

is right about the world we live in, and therefore must do theology in. I happen to disagree with Lash's final judgment that Christianity and Marxism are incompatible mainly because I disagree with his interpretation of Marx. Hence we also disagree about the implications of Marxism for the theological enterprise. Nonetheless we clearly do agree that, for the theologian as for anyone else, there is no alternative to deciding whether Marx was right or not. Agreeing on that, it is a pleasure to disagree with Lash on almost anything else.

## **Church and Family II:**

### **Church and Family in the Medieval and Reformation Periods**

Rosemary Radford Ruether

In our first article (published in last month's issue of *New Blackfriars*) we discussed the tensions between the Christian Church as a model of a new kind of family and the traditional family in Greco-Roman society, and trends toward the resolution of this tension both by separating out the vision of the new community into an eschatological ascetic religious order, on the one hand, and the repatriarchalisation of the Church and the resacralization of the patriarchal family, on the other hand. It would be useful at this point to summarize the major features of the patriarchal family as that existed in Jewish and Greco-Roman society.

Patriarchy refers to a legal, social and economic system of society that validates and enforces the domination of male heads of families over the dependent persons in the household. In classical patriarchal systems, such as are found in Hebrew law, this included wives, dependent children and slaves. In this sense, various groups of males are also dependent persons in patriarchal systems. However, women are subjugated persons in patriarchal societies in a different sense than either male children or male slaves. The former could grow up and become themselves householders; the latter might become emancipated and become householders. Women, first as daughters, then as wives, and sometimes even as widows dependent on the eldest son, were defined generically as persons depen

dent on the patriarch or male head of the household in which they lived.

Patriarchy, in this sense, is not to be understood as peculiarly “Jewish” or confined to Old Testament patriarchy. As a social system it is found in classical religious and social systems throughout the world. Ancient Greek and Roman societies, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, medieval Christianity and English common law all reflect patriarchal social orders.

Some people have imagined that patriarchal order is the aboriginal order of human society and hence is “natural” or inevitable. But anthropological scholarship over the last 140 years has modified this assumption. It appears that patriarchal social systems arose with the first developments of large private landholding, the movement from gardening to animal-plowed agriculture, urbanization and class societies (including slavery) in approximately the beginning of the second millennium B.C. Before that (and alongside these patriarchal cultures) for at least a hundred thousand years, the predominant human patterns of hunting-gathering and hunting-gardening societies allowed for a more balanced community characterized by communal property, little or no class structure, and balanced productive spheres and powers of adult men and women.

The status of women under patriarchy contains many nuances, depending on whether remnants of mother-right remained in the society. Also, economic shifts and the spread of education can create periods of liberalization of patriarchal law, as took place in the Hellenistic and later Roman periods. Thus, it is difficult to define a single system that would be true of all patriarchal societies at all times. However, it is possible to generalize about the characteristics that are usually found in patriarchal societies, although not all may be found there in the same way and at the same time.

(1) Women are defined as legally dependent on the male head of family, father, husband or guardian. This means women lack autonomous civil or legal status or can exercise it only extraordinarily or through a male representative. This, in its turn, means women cannot vote, cannot hold office, cannot represent themselves at law or enter into contracts in their own name. Sometimes this even means that they cannot be responsible for crimes, or at least fines must be paid by their male guardians.

(2) Women are economically dependent. This does not mean that women do not “work”, but rather that their economic productivity, whether at home or out of the home, belongs to their fathers or husbands. Restrictions are placed on them as inheritors of property. Often the property they can inherit is managed by their husbands or other male relatives.

(3) Rights to their person are restricted. Sometimes this means they cannot decide who they marry. This decision is made by the family and they must comply. On marriage, they leave membership in their own family and are adopted into the family of their husband, often with exchange of

goods between the two families. Since inheritance is through the father, female virginity before marriage and chastity during marriage is strictly guarded and violations severely punished, to assure that the wife's child is that of her husband, while the husband is sexually free (in other words there is a double standard). Male children are preferred to female, and there is a sharp distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children. The father and husband has the right to chastise the woman, sometimes to kill her, i.e. for sexual offenses, or to sell her into slavery. The husband has unlimited sexual access to the wife, whether she desires it or not. Children belong legally to the husband. The wife has no right to interfere in the generative effects of the male's 'seed', either by contraception or abortion. The woman's body and its "fruits" are viewed as the private property of the husband. Rape is viewed as an offense against the property rights of the husband. Hence, rape of 'loose' women is not viewed as an offense in the same way as rape of a married woman or marriageable virgin daughter. The wife can be divorced easily, especially for adultery or for failure to produce a male heir. Women, even when physically abused, do not have similar rights to divorce.

(4) Women are excluded from exercise of the public roles of power and the education and credentials that lead to these offices. These generally include leadership in the public civil cultus (as distinct from private religions which, in polytheistic societies, may exist alongside the public cultus). Women are excluded from the political *cursum honorum* and also the professional roles that support it, i.e. lawyer, rhetor. Women are excluded from war both as foot soldiers and as generals (the occasional exception of queens does not change the general rule, since they are extraordinary place-holders for absent males).

Women are excluded from general higher education and from the teaching offices, as well as the other professions generated by education, e.g. scribe. Thus, women are excluded both from learning and from *forming* the public culture. This accounts for the exclusive male formation of public culture under patriarchy; the definition of women in the culture solely from a male point of view; the difficulty women have in gaining visibility as creators of culture and the tendency to "lose" these accomplishments of women when they do occur.

Patriarchal social systems with these characteristics form the predominant background of Western civilization. Hebrew law in the Old Testament reflects most of these characteristics. This type of society was also the norm for classical Greek and Roman law, although there was liberalization of women's property rights in the later periods of these societies. Patristic Christianity represents a strong reversion to this type of patriarchal society, although modified by the new institution of female celibacy (which, for example, could counteract the marriage rights of fathers over daughters). It also modified patriarchal law in such areas as female consent to marriage, the moral double standard and the

male right to divorce, but it often failed to promote these principles in practice when they conflicted with the dynastic needs of feudal families. The European legal codes that emerged as national law in France, Spain and England reflect most of these patriarchal patterns discussed above.

Although this general pattern of patriarchal family life and society remained intact in law as well as social theory taught by the Church in the Middle Ages, in many ways the feudal social order created certain contradictions to it in practice. As a rule we can say that patriarchal society confines women to the household and denies her access to roles outside of the household. But, within this household, she may exercise great power as its manager. This means, in practice, that where there is little differentiation between the household of ruling aristocratic families, nobles, princes and kings, and the political order, a woman who is allowed to inherit property may, in the absence of a male heir, become the heiress of fiefs and kingdoms. She would then exercise the political rule over this territory, administering it as its sovereign, coining money, raising and directing armies in its defense, etc. It was this fusion of household management and political rule which allowed women a sphere of political power, as independent heiresses or surrogates for absent fathers, husbands or sons, in medieval feudal society.

Similarly, where there is little differentiation between the household and the economic workplace, as economic worker and manager in the household, a woman may exercise considerable economic power, particularly if she is a widow who is regarded as representing her absent husband in directing the relationship between household economy and trade. Thus, we find many a skilled female laborer in the Medieval and Reformation eras who managed farms, were skilled craftspersons and even held membership in guilds made up of women, such as the cloth guilds, or as representative of an absent husband's membership in a guild.

However, when the political realm separates out from the household of the ruling classes and sets up its own sphere of political bureaucracy, then women lose the political powers they had exercised in the feudal system. Similarly, when the economic sphere separates from the home and becomes autonomous, women become shut out of work, and access to the training for work, in a public order reserved for men. We can see both of these processes of shrinking of the sphere of the household, and with it, the shrinking of the roles played by women, as we move from the feudal to the Reformation and early modern periods.

The feudal pattern, which gave to the property holders the rights of political jurisdiction over the property as an autonomous kingdom, had a marked effect on female monasticism in the early Middle Ages. Medieval Christianity inherited from the earlier Church an exaltation of celibacy as a higher vocation than marriage, even against the wishes of parents or husband. One of the favorite motifs of medieval saints' lives

has the female saint, often as a very young child, decide to choose Christ as her heavenly bridegroom, rather than marriage. The story then unfolds through conflict between this decision for celibacy by the pious woman and the efforts of her family to force her to marry in order to fulfill their own social goals, or the efforts of suitors, fiance or husband, forced upon her unwillingly, to rape her or seduce her from this firm decision to spurn the marriage bed. The saint goes through many trials and perils in which her vocation is tested by these family demands. She eventually emerges victorious, vindicated by the bishop or other representatives of the Church, and is allowed to retire triumphantly to a monastery.

Behind such stories in the medieval Church stand certain social realities which indeed often made the monastery appear preferable to marriage for women of all classes, but especially for the upper-class woman. An heiress retained control of her own property, including the political prerogatives that went with it, so long as she remained unmarried. But when she married, control over her property, as well as control over her person, passed into her husband's hands. One thinks of the fate of Eleanor of Aquitaine in the 12th century, who was the heiress of a vast independent kingdom in southern France. As long as she could remain independent of her husband, first the king of France (whom she divorced) and then King Henry II of England (whom she made the mistake of marrying), and as long as she could remain resident in her own court in Aquitaine, she could exercise her rights as an independent sovereign. But when forced to reside, as she was supposed to do, under her husband's jurisdiction in his kingdom, she lost this independent power and even the freedom of her own person, as happened when her second husband, Henry II, imprisoned her in England for treason, following the revolt against him of her eldest son.

On the other hand, an heiress who took vows of celibacy might organize her own property into a female monastery, gather a sisterhood around her, and reign independently as an abbess over her own little kingdom. Such a monastic establishment would comprise not only the convent itself, but vast estates consisting of many farms and villages, including serfs of the monastery who supported it by their labor. The abbess was the independent sovereign both over her cloister and its lands and dependents. She exercised the political prerogatives of an independent sovereign within her realm. She coined money, raised armies in its defense, managed its economic affairs and might even be granted a place in the assemblies of Lords Spiritual and Temporal which made up the medieval Parliament. Some abbesses in Germany and a few in England were mitred abbesses, bearing the mitre and crozier which indicated that they exercised the juridical rights of a bishop over their realms. This means that they then supervised the churches and granted or withdrew the sacramental credentials of priests who operated in their

realms.

In the early Middle Ages some great lords preferred to settle a sizable estate upon a daughter who took vows of celibacy, rather than allow family property to become alienated under political rivals through marriage. Or a widow would prefer to retire on estates inherited from her husband rather than marry again. The celibate daughter or widow would then become the abbess of a monastic kingdom. The women of her family, mothers, sisters, daughters and nieces, might then retire there, as a safe space for themselves. A line of abbesses, often from the same family, thus became a parallel female realm within the larger sphere of influence of a particular ruling family. So, we find some of the great female abbeys of the early Middle Ages, such as the English Abbey of Whitby or the German abbeys at Gandersheim and Quedlinberg, set up on family estates bequeathed to them by their rulers' fathers or husbands.

Such female monasteries sometimes became great centers of learning in the 9th—12th centuries, with schools, libraries and traditions of female scholarship. In spite of the official exclusion of women from ordained ministry, the female religious order afforded medieval women a sphere of independent power, in both the church and in society, and the possibility of high attainments in scholarship and mystical spirituality. Such female teachers of mystical theology might today even be accorded the rank of Doctors of the Church. The editing of their writings has often been poorly done and the interpretation of the significance of their works has often been coloured by patriarchal values. Only recently has scholarship on the medieval period (notably feminist scholarship) begun to make these classics of mystical theology written by women much more easily available in sound editions and translations. I am thinking of the writings of, for example, Hrotsvith of Gandersheim, Abbess Herrad of Hohenburg, Hildegard of Bingen, Elizabeth of Schönau, Mechthild the Beguine, Mechthild of Hoëheborn and even Gertrude the Great.

The later Middle Ages and Reformation periods (the 14th—17th centuries) saw a sharp decline in the independent religious, political and economic power exercised by women in the feudal period. In the political realm we see a sharpening of the separation between a public political realm reserved for males and the household where women are confined. The household is privatized and loses its political power. Fiefs of nobles, smaller kingdoms and monastic realms are subsumed under the new political jurisdiction of the nation-state, which elaborates its own state apparatus, run by professional bureaucrats, rather than the old warrior nobility. A new concept of citizenship in the nation-state is developed, giving to all propertied males rights of citizenship in the nation-state, but depriving women of civil rights as dependent persons within the privatized household.

While modern nationalism increasingly equalized political rights of males as citizens, it also deprived women, as dependents, of these

citizen rights. Class hierarchy was softened, but gender dichotomy was accentuated. In some instances, a single propertied woman or widow might still exercise surrogate political rights as head of her household. But the tendency of earlier modern European law was to eliminate these vestiges of feudalism. Thus, in American colonies, some women voted as independent property holders, but lost their voting rights in the new state and federal constitutions of the Republic after the American Revolution.

In the intellectual and religious realm, we also see a loss of female opportunities. The 13th century saw European intellectual life shift from the monastic schools to the universities. Whereas women had cultivated schools and libraries in monastic life, women were strictly forbidden to enter the universities, especially for theological studies. A few women were able to study law and medicine in the more secular Italian and Spanish universities, but the trends there were to eliminate their presence as well. As monastic power and prestige declined, women's monasteries lost their earlier intellectual eminence.

Late medieval and Counter-Reformation canon law also sought to curtail the independence of nuns within their own orders and monasteries, by putting female religious under the jurisdiction of representatives of the male hierarchy. Nuns became strictly confined to cloister, were allowed limited education, and had to refer all decisions, as well as control over their own individual spiritual lives, to male directors. Although the Counter-Reformation saw a flowering of women's religious orders and of female mystics, this was in sharp conflict with the canonical trends toward the circumscribing of women's autonomy in religious life, which was being carried out in the name of reform of the Church.

Likewise in economic life, there was a shrinking of the female sphere. More and more trades and professions in the early modern period came to demand special training and credentials. Women, denied this special training and credentials, then could no longer exercise trades such as law, surgery, pharmacy, brewing, baking and printmaking, that they had exercised earlier, under a household-based economy and apprenticeship. Women still had a large sphere of work and economic management within the household where most consumer goods were still produced, but their access to skilled trades and professions was diminishing.

The Reformation represents a major religious rationalization of this development of the bourgeois patriarchal family of the 15th—17th centuries. Celibacy was rejected categorically by the various Reformation Churches. Monastic property was liquidated and sold to landholders or confiscated by the state. Female monasticism thus lost its millenium-old function within Christianity of providing women with an independent sphere of female religious power and learning. Women no longer had a religious vocation outside of the family, although a few Protestant

cities, such as Amsterdam, allowed the continuation of Beguinages where single pious women could live together and carry out a modest ministry as church workers. The Reformed theologians took the household codes of the New Testament as a definitive Pauline statement on the relationship of women to Church and family. Women were to keep silence in Church. They were not to be admitted to ordained ministry, nor were they to be allowed any roles in public teaching and preaching of the gospel. Their place was in the home, as auxiliaries of their husband in the male-headed household.

The Reformation overcame the split between family and Church which had persisted in medieval Christianity. The family was no longer a profane realm over against the sacred, which was represented by celibate clergy, nuns and monks. Instead, the Church and family were closely integrated in Reformation thought. The family itself became a little church, with the father as household minister who gathered his wife, children and servants round him to go over the Sunday sermon and engage in family prayer. The household was to be the place of religious training for the household. It became an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, a "little church" within the larger Church which gathered these households together under the ordained minister in public worship.

The Reformation elevated the religious status of the family, which had been viewed with suspicion by the celibate and monastic Church as a realm of sexuality, and hence of profane or non-redeemed life. It also gave woman a new religious role as religious companion of her husband, and teacher of her children, under her husband's direction. Some 17th century English tracts expect the woman to be the religious heart of the family. Women within their households were directed to a new lay piety by which they could chart the religious progress of their souls toward heaven. But, at the same time, they were more strictly confined to their households, under husbands at home and ministers and magistrates in public life. As potential rebels against this subordination to patriarchal authority, women were viewed as dangerous by Reformation thought, especially by Puritan thought, which represents the clearest expression of this Reformation sacralization of the patriarchal family. As docile wife and pious mother, a woman could be a great asset to the religious life of her family. As rebel against her subordination to patriarchal authority in the family, the Church and the state, a woman was a heretic or a witch.

Puritan literature in England and in the American colonies in the late 16th and 17th centuries reveals clearly this double view of women, as either "good wife" or as "heretic witch". William Perkins, a leading Puritan divine of the period, wrote two treatises which illustrate the double-sided view of women in Puritan thought. In 1590, he published a work on the Christian household entitled *Christian Oeconomy*. In 1596, he published a treatise entitled *On the Damned Art of Witchcraft*. In his treatise on Christian economy (household life), the "good wife" is



praised as a companion of her husband in all things, religious and economic. As companion or yokefellow of her husband, she was both under his head and yet co-regent with him over the dependent persons in the family, children and servants. Together husband and wife made a team of dominant and subordinate partners in the work and management of the household economy. As in the Biblical version of the valiant woman of the book of Proverbs, the good wife's hard work, frugal management and shrewd supervision of her servant's work would be a boon to her husband's prosperity.

Puritanism does not make a woman man's spiritual inferior, at least in theory. Like the male, the female is a soul redeemed by faith through grace and thus is related directly to God in Christ. Her subordination does not reflect a spiritual inferiority, but rather a social subordination in a divinely-mandated social order that places women under male headship, and servants and children under the rule of parents and masters,

Spiritually, the woman, like the man, has an independent conscience and must pursue her own salvation as an individual, even if it conflicts with husband or authorities. However, Puritans only recognised the legitimacy of this conflict *vis à vis* Catholic or Anglican husbands, ministers or magistrates, not those of the true or reformed tradition. In the Puritan social order, the woman must obey husband, minister and magistrates as the ordained instruments of the will of God. To rebel against their authority was to rebel against God.

In speaking of witchcraft, however, Perkins takes a dimmer view of women. For him, as for the late medieval Dominican Inquisitors who authored the *Malleus Maleficarum*, witchcraft is found predominantly in the female sex. This is due to the fact that women are weak-minded and more often taken in than men, and also because they are rebellious and restive against their proper subordination in the social order. It is this restiveness against subordination that leads women straight to heresy and witchcraft. Indeed, for Perkins and other Puritans, for women to criticize the authority of husband, minister or magistrate was itself heresy, since it flouted God's law of subordination of women revealed in the Scripture. It was tantamount to witchcraft, since woman rebelled most probably at the promptings of the Devil.

Thus, Puritan thought on church, society and family gave a solid but diminished religious role to women within the home in the very process of integrating the family and the Church. As married men, Puritan divines were less interested in vilifying women than in persuading women to accept their subordination voluntarily, as the sphere of their religious duty. Yet paranoia lurked around the edges of the Puritan view of woman and the family. Puritan thought was haunted by the dark fear of woman in rebellion, woman out of her place, acting as autonomous head and religious teacher. Against woman as rebel, witch or heretic,

they mobilized both their fiercest polemic and the instruments of ecclesiastical and political repression, the dunking stool, the pillory and the stocks, and finally, the gallows.

## Reviews

**MUSLIM NEOPLATONISTS: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity** by I. R. Netton. *George Allen & Unwin, London, 1982. pp xii + 146 £12.50.*

The *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafā* or Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, an Arabic philosophical encyclopaedia in fifty-two epistles, have been the subject of much study and speculation among modern scholars. Yet there is still wide disagreement on some of the most basic issues raised by them, their date, authorship, and their religious background and purpose. The author of the present book proposes to take a new approach to their study. Setting aside the question of the identity of the authors and their date, he concentrates on their thought and its relation to its apparent sources. Here he is primarily concerned with the ultimate sources and only secondarily with the channels and immediate sources through which their ideas may have reached the authors. Thus a chapter deals with "the legacy of Greece" as represented by Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. In another chapter the influence of Neoplatonism is analysed. This is, as indicated by the author in the title of his book, the predominant philosophical influence on the Brethren. It is, however, as he rightly stresses (p 33), a Neoplatonised Aristotelianism, characteristic of much of Islamic philosophy, rather than the Neoplatonism known to medieval Europe. The next chapter deals with the attitude of the Brethren to Christianity and Judaism. Their views were here to some extent independent from Qur'anic and orthodox Islamic doctrine. They frequently quote the Gospel and, at least in one passage, accept the crucifixion, death and resurrec-

tion of Jesus, though this is contradicted elsewhere; they also display markedly more appreciation of Christian asceticism and monasticism than Muslim orthodoxy in general. Their attitude to Judaism is more reserved and negative. A further chapter deals with "the uses of literature" in the Epistles. In particular, the use of the Qur'an, where the Brethren often looked for an esoteric (*bāṭin*) meaning behind its exoteric (*ẓāhir*), literal aspect, and their portrait of the major prophets based on it, are examined; this is followed by a discussion of their use of Indian literature, represented by the legend of Bilawhar and Yūdāsaf, known in medieval Europe as Barlaam and Josaphat, and by the fables of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. These chapters offer an instructive and balanced, if not exhaustive, analysis of the thought of the Brethren and some of its ambiguities.

In the final chapter, on "the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā and the Ismāʿīlīs", the author takes up the question of the religious background of the Epistle. Here his conclusions will probably prove most controversial. He affirms that the authors "were not Ismāʿīlīs; this is far too narrow a definition, besides being inaccurate. They were, however, influenced by Ismāʿīlī thought" (p 107). Although opposed to the prevalent view, this opinion is not entirely isolated. It is usually based on a comparison between the Epistles and Fatimid Ismāʿīlī doctrine as represented, for instance, by the works of Qādī al-Nu'mān. The differences are so obvious that Fatimid Ismāʿīlī origin of the