for instance or soldiers or even lovers. In another Christian document, the *Acts of Phileas* (B 8.1), the bond can still be seen in the early fourth century to be of vital importance when an advocate in court makes a desperate attempt to save his contumacious Christian brother from execution. In Aemilian’s case, however, the potential for the Christian cult to become a divisive, disruptive force in the family is inescapably clear, for in its uncompromising rigidity and exclusiveness it has separated men who shared a natural bond from birth. The evidence is no more than that of a dream, but it is a dream that Christian audiences were expected to accept as realistic in its demonstration of Aemilian’s superior Christian dialectic. It reveals now an unfortunate social reality.¹²

Aemilian’s brother, it should be noted in passing, is introduced in the *Martyrdom of Marian and James* as Aemilian’s ‘*frater...carnalis*’ (8.2 [‘brother in the flesh’]), an ironic label to say the least. The appropriation of family language to signify brotherhood in Christ was so pervasive in early Christianity (as the martyrdom accounts themselves amply reveal) that real family connections could become obscured, with the consequence that a

¹¹ *Martyrdom of Marian and James* 8.2–11. For the date of the document, see Musurillo 1972: xxxiv (259; Birley 1991: 603, placing the martyrdoms recorded ‘in the spring of 259’), and see in general Delehay 1966: 59–62. Vision: note the remarks of Prinzivalli 201: 123.

¹² Model: Bannon 1997. For the date of the *Acts of Phileas*, see Musurillo 1972: xlvi; Pietersma 1984: 23; and on the different versions, Lane Fox 1987: 434–435; for the brother, cf. also Pietersma 1984: 70.

biological brotherly bond such as the one here had to be glossed for purposes of basic communication. Another example appears in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* (7.5), a document to which I shall return. In a small but telling way, the phrase reveals how for some the new, artificial Christian family was coming to supersede the natural family. Christian ‘brothers’ could live together in *societas* and share *domestici affectus*, and the Christian community could see itself characterised by *concordia*, *pax*, and *unanimitas*, as the martyr acts make clear. Some might have thought under such conditions that traditional configurations of family values were becoming obsolete.¹³

The martyrdom of the Greek woman Agathonicê took place at Pergamum perhaps during the Decian persecution of 250–1 rather than in the second century. The date is not absolutely certain. It is reported in two accounts of the trials and deaths of other Christians named Carpus and Papyrus, one version, the earlier, written in Greek, the other in Latin. The accounts differ appreciably. In the Greek version Agathonicê throws herself onto the stake and immolates herself as an act of solidarity when the other martyrs Carpus and Papyrus have been tried and are about to be burned, while in the Latin account Agathonicê is tried and condemned by a Roman proconsul independently of the trials of others. In the Greek version her death is spontaneous, in the Latin more calculated. Redactors tampered with the Greek version, it has been thought, wishing to expunge from the record any notion of a voluntary martyrdom.¹⁴

The significant point for present purposes is that in both versions Agathonicê is advised before she dies to take pity on her children—she has a son in the Greek version and children, in the plural, in the Latin—to consider, in effect, what will become of her offspring if she dies. The intent of those offering the advice was evidently to deter her from ending her life by appealing to the fate of her children and her responsibility as a mother to

¹³ The Latin terms come respectively from the *Martyrdom of Marian and James* 1.2 (cf. 11.1: Agapius loved Tertulla and Antonia like children [*ad vicem pignerum*]); and the *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius* 11.6.

¹⁴ *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonicê* A 42–47; B 6.1–5. For the date, see Barnes 1968: 514–515; cf. Musurillo 1972: xv, preferring the second century. On the documents in general, see Delehay 1966: 99–102. Tampered: Barnes 1968: 527; cf. 514: ‘The Latin version...seems to have been revised in the interests of orthodoxy’; cf. Bowersock 1995: 39, and note *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4, for the discountenancing of voluntary martyrdom.

look to their well-being. In the Greek version, the crowd attending the proconsul's hearing, once aware of Agathonicê's intention to kill herself, shouts out: 'Have pity on your son' (A 43), and in the Latin version both the crowd and the proconsul urge her to the same end: 'While the crowd cried out to her: 'Have pity on yourself and on your children', the proconsul said: 'Look to yourself; have pity on yourself and on your children, as the crowd cries'' (B 6.2). The obvious implication is that a mother's first responsibility was to care for her offspring and to place their interests above her own—this is the behaviour that would prevail in normal circumstances—but in her response Agathonicê shows how the Christian mother, from her Christian point of view, can easily reject conventional norms and abandon her children with a clear conscience. Her son, she says in the Greek version, 'has God who can take pity on him; for he has providence over all' (A 44); and, in the Latin account, 'My children have God, who watches over them' (B 6.3). Yet the result was that because of her Christian devotion Agathonicê left her offspring to fend for themselves (no details are provided of a father or other relatives), and so forfeited all claim to the title of responsible mother in conventional terms. In the Greek version of her death, when, following the deaths of Carpus and Papyrus, Agathonicê has a vision of 'the glory of the Lord' (A 42) and immediately destroys herself, martyrdom appears as a contagious, impetuous force that overwhelms everything in its path, family bonds included. In the Latin version martyrdom is equally catastrophic, but here it is more disturbing still since Agathonicê's death and abandonment of her children depend no longer on the compelling, irresistible example of others, but on her own cool-headed calculations before the proconsul. Whichever version is the more accurate, Agathonicê emerges in either case as an unnatural mother whose actions to the non-Christian majority are incomprehensible. To Christians, frighteningly, she is an example of courage and commitment.¹⁵

A coda to Agathonicê's history, equally frightening to my mind, is found in the *Martyrdom of Marian and James* (13.1–2), the mid-third century record of executions in North Africa already mentioned. Marian's mother is the crucial figure here. Appearing in the narrative only in its final stage when Marian the *lector* has died, she displays an almost pathological fascination with his corpse and reacts to his death, amazingly, with joy: 'When this was

¹⁵ Droge & Tabor 1992: 138 implausibly suggest that Agathonicê was not a Christian but 'a pagan onlooker, who was sparked off by the sight of Carpus's death.'

all over, Marian's mother, now sure of her son once his passion was finished, rejoiced like the mother of the Maccabees, congratulating not only Marian but also herself that she had borne such a son. In the body of her son she embraced the glory of her own womb; again and again with religious devotion she pressed her lips to the wounds of his neck.' Now in the demographic regime that prevailed in Roman antiquity the untimely loss of a child was a commonplace event that any parent, regardless of social status, might reasonably anticipate. Responses on the part of adults varied. At one extreme an excess of grief might pour forth, the reaction of Cicero to the death of his adult daughter Tullia providing the classic illustration. At the opposite extreme philosophers might urge, and presumably some parents adopt, an attitude of indifference to the loss of the young. It is impossible therefore to speak in terms of a general, all-embracing response: the variables are too many. But while, in view of the specific cultural conditions that obtained in the Roman past, reactions as a whole are bound to have differed from those of parents in societies where child mortality is a relative rarity, positive *re-joicing* in the loss of a child was not a response that figures prominently in the Roman historical record. From a conventional standpoint, it follows, the response of Marian's mother was an altogether strange phenomenon, attributable to the dissemination of a theological construct postulating the martyr's immediate translation to Heaven. It signalled a complete inversion of the traditional norms of family life, and marked the appearance of a radically new Christian family ethic. In a comparable case from North Africa of the late third century, a certain Fabius Victor is seen making no attempt to dissuade his twenty-one-year-old son Maximilian from pursuing the martyr's crown by refusing to serve in the Roman army; and when, on a proconsul's order, Maximilian had been executed, Victor, it was said, 'returned to his home in great joy, giving thanks to God that he had sent ahead such a gift to the Lord, since he himself was soon to follow.' To the non-Christian majority, one imagines, such joy must have seemed utterly bizarre. Likewise, the mother of the mid-third century martyr, the deacon Flavian, who visited her son (her only son) in prison as he awaited execution and found herself saddened because his end had been postponed, can surely have elicited little sympathy from the people of Carthage, where these events took place.¹⁶

¹⁶ Demographic regime: high infant and child mortality is a standard assumption of all modern reconstructions of Roman demography, for a summary account of which see Frier 2000. Responses: see Bradley 1986: 216–219 for appropriate illustrations. Rejoic-

Whether Christians determined to give their lives for the faith had family members to take into consideration was a question regularly posed by Roman administrators seeking a way to avoid handing down capital sentences. Papyrus, one of the martyrs associated with Agathonicê, was asked when he appeared before the proconsul of Asia in Pergamum whether he had children; Irenaeus, the bishop of Sirmium in Pannonia who died in the early fourth century, was likewise asked whether he had a wife, children, or other kin by Probus, the governor who tried him—Probus knew that the answer was yes because he had seen them at a previous hearing—and Phileas, the bishop of Thmuis in Egypt who was executed in Alexandria at more or less the same time, was asked at his trial by his judge Culcianus about the claims on his conscience of his wife and children. The recurrent question presupposes, well into the late imperial age, the centrality in ordinary social life of family relationships, the primacy of those relationships over all other claims on the individual, and a particular valuation of children. In repeatedly asking it, Roman officials appealed to the most fundamental of human bonds that society knew in their attempts to prevent unnecessary deaths. What was the response?¹⁷

The answer Carpus gave was sophistical. He played to the governor's conventional sensibilities by saying that, indeed, he had many children. But

ing: it is not obvious from the Maccabean sources (above nn. 5, 6) that the Mother of the Maccabees rejoiced in the deaths of her sons as implied by the text quoted here. She is perhaps more analogous to the Spartan women who are credited by Plutarch (*Mor.* 240F, 241A, 241B, 241C, 242A, 242B) with phlegmatic statements of patriotic acceptance, resignation or pride when informed of their sons' deaths in battle. Comparable case: *Acts of Maximilian* (quotation: 3.5), for the date of which, Musurillo 1972: xxxvii; cf. in general Delehay 1966: 77–81. Mother: *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius* 16.3–6 (cf. Delehay 1966: 55–59).

¹⁷ *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonicê* A 28; B 3.2; *Martyrdom of Irenaeus* 4.5–6 (for the date, see Musurillo 1972: xliii); *Acts of Phileas* A 143–145; B 3.3; comparable newer material in Pietersma 1984: 48. It is notable that the question is asked of three men as well as of Agathonicê. Similar family questions are asked of the martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas, but not of their male companions, in the *Acta* (I 4–5) that derive from the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* (for which see Amat 1996), where the redactor has inserted a trial protocol not found in the *Martyrdom* itself (the questions do not appear, however, in *Acta* II 4–5). Shaw 1993: 34–36 attributes the questions in the *Acta* to a concern on the part of a male redactor to supply appropriately gendered (and demeaning) questions to women, suggesting that family matters were more suitable a subject of enquiry of women than of men. A concern of this kind, however, presumably did not present itself to the redactors of the three examples collocated here. For the date of the *Acta*, not before the fifth century, see Amat 1996: 269–271.

he meant 'children' who were his spiritual progeny not his biological children, and so with Christian stubbornness, and perhaps even arrogance, he turned the question against his questioner.¹⁸

Irenaeus' case is more disturbing. While, following his first interrogation by the provincial governor, the bishop was being tortured, he was visited by relatives ('*parentes*') who upon seeing him immediately tried to persuade him to apostasise: 'His children kissed his feet and begged, 'Father, have pity on yourself and on us!' Then [his wife] urged him to yield, weeping for his youth and good looks. He was hard pressed by the weeping and mourning of all his relatives, the groans of his servants, the wailing of neighbours, and the crying of his friends...' But Irenaeus did not break: his resolve to die a martyr's death remained unaffected. Subsequently the governor interrogated him a second time, and this was when he asked the question about the claims on Irenaeus' conscience of his wife and children. At first Irenaeus denied their very existence, which is enormously revealing in its own right, and when the governor reminded him that he knew of Irenaeus' family, he quoted the verse from the Gospel of Matthew on which his denial was based: 'He who loves his father or his mother or his children or his brethren or his family more than me, is not worthy of me.' Unless this is a complete fabrication, there could be no clearer indication of the impact of Jesus' teaching on the familial lives of his followers: 'looking to God in the heavens and bearing in mind his promises and despising all else, Irenaeus insisted that he neither had nor knew any other kin.' Finally in response to the governor's last appeal to sacrifice to the Roman gods for the sake of his children, Irenaeus echoed the words of Agathonicê: 'My sons have the same God as I do. He can save them.'¹⁹

From a traditional Roman point of view Irenaeus' position is astonishing. In place of the model of the *pater* who devotes himself to his children, regarding it as a life-long obligation to cater to their well-being, Irenaeus presents a new Christian model of social comportment that under the threat of eternal damnation demands of the father that he put self-interest above all other claims and that he renounce all responsibility for those who would normally be dependent upon him. The standard model of paternal behaviour has been turned completely on its head under the psychological pressure exercised on the believer, in all its terror, by the concept of an afterlife of

¹⁸ *Acts of Carpūs, Papyrus, and Agathonicê* A 29–32; B 3.2–3.

¹⁹ *Martyrdom of Irenaeus* 3.1–2 (reading '*uxor*'); 4.5, 4.6–7, 4.8.

punishment. In this case the human results were devastating—a wife left without a husband and sons without a father, and havoc wreaked in their lives by the decision of the *pater* alone. How widely replicated in the cities of the Roman Empire the model was it is impossible to say; but the new paradigm closed off the opportunity for fathers to emulate Roman paragons from the distant past such as Aemilius Paullus, who could be remembered as ‘the lovingest of fathers,’ or Fabius Maximus, who could be remembered as a ‘wise man and a good father.’ The Christian asserting that ‘Christ is our true father’ and ‘our faith in him is our mother’, as Hierax the companion in death of Justin Martyr did, embodied in his overwhelming desire to win a martyr’s crown the Christian revolution in social psychology as a consequence of which earthly ties could, and sometimes did, become meaningless. The young widow Eutychia, who was tried at Thessalonica in the spring of 304, was prepared to die a martyr’s death as a ‘slave of God’ with no thought at all impinging on her conscience for the child she was carrying—though in the event, and in accordance with Roman law, she was spared because of her pregnancy.²⁰

Phileas’ history only serves to confirm these conclusions. His reply to the question was essentially the same as that of Irenaeus: the higher claim of God took precedence over the claims of wife and children, and Scripture permitted no doubt: ‘You shall love the Lord your God, who made you.’ When during his interrogation the judge Culcianus observed that his wife was looking at him, as if that by itself should have been enough to impel him to sacrifice in the Roman manner, Phileas, full of the death-wish, answered with the words that from a non-Christian viewpoint seem callous and uncaring: ‘The Lord Jesus Christ is the redeemer of the souls of us all. It is he

²⁰ Threat: *Martyrdom of Irenaeus* 3.3. The notion was widespread: see *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2.3, 11.2; *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice* A 7, B 5; *Acts of Justin and Companions* C 2.1, cf. C 4.6; *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.26; *Martyrdom of Pionius* 4.24, 7.4; *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius* 11.7; *Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 3.4; *Martyrdom of Crispina* 2.2, 3.2. Aemilius Paullus: Plutarch, *Aemilius* 6.5; Fabius Maximus: Plutarch, *Fabius Maximus* 24.4. Hierax: *Acts of Justin and Companions* B 4.8. Eutychia: *Martyrdom of Agapê, Irenê, Chionê, and Companions* 3.5–7; 4.4 (for the date, see Musurillo 1972: xliii). As with family language, appropriation of the language of slavery by early Christians to characterise their relationship with God was common, as many examples in the martyr acts themselves demonstrate; for background and Greek and Jewish precedents, see Pleket 1981; Hilhorst 1989. For the Roman legal texts showing postponement of execution of a pregnant condemned woman, see Quasten 1941.

whom I serve in chains. And he who has called me to the inheritance of his glory can also call her.' A wider circle of relatives (*propinqui*), together with the court officials, then entreated Phileas to have regard for his wife and children, embracing his feet in their appeal that he show '*respectus uxoris*' and '*cura liberorum*' ('regard for his wife,' 'concern for his children'). Those phrases capture traditional ideas very well, and indicate their continuing vibrancy in late imperial society. They recall the ironic image of the martyr Blandina, a slave woman who exhorted her fellow martyrs 'like a noble mother encouraging her children' when she was put to death at Lugdunum under Marcus Aurelius—a clear hint perhaps of a constant tension between the old ideals and the new prescriptions. In Phileas' case, however, the attractions of martyrdom erased the old ideals from the picture, and once more the martyr chose to leave his wife a widow and his children fatherless in order to satisfy an individualistic goal inspired by obsessive Christian faith. There is no sign in the record of a crisis of conscience over the choice before him, of regret or remorse, and Phileas' final response to his relatives' entreaties was singularly heartless: 'He rejected what they said, claiming that the apostles and the martyrs were his kin.' The natural family was once again abandoned in favour of the newly constituted Christian family united not by blood but by faith, with human consequences scarcely fathomable. Perhaps, therefore, the loss of a complete family to martyrdom, as happened in the case of Quartillosa, her husband and son, who within days of one another were executed at Carthage in the mid third century, was not the tragedy it would have been for non-Christians.²¹

The familial conflicts and disruptions that Christianity could generate are best illustrated in the most famous, and most complex, of the martyrological sources, the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. This document records the martyrdom of a number of Christians at Carthage in the early third century, principally of course that of the prosperous young mother Perpetua. Much has been written about her. But the familial tragedies her story contains deserve to be highlighted, for Perpetua's history reveals more clearly than anything seen so far the terrible collision between traditional and non-

²¹ *Acts of Phileas* B 3.3, 6.1, 6.4. Blandina: *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.55 (for the date of which, see Barnes 1968: 518–519; Musurillo 1972: xx). Quartillosa: *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius* 8.1–2.

traditional systems of family ethics to which Christian beliefs, fortified by a human recalcitrance born of what can only be called fanaticism, gave rise.²²

Perpetua was a well-born, well-educated young provincial woman from Thurburbo, whose family history is known in considerable detail. At the time of her trial she is said to have been about twenty-two (perhaps twenty-one in modern terms), her father and mother were still living, as was a maternal aunt, and she had two more or less grown up brothers. A third brother had died in childhood, at the age of seven, from disease. Perpetua was, or had been, married, though notoriously the *Martyrdom* makes no mention of her husband, the father of the infant son who was still at her breast. It is difficult to imagine that the slaves Felicitas and Revocatus, two of Perpetua's fellow catechumens and martyrs, were anything but slaves from her or her father's household, though this cannot be certain.²³ In many ways the family group seems to have been typically Roman, or typically Romano-African—a family perhaps socially and culturally comparable to that into which the polymath Apuleius, a man of decurial background from Madauros, had married half a century earlier when he became the husband of the widow Aemilia

²² The *Martyrdom* exists in a Latin and a Greek version, of which the Latin is probably the earlier: see Amat 1996: 51–66. On the date, see Barnes 1968: 522; Musurillo 1972: xxvi–xxvii; Barnes 1985: 263–265. For a summary of bibliography, with particular reference to European scholarship, see Prinzivalli 2001: 221–225 (especially useful on the history of the text and its authorship, the interpretation of Perpetua's visions recorded in the *Martyrdom*, the possibility of Montanist influence, and structure; add Bremmer 2002. See also on these issues the Introduction to Amat 1996, and cf. Delehay 1966: 49–52). Fanaticism: on the related emergence of physical endurance as a means to demonstrate Christian resistance, see Shaw 1996.

²³ On the family details, see *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 2.1–3, 5.3, 7.5. Husband: various theories have been propounded to explain his absence from the record, such as early death or withdrawal from Perpetua at the time of her arrest; see Shaw 1993: 24–25 for an elaborate theory, and cf. Amat 1996: 31. Osiek 2002 suggests that Perpetua's fellow martyr Saturus was Perpetua's husband, but he is never identified as such in the *Martyrdom* and the suggestion requires the audience of the *Martyrdom* to be already familiar with the fact. Felicitas: it is often assumed that she was Perpetua's slave, or a slave belonging to Perpetua's family (e.g. Droge & Tabor 1992: 1; Miller 1994: 149), but the text does not specifically attest this (cf. Amat 1996: 35; Osiek 2002: 287 n.2). Brown 1988: 74 goes so far as to call Perpetua 'already the head of a household in a small North African town' and possibly 'the mistress and protector of the group of Christians who had been arrested with her.' Similarly Barnes 1985: 72 believes that all the martyrs here were 'members of a single household.' Shaw 1993: 10–11 proposes that Perpetua's family was of decurial status; cf. Rives 1996: 22. Barnes 1985: 70 posits senatorial status (surely optimistically). Bremmer 2002: 87 sees no difficulty in calling Perpetua's family 'thoroughly Romanized.'

Pudentilla of Oea. A connection of a certain kind has indeed been posited between Perpetua and Apuleius, the notion, based on certain phrases that appear in the portion of the *Martyrdom* that derives from the journal she herself kept while in confinement, that Perpetua had read Apuleius' great novel, the *Metamorphoses*. Though plausible, the idea cannot be admitted as fact.²⁴

The dominant family member in the *Passion* is Perpetua's father, and it is of some significance that the record of their relationship comes from Perpetua herself, again from the journal not a third party account that Perpetua composed while in confinement. In the past, Perpetua makes clear, her father had been an exemplary parent. He had raised his daughter with his own hands and had, perhaps unusually, favoured her over her brothers. During her ordeal, moreover, the devotion he displayed to her is evident throughout her descriptions of their several encounters so that his love for her can scarcely be doubted. In order to save her life he constantly took the initiative and tried to persuade her to recant, the first attempt—motivated, as she says, by the affection he felt for her (*'pro sua affectione'*)—occurring after Perpetua's initial arrest. However, her stubborn refusal to accede to his wish bordered on effrontery and upset traditional expectations of social comportment. The refusal provoked in him a violent reaction, the product perhaps of frustration at a *pater's* unforeseen and unpredictable inability any longer to dictate a course of action to his daughter and fear of the consequences he knew her recalcitrance would bring.²⁵

Perpetua's father cannot have shared his daughter's religious convictions. That seems obvious from the polar positions represented in the record

²⁴ See the Appendix. On Apuleius and Pudentilla, see Bradley 2000, and on Perpetua and the *Metamorphoses*, Dronke 1984: 14, 285–286, confidently but erroneously taken as fact by Salisbury 1997: 46 (though Shaw 1993: 9 offers the notion that an educated Perpetua would have been familiar with ancient novels). Journal: Perpetua's own words are introduced by the redactor at 2.3, and they extend from 3.1 to 10.15; they are commonly taken to be authentic (e.g. Dodds 1970: 47–53; Barnes 1985: 263; Shaw 1993: 22; Amat 1996: 70–73), and may originally have been written in Greek (Robert 1989: 816–819; Lane Fox 1987: 469; Bowersock 1995: 34–35), though this is doubted by Bremmer 2002: 81–82. Dronke 1984: 1–16 offers an imaginative analysis of the journal, speculating that Perpetua's dreams recorded there are again authentically recounted (cf. Shaw 1993: 26; Amat 1996: 38–50; Prinzivalli 2001: 127–128): they functioned as vehicles for the release of tensions provoked not least by family ties and the desire for martyrdom. For a strongly feminist view of Perpetua's dreams, and the journal as a whole, see Miller 1994: 148–183, which is doggedly challenged by Bremmer 2002: 95–119.

²⁵ *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 5.2, 3.1–3. Effrontery: cf. Prinzivalli 2001: 121.

of their first encounter. It is a view confirmed by an inference from their second meeting, when Perpetua remarked that her father alone among her relatives would not rejoice in her suffering. This must mean that he alone in the family was unable to identify with her wish for martyrdom because he alone did not share her faith. One of her brothers was certainly a Christian because he is identified as a catechumen. But the suspicion must be that well before Perpetua's detention Christianity had come between her parents (as it did in the case of the anonymous divorcing couple at Rome seen earlier), as well as between father and children, and had created a long, if now lost, history of family conflict and dissension. Once the new faith had been partially embraced within a family, secrecy and caution were at times required *vis-à-vis* those who remained outside, for the unconverted could become objects of mistrust and possible sources of danger, 'worse than our enemies,' as a later martyr said in reference to the Christian need to conceal sacred literature.²⁶

In the second encounter, with Perpetua imprisoned but not yet tried, her father, worn out with worry but driven by familial *pietas*, tried to persuade his daughter to recant by appealing to her sense of obligation to the other members of her family: to himself, her mother and brothers (evidently under no threat themselves), and also to her infant son, 'who,' the father said, 'will not be able to live' if his mother were to die. It was an appeal to the well-being of the extensive kin circle in general and to the very survival of Perpetua's newborn child in particular. It can scarcely have been lost on Perpetua, either at the moment itself or when she later recorded it, that her commitment to her faith would jeopardise her family as a whole and leave her son motherless. The choice before her was straightforward, and it was faith over family that she chose.²⁷

The next meeting took place in the forum of Carthage when Perpetua was on trial. Again she rejected family ties. She describes two significant

²⁶ *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 5.6, 2.2. Family: cf. Amat 1996: 31. Dronke 1984: 10 believes only Perpetua and her catechumen brother to have been Christians, the other family members, the father apart, being 'Christian sympathizers'; there is no obvious basis for this view in the *Martyrdom*. Conflict: cf. Prinzivalli 2001: 125. Perkins 1995: 104–123 emphasises the role of the *Martyrdom* in challenging conventional structures of power at large, but without considering how non-Christian and Christian audiences might have responded differently to the challenge.

²⁷ *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 5.3; cf. Prinzivalli 2001: 120; and note also Tilley 1995, arguing for the transformation through faith of Perpetua (as also of Felicitas) from a state of social repression to one of fearlessness.

moments. First, just as she was about to be asked about her religious allegiance, Perpetua's father appeared on the spot with her infant son, seized her from the step of the platform on which she was standing, and said: 'Perform the sacrifice—have pity on your baby!' Both at that instant and when she recorded the details later, Perpetua could again hardly have failed to realise that her refusal to sacrifice to the gods of Rome meant sacrificing the infant to whom she had recently given birth. But Perpetua made no reply to her father. Secondly, the procurator Hilarianus, her judge, then appealed to Perpetua to have pity on her father and her son, expressing in his injunctions, again, the fundamental importance that society normally attached to family ties: 'Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors.' Once more the familial ramifications of her decision must have been obvious to her, but Perpetua simply, and immediately, replied that she would not sacrifice. Instead she adamantly professed her faith which led, as he continued to importune her, to the procurator's order that her father was to be flogged—so that a man of status was visited with physical abuse and humiliation of a servile sort from which his child would customarily have been expected to save him. Perpetua felt sorrow for her father's misfortune, as though she had been beaten herself, and for his wretched old age; but her Christian resolve to put self above all others precluded anything further.²⁸

The fourth and final encounter came shortly before Perpetua's execution. Several days had elapsed since her conviction. Her father was now, as she described it, beside himself (*'consumptus taedio'*): 'He started tearing the hairs from his beard and threw them on the ground; he then threw himself on the ground and began to curse his old age and to say such words as would move all creation.' But apart from again expressing sorrow for his old age, Perpetua remained unmoved. The traditional notion that it was her duty to support her father in his old age did not register with her, her fixation with death leaving no room for the familial idioms of centuries past. For all the father's devotion, therefore, tragedy in Perpetua's family could not be averted: parents lost a child, brothers their sister, an aunt her niece, an infant son his mother. What happened to the family in the long term is unknown,

²⁸ *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 6.2, 6.3–4, 6.5. On beating as a traditional punishment for slaves, see Garnsey 1970: 136–141.

but the turmoil that Christian fanaticism produced at one precise moment presumably had lasting effects.²⁹

Nothing in Perpetua's tragic history is more affecting than the fate of her infant son. Perpetua's anxious concern for her child is self-evident in the early stages of her account: nursing the infant herself (there is no sign of a *nutrix*), she agonises over him in prison until she is given permission to keep him with her. After sentencing, however, when the child no longer needs the breast and she is free from the physical discomfort of breastfeeding, her anxious concern seems to vanish as she awaits her fate and writes of the child no further. It cannot be said that Perpetua had been indifferent to him. But a constant concern for the child is not in evidence, and her decision to die a martyr's death brought Perpetua to a point where she was prepared to abandon her child as if she were a parent exposing an unwanted infant—the difference in this case being, as Perpetua knew, that reclamation of the child had already taken place: he is last heard of in the protective custody of his grandfather. Comfort, moreover, was found in attributing the child's lack of need for the breast and her own physical relief to the will of God, which no doubt made the act of abandonment all the easier to undertake. Refuge in the will of God can cover a multitude of sins.³⁰

Perpetua's child is not the only infant to appear in the *Martyrdom*. At the time of her arrest the slave Felicitas, the other principal character in the record, was in the late stages of pregnancy and gave birth to a daughter before she was put to death. Her fellow slave Revocatus was perhaps the child's father. The lowly status of slave parents did not mean that family life was any less important to them than to their social superiors: evidence of the

²⁹ *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 9.2–3. Cf. Shaw 1993: 4 on Perpetua's unconventional behaviour. Note that Perpetua recorded in her journal her belief that the brother who had died as a child from disease was relieved of his suffering in the afterlife through her prayers (*Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 7–8), which could be taken to show a certain family devotion but which hardly offsets the main events.

³⁰ *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 2.2, 3.6, 3.8–9, 6.7–8 (note that Perpetua's father already had the son in his care by the time of the third encounter: 6.2). It is remarkable that Perpetua never mentions the child after her sentence has been passed: he does not figure in the remainder of the *Martyrdom* at all. Cf. Prinzivalli 2001: 126: 'Although in the eyes of her Christian brethren, the indirect sacrifice of a child might possibly have found religious justification, such an attitude was incomprehensible to the pagan society surrounding her.' Meeks 1986: 22 seems to me to misrepresent the text (6.8) in stating, 'Only when Perpetua's anxiety about the safety of her infant son has been satisfied does she gain strength for her ordeal.' On infant exposure, see Harris 1994.

importance slaves attached to family ties is abundant and incontrovertible. What is astonishing here, however, is Felicitas' belief before her delivery that because it was illegal to execute a pregnant woman her hope of Heaven would be unduly delayed: 'As the day of the spectacle drew near she was very distressed that her martyrdom would be postponed because of her pregnancy; for it is against the law for women with child to be executed.' In Felicitas' Christian view of the world, her child's birth was inconsequential in comparison with the anticipated glory of martyrdom, a view that once more illustrates how Christian ideology could bring about a total inversion of the natural order. When her child was born prematurely it was of course a miracle, an answer to prayer from her fellow prisoners that allowed her execution to proceed on schedule—the infant herself, orphaned virtually at birth, being entrusted to a Christian woman who, naturally enough, was a 'sister.' Thus it was that the mother went to her death, *rejoicing* 'that she had safely given birth so that now she could fight the beasts, going from one blood bath to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism.' A greater perversion of nature it is difficult to imagine.³¹

Christian martyrs were punished, as were many other convicted criminals, by being exposed to wild beasts, by being burned alive, by crucifixion or by simple decapitation. But whatever the mode of execution martyrdom was almost always a public event, played out before an audience of interested onlookers who can be presumed to have had an appetite for the macabre and a taste for the element of spectacle that Roman capital sentences involved. How much the onlookers knew of the individual circumstances of those being punished before them it is impossible to know. But some, perhaps many, will also have been present at the trials preceding the executions and thus were in a position to inform others in the audience of what they had observed. Trials conducted before Roman provincial governors were also often public events, held in the open air or in no more than partially enclosed buildings. People were able to see and listen to the dispensation of Roman justice in progress as much as they wished. The crowd of onlookers was in fact a stock element in the process of a Roman public trial, and advocates could use it to their advantage. The *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* show that

³¹ *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 15.1–5; 15.7; 18.3. A milder view is taken of Felicitas and Perpetua as mothers by Nathan 2000: 51. On slave families, see Bradley 1987: 47–80.

crowds of spectators regularly attended the trials of the Christians, and as certain details noted earlier indicate at times even participated in the proceedings. Clusters of local residents, therefore, in Carthage, Pergamum, Rome and all of the other cities where Roman justice was meted out, were continually observing and hearing the actions and words the Christians performed and spoke. What did they learn about the martyrs, and what were they able to communicate to their peers who filled the theatres and amphitheatres to witness, and to be entertained by, the execution of the Christian criminals?³²

The answer, I think, is that they saw evidence of a religious cult working as a highly destructive instrument of social change, promoting discord and divisiveness, setting wife against husband, brother against brother, daughter against father. They saw evidence of a cult that encouraged older mothers to rejoice in the untimely deaths of their adult sons and that told younger mothers to forsake their infant children for the sake of an immediate death which brought some strange personal reward. They saw Christians placing the interests of the individual far above the interests of the family, championing as a result an ethic completely at variance with traditional family values. They saw in other words what Celsus saw: a threat to the established order. Punishment consequently made sense: it promised to remove the threat and to restore the normal state of things.³³

In some respects, as is well known, Christian teachings created a potential for improving social change: insistence on the availability of salvation to all, regardless of status, opened the way in theory to the elimination of conventional social barriers, particularly those associated with the worst of all social conditions, slavery. As far as slavery is concerned, however, the potential was never realised. Martyrdom gave free and slave an equal opportunity to die together, as the *matrona* Perpetua and the *conserua* Felicitas

³² On the public and spectacular character of martyrdom, and the problems it raised for both Christians themselves and the Roman authorities, see Potter 1993; cf. Lane Fox 1987: 420. For the wider context, Hopkins 1983: 1–30; Coleman 1990. Observe Bowersock 1995: 66: ‘It was probably through martyrdom that many pagans became aware of Christianity in the first place during the second and third centuries.’ Not all trials were public: for hearings ‘*in secretario*’ or ‘*in consistorio*’ see *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 1.1; *Acts of Cyprian* 1.1; *Acts of Marcellus* A 1.2; and *Martyrdom of Crispina* 1.1.

³³ Cf. the impassioned statement of Harnack 1908: 393: ‘How deeply must conversion have driven its wedge into marriage and domestic life! What an amount of strain, dispeace, and estrangement conversion must have produced, if one member was a Christian while another clung to the old religion!’

did, but that can hardly be called a gain. Christian bishops such as Irenaeus in Pannonia did not contest the habit of owning human flesh, nor did lesser members of the Christian community, which made it easily possible for people like Euelpistus, one of the martyred companions of Justin Martyr, and Blandina and her fellow Gallic martyr Sanctus to go to their deaths as slaves. Christians were even prepared to own non-Christian slaves, despite the danger of being betrayed to the authorities by those they possessed. They might on occasion attempt to intercede on behalf of Christian slaves owned by non-Christians: this happened in the case of the slave woman Sabina, the companion of the presbyter Pionius who was martyred at Smyrna in the mid third century. Sabina's pagan mistress Politta had expelled Sabina from her household in bonds in an effort to make the woman renounce her Christian beliefs. Alone in the mountains she was helped by co-religionists who tried to free her from her shackles and to claim her freedom from her mistress. But such actions did not develop into an assault on the institution of slavery *per se*, which never became the problem for early Christians that it was to become in later history. The case can in fact be made that early Christianity made the condition of slavery worse.³⁴

In a comparable way, the evidence of the martyr acts suggests as far as family history is concerned that Christian teachings again failed to foster social improvement. The stories of the martyrs and their glorious deaths were repeatedly told and retold to Christian congregations as ways of confirming the faithful in their faith and strengthening the communities to which they belonged. But the stories also had the effect of placing models of be-

³⁴ *Martyrdom of Irenaeus* 3.2 (*domestici*); *Acts of Justin and Companions* B 4.3; C 3.4 (Euelpistus was or had been an imperial slave; he was tried in Rome but originally came from Cappadocia and had Christian parents [B 4.7]; Hierax, one of his companions in death, was perhaps also a slave; he says that he had been 'dragged off from Iconium in Phrygia' [B 4.8], and may have been a victim of the slave trade); *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.18 (Blandina had a Christian mistress), 1.20 (Sanctus refuses to say whether he was a slave or a freedman); cf. *Martyrdom of Fructuosus and Companions* 3.4 (the bishop's *lector*, usually a slave; note that the daughter of the governor who tried the bishop Fructuosus had two Christian slaves in her *familia*); *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.14 (pagan slaves who informed on the Christian owners under interrogation); *Martyrdom of Pionius* 9.4 (cf. Robert 1994: 71. Sabina: she was perhaps not originally from Smyrna, the site of Pionius' trial [18.7]; cf. Robert 1994: 101; for competing views on the identification of Politta, see Lane Fox 1987: 463–465; Jones 1989 [cf. Robert 1994: 71]; and on the date of the document, Lane Fox 1987: 465–468; Robert 1994: 2–7). On slavery and Christianity at large, see Glancy 2002. The case: Ste Croix 1975; cf. Bradley 1994: 145–153; Garnsey 1996: 173–188 (on Paul).

haviour before their audiences that favoured self-interest over communal obligations to kin, and these were models intended for emulation by those who encountered them. To this extent, while Christianity certainly made a difference, the change it encouraged was regressive: change for the worse not for the better.

The exemplary character of the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* cannot be missed. It is made explicit in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua* (1.1–2; 21.11) and the *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius* (1; 23.7; cf. 16.4), where the terms of reference recall the didactic traditions of Roman historiography. But what emulative effect the *Acts* had, who can say? The familial consequences of martyrdom as I have described them may well have been more evident to early Christians than the records suggest at face value, as patent in the past as they are to the modern observer. So perhaps there were not really all that many among the ordinary Christian congregations who were prepared to give up everything for the faith as the martyrs themselves did. The effect of the martyrologies may simply have been to increase among contemporary audiences the aura of heroism enveloping those who had made the ultimate declaration of faith. Certainly the injunctions of the household code tradition presuppose that some, perhaps most, Christians neither desired nor foresaw any essential change in the general familial organisation of society, and the family of course never died out.³⁵

Nonetheless, as ideas spread of renouncing sexual activity, of cultivating chastity, of living in monastic seclusion, of setting alongside the biological family the ‘family’ of the faithful, a challenge to the old communal ethic of Roman family life must surely, if gradually, have arisen from a mode of thought, individualistic and inward-looking, far different in character. The development is one manifestation of how Christianity eventually came to transform classical civilisation, and in a small but telling way the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* illuminate the process of historical change in the second and third centuries that the rise of Christianity dictated. In celebrating martyrs as heroes, Christian congregations tacitly and complicitly endorsed the notion that the faithful *ought* to be prepared to sacrifice everything for the

³⁵ Exemplary character: cf. also *Letter of Phileas* B 2 (Rufinus). Emulative effect: cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17.3, 18.3, 19.1; *Martyrdom of Marian and James* 3.5. On the disproportionate contrast between the small numbers of Christian martyrs and the impact of their deaths on both other Christians and pagans, see the discussion of Stark 1996: 163–189.

cause, their kin included, if that was what was demanded of them—and that was indeed enough to shake the foundations of society. To those like Celsus who were not of the elect there was every reason to feel alarmed.³⁶

Appendix

On the basis of certain (putative) correspondences between the text of Perpetua's journal in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* and Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* (exclusively from *Met.* 10), P. Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 1984) 285–286 n. 58, cautiously suggested that Perpetua before she became a Christian had read Apuleius' novel. He states:

...especially in Apuleius' amphitheatre episode (X 29ff) I am struck by such expressions as 'dies...muneri destinatus' (cf. *Passio* VII 9), on which the woman criminal had been 'condemned to the beasts' ('quam dixi propter multiforme scelus bestiis esse damnatam,' X 34; cf. *Passio* X 5 'ad bestias damnatam esse'). In this context in Apuleius there also occur the relatively rare words 'flexuosus' (X 29, though used of dance-movements, not of paths, as in *Passio* X 3) and 'adtonitus' (X 35), used, as in Perpetua (X 5) to evoke the rapt absorption of spectators.

On examination, however, the similarities of expression are not compelling

1. The only words that appear in Apul. *Met.* 10.29 ('*dies ecce muneri destinatus aderat*') and *Martyrdom* 7.9 are 'dies' and 'munus': '*et experrecta sum, et cognoui fratrem meum laborare, sed fidebam me profuturam labori eius, et orabam pro eo omnibus diebus quousque transiuimus in carcerem castrensem. munere enim castrensi eramus pugnaturi; natale tunc Getae Caesari.*' Apart from the fact that 'dies' and 'munus' are very common words, there is no similarity of usage or contextual correspondence in the two passages at all.

2. Similarity of expression is close between Apul. *Met.* 10.34 and *Martyrdom* 10.5 with the phrases '*bestiis esse damnatam*' and '*ad bestias dam-*

³⁶ I am grateful to have had the opportunity to present oral versions of this essay to audiences at the University of Groningen, the University of Chicago, and the University of Western Ontario. Special thanks are due to Susan Treggiari and Mary Rose D'Angelo for their valuable observations on a final draft. The anonymous reader for *Ancient Narrative* provided useful bibliographic suggestions.

natam esse'. But the phrase 'to condemn to the beasts' is such a common technical term, appearing in a multiplicity of authors and legal texts, that to claim influence of one passage over the other is unacceptable.

3. Of '*flexuosus*' at Apul. *Met.* 10.29 M. Zimmerman, *Apuleius Madaurensis Metamorphoses Book X Text, Introduction and Commentary* (Groningen 2000) 364 remarks: '*Flexuosus* ('winding') is said of rivers or roads; cf. 9.11... *propellor ad incurua spatia flexuosi canalis*.' She also notes that its 'use to describe the dancers who are turning around in varying circles' is 'unusual.' On *Met.* 9.11 the Groningen commentators (B. L. Hijmans et al., *Apuleius Madaurensis Metamorphoses Book IX Text, Introduction and Commentary* [Groningen 1995] 110) report: '*flexuosi*: Apul. employs the word in one other passage: 10.29 ..., where it refers to a circular dance movement. This fairly infrequent adjective occurs only in prose authors, and is first attested in Cato, *Agr.* 33,1. Its frequency picks up after Apuleius; see e.g. Mar. Vict. *Gramm.* 6,60,3 *intortum et flexuosum iter labyrinthi*.' There is obviously no justification for thinking that *Martyrdom* 10.3, '*aspera loca et flexuosa*', was influenced by Apuleius.

4. On '*attonita*' at Apul. *Met.* 10.35 and '*adtonitum*' at *Martyrdom* 10.5, it is enough to quote J. Amat ed., *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité suivi des Actes* (Paris 1966) 223–224: 'L'adjectif exprime souvent une attente anxieuse' (my emphasis), with reference to Sen. *Ep.* 72.8; 118.3 ('omnes attoniti uocem praeconis expectant'); Tert. *Fug.* 1; *Idol.* 24; *Spect.* 23.1. Again therefore there is no need to think in terms of correspondence with Apuleius.

As stated in the text it is plausible, if not attractive, to believe that Perpetua had read the *Metamorphoses*. But the evidence adduced to support the claim is weak. This renders unlikely therefore the speculation (Dronke, *Women Writers*, 14) that Perpetua's journal was influenced by her memory of *Met.* 11 ('...it may even be [Apuleius'] heady account of the mysteries of Isis and Osiris that had shown the adolescent Perpetua how great a force to overcome was that Egypt of the mind' [in reference to the Egyptian of *Martyrdom* 10]).

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