

**RECONSTRUCTING CELIBACY: SEXUAL RENUNCIATION IN THE FIRST
THREE CENTURIES OF THE EARLY CHURCH**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the philosophical and theological motivations for early Christian celibacy prior to the appearance of monasticism. This thesis will challenge recent scholarly positions that portray early Christian celibacy only in light of the emergence of monasticism in the fourth century, and which argue that celibacy as an ascetic practice was motivated primarily by resistance to the dominant social structures of antiquity. The practice of celibacy was a significant movement in the early church well before the appearance of monasticism or the development of Christianity as the dominant social force in the empire, and although early Christian sexual austerity was similar to the sexual ethics of Greco-Roman philosophical constructs, early Christian sexual ethics had developed in relation to uniquely Christian theological and cosmological views. Moreover, a segment of the early Christian community idealized celibacy as an expression of the transformation of human nature amidst a community that continued to remain sexually austere in general.

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Does not the Saviour who heals our soul also heal the body of its passions?

-Clement of Alexandria

Foreword

The complexity that confronts anyone studying early Christian celibacy is daunting, to say the least. The primary documents and secondary studies concerning celibacy in the early church confront one with a myriad of historical, textual, cultural and methodological questions, all set within a modern field of study that lacks unity with regard to a theoretical approach to the study of religion in general. In addition, the practice of sexual renunciation, as contrary to basic human biological and social behaviour, stands as a puzzling but seemingly widespread aspect of religion, which only adds to the complexity of the issues surrounding its practice. This thesis is an attempt to sort through the jungle of ancient and modern texts dealing with celibacy in the early Christian church.

In particular, this thesis will attempt to answer the simple question of why early Christianity engaged in celibacy as an ideal practice. This necessarily means that how the practice developed as a historical reality must be examined, as well as what sorts of things motivated early Christians to practice sexual renunciation as a spiritual discipline. Contrary to recent scholarship, this thesis will take a methodological position that emphasizes the importance of theological and cosmological speculation as the central motivator behind celibacy, and will attempt to demonstrate that academic explorations of asceticism in the past twenty years have not only failed to account for the entire historical situation in regard to early Christian celibacy, but have also left a portion of historical

data on celibacy largely unexplored. The methods of post-modern criticism, at least in the study of early Christianity, have redefined celibacy and asceticism as a kind of social resistance within a given society, and assumed that the role of asceticism is primarily a social one. This *a priori* assumption about the nature of asceticism has led to recent misinterpretations of historical data, as well as causing a large portion of historical data to be overlooked, oversimplified or simply dismissed.

This thesis, then, will ultimately argue that early Christian idealization of celibacy had its roots in the late first and early second century as an amalgamation of Christian theology with Greco-Roman concepts of human anthropology.¹ The rises of institutional monasticism, and the ascendancy of rhetorical support for celibacy in the fourth century church, reflect the complicity of the Greco-Roman culture with the Christianisation of the empire. In addition, it will be argued that monasticism was not so much the initial ascetic impulse of early Christianity as it was the employment and transformation of an already well established ascetic form with much earlier roots. It will be argued, therefore, that religious concerns motivate celibacy, which in turn creates social ramifications as the natural by-product of a new belief system. Modern scholarly treatments, then, have placed the cart before the horse, so to speak. The attempt to define asceticism and celibacy primarily as social discourses does not represent the historical reality of celibacy in the early church and results in the misrepresentation of the nature of early Christian celibacy, treating it as an ahistorical and areligious counter-cultural force.

¹ Here it must be noted that the term “anthropology” will be used in a very narrowly defined sense for this thesis. Anthropology, in this sense will be used to refer the concepts and constructs specifically pertaining to the ancient understanding of human nature and the relationships between the physical, spiritual and ethical elements of human beings. In that regard, the term “anthropology” will not be used in any way that one might expect to find in the modern academic field of anthropology.

In order to proceed logically through this argument, this thesis will have four progressive discussions. In the first chapter, the recent historical conclusions and methodological perspectives on asceticism and celibacy will be discussed, with an aim to demonstrating the scholarly shift towards describing celibacy as a social discourse, and to show how these discussions do not take into account the full range of historical data. The second chapter will be a re-examination of the primary sources on early Christian asceticism in order to gain a full perspective of the historical data on the subject. Third, a chapter will be dedicated to comprehending the Greco-Roman philosophical standards on sexuality so that a proper comparison can be made to determine what changes early Christian theology brought about in order to produce such an idealization of celibacy. Finally, a fourth chapter will focus on the early Christian texts of the first through third centuries in order to examine the nature of theological and philosophical motivations for celibacy. In particular, this chapter will attempt to demonstrate how the early Christian conception of human anthropology in regard to Christ, the Holy Spirit, sin, salvation and the *telos* of human existence, produced the belief that human nature could be transformed through the practice of asceticism.

Chapter One - A Survey of Scholarship on Asceticism and Celibacy

I. Early Scholarship on Asceticism

Presentation of the history and motivations behind celibacy, and asceticism in general, naturally has a history of its own. Prior to the Reformation, Enlightenment and rise of scientific theory, the western and eastern churches had their own version of the history of asceticism that was rooted in their confessional commitment to celibacy's superiority. Faith in the histories found in the writings of the church and desert fathers was firm, and their presentation of asceticism tended to be a linear progression reflecting the growth of Christianity as the superior culture of the empire and the rise of virginity as a reflection of God's victory over "pagan" immorality. For centuries, asceticism and celibacy represented the culmination of God's work of salvation that transformed the Roman empire into this City of God, and ascetics across Europe, well into the middle ages, understood their own activities to be continuous with a tradition rooted in the glorious days of the heroic Anthony and Pachomius. It was thought that Anthony and Pachomius were the pioneers of the ascetic process that brought temporal human existence even closer to the eternal through the disciplines of desert and monastery. Their appearance was nothing short of a miraculous movement of God designed to inaugurate his kingdom on earth.²

This confessional and idealistic view of the early church and the development of asceticism was, of course, challenged in the centuries following the Protestant Reformation and the rise of Enlightenment and scientific thinking. On the one hand, an

² Even in the present, one can find this view still put forward as modern Christian monastics wrestle with their vocation. See for example, T. Merton's *The Silent Life* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957) or J.M. Talbot's *Hermitage - A Place of Prayer and Spiritual Renewal: Its Heritage and Challenge for the Future* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989).

internal dialogue continued about asceticism within the Christian church, only it was now reworked in the light of Protestant and Roman Catholic doctrine. Catholics continued to defend the history of asceticism and its monastic institutions, particularly in light of their perceived sacramental value. Naturally, Protestants often rejected the role of asceticism in salvation or spiritual life. For example, concerning monasticism Martin Luther wrote, “Here let us lay our rock and foundation, our first principle of faith, namely, the words of Paul in Romans 14, ‘Everything that is not of faith is sin.’ From this we infer that monastic vows, if not of faith are sins. Moreover, if these vows are life long, compulsory and not optional, they are not of faith.”³ On the other hand, Enlightenment thought that challenged the historical claims of the Christian church simply viewed asceticism as an aberration that demonstrated the irrational nature of religion. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, works appeared portraying asceticism as a pathological perversion of sexual and social impulses.⁴ One can hardly forget, for example, the numerous scathing comments by Gibbon condemning asceticism and celibacy as among the many species of tyranny and superstition that so tragically regressed the civilization of Rome.⁵

By the twentieth century, after a series of new textual discoveries as well as a methodological shift that leaned towards social scientific theory, scholarly perception of asceticism had gained a bit more balance and sought to explain asceticism as a historical phenomenon that was intricately linked to the social situations of the Roman Empire. A more historical-critical approach to early Christian texts highlighted and adjusted to the

³ Martin Luther, *On Monastic Vows*, II. See *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 44, J. Atkinson & H.T. Lehmann eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 243-400.

⁴ R. Valantasis & V.L. Wimbush, “Introduction” in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush & R. Valantasis, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xxi.

⁵ For example, Gibbon opens his chapter on the rise of monasticism: “...the Ascetics, who obeyed and abused the rigid precepts of the Gospel, were inspired by the savage enthusiasm which represents man as a criminal.” See *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Dent, 1962), XXXVII.1.

rhetorical nature of the texts. As a result, scholars focused on the real practices of ascetics gleaned from the texts, and attempted to locate the real experiences of ascetics and how they were related to Greco-Roman culture. Moving away from the Romanticized confessional approaches, scholars consequently came to understand asceticism as a complex set of practices that interacted with many levels of both the church and society.

II. Twentieth Century Scholarship on Asceticism

In the twentieth century, the origins of Christian asceticism and sexual renunciation have been linked primarily to the emergence of monasticism in the early fourth century. Surveys of the history of asceticism generally acknowledge that an undeveloped and limited ascetic practice existed in isolated areas of Christianity prior to ca. 300 CE, at which time there seems to have been an explosion in the practice and extent of asceticism and celibacy across early Christianity as a whole.⁶ That is, beginning in the early 300s, substantial numbers of Christians suddenly abandoned their normal cultural positions to pursue a life in singular pursuit of a spiritual existence. Leaving behind family, wealth and social status, these individuals would move to the desert to live an ascetic life rooted in celibacy, fasting and a variety of spiritual disciplines. Some lived in isolation as hermits, while others banded together to form communities, and both “forms” of ascetic lifestyle had their heroic founders in the persons of Anthony and Pachomius. The movement of people from towns, cities and villages to the desert was so great that it prompted Athanasius in his *Life of Anthony* to comment that the ascetics had

⁶ J. Goehring calls it the “Big Bang Theory” of monasticism. See his “The Origins of Monasticism” in *Eusebius, Christianity and Judaism*, eds. H.W. Attridge and G. Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), pp. 235-55.

“made the desert a city.”⁷ The values and ethos of the monastic life became ideals of Christian spirituality, and the monastics of the desert were held to be superior examples of the truly Christian life.

As scholars of the twentieth century understood it, the broad picture of an ascetic/monastic life was one of *anachoresis*, *askesis* and *enkrateia*.⁸ *Anachoresis*, or “withdrawal”, represented the movement from the city to the desert, while *askesis*, that is, the “discipline” rooted in celibacy, fasting, poverty and a variety of spiritual practices, provided the path to *enkrateia*, or “self-mastery.” *Anachoresis* first removed the individual from the temptation of sexuality, family, wealth and power, and *askesis* then allowed individuals to overcome their own nature through rigorous hard work. The stories of Anthony and Pachomius, as well as the numerous anecdotes of the desert fathers found in the *Apothegmata Patrum*, all depicted the ascetic life as one of wrestling with self and demons, avoiding sexual desire, engaging in hard labour, enduring hunger, reading scripture and battling temptation. When ascetics had attained a level of discipline to be successful in their *askesis*, they had achieved *enkrateia*, the self-mastery that would ultimately aid in the transformation of their soul into a sanctified being.

The heart of the monastic and ascetic explosion was the practice of celibacy, and sexual renunciation was expected of both male and female monastics. In the accounts of both the lives of Pachomius and Anthony, the struggle against sexual desire looms large, and as heroic examples of the monastic life, they embraced celibacy as the core of the

⁷ *Life of Anthony*, 14:865.

⁸ Kalistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Positive?” in *Asceticism*, Wimbush, V.L. & Valantasis, R. eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 3-15.

monastic life.⁹ Not only was sexual activity presented as a struggle with the “demon of fornication”, it was also portrayed in terms of an antithesis between the desert and the world. Celibacy was the first movement of *askesis* toward personal sanctification and the pivotal move to separate oneself from the world (*anachoresis*), which was the location of everything opposed to God. Indeed, only a few decades after the emergence of Pachomius and Anthony, Gregory of Nyssa can confidently say that sexual activity is the first link in a “chain” of vice that will lead to the soul’s descent into sin, while celibacy is the “science”¹⁰ of assimilating one’s nature with the divine.¹¹ Simply put, one could not be a monastic without being celibate as well.

Moreover, scholars argued that in the years following the conversion of Constantine and the emergence of a “Christian” empire, the early church in general embraced asceticism and monasticism as an ideal expression of human sanctification and spiritual practice. In particular, the ideal of “virginity” became the marker of the superior Christian. We find in the religious literature of the fourth century a number of works devoted entirely to the subject of virginity¹² and encouraging the pursuit of celibacy as a higher spiritual path. Consequently, many men and women took vows of celibacy to preserve their uncorrupted state from their youth, while many others took vows in their adulthood, often leaving spouses and children behind to pursue life in the desert.¹³ So

⁹ P. Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 214-18.

¹⁰ Gregory writes “In other sciences men have devised certain practical methods for cultivating the particular subject; and so, I take it, virginity is the practical method in the science of the Divine life, furnishing men with the power of assimilating themselves with spiritual natures.” *On Virginity*, ch. 4.

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ch. 4-5.

¹² For example, Methodius *Symposium*, Gregory of Nyssa *On Virginity*, Basil of Ancyra *On the Preservation of Virginity*, Augustine *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, John Crystostom *On Virginity*, Jerome *Letter 130: To Demetrias*.

¹³ For example, the sayings of Apa Paphnutios in the *Apothegmata Patrum* (Paphnutios 4) tell the story of a young man who, after marrying and finding it difficult to care for his wife, simply abandons his wife at the invitation of a desert monk.

supreme was the ideal of virginity that in order to avoid temptation the monks and nuns, either as hermits or in communities, separated themselves from the opposite gender or sought to come into contact with the opposing sex as little as possible, and never if able.¹⁴ There even existed cases of married couples living in celibacy once they had filled their obligations to produce children. For some, such as Jerome, the ideal of virginity was so firmly entrenched that they rejected marriage itself as a viable option.¹⁵

In addition, the fourth century Christian literature on virginity provides a variety of theological justifications for the practice of celibacy. In these works, celibacy is linked with numerous theological concepts, including the following: celibates (especially women) are seen as the full expression of being the bride of Christ; sexual activity is linked to the sin of the Fall and virginity to the primordial state of perfection; celibacy is equated with the effort and faith previously exhibited by martyrdom; celibacy represents a sanctified state of incorruption; celibacy is an imitation of Jesus and his mother Mary; celibacy represents a resurrected self that has died to sin; celibacy represents a more intense intimacy with God, and so on.¹⁶ In sum, the elevated status of sexual renunciation had resulted in its connection with some of the most significant and powerful spiritual concepts of Christian theology, and those who practiced celibacy were held in high regard by the early Christian communities.

¹⁴ For example, when asked if he should like to move closer to a village by a disciple, Apa Siseos simply says “Where there is no woman, that is where we should go.” *Apothegmata Patrum*, Siseos 3.

¹⁵ It is important to note that Jerome is perhaps the most “conservative” of orthodox thinkers in terms of sexuality. But, although he felt marriage was inferior to celibacy, he never crossed the line that the Gnostics did in rejecting marriage and creation as sinful.

¹⁶ Whether these justifications are simply rationalizing the practice of celibacy or a genuine set of beliefs about it will be addressed more fully in the next chapters. A good survey of this kind of material can also be found in Peter Brown’s classic treatment of sexual renunciation in the early church, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

Finally, the lofty position of virginity in the church was incorporated into the ecclesiastical and social structures of the early church. First, although celibacy as a requirement for clergy was only to become required by canon law in the early medieval period,¹⁷ the expectation that clergy would benefit from celibacy was widely held during the fourth century (and beyond). For example, although isolated incidents, the Councils of Nicea and Elvira not only had corrective canons for clergy who were living as celibates, but also included proposals to legislate that clergy should be required to be unmarried.¹⁸ In addition, even though celibacy did not become a requirement, clergy that wished to marry often required the permission of their bishop¹⁹ and certainly faced pressures to remain sexually inactive once they did marry, or at least after they had produced children.²⁰ Regardless, it is clear from the writings of the fourth century that celibacy provided the clergy with the virtue, sanctity and spiritual power to properly execute their office.

¹⁷ It is certainly clear that despite efforts to enforce clerical celibacy, it was adopted haphazardly in different areas and times from the fourth century until the eleventh century. Primarily the concerns of the early medieval canons are over the impression that Christianity makes in the West, and over corruption where the wives and children of all ranks of clergy would exert undue influence, or receive offices and financial gain, due to their husband's ecclesiastical position. Synods from the sixth through tenth centuries were consistently attempting to place firm boundaries upon married clergy, for example, often by declaring their children to be illegitimate or making clergy sleep in separate quarters from their wives, and so on. These reforms met with limited success and it was only in the eleventh century under Pope Gregory VII that more lasting clerical reforms were achieved. In the Lenten Synod of 1074 a canon prohibiting clerical marriages was adopted, ordering that no one in the future should be admitted to an office without a vow of celibacy, and renewing an older canon that commanded the laity not to receive the ministrations of those clergy who were in violation of the rule. Though there was significant resistance to the canons of the Lenten Synod (including riots and murder by affected clergy), Gregory managed to enforce the canon through the use of excommunication, public humiliation and the help of secular powers, who were more than happy to see the clergy's power bases reduced. For a good survey of the history this issue see H.C. Lea's *The History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church* (University Books, 1966).

¹⁸ For example, Canon 3 of Nicea forbids clergy to have women "subindoctrinae", or disciples, living in their homes with them. In addition, the non-extant "Proposed Action on Clerical Celibacy" of Nicea recounted by later historians, and Canon 33 of Elvira, show that there was significant impetus among the leadership of the early church to require celibacy of all clergy.

¹⁹ See Canon 10 of the Council of Ancyra.

²⁰ Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 257.

Second, within the social structure of the church, celibates took on the position of trusted and empowered examples of the true faith. Alongside the clergy, who were also qualified and equipped for their position through celibacy, monastic celibates living in the deserts and communities also took on the role of local sages and patrons.²¹ Celibate figures became advisors for spiritual matters, arbiters over local disputes in the absence of civil authorities, local healers, and often gained large numbers of followers who would dwell close to them in order to access their divine wisdom. For example, one of the more renowned ascetics of the Syrian desert, Symeon Stylitus, was said to have large crowds appear daily at the base of his pillar in order to receive instruction and justice from his pronouncements. Indeed, it is said that individuals would travel for miles, often migrating from one ascetic figure to another, in search of truth or in search of a figure to follow.²² In fact, both clergy and the monastics, as celibate loci of spiritual power, came to possess enormous authority, sometimes even in conflict with one another.²³ The virgin and desert monk, then, had been included among the spiritual heroes of the early church, providing both inspiration and authority to Christian practice.

III. Post-modern Scholarship on Asceticism: Historical-Critical

With the rise of post-modern criticism and new methodological perspectives in the 1980s, this historical picture of early Christian asceticism was criticized for being over simplified in its presentation. In particular, a new emphasis on social theory and how it functions was critical of historical accounts of the development of celibacy that did not account for the role of asceticism in social and cultural dynamics. Scholars of the

²¹ See P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity", in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 103-152.

²² Brown, *Holy Man*, pp. 112-114.

²³ For example, the Council of Saragossa is largely devoted to tensions over authority between monastics and regular clergy. See V. Burrus, "Asceticism, Authority and Text: The Acts of the Council of Saragossa" *Semeia* 58 (1992): 95-108.

1980s and 1990s rightly emphasized that the practice of asceticism was more than just a spiritual discipline and that it encompassed a variety of social motivations and consequences. In particular, the overarching theoretical approach to asceticism was to examine it in light of the social dynamics of power. Thus asceticism and celibacy were considered from a variety of new points of view such as gender, family, politics, economics, Greek medicine, Roman civil life and sexuality, and scholars postulated many new perspectives on the motivations and technologies of ascetic practice. Indeed, the complexity and breadth of these studies is such that the wide range of issues discussed, and the difficulty in integrating them comprehensively, can easily overwhelm the student of asceticism in the early church. Since the general historical picture portrayed has already briefly been discussed, it is now important to examine the theories of power that informed late twentieth century scholarship and then to summarize the conclusions concerning asceticism drawn from those theories.

Interestingly, when it comes to the methodological approaches to the study of asceticism, there are few works directly dedicated to that subject alone. Asceticism is most often studied as a historical phenomenon, with methodological concerns usually mentioned briefly in these works simply as a preamble to a particular conclusion that will be drawn from the data. There are really only two scholars who have had a significant influence on the study of asceticism in the past twenty-five years. First, there is Geoffrey Harpham and his 1987 work *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*,²⁴ which is a theoretical work exploring the role asceticism plays in social discourses. Second, there

²⁴ G.G. Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

is the 1995 article “Constructions of Power in Asceticism” by Richard Valantasis,²⁵ which applies the broader theories of power specifically to the practice of asceticism in the early church. More importantly, these two works represent two different periods of scholarly study and reflect how their methodological perspectives on asceticism shifted initially towards social scientific explorations and then a complete redefinition of asceticism as a heuristic device to measure shifting power discourses of any culture. Following method, then, historical studies of asceticism have also followed a similar pattern, examining asceticism as defined by these methodological works.

Turning to Harpham’s monograph, it is important to note that he is neither a scholar of religion nor a historian, but a literary critic. This reflects the fact that recent methodological concerns in religious studies have been subsumed into the larger methodological discussions of post-modern philosophy and the humanities. Harpham, and Valantasis, too, for that matter, take cues from post-modern thought that is rooted in deconstruction and a preoccupation with relations of power within social structures. For Harpham, asceticism “refers not only to a particular set of beliefs and practices that erupted into high visibility during the early Christian era, but also to certain features of our own culture, features that have survived the loss of the ideological and theological structures within which they emerged.”²⁶ According to Harpham, then, asceticism exceeds the “limitations” of religious belief systems and should be considered a “sub ideological” structure that functions within any given culture as a kind of self-reflection where that culture considers, resists and redefines itself. For example, he argues that the self-denial and counter-worldly views of early Christian asceticism are the self-reflective

²⁵ R. Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995): 775-821.

²⁶ Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, xi.

dialogue of late Roman culture couched in Christian language. Questions of temptation, wrestling with demons and remaking oneself in non-compliance with the world is a kind of conversation where one comprehends and resituates oneself within the culture, neither condemning culture fully or endorsing it either.²⁷ In essence, asceticism becomes the resistance common to all peoples who live in a culture and, in an ambivalent and deeply human way, long for “the pre-cultural, post cultural, anti-cultural, or extra cultural.”²⁸ In a post-modern world dominated by the resistance to power, asceticism has been portrayed the natural expression of that resistance in all cultures through history. Harpham’s monograph, therefore, seeks to trace this impulse of resistance through early Christianity and into the modern world, with asceticism initially being dominated by Christian ideology and then subsequently stripped of it yet remaining in our own cultural discussion.

While Harpham’s work is largely a sociological exploration of the interaction of text and culture with small interest in historical matters, between about 1980 and 1995 its methodological perspective came to dominate the study of the historical phenomenon of asceticism. Interest in studying asceticism primarily as a religious phenomenon shifted to studying it as a social one, and religious motivations behind ascetic practice became secondary or were assumed to be manipulated by the social dialectic that Harpham described. The more significant functions of asceticism were to be found by examining the role it played in shifting cultural values, and historians turned initially to three broad areas of social interaction; 1) gender & family, 2) Christianisation of the Roman empire, and 3) philosophical and ideological roots of ascetic behaviour. These categories, it must

²⁷ Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, xii.

²⁸ Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative*, xii.

be made clear, are simply placed into this work for organizational purposes and anyone familiar with these scholarly works will recognize that a great deal of crossover exists among these categories, and that they are by no means exclusive of one another.

First, the study of gender, self-identity, the self's relation to the body, and how these elements interact with social and institutional forces is a massive field of scholarly exploration. The perspective of feminism, in particular, has had a great deal of influence on the study of religion, and especially upon the study of the ascetic practice of celibacy. Feminist scholars have generally attempted to clearly demonstrate the relationship between gender, dominance and social power, and that sexual roles in the past have been portrayed as natural categories within dominant ideological institutions.²⁹ The treatment of women, they argue, reflects a struggle for power on the basis of the "natural" qualities of their gender. For example, they point out that in Greco-Roman society a woman's status was defined by her marital condition; the only safe and proper place for her was to be married.³⁰ Simply put, under the strong influence of Greek philosophy, Roman society understood women to be by nature more irrational and prone to weakness and temptation. Therefore, the more appropriate use of the female nature was to keep it private while encouraging and training it to produce the virtues needed to run a household and defend family honour. This ancient traditional role was the epitome for a good woman to strive for, and a good wife was often rhetorically contrasted with the prostitute, who dishonoured her family and herself by encouraging weakness in the public sphere.

²⁹ See T. Shaw, "Sex and Sexual Renunciation" in P. Esler, ed., *The Early Christian World* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 401, and A. Cameron, "Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Christianity" in A. Cameron, ed., *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (London: Duckworth, 1989), p. 189.

³⁰ See P. Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 11-17, A. Cameron, *Virginity as Metaphor*, pp. 189-91, and J.A. McNamara, "Sexuality and the Cult of Virginity in Early Christian Thought" *Feminist Studies* 3 (1976), p. 152.

For feminist scholars, the practice of celibacy as found in the Christian virgin and widow, therefore, is a striking contrast to the Greco-Roman ideal. Consequently, they argue that for a woman to reject the socially expected position of a wife in the pursuit of a spiritual calling³¹ was to reject the very order of society and threaten the well-being of the community which relied upon women to produce heirs and order their families' households.³² Indeed, celibacy was sometimes met with derision or violence due to Roman perception of the practice,³³ and Roman society occasionally portrayed Christian celibacy as yet another example of Christian obstinacy and unethical behaviour.³⁴ For early feminist scholars, such as Clark and Ruether, the practice of celibacy was a shining example of Harpham's theory of asceticism as resistance to the dominant culture.³⁵ Celibacy offered women the ability to resist the dominant expectations of marriage and

³¹ The only apparent exception in Roman society was those women, such as the Vestal Virgins in the temple of Vesta or the Pythia prophetess in the temple of Apollo, who took oaths of virginity in order to attend to religious duties. This, however, was not considered counter cultural because these women were given many dignities and privileges, usually reserved for males, due to their service to city-state and empire. For a more in depth discussion see M. Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins" *Journal of Roman Studies* 70 (1980): 12-27.

³² It is interesting to note that this rejection of the social order would also be applicable to men as well, for the expectations of providing heirs and participating the political life of the city-state were equally demanding. This reflects one of the weaknesses of the feminist position that continues to emphasize only the autonomy granted to women by celibacy. A view that would include men in this pattern can be found in P. Brown's work *The Body and Society*, chapter one "Body and City", pp.5-32.

³³ K. Cooper's exposition of the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* is an excellent demonstration of how the pre-Constantinian practice of celibacy often conflicted with the authority and ethos of the city-state, which expected women to marry and produce children. The heroines of these *Acts* are regularly portrayed in conflict with Roman authorities due to the wrath of unhappy spouses or snubbed fiancés. See "The Bride That Is No Bride" in *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 45-67.

³⁴ For example, the Roman doctor Galen mentions celibacy in association with Christian obstinacy in the face of martyrdom. Peter Brown also notes the irony that apologists such as Justin Martyr appealed to the sexual morality of the Christian in support of their religion in the empire. See P. Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 60-61.

³⁵ Another weakness of this theory is that if it is argued that celibacy exploded after Christianity was already the dominant force of the empire, it would be difficult to argue that women celibates were resisting the culture which is already "Christian." It will be noted shortly in this chapter that a recent re-definition of asceticism by R. Valantasis expands asceticism to a kind of dialogue over power that is *either* a resistance to the dominant culture *or* the inauguration and justification of a new one. Hence, feminist scholars could argue that Christianity embraced celibacy for women initially as resistance to Roman culture, but then continued that embrace as a justification of the newly inaugurated Christian culture.

family by providing them with a role sanctioned by the community to avoid taking a husband and having children.³⁶ Indeed, early Christian texts defending celibacy often pointed to the bondage, suffering and drudgery of marriage and how virginity provides an escape for the upright woman.³⁷ Celibacy, at least for Clark and Ruether, was really a form of resistance to patriarchal dominance of women in late antiquity and the paradox lay in that empowerment came with a price, and celibate woman embraced a more oppressive set of rules in order to resist the male perspectives on female identity.³⁸

However, this first wave of feminist perspectives on celibacy and asceticism was challenged by a number of scholars who argued that celibacy was still a practice constrained by male perspectives on women and society.³⁹ Elizabeth Castelli simply states “the ideology of virginity did not challenge that of the surrounding culture, but rather adopted and added to it a theological division, producing perhaps an even more restrictive and coercive system.”⁴⁰ McNamara, as well, points out that although celibacy may have given rise to an opportunity to escape marriage, it was predicated on the assumption that virginity represented equality with the male virtue of self-control.⁴¹ Moreover, she points out that throughout the early Christian literature on virginity, the celibate female is sometimes praised for her “manliness”, thus requiring celibate women

³⁶ E.A. Clark, “Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity,” *Anglican Theological Review* 63 (1981): 240-57, and R. Ruether, “Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age,” in *Women of Spirit: Female Leaders in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, eds. R. Ruether and E. McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 71-98.

³⁷ See McNamara, *Sexuality and the Cult of Virginity*, p. 151.

³⁸ See Castelli, E. “Virginity and Its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity” *Journal of Feminist Studies In Religion* 2 (1986): 61-88.

³⁹ See E. Castelli, “Virginity and Its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity” *Journal of Feminist Studies In Religion* 2 (1986): 61-88, and McNamara, J.A., “Sexuality and the Cult of Virginity in Early Christian Thought” *Feminist Studies* 3 (1976): 145-58. However, these studies again fail to take into account the fact that men were engaged in celibacy as well, and in the last chapter of this thesis a motivation for celibacy that would attract both men and women will need to be discussed.

⁴⁰ Castelli, *Virginity and Its Meaning*, p. 88.

⁴¹ McNamara, *Sexuality and the Cult of Virginity*, pp. 153-54.

to deny their gender. Similarly, Averill Cameron has pointed out that the rhetorical power found in early Christian praise for female chastity, for example in the cult of Mary, is only possible on the basis of male rhetoric about the status of women.⁴² In essence, the low opinion of the female nature makes virginity (when accomplished) all the more impressive an achievement, and therefore, all the more appropriate as an ideal and standard. The more considered feminist position is that while conceding that celibacy may have given women another social option, it is difficult to defend it as an expression of resistance to male perspectives. Rather, the practice seems to accept and emphasise ancient perspectives on female nature while transforming it through Christian doctrine.

A second area where postmodern ideas of resistance have affected the study of asceticism is in the whole question of the Christianisation of the Roman empire. That is, what forces led to and aided in the transformation of the empire from a “pagan” culture to a Christian one that even dominated the political sphere? Simply put, recent scholarship on asceticism in the early church has argued that celibacy and monasticism either overtly resisted Roman political, economic and social institutions, or naturally assimilated social and political roles held by Roman elites. Either way, asceticism is seen to be a force that directly aids the Christianisation of the empire. Peter Brown is the scholar of authority on these matters. Much of his career has been spent trying to determine exactly how a religious faith could transform an entire culture with such rapidity.⁴³ In particular, his thoughts on celibacy describe a practice that unconsciously challenges Roman culture on its deepest levels while undermining and replacing the social institutions that held Roman society together.

⁴² Cameron, *Virginity as Metaphor*, pp. 190-91.

⁴³ See P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

Amidst the myriad of historical details that Brown presents is a profound understanding of the communal nature of Greco-Roman society as rooted in the ethos of the *polis*, or city-state. The whole first chapter of his work “The Body and Society” is a fine summary of the social pressures accompanying the needs of an ancient city-state to remain stable and productive. Brown argues that among the many forms of social discourses found in the culture of these city-states, the discourses around sexuality are some of the most powerful. In essence, Brown skilfully demonstrates that “the ancient city expected its citizens to expend a requisite portion of their energy begetting and rearing legitimate children.”⁴⁴ This need for legitimate children, he points out, was in place for a variety of reasons: stabilizing the community due to losses incurred through sickness, age and war, legitimating of the social order (i.e. privileged classes), and as a means to achieving personal virtue and honour. Consequently, he concludes the vast majority of individuals in the city were expected to marry and immense social pressure was placed upon individuals to produce children.

For example, Brown points out that bachelors were only tolerated in upper class circles and chastised regularly,⁴⁵ while unmarried women, few as they were, were portrayed as unhealthy or immoral if not confined to the role of a guardian in a religious shrine. In addition, he shows much textual and archaeological evidence clearly demonstrating that an aspect of virtue in late antiquity included fulfilling one’s duty to reproduce legitimate children. Ancient grave markers speak of how an individual was an example of virtue because he had not broken the ancient lineage of his ancestors, while

⁴⁴ Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 7.

numerous letters and treatises encourage young men to marry and to reproduce heirs.⁴⁶ K. Gaca, too, supports Brown's assessment by pointing out that even in the lower classes, which we sadly know little about from the evidence, the power of *eros* seems to have been popularly understood to be a divine force emanating from the gods, which could only be resisted through the use of magic or ritual appeals to the gods.⁴⁷ Still, they argue that both the upper and lower classes worked from a basic cultural conception of human anthropology where the symbiosis of body and soul made the individual vulnerable to either inherent weaknesses of the body or overpowering by the gods,⁴⁸ and required significant social responsibility in response to that weakness.

While scholars of late antiquity have explored this phenomenon in great detail, Brown's concern is simply to demonstrate the inexorably strong communal ethos of the city-state and how it placed codes of behaviour and conduct upon the individual. For Brown, this pressure from the city-state carried enormous symbolic weight in regard to the body,⁴⁹ and made the body the primary battleground for the demands of society upon the individual.⁵⁰ Concerning the matter of celibacy, then, Brown argues that an individual engaging in sexual renunciation was performing a profoundly asocial (Brown's term) act, defining oneself in such a way that they did not belong to any of society's natural categories.⁵¹ The celibate, he concludes, was making an "abnormal" choice that

⁴⁶ Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁷ See K. Gaca, "Early Stoic Eros: The sexual ethics of Zeno and Chrysippus and Their Evaluation of the Greek Erotic Tradition" *Aperion* 33.3 (2000): 214-17.

⁴⁸ See chapter three of this thesis for a more in depth discussion of these issues, particularly those concerns of the philosophical schools of the Greco-Roman culture.

⁴⁹ See J. Behr's discussion of Brown and Foucault in "Shifting Sands: Foucault, Brown and the Framework of Christian Asceticism" *Heythrop Journal* 34.1 (1993), pp. 9-10.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 28.

⁵¹ P. Brown "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church" in McGinn, Meyendorff and Leclercq, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (London: SCM, 1989), pp. 434-35.

emphasized the importance of the individual over society, and thus challenged the communal ethos that ordered Greco-Roman society.

Therefore, according to Brown, the Christian emphasis upon resurrection of the body and embrace of celibacy as a means to transform the individual is an example of the kind of resistance that Harpham explored. In Brown's case, Christian celibacy demonstrates the resistance to a social structure that overly burdened individuals for the sake of social stability. Celibacy, now justified by Christian theology, gave the individual, both male and female, the ability to resist social demands of marriage and children, and challenged the right of society to assert its demands upon the individual. In that way, Brown sees Christian theology, which emphasizes individual and personal association with the divine through Christ, as a direct challenge to the Roman social structure. For Brown, the embrace of celibacy by Christians in the first two or three centuries of the common era is a kind of first shot in the long drawn out process where Christianity slowly takes over as the dominant social structure in late antiquity.

The inherent weakness in this position is that it could easily be argued that early Christianity, though definitely oriented towards the salvation of individuals, was as socially and communally minded as the culture from which it came. Indeed, the ascetic texts of both the pre and post Constantinian church contain demands upon the individual for the sake of the church as the new society, and emphasized the health of the church over the health of the individual. For example, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, the majority of the corrections placed upon ascetics in the first three centuries CE are done for the well-being of the congregations and communities where ascetics lived.⁵²

⁵² For example, Tertullian in his *On the Veiling of Virgins* writes "Turn we next to the examination of the reasons themselves which lead the apostle to teach that the female ought to be veiled, (to see) whether the

Brown's argument, then, contains an inherent contradiction that requires ascetic practices to support both the claims of the individual and responsibility to the new social structure of the Christian empire. It would be more accurate to say that rather than emphasizing the individual over the community, early Christian asceticism emphasized Christian society as better than the Roman society because of its theological and cosmological views. The role of the individual in relation to society has changed, but not in opposition to a communal ethos, which early Christianity clearly shares with Roman society. Instead, early Christian perspectives see the role of the individual as continuing to preserve well-being of the community, but now it is by helping the church live out its teleological goals.⁵³

Still, one of Brown's strengths is that he does not see celibacy as a fixed and static kind of practice. For him the role of celibacy changes following the emergence of monasticism as a formal institution in the fourth century. The resistance to Roman social order found in celibacy prior to the emergence of monasticism continued to exist, but now celibacy (and asceticism in general) begins to erode the Roman social order by assimilating the role of patronage into the sphere of the ascetic. Brown argues that in places where ascetics had begun to withdraw to the desert or cloister, a symbiotic relationship began to form between the ascetics and the nearby villages, towns and cities.⁵⁴ The impressive nature of the ascetic as a moral, ethical person, who has chosen to live outside the social structure, gave the ascetic a great deal of authority due to his "unbiased" position in the universe, and because of the natural "power" he exhibited over

self-same (reasons) apply to virgins likewise; so that hence also the community of the name between virgins and *not-virgins* may be established, while the self-same causes which necessitate the veil are found to exist in each case." (*On the Veiling of Virgins* VII).

⁵³ This issue will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.

⁵⁴ Brown, *Holy Man*, p. 110.

himself and society.⁵⁵ Consequently, Brown demonstrates that from the fourth century through to the sixth, ascetics began to take over the role of patron in the towns and cities of the empire. The role of patron, that is, an individual who used his natural authority and power to bring benefit to his city and administer justice - a role formerly given to Roman nobility - was slowly transferred to local holy men and women. Sometimes, the ascetic was able to accept the role of patron because the local Roman patron was too far away or had abdicated his responsibility as the empire was beginning to break down. However, more often, the local ascetic could clearly demonstrate that his natural power and authority were superior to those of the secular patron. Not only could the ascetic provide judgement for local disputes with impartiality,⁵⁶ he could also bring direct benefit to his area of patronage through protection from divine wrath,⁵⁷ keeping violence from erupting,⁵⁸ and as a healer, sage or confessor.⁵⁹ For Brown, then, the process of Christianization was aided by celibacy and asceticism as they provided a new and more powerful alternative for the important social position of patron.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Brown, *Holy Man*, 116.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Holy Man*, p. 132.

⁵⁷ Brown, *Holy Man*, p. 122.

⁵⁸ Brown, *Holy Man*, p. 126.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Holy Man*, p. 141.

⁶⁰ One weakness in this theory is that bishops in the early church had taken on the role of patrons as well. The bishops were not ascetic in the sense that the holy man was, but they still took on many of the same roles that the ascetics did (i.e. settling disputes, providing charity, aiding in social and political mobility, etc.). In that sense, the holy man gained authority through his asceticism, while the bishops had gained it through ordination to their office. Both were endowed with a special share of the Holy Spirit, had achieved a high level of virtue through self-formative discipline, and benefited others through public actions. However, the non-ascetic nature of the bishop makes it more difficult to argue that the role of asceticism is to undercut the dominant social order. The bishops adapted the role of patron but subverted the Roman social authority largely without engaging in asceticism, and the rise of Christianity can as much be attributed to them as to the ascetics. In addition, the bishops gained a more general authority that did not depend upon their location or charisma. For good surveys of how the bishops of the early church took the role of patron see H. A. Drake's *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), Claudia Rapp's *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005) and Andrea Sterk's *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Another scholar who argues that celibacy and asceticism aided in the Christianization of the empire is Kate Cooper. In trying to answer how Christianity was so successful in transforming Roman society, especially in its adherence to virginity as an ideal that seemingly undermined the fabric of ancient moral society, Cooper argues: “The reason for the Christians’ seemingly inexplicable success seems to lie in the way the political and moral theorists of the Roman empire understood the relationship of sexual morality to civic virtue. Unwittingly, they had left an unstable link in the system for judging a man’s fitness for public office.”⁶¹ Using the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, Cooper asserts that these texts, which show a conflict between the ideal of Christian virginity and a society resisting its validity,⁶² are not really concerned with issues of gender, women and reproduction. Rather, she points out that it was pagan and Christian men of elite status who wrote these texts. Consequently, Cooper argues that the conflict over virginity is a conflict over who has the authority and right to define the social order.⁶³

Cooper reminds the reader that Greek and Roman moralists saw austerity (not abstinence) as providing the moral grounding to be socially responsible and politically astute.⁶⁴ Too much sexual activity would create irrational weakness, but one still needed to engage it enough to produce children and provide balance to the body.⁶⁵ Thus, controlled sexual habits were required to produce a superior moral person. Consequently,

⁶¹ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, p. ix.

⁶² Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, pp.55-56.

⁶³ Since the *Apocryphal Acts* date to the late second and early third century, Cooper’s thesis at least has the strength of seeing social resistance a good length of time before the Constantine’s victory. However, it still does not take into full account that men were embracing celibacy as well. Why do we not see “Chastity Tales” about men as well?

⁶⁴ More will be said on this issue in chapter three of this thesis.

⁶⁵ Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 17-25. See also J. Lieu, “Embodiment and Gender” in J. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Greco-Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 181-83.

Cooper argues that in these texts both continuity and subversion are present: continuity in the heroic status of a woman who overcomes her nature is present, but subversive in that celibacy shows a virtue superior to that of the austere married male.⁶⁶ In that way, moral theorists of the Roman world left an opening for a more superior morality to claim the authority to rule and determine social order. Christians who practiced celibacy were able to claim authority through their greater virtue, and according to Cooper, the ideal of virginity is simply the rhetorical, textual expression of the early Christian claim to social power. In essence, because sexual restraint was already an ideal of Greco-Roman society, the ideal of virginity, as the most intensive form of sexual restraint, lent moral superiority to Christian culture, and gave it that much more weight in its slow conquest of the Roman social order.

A final example of how celibacy and asceticism fit into an empire that was slowly coming under the influence of Christianity is the hypothesis that celibacy in the early church represents a stream of self-identity in opposition to Roman culture. In particular, social theories about how communities form themselves⁶⁷ have been used to demonstrate that celibacy may have been employed by the early Christian communities to differentiate themselves from the broader Roman culture. Again, there is a distinction among scholars between the pre and post-Constantine empire. Prior to Constantine's conversion strict moral codes governing sexual behaviour had been placed upon Christians from the time of Paul onwards. For example, Chadwick points out that the "world", which happened to be Roman, was often held to be a "secular" world that lived in rebellion against God's kingdom, and celibacy, or continence within marriage, was one way in which Christians

⁶⁶ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, p. 55.

⁶⁷ For example, see D.B. MacKay's article "Ethnicity" or B.L. Mack's article "Social Formation" in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (Cassell: New York, 2000), eds. W. Braun & R.T. McCutcheon.

might reject the “secular” world and clearly identify themselves with God and the church.⁶⁸ Following Constantine’s conversion, and the mixture of Christian theological concerns with Roman political structures, scholars argue that there was a grass roots movement that rejected a perceived “watering down” of the Christian faith. Christians might no longer face persecution, but now they faced the temptations of the city where beguiling pleasures still existed in large quantity.⁶⁹ Many fled to the desert to engage in the “true” faith away from the world that was still corrupt and now Christian in name only. In this way, an element in early Christianity continued to use celibacy as a tool to establish the boundaries of its own identity.

Moreover, celibacy used for the purposes of self-identity has also been linked to martyrdom and the internal Christian debate over orthodoxy. Regarding the connection between celibacy and martyrdom, a number of scholars have argued there is a clear connection between the feats of faith done by martyrs and the power derived from celibacy.⁷⁰ Celibacy and continence, they argue, provided the body with the power needed to keep faith under torture and to face death with certainty of salvation, while simultaneously providing a boundary between those who remain faithful (i.e. “us”), and those who persecuted or gave up their faith, (i.e. “them”). In addition, as Ramsay argues, following Constantine’s conversion celibacy continued to be an identity marker for the

⁶⁸ H. Chadwick, “Pachomius and the Idea of Sanctity” in *The Byzantine Saint: University of Birmingham, Fourteenth Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (1980), S. Hackel, ed. (London, 1981), pp. 11-24. Reprinted in *History and Thought of the Early Church* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1982), p. 13.

⁶⁹ For example, both Augustine and John Chrysostom often railed against the pleasures of the city in sermons and argued that marriage was the only safety valve that would provide sufficiently regular intercourse to dampen desire. See Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 308-10.

⁷⁰ See Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 73-77; S.P. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Numen* 20 (1973), p. 2; G. Clark, “Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender” in *Asceticism*, Wimbush, V.L. & Valantasis, R. eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 47-48; B. Ramsey, “Martyrdom and Virginitly” in *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 122-48.

true Christian, but now expressed through “death” to the “self”, sometimes called a “long martyrdom”, that was proof of genuine religion. Ramsay points out that the language of celibacy, after the possibilities of martyrdom were gone, contained the language of the “athlete” who was engaged in a “contest”. This language, he argues, was formerly used primarily of the martyrs, and after Constantine’s victory the adversary is one’s own weak nature and the spiritual adversary of the devil.⁷¹ In both cases, celibacy clearly defined one as being truly an insider to the faith, and failure in the face of temptation showed that one’s motives were never pure from the start, hence membership had been a sham.⁷²

A more complicated example of the issues of identity with regard to celibacy is the whole matter of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The well-known struggle the church had with “heretical” and Gnostic groups also spilled over into the practice of celibacy, with a number of heterodox Christians practicing celibacy to the extreme of rejecting marriage entirely.⁷³ For example, T. Shaw argues that the orthodox position included a finely tuned (sometimes not so finely tuned) argument that struggled to define the true Christian who recognized the superiority of celibacy without compromising the goodness of creation and marriage,⁷⁴ whereas some heterodox groups argued that sexual activity, including marriage, was part of the sinful order of the world. Consequently, through the first five centuries of Christian history celibacy was often used as a measure to define appropriate

⁷¹ Ramsay, *Martyrdom and Virginity*, p. 147.

⁷² The limitation of this theory is that it would require that the martyrs were drawn only from the class of celibates in the early church. However, the martyrs were drawn from all classes of society, and perhaps it would be more accurate to say that celibacy and martyrdom were given the same status rhetorically. It is more likely that celibacy developed at the same time that martyrdom was occurring, and the high honours and status of both occurred simultaneously. Really, only a few texts link the two, largely found among accounts of martyrdoms, and they do not represent a large segment of early Christian thought.

⁷³ For example, the followers of Marcion, as well as a number of other Gnostic thinkers, were guilty of rejecting marriage as a sin and the world as evil. Book III of Clement’s *Stromaties* is essentially one long defence of the goodness of marriage held in balance with the proper place of celibacy.

⁷⁴ See T. Shaw, “Sex and Sexual Renunciation” in P. Esler, ed., *The Early Christian World* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 415, and Elizabeth Clark’s monograph *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999).

theological values and used to help condemn groups like the Manicheans and Marcionites as something “other” than Christian.⁷⁵ In that way, some scholars argue that celibacy seems to have had an impact on formation of the Christian identity on the basis of theological views. Indeed, well into the fifth century the church fathers continued to argue over the matter of celibacy as an element of the Originist controversy and often accused one another of being heterodox for defending a particular position on celibacy.⁷⁶

A third area of research pursued by scholars has been into the ideological and philosophical disposition of the Roman Empire and the extent to which early Christianity adapted it. In particular, Peter Brown and Teresa Shaw⁷⁷ have spent much effort explaining how Christianity adopted Greco-Roman moral and philosophical traditions in its idealization of celibacy and virginity. Although Brown’s *Body and Society* does not deal directly with Greco-Roman philosophy, he points out on numerous occasions that Greek philosophical concepts of the body and soul conceived the body as the locus of sexual danger for the individual and community.⁷⁸ Due to its material nature the body was a constant source of danger for irrational and destructive behaviour, and, for Brown, celibacy was the next natural step in controlling the weaknesses of the individual.⁷⁹ Consequently, he argues that the inherent weakness of the body and the temptation of “female” seductiveness could be avoided through continence, and the “virtue” of the Roman world was adapted by Christians and granted to those who lived in abstinence.

⁷⁵ More will be said about this in chapter two.

⁷⁶ These accusations are largely rhetorical in that they can easily connect an individual to Gnostic practices through their position on asceticism. As will be seen in chapter two, though, celibacy’s relationship to Gnosticism is far more complex and does not necessarily reflect either an orthodox or heterodox position. See E. Clark, , *Reading Renunciation*, p. 5-7. See also, D. Hunter, “Resistance to the Virginal Ideal in Late Fourth Century Rome: The Case of Jovinian.” *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 45-64.

⁷⁷ See Shaw, T., *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

⁷⁸ A full treatment of this concept will be in chapter three.

⁷⁹ Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 81.

However, Brown does not explore any reasons as to *why* celibacy would be the next natural step in Roman society, and he simply assumes that early Christians were practicing their own version of sexual austerity. Indeed, the need for an explanation as to *why* early Christians embraced celibacy instead of the simply austere morality of the Greeks and Romans will ultimately be the crux of the issue for this thesis. Chapters three and four will be dedicated to answering that question.

Teresa Shaw's work, as well, points to medical models of antiquity as a source for Christian idealization of celibacy.⁸⁰ Her work walks the reader through both Greek and Roman medical understanding of the human body, and how ancient doctors perceived the inherent danger in sexual activity that was often the cause of madness and illness.⁸¹ She argues, then, that the early Christians often used contemporary medical knowledge in support of virginity, claiming with some of their "pagan" counterparts that the sole purpose of sexual intercourse was procreation, and that all other sexual activity was detrimental to physical and emotional health. For many scholars, then, Christian celibacy is simply an adapted religious version of a sexual austerity that already existed in the Greco-Roman world. However, like Brown, Shaw's argument does not explain the early Christian escalation of the cultural norm of austerity in Greco-Roman society to the complete abstinence of celibacy. To explain this, it will be argued in succeeding chapters that the philosophical and medical speculations of the Greco-Roman world were adapted by early Christians to defend an already established practice of celibacy using the

⁸⁰ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, pp. 27-78.

⁸¹ Shaw focuses on the fact that "The modern tendency to see the body and soul as two distinct and unrelated or even conflicting spheres of activity and attention does not translate well into Greco-Roman antiquity, when medical and philosophical practitioners and theorists paint a more complicated and dynamic picture of their relationship." *Burden of the Flesh*, p. 29. In that regard, she focuses on the reciprocal nature of body and soul in ancient thought and how their medical speculation often addressed illness in regard to that relationship. Her argument is essentially that early Christianity adopted and adapted the medical knowledge of the Greco-Roman world and used it as the basis of the need for celibacy.

common and accepted knowledge of the society. For if it could be shown that the practice of celibacy was compatible with the accepted notions of morality in the Roman elites, it would be much easier to defend and justify. However, this does not mean that early Christians were initially motivated solely by philosophical and medical considerations. Therefore, the task of this thesis is also to explore how early Christians employed the accepted knowledge of the Roman world and how they changed it.

IV. Post-modern Scholarship on Asceticism: Social Theorists

Now, in many ways, this survey of scholarly literature on asceticism and celibacy is a vast over-simplification. All of the positions described above are supported by complex historical data, and none of the scholars mentioned would endeavour to encourage anything but a complex view of asceticism in the early church. That said, it is still clear that methodological theories of social formation and resistance have led scholars to focus on many aspects of asceticism that had previously been unexplored. But this is not the end of the story either, as another important shift in methodology in the mid 1990's has led to a new perspective on asceticism. This shift occurred due to the frustration of scholars over two issues: 1) social theory's inability to bring consensus on the origins of asceticism in the early church, and 2) a new concern for cross-cultural studies that demanded a definition of asceticism that would be universally applicable.⁸² In response to this frustration, Richard Valantasis wrote "Constructions of Power in Asceticism" in an attempt to formulate an overarching theoretical framework that would both be inclusive of all types and expressions of asceticism found in religious traditions

⁸² See R. Valantasis & V.L. Wimbush, "Introduction" in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush, & R. Valantasis, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xxiii ff.

world wide, and that would put an end to the search for the “origins” of any ascetic practice.⁸³

Valantasis’ article is essentially an unrestricted application of post-modern theories of power to the concept of asceticism. Indeed, more than half of this lengthy article is devoted to summarizing the progression of theories of power in the past twenty years. Beginning with T.E. Wartenberg and L. Althusser and working his way through to Foucault, Hodge and Kress, Valantasis demonstrates that theories of power - which basically argue for one social agent wielding power over a second agent in order to make that agent do or act in some way they would not otherwise naturally act - move from arguing for a simplistic and naïve notion of unrestricted use of power to a more sophisticated and complex understanding of the nature of power within social discourses. Initially theorists of power focussed on the blatant mechanisms of economic and political power, and emphasized the unrestricted oppression of one agent over another.⁸⁴ However, this view was criticized by a second generation of power theorists who rejected the mechanistic and simple conception of power as oppression. Instead, these scholars focussed on the social dynamics of power where both agents in a relationship attempted to control or resist the other through more subtle means such as gender, race, family, morality and a host of other areas where social relationships exist.⁸⁵ In particular, it was emphasized that people do not usually blatantly assimilate into a culture, but go through a complex process of initiation and formation where the dominant structure attempts to create solidarity with it, while simultaneously being resisted on an instinctual level.

⁸³ R. Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995): 775-821.

⁸⁴ Valantasis, *Constructions of Power*, pp. 777-82.

⁸⁵ Valantasis, *Constructions of Power*, pp. 782-92.

More importantly, social theories of power insist that individuals and social groups create and employ ideological complexes as a means of constraining behaviour, either structuring reality in agreement with the dominant social structure, or creating a new world view that challenges the dominant social structure.⁸⁶ Consequently, the concept of “truth” in a given culture is simply regarded as a function of the solidarity and power of a group, and regardless of the content of that “truth” the most important role of asceticism is to foster a social change through a reinvention of a worldview. Taking all this theory of power to heart, Valantasis is finally able to offer a new definition of asceticism: “*Asceticism may be defined as performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe.*”⁸⁷ With this definition in hand, scholars were now able to alleviate the frustrations of earlier social theory. First, this definition can be applicable to any culture, in any historical period, so cross-cultural definitions and discussions should be able to occur. And second, since asceticism is simply a function of every culture, it was bound to appear when Christianity challenged the Roman order, and the elusive origins and motivations of asceticism in the early church need no longer be defined. Christianity, some have argued, created its own worldview, which included an ascetic ideology, in order to inaugurate its own dominance within the Roman Empire.

Consequently, this theoretical shift in the study of asceticism in the early church produced an odd combination of miscategorization of ascetic behaviour and an abandonment of any serious search for early Christian motivations of celibacy. Valantasis’ definition is too broad in that *any* action that attempts to change the distribution of social

⁸⁶ Valantasis, *Constructions of Power*, p. 788.

⁸⁷ Valantasis, *Constructions of Power*, p. 797.

power in a culture could be considered ascetic, and that many actions, either deliberate or subconscious, successfully change power structures and world views, but without engaging in what would be considered traditional forms of asceticism. Consequently, there is a tendency to define any set of texts or behaviours that attempt to change worldviews or moral conduct as ascetic. What this means in terms of historical study is that since the mid 1990s, the concept of asceticism has been used as a measuring device that can be applied to any religious behaviour that encourages social transformation or new worldviews. Two examples, at least in terms of early Christianity, will suffice.

In addition to his methodological work on asceticism, Richard Valantasis also has written a critical commentary on the Gospel of Thomas, where he speaks of Thomas' gospel message in terms of asceticism.⁸⁸ Although there are a few references in Thomas to what might be considered traditional ascetic practices, Valantasis argues that Thomas' message is ascetic *as a whole* and actually one of three competing worldviews found in early Christianity.⁸⁹ Thomas' sayings gospel is ascetic because it is competing with the Johannine and synoptic theological presentation of Jesus, and contesting for the limited power over the Christian worldview. So despite the fact that the Gospel of Thomas is not particularly known for encouraging fasting or celibacy or any other practice we usually associate with asceticism, some scholars can now see it as an ascetic text because it competes for power within a specific world view.

Another example of this trend in the collection of essays edited by Lief Vaage in 1999 called *Asceticism in the New Testament*.⁹⁰ In this work, the documents of the New Testament are examined for their ascetic nature as documents that are attempting to

⁸⁸ R. Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁸⁹ R. Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*, pp.21-24.

⁹⁰ L.E.Vaage, & V.L. Wimmbush, eds. *Asceticism and the New Testament* (NY: Routledge, 1999).

transform the dominant worldviews found in either Judaism or Greco-Roman society. In that way, despite the fact that there are only a few examples of traditional ascetic practice in the gospels and Paul's letters, all of the texts of the New Testament are considered to be either partially or fully ascetic documents. For example, the Gospels are naturally attempting to transform the Jewish view of the Messiah and the Law, or Paul's letters, being driven by praxis, are perfect examples of the ascetic nature of early Christianity. Consequently, the book concludes on the whole that early Christianity is an ascetic movement found within the broader religious milieu of the Roman world.

Second, there is little interest in continuing to search for a religious or theological motivation behind early Christian asceticism. Elizabeth Clark has admitted as much in a recent study: "The study of early Christian asceticism in recent years has retreated from the two questions that dominated discussion in decades past, namely, "Where did Christian asceticism come from?" and "Why did ascetic practitioners do what they did?" For convenience, we may label these the "origins" question and the "motivations" question. Both, I think, have proved unproductive for future research."⁹¹ Most scholars still examine the belief structures of early Christianity, but primarily as a kind of rhetoric or propaganda that is either an unconscious or subconscious attempt to undermine the larger culture.⁹² And if they do admit that belief systems may have factored into motivations for asceticism it is done as an oversimplified dependence upon some other cultural norm or social construct. For example, Daniel Boyarin traces the impetus behind Christian celibacy to certain pessimistic notions of sexuality found in first century

⁹¹ E. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, p. 18.

⁹² For example, A. Cameron's essay "Ascetic Closure and the End of Antiquity" in *Asceticism* V.L. Wimbush & R. Valantasis, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 147-61. Cameron's main goal is to explore how ascetic practice in the fourth and fifth century was a kind of discourse where certain theological or philosophical themes were employed to shift the balance of power and authority in the empire into the hands of Christianity.

Judaism.⁹³ And, of course, as discussed previously, many scholars assume that early Christianity simply adapted Greco-Roman medical and philosophical concepts of the body and produced a whole series of theological justifications for adopting the more severe perspectives of cultural views on sex and the dangers of desire. Either way, there is a strong sentiment among scholars that early Christian asceticism is simply bound up in the cultures that produced it and does not represent any religious construct unique or independent from the culture.

It can clearly be seen, then, that social theories of power and resistance have come to dominate the study of asceticism in the early church. Asceticism has been described as a form of resistance to the dominant culture for most, and more recently, as the mechanism of social change in any given society or culture. It is thought, therefore, that Early Christian celibacy challenges the Greco-Roman social order by rejecting social and familial responsibilities, it aids in the Christianization of the empire, both before and after Constantine's conversion, and paradoxically, does it by adapting Greco-Roman concepts of the body to a Christian worldview. The ideal of virginity is the construction of a growing Christian culture, employed to take power in the empire and control over political institutions and individual lives. And, indeed, any new practice or belief system should be considered as ascetic since ascetic practices function as a catalyst for change and can be examined as a reflection of social discourses in any culture.

⁹³ D. Boyarin, "Body Politic among the Brides of Christ: Paul and the Origins of Sexual Renunciation" in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush, & R. Valantasis, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 459-78. Boyarin's position is difficult to defend since it is unlikely that the influence of Judaism on Christianity continued much beyond the early part of the second century. In addition, it is also difficult to defend Boyarin's position because Judaism as a whole encouraged marriage and having children as part of fulfilling their covenant with God. Are we to argue that a small number of texts, representative of a small stream of ascetic Jews, was to become the foundation of early Christian asceticism? Certainly, early Christian ascetic texts are compatible with Jewish ascetic texts, but that does not prove literary or historical dependence.

VI. Critique of Modern Scholarship on Asceticism

The concern of this thesis is that the dominance of social theory has led to a variety of problems for understanding celibacy and asceticism in the early church. In particular, there are several assumptions of social theories of power that lead to mistakes in interpreting the primary data of asceticism, and to avoiding application of important data that social theory ignores.

The largest and most important assumption that social theories of power make is that ideologies and religious belief systems are created to inaugurate new social discourses or to bolster old ones. In this way, for example, the rise of Christianity as a community that challenges the old Roman social institutions required that Christianity create its own set of ideals and institutions to replace the old. Therefore, the theological and ideological beliefs of Christianity were formed out of the need to authorize and justify their acquisition of social power, and among those idealized concepts, of course, was virginity. However, it is a mistaken assumption to argue that ideological and theological beliefs are primarily fabricated to support a struggle for social power, and that the “real” motivation behind the emergence of asceticism, or any religious phenomenon, is an *a priori* natural human competition for power. There is a logical inconsistency in this theory in that it requires that a social group come into existence accidentally or without warrant of a belief system before it then struggles to gain social influence and creates its own set of ideals to challenge the dominant social order. How could a social group come together with enough organization and identity to challenge the dominant social order without an already established alternative belief system? Rather, it makes more sense to argue that an altered world view or belief system would have natural social

ramifications where society would be complicit or resistant to it on the basis of an older ideological perspective. In that way, a new world view held by Christians is more likely to have caused the idealization of celibacy, or at least mutually developed its ascendancy as Christianity became a cultural force, than to argue Christians developed an ideology of virginity to support their growth as a social power.

This does not mean, however, that social theories are of no value to the historian. The consequences and ramifications of new belief systems on a culture are of great interest to the historian, but it is important not to put the “cart before the horse”, so to speak. Nor does it mean that current scholarship is oblivious to the religious and theological motives behind celibacy, which they obviously recognize and respect. It is more properly a matter of sensitivity and priority, and currently scholarship is more sensitive to asceticism as a social force than to its place as a religious practice motivated by religious beliefs. There is a slippage here where the consequences of an action have sometimes been mistaken for its motivation or intention; that is, that because early Christianity gained social power in the empire as a consequence of its belief system, its belief system must have come into existence for that purpose. Hence, celibacy, or fasting, or creed, or whatever might signify a unified Christian social power must have been employed by the early church to gain power. While it is clear that Christianity did gain the social power to undo the institutions of Rome, it is not clear that early Christianity was always motivated by a search for power. Did early Christians exert power and influence? Yes. Did they use rhetoric and philosophy to persuade others of the validity of their worldview? Yes, of course. But the intentions for ascetic behaviour also must include conviction of religious belief, as well as acknowledging the power that

accrues to it, and scholars of recent years have let that fact slip from their investigations. In that way, some recent scholarship has been guilty of the same monolithic portrayal of asceticism that earlier confessional views had been criticized for; only the caricature of ascetic behaviour is limited to the sphere of social discourse.⁹⁴

That slip actually represents the second major assumption of social theories of power, that is, the assumption that all societies across space and time universally act the same. In particular, the assumption is also that ancient cultures behave in a manner similar to modern ones. Modern western society has been dominated by ideologies, with political and economic institutions that have manipulated those ideologies in order produce a given result. Modern culture is driven by the media, advertising and popular culture, which are all deeply rooted in the manipulation of images and ideas. Further, technology and mass communication have made it difficult to determine truth from lies, and in the modern world the fear of illusion is very real. That being said, it is not difficult to see how theorists can accuse modern cultures and nations with manipulating belief systems for the sake of power and control. However, it is mistaken to assume that non-modern and non-western cultures had a similar habit of manipulating reality to consolidate power. Again, this does not mean that ancient or non-western cultures did not compete for power, only that scholars cannot assume a similarity with modern culture in terms of extent, scope and intent. Further, scholars must engage in a methodological sensitivity that can differentiate between a play for social power and a genuine religious motivation, and the extent to which each has influence. The problem scholars face is that the two are often so intertwined that it is difficult to say which takes priority. The

⁹⁴ Indeed, motivations for any act are seldom simple. Not only are the religious convictions and beliefs of both individuals and social groups important, but empowerment need not be understood only in terms of social discourses.

methodological mistake, then, is to always give priority to theories of social power, when both are needed to fully understand history.⁹⁵

The result of this imbalance created by methodology, at least in terms of early Christian asceticism, is twofold. First, although there is recognition that celibacy and asceticism existed prior to the emergence of institutional monasticism in the fourth century, the loss of interest in the origins of asceticism has left the earliest theological considerations of Christian history on celibacy— from the New Testament to the end of the third century – largely un-investigated.⁹⁶ The assumption is that prior to the mid third century, the early Christian communities were not unified or well enough defined to encourage asceticism as a resistance to the Roman social order. The habit of scholars, therefore, is to study the emergence of asceticism as it is expressed in monasticism in the post-Constantine church, and although celibacy is present in all the major Christian literature from Paul onward, little comprehensive investigation of second and third century asceticism has been undertaken or incorporated into method and theory. Indeed, the majority of scholarly works on virginity and asceticism in the early church focus on the works of the fourth and fifth century fathers, and the pre-fourth century documents are treated as isolated phenomena that reflect only local interests or developments,⁹⁷ or as a part of conflicts with heterodox groups. The possibility that asceticism may have

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Clark gives fair warning: “Where we stand in our investigations is equally important. As William Deal notes, if we took Shinto as our definitive model of asceticism rather than Christianity, we might think that asceticism essence lay in bodily purification, not in union with God. But further: it is not only our models, it is our contexts. Each of us – this writer included – would benefit from being more attentive to the conditions under which we have produced our own versions of asceticism, for we are very differently grounded in relation to religion, ideology and institutions.” See “The Ascetic Impulse in Religious Life: A General Response” in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush & R. Valantasis eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 510.

⁹⁶ E. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, pp. 27-33.

⁹⁷ Aside from a few exceptions that will be examined later in the thesis, most of the major treatments of early Christian asceticism, while acknowledging the presence of asceticism from the New Testament period on, limit their research to the late third century and forward, linking it primarily to the practice of monasticism.

existed in significant amounts in the early church prior to the fourth century does not receive much interest, and its motivations and origins during those centuries remain largely unexplored.

Second, the gap between theorists and historians continues to widen. Despite the sophisticated variety of approaches to asceticism, scholarly attempts at defining it have sometimes led to ahistorical and areligious interpretations of ascetic behaviours and texts. Definitions of asceticism become ahistorical in the sense that the commitment to social theories of power could predetermine an interpretation that may be contradictory to the historical reality. For example, as mentioned earlier, documents from the New Testament and Gnostic texts are now being categorized as ascetic even though they largely do not encourage asceticism as a set of religious practices that include the well-known elements of sexual and bodily self-denial. Simply being texts that encourage a worldview different from the dominant culture (i.e. Christian versus Roman) has now led some scholars to mislabel certain behaviours and texts as ascetic when they are clearly not. In addition, the gap between theorists and historians widens because the theorist, again, incorrectly assumes that asceticism only has meaning in relation to other behaviours in a culture.⁹⁸ But scholars often forget that asceticism is primarily the practice of an elite group within a community that may or may not form the dominant culture of society. For example, not all Christians are ascetic though both non-ascetic and ascetic Christians would subscribe to a similar worldview. Those who practice asceticism have a particular religious intention or goal that is relevant in relation to their insider world view and may only come in contact with the broader culture in a secondary way as a part of inevitable human connections.

⁹⁸ E. Clark, *Ascetic Impulse*, p. 507.

In this way, interpretations of social theory also become areligious. Again, it is not being suggested that asceticism has no role to play in the social dynamics of the culture in which it exists; it is once again a matter of priority and sensitivity. To downplay the importance of real religious intentions of ascetic practitioners (even if difficult to retrieve) is to misunderstand them at the most important level and may lead to a misunderstanding of the historical realities. In the case of early Christian asceticism, it has led to both miscategorization of texts as ascetic and to a demotion of religious belief as an important factor in these practices. What is required of scholars is a more sensitive matrix of interpretation that places the motivations for asceticism in relation to their religious worldview while still acknowledging that those practices will have consequences upon social dynamics. Both the religious motivations and the social ramifications must be examined and neither can be sacrificed as unimportant.

Obviously, much work has been done on the role that asceticism plays in social dynamics, but there is still much work to be done on asceticism as a religious practice. With that in mind, a refined view of asceticism will be adopted in this thesis in order to help direct further investigation of celibacy in the early church. The refinement offered is to reintegrate religious notions into the motivation and practice of asceticism. In this regard, Weber's old definition of "methodically controlled behaviour specifically within the teleological path towards salvation"⁹⁹ is a good starting point. However, unlike Weber, whose emphasis was on the wider economic and political forces that the Protestant work ethic resisted, the emphasis of the new definition will focus on the teleological path towards salvation. Remembering that asceticism is an elite set of

⁹⁹ R. Valantasis, quoting Weber in "A Theory of Social Function of Asceticism" in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush, & R. Valantasis eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 545.

practices engaged in by a minority of a religious community, it is safe to say that asceticism intends to bring about a teleological goal with greater efficacy than for an “average” member. Whether it is a Christian monk seeking righteousness or union with God, or a Sannyasin renouncer seeking liberation, both have established a set of practices to achieve their goal through extra effort. The teleological goal will, of course, depend upon cosmological and anthropological speculation within a particular belief system, as will the technology¹⁰⁰ used to achieve it. Thus, the nature of the universe and how human beings fit into the cosmological scheme will direct the goal and the path to achieve the goal.

For example, all Hindus attempt to escape *samsara*, but only in the Sannyasin stage of life do many Hindus make an extraordinary effort to engage a yogic path to achieve liberation. The kinds of disciplines of meditation, fasting and abstinence are designed to be more effective in achieving liberation through extra effort and focus. Moreover, the technologies of ascetic disciplines are based on helping individuals escape the illusion (*maya*) that keeps them bound in the cycle of rebirth. Similarly Christians wish to achieve salvation and redemption, but only the monastic attempts to achieve that redemption through a greater effort. However, Christian technologies of ascetic discipline focus on cleansing and prevention of sin due to their uniquely Christian perspective on cosmology and human nature. In both cases, there are naturally going to be ramifications for the community and the distribution of social power, or upon the dominant structures worldview, but one of the primary motivations continues to be a religious belief or conviction. Working with Valantasis’ definition, asceticism may be re-

¹⁰⁰ The most comprehensive work on technologies of altering the self and worldviews in Western history is still Foucault’s *History of Sexuality, Volumes I-III* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

defined as “Performances done to inaugurate a teleological goal (either individually or communally) that have social ramifications for the distribution of power and an effect on the worldviews which those performances come into contact with.” This definition would allow for a cross-cultural application while simultaneously encouraging an understanding of both the religious motivations and social significance of ascetic practice.

However, many kinds of religious performances are done to inaugurate a teleological goal, and no religious performance necessarily has an effect on the social distribution of power or the world-views it comes into contact with. For example, the Essene community is considered to have been strongly ascetic, but in the larger picture of Second Temple Judaism within the Roman empire their ascetic practices affected the Jewish world only in a minor way, and the Greco-Roman culture not at all. Likewise, the practice of the Eucharist was meant to aid in achieving salvation, but was not considered an ascetic practice though it has an obvious teleological goal. What is it, then, that makes ascetic practice “ascetic”? An element of ascetic practice that is often overlooked is asceticism’s nature as an *elite* practice within a specific social group. That is, asceticism is practiced by a small minority of people within a larger religious group where the majority acts differently. More importantly, it is this difference that holds the key to understanding asceticism because it demonstrates that ascetic practice is engaged over against the community in which the ascetics live, and not necessarily over against the broader culture.¹⁰¹ Rather, the difference between an ascetic and a non-ascetic member of the religious group is not that they have different teleological goals, but that they attempt

¹⁰¹ If this fact is taken seriously, it would require scholars to have some sensitivity as to whether a particular ascetic practice is over against the broader culture or simply in regard to the religious community in which it operates. It is likely that it could be both, with the motivation primarily being their religious or philosophical position, while possibly having social ramifications that the culture, or the religious community for that matter, either resists or is complicit with it.

to achieve that goal differently. When compared, then, the ascetic differs from the non-ascetic members in two respects.

First, the ascetic engages in practices that are both negatively and positively¹⁰² oriented in ways that non-ascetic members are not. *Negatively*, an ascetic gives up elements of natural existence that are permissible under their teleological and cosmological schemes. For example, it is normally permissible to marry or to eat to sustain oneself, but ascetics relinquish those elements of life to an extent that is deemed appropriate to achieve their teleological goals with greater efficacy. Thus celibacy is the relinquishing of the normally permissible natural function of marriage and procreation, and fasting is the relinquishing of the normally permissible natural function of eating to sustain oneself. *Positively*, the ascetic attempts to bring about the teleological goal in a more immanent and effective way. For example, the achievement of virtue or union with God is the goal in Western traditions, but the ascetic attempts to achieve that goal in the present instead of in some future eschatological moment. Likewise, the Eastern ascetic attempts to overcome illusion or attachment so that enlightenment can occur in the present and not in some future incarnation.

Still, it could be argued that the positive element of asceticism is found in non-ascetic members as well. Ideally, do not non-ascetic members of the Western traditions seek salvation through the achievement of virtue and union with God? Do not non-ascetic members of the Eastern traditions seek enlightenment through overcoming illusion and attachment?¹⁰³ In that regard, the major difference between ascetic and non-ascetic is the

¹⁰² See Kalistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Positive?" in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush, & R. Valantasis eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 3-15.

¹⁰³ Even in traditions such as Chinese & Taoist Philosophies, there is still an attempt to overcome human nature and the "sage" of those traditions is attempting to realize their potential in the present.

second respect in which they differ: *effort*. Without a doubt, it is obvious that the ascetic attempts to achieve the teleological goal through greater effort, and the intensified extent of practices, discipline and focus are the hallmarks of asceticism. In that way, the word “asceticism”, which has its roots in the Greek word *askesis* (ἀσκησις), is actually quite accurate in its depiction of this set of practices. *Askesis* was the word used by the Greeks to describe the intensified training and effort found in the gymnasium or athletic arena,¹⁰⁴ obviously done to achieve the transformation of the individual for a larger purpose. The ascetic, then, is marked by the extra effort and discipline made in regard to the negative and positive aspects of achieving their teleological goals.¹⁰⁵

With this in mind, we can offer up a revised definition of asceticism:

“Performances done to immanently inaugurate a teleological goal, either individually or communally, through negative renunciation and intensified positive effort of discipline that may have social ramifications for the distribution of power and/or an effect on the worldviews it comes into contact with.” This definition should be broad enough to be inclusive of the variety of ascetic forms across cultures, while remaining specific enough to differentiate ascetic practices from other religious practices. However, the important thing to remember is that there will be no cut and dried way to separate and categorize ascetic and non-ascetic practices, as though there are only two categories. Rather, there will be many levels of ascetic engagement, and scholars should be sensitive to the extent to which individuals or communities engage ascetic practices. In that way, there will be

¹⁰⁴ See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. Kittel ed., Volume I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 494-95.

¹⁰⁵ It is important to recognise that this element of asceticism is often employed by ascetics in knowing the boundaries of their practices. For example, the Encratites of the early church were condemned for making their asceticism the requirement of all people, thus making what is permissible a sin. Likewise, the *flagellants* were condemned for making the aspects their ascetic practice destructive, and censured by the church canons.

groups that are very clearly ascetic and those that are clearly not, with a range of individuals and groups that are “more ascetic” and “less ascetic”. For example, a group of puritan Christians in the seventeenth century are “more ascetic” than most Protestants, and “less ascetic” than Benedictines in the twelfth century. Therefore, scholars should be more perceptive to the degree of ascetic practice displayed by persons and groups, as well as paying attention to how their theological and cosmological views direct them in regard to both the culture and group in which they exist.

With these criticisms in mind, and with a redefinition of asceticism that re-emphasizes religious belief systems as an important element of asceticism while preserving a more accurate definition, the remainder of this thesis will be dedicated to examining the first three centuries of Christian asceticism to determine the origins of celibacy in the early church. First, this thesis will summarize the historical data on early Christian celibacy in order to demonstrate that asceticism was more than just an isolated or local phenomenon prior to the fourth century. Following this survey, Greco-Roman philosophical perspectives on sexuality will be examined to provide a point of comparison for how early Christianity differs from the culture in which it developed. Finally, the early Christian texts on celibacy from the first three centuries of the Common Era will be examined to demonstrate how developing early Christian cosmology and anthropology amalgamated accepted cultural perspectives on sexuality with Christian theological concerns, which in turn led to an idealization of sexual renunciation.

Chapter Two - Early Christian Celibacy: New Testament Times to the Third Century

I. Introduction

If the origins of early Christian asceticism are to be discerned and understood in the light of the teleological goals of early Christian theology, several crucial issues must be addressed. The recent scholarly position that describes early Christian asceticism primarily in relation to the appearance of monasticism in the fourth century must be corrected. Although scholars do not dispute the presence of asceticism prior to the beginning of the fourth century, the extent of its presence has often been dismissed as localized and isolated incidences that demonstrate a sort of “proto” ascetic behaviour.¹⁰⁶ This contention reflects the recent trend of some scholars to argue that Christianity was not a unified group with a clearly defined self-identity until the end of the third century,¹⁰⁷ and, therefore, would not have the social strength to either challenge the

¹⁰⁶ For example, Elizabeth Clark’s recent summary of scholarly explorations of early Christian celibacy notes that the search for the “origins” of early Christian asceticism has largely been abandoned. Clark explains that recent scholarship has preferred to trace parallel ascetic developments within various religious and philosophical groups in the third and fourth century monasticism, while the evidence of the first and second century ascetics are thought to be anomalous or pre-monastic. The anomaly of early examples of ascetic behaviour, it seems, is rooted in their “non-monastic” forms (i.e. no *anachoresis*), and Clark shows that scholarly investigations of first and second century examples of ascetic behaviour primarily explore the relationship of heterodoxy and orthodoxy to ascetics more than attempting to understand the practice as a whole. At best, there is an attempt to locate an ascetic tendency or inclination that could have been inherited by early Christianity. In that regard, Clark notes that both Greco-Roman ethical considerations, as well as Jewish ascetic trends, have been considered as the roots of ascetic behaviour in early Christianity. However, Clark deems these arguments as “suggestive” but not “substantiated,” due to a lack of clear data on the subject in the earliest Christian texts. As such, she writes “Given considerations such as these, scholars of early Christian asceticism now deem it misguided to locate some particular moment after the late second century when Christianity took an ascetic turn.” (p. 22) See E. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 14-42.

¹⁰⁷ This current trend blurs the lines between early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, arguing that Christians were not a distinctly identifiable group separate from Judaism until well into the third century. The result is a debate over the semantics of identity and the difference between the image of self-identity created by a social group and the reality of its true social position. It has been argued, then, that early Christian self-presentation, which identified Christians as distinct from both Jews and “pagans,” was really only an image that was fostered for the sake of encouraging group solidarity, when the reality was that Roman society did not differentiate Christians from Jews. Consequently, the tendency among these scholars is to argue that early Christianity did not develop as a *real* social force until the third century when Christianity *really* became a distinct social group in the empire. For a good survey and critique of this trend

dominant social structure or develop a unified ideological rationale for the idealization of celibacy.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, the task of this chapter will be to examine the evidence dealing with early Christian asceticism that dates from the first three centuries of Christian history in order to determine its extent and nature.

The crux of the issue is in the interpretation of early Christian texts on asceticism, particularly celibacy. The problem arises in the kinds of literature from which historical data can be drawn and the question of how to determine the extent of ascetic behaviour from such literature. There are, in fact, a substantial number of early Christian texts that mention the presence of celibate ascetics from the earliest periods of Christian history and in a variety of geographical locations. However, these texts are often largely dismissed as showing only that a few ascetics lived among the Christian communities up until the end of the third century, and, therefore, it is assumed that asceticism was not a significant movement in early Christianity until then. In addition, it is thought that these early texts are of little value in determining the motivations of asceticism, since the texts that mention celibate Christians from the first, second, and early third centuries are often considered *ad hoc* treatments that addressed local issues or conflicts with Gnostic groups.

see T.A. Robinson's upcoming book *Ignatius and the Way that Parted: The Formation of Early Christian Identity* (Forthcoming, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ A recent study on asceticism, *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism and Haigiography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), D.B. Martin and P. Cox Miller, eds., is largely a study on how ascetic/monastic texts of the fourth century were employed by early Christianity in an ideological fashion to bolster Christianity's newly established cultural dominance. In essence, the authors in this book argue that the "reality" portrayed by ascetic texts is a rhetorically created artifice employed to create a mythical unity to aid in the naturalization of the early Christian cultural dominance. For example, J. Goehring compares ascetic texts to a nineteenth century English painting of a peaceful rural scene meant to be more acceptable in the drawing rooms of polite society, where they served the elite by lending ideological support to new land divisions and industrialization. In that regard, he argues, the *Life of Anthony* was meant to operate on similar grounds: "The process of fashioning this illusionary, mythic landscape witness in the *Life of Anthony* developed its own momentum as the desert myth grew by naturalizing its image reality in the emerging Christian culture." See J.E. Goehring, "The Dark Side of the Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert", in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism and Haigiography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), D.B. Martin and P. Cox Miller, eds., p. 141.

Most scholars note that it is only in the late third and mid fourth century that we find any extensive description of the theological motives for the practice of celibacy, and, it is argued, only in the early fourth century that the number of Christian ascetics becomes significant. Therefore, it may be argued, it is difficult to determine the extent to which those early texts are representative of a broader early Christian perspective on ascetic practices.

It is easy to see how scholars can argue that Christian asceticism found its origins primarily in monasticism. One assumption that social theories work from is that texts function as ideological tools that help undercut the dominant social order while establishing a competing worldview. In addition, when the texts on asceticism in the early church are examined, one finds that the texts that seem the most strongly ideological in nature are from the fourth and fifth centuries. For example, the first fully philosophical and theological treatment of celibacy is Methodius of Olympias' work *The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity* from the late third or early fourth century.¹⁰⁹ The work basically adapts the form of the dialogues found in Plato's *Symposium*, only now it is a group of celibate women attending a dinner party and exploring the rationale and theology behind the practice of celibacy. In particular, it is a fascinating amalgamation of systematic exploration of Biblical theology and Platonic philosophical allegory. It is significant, also, to note that this work coincides with the period when the monastic movement seems to

¹⁰⁹ Dating this work is difficult. There are no fewer than five manuscript traditions as well as disagreement among scholars over which persecution Methodius died under. Possible dates range from between 270 to 320 CE, but the most likely date is martyrdom under the Diocletian persecution of 311. Consequently, the *Symposium* could land anywhere in the last two decades of the third century or the first decade of the fourth. See H. Musurillo, *St. Methodius: The Symposium - A Treatise on Chastity* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1958), pp. 1-37.

have taken off.¹¹⁰ Also, in the fourth century Athanasius's *Life of Anthony* and Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity* represent major works encouraging celibacy using heroic idealism and Platonic philosophy, respectively. If one adds to those works the homilies, letters and treatises of Jerome, John Chrysostom and Augustine, the explosion of monastic practice in the fourth century can seemingly be easily explained. In addition, these kinds of texts could demonstrate the justifications of a socially driven practice that represents Christian resistance to the Roman social order and the construction of a new Christian one.

Working from recent methodological assumptions that asceticism is motivated by social resistance and change, it is thought that until early Christianity had developed a social identity that was capable enough to challenge the Roman social order, it would not naturally develop an ascetic movement. In essence, the scholarly assumption that early Christianity did not differentiate itself from Rabbinic Judaism, or that there were a variety of competing "Christianities" in different areas of the empire until the third century, automatically precludes Christianity from developing as a unified social group with enough influence to challenge the social order. Consequently, any ascetic practice that existed prior to the rise of Christianity as a social force¹¹¹ is automatically assumed to be an isolated incident or unique to a particular geographic locale. The irony of this situation is that by scholarly standards, "early Christianity" has become a cluster of "ascetic" movements from the New Testament period forward because it challenges Jewish and

¹¹⁰ From 270 to 305, Anthony had lived a life of solitude in the desert and then emerged to gather disciples, and Pachomius, as well, lived out his communal style of monasticism from the turn of the fourth century until his death in 346.

¹¹¹ This is particularly difficult to measure. It is not insignificant to note that scholars see the social power of Christianity coinciding with its rise as a political power, but that may be overly simplistic. Can a culture or social group have influence and power without political power, and if it can, how can the social influence of early Christianity be measured prior to Constantine?

Roman world views,¹¹² but does not engage in an idealized ascetic *practice* until the late third and early fourth centuries when it has fused into a cohesive social group. There is an inherent contradiction in this position. How can early Christianity be ascetic, but not engage in ascetic practices? And, if ascetic practices had been occurring prior to the rise of Christianity as a social power, what could have motivated such practices apart from a religious or philosophical world-view?

It has become the habit of many scholars, then, to fall back on social theory to explain early Christian asceticism, and claim that its origins have been lost in a perceived lack of applicable data. It is assumed that the *ad hoc* nature of the earliest data on celibacy does not represent the ideological creations of a unified social group with a clearly defined self-identity. The result, as was discussed in the first chapter, has been a description of celibacy primarily as an expression of social resistance and/or change as Christianity formed its identity and managed to become one of the dominant social forces in the empire. However, the overemphasis on social theory has unnecessarily limited scholarly perception of the origins of asceticism, and needlessly forced an abandonment of the search for understanding its religious motivations.

In many respects, scholars of the early church have been working backwards. It is important to remember that monasticism has generally been the only foil for comparison

¹¹² See L. Vaage & V.L. Wimbush, eds. *Asceticism and the New Testament* (New York: Routledge, 2000) & R. Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Routledge, 1997). For example, Anthony Saladrini, in his opening article on “Asceticism in the Gospel of Matthew,” admits that within Matthew no traditional practices associated with asceticism (prayer, meditation, sexual renunciation, fasting, vigils, poverty, etc.) can be detected, but using Valantasis’ redefinition of asceticism he can write “The probable social context of the Gospel of Matthew also fits the ascetical enterprise. Matthew’s group is most probably a sect or deviant association within the larger Jewish community. Alternatively, many hold that Matthew’s group has just felt or been expelled from the Jewish community. In either case, the late first century CE tensions and conflicts mirrored in Matthew’s narrative demand a pattern of resistant behaviour and the construction of a revised subjectivity and identity for the deviant group. The stringent demands [for righteousness] that Matthew makes on his audience are typical of new religious movements that meet social opposition and oppression.” (p.19)

as the sole manifestation of early Christian asceticism that scholars have used in their historical investigations. Naturally, scholars looking backward through history see many instances of ascetic behaviour prior to the emergence of monasticism, and after comparing the practices, they rightly point to a variety of differences. For example, they point to the fact that asceticism existed long before monasticism, that it was not limited to the desert alone, and that there were a variety of local manifestations of ascetic behaviour that engaged in different forms and practices than monasticism. However, because of the heavy reliance upon social theory to explain those differences, it is assumed that the emergence of monasticism reflects an expression of unified Christian solidarity against the dominant culture and that the varieties of “pre-monastic” asceticism could not possibly reflect anything but early manifestations of Christian identity over against the broader culture. As a result, while a few scholars have been interested in those particular early manifestations of ascetic behaviour in the church, rarely have all the relevant texts been examined together or comprehensively.¹¹³ Moreover, little exploration has been undertaken to discern any broader themes and patterns within these earliest texts.

What has occurred under the influence of social theory is a false assumption based upon a true historical reality. It is true that monasticism reflects the shift of the Roman Empire to the hierarchical world of the Constantinian “Great Church”. As Sydney Griffiths writes, “ ‘Monasticism’ is the term which has come to functionally designate the new fashion, the hallmark of which, from a phenomenological point of view, was what the Greeks called *anachoresis*, the departure of individuals or groups from the life of the

¹¹³ Teresa Shaw’s article “Sex and Sexual Renunciation” in P. Esler, ed., *The Early Christian World* (New York: Routledge, 2000), has a decent survey, but is all too brief due to its broad treatment of the subject. G.S. Gasparro’s article “Asceticism and Anthropology: *Enkrateia* and “Double Creation” in Early Christianity” in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush, & R. Valantasis, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 127-46, is a decent survey of many of the earliest texts in an attempt to discern their theological motives, but again, the article does not go into great detail or engage in a comprehensive analysis.

city's church community to an environment more suited to the practice of asceticism seemingly for its own sake, or at least free of the entanglements of day to day ecclesiastical life."¹¹⁴ However, it is a false assumption to say that asceticism was *new* to Christian practice and thought. Only the *forms* of asceticism changed with the rise of the Great Church, and the earliest texts reflecting ascetic behaviour show a variety of ascetic practices as they manifest across the empire without the influence of the hierarchical and political pressures of the institutional church. By an examination of the texts on celibacy from the pre-Constantinian church, it can be demonstrated that celibacy was present in the early church in substantial ways, and had developed out of theological concerns well before the emergence of the Great Church.

In fact, despite the protest that the *ad hoc* nature of the earliest texts represents only isolated incidents, it is their *ad hoc* nature that demonstrates that early Christians were both practicing and thinking a great deal about asceticism. Simply put, there were enough early believers engaging in ascetic practice that there was disagreement and argument over it. The purpose of the remainder of this chapter is to show that there was, in fact, a strong ascetic impulse from the earliest period of Christian history and that the *ad hoc* nature of the texts reflects corrective boundaries placed upon ascetic behaviour on the basis of theological and social considerations. If the early Christian texts on celibacy from the first century through to the fifth are examined as a whole, a pattern emerges. This pattern, as will be shown, is found in the establishment and correction of proper ascetic forms that are driven by a broadly consistent early Christian understanding of God, the world, human anthropology and salvation. Indeed, the corrections placed on

¹¹⁴ S. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism" in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush & R. Valantasis eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 223.

ascetic behaviour did not stop with the rise of the Great Church, but continued to be placed on all ascetics, including monastics, through the employment of the canons established by ecumenical councils. In addition, the highly philosophical and theological considerations of fourth and fifth century texts do not represent the emergence of a new Christian asceticism, but the transformation of an old and well-established one.

Therefore the assumption of this thesis is that while recognizing that asceticism has natural social consequences, many of which have been explored in depth by scholars, a better solution to explain the origins of celibacy is to understand it primarily as a religious phenomenon. If the altering the social distribution of power is not forced upon asceticism as its primary function then it becomes possible again to examine the evidence of the first three centuries of Christian history for the origins and motivations that led to the idealization of celibacy. No doubt, as many scholars have demonstrated, as Christianity became a dominant social force in the empire, there were many changes in the social order by which asceticism affected the culture and was affected by it. But, despite scholarly protest, the origins of early Christian asceticism are not found in social discourses, but in the world-view of early Christian theology. In addition, despite the recent recognition that early Christianity was not monolithic in nature and practice, the variety of ascetic practice found in early Christian texts does not necessarily imply differences distinct enough to rule out a unified early “Christian” motivation for celibacy.

But how early can celibacy and asceticism be said to have existed in the early church? While scholars are clear enough that celibacy and asceticism were present in the century before the emergence of monasticism, they have not come to terms with the extent to which asceticism, especially celibacy, can be found in the earliest writings of

the early church. Indeed, Paul was forced to address issues of sexual renunciation in the church in Corinth, and every major Christian writer of the first three centuries of the Christian era, from Clement of Rome to Tertullian, made comment on the practice. By the time of the great monastic explosion of the fourth and fifth centuries, which one might see as the normal realm of sexual renunciation, the practice was so well accepted in Christianity that the monastic way of life necessarily included sexual abstinence. We will now turn to a brief survey of Christian texts on celibacy prior to the end of the third century.

II. The New Testament and Apostolic Fathers

The earliest evidence of Christians practicing ascetic celibacy appears to be from the New Testament. Three passages in particular are of importance: I Corinthians 7, I Timothy 5 and Revelation 14. In I Corinthians 7 Paul is addressing a situation where celibate Christians were trying to enforce celibacy upon others or were divorcing their spouses in order to be celibate in their service to God.¹¹⁵ Paul's solution is simple enough: celibacy is desirable since one is able to serve the Lord without distraction and anxiety (7:25-35), but one should not divorce to become celibate (7:10-11), nor force celibacy upon those who are not capable of or inclined to it (7:9).¹¹⁶ Unfortunately, the motivations behind the practice of continence are not described in the passage, with the only reference being the ambiguous opening statement of 7:1 "It is good for a man not to

¹¹⁵ See I Cor. 7. Scholars generally agree that the passage includes comment and direction for those who had adopted abstinence as a spiritual practice. Some had obviously stopped having sexual intercourse with their spouses while others had even gone so far as to divorce their spouse to pursue their ascetic goals. See G. Fee's discussion in his commentary *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 269-70.

¹¹⁶ Here Paul covers a range of particular situations including unmarried virgins and betrothed individuals who have yet to marry, widows or individuals who have already divorced who wish to re-marry, and married individuals whose spouse has refused sexual intimacy or happens to be non-Christian.

touch a woman.”¹¹⁷ Scholars have suggested a number of possible motivations of celibate activity in Corinth, including Stoic influences,¹¹⁸ possible interactions with early Gnostics,¹¹⁹ ascetic streams of Judaism,¹²⁰ and eschatological fervour.¹²¹ However, these explanations only demonstrate a certain compatibility of celibacy with concurrent views of the Greco-Roman world, and no dependency or clear historical connection can be demonstrated from the contents of I Corinthians 7. Paul is content to simply agree with the Corinthians that celibacy is better than marriage and provides no clear explanation of either his or the Corinthians’ motives. But he is also clear that if an individual is not gifted by the Spirit with the capacity for continence (7:7), then it is no sin to marry, and equally clear that if married, spouses are duty bound to provide conjugal rights, and by no means entitled to a divorce for the purposes of celibacy. Naturally, in the future the proponents of sexual renunciation in the early church would use Paul’s endorsement of celibacy with great effect.¹²²

In I Timothy 5, there seemed to be some concern over the age of those assigned to the list of widows in the congregation. The author of I Timothy prohibits entering a widow into the list if she is too young on the basis of concerns over her ability to remain chaste. A woman who is too young may yet give in to sensual desire and violate her

¹¹⁷ There is even some disagreement on whether Paul is quoting the Corinthian position or describing his own views. See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 270-71.

¹¹⁸ See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 519. n. 21.

¹¹⁹ For example see W.F. Orr & J.A. Walther’s commentary *I Corinthians*, The Anchor Bible Vol. 32 (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 208.

¹²⁰ D. Boyarin, “Body Politic among the Brides of Christ: Paul and the Origins of Sexual Renunciation” in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush, & R. Valantasis, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 459-78.

¹²¹ C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 153-87. Barrett argues that the immanent return of Jesus and the present reality of the Holy Spirit in Corinth may have prompted some to reject marriage on the grounds that it is no longer necessary in the new age, or that the presence of the Holy Spirit should be reflected in a superior spirituality of celibacy.

¹²² For an excellent survey of the use of scripture in order to support the idealization of celibacy in the early church, see E. Clark’s monograph *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

pledge of celibacy as a widow (5:11-12). Again, though, while I Timothy 5 is concerned with the proper distribution of material goods to “real” widows,¹²³ the reasons for expecting widows to be celibate remains unclear. Only 5: 11 mentions that sensual desire may tempt younger widows to remarry, but scholars disagree as to whether giving in to “sensual desire” is sexual in nature.¹²⁴ However, I Timothy 4:3-4 does indicate that some group in that city was in fact urging a rejection of marriage and abstinence from food, and to counter them the author of I Timothy argues that marriage is a good act that can be sanctified by God. Thus, although celibacy seems to be a clear requirement of widows in Asia Minor and that ascetic practice may have been encouraged by a group of early Christians in Asia Minor, there is little to indicate their motivations for such expectations, though it is important to note that like I Corinthians 7, I Timothy sees no sin in remarriage, if to another believer.

One final New Testament text which indicates the presence of celibates is

Revelation 14:1-5:

Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth. *It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits*

¹²³ See D.C. Arichea & H.A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to Timothy and to Titus* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), p.110-24.

¹²⁴ For example, G. Fee argues that “sensual desires” refers back to I Tim. 5:5-6 and widows who remained under the care of their family yet still accepted material goods from the church in order to live a more luxurious lifestyle. Thus the “pledge”(5:12) that widows who remarry are breaking, is their pledge to Christ, which they abandon to remarry in order to live comfortably. Verse 15, then, refers to widows who have turned away to follow Satan, or more simply, widows who have remarried a non-Christian and given up her faith in Christ to gain material comfort. See G. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), pp.75-81.

for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.

The context of this passage within the structure of the book of Revelation is incredibly difficult to summarize, but the basic situation in John's vision is that the Beast (Satan's agent on earth) has been waging war upon the saints, here depicted as one hundred forty-four thousand believers who had been numbered for holy war. This passage pictures their song of victory before God's throne after having been martyred,¹²⁵ and for the purposes of this study it is significant to note that John has chosen to describe them as "virgins" (*parqenoi*) since they had "not defiled themselves with women" (*meta gunaikwn o0uk e0molunqhsan*). J. Massyngberde Ford has summarized the scholarly opinions about John's use of the term "virgin": 1) a literal expression of sexual renunciation, either of genuine ascetics during the late first century (Allo) or as a later interpolation by celibate scribes (Charles), 2) a metaphorical use of "virgin" that is intended to convey the purity of the martyrs in the same way that a sacrifice in the Old Testament was required to be unblemished (Swete, Kiddle), and 3) since the martyrs have been "numbered" for battle against God's enemies, "virgin" should represent an expression of the Old Testament regulations to consecrate warriors for holy war through a period of abstinence before battle (Caird, Zahn).¹²⁶ While the opinions that link the "virgins" to Old Testament imagery are more than likely correct in terms of visionary intertextuality, the opinion that "virgins" literally represents men who have renounced sexual intercourse is a valid interpretation as well.

¹²⁵ The notion that martyrdom is a victory over Satan and the world is a consistent theme in Revelation. See R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 93-95.

¹²⁶ J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 234-35.

First, though obviously not referring to any specific historical group of celibates, the text does show that John's audience was familiar enough with the concept of sexual renunciation that he could use it as an image in this text. It is clear from I Corinthians and I Timothy that the practice of celibacy did exist during this period, and since both I Timothy and Revelation were written to the churches in Asia Minor (I Tim 1:3, Rev. 1:11, 2:1), it is not unlikely that John was aware of celibacy, and then employed the practice as a visual image that would be obviously recognizable, as well as having compatibility with the additional meanings of sacrificial purity and regulations for holy war. Second, the choice of terminology for the passage indicates a concern for sexual renunciation as an ascetic practice, since it is obvious that the one hundred forty-four thousand are not described as unwed individuals of marriageable age. In addition, the phrase "they did not defile themselves with women" is also an indicator that "virgins" refers to celibate individuals who abstained from sexual intercourse. The regularly employed early Christian term for avoiding idolatrous or immoral sexual activity in general is *porneia*,¹²⁷ or "fornication", and John uses it often in Revelation.¹²⁸ However, in this passage John has chosen not to use *porneia*, more likely indicating a specific practice that is not part of early Christianity's broader sexual ethic to avoid "fornication."¹²⁹ Indeed, it is *because* the practice of celibacy was present in the New Testament period in visible quantities that John has a distinctly Christian practice which he can adapt in continuity with Old Testament and apocalyptic

¹²⁷ More will be said on the meaning and use of *porneia* in chapter four.

¹²⁸ Rev. 14:8; 17:2; 18:3,9; 19:2.

¹²⁹ Ironically, this is Charles' reasoning behind his assertion that Rev. 14:4 represents a later interpolation by scribes with ascetic sympathies.

imagery. Thus, it is safe to say that this passage from Revelation provides evidence that celibacy was widespread enough ways that John could circulate a letter to seven churches across Asia Minor and expect his audience to recognize his use of “virgins” in his imagery.

It seems, then, that during the New Testament period there was an early, though not clearly explained, impetus among some Christian communities to encourage or expect celibacy of some of their members. Turning to the late first and early second centuries, when it comes to sexual renunciation in the early church following the initial phases of the New Testament period, scholars are frustrated by the lack of sources. From the turn of the century until about the 140’s CE only a smattering of Christian writings is extant, and the best sources for life in the early church during this period come from Ignatius of Antioch, and to a lesser degree, from Polycarp and Clement of Rome. Consequently, what can be pieced together concerning sexual renunciation during this period is general at best, and often thought only to be demonstrable for specific locations or areas.

The first piece of evidence for the practice of second century sexual renunciation appears in Clement of Rome’s letter to the church in Corinth. Writing from Rome shortly after the persecution under Domitian (ca. 97CE), Clement was addressing a terrible schism that seems to have occurred in Corinth, which had resulted in several presbyters being deposed from their office.¹³⁰ Amidst Clement’s admonitions to humility and repentance, there is a short passage that indicates that sexual renunciation was still practiced in Corinth:

¹³⁰ See Kirsopp Lake’s introduction to Clement in *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. I, Loeb Classical Library, (London: Heinemann, 1912-13), pp. 3-7.

Let him that is pure in the flesh not grow proud of it, and boast, knowing that it was another who bestowed on him the gift of continence (*enkrateia*).¹³¹

It would seem, then, that in Corinth the practice of sexual renunciation continued to be present, with some engaging in *enkrateia*. Indeed, it seems that some had boasted of their purity and the practice of sexual renunciation was partly at the center of the schism that Clement was addressing. Yet there is little else in terms of information about the practice and nothing about the nature and form of such practices can be surmised.

Approximately ten to fifteen years later, Ignatius of Antioch was on his way to Rome to be martyred and wrote his famous series of letters to early Christians across the empire. While it might seem hopeful in that Ignatius is the first to give a picture of Christianity as a whole during this period, he unfortunately says very little about celibacy, although the fact that he mentions celibates at all in letters that say little about early Christian practice in general makes the presence of celibates all the more obvious. Regardless, all of his letters are heavily weighted towards establishing the charismatic authority of church offices (bishop, presbyter, deacon),¹³² and although there are a number of warnings against lust,¹³³ he only mentions those who practice sexual renunciation on a couple of occasions. For example, in his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius writes:

Flee from evil arts; but rather preach against them. Speak to my sisters, that they love the Lord, and be content with their husbands both in the

¹³¹ I Clement 38. Here it seems that the early Christians have already adopted the Greek term “*enkrateia*” as a term for continence. The term has a long history of use in the Greco-Roman world as “self-mastery” or the virtue of “temperance”, found in individuals who have achieved a level of discipline necessary to control the lower, irrational desires linked to the body. However, the term was very rarely used to indicate complete sexual abstinence. For a more in depth discussion see chapter three of this thesis.

¹³² See H.O. Maier, *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas, Clement and Ignatius* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1991), pp.156-70.

¹³³ See for example, Ignatius’ letters: *To Polycarp*, 4; *To the Ephesians*, 8; *To the Romans*, 7; *To the Philippians*, 6.

flesh and spirit. In the same way, enjoin on my brothers, in the name of Jesus Christ, “to love their wives, even as the Lord loved the Church.” *If any one can continue in continence,¹³⁴ to the honor of the flesh of the Lord, let him so remain without boasting. If he begins to boast, he is lost; and if it be made known except to the bishop, he is polluted.* But it is right for men and women who marry to be united with the consent of the bishop, that their marriage may be according to Lord and not according to lust. Let all things be done to the honor of God.¹³⁵

This passage is interesting in that Ignatius’ advice seems to indicate that problems over celibates were also present in Polycarp’s church in Smyrna. It appears that those who engaged in celibacy in Smyrna felt themselves to be spiritually superior, which led some to refrain from marriage, on some level or worse yet, at least for Ignatius, to deem themselves better than the bishop.

In addition, another of Ignatius’ letters mentions a group of celibate women in Smyrna, who seem to cross over both the categories of virgin and widow. In 13:1 of his letter to the Smyrneans, Ignatius sends greetings: “I salute the households of my brethren with their wives and children, and the virgins who are called widows.” The ambiguity of the phrase “virgins who are called widows,” seems to be one largely because of the English word “widow.” The English term “widow” refers unambiguously to a woman whose husband has died, but in Greek and Latin, the term is less clear in its meaning. Scholars have argued that the ambiguity in the term is focused upon a woman’s marital status, and that a “widow” (*cepa*) was regularly used to describe a woman who did not live with a husband.¹³⁶ Consequently, according to Andrew Louth, the phrase may refer

¹³⁴ It is interesting to note that Kirsopp Lake’s translation uses the word “continence” for the Greek *eOna* (*gneaia*), which would normally be translated as “purity” or “holiness”. Lake correctly uses “continence” instead of “purity” in order to capture the nuance that this passage contrasts those who marry and those who do not. Thus, there appeared to be some in Smyrna had been renouncing sexual intercourse and marriage.

¹³⁵ Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp*, 5.

¹³⁶ See C. Methuen, “The ‘Virgin Widow’: A Problematic Social Role for the Early Church?” *Harvard Theological Review* 90.3 (1997): 286-88.

to “either actual widows whom because of their purity and devotion [Ignatius] characterizes as virgins,¹³⁷ or perhaps unmarried women included in the widows’ register for the purposes of charity.”¹³⁸ Again, though, the statement of Ignatius simply acknowledges the existence of celibate Christians who have chosen a life of sexual continence, either as lifelong virgins or after the death of a spouse, but he does not inform the reader of their motives.

Shortly after the martyrdom of Ignatius, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna and friend of Ignatius, wrote a letter to the Philippians, partly to address apostasy in Philippi and partly in response to Philippians’ request for copies of the letters of Ignatius, to which he had access. In the fifth chapter of his letter Polycarp writes:

In like manner, let the young men also be blameless in all things, being especially careful to preserve purity, and keeping themselves in, as with a bridle, from every kind of evil. For it is well that they should be cut off from the lusts that are in the world, since “every lust wars against the spirit; “ and “neither fornicators, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, shall inherit the kingdom of God,” nor those who do things inconsistent and unbecoming. Wherefore, it is needful to abstain from all these things, being subject to the presbyters and deacons, as unto God and Christ. *The virgins also must walk in a blameless and pure conscience.*¹³⁹

This passage contains prescriptions against sexual immorality similar to those of Ignatius, but now it is directed generally towards young men and virgins. This is typical early Christian sentiment about sexuality and, as demonstrated by his references of New

¹³⁷ Despite what ambiguity may have existed in the term “widow” (xhpa), it is still difficult to argue that a widow, that is an individual whose spouse had died, would have been categorized as a “virgin widow”, as though in accepting celibacy after the death of their spouse they have somehow regained their virginity. First, there is no textual evidence supporting that widows considered their celibacy in such a manner. Second, all of the references of the “virgin widows” indicate that these celibates were young women who chose not to marry and expected the honour and charity given to widows to be allotted to them as well. See I Tim. 5, Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 9.

¹³⁸ A. Louth, *Early Christian Writings* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1987), p. 105. Methuen also notes that this passage from Ignatius indirectly supports the passage from I Timothy 5 and acknowledges the existence of women who were young, unmarried and celibate and included on the rolls of widows to receive charity. See Methuen, p. *The ‘Virgin Widow’*, p. 291.

¹³⁹ Polycarp, *To the Philippians*, 5.

Testament epistles,¹⁴⁰ it falls in line with Pauline thought. However, the significant issue here is that Polycarp has included virgins among those he advises. Unfortunately, Polycarp does not describe that role in much detail and we are left to speculate that it may have been similar to the continence described by other Christian texts, or that it may simply have been Polycarp addressing the young, unmarried people to encourage them to remain sexually austere.¹⁴¹

It appears, then, that such renunciation of sexual activity was present in various locales across the empire during the period of the Apostolic Fathers. Clement knows of it in Rome and writes of it in Corinth, Ignatius knows and writes of it in Smyrna,¹⁴² and Polycarp obviously knows of it in Smyrna and writes of it in Philippi. Although this is not an all-inclusive list, it does cover Rome, Greece and Asia Minor, a large portion of the northern half of the empire, and more or less in the areas for which there is documentation of early Christian activity.

III. The Mid to Late Second Century Texts

From the 140's CE through to the beginning of the third century the writings of Hermas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria reveal the presence of sexual renunciation in early Christianity during the second century up until the time of Tertullian.

The Muratorian Canon states that *The Shepherd of Hermas* was written by the Presbyter Hermas in the city of Rome at the time when Pius was the bishop of Rome (ca.

¹⁴⁰ Polycarp is quoting Galatians 5:17 and I Corinthians 6:9-10. See chapter four for more on the general early Christian position on sexual morality.

¹⁴¹ It is likely that at this point in the development of early Christianity the terminology of celibacy was not distinct yet from the terminology of the sexual restraint expected of all Christians, perhaps using ἀγνοῖα and εὐγκράτεια interchangeably.

¹⁴² It is more than likely that he knew of celibacy from his home church in Antioch, since his comments concerning celibates did not indicate in any way that he was unfamiliar with the practice.

140's CE).¹⁴³ It is a series of apocalyptic visions designed to encourage, correct and motivate the church in Rome in a time of persecution. In this series of visions, Hermas is visited by a lady who appears in a variety of forms (young, old, angelic), and who gives Hermas visionary revelations and then interprets them for him. Important for this study is the fact that among the myriad of visions and interpretations is an emphasis upon celibacy, referred to as continence (*enkrateia*). First, Hermas is called "Hermas the Continent" (vis. I.ii.4, vis. II.iii.2), and is described as one "who abstains from every evil desire (*epithumia*) and is full of simplicity and great innocence." As the model for his readers, he is marked by the sort of virtue already attributed to celibates by Clement and Ignatius – self-mastery (*enkrateia*) marked by a rejection of desire. He is the model of continence and righteousness, which are now held as almost synonyms in *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

Second, among the visions there are several examples of continence as the most appropriate expression of faith. For example, in a vision where Hermas sees seven women standing around a tower, his guide tells him:

This tower is being supported by them according to the command of the Lord. Hear now their qualities. The first of them who is clasping her hands is called faith; through her the chosen are saved. The second, who is girded and looks like a man, is called Continence (*enkrateia*); she is the daughter of faith. Whosoever then shall follow her will abstain from all evil deeds, believing that if he refrains from every evil lust (*epithumia*) he will inherit eternal life.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ There is considerable dispute among scholars as to the dating of this work. Some are comfortable with the date set forth by the Muratorian Canon, while others think it was written much earlier, as early as the turn of the first century. Basically, if the Muratorian Canon is considered unreliable, one needs to fall back upon the internal evidence of the document itself, which is full of ambiguities. (See H. Maier, *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas, Clement and Ignatius* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1991), pp. 55-58, for a full discussion of the issues) The position taken in this study is that due to the apocalyptic nature of the work it is difficult to assign historical value to obviously visionary and literary symbols of *Hermas* and that the Muratorian Canon is correct in its date of Hermas.

¹⁴⁴ *Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. III.viii.2-4.

And shortly after:

From faith is born continence (*enkrateia*), from continence simplicity, from simplicity innocence, from innocence reverence, from reverence knowledge, from knowledge love.¹⁴⁵

For Hermas, *enkrateia* is the natural response or consequence to faith and, in turn, provides the basis for all Christian virtues culminating in love. Moreover, aside from including avoidance of desire as the basis for *enkrateia*, Hermas expected everyone to embrace *enkrateia* as an appropriate expression of faith, especially in the face of persecution.¹⁴⁶ So, although Hermas does not specifically mention celibate figures, it does help show how the ideal of continence had spread and become a popular notion in the practice of piety.

Justin Martyr (ca. 150-65 C.E.), as well, mentions those who practice sexual renunciation:

The function of the womb is to become pregnant; and of the member of the male to impregnate. But as, though these members are destined to discharge such functions, it is not therefore necessary that they from the beginning discharge them (since we see many women who do not become pregnant, as those that are barren, even though they have wombs), so pregnancy is not the immediate and necessary consequence of having a womb; but those even who are not barren abstain from sexual intercourse, some being virgins from the first, and others from a certain time. *And we see men also keeping themselves virgins, some from the first, and some from a certain time; so that by their means, marriage, made lawless through lust, is destroyed.* And we find that some even of the lower animals, though possessed of wombs, do not bear, such as the mule; and the male mules do not beget their kind. So that both in the case of men and the irrational animals we can see sexual intercourse abolished; and this, too, before the future world. And our Lord Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, for no other reason than that He might destroy the begetting by lawless desire, and might show to the ruler that the formation of man was

¹⁴⁵ *Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. III.viii.7. Other examples include Mand. 1; Mand. 6; Mand. 8; Sim. V.i.5; Sim. IX.xv1-3.

¹⁴⁶ In II.iii.2, the angelic figure tells Hermas to be faithful in the face of persecution because he will be saved “by not having broken away from the living God [i.e recanted] and by your simplicity and continence (*enkratia*).” The eternal life earned by his faith will be the ultimate victory over persecution.

possible to God without human intervention. And when He had been born, and had submitted to the other conditions of the flesh, — I mean food, drink, and clothing, — this one condition only of discharging the sexual function He did not submit to; for, regarding the desires of the flesh, He accepted some as necessary, while others, which were unnecessary, He did not submit to. For if the flesh were deprived of food, drink, and clothing, it would be destroyed; but being deprived of lawless desire, it suffers no harm. And at the same time He foretold that, in the future world, sexual intercourse should be done away with; as He says, “The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage; but the children of the world to come neither marry nor are given in marriage, but shall be like the angels in heaven.” Let not, then, those that are unbelieving marvel, if in the world to come He do away with those acts of our fleshly members which even in this present life are abolished.¹⁴⁷

Here Justin mentions both men and women who have embraced sexual renunciation, some from their youth and others from later in life, as a lifelong practice in order to avoid lustful desire that accompanies the members of their bodies (i.e. reproductive organs). Significant in this instance is the fact that these Christians and Justin have interpreted their sexual renunciation both in light of Hellenistic philosophical concerns as well as theological ones. The entire discussion is held in the realm of the natural functions of the body, similar to the discussion that Aristotle had concerning the natural function of sexual desire as the impetus for reproduction.¹⁴⁸ These Christians had even abandoned the natural and necessary functions of the body so as to avoid “lawless” desire and some early Christians seem to even have abandoned marriage itself. Justin is able to defend their actions on account of a theological interpretation of the life and words of Christ; Jesus himself, though recognizing the necessity of desire for the sake of producing children, did not let even those natural desires function in his life. Indeed, Jesus even claims that in heaven marriage will end, thus proving that the natural functions of the body are temporary necessities prior to the coming age.

¹⁴⁷ Justin Martyr, *On the Resurrection*, III.

¹⁴⁸ See chapter three’s discussion on Aristotle’s understanding of human nature.

Shortly after this, during a persecution in 177CE, the Christian apologist Athenagoras wrote to the emperor Marcus Aurelius to defend the Christian faith from the charges of atheism, cannibalism, incest and a number of accusations of immorality. Amidst his defense of the Christians against charges of immorality Athenagoras points out:

Since we hope for eternal life, we despise the things of this life, including even the pleasures of the soul. Thus each of us thinks of his wife, whom he married according to the laws we have laid down, with a view to nothing more than procreation. For as a farmer casts seed into the ground and awaits the harvest without further planting, so also procreation is the limit we set for the indulgence of our lust. You could find many among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried in the hope of being united more closely with God.¹⁴⁹

Like Justin Martyr, Athenagoras bears witness to the fact that by the second half of the second century, many Christians had embraced a lifelong celibacy, and at the very least, the austerity of sexual intercourse solely for the purpose of procreation. More importantly, Athenagoras bears witness to the fact that some early Christians had developed laws by which they had placed limits upon their sexual activities.

Athenagoras' apology also suggests that celibacy was hardly a practice done in isolated areas or by few people. How could he write such a thing to the emperor as a representative of early Christianity as a whole if he did not assume that celibacy was a practice prevalent enough to be recognized as a Christian one? It is clear that Athenagoras thinks of celibacy as a uniquely Christian moral practice, and one that Christians are recognized for across the empire. In fact, he is quick to point out the hypocrisy of pagans that accuse Christians of immorality when Roman society, at least to Christian

¹⁴⁹ Athenagoras, *Legatio* 33, trans. W.R. Schoedel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

sensibilities, exhibits excessive sexual immorality. Indeed, in *Legatio* 34 he writes that pagans have no right to criticize Christian morality:

These adulterers and pederasts reproach men who abstain from intercourse or are satisfied with a single marriage, whereas they themselves live like fish. For they swallow up whoever comes their way, the stronger driving out the weaker. And this is what it really means to feed on human flesh: that when laws have been promulgated to further every form of justice, they violate these ordinances so that the governors of the provinces which you have sent out cannot even handle all the lawsuits.¹⁵⁰

It is not insignificant, either, that a mid second century pagan text confirms that Christians were recognized for their celibacy. The Roman doctor Galen briefly alludes to Christians in some correspondance with Marcus Aurelius and his son, Commodus:

...Most people are unable to follow any demonstrative argument consecutively; hence they need parables and benefit from them - and he [Galen- adds the editor who preserved this extract] understands by parables tales of rewards and punishments in a future life – just as now we see the people called Christians drawing their faith from parables and miracles, and yet sometimes acting in the same way as those who philosophize. For their contempt of death, and of its sequel, is patent to us every day, and likewise their restraint in cohabitation. For they include not only men but also women who refrain from cohabiting all through their lives; and they also number individuals who have reached such a point in their control regarding their daily conduct and in their intense desire for rectitude that they have in fact become not inferior to those who are true philosophers.¹⁵¹

At first glance this passing remark may only seem a curiosity, but methodologically it is of great importance when a non-member of a social group can provide important evidence for that group's distinct identity markers within a society. Recently scholars have focused a great deal on the concept of self-identity within social groups and how those identities are often ideological due to their inherent biases towards group solidarity. But here there is an example of an outsider being able to identify distinguishing

¹⁵⁰ Athenagoras, *Legatio* 34.

¹⁵¹ See R. Waltzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).

characteristics of a social group to which he does not belong. Galen chose to identify three distinctive qualities: 1) Christians use parables but paradoxically are capable of philosophical behaviour, 2) they have contempt for death in the face of persecution, and 3) they are known for their practice of sexual renunciation. Assuming that Galen is not misrepresenting Christians, and his grudgingly respectful attitude would seem to support that he was not,¹⁵² it could be argued that by the mid second century Christians were known for embracing celibacy to an extent that it became part of their identity in relation to society. Not only did Christians identify themselves as those who engaged in celibacy over against the broader society, pagans also identified them as those who practiced celibacy.¹⁵³

IV. Anti-Gnostic and Apocryphal Texts

The relationship between orthodox and Gnostic Christianity in the second and early third century is a complex and difficult issue. The old scholarly perspective of an orthodox group of Christians fending off a world of Gnostic heretics (who promoted a philosophical duality and a rejection of the goodness of the supreme God as the creator of the world) has been replaced by a more flexible and careful presentation. Rather, early Christianity of the second century is described as more fluid and flexible, as various doctrinal positions and religious practices were simultaneously developing in different Christian circles. While it is not necessary, as some scholars think, to envisage “a

¹⁵² Harnack boldly states “One can hardly imagine a more impartial and brilliant testimony to the morality of the Christians.” See A. Harnack, *the Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, Trans. J. Moffatt (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1972), p. 213.

¹⁵³ It is interesting to note that taken seriously, this self-proclaimed part of the early Christian identity, along with the pagan recognition of that identity, brings into doubt the scholarly position that early Christianity had not formed a cohesive self-identity until the end of the third century. At the very least, you can argue from this that Christian identity was fairly well established by the mid second century for it to have received recognition by Roman outsiders.

continuum of ideas” with markedly varied content,¹⁵⁴ it is nonetheless more proper to refer to Gnosticizing elements and orthodox elements within the church that existed in a tension of popular support. With that in mind, the notion that the two existed in a pure antithetic dichotomy has been rejected, and most scholars now recognize that there were probably “more Gnostic” or “less Gnostic” groups within early Christianity and that many degrees of “Gnosticism” can be detected in the “Gnostic” texts of the early church. Thus, in some texts the philosophical dualism of Gnosticism, when pushed to the extreme, results in the rejection of God and Creation, while in others, that dualism may be only barely discernable.¹⁵⁵ Inclusion under the umbrella of orthodoxy, then, may have been a more complicated and flexible proposition than previously suspected.

What this means for the present discussion is that a number of texts concerning celibacy in the second century are going to be affected by how we consider the issue of Gnosticism. Two kinds of texts need to be addressed: first, there are the *Apocryphal Acts*, and second, the apologetic works of Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, all of which date to the second half of the second century CE. Essentially, both the *Apocryphal Acts* and the anti-Gnostic apologetic works of the church fathers can be used to demonstrate the popularity of celibacy in the second century. The key to understanding their perspectives lies in understanding the Acts as positive support for popular asceticism, while the apologetic works demonstrate the correctives placed on celibates who are judged to have erred in their perspectives.

¹⁵⁴ See S.L. Davies’ summary of scholarly positions in *Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (London: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1980).

¹⁵⁵ Davies’ comparison is to modern American Christians who all have a variety of doctrinal differences but are still considered orthodox Christians. See Davies, *Revolt*, p. 11.

The problem with the *Apocryphal Acts* is that they are clearly fictitious (idiosyncratic haigiography at best), and therefore often dismissed from serious considerations as the “ridiculous pseudo-history originating from the disturbed minds of unhappy heretics.”¹⁵⁶ Recently, however, some scholars have rehabilitated the Acts, not by claiming there is clear historical data in them, but by examining them as forms of popular literature that reflect the values and life-styles of the early Christian community.¹⁵⁷ By examining the *Acts* as a type of ancient literature, scholars like Kate Cooper, Virginia Burrus and Stevan Davies have identified the *Apocryphal Acts* as a variety of the ancient folk-tale or novel. Burrus, for example, demonstrates that the *Apocryphal Acts* have a literary structure that is common to all of the *Acts* in the same way that there are literary structures common to the ancient novel. She first shows how the ancient novel, such as Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirohe* or Xenophon’s *Ephesian Tale*, has four structural elements:

- 1) A young and beautiful couple fall in love and are betrother or married.
- 2) They leave home on a ship voyage and become separated.
- 3) They endure persecutions and threats to their chastity, yet remain faithful.
- 4) They are reunited and return home.¹⁵⁸

Similarly, the *Apocryphal Acts* show a literary structure she calls the “Chastity Tale”, which is designed to encourage faithfulness to God through celibacy. The structure of the Chastity Tale is as follows:¹⁵⁹

- 1) Apsotle arrives in a town.

¹⁵⁶ This is Davies’ characterization of some scholarly opinions that dismiss the *Acts* off hand, while he himself argues that the *Apocryphal Acts* derive from “the common people who agreed on the proper way of living for a Christians but had differing doctrinal positions.” *Revolt*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁷ See V. Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* (New York: The Edward Mellen Press, 1987), S.L. Davies, *Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (London: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1980), and K. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹⁵⁸ Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, p. 48.

¹⁵⁹ Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, p. 34-35.

- 2) Woman goes to hear apostle preach.
- 3) Woman vows chastity.
- 4) Husband attempts to violate vow.
- 5) Apostle encourages woman.
- 6) Woman resists husband.
- 7) Husband/governor imprisons apostle
- 8) Woman visits apostle in prison (encouragement; baptism of woman).
- 9) Husband/ governor attempts to kill apostle.
- 10) Apostle dies as martyr or is rescued miraculously.
- 11) Husband/ governor persecutes woman.
- 12) Woman is rescued miraculously.
- 13) Woman defeats husband/governor (who may be converted or punished, and never succeeds in persuading the woman).
- 14) Woman is freed and allowed to remain chaste.

Of eleven examples of Chastity Tales in the *Apochryphal Acts*, only two are missing any of the usual functions of the story, and in her opinion they are only secondary sequences of the tale.¹⁶⁰

Although this concern for chastity is the driving force for the *Acts* of Peter, Andrew, Thomas and John, the best example of these texts supporting the church's adoption of celibacy as a pious activity is *The Acts of Paul*.¹⁶¹ Philip Sellew correctly summarizes the work of scholars that recognize the apocryphal *Acts of Paul*, dating from the mid second century, as a work in which "...Paul is pictured as traveling from city to city, converting gentiles and proclaiming the need for a life of sexual abstinence and other encratite practices."¹⁶² Notice, too, how the story follows the literary structure Burrus suggested for the "Chastity Tale." In this story, Paul arrives in Iconium and preaches celibacy as the core expression of faith in Jesus Christ:

And when Paul entered into the house of Onesiphorus, there was great joy, and bowing of knees and breaking of bread, and the word of God concerning abstinence (or continence) and the resurrection; for Paul said:

¹⁶⁰ Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, p. 61-62.

¹⁶¹ Sometimes referred to as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

¹⁶² P. Sellew, "The Acts of Paul" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 5, D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 201-02.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are they that keep the flesh chaste, for they shall become the temple of God.
Blessed are they that abstain (or the continent), for unto them shall God speak.
 Blessed are they that have renounced this world, for they shall be well pleasing unto God.
Blessed are they that possess their wives as though they had them not, for they shall inherit God.
 Blessed are they that have the fear of God, for they shall become angels of God.
 Blessed are they that tremble at the oracles of God, for they shall be comforted.
 Blessed are they that receive the wisdom of Jesus Christ, for they shall be called sons of the Most High.
Blessed are they that have kept their baptism pure, for they shall rest with the Father and with the Son.
 Blessed are they that have compassed the understanding of Jesus Christ, for they shall be in light.
 Blessed are they that for love of God have departed from the fashion of this world, for they shall judge angels, and shall be blessed at the right hand of the Father.
 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy and shall not see the bitter day of judgement.
Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well-pleasing unto God and shall not lose the reward of their continence (chastity), for the word of the Father shall be unto them a work of salvation in the day of his Son, and they shall have rest world without end.”¹⁶³

Obviously, this work represents the popular nature of the text as it has been blended with the style of Jesus’ Beatitudes and spoken from the mouth of Paul. Then, a virgin named Thecla hears Paul’s preaching on celibacy and vows chastity,¹⁶⁴ incurring the wrath of her fiancé and other men of the town.¹⁶⁵ After having his appeals for marriage rejected, her former fiancé manages to have Paul thrown into prison where she visits him and is encouraged.¹⁶⁶ Finally, she too is condemned to martyrdom by the city’s officials,¹⁶⁷ and

¹⁶³ *Acts of Paul*, 2.5-6.

¹⁶⁴ *Acts of Paul*, 2.7.

¹⁶⁵ *Acts of Paul*, 2.8-14.

¹⁶⁶ *Acts of Paul*, 2.18.

¹⁶⁷ *Acts of Paul*, 2.21ff.

instead of being killed by the beasts in the arena, Thecla's power miraculously prevents her death and the people of the city are fearful and awe-inspired.¹⁶⁸ Thecla then leaves Iconium to live out her days in a cave where she lives the life of an ascetic.¹⁶⁹

Scholars now see the *Apocryphal Acts* as a kind of literature similar to the novel, derived from the common people to provide instruction through entertainment for the less educated. In that regard, the *Acts* "...are testimonies to varieties of Christian belief and to a particular way of life. They derive from common people who agreed on the proper way of living for Christians but had differing doctrinal opinions."¹⁷⁰ In addition, the tendency to assume that the *Apocryphal Acts* are Gnostic in character has been challenged due to a lack of clearly discernible Gnostic tendencies of dualism and the rejection of God and creation. The assumption that an encratite position implies a Gnostic one is simply not true for the *Apocryphal Acts*. Rather, each of the *Acts* has a degree of Gnostic quality in relation to orthodoxy. For example, M.R. James has assessed the orthodoxy of each of the *Acts* and pronounced the *Acts of Paul* to be orthodox, while Peter is less so than Paul but more than John.¹⁷¹ As Schneemelcher puts it:

One of the most distinctive features on these works is that they are not determined by theological reflections but rather directed by practical intentions. Thus the encratite strain that occurs in different forms in the several apocryphal Acts should undoubtedly be understood as showing the authors of these Acts took sexual continence to be an essential feature, or sometimes indeed the essential content, of the Christian message.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ *Acts of Paul*, 2.22, 2.36.

¹⁶⁹ *Acts of Paul*, 2.43.

¹⁷⁰ Davies, *Revolt*, p.11.

¹⁷¹ M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 270, 300. In addition, S.P. Brock argues that the *Acts of Thomas* reflect Syriac Christianity, including both its Gnostic tendencies and cultural tendencies. See *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1987). Thus, while most of the *Acts* are from Greece or Asia Minor, the *Acts of Thomas* seem to reflect the presence of asceticism and celibacy in Syria during the late second century.

¹⁷² See W. Schneemelcher and E. Hennecke, eds, *The New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol 2. English translation edited by R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 172.

Interestingly, Eusebius can confirm this position for us. In an account of a letter written by Dionysius, the bishop of Corinth from 166-75CE, Eusebius tells us that Dionysius had some comments concerning overly harsh encratism among the orthodox:

He gives them much advice also in regard to marriage and chastity, and commands them to receive those who come back again after any fall, whether it be delinquency or heresy. Among these is inserted also another epistle addressed to the Cnosians, in which he exhorts Pinytus, bishop of the parish, not to lay upon the brethren a grievous and compulsory burden in regard to chastity, but to have regard to the weakness of the multitude. Pinytus, replying to this epistle, admires and commends Dionysius, but exhorts him in turn to impart some time more solid food, and to feed the people under him when he wrote again, with more advanced teaching, that they might not be fed continually on these milky doctrines and imperceptibly grow old under a training calculated for children. In this epistle also Pinytus' orthodoxy in the faith and his care for the welfare of those placed under him, his learning and his comprehension of divine things, are revealed as in a most perfect image.¹⁷³

As can be seen, regardless of one's theological position it was possible to be orthodox and hold the encratite position in regard to celibacy. Pinytus' orthodoxy was not in question, nor was the orthodoxy of Dionysius, though both had differing opinions on the enforcement of celibacy. This passage, in combination with the clear popularity of celibacy demonstrated by the Apochryphal Acts, makes it safe to say that celibacy was frequently practiced during the second century.

Finally, by the end of the century, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria had begun to defend and teach Christianity through large-scale projects, such as their works against heresy or works of instruction for Christians. In particular, their work against encratist thought during the second century included correctives to the effects of Gnosticism on sexuality in the early church. The basic situation appears to be that Gnostic thought had prompted some Christians to adopt either a too libertine attitude

¹⁷³ Eusebius, *Church History*, IV.23.6-10.

towards sexuality,¹⁷⁴ or much more prevalent, too harsh a one that rejected God's creation and the goodness of marriage and children.¹⁷⁵ Naturally, both Irenaeus and Clement weigh in on the situation, and their comments luckily give us another clear picture of the presence of celibacy in the second century.

Irenaeus offers up theological defenses of orthodoxy that include correctives that addressed the Gnostic rejection of marriage and their excessive use of celibacy. Two passages are relevant. First, in *Against Heresies* 1.28.1 Irenaeus specifically mentions the Encratites:

Many offshoots of numerous heresies have already been formed from those heretics we have described. This arises from the fact that numbers of them—indeed, we may say all—desire themselves to be teachers, and to break off from the particular heresy in which they have been involved. Forming one set of doctrines out of a totally different system of opinions, and then again others from others, they insist upon teaching something new, declaring themselves the inventors of any sort of opinion which they may have been able to call into existence. To give an example: Springing from Saturninus and Marcion, those who are called Encratites preached against marriage, thus setting aside the original creation of God, and indirectly blaming Him who made the male and female for the propagation of the human race. Some of those reckoned among them have also introduced abstinence from animal food, thus proving themselves ungrateful to God, who formed all things. They deny, too, the salvation of him who was first created. It is but lately, however, that this opinion has been invented among them. A certain man named Tatian first introduced the blasphemy. He was a hearer of Justin's, and as long as he continued with him he expressed no such views; but after his martyrdom he separated from the Church, and, excited and puffed up by the thought of being a teacher, as if he were superior to others, he composed his own peculiar type of doctrine. He invented a system of certain invisible Aeons, like the followers of Valentinus; while, like Marcion and Saturninus, he declared that marriage was nothing else than corruption and fornication. But his denial of Adam's salvation was an opinion due entirely to himself.

¹⁷⁴ For example, Clement reports that the followers of Epiphanes had felt the eschatological redemption of Christ was now fully present and all social boundaries could be rejected as from a previous sinful era. The result was that wives were held in common in Epiphanes' community and prompted sharp rebuke by Clement. See *Stromaties* III.2.

¹⁷⁵ The followers of Marcion in particular, as well as a number of other thinkers, were guilty of rejecting marriage as a sin and the world as evil. Book III of Clement's *Stromaties* is essentially one long defence of the goodness of marriage held in balance with the proper place of celibacy.

Second, in another passage from *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus make a unique comparison of the encratite position with the response of Adam & Eve following their sin in the Garden.

For [Adam] showed his repentance by his conduct, through means of the girdle [which he used], covering himself with fig-leaves, while there were many other leaves, which would have irritated his body in a less degree. He, however, adopted a dress conformable to his disobedience, being awed by the fear of God; and resisting the erring, the lustful propensity of his flesh (since he had lost his natural disposition and child-like mind, and had come to the knowledge of evil things), *he girded a bridle of continence (celibacy) upon himself and his wife*, fearing God, and waiting for His coming, and indicating, as it were, some such thing [as follows]: Inasmuch as, he says, I have by disobedience lost that robe of sanctity which I had from the Spirit, I do now also acknowledge that I am deserving of a covering of this nature, which affords no gratification, but which gnaws and frets the body. And he would no doubt have retained this clothing forever, thus humbling himself, if God, who is merciful, had not clothed them with tunics of skins instead of fig leaves.¹⁷⁶

In essence, as J. Behr explains, Irenaeus makes the analogy that the encratite position is similar to how Adam and Eve's immature and fallen reasoning led them to sew garments out of fig leaves that would "gnaw and fret" the body.¹⁷⁷ Irenaeus' analogy to the encratite position, this "bridle of continence", represents a response to guilt that will prevent a true return to God, and Irenaeus argues that God gently corrects them by giving them "garments of skin." Irenaeus' corrective, then, was to make a distinction between the immature asceticism, the "feigned continence" of the encratites,¹⁷⁸ and a celibacy under the guidance of the Spirit, which in no way could ever root itself in a rejection of

¹⁷⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.23.5

¹⁷⁷ For a full exploration of this critique see J. Behr's *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), and his article "Irenaeus AH 3.23.5 and the Ascetic Ideal" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37.4 (1993): 305-13.

¹⁷⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.24.2.

marriage or God's good creation.¹⁷⁹ Regardless, it is yet another clear demonstration of the presence of celibacy and asceticism in the second century.

Finally, Clement of Alexandria also addresses the problems facing the early church in regard to the practices of the encratite Gnostics. Book three of his *Stromaties* is basically one long discussion and refutation of the two Gnostic positions on sexuality. As briefly stated earlier, on the one hand a small number of Gnostics, like Epiphanes for example, had adopted a theological position that enabled them to justify living in an open community where wives were held in common.¹⁸⁰ Naturally, Clement is not impressed and simply states that those Christians are living in adultery and fall under God's judgment.¹⁸¹ On the other hand, and in greater numbers, were Christians who had rejected the body, sex, and marriage as part of the sinful order of the world under their Gnostic worldview.¹⁸² Clement's response is to affirm the goodness of God's creation, of sex for procreation, and of marriage using both biblical proofs and extensive discussions of correlative wisdom found among the Greeks and Romans.¹⁸³ In short, Gnostics who embrace an exclusive asceticism of celibacy and reject marriage are denying God's will

¹⁷⁹ See Behr, *The Ascetic Ideal*, pp. 212-13.

¹⁸⁰ *Stromaties* III.5.

¹⁸¹ *Stromaties* III.8-11.

¹⁸² In *Stromaties* III.81 he writes "I believe Tatian the Syrian made bold to teach these doctrines. At any rate he writes these words in his book *On Perfection According to the Saviour*: 'While agreement to be continent makes prayer possible, intercourse of corruption destroys it. By the very disparaging way in which he allows it, he forbids it. For although he allowed them to come together again because of Satan and the temptation to incontinence, he indicated that the man who takes advantage of this permission will be serving two masters, God if there is 'agreement,' but, if there is no such agreement, incontinence, fornication, and the devil.' This he says in expounding the apostle. But he falsifies the truth in that by means of what is true he tries to prove what is untrue. We too confess that incontinence and fornication are diabolical passions, but the agreement of a controlled marriage occupies a middle position. If the married couple agree to be continent, it helps them to pray; if they agree with reverence to have sexual relations it leads them to beget children."

¹⁸³ One can detect in Clement's writings knowledge of nearly every school of Greco-Roman philosophy (including Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian, Epicurean and Stoic thought) and he is more than comfortable drawing upon those philosophies when needed and rejecting them when they conflict with his understanding of biblical principles.

for humanity and condemning creation as sinful, and Clement clearly rejects celibacy engaged in on the basis of that position.

Moreover, what is of great value for historians is that amidst the correctives placed on the Gnostics, Clement describes what he understands to be the majority early Christian position on celibacy and asceticism. While the Greeks would suffer desire for the sake of balance and necessity, Clement claims that Christians actually go one step further:

The human ideal of continence, I mean that which is set forth by Greek philosophers, teaches that one should fight desire and not be subservient to it so as to bring it to practical effect. *But our ideal is not to experience desire at all.* Our aim is not that while a man feels desire he should get the better of it, but that he should be continent even respecting desire itself. This continence cannot be attained in any other way except by God's grace. That was why he said "Ask and it shall be given you." This grace was received even by Moses, though clothed in his needy body, so that for forty days he felt neither thirst nor hunger. Just as it is better to be in good health than for a sick man to talk about health, so to be light is better than to discuss light, and true chastity is better than that taught by the philosophers. Where there is light there is no darkness. But where there is inward desire, even if it goes no further than desire and is quiescent so far as bodily action is concerned, union takes place in thought with the object of desire, although that object is not present.¹⁸⁴

For Clement, the goal of Christians is to feel no desire at all, but the difference between them and the encratites is that such an endeavour is undertaken in devotion to God and not out of a rejection of the created order. "As for ourselves," he writes, "we set high value on continence which arises from love to the Lord and seeks that which is good for its own sake, sanctifying the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is good if for the sake of the kingdom of heaven a man emasculates himself from all desire, and 'purifies his conscience from dead works to serve the living God.'"¹⁸⁵ Indeed, elsewhere in the

¹⁸⁴ *Stromaties*, III.57.

¹⁸⁵ *Stromaties*, III.59.

Stromaties, he is well aware of ascetics and celibates in the church and he even uses them as examples of the “true Gnostic” who uses continence as a means of self-restraint out of fear of God.¹⁸⁶

In addition, Clement’s discussion also gives us insight into the fact that by the second half of the second century celibacy was seen as the root virtue of a broader asceticism embraced by Christians. Two passages are enlightening:

Our general argument concerning marriage, food, and other matters, may proceed to show that we should do nothing from desire. Our will is to be directed only towards that which is necessary. For we are children not of desire but of will. A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice continence so that it is not desire he feels for his wife, whom he ought to love, and that he may beget children with a mastered and controlled will. For we have learnt not to "have thought for the flesh to fulfil its desires." We are to "walk honourably as in the way", that is in Christ and in the enlightened conduct of the Lord's way, "not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and lasciviousness, not in strife and envy."¹⁸⁷

And once more:

However, one ought to consider continence not merely in relation to one form of it, that is, sexual relations, but in relation to all the other indulgences for which the soul craves when it is ill content with what is necessary and seeks for luxury. It is continence to despise money, softness, property, to hold in small esteem outward appearance, to control one's tongue, to master evil thoughts. In the past certain angels became incontinent and were seized by desire they fell from heaven to earth. And Valentine says in the letter to Agathopus: "Jesus endured " all things and was continent; It was his endeavor to earn a divine nature; he ate and drank in a manner peculiar to himself, and the food did not pass out of his body. Such was the power of his continence that food was not corrupted within him; for he himself was not subject to the process of corruption."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ *Stromaties*, VII.12.

¹⁸⁷ *Stromaties*, VII.12.

¹⁸⁸ *Stromaties* III.59. It is interesting to note that Clement is appealing here to Valentinus, a Gnostic he clearly associates with other Gnostic teachers. However, reading through the *Stromaties* it is also clear that Clement sees Valentinus and his followers as the least heretical of the Gnostic sects. He primarily understands Valentinus as a Gnostic who appeals to a kind of elitist spirituality that focused too greatly upon the soul’s non-corporeal relation to God through knowledge and obvious Neoplatonic conceptions of the soul’s immortal nature. Yet nowhere does Clement accuse Valentinus of the same dualistic tendencies of Gnostic thought that result in the rejection of God and Creation as good, nor of the encratism of other

The picture, then, is one where asceticism has been embraced as an ideal for all Christians. Some would be able to embrace celibacy and asceticism as a lifestyle, serving the church as we have explored earlier (widows, virgins, clergy) or simply as ascetics dedicated to living out a life of faith within the community.¹⁸⁹ But along side those people, Clement sees all Christians embracing continence on some level. Beginning with sexual continence, the Christian is to eliminate desire for all things that may threaten to induce ungodly behaviour. For our purposes it is also most important to note that Clement pictures the ideal Christian as one that both embraces proper Christian continence and rejects encratite teachings; the true Christian is the married believer who remains celibate within marriage except for the purpose of begetting children, or a celibate who does not denigrate the goodness of God and Creation. In this way, Clement joins Irenaeus, and likely a number of early Christians, in embracing asceticism rooted in celibacy that is based on dedication to God, and not on a rejection of God's good creation.

V. The Third Century Texts

Moving into the third century, Tertullian wrote *On the Veiling of Virgins*, wherein he discussed several matters pertaining to the order of virgins and widows in the

Gnostic sects. In fact, Clement notes that the Valentinians do not reject marriage (*Strom.* III.1) and that they still acknowledged the goodness of God, the incarnation of the Logos and the goodness of Creation (*Strom.* II.20). Indeed, he even quotes Valentinus on several occasions, such as the passage above, in support of his arguments. It seems, then, that Clement's opinion of Valentinus is similar to his attitude towards the Greek philosophical schools: he simply picks and chooses what wisdom supports his understanding of Christianity, while discarding what is not in agreement with it. Moreover, it may also provide support to the thesis of scholars who study the Apocryphal Acts and argue that there was a range of Gnostic thought that may or may not have been encratite in its position, and that there is not necessarily a correlation between encratism and Gnostic theology. Here it seems that the Valentinians, though Gnostic in some respects, did not go so far as to embrace a rejection of marriage while recognizing the superiority of continence.

¹⁸⁹ A contemporary of Clement's, Athenagoras, states, "Nay, you would find many among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried, in hope of living in closer communion with God." *On the Resurrection*, 33.

congregations under his care. In Carthage, there seemed to be some disagreement over whether virgins should wear a veil, a right normally limited to a married woman. Apparently, a number of the male celibates in those congregations took exception to the status granted by such a visible marking of virginity,¹⁹⁰ and argued that a woman who had reached physical maturity but remained a virgin did not have the right to wear the veil of matrimony. In addition, Tertullian's exposition seems to also point to the fact that some married or remarried women had attempted to acquire the same status as virgins through either accepting the honour of virgins while married¹⁹¹ or refusing to wear the marriage veil altogether.¹⁹² Tertullian argues that a virgin *should* wear the veil on the basis of her requirement for modesty and humility,¹⁹³ and he also prohibits a virgin of too young an age from being accepted into the roll of widows.¹⁹⁴

It is also interesting that while much of Tertullian's *On the Veiling of Virgins* is an exegetical exposition of New Testament distinctions between a woman, a virgin and a widow, the first three chapters of the work are dedicated to examining the customs concerning the use of veils passed down by the church. For example, Tertullian writes:

Throughout Greece, and certain of its barbaric provinces, the majority of Churches keep their virgins covered. There are places, too, beneath this (African) sky, where this practice obtains; lest any ascribe the custom to Greek or barbarian Gentilehood. But I have proposed (as models) those

¹⁹⁰ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, ch. 10.

¹⁹¹ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, ch. 3.

¹⁹² Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, ch. 17.

¹⁹³ Tertullian actually argues that the veil is a concession granted because of the virgin's nature as a female. In chapter 10 he argues that the male virgin is not granted any concession because he has been granted the authority of the virtue inherent in the male gender, thus making the continence of the male a reasonable expectation due to the superiority of his nature. But those females who have remained virgins, or become continent after having been married, are overcoming their inferior nature, and the Holy Spirit has granted them the concession of acknowledgement through the veil.

¹⁹⁴ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, ch. 9. Here also, as it was with I Timothy 5 and Ignatius, Tertullian bears witness to the fact that some churches had young unmarried virgins enrolled in the register of widows. In this situation, it seems that the young woman not only stopped wearing the veil but also took a seat of honor reserved for widows in the church. Apparently, these "virgin-widows" continued to exist in some areas into the third century.

Churches which were founded by apostles or apostolic men; and antecedently, I think, to certain (founders, who shall be nameless). Those Churches therefore, as well (as others), have the selfsame authority of custom (to appeal to); in opposing phalanx they range “times” and “teachers,” more than these later (Churches do). What shall we observe? What shall we choose? We cannot contemptuously reject a custom which we cannot condemn, inasmuch as it is not “strange,” since it is not among “strangers” that we find it, but among those, to wit, with whom we share the law of peace and the name of brotherhood. They and we have one faith, one God, the same Christ, the same hope, the same baptismal sacraments; let me say it once for all, we are one Church. Thus, whatever belongs to our brethren is ours: only, the body divides us.¹⁹⁵

Not only does Tertullian bear witness to the extent of the practice of celibacy across the Mediterranean, he also shows that by the beginning of the third century the church has conceived of celibate practices as part of the “customs” that are passed down as part of church tradition. More importantly, Tertullian points out that up until his time the customs concerning veiling had been treated with indifference,¹⁹⁶ but because the scandals of his era concerned prideful disputes over the honour and privileges granted to celibates in the church, a new rigour should be embraced in recognition that the truth outweighs the indifference of custom and, therefore, the veil should be worn out of modesty and humility.¹⁹⁷ It could be concluded, then, that by Tertullian’s time celibacy had been

¹⁹⁵ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, ch. 2.

¹⁹⁶ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, ch. 3.

¹⁹⁷ Tertullian’s entire argument rests on his assertion that custom is only valid when it agrees with the truth. In chapters one to three of the text he argues that any custom is developed slowly, and that unless clearly in opposition to the truth, the custom could be either accepted or rejected as a matter of choice. Tertullian informs the reader, then, that in the past whether a virgin wore a veil was treated with indifference because it was a matter of choice, as the choice carried no inherent opposition to the truth. However, in chapter three he writes, “But not even between customs have those most chaste teachers chosen to examine. Still, until very recently, among us, either custom was, with comparative indifference, admitted to communion. The matter had been left to choice, for each virgin to veil herself or expose herself, as she might have chosen, just as (she had equal liberty) as to marrying, which itself withal is neither enforced nor prohibited. Truth had been content to make an agreement with custom, in order that under the name of custom it might enjoy itself even partially. But when the power of discerning began to advance, so that the licence granted to either fashion was becoming the mean whereby the indication of the better part emerged; immediately the great adversary of good things-and much more of good institutions-set to his own work. The virgins of men go about, in opposition to the virgins of God, with front quite bare, excited to a rash audacity; and the semblance of virgins is exhibited by women who have the power of asking somewhat from husbands, not to say such a request as that (forsooth) their rivals-all the more “free” in that they are the “hand-maids” of

practiced long enough in the church that it both could be considered as part of the apostolic traditions, and had gained enough prestige that there was now competition for the honours it drew within the church communities.¹⁹⁸

The third century also shows evidence of celibate women that have taken on a specific and unique roll in the social structure of the church. Though reaching the height of their operation in the third century, the widow and the deaconess were found in various positions across the Christian church from the early second century, and continued to be a viable ascetic option for women well into the fifth century.¹⁹⁹ By the third century their responsibilities were considered to encompass the devotional arena, and in that regard, widows, virgins and deaconesses were involved with the care of the sick and the poor²⁰⁰ and increasingly focused upon spiritual guidance for women, especially those who were housebound.²⁰¹ Some scholars, such as Mary Malone, have argued it is possible that the church initially considered these positions to be ordained “offices”, but that by the

Christ alone -may be surrendered to them. "We are scandalized," they say, "because others walk otherwise (than we do); "and they prefer being "scandalized" to being provoked (to modesty)." (*On the Veiling of Virgins*, ch. 3). In other words, the custom of veiling of virgins has become a matter of moral significance because through pride it has created audacity among some and jealousy among others. Tertullian can then argue in the remainder of his treatise that the custom of veiling virgins should be enforced with more rigor because that would agree with the truth's demand for modesty and humility. Therefore, the young female virgins should wear the veil in order to preserve their modesty, and married women should continue to do so as well, also in order to preserve their modesty, but also to resist the inclinations of a jealous heart.

¹⁹⁸ Proponents of social theory and the use of power would likely argue that Tertullian and the church had claimed the antiquity of celibacy in order to justify their growing social influence. However, this would be to let the data be coerced by the theory, and there is no reason to suspect that Tertullian considered the practice of celibacy as a new phenomenon. Male virgins simply need to have humility to respect what honours are given them. See n. 193.

¹⁹⁹ Some have argued that Paul's greeting to Phoebe in Romans 16:1, where she is listed as *diakonos*, is a clear reference to a “deaconess” in the first century. However, the first clear use of a technical distinction of the deaconess is in Pliny's letter to Trajan ca. 110 where he informs the emperor that he had at some point examined two “deaconesses” in his investigations against Christians. In addition, it is also clear that widows and virgins were also often the recipients of charity. As was explored in discussion of I Timothy 5 and Tertullian's *On the Veiling of Virgins*, both indicate that some early Christian women were abusing the charity reserved for “real” virgins and widows. For a good survey of issues surrounding these offices see M.T. Malone, *Women and Christianity, Vol. I: The First Thousand Years* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2000) and C. Methuen, “The ‘Virgin Widow’: A Problematic Social Role for the Early Church? *Harvard Theological Review* 90.3 (1997): 285-98.

²⁰⁰ Malone, *Women and Christianity*, p. 124.

²⁰¹ Methuen, *The ‘Virgin Widow’*, p. 292.

end of the fourth century the councils of the church had removed that status from celibate women who performed this role. Hence, she argues, the appearance of the canonesses (kanonai) in the fourth century,²⁰² who were essentially the same as virgins, widows and deaconesses, but now portrayed as piously refusing ordination as deaconesses²⁰³ while continuing to educate, minister and care for the destitute without ecclesiastical authority.²⁰⁴ However, this could only clearly be argued for the deaconesses, and then perhaps only for the third century when the *Didascalia Apostolorum* indicates that ordination may have been granted to them for a short period of time in some areas.²⁰⁵ Despite the obvious role that they played in the life of their congregations, evidence for widows and virgins as an ordained office does not exist.²⁰⁶

Nonetheless, the literature of the early church records that local congregations had “orders”, “registers” or “lists” of celibate women who performed a variety of functions in

²⁰² For example, Basil writes a letter (Letter CLXXII) to a “Canoness” to encourage her to remain faithful to the path she has chosen.

²⁰³ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.23.

²⁰⁴ Malone, *Women and Christianity*, p. 130-31.

²⁰⁵ Not only does the *Apostolic Constitutions* clearly refer to deaconesses as ordained clergy (3.11, 3.15), in 8.20 includes a prayer to be used in the ordination of a deaconess: “O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; who didst not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of Thy holy gates,—do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant, who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit, and “cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,” that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Thy glory, and the praise of Thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to Thee and the Holy Spirit for ever. Amen.”

²⁰⁶ By “ordained office” I mean inclusion in the church’s hierarchical structure of authority to administer the sacraments and lead in continuity with apostolic succession. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, however, does indicate that by the third century virgins were taking formal vows celibacy and service. For example: “Concerning virginity we have received no commandment; but we leave it to the power of those that are willing, as a vow: exhorting them so far in this matter that they do not promise anything rashly; since Solomon says, “It is better not to vow, than to vow and not pay.” Let such a virgin, therefore, be holy in body and soul, as the temple of God, as the house of Christ, as the habitation of the Holy Spirit. For she that vows ought to do such works as are suitable to her vow; and to show that her vow is real, and made on account of leisure for piety, not to cast a reproach on marriage. Let her not be a gadder abroad, nor one that rambles about unseasonably; not double-minded, but grave, continent, sober, pure, avoiding the conversation of many, and especially of those that are of ill reputation.” *Apostolic Constitutions* 4.14.

the church.²⁰⁷ What is important for our purposes is to remember that despite the variety of functions and ambiguity of “ordained” statuses, women in these positions were expected to be celibate and ascetic while living and serving among the local congregations, and they represented a significant population of celibate ascetics in the early church.²⁰⁸ The third century provides evidence of this ascetic behaviour in two of its important legislative works, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*.²⁰⁹ The *Didascalia*, for example, prohibits the election of a widow unless she is beyond all suspicion of desiring a second husband and requires that the bishops encourage those who have been widowed young to remain chaste until they are able to properly enter the order of widows with their virtue intact.²¹⁰ The *Apostolic Constitutions*, as well as providing almost identical recommendations for widows,²¹¹ provides evidence that deaconesses were also required to be virgins saying “Let the deaconess be a pure virgin; or, at the least, a widow who has been but once married, faithful, and well esteemed.”²¹² So it seems that for the time that widows and

²⁰⁷ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.17, mentions a register for virgins. Interestingly, the mention of the register occurs during a story portraying Constantine’s mother, Helen, as a woman performing the role of a virgin amidst here feverish building schedule. She is portrayed as a woman who cares for the sick, prays with other women and looks after the poor, having assumed a virginal aspect late in life. Basil, too, in a letter to Amphilochius (Letter 194) explaining the church’s canons, describes both the church’s views of the “order of virgins” (Canon 18) and mentions the “list of widows” in response to a specific question about re-marriage.

²⁰⁸ Bishop Cornelius sent a letter to Fabian in Antioch in 251, and mentions that there were forty-six presbyters, seven deacons, seven sub-deacons, forty-two acolytes, fifty-two exorcists, readers, and janitors, and over fifteen hundred widows and persons in distress in Rome. Granted, Rome would be one of the larger cities of the empire, and would therefore have a larger number of widows. Still, if the ratio of widows to clergy is generally correct, then it would seem that they made up a significant cross-section of the early church.

²⁰⁹ The dating of these works is a matter of considerable debate, though it is clear that the *Didascalia* dates from the early to mid third century and the *Constitutions*, which contains some of the materials from the *Didascalia*, is of a later date, likely the early fourth century. However, most scholars agree that the materials found in the *Constitutions* do represent the considerations of an earlier period, most agreeing the third century.

²¹⁰ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, XIV.3.1-4.

²¹¹ *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.1-2.

²¹² *Apostolic Constitutions* 6.17.

deaconesses were operating among the third century Christian communities they were also required to be celibate ascetics as part of their service.

By the later half of the third century the extent and practice of celibacy also resulted in the appearance of localized expressions of the forms of celibacy. The *apotaktikoi* in Egypt and the *ihidāyā* in Syria were groups of celibate Christians that emerged as unique expressions of celibates in their particular cultures. We can confidently locate these forms in the latter half of the third century because they likely existed long enough to have been incorporated into ascetic works from those regions and been around long enough to require correction as disagreement over the form began to appear. For example, Griffith argues that although the main sources for the study of the *ihidāyā* are the works of two fourth century Syrian ascetics, Ephraem and Aphrahat, those sources do demonstrate that the ascetic institutions of Syria "...were already well enough established that certain abuses had crept into them, and currents of change and reform in the ascetical establishment were already afoot, prompted perhaps by the Peace of Constantine."²¹³ E.A. Judge, as well, argues that the *apotaktikoi* were essentially the Egyptian parallels of widows and virgins of the third century, and that once monasticism came on scene, the *apotaktikoi* were rapidly overshadowed and eventually absorbed within the anchoritic ideal of Anthony's experience in the desert.²¹⁴

Asceticism and celibacy in Egypt reveals a situation where many Egyptian celibates were practicing their asceticism without engaging in a withdrawal to the desert. Despite the fact that the practice of asceticism in Egypt contained numerous examples of

²¹³ S. Griffiths, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism" in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush & R. Valantasis eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 235.

²¹⁴ E.A. Judge, "The Earliest Use of Monachos for 'Monk' and the Origins of Monasticism." *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 10 (1977), p. 75.

“classic” *anachoresis* and *enkrateia* in the desert, it is also clear from the sources that a class of ascetics called *apotaktikoi* existed as an option to the hermit or communal style monk. E.A. Judge and J. Goehring²¹⁵ have explored the meaning of this term at length and have demonstrated that the *apotaktikoi* (loosely translated “set apart”) were essentially “inner-city ascetics”²¹⁶ who embraced celibacy and set up houses of their own in towns and cities from where they could practice their asceticism and offer services to the church. What is interesting about the *apotaktikoi* is that out of necessity for a location within the towns and cities, many of them continued to own property, and did not engage in the renunciation of property typical of other ascetics.²¹⁷ Again, however, regardless of their status or location, the *apotaktikoi* were expected to practice celibacy as the core discipline of their asceticism.

A similar situation existed in Syria. Although the Syrian deserts and mountains contained some of the most idiosyncratic and extreme examples of ascetic withdrawal,²¹⁸ it is also clear that there were celibate ascetics who continued to live within the communities of the Syrian-speaking churches. Sidney Griffith²¹⁹ has recently published an article detailing a summary of scholarly views about the position of a group of people called the “*Īhīdāyā*” (roughly translated “single”), who were a unique form of celibate Christians in the Syrian churches. The term *ihīdāyā*, Griffith writes, “in general came to include both male and female celibates, as well as persons who may have once been married, but who subsequently consecrated themselves in a special way and who

²¹⁵ J. Goehring, “Through a Glass Darkly: Diverse Images of the Apotaktikoi(ai) of Early Egyptian Monasticism” *Semeia* 58 (1992): 25-45.

²¹⁶ Goehring, *Through a Glass*, p. 27.

²¹⁷ Goehring, *Through a Glass*, pp. 30-35.

²¹⁸ One of the most famous examples, of course, is Simeon Stylitus who spent 36 years on the top of a marble column.

²¹⁹ Griffiths, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria”, pp. 220-245.

then lived as consecrated celibates in the Christian community under the name *qaddīšē* (saints or holy ones).²²⁰ Additionally, Griffith demonstrates that the term *ihîdāyā* actually has a significant theological meaning and it reflects the individual's consecration to God in single-minded devotion or as an imitator of Christ's "only begotten" relationship with the Father,²²¹ but does not reflect the "singleness" of the Greek *monachos*, or desert monk. These *ihîdāyā*, then, served their congregations as both spiritual examples and as guides for spiritual development, and it was their celibacy that was the key to their status within the church.²²²

In addition, the two pseudonymous *Epistles to Virgins*,²²³ falsely attributed to Clement of Rome, date from the mid-third century and exist only in Syriac, leading scholars to believe they are Syrian in origin.²²⁴ These two letters, which address both male and female ascetics, support the theory that the *ihîdāyā* served their congregations as part of their devotion to God. For example, both letters address situations that these ascetics would face in their travels, and instruct them on what to do in those situations to prevent offence or sin.²²⁵ Moreover, the first letter employs nearly half its length in the description of the motives behind celibacy and attempts to show the nobility of the

²²⁰ Griffiths, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria", p. 223.

²²¹ Griffiths, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria", pp. 227-29.

²²² R. Murray even argues that baptism was reserved for those who vowed celibacy, with many people waiting until late in life or their deathbed to get baptised. See R. Murray, "The Exhortation to Candidates for Ascetical Vows at Baptism in the Ancient Syriac Church," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974-74): 59-80.

²²³ See *Epistolae ad Virgines*, trans. B.P. Pratten, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VIII, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970).

²²⁴ See S.P. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," *Numen* 20 (1973), p. 7, and R. Macmullen and E.N. Lane's introduction to the letters in *Paganism and Christianity 100-425 C.E.: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 170.

²²⁵ For example, the first letter refers to avoiding places where men live unmarried with women (*First Letter*, ch. 10), rules of conduct when visiting the sick or performing exorcisms (*First Letter*, ch. 12) and how to work peacefully with each other (*First Letter*, ch. 13). The second letter as well, gives advice on how to minister in places where there are only married Christians (*First Letter*, ch. 10) and where there are only women (*Second Letter*, ch. 3), and how they should behave when they are around non-Christians (*Second Letter*, ch. 6).

profession. In essence, the letter argues that virginity is necessary for perfect virtue, rooted in self-denial and effected through the imitation of Jesus and Mary and the laying aside of carnal desire. In that regard, it shows how the Christians of third century Syria were engaging celibacy on a deep level, making theological and moral speculation in support of asceticism well before the appearance of the well considered treatments of the fourth century.²²⁶

Another example of the presence of significant numbers of celibate Christians in the late third century is demonstrated by the corrective canons put in place by a number of church councils. The Councils of Ancyra (314 CE), Neocaesarea (ca. 315 CE), Gangra (ca. 320-40 CE?),²²⁷ and Laodicea (340's CE) established canons to correct the behaviour of ascetics who clearly lived among the larger communities of cities and villages. For example, the Council of Ancyra forbids male and female ascetics from living together in personal residence (Canon 19). Canon I of Neorcaesarea shows the general support of the popular notion that the clergy should be celibate by deposing Presbyters who marry. Canon 30 of the Council of Laodicea forbids ascetics, as well as clergy and Christians in general, from bathing with women in public baths. The Council of Gangra, too, has a

²²⁶ More will be said about this in chapter four.

²²⁷ The date of this council is highly debated with dates ranging from 325 CE to 376 CE being proposed. Scholars are sure that it occurred between the first and second ecumenical councils, but there are many chronological difficulties in attempting to identify those who were present at the council. The clearest indication of the date seems to be the traditional ordering of the councils that place it after Neocaesarea in 315, but before Antioch in 340. The only other indications of its date are that it condemned an Armenian bishop, one Eustathius, of excessive asceticism and Arian sympathies, and that the council was presided over by a man named Eusebius. Unfortunately it is known that Eustathius was in operation as a priest from the early 300's until his death in 377, so that does little to help narrow the date. What remains is which Eusebius is being talked about, and a number of possibilities have been suggested. In the end, the only solution that aligns with the traditional ordering of the councils is Lightfoot's suggestion that the episcopate of Eusebius Pamphili from 317-337 is the only "Eusebius" that fits the chronology. Hence, we may hesitantly date the council between 317 and 337, but more likely in the later years of his episcopate since he may have needed to prove himself as bishop before being given the task of presiding over a council. For a full discussion see H. Percival's summary in his introduction to the council of Gangra in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XIV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp.89-90.

series of correctives for ascetics living in urban areas, including a prohibition on wearing the *periboloeum* (Canon 12), or philosopher's mantle, in order to appear superior to the lay congregation. Similarly, Gangra also prohibits fasting or absence from church on Sundays (Canon 18) and in general despises ascetics who act superior to regular folk in the church. It is important to remember, then, that the councils of the early fourth century place correctives on celibates living in urban areas, which means that the practice of asceticism had been around long enough for abuses and concerns over their interactions with the church to form.

Finally, with regard to monasticism as a particular manifestation of asceticism, we know from Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* that when Anthony first went into the desert there were already a few monasteries in the desert and that he sought the advice of an elderly hermit who had lived in the desert since his youth.²²⁸ So too, the earliest Greek *Lives* of Pachomius reveal that when he first became a Christian and began to pursue the communal life in the desert, he went to live with an old hermit named Palamon who had already engaged in the *anachoresis*, or withdrawal, of classic monasticism. In addition, Pachomius' attempts at forming a monastic community were contrasted with an earlier unsuccessful attempt by an ascetic named Aotas.²²⁹ Although the number of ascetics living in the desert prior to the lives of Anthony and Pachomius was likely small, it is still important to note because it clearly demonstrates that asceticism was present to a large enough extent within Christian culture that it *could* be transformed into the formal monastic practices of the fourth and fifth centuries. Indeed, often overlooked by scholars

²²⁸ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony*, 3.

²²⁹ H. Chadwick, "Pachomius and the Idea of Sanctity" in *The Byzantine Saint: University of Birmingham, Fourteenth Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (1980), S. Hackel, ed. (London, 1981), pp. 11-24. Reprinted in *History and Thought of the Early Church* (London : Variorum Reprints, 1982).

is the fact that monasticism simply *assumed* that celibacy and other ascetic practices would be the foundation at the heart of the movement to the desert. For ascetic practice to be adapted by the monastics, it necessarily means that the origins of ascetic practice in the church are earlier than the beginning of the fourth century.

VI. Conclusion

This survey of the early Christian texts on celibacy and asceticism was meant to show that there are significant data available demonstrating the extent of ascetic behaviour prior to the end of the third century. The question remains, though, how representative are these texts of early Christianity as a whole, and how can we determine the extent of asceticism prior to the appearance of monasticism? It could be argued that these texts only tell us about the local situation where celibacy had become an issue. Undeniably, many scholars are hesitant to see these texts as representative of early Christian behaviour as a whole, especially since the rise of the theory that early Christianity did not have a unified set of beliefs, practices and identities until after the end of the third century. If it is assumed that this theory is correct, then any text describing celibacy or asceticism must be localized to a specific geographical arena. However, it is helpful to step back and examine exactly where and when each of these texts reveals the presence of celibacy. Here is a list of the texts examined in this chapter with both their date and geographical location:

- 1) New Testament – Asia Minor & Greece - mid to late 1st century
- 2) Apostolic Fathers – Asia Minor, Greece & Rome²³⁰ - late 1st / early 2nd century
- 3) Shepherd of Hermas – Rome – early mid 2nd century
- 4) Justin Martyr – Asia Minor & Rome – mid 2nd century

²³⁰ Ignatius was from Antioch in Syria, but none of his letters mention anything about celibacy in the region where he was from. One could argue that his ability to give attention to celibates in his letters to Asia Minor might indicate that he was familiar with the practice in his own church. However, that would be at best only a reasonable guess.

- 5) Athenagoras – Greece – mid to late 2nd century
- 6) Galen – Greece & Rome – mid 2nd century
- 6) Irenaeus – Asia Minor & Gaul – mid to late 2nd century
- 7) Clement of Alexandria – Egypt – late 2nd century
- 8) Apocryphal Acts – Greece, Asia Minor & Syria – mid 2nd / early 3rd century
- 9) Dionysius (from Eusebius) – Greece – late 2nd century
- 10) Tertullian – Carthage – late 2nd to early 3rd century
- 11) Apostolic Constitutions & Didascalia – Syria & Asia Minor – mid 3rd century
- 12) *Apotaktikoi* – Egypt – 3rd century
- 13) *ihidāyā* – Syria – 3rd century
- 14) Appearance of Anthony & Pachomius – Egypt – late 3rd century
- 15) Methodius' *Symposium* – Asia Minor & Syria – late 3rd to early 4th century
- 16) Councils – Asia Minor – early 4th century

Considering that most scholars argue that there is a general lack of data from the first three centuries of early Christian history, this survey represents a significant amount of data concerning celibacy. Seen as a whole, this group of texts tells us that celibacy and ascetic practices were present in the early church right from its inception and that as Christianity spread, so did the practice of celibacy. Looking at the list it is clearly discernable that celibacy had spread to Asia Minor, Greece & Rome during the late first and early second centuries. By the mid second century it is attested in Egypt, Syria²³¹ and Gaul as well, with both Irenaeus and Athenagoras describing Christians who by then had been celibate their whole lives. By the end of the second century celibacy is found in Tertullian's North Africa, and described by him as part of the church's traditions. By about early to mid third century, there are unique cultural expressions of celibacy in Egypt and Syria as well, and by the fourth century the councils of the church have begun to weigh in on issues surrounding celibate activity in the major centres of Christianity. This survey hardly represents a series of isolated incidents of "proto"-ascetic behaviour. Rather, it shows that early Christianity had quickly adopted celibacy as an ascetic

²³¹ Remember that both Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria attest to Tatian's Encratism in Syria during the mid to late second century. S. P. Brock also notes that Tatian's *Diatessaron* has redactions that emphasize Tatian's encratite position. See S.P. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," *Numen* 20 (1973), p. 5.

practice and that by the middle of the second century it had spread to nearly everywhere that Christians existed.

The explosion of monasticism in the early fourth century, therefore, does not represent a largely new ascetic element of early Christian behaviour. Rather, it represents a development of a new *form* of asceticism that eventually transformed and absorbed the older forms by the end of the sixth century. This survey shows that there was a long tradition of the practice of celibacy prior to the monastic explosion, and long before one might be able to argue that Christianity had developed the ability to challenge the Roman social order. Therefore, we must look to these passages in an attempt to discern their motivations for embracing celibacy, which will be the task of the remaining two chapters.

Chapter Three - Sexual Ethics in Greco-Roman Philosophy

I. Introduction

Now that it has been established that ascetic practices in the early church were present to a significant extent prior to the fourth century, we can turn to the question of the origins and motivations of early Christian celibacy. Because so much scholarly work has been done on the basis of social theory, the remainder of this thesis will generally leave social theory aside and focus on the theological, philosophical and cosmological speculations of the Greco-Roman world and early Christianity. The goal of this chapter, then, is to attempt to understand the accepted philosophical and cosmological wisdom of Greco-Roman philosophy in regard to sexuality, so that a point of comparison can be established for the motivations of early Christian idealization of celibacy. As was stated in chapter one, the crux of the issue will be found in understanding the similarities and differences between Greco-Roman influences and Christian theological perspectives, and understanding why early Christianity escalated austerity in regard to sexuality to the idealization of sexual renunciation.

Naturally, to fully understand the precise nature of the influences that affected early Christian perspectives of sexuality, it is important to understand those pre-existing territories of thought on their own terms. Only then can a proper comparison be made in order to determine the extent and character of their sway upon Christian theology and spirituality. This chapter's aim is to explore and summarize attitudes towards sexuality found in the philosophical schools of the Greco-Roman era. Although most schools of thought in ancient philosophy originated centuries prior to the Christian era, those schools still had devoted followers and substantial influence well after the appearance of Christianity. Indeed, the philosophers who reworked and reorganized the systems of

Hellenistic philosophy during the first few centuries of the Common Era often found themselves in conversation with Christians, and their work was both used and contradicted by Christian thinkers around them.

It is important to remember that the ethical considerations of ancient philosophical schools were firmly rooted in their cosmological speculations. The nature of the body and soul were determined by their place in the cosmological order, and the goal, or *telos*, of body and soul was equally established by its relationship to the world and the ordering principles of the universe. Only when the goal of human existence was clearly understood, and the means of directing the body and soul towards that goal established, could human beings reach their full potential. Ethical behaviour, then, was largely thought to be the most efficient and rational means of achieving the *telos* of human existence. How one acted directly affected the condition and state of body and soul, and was thus important matters for consideration. This study will examine the series of steps – cosmology to *telos* to ethics – of the major philosophical schools of the Greco-Roman era, specifically as they relate to their views on sexuality.

Broadly speaking, ancient philosophical theories can be divided into two camps, the materialist camp and the metaphysical camp. The metaphysical camp, inspired primarily by the works of Plato and Pythagoras, understood the universe to be composed of both material and non-material realities. The physical world, however, was the lesser manifestation of the metaphysical realities that provided the universe with order. Thus, Plato's "Forms" were the metaphysical essences that were superior to the corporeal and material substances that they ordered. Similarly, the body was seen as the corporeal and material substance that was ordered and directed by the immaterial soul, with the soul

often seen as contained, even trapped, within the body. This hierarchy of superior metaphysical essences over their inferior material counterparts, or *dualism*, has played a large role in that camp's attitudes towards sexuality.

The second camp, the materialists, understood the universe to be made up purely of matter, and that the rational principles which ordered it were not separate essences that existed independently. With Aristotle's critique of Plato's metaphysics at the heart of this position, materialists saw everything in existence as essential to itself, made up of matter organized by various qualities and principles. Thus a chair, for example, was not made of material (wood) and Form ("chairness"), but simply material (wood) organized in a recognizable pattern or with a specific quality (qualities necessary to be a chair). Those patterns and qualities could be observed, ordered, and systematized, and the rational principles that underlay them could be understood. In this system of thought the soul, too, was material substance, the matter that animated the physical body, but no less material than the body itself. The soul was marked by the quality of rational thought or the ability to think in an ordered and unified way, but at death it would dissipate and break down, just as the body would. Ethics for the materialist, then, were largely directed at the present existence of body and soul, since there was no metaphysical reality to be considered.

For both camps, however, the *telos* of human existence was happiness (*eudaimonia*). Both Plato and Aristotle acknowledged that the basic impulse of human beings was to be happy, and that even bad and irrational decisions were simply poor or ignorant attempts at achieving happiness. However, both they and the philosophers who followed them disagreed on *how* happiness was to be achieved. Aside

from generally agreeing that happiness was to be found in rational (λογου)²³² behaviour, the many schools of thought took a variety of different tacks in their explanations of how eu0daimonia was to be found. Even within cosmological camps, there were a variety of opinions, and both materialist and metaphysical camps were divided into smaller schools founded around the views of one particular thinker or group. As we shall see, the metaphysical schools saw eu0daimonia as rooted in the soul's connection with non-material essences, while the materialist schools focused upon the present realities of material existence.

An examination of attitudes towards sexuality, which were deeply rooted for both schools in the concepts of body and soul, will naturally depend upon a full understanding of the cosmology, teleology, and ethics of each school. We will now examine Platonist, Neo-Platonist, and Pythagorean speculation as the major schools of metaphysical thought, and Aristotelian, Stoic and Epicurean speculation as the major schools of the materialist camp.

II. The Metaphysical Cosmologies

A. Platonism

Plato's views on sexuality are actually the terminus of a long line of theorizing about the nature of body and soul, and he speaks of sexual activity (α)φροδισια), and the desires (ε)πιϋμια) and pleasures (η)δονη) associated with it, on many occasions. However, there is some debate as to how to sort through the variety of metaphors and dialogues about sexuality which Plato engages.²³³ At times, Plato speaks

²³² Literally "from the *logos*", in the genitive of source.

²³³ K.L. Gaca, , *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 31-33. See also R. Robinson, "Plato's Separation of Reason and Desire", *Phronesis* 16 (1971): 38-48; C.H. Kahn, "Plato's Theory of

of the sexual appetites as a natural function of the body (Laws I, 636c; Rep. 580e2-4; Tim. 91) that ensure the perpetuation of the community. In this regard, the sexual appetites are similar to thirst, or hunger, driven by a natural desire to provide for an appropriate need. At other times, Plato seems to speak of sexuality in terms of a dangerous appetite that has the potential to be imperiously irrational. Often referring to it as an irrational function of the soul, Plato provides a variety of colourful imagery depicting sexual desire, such as that of a mindless animal (Rep. 439b4), a rebellious faction of a civil war (Rep.444b), a tyrant (Rep. 573b) and so on. The sexual appetite in these highly rhetorical passages is depicted as a “raving and beastly master” (Rep. 329c) of raging lusts that is intensely opposed to rational behaviour, often to such an extent that the irrational basis of sexual behaviour is the root of all other vices.²³⁴

At the same time, often in the same breath or passage, Plato refers to sexuality with a more balanced description. Particularly in the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, Plato refers to the sexual appetite as one of the faculties of the soul that is both necessary and even linked to reason in a roundabout kind of way.²³⁵ C.H. Kahn argues that in the *Republic* 580-81 (as well as the *Phaedrus* 254) Plato demonstrates a more developed concept of the soul that he (Plato) divides into three parts. First, there is the rational faculty of the soul (*logistikón*), which essentially pursues the Good and determines

Desire”, *Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1987): 77-103 and J.M. Dillon, “Rejecting the Body, Refining the Body: Some Remarks on the Development of Platonist Asceticism” in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush & R. Valantais eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 80-87.

²³⁴ Gaca writes “Plato is contending that all vicious desires are propagated from the unregulated core appetites and from sexual desire especially. The unrestrained appetites bring about injustice, Licentiousness, cowardice, ignorance, folly, and in general, every vice (*cullhbdhn pasan kakian*)” (*Rep* 444a10-b8). A tree of vices to illustrate this idea would have a three pronged tap root, with the longest root at the center being uncontrolled sexual desire.” *The Making of Fornication*, p. 35.

²³⁵ This is the argument of C.H. Kahn’s article “Plato’s Theory of Desire” *Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1987): 77-103.

the rational and reasonable paths to achieve it.²³⁶ Second, there are the natural appetites (ἐπιθυμία) which ensure the survival of the body and person but also provide the impetus for action in the soul (i.e. ensures that the Good is desired as well as reasoned).²³⁷ Finally, there is the “spirited” faculty (θυμώδης), sometimes referred to as “anger”, which rules both the rational and appetitive faculties in order to make them work together.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato depicts this relationship as a chariot with two horses (*Phd.* 254). The horses are the rational and appetitive faculties, often trying to drive the chariot in different directions. However, the spirited faculty is the driver that simultaneously urges the rational faculty while restraining, sometimes violently, the appetitive faculty. The appetitive faculty demands the chariot move, while the rational faculty should determine (i.e. think!) its direction. However, if the spirited faculty does not perform its proper role, the appetites will obviously drive the chariot far off course and into danger. It is important to note, still, that both horses are required to drive the chariot, but the appetitive horse is substantially more dangerous than the other because it has no capacity to discern or understand the Good.²³⁸ It is the spirited faculty which must ultimately help the two to work in harmony (ἁρμονία).

Like two hands firing a bow, one pulling, the other pushing, the desiring part of the soul and the reasoning part of the soul work together at the will of the person (spirit) holding the bow (*Rep.* 439). In this way, Plato can argue that thirst, for example, as an appetitive faculty required to keep the body alive, can be resisted by the rational faculty if there is appropriate need. But if the rational faculty is not employed to balance out the

²³⁶ Kahn, *Plato's Theory of Desire*, pp. 87-92.

²³⁷ Kahn, *Plato's Theory of Desire*, pp. 87-92.

²³⁸ Gaca, *The Making of Fornication*, pp. 32-33, 36; Kahn, *Plato's Theory of Desire*, p. 94.

desiring faculty, then that desire can run freely and unrestrained. Thirst, appropriately desired for the life of the body, can become drunkenness. Similarly, hunger can become gluttony and sex can become licentiousness. The spirited faculty is then required to engage the rational faculty so that the Good is acquired and not vice versa. Yet without desire, the rational remains immobile. What is more, both the appetitive and rational faculties can be trained, and are by no means by their very nature essentially bad.

With this more balanced view in mind, Plato can, in seeming contradiction to his previous dire warnings about sexual desire, argue that erotic love can actually lead one to contemplate the Good and love Beauty (Symposium 210-11).²³⁹ Essentially, what Plato is arguing is that the initial desire of erotic love can be transformed into the desire to love Beauty and contemplate the Good. The desire is a necessary part of the soul's being and activity, except in erotic love it is directed towards bodily pleasure. But with the proper guidance of the rational part of the soul, which will focus its attention upon the Platonic Forms, erotic desire will become desire for the Good and Beauty. For Plato, it is homoerotic desire that is best suited for this transformation. Heterosexual desire is obviously naturally intended for reproduction (Laws I, 636c) and therefore directed towards the body. Homosexual desire, lacking the natural purpose of reproduction, has no permanent attachment to the body, and can thus be redirected in its orientation towards the metaphysical, namely the Good and Beauty. Hence, Plato's perfect friendship between men could begin as an erotic encounter, but should grow beyond sexual activity as desire is reoriented towards the higher principles of reality.

How can this seeming contradiction be explained? How can Plato's combination of neutral, negative and positive assertions about sexuality be defended? Some scholars

²³⁹ See Gaca, *The Making of Fornication*, pp. 36-38; Kahn, *Plato's Theory of Desire*, p. 93-94.

believe that it simply represents a development of Plato's thought into a more mature form.²⁴⁰ For others, the variety of descriptions for the sexual appetites represents different rhetorical strategies employed by Plato. The harsh and intensely negative views of sexuality are used in Plato's earlier works to oppose the enlightened hedonistic atmosphere of fourth century Athens,²⁴¹ while the later more deliberative works, especially the *Republic*, represent Plato's developed social ideals and ethics.²⁴² Other solutions try to understand Plato's comments as unified in thought and understandable as a unified system of body and soul.²⁴³ All these approaches correctly capture elements of Plato's views, but a more comprehensive approach is needed. The position of this chapter is that Plato's thoughts on sexual desire do form a unified theory of body and soul that is consistent through all his works, but that a lack of understanding about the connection between Plato's cosmology and his concepts of body and soul led to isolation of particular elements of sexual desire at the expense of others.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ For example, Gosling & Taylor argue that Plato develops his theories on pleasure as he thinks about the issues throughout his life and responds to the arguments of other philosophers. Plato begins with no theories on pleasure at all as an enlightened hedonist, but when he embraced Pythagorean thought early in his career he began to see the need to provide an account for the nature of pleasure. As he developed his own theories, the *Protagoras* and *Phaedrus* represent his early polemical thought in relation to hedonism. The *Republic* and *Gorgias* represent a more balanced polemic that sees pleasure as a useful criterion for achieving happiness, so long as it does not create distress. Finally the *Timaeus*, *Philebus* and *Laws* represent Plato's fullest development of his theory of Forms, and pleasure and sensation are seen as dangerous elements of the body that may create illusion for the soul. See J.C.B. Gosling and C.C.W. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 165-66, 169-92.

²⁴¹ Gosling & Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure*, pp. 83-95. See also J.M. Dillon, "Rejecting the Body, Refining the Body: Some Remarks on the Development of Platonist Asceticism" in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush & R. Valantais eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 80-87.

²⁴² K.L. Gaca, for example, sees Plato as a maverick philosopher with the self-appointed task of patrolling the power of sexual desire through all stages of the social and communal development of an individual. See *Making of Fornication*, pp. 41-58.

²⁴³ E.g. C.H. Kahn, *Plato's Theory of Desire*.

²⁴⁴ For example, an unfortunate consequence has been a great deal of confusion about Plato's attitudes towards the body. The "dualism" that is typically attributed to him indicates a general misunderstanding, likely created from too much focus on his intense polemical rhetoric directed at physical pleasure in his earliest works, that the appetites lie within the body and not the soul.

Typically, a dualism between body and soul has been argued wherein the immortal, rational and non-material soul stands in open conflict with the mortal, irrational and material body. This is not surprising, considering the intense rhetoric that Plato uses in regard to how the physical pleasures are rooted in the tyranny of the appetites. Certainly, the physical pleasures need to be located in the body's organs, but it is an undue leap to say that because the pleasure (η δονη) is located in the body that the appetite (ϵ) πικυμία) is located there as well. This position seems to have mistakenly located the appetites within the body, despite the fact that Plato has clearly and repeatedly located the appetitive faculty within the soul. As discussed briefly above, both the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus* describe the desiring appetite (ϵ) πικυμία) as one of the three elements of the tripartite soul. What, then, is at the heart of both the rhetoric and the clear definition of the soul that allows them to stand?

Plato's Cosmology of Body and Soul

The key to the matter lies in *how* the body and soul relate to one another in Plato's thought. Plato's concern is not that some irrational element dwelling within the body can overtake the rational purposes of the soul, thus placing body and soul in opposition. Instead, he is concerned that if the appetitive faculty of the soul has been left unguided by the rational faculty, then the soul will be engaged in its *being* through material reality instead of the metaphysical reality of the Forms of Good and Beauty. The dualism so commonly appealed to, then, is more properly an existential or transcendental dualism²⁴⁵ where the direction and focus of the soul, either towards matter or the higher Forms,

²⁴⁵ See G. Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy, Volume II: Plato and Aristotle* (New York, State University Press, 1990), pp. 57-60.

determines the health of the person. A passage from the *Phaedo* (*Phaed.* 80-82) is quite instructive.

In this dialogue between Socrates and Cebes, the master explains to the student the nature of the soul and how that soul is to achieve happiness (*eu0daimonia*). Plato's cosmology becomes clear as Socrates teaches his pupil that the soul is immortal and divine while the body is mortal and perishable, exactly parallel with the metaphysical and physical division of the universe (*Phaed.* 80b-d). Socrates explains that the highest happiness is for the soul to escape the body and enter into the blissful realm of the "divine and immortal and rational." (*Phaed.* 81a) The soul that has not achieved this has failed because of a pollution that has occurred due to the soul's connection to the body (*Phaed.* 81b). That pollution is rooted in the lusts of bodily desires (*Phaed.* 81b, 81d, 83a-c) and those who have denied those bodily desires through philosophy have purified themselves so that they may ascend to an immortal reality (*Phaed.* 82b-c).

So far, this understanding of the dialogue could easily be cited in support of the standard body/soul dualism attributed to Plato. However, there are several key moments in the dialogue that shift the meaning of this passage toward Plato's tripartite conception of the soul and towards an existential dualism of the soul's focus. First, at the very beginning of this dialogue Socrates says:

When the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve. Now which of these two functions is akin to the divine? and which to the mortal? Does not the divine appear to you to be that which naturally orders and rules, and the mortal to be that which is subject and servant?²⁴⁶

It is clear that for Plato, the soul orders and rules the body. That is, the soul is responsible for all the actions of the person and the body is simply the vessel that obeys and serves

²⁴⁶ *Phaedo*, 80a.

the purposes of the soul. There is no indication at this point that the body has any powers or capacity of its own, and by nature it is designed simply to respond to the soul's direction. This is not a strict dualism, but a clear hierarchy of the higher soul over the lower body.

It is important to note at this point that Platonic cosmology is based upon a hierarchical structure of reality. Giovanni Reale explains:

...here we only want instead to call attention not to the basic distinction between *physical* and the *superphysical*, but rather on the *complex articulation of this distinction* (which we have explained earlier), which begins from the first and supreme Principles, on which the sphere of the hierarchical structure of Ideas [forms] follows, and then further the sphere of the mathematical entities hierarchically structured, and finally, the sphere of sensible realities. Each of these spheres is articulated, according to an hierarchical structure (with the emergence and particular importance of the sphere of Ideas, which is articulated in the ideal Numbers, the more general Ideas or Meta-Ideas, specific Ideas), with a structural dependence of the lower on the higher (and not vice versa) and in various ways with a dependence of all reality at all levels on the primary Principle.²⁴⁷

For Plato, the soul was hierarchically superior to the body, and since the lower hierarchies of reality do not, and cannot, affect the higher realities, it would seem unlikely that Plato would think that the body could directly affect the soul. A strict dualism of body and soul is simply not possible according to his cosmology. Why then the language about the soul's pollution by the body and the rejection of bodily pleasures?

Here Plato's Socrates tells Cebes that the soul and the body are connected together, the soul "fastened and glued" (*Phaed.* 82e) to the body, "nailed" and "riveted" together (*Phaed.* 83d) by pain and pleasure. In Plato's mind, the connection of body to soul associated with its coming together in the individual

²⁴⁷ Reale, *Volume II*, p. 238.

allows for one to affect the other through experience and sensation. The soul's effect over the body, as we have seen, is to be the natural ruler, giving direction and order to the body (*Phaed.* 80a) and this is in full agreement with Plato's hierarchical structure of reality, where the supersensible (the soul) is the causal source of the sensible (the body).²⁴⁸ But the body's effect on the soul creates *illusion* in the soul by mistaking sensation as real representations of truth. Socrates' dialogue with Cebes concludes:

Socrates: The evil is that when the feeling of pleasure or pain is most intense, *every soul of man imagines the objects of this intense feeling to be then plainest and truest*: but this is not so, they are really the things of sight.

Cebes: Very true.

Socrates: And is not this the state in which the soul is most enthralled by the body?

Cebes: How so?

Socrates: Why, because each pleasure and pain is a sort of nail which nails and rivets the soul to the body, *until she becomes like the body, and believes that to be true which the body affirms to be true; and from agreeing with the body and having the same delights she is obliged to have the same habits and haunts, and is not likely ever to be pure at her departure to the world below, but is always infected by the body; and so she sinks into another body and there germinates and grows, and has therefore no part in the communion of the divine and pure and simple.*

Cebes: Most true, Socrates.

Socrates: And this, Cebes, is the reason why the true lovers of knowledge are temperate and brave; and not for the reason which the world gives.

Cebes: Certainly not.

²⁴⁸ Reale, *Volume II*, 59. Reale writes "...the dualism of Plato is nothing other than the dualism of anyone who admits the existence of a supersensible cause as a reason of being of the sensible itself and maintains that the sensible, by reason of its self-contradictory nature, cannot be in its totality its own reason for being."

Socrates: Certainly not! The soul of a philosopher will reason in quite another way; she will not ask philosophy to release her in order that when released she may deliver herself up again to the thralldom of pleasures and pains, doing a work only to be undone again, weaving instead of unweaving her Penelope's web. *But she will calm passion, and follow reason, and dwell in the contemplation of her, beholding the true and divine (which is not matter of opinion), and thence deriving nourishment.* Thus she seeks to live while she lives, and after death she hopes to go to her own kindred and to that which is like her, and to be freed from human ills. Never fear, Simmias and Cebes, that a soul which has been thus nurtured and has had these pursuits, will at her departure from the body be scattered and blown away by the winds and be nowhere and nothing.

The soul "imagines" (83c) that what it experiences in connection with the body has the ring of truth and reality and is "enthralled"²⁴⁹ (83c) by the sensible, believing "that to be true which *the body* affirms to be true." (83d) If allowed to be deceived by its connection with the body, the soul will be "infected by the body", and very likely depart from the world in an impure state. (83d) Conversely, the soul that calms passion, dwells in reason, and contemplates true and divine realities (83d-e) will, having been delivered from enthrallment to pain and pleasure, depart from the world in a pure form.

What is most fascinating is that Plato believes this illusion of the soul's perception of bodily experience has some real capacity to affect the soul, and that the contemplation of true and divine realities has a similar but purifying effect. This view is rooted in an often-unwritten Greek philosophical assumption that when a soul contemplates something it becomes like the object it contemplates.²⁵⁰ For Plato, the *direction* of the soul's existential being will create a better or worse condition through the object of its contemplation. We know well Plato's argument that erotic love can be reoriented towards the eternal Forms, and thereby transformed into a pure love for the Good and Beauty

²⁴⁹ Fowler's translation in the Loeb Classical Library uses the word 'bondage' here for 'enthralled'.

²⁵⁰ See Raphael Woolf's description of the 'Affinity Argument' in his article "The Practice of a Philosopher" in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 26 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 97-129.

(*Symposium* 210-11), and his often dire and negative warnings against overindulgence of the bodily pleasures is based upon a similar kind of theory. The soul left to contemplate only the bodily pleasures will soon become as base and irrational as the pleasures themselves. The soul becomes “like the body” (*swmatoeidh*) and behaves in a similar manner, which in turn makes the soul behave irrationally, while simultaneously preventing the soul from having “communion of the divine and pure and absolute.”²⁵¹ In reality, the sense perceptions of the body are only illusion in comparison to the supersensible realities of the first Principles and Forms, but they have a real and negative effect upon the soul because of the direction and subject of the soul’s contemplative activity.

That effect, for Plato, is nothing short of a usurpation of the true nature of the soul. Just prior to the portion of dialogue from the *Phaedo* quoted above, Socrates tells Cebes:

When the soul inquires alone by itself, it departs to the realm of the pure, the everlasting, the immortal and the changeless, and *being akin to these it dwells always with them whenever it is by itself and it is not hindered*, and it has rest from its wanderings and remains always the same and unchanging, since it is in communion therewith. (*Phaed.* 79d)²⁵²

Because the soul is akin to the supersensible and is the “likeness of the divine” (80b), its goal is the participation in such realities. But the soul, by inappropriately directing its contemplative being towards the body, becomes more akin to the body and has engaged in a kind of being which is contrary to its nature. Hence, Plato can refer to the bodily pleasures with such strong rhetoric. The soul directed towards the body, ironically through its own powers of contemplation, has been overtaken, usurped, rebelled against. The appetitive faculty of the soul, normally directed towards the body only for the sake of

²⁵¹ Fowler’s translation here is better, using ‘absolute’ for *monoeides* instead of ‘simple’ which does not capture the clear philosophical connection to Plato’s theory of Form.

²⁵² Fowler’s translation.

its preservation, now is under the spell of the physical pleasures and drags the rational faculty of the soul into their sphere. Like the two horses of the *Phaedrus*, the one beast focused on the body drives the other into the same realm, where they are both out of control.

The dualism in Plato's concept of body and soul is not so much between the sensible and supersensible but an existential dualism that demands that the soul, containing both rational and desiring faculties, be directed towards the higher Forms of reality, in opposition to the material body. The body by itself is the hierarchical inferior to the soul, and by itself it has no power or effect upon the soul. However, if the soul directs its existential energies towards the body, it will be adversely affected by the base nature of the body. The higher purpose of the soul will be corrupted, and it will begin to behave in ways that are dominated by the bodily pleasures that, in turn, will drive the person in the same unthinking and uncontrolled manner that is found among animals. Consequently, Plato can see both the negative and positive sides to sexual pleasure. Positively, Plato knows that it is a necessary and appropriate part of the body's need to reproduce, and if directed properly towards the immortal Forms, sexual pleasure can be transformed into a powerful desire for the Good. Negatively, Plato also sees that both the rational and desiring faculties of the soul can be misled if solely directed at sensible realities experienced through the body. In strong rhetorical form, Plato can then warn against the consequences of a soul under the sway of bodily pleasures as though the body had usurped control from the soul, or polluted the soul with some terrible taint. Unfortunately, these metaphors have been interpreted as directed towards the body, when

they are ultimately directed towards individuals who have failed to fully grasp the true nature of the soul.

Plato's Program of Sexual Austerity

When it comes to sexual activity (α)φροδισία) Plato embraces a program of austerity in order to place the proper controls upon the soul's association with bodily pleasures. On the one hand, the appetitive or desiring faculty of the soul must not be over exposed to bodily pleasures, lest the soul begin to engage being too much in the physical realm. On the other hand, the rational faculty of the soul must be engaged sufficiently so as to keep the whole soul directed towards the immortal realm. What is more, both faculties are necessary to properly engage in either virtuous activity or philosophical contemplation. Without the desiring faculty, the soul would remain immobile towards the higher Forms, yet without the rational faculty the soul would ultimately corrupt its own perception of physical reality and elevate the sensible to the status of the supersensible (i.e. Form, etc.). With this in mind, Plato moves to both restrict the activities involved with physical pleasure and re-direct the soul towards the supersensible Forms.

The practice of virtue in regard to sexual pleasure is summed up by the term "self-mastery"(ε)γκρατεία). In the *Republic* 430e-431a Plato's Socrates is speaking about the matter:

Temperance (σωφροσύνη) is a kind of beautiful order and a mastery (ε)γκρατεία) of certain pleasures (ἡδονή) and appetites (ἐπιθυμία), as they say, using the phrase 'master of himself' I know not how; and there are other similar expressions that as it were point us to the same trail. Is that not so?" "Most certainly." "Now the phrase 'master of himself' (κρείττω αὐτοῦ) is an absurdity, is it not? For he who is master of himself would also be subject to himself, and he who is subject to himself would be master. For the same person is spoken of in all these expressions." "Of course."

“But,” said I, “the intended meaning of this way of speaking appears to me to be that *the soul of a man within him has a better part and a worse part, and the expression self-mastery means the control of the worse by the naturally better part.*

Similarly, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates teaches the young Callistos. “What do you mean,” the young man asks, “by one who rules (α) ρηοντα himself?”. Socrates replies:

“Nothing recondite, merely what most people mean – one who is temperate (σωφροσυνη) and self-mastering (ε) γκρρατε αυ) τον εα (ου), ruler of the pleasures (η (δονη) and desires (ε) πιγμαια) within himself.” (*Gor.* 491d-e)

It is interesting to note that the mastery of the self includes both the physical component, “pleasures” (η (δονη), and the metaphysical component, “desire” (ε) πιγμαια). Both the physical pleasures and the appetitive faculty of the soul must be mastered in order to possess temperance (σωφροσυνη), the first of the four chief virtues. In addition, the passage from the *Republic* indicates that the physical pleasures are curbed by the control of the reasoning faculty (i.e. the better part of the soul) over the appetitive faculty (i.e. the worse part of the soul). Several paragraphs later in the same dialogue Socrates praises “The simple and moderate appetites (ε) πιγμαια) which with the aid of reason and right opinion are guided by consideration that you will find in few and those the best born and best educated.” (*Rep.* 431c) There is a chain of command, it seems, beginning with the rational faculty of the soul, moving to the appetitive faculty of the soul, and lastly to the physical pleasures. To ensure that mastery of the physical pleasures occurs, one must master first the appetites of the soul through their rational counterpart. With the rational faculty doing its proper job, the appetites are now much less threatening, and understood simply to be “simple and moderate.”

Practically, this means for Plato that one needs to limit exposure to the physical pleasures as the first part of a double-sided set of safeguards. The “simple and moderate” appetite of the soul is properly the natural impulse to reproduce. In this case, a limited and moderate engagement in sexual activity for the purposes of reproduction and for physical health²⁵³ is encouraged. Otherwise, the use of sexual activity, purely for the sake of experiencing the physical pleasure, is harshly ridiculed, and should be curbed. Consequently, homoerotic desire, outside Plato’s concept of the idealized friendship, is seen as “slavery to pleasure (h (donh)” (*Laws* 636c) and all sexual activity outside of the marriage bed is considered an unnecessary indulgence that is contrary to the well being of both the individual and the city-state.²⁵⁴ The less sexual activity one engages in, the less the soul will be fooled into focusing too much upon the body and, therefore, the less the soul will be oriented towards the irrational behaviour of the body.

The second half of Plato’s sexual program is to encourage an affirmative orientation of the soul towards the immortal. For Plato, the highest goal of philosophy is to orient both the rational and appetitive faculties of the soul towards the immortal Forms in order to ensure the future immortality of the soul.²⁵⁵ In the passage quoted above from the *Phaedo*, Socrates argues that the liberated and pure soul has not only abstained from “all fleshly lusts”, which are the “accomplice of her own captivity” (*Phaed.* 82e), it has

²⁵³ In the *Timeaus* 82-87 Plato describes a situation where a body that has too much seed is also in danger of sickness. An excess of seed brings on a kind of madness that forces a senseless pursuit of sexual activity. This is as serious as a lack of control due to over-indulgence. The solution is regular and moderated sexual activity to prevent such a build up.

²⁵⁴ K.L. Gaca is particularly strong in her emphasis on Plato’s need to regulate conflict in the city-state and how he saw unrestrained sexual activity as a source for the irrational behaviour that caused violence and disruption in the community. See *The Making of Fornication*, pp. 41-58. See also P. Brown’s discussion in *The Body and Society*, pp. 28ff.

²⁵⁵ See Woolf’s discussion for a good exploration of whether the soul is immortal by nature or by its ascension into the higher forms. Woolf argues that Plato understands the soul to be immortal by nature and that through its association with the body it is fooled into believing that the sense perceptions of the body are what is real and will, therefore, be dragged down into another ‘incarnation’. The goal of the philosopher is then to escape these ‘incarnations’ and ascend into communion with immortal.

also actively sought out the love of knowledge and become “temperate (*swfrosunh*) and brave” (*Phaed.* 83d). By pursuing philosophy, the soul is cleansed and purified of the corruption created by perceiving reality through the body. The true philosopher has set out on a path to enter into a communion with the divine absolutes of reality, and only the true lover of knowledge will be left unscathed at death by the soul’s association with the body. Indeed, Plato even believes that the physical pleasures of erotic love can be transformed through philosophy into a pure and passionate love for the Good and Beauty. (*Sym.* 210-11, *Rep.* 586d-e) The *telos* of happiness (*eu0daimonia*) that all men seek is found in the movement of the soul upwards to communion with the immortal and unchanging Forms derived from the first Principles of the universe.

Although Plato was certainly not the only influence on Greek attitudes towards the body and sexuality, his thought did come to bear considerable weight on the subject. Both the self-mastery (*e) gkrateia*) at the heart of temperance (*swfrosunh*) and the affirmative orientation of the soul towards the immortal Forms of being became a strong influence on general attitudes towards sexuality in Greek thought. It is well known that in terms of the body, the Greeks and Romans of the ancient world often embraced a well organized and strict set of ascetic (*a) skhsi j*) practices. These ascetic practices (extensive diets, exercise regimens, social regulations and sexual rules) were primarily designed to avoid over-indulgence while simultaneously controlling and hardening the natural needs of the body, in order to avoid falling into the irrational behaviour found at the heart of the bodily pleasures, a decidedly Platonic concept.²⁵⁶ Similarly, the positive role of philosophy for the “purification” of the soul became one of the main streams of

²⁵⁶ Here the classic survey of both the training and vast array of diets, regimens and rules appropriate to sexual behaviour in the ancient world is M. Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (New York: Vinatge/Random House, 1985).

thought, standing alongside an Aristotelian stream, which saw the cultivation of virtue as the pursuit of the highest Good. The philosopher or king engaged in contemplation and meditation, while simultaneously avoiding the pleasures of the body became the ideal; the man who gave in to the pull of sensual pleasure became the epitome of failure and weakness.²⁵⁷

Much time and effort has been spent here on Plato for two reasons. First, as mentioned, he is the main representative of the metaphysical stream of ancient philosophy and as such, he bears a great deal of importance for the sexual ethics and attitudes of ancient Greeks and Romans. Second, and more importantly, because the majority of ancient philosophical thought, even the materialist stream, builds from Plato's vast system of thought, it is appropriate to cover his views more comprehensively. The Neo-Platonists and Pythagoreans have a great deal in common with Plato, and Aristotle, the Stoics and Epicureans built their systems of thought in contrast to Plato. As such, the common language of cosmology, teleology and ethics can be used without further reiteration of their source.

B. Pythagorean Philosophy

It is perhaps more appropriate to explore the philosophy of the Pythagoreans prior to the direct inheritors of Plato's thought, the Neo-Platonists. The Neo-Platonists, who appeared in the 3rd century C.E., must be examined in the light of Plato *and* Pythagoras, as both thinkers influenced them. It is also must be noted that Pythagorean thought is actually older than Plato, and that Plato was certainly influenced by Pythagoras with

²⁵⁷ See for example, Plutarch's biographies of Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great and his contrast between the extremes of Alexander's self-control and virtue, and Julius Caesar's lack of self-control and resulting vices. Plutarch, *Lives: Alexander and Julius Caesar*, Vol. VII, Loeb Classical Library, Translation B. Perrin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1919).

much of his cosmology (especially portions found in the *Timeaus*) often credited by scholars more to Pythagoras than to Plato. However, Pythagorean thought, though influential, did not achieve the same kind of mainstream authority that Platonic thought did. As will be seen, this lack of influence was largely due to the narrow scope of Pythagorean metaphysics, and the large mystical and religious element of its practice. Still, Pythagorean philosophy and its adherents were a constant if small presence in the Mediterranean milieu from the 6th century BCE until the collapse of the Roman Empire, and therefore, they must be examined as a possible influence upon Christianity.

The dualism of Plato was earlier qualified as an “existential” sort of dualism that has more to do with the direction of the soul’s orientation either towards the body or towards the higher Forms of reality. For Pythagoreans, though, the cosmological foundations of thought are much more simplified, and this results in the kind of stricter dualism that is typically assigned to Plato. First, whereas Plato has a well-developed hierarchy of causality (e.g. First principles, to Forms, to mathematical realities, to the sensible) with the body and soul located upon the cusp between supersensible and sensible reality, Pythagoras’ hierarchy of causality is grounded purely in mathematics. In the same way that for Plato the Forms are real essences that exist as real things, for Pythagoras *numbers* exist as real things, and are the root cause of all reality.²⁵⁸ The Pythagoreans were the first systematic thinkers in the area of mathematics and the discovery of numerical ratios, harmonies, cycles and rhythms inspired them to believe that there was a causal reality based in numbers which resulted in the ordered existence

²⁵⁸ G. Reale *A History of Ancient Philosophy, Volume I: From Origins to Socrates* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 61ff. See also W.K.C. Guthrie’s *A History of Greek Philosophy, Volume I: The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 146-340.

of the universe. Consequently, the Pythagorean cosmological structure of the universe is based upon mathematics and numbers. Pythagoreans would say that the first principle of the universe is the indivisible “One”, followed by the first expression of multiplicity in the “Dyad”, which is then followed by a variety of mathematical concepts such as magnitude, infinity, shapes, angles, odd-even and so on, which, in turn, are the causal forces behind the material universe.²⁵⁹ In particular, it is the concept of *harmonia* (a rmonia) which is essential for the generation of all things. The various relationships between real numbers existing in harmonic balance generate subsequent realities and even the material universe. For example, in Pythagorean cosmology, the four basic elements of the physical world – earth, air, fire and water – are the result of a balanced monadic cube made up of a simpler, more unified, fiery substance.²⁶⁰ However, it was the *harmonia* that ultimately dictated the full goodness and beauty of the universe. As Guthrie writes, in Pythagorean cosmology:

... the cosmos owes all these desirable qualities to the fact that it *is* a *harmonia* and this *harmonia* is therefore found above all the majestic movements on a cosmic scale of the sun, moon, planets and fixed stars. The heavens do not *declare* the glory of God, they *are* the glory of God; for the cosmos is a living god, welded into a single divine unity by the marvelous power of mathematical and musical harmony.²⁶¹

As can be seen from the quote above, Pythagoreans were also very religious in their orientation. In essence, they understood that God and other deities existed, and in practice they equated the divine with their mathematical theory. In this regard, God or the Divine is the same as the “One”, while the gods and *daimons* were associated with a

²⁵⁹ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, pp. 240-276.

²⁶⁰ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, p. 292.

²⁶¹ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, p. 308.

variety of numbers or mathematical principles.²⁶² *Harmonia*, perfection, and unity were associated with the Divine, while the irrational, unlimited, and divided were associated with evil. Scholars argue that this attitude was derived from the fact that Pythagorean thought was more of a lifestyle than a philosophy. The followers of Pythagoras were dedicated to living a life of harmony, and the mathematical theories were more of a strategy or means of achieving that harmony.²⁶³ Pythagoreans, therefore, set goals designed to preserve the *harmonia* of the universe, and often had pious prescripts that were quite strange to their contemporaries. For example, Pythagoreans were well known for their vegetarian views and, strangely enough, for their prohibition on eating beans.²⁶⁴ Regardless, what is most important is the recognition of the need for *harmonia*, and pious actions towards the gods were an accepted and undisputed part of their project.

Pythagoras' conception of body and soul is similarly a mixture of philosophical theory and religious belief. On the one hand, Pythagoras argued that the soul is divine, immortal, and unchanging, and is derived from the same sort of essence as numbers.²⁶⁵ The soul is also held in a *harmonia* of its parts²⁶⁶ – reason, desire and spirit²⁶⁷ – and

²⁶² Reale, *Volume I*, pp. 71-73. This sort of position is difficult to defend philosophically and scholars are generally agreed that the Pythagoreans were not successful because of it.

²⁶³ Reale, *Volume I*, p. 59.

²⁶⁴ Unfortunately, their reasoning behind such behaviour is not well preserved. But the general idea does seem to be preserving the harmony of the body and of the soul.

²⁶⁵ Reale, *Volume I*, p. 67; Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, p. 306.

²⁶⁶ This doctrine is found adopted by Plato. In the *Phaedo* 86b, Simmias says “Might not a person use the same argument about harmony (*ἁρμονία*) and the lyre-might he not say that harmony is a thing invisible, incorporeal, fair, divine, abiding in the lyre which is harmonized, but that the lyre and the strings are matter and material, composite, earthy, and akin to mortality? And when someone breaks the lyre, or cuts and rends the strings, then he who takes this view would argue as you do, and on the same analogy, that the harmony survives and has not perished; for you cannot imagine, as we would say, that the lyre without the strings, and the broken strings themselves, remain, and yet that the harmony, which is of heavenly and immortal nature and kindred, has perished-and perished too before the mortal. The harmony, he would say, certainly exists somewhere, and the wood and strings will decay before that decays. For I suspect, Socrates, that the notion of the soul which we are all of us inclined to entertain, would also be yours, and that you too would conceive the body to be strung up, and held together, by the elements of hot and cold, wet and dry, and the like, and that the soul is the harmony or due proportionate admixture of them. And, if this is true, the inference clearly is that when the strings of the body are unduly loosened or

bringing the soul's *harmonia* into alignment with the *harmonia* present in the Divine is the ultimate goal of the soul. The union with the body, then, is not in conformity with its nature, and the two are completely opposed to one another. The body disrupts the *harmonia* of the soul, and the soul is in need of constant purification from that disruption through the study of mathematics, geometry and music, which will bring the soul the *harmonia* it has lost.²⁶⁸ Simultaneously, the religious notions of Pythagorean thought indicated that the soul was placed in a body as a punishment for offending God(s).²⁶⁹ The offending soul is doomed to roam from body to body, transmigrating into the body of animals if no human body is available,²⁷⁰ repeating "incarnations" until the soul can achieve *harmonia* with the divine again. In this way, the Pythagoreans were also careful to be appropriately pious as well as regarding all life as kindred. Consequently, all Pythagoreans were full participants in the religious practices of their day, and their practice of vegetarianism was largely engaged in order to avoid killing an animal that might possess the soul of another person.

overstrained through disorder or other injury, then the soul, though most divine, like other harmonies of music or of the works of art, of course perishes at once, although the material remains of the body may last for a considerable time, until they are either decayed or burnt. Now if anyone maintained that the soul, being the harmony of the elements of the body, first perishes in that which is called death, how shall we answer him?"

²⁶⁷ Iamblichus writes "The Platonists, Archytas, and the other Pythagoreans declare the soul to be tripartite, dividing it into reason, spirit and desire. For these [parts] are useful for the constitution of the virtues. But they reckoned the powers of the soul to include nature, imagination, sense-perception, opinion, the thought that moves bodies, the desire of the fair and the good, and intellections." A quotation of Iamblichus' work *De anima* found in Stobaeus, *Anthologium* I. 369, 9-15.

²⁶⁸ Reale, *Volume I*, p. 68; Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, p. 315-318.

²⁶⁹ Clement of Alexandria quotes the Pythagorean Philolaus "The ancient theological writers and prophets also bear witness that the soul is yoked to the body as a punishment, and buried in it as in a tomb." *Stromaties*, III, 17.

²⁷⁰ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, p. 186-87. Porphyry, a third century CE Pythagorean, writes "What he [Pythagoras] said to his disciples no man can tell for certain, since they preserved such exceptional silence. However, the following facts in particular became universally known: first that he held the soul to be immortal, next that it migrates into other kinds of animals, further that past events repeat themselves in cyclical process and nothing is new in an absolute sense, and finally that one must regard all living things as kindred." *Life of Pythagoras* 19.

With this in mind, Pythagorean attitudes towards sex (*a frodisia*) were primarily directed towards the concept of *harmonia*. Like Plato, Pythagoreans considered the natural function of sexual intercourse to be reproduction, and in regard to *harmonia* of the soul, they came to two conclusions. First, sexual intercourse is essentially the process of “en-souling” a body, which will directly affect the *harmonia* of the soul subject to that process. In a passage from the *Republic* that scholars agree is derived from Pythagorean thought, Plato’s eugenic breeding program in his ideal society is based upon the timing and numeric relationships needed to establish *harmonia*.

Now for divine begettings there is a period comprehended by a perfect number, and for mortal by the first in which augmentations dominating and dominated when they have attained to three distances and four limits of the assimilating and the dissimilating, the waxing and the waning, render all things conversable and commensurable with one another, whereof a basal four-thirds wedded to the pempad yields two harmonies at the third augmentation, the one the product of equal factors taken one hundred times, the other of equal length one way but oblong,—one dimension of a hundred numbers determined by the rational diameters of the pempad lacking one in each case, or of the irrational lacking two; the other dimension of a hundred cubes of the triad. And *this entire geometrical number is determinative of this thing, of better and inferior births*. And when your guardians, missing this, bring together brides and bridegrooms unseasonably, the offspring will not be well born or fortunate. (*Rep.* 546b-d)

This immensely complicated and esoteric formula for reproduction that best provides the *harmonia* required for rulers of good character is obviously rooted in some number or geometric ratio. While the meaning of this elaborate scheme for conception is largely lost upon our modern minds, it is still clear that, according to Pythagorean thought, the *harmonia* found in human offspring is a direct result of engaging in sexual intercourse at the proper time and in a properly harmonious state. Naturally, then, if sexual intercourse is not performed at the proper time or in a properly harmonious state, there is danger that

the children begotten of that union will be of a poor and irrational character.²⁷¹ If intercourse is pursued for reasons other than reproduction (i.e. neither at the proper time nor with proper motivation), then the obvious connection to the irrational pleasures will create disharmony in the soul of the child produced.²⁷² “Random copulation is undesirable,” Gaca comments, “and discordant to the harmonic intervals of the soul being embodied.”²⁷³ One must protect against that as much as possible, and therefore in Pythagorean ethics, sexual intercourse must only be undertaken for the purpose of reproduction.

Second, due to the general discomfort with the irrational and uncontrolled behaviour exhibited during sexual intercourse, Pythagoreans saw sexual intercourse as an activity to be avoided for the sake of continued *harmonia* of the individual soul.²⁷⁴ The ethical character of the person is the result of good *harmonia* within the soul, and the pursuit of virtue is centered round achieving and maintaining a balance in the soul between reason, desire and spirit.²⁷⁵ A person engaged in sexual intercourse for the sake of pleasure, and not reproduction, disrupts that harmony by giving too much weight to the power of desire, which in turn leads to other wickedness and corruption.²⁷⁶ Pythagoreans, then, argue that “There should be as many impediments as possible on the exercise...of

²⁷¹ See Gaca, *The Making of Fornication*, pp. 97-103.

²⁷² It is important to remember the ancient belief that during sexual intercourse the person was involved in a completely irrational behaviour that involved nothing short of a total loss of control, mentally and physically. Brown writes, “Successful intercourse was a convulsive act, little different in its causes and physical effects from a sudden burst of rage. It bore a dread resemblance to the failing sickness: orgasm was a ‘minor epilepsy.’ Did not the mouth of the epileptic froth with the same bubbling, whitened blood as did the penis? We are dealing with gentleman whose gait must be measured, whose gestures were controlled, and who were advised by Plutarch in his *Advice on Keeping Well*...to avoid ‘passionate and convulsive vociferations.’” *The Body and Society*, p.18.

²⁷³ Gaca, *The Making of Fornication*, p. 101.

²⁷⁴ Gaca, *The Making of Fornication*, pp. 105-115.

²⁷⁵ See D.J. O’Meara, *Pythagoras Revived* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 70-76.

²⁷⁶ Gaca, *The Making of Fornication*, p. 105.

human sexual activity (a) *frodisa*), which one must practice infrequently.”²⁷⁷

Whereas Plato was willing to suffer people’s weakness, placing boundaries on a variety of sexual behaviours for the sake of social order, Pythagoreans were unwilling to accept the slightest threat to the harmony of the soul. This meant that all sexual activity outside full penetrative heterosexual intercourse for the purpose of having children was forbidden to the followers of Pythagoras.²⁷⁸

It also means that the Pythagoreans are unique among the ancients in their affirmation that only sex for the purpose of reproduction within marriage is acceptable. “We do not engage in sexual relations for pleasure (h (donh),” says the Pythagorean Ocellus, “but for the procreation (genesewj) of children.”²⁷⁹ While the reproduction of children is central, and generally thought of as the proper realm of sexual activity in the Greco-Roman world, no Greek or Roman would have normally placed such a firm boundary on sexual relations. But it is the Pythagorean concern for the *harmonia* of the individual, as well as for the community, that inspired such restrictive view of sexuality. It is interesting, then, that long before the emergence of Christianity there was a practice of procreationism that seems so familiar to modern ears. However, to equate the two practices in terms of the meaning and motivation would be a mistake.

C. Neo-Platonic Philosophy

Neo-Platonism is essentially the re-emergence of the philosophy of Plato, reworked primarily by Plotinus (204-70CE) during the third century CE, which became the dominant philosophical view of the Roman Empire from the third through the sixth

²⁷⁷ Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, 209-210.

²⁷⁸ For example, the Pythagorean writing under the pseudonym “Charondas” could write “Each man must love his legitimate wife and procreate from her. Into nothing else should he ejaculate the seed of his children. He must not waste or abuse that which is honourable in nature and custom. Nature made seed for the sake of producing children, not licentiousness.” *Preamble to the Laws* 62.30-33.

²⁷⁹ Ocellus, *On the Nature of the Universe*, 135.11-13.

centuries. Prior to the time of Plotinus, Platonism had actually undergone a loss of influence, as the Academy had slowly lost any creative pursuit in regards to Plato's theories, and Aristotelian materialism became the dominant philosophical perspective of the period.²⁸⁰ From about the start of the Common Era until the appearance of Plotinus, a rediscovery of the incorporeal and transcendent realities of Plato occurred in resistance to the purely material schemes of the Stoics.²⁸¹ This initial stage of re-emergence, of which Plutarch is an example, is called Middle Platonism, and is marked primarily by a new religious sensibility that creeps into the older Platonic ruminations about the higher Forms. Specifically, this meant that the first Principles and higher Forms of Plato's hierarchical cosmology had begun to be associated with "God" as a personalized version of the demiurge,²⁸² and matter becomes associated with the source of evil.²⁸³ In essence, Middle-Platonism is the preparatory stage for the appearance of Plotinus' full-blown systematic account of Platonic thought that is both quasi-religious and strictly dualistic.

The quasi-religious nature of Plotinus' thought derives from the cosmological adjustments made to Plato's hierarchy of Formal causes.²⁸⁴ In Plotinus' thought, Plato's

²⁸⁰ Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy, Volume IV: The Schools of the Imperial Age* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 207-09.

²⁸¹ Reale, *Volume IV*, p. 215.

²⁸² For Plato the existence of the universe is "emanated" by the existential being of higher realities such as the first principles and higher Forms. Each hierarchically emanates the next order of existence with the material cosmos brought into existence by the will of the Demiurge, the impersonal ordering force emanating from the higher Forms. In Middle-Platonism, however, the Demiurge and its higher Forms begin to be referred to as God, if in an unclear manner. A divine Mind and Soul begins to be posited as a part of the immaterial reality that created the universe, though often in a manner which is difficult to fully articulate. For example, the Middle-Platonist Albinus writes "When Plato says that the world is generated, he does not mean it in the sense that there was a time when the world did not exist, but that the world is always becoming and manifests a more primary principle of its being. And the soul of the world also, which is eternal, God did not create even this, but orders it; and it is said that he created it in this sense: awakening and moving his mind and himself as from a lethargy and profound sleep, so that they look towards the intelligibles of God, grasping the Ideas and the Forms, aiming at thinking them." (*Didaskalos* 14.3) Similarly, a *daimonology* depicting a hierarchy of supersensible beings created as inferior to God but superior to men also appeared. See Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 215-227.

²⁸³ Reale, *Volume IV*, p. 225-26.

²⁸⁴ For a full discussion of Plotinus' system see Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 325-404.

hierarchy of immaterial and immortal Principles and Forms is preserved, but now understood differently in terms of their emanation. For Plato, an “emanation” was a necessary by-product of a particular reality’s *being*. For example, if the being of the first Principle was absolute singularity, the by-product of mixture with its opposite, multiplicity, generates Numbers. Hence Plato’s first principles of Monad & Dyad generate, or “emanate”, the subsequent Forms of numbers. The being of Numbers then produces Figures, and so on. However, for Plotinus the *being* of the first principles lay in their ability *to relate to themselves*, an invention of his own very different from Plato or Aristotle.²⁸⁵ In essence, a particular immaterial reality (which he called a *hypostasis*) is able to turn in upon and “contemplate” itself. The contemplation, as the activity of its being, then becomes the emanation of a second hypostasis. So Plotinus argues that the first Principle of One (Monad) standing in relation to itself generates Mind, which is the Monad’s self-contemplation. The being of the Mind, which can turn upon itself and consider its own being, is contemplation which generates again the Soul of the universe, which is the Mind’s self-contemplation. For example:

Seeking nothing, possessing nothing, lacking nothing, the One is perfect and, in our metaphor, has overflowed, and its exuberance has produced the new: this product has turned again to its begetter and been filled and has become its contemplator and so Mind. That station towards the one [the fact that something exists in presence of the One] establishes Being; that vision directed upon the One establishes the Mind; standing towards the One to the end of vision, it is simultaneously Mind and Being; and, attaining resemblance in virtue of this vision, it repeats the act of the One in pouring forth a vast power. This second outflow is a Form or Idea representing the Mind as the Mind represented its own prior, The One. This active power sprung from essence [from the Mind considered as Being] is Soul. (*Enneads* 5.2.1)

²⁸⁵ Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 341-42.

The quasi-religious nature of this system comes from Plotinus' understanding that the One is God, and thus the Mind and Soul are the intellectual and essential operations of God. Each subsequent generation, then, not only contemplates itself (thus producing another hypostasis) but also is directed upwards towards its ultimate source, the One. In this way, there are many hypostases that direct their contemplation towards God, a development that certainly has the ring of religious devotion. In addition, Plotinus' cosmology places the material world, and thus body and soul as well, into a dualism between being and non-being. For Plotinus, both sensible and supersensible hypostases are made of "matter"; only the supersensible matter possesses the ability to contemplate itself and its source (the One).²⁸⁶ It is important to remember here that the process of emanation, as it gets further and further from its source, is slowly draining its potential and capacity for *being*. Giovanni Reale explains:

Sensible matter derives its cause as ultimate possibility, as the extreme stage of that process in which the impulse to create and the power to produce *are weakened* to the point of complete exhaustion. Sensible matter becomes thus the total emptying and hence *extreme privation of the power of the One and therefore the One itself, or in other words the privation of the Good* (which is identical with the One.)²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 361-65. The distinction between sensible "matter" and supersensible matter in Plotinus's thought is difficult to follow. Plotinus writes "The Matter even of the Intellectual Realm is Indefinite (the undelimited); it must be a thing generated by the undefined nature, the illimitable nature of the Eternal Being, the One – an illimitableness, however, not possessing native existence There (not inherent) but engendered by the one. But how can Matter be common to both spheres, be here and There? Because even indefiniteness has two phases. But what is the difference between phase and phase of Indefiniteness? The difference of archetype and image." (Enneads, 2.4.15) The "matter" of the metaphysical world is the archetype with the "matter" of the physical world only being an image of the metaphysical. Do not doubt, however, the notion emphasizes that the metaphysical is superior to the corporeal in Plotinus's thought. The use of "matter", I think, is simply used to ensure the causal connection between the emanation of real hypostases and the spiritual, indefinite, immortal, unchanging nature of the metaphysical "matter" is of such a higher status that to say there is any real similarity would be to misrepresent Plotinus.

²⁸⁷ Reale, *Volume IV*, p. 363.

The result is that matter, as it has become a sensible reality, has lost the capacity for being that the supersensible hypostases possess, and in turn, any similarity with its source, the One.

The practical results of this are two-fold. First, the dualism of Plato, described earlier as an existential dualism located within the soul's orientation towards the sensible (illusory) and supersensible (real), is escalated and hardened by Plotinus' view of sensible matter. Because sensible matter is considered the terminus of procession from the One and has essentially no capacity for contemplation (self-thought), Plotinus considers it the categorical opposite of God and the Good. For example, Plotinus can write:

Here is another consideration establishing the necessary existence of Evil. Given that The Good is not the only existent thing, it is inevitable that, by the outgoing from it or, if the phrase be preferred, the continuous down-going or away-going from it, there should be produced a Last, something after which nothing more can be produced: this will be Evil. As necessarily as there is Something after the First, so necessarily there is a Last: this Last is Matter, the thing which has no residue of good in it: here is the necessity of Evil. (*Enneads*, 1.8.7)

Poised midway between sensible and supersensible reality,²⁸⁸ the soul is not just in danger of being misled, but it also comes into contact with the potential for evil. The souls driven into the body are not only capable of irrational behaviour; they have been driven away from the One, the source of their being, which can be nothing less than the greatest evil possible.

The evil that has overtaken them has its source in self-will, in the entry into the sphere of process, and in the primal differentiation with the desire for self ownership. They conceived a pleasure in this freedom and largely indulged their own motion; thus they were hurried down the wrong path,

²⁸⁸ Plotinus writes "And as to our own Soul we are to hold that it stands, in part, always in the presence of The Divine Beings, while in part it is concerned with the things of this sphere and in part occupies a middle ground. It is one nature in graded powers; and sometimes the Soul in its entirety is borne along by the loftiest in itself and in the Authentic Existent; sometimes, the less noble part is dragged down and drags the mid-soul with it, though the law is that the Soul may never succumb entire." (*Enneads*, 2.9.2)

and in the end, drifting further and further, they came to lose even the thought of their origin in the Divine. A child wrenched young from home and brought up during many years at a distance will fail in knowledge of its father and of itself: the souls, in the same way, no longer discern either the divinity or their own nature; ignorance of their rank brings self-depreciation; they misplace their respect, honoring everything more than themselves; all their awe and admiration is for the alien, and, clinging to this, they have broken apart, as far as a soul may, and they make light of what they have deserted; their regard for the mundane and their disregard of themselves bring about their utter ignoring of the divine. (*Enneads* 5.1.1)

The dualism of Plotinus, then, is still a Platonic existential dualism concerning the orientation of the faculties of the soul²⁸⁹ but now the outcome of the soul has been lifted into a religious conflict between good and evil.

The highest good of the soul is to achieve reunion with its source,²⁹⁰ namely the absolute One and that reunion is considered a “purification” or “cleansing” from the body’s taint. This purification is essentially to escape from the body:

But what can be meant by the purification of a Soul that has never been stained and by the separation of the Soul from a body to which it is essentially a stranger? *The purification of the Soul is simply to allow it to be alone; it is pure when it keeps no company; when it looks to nothing without itself; when it entertains no alien thoughts-* be the mode or origin of such notions or affections what they may, a subject on which we have already touched- when it no longer sees in the world of image, much less elaborates images into veritable affections. Is it not a true purification to turn away towards the exact contrary of earthly things?

Separation, in the same way, is the condition of a soul no longer entering into the body to lie at its mercy; it is to stand as a light, set in the midst of trouble but unperturbed through all. In the particular case of the affective phase of the Soul, purification is its awakening from the baseless visions which beset it, the refusal to see them; its separation consists in limiting its descent towards the lower and accepting no picture thence, and of course in the banning for its part too of all which the higher Soul ignores when it has arisen from the trouble storm and is no longer bound

²⁸⁹ Plotinus agrees with the Platonic tripartite division of the soul. See Reale, *Volume IV*, p. 376.

²⁹⁰ Plotinus is much clearer than Plato in his system of thought that human souls were initially a part of the supersensible realm and subsequently descended into bodies later. The reason for that descent is somewhat unclear, though, and usually understood to be a necessary descent as a result of the nature of the emanations or as a result of an abuse of freedom while in the supersensible realm. See Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 374-75.

to the flesh by the chains of sensuality and of multiplicity but has subdued to itself the body and its entire surrounding so that it holds sovereignty, tranquilly, over all. (*Enneads*, 3.6.5)

Once free of the body, the soul is again capable of contemplating its source and once again capable of union with the One. With the liberty achieved through purification the soul turns itself towards its source and moves “outside the bodily sphere; body-free, containing nothing of the body – there where Being is, and Being, and the Divine within Divinity.” (*Enneads*, 4.3.24) In such a place, the soul is able to achieve a kind of hyper-awareness where the soul is filled with God and stilled perfectly, resting peacefully and without the disturbing passions of the body.²⁹¹ In short, the system of Plotinus is a quasi-religious dualism where the soul is the true person in need of purification from the body in order to return to the God that created it.

In terms of sexuality, then, Neo-Platonism is similar to Platonism in that it seeks to avoid contact with bodily pleasures as part of the soul’s attempt to avoid being overly grounded in the body. The soul’s true nature is grounded in its divine origins and should therefore, like the Divine, be “intellective and immune to passion.” (*Enneads*, 1.2.3) Of the soul, Plotinus writes:

It will hold itself above all passions and affections. Necessary pleasures and all the activity of the senses it will employ only for medicament and assuagement lest its work be impeded. Pain it may combat, but, failing the cure, it will bear meekly and ease it by refusing assent to it. All passionate action it will check: the suppression will be complete if that be possible, but at worst the Soul will never itself take fire but will keep the involuntary and uncontrolled outside its precincts and rare and weak at that. The Soul has nothing to dread though no doubt the involuntary has some power here too: fear therefore must cease, except so far as it is purely monitory. What desire there may be can never be for the vile; even the food and drink necessary for restoration will lie outside of the Soul’s attention, and not less the sexual appetite: or if such desire there must be, it will turn upon the actual needs of the nature and be entirely under

²⁹¹ Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 390-91.

control; or if any uncontrolled motion takes place, it will reach no further than the imagination, be no more than a fleeting fancy. (Enneads, 1.2.5)

As can be seen, like Plato, Plotinus sees that there are necessary pleasures required for natural and medical reasons, but all other “passionate action” must be checked and suppressed completely if possible. Not surprisingly, the imaginations and fancies of the mind must also be kept in check, since that would certainly represent the faculties of the soul using the body as a referent for reality. What is clear, though, is that despite the differences in cosmology, Plotinus is not significantly out of sync with Plato on ethical matters concerning sexuality.

Where Plato and Plotinus do differ is in the intensity of the dualism between the sensible and supersensible. For Plato, matter has not entered into the realm of evil, and the soul is not in danger simply through association with it. However, for Plotinus, that is precisely the case. Indeed, Plotinus has so firmly placed the soul into the realm of the divine that even the tripartite division of the soul has become hierarchical. In his discussion on the soul, Plotinus refers to the reasoning faculty as the “higher” nature and the desiring faculty as the “lower.” Such is the soul’s proper orientation towards the divine that the desiring faculty that responds to the body is clearly inferior to its reasoning counterpart. When describing the soul’s resistance to the passions associated with the body Plotinus says:

The Soul itself will be inviolately free and will be working to set the irrational part of the nature above all attack, or if that may not be, then at least to preserve it from violent assault, so that any wound it takes may be slight and be healed at once by virtue of the Soul's presence, just as a man living next door to a Sage would profit by the neighborhood, either in becoming wise and good himself or, for sheer shame, never venturing any act which the nobler mind would disapprove.

There will be no battling in the Soul: the mere intervention of Reason is enough: the lower nature will stand in such awe of Reason that for any

slightest movement it has made it will grieve, and censure its own weakness, in not having kept low and still in the presence of its lord.
(*Enneads*, 1.2.5)

Here the clear superiority of the reasoning faculty is a result of Plotinus' more intense dualism, and he stands apart from Plato in that regard. Plato's faculties stand in equal authority within the soul, requiring the third element, the spirit, to balance the powers of the other two. In Plotinus' case, though acknowledging the tripartite division of the soul that Plato uses, the third ruling element largely vanishes in favor of a clear hierarchy of the reasoning faculty over the desiring one.²⁹²

In terms of sexual practices, the true extent of Neo-Platonic practice is difficult to pin down due to the appearance of Christianity. On the one hand, pagan Neo-Platonists tended to blend their philosophy with Pythagorean thought. For example, Porphyry, who has clear leanings towards both Plotinus and Pythagoras, engages in asceticism that includes avoiding sexual pleasure, eating meat and a clear encouragement of Pythagorean procreationism. On the other hand, by the third century CE, Christians, who had been practicing sexual renunciation and procreationism nearly since the first century, began to appeal to Neo-Platonic thought in support of their practices. The consequence of this picture is that it is extremely difficult to separate a clearly and uniquely Neo-Platonic sexual ethic. It would certainly be correct to assume Neo-Platonists embraced a minimum of procreationism, considering the strong link to Plato and Pythagoras. But considering its strong dualism of body and soul, it would also be difficult to say that Neo-Platonic thought would be as indulgent as Platonic thought. Indeed, Porphyry's example shows

²⁹² Plotinus openly rejects any sense that the soul is a harmony of its parts. The soul is clearly divine and therefore essentially Mind. All other functions related to the body are inferior, if necessary, parts of the soul. See *Enneads* 4.1-4.2.

that there must have also been a strong ascetic stream within Neo-Platonism outside of Christian thought.

III. The Materialist Cosmologies

A second stream of thought in ancient philosophy can be broadly described as “materialist”, though that by no means rules out metaphysical considerations from this system of thought. Essentially this means that Plato’s theory of causality based upon the first Principles and Forms is rejected in favor of a theory of causes that is based more in material reality. Metaphysical realities are still considered as part of cosmology (at least for Aristotle), but not in opposition to material reality, and elaborated with alternative metaphysical theories that differ from Plato’s Forms. The first major critique of Plato was, of course, from his student Aristotle, who had his own metaphysical explanations for causality in the universe, and a much greater respect for material and sensible existence. As will be seen, this meant that Aristotle’s conception of body and soul was substantially different from Plato’s, as were his ethical motivations. Working from this initial critique of Plato, other philosophies worked (and re-worked) Aristotle’s theories in pursuit of the same *telos* of ancient philosophy, happiness. The Stoics and Epicureans both worked from this materialist premise, though they argued for different means of achieving happiness as well as different ethical motivations that accompanied those explorations. We will begin with Aristotle.

A. Aristotelian Sexual Ethics

Cosmology

Aristotle's entire project is based upon a frustration with his master's theory of Forms as the basis for causality in the universe.²⁹³ In essence, Aristotle found that the theory of Forms was contradictory, because it demanded transcendence from the material world that made the supersensible realities of the first Principles and Forms both entirely unknowable and unsustainable as the ultimate cause of sensible reality. For Aristotle, knowledge of something must come from understanding the essence or nature of that thing, which exists only *in* the things themselves. Yet because the human connection with the sensible world is so deep, we exist *outside* of those supersensible realities (i.e. Forms) and therefore cannot have any real knowledge of them. In addition, that connection with the sensible and material universe makes it impossible to observe causality in the supersensible world, and in combination with Plato's somewhat ambiguous explanation of how his series of "generations" worked, Aristotle was led to reject the One Good that was at the pinnacle of Plato's Principles and Forms. Instead, Aristotle then began to pursue his famous "scientific" engagement with the universe, fully accepting the material reality of our existence and investigating the world systematically, in order to discern the nature of existence through observation. It is important to note, however, that Aristotle did not reject the notion of the supersensible or metaphysical as a real category, he simply disagreed with Plato's conception of it. With his "scientific" method in hand, Aristotle would observe the material world and deduce the nature of causality and the supersensible from the bottom (material/sensible) up.

Through a systematic categorization of observed phenomena, Aristotle explored the nature of causality in the universe. He argued that everything that exists has four

²⁹³ See Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 254-55.

causes which are necessary for it to come into existence.²⁹⁴ First, everything has a *formal* cause, which is basically the essence, form or group of qualities that make something uniquely itself. Second, everything that exists must have some sort of material existence, with matter arranged according to the formal cause and making its presence sensible in the universe. Third, everything must have an *efficient* cause, that is, an originator of existence which impels it into being. Finally, all things must have a *final* cause, which is simply the goal of existence that includes either a purpose or function that is particular to that thing. Thus a chair, for example, has the following causes: 1) its *formal cause* is the form of a chair (shape, use) along with 2) a *material cause* (wood, plastic, metal) which is its material components. In addition, 3) its *efficient cause* was the labourer who both built it or had the idea for it, while 4) the *final cause* is its function as an item to sit upon in order to provide comfort and rest.

Two matters in regard to Aristotle's causality are of great importance. The first is that under his observations, only the *efficient* cause reveals anything of metaphysical reality. For him, the three other causes are simply the manipulation and use of material substance (ουσια), but the *efficient* cause is not. Take away the substance and its form and the only thing left is the essential cause. Take away the essential cause, and nothing would come into existence, since it lacks the mover that impels it into existence. In his terms, substance has potential requiring an act or motion, what he calls an *entelechy*,²⁹⁵ which arranges substance according to some form. This entelechy creates a synolon (συνολον), or union, of substance (ουσια) and form (ειδος), without which the

²⁹⁴ For a more detailed and comprehensive discussion of Aristotle's views of the Four Causes see Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 265-92.

²⁹⁵ In *De Anima* I.ii, Aristotle admits he is working from the same assumption as his forbearers, that motion is one of two qualities unique to the soul, along with sensation.

final cause, or *telos*, cannot be fulfilled. What is essential to comprehend, then, is that Aristotle came to believe that this motion at the root of the efficient cause is the conceptual core of metaphysical reality.

Here, Aristotle's logic is that substance (i.e. sensible matter) is corruptible and changing, but supersensible realities are not. Within an essential cause is the glimmer of incorruptible *movement* and therefore, if one were to follow the movement through the string of causality due to act and motion, one would eventually arrive at the First movement. The source of that movement would necessarily have to be immobile (for if it was in motion, what moved it?) as well as capable of acting to create the motion from which all other realities are derived. For Aristotle, the only essence that is both immobile and capable of acting must be similar to the mind's thought. For in thought, there is an immobile and unchanging essence²⁹⁶ that is obviously a self-generated act. Therefore, causality traced back through the universe must ultimately end in some eternal, perfect, immobile essence of act: the Mind or Absolute Intelligence. Without going into too much unnecessary detail, this divine Mind is essentially a "self-knowing knowing", since initially it has only itself to know. Aristotle writes:

Such, then, is the first principle upon which depend the sensible universe and the world of nature. And its life is like the best that we temporarily enjoy. It must be in that state always (which for us is impossible), since its actuality is also pleasure. (And for this reason waking, sensation and thinking are most pleasant, and hopes and memories are pleasant because of them.) Now thinking in itself is concerned with that which is in itself best, and thinking in the highest sense with that which is in the highest sense best. And *thought thinks itself* through participation in the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought by the act of apprehension and thinking, so that thought and the object of thought are the same, because that which is receptive of the object of thought, i.e. essence, is thought. And it actually functions when it

²⁹⁶ "But thought seems to be an independent substance implanted within us and to be incapable of destruction." *De Anima* A 4.408b.18.

possesses this object. Hence it is actuality rather than potentiality that is held to be the divine possession of rational thought, and its active contemplation is that which is most pleasant and best. If, then, the happiness which God always enjoys is as great as that which we enjoy sometimes, it is marvelous; and if it is greater, this is still more marvelous. Nevertheless it is so. Moreover, life belongs to God. For the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and the essential actuality of God is life most good and eternal. We hold, then, that God is a living being, eternal, most good; and therefore life and a continuous eternal existence belong to God; for that is what God is. (*Metaphysics* 7.1072b)

For Aristotle, God or Mind or Intelligence, is the first mover that orders all existence, including the material world.²⁹⁷ The Mind's motion of intellection is then able to place form upon substance and thereby create an infinite series of *synola*, which are the material realities that are both sensible and intelligible.

Second, Aristotle's conception of *form* is understood in terms of act and not, as seen in Plato, in terms of a universal Form, and the *entelechy* mentioned above is crucial to his understanding of how form orders substance. In Aristotle's mind, the *potential* of substance must be acted upon in order to have its capacity fulfilled.²⁹⁸ Consequently, for Aristotle, *form* is the guiding principle embedded in the *entelechy* that brings order to substance. When the motion (*entelechy*) organizes substance (*ousia*), it must necessarily be an act that includes some guiding principle that will give the substance shape and purpose. What is important to note, however, is that even though the resulting object is a union (*synolon*) of the form and the substance, the form is not the acting agent and does not exist separately if no action had taken place. In fact, the form of a thing can vary immensely depending upon the variety of *entelechies* that have acted in its generation,

²⁹⁷ Unfortunately, Aristotle is not clear on the causal relationship between matter and the divine Mind. Scholars have disagreed over how to explain his position with some arguing that Aristotle simply sees the material matter of the world as eternally existing in its elemental forms (e.g. earth, air, fire, water, spirit) and being order and controlled by the higher incorruptible reality of the divine Mind. Other Scholars have tried to argue for something just short of creationism in Aristotle's thought, seeing the divine Mind, which he regularly refers to as God, as the creator of the world. The matter remains unresolved.

²⁹⁸ Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 284-85.

and an object's *form* rarely contains a single category of being.²⁹⁹ Instead, the sort of action that results in something coming to being is by far the more important concept in Aristotle's thought. Whatever the *form* of the action is, that will be the guiding principle of the form for the object that is created.

Form is not limited to the physical ordering of matter in a thing and includes the factors that determine its own action and being. What something *does* is as much tied up with its form as its physical structure. An example Aristotle uses is vegetation. Plants are certainly alive, and have particular shapes and species, but what they *do* is as much a part of their form as the shape. What they do is what he calls a "nutritive faculty",³⁰⁰ which is simply the ability to gather food and continue to live. This limited existence, however, is still a part of their form and would be very different from the form of a rock, which has no nutritive faculty at all. Animals, too, have the nutritive faculty but also a faculty for sensation.³⁰¹ By sensation, Aristotle is referring to the fact that the being of an animal also includes the ability to move and to sense other material reality (sight, smell, touch, etc.), to feel the appetites and the capacity to feel pain and pleasure. This form of their being then explains their behaviour, and even allows for an element of predictability. The actions of both plants and animals are then a part of their form, and in Aristotle's thought, without that form their behaviour would be different or non-existent. He calls these kinds

²⁹⁹ For Aristotle there are primary and derivative categories involved in the concept of form. "Being is predicated of all the categories, but not in the same way, since it is said of substance in a primary way and of the other categories in a derivative way." (*Metaphysics* Z 4.1030a21-23) Thus a primary category might be "animal" but a derivative category might be "lion" or "cow". The form of each has both similar and different categories in its guiding principles and no universal essence, such as Cow or Lion, can be posited. Indeed, even individuals within the same genus can vary according to their forms and the variety of *entelechies* that acted in their creation.

³⁰⁰ *De Anima*, III 414b1-5.

³⁰¹ *De Anima*, III 414b1-15.

of forms of living beings the vegetative soul (plants) and the sentient soul (animals), with the form of the sentient soul including the faculties of the vegetative soul.

Body and Soul

With this brief account of Aristotle's cosmology in hand, we can turn to his ideas about the body and soul. As plants and animals are material substance ordered by their respective vegetative and sentient forms, so too, human beings are material matter organized by the soul. The body must find food (vegetative faculty), and also has the capacity to experience sensation of all kinds (sentient faculty), but it also simultaneously possesses a third faculty: the ability to think. The human soul is simply the vegetative soul and sentient soul combined with a further faculty, one of thought: "That part of the soul, then, which we call mind (by mind I mean that part of the soul which thinks and forms judgments) has no actual existence until it thinks."³⁰² More importantly, Aristotle believes that the rational soul has a connection with the divine Mind as its source:

But thought seems to be an *independent substance implanted within us* and to be incapable of being destroyed. ... Thus it is that thinking and reflecting decline through the decay of some inward part and are themselves *impassible* (α)παράεξ). Thinking, loving and hating are affections not of thought, so far as it has it. That is why when this vehicle decays, memory and love cease; they were activities not of thought, but of the composite which has perished; thought is, no doubt, something more *divine and imperishable*.³⁰³

Unfortunately, Aristotle says very little about how the rational faculty of the human soul gets implanted, or what happens to it once death occurs. For some scholars there is a clear tendency to treat the soul as a kind of pure *entelechy* for the body which disappears at death, while others think that because of the soul's connection with the divine Mind

³⁰² *De Anima*, III 429a22-25.

³⁰³ *De Anima*, III 408b19-33. Reale's translation.

Aristotle would have been open to its continuation beyond death.³⁰⁴ Either way, it is clear that Aristotle sees the tripartite division of the soul as having vegetative, sentient and rational faculties, with the thinking aspect of the soul being the highest and most important element to the human form. In short, the soul is the *form* particular to humans. As a form should, the soul provides the structure for the material that makes up the human body, but it also provides the essence of human activity, which includes both the means to provide for the body (vegetative and sentient faculties) as well as the higher purpose of thinking and reasoning (rational faculty).

Aristotle's Ethics

With this picture of Aristotle's cosmology and psychology in hand, we now turn to his ethical considerations. In the same way that Aristotle disagrees with Plato's conception of metaphysical realities, he also disagrees with Plato's conception of the *telos* of human existence: Happiness (*eudaimonia*). For Plato, complete happiness is achieved through a reunion of the soul with the highest Form, the One Good. However, since Aristotle rejects Plato's cosmology of Forms,³⁰⁵ and engages a material cosmology,

³⁰⁴ The crux of the argument seems to lay in the interpretation of one of Aristotle's statements about the soul: "(the soul) is the first entelechy of a natural body (soma physikon) which potentially possesses life and which is *organikon*." (*De Anima* II 412b5) Some scholars, represented by M. Pavlopoulos's article "Aristotle's Natural Teleology and the Metaphysics of Life" (D. Sedley, ed., *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 24 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003]), pp. 133-181), argue that *organikon* simply mean "physical organs". In their interpretation Aristotle sees the soul as the sum of activity that is surrounded by the functions of a complex unity of the body's organs. Thought comes from the head or heart as its physical source, but once death occurs the functioning of those body parts ceases and so should the existence of the soul. Other scholars, represented by A.P. Bos' article "Aristotle's Psychology: The Traditional Interpretation Refuted" (Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy: Boston, 1998) argue that *organikon* should be translated as "instruments" which are used by the soul. In this interpretation the soul employs the use of the body as an instrument and it is capable of survival beyond the death of the body. The advantage of this interpretation, which the current author agrees with, is that statements of Aristotle concerning the mind's divine connection can be accounted for as well as aligned with his general cosmology of form and substance united in a synolon. The unfortunate reality is that Aristotle simply did not address these issues in enough detail to satisfy our curiosity.

³⁰⁵ Aristotle writes, "If, in fact, the good were a unity or something predictable in common and existed separately by itself, it is evident that it will not be attainable or realizable by man; but what we are searching for is instead our own good." (*Nicomachean Ethics* A 5.1096b32-35) Notice Aristotle's insistence

the *telos* of his philosophy falls in line with his theory of formal causes. As we know from the previous discussion, for Aristotle the form of a thing also determines the activity or function of its being. For example, the function of the eye is sight and the function of the ear is to hear. The highest good, then, is that everything performs its natural function to the fullest. In addition, since the form and function of each is derived from the divine Mind, it is also to be expected that they perform their functions in accordance with the reason and intelligence at the root of their efficient cause.³⁰⁶

What is the highest good of man? Simply to perform the function that is peculiar to him: to reason, and regulate the activity of the soul in accordance with reason. Aristotle explains:

To say however that the Supreme Good is *happiness* will probably appear a truism; we still require a more explicit account of what constitutes happiness. Perhaps then we may arrive at this by ascertaining what is man's *function*. For the goodness or efficiency of a flute-player or sculptor or craftsman of any sort, and in general of anybody who has some function or business to perform, is thought to reside in that function; and similarly it may be held that the good of man resides in the function of man, if he has a function. Are we then to suppose that, while the carpenter and the shoemaker have definite functions or businesses belonging to them, man as such has none, and is not designed *by nature* to fulfill any function? Must we not rather assume that, just as the eye, the hand, the foot and each of the various members of the body manifestly has a certain function of its own, so a human being also has a certain function over and above all the functions of his particular members? What then precisely can this function be? The mere act of living appears to be shared even by plants, whereas we are looking for the function peculiar to man we must therefore set aside the vital activity of nutrition and growth. Next in the scale will come some form of sentient life; but this too appears to be shared by horses, oxen, and animals generally. There remains therefore what may be called the practical life of *the rational part of man*. (This part has two divisions one rational as obedient to principle, the others possessing principle and exercising intelligence). Rational life again has two meanings; let us assume that we are here concerned with the active exercise of the rational

that the Good as a Platonic Form is unattainable because of its transcendence. The obvious solution is to pursue the highest good in the material universe.

³⁰⁶ Reale, *Volume IV*, pp. 318-322.

faculty, since this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. If then the function of man is the active exercise of the soul's faculties *in conformity with rational principle*[i.e Mind], or at all events not in dissociation from rational principle, and if we acknowledge the function of an individual and of a good individual of the same class (for instance, a harpist and a good harpist, and so generally with all classes) to be generically the same, the qualification of the latter's superiority in excellence being added to the function in his case (I mean that if the function of a harpist is to play the harp, that of a good harpist is to play the harp well): if this is so, and if we declare that the function of man is a certain form of life, and define that *form of life as the exercise of the soul's faculties and activities in association with rational principle, and say that the function of a good man is to perform these activities well and rightly, and if a function is well performed when it is performed in accordance with its own proper excellence--from these premises it follows that the Good of man is the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue, or if there be several human excellences or virtues, in conformity with the best and most perfect among them.* Moreover, to be happy takes a complete lifetime; for one swallow does not make spring, nor does one fine day; and similarly one day or a brief period of happiness does not make a man supremely blessed and happy.”
(Nicomachean Ethics A 7.1097b22-1098a20)

As can be seen, Aristotle sees the happiness of mankind as the proper and best performance of the function most appropriate to the soul. Consequently, the whole concept of virtue (αρετή) in Aristotle's thought is summed up in a search for behaviour that is appropriate to the functions of the soul. With three basic faculties in the soul, Aristotle also sees three basic functions to man: the vegetative, the sentient, and the rational. Man must then find the best path to provide itself with nutrients and food, the best path for ordering its movement and experience of the material world and, lastly, the best path to perform the rational functions related to the mind. Additionally, Aristotle sees virtue as being the middle path between the two vices of excess and defect.³⁰⁷ For

³⁰⁷ Aristotle writes “For example, one can be frightened or bold, feel desire or anger or pity, and experience pleasure and pain in general, either too much or too little, and in both cases wrongly; whereas to feel these feelings at the right time, on the right occasion, towards the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel the best amount of them, which is the mean amount--and the best amount is of course the mark of virtue. And similarly there can be excess, deficiency, and the due mean in actions. Now feelings and actions are the objects with which virtue is concerned; and in feelings and actions excess and

example, the best path for the vegetative faculty of the soul is to neither engage in deprivation nor gluttony, since both lead to obvious physical and social problems. Likewise, ordering of the sentient faculty should be according to appropriate needs, neither depriving the body of sensible experience, nor inflicting excessive amounts of pain or pleasure. However, being above sensible reality and unique to humans, the rational faculty of the soul should be in line with the rational principle, the divine Mind. Thought and contemplation, then, should not be neglected, and they should be encouraged with no fear of excess.³⁰⁸ In short, ethical virtue is the mind's placement of reason upon attitudes or actions that, without reason, would tend towards excess.³⁰⁹

In terms of sexuality, Aristotle naturally places sexual behaviour under the realm of the vegetative and sentient faculties of the soul, where it is observably susceptible to excess.³¹⁰ The task of the person, in regard to virtue, is to keep the natural functions of the lower faculties of the soul properly balanced, preventing extremes of avoidance or indulgence. For example, Aristotle writes:

But of the people who are incontinent with respect to bodily enjoyments, with which we say the temperate (*σωφρονα*) and the self-indulgent (*ακολασια*) man are concerned, he who pursues the excesses of things pleasant and shuns those of things painful, of hunger and thirst and heat and cold and all the objects of touch and taste-not by choice but contrary to his

deficiency are errors, while the mean amount is praised, and constitutes success; and to be praised and to be successful are both marks of virtue. Virtue, therefore is a mean state in the sense that it is able to hit the mean." (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b18-28) See also Reale, *Volume IV*, p. 324.

³⁰⁸ Friendship, of course, is Aristotle's middle path for the person trying to engage in the proper function of the rational soul. Friendship provides the perfect venue for the performance of virtue, as well as a place for the provision of affection and utility for the functions of the mind.

³⁰⁹ For example, in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle describes the virtue of gentleness as the mean between irascibility and lack of feeling, the virtue of courage as the mean between foolhardiness and cowardice, and so on. See Reale, *Volume IV*, p. 325.

³¹⁰ Aristotle writes "But the things that give pleasure are of two kinds: some are necessary, others are desirable in themselves but admit of excess. The necessary sources of pleasures are those connected with the body: I mean such as the functions of nutrition and sex, in fact those bodily functions which we have indicated as the sphere of Profligacy and Temperance. The other sources of pleasure are not necessary, but are desirable in themselves: I mean for example victory, honor, wealth, and the other good and pleasant things of the same sort." (*Nicomachean Ethics* 7.1147b)

choice and his judgment, is called incontinent, not with the qualification 'in respect of this or that', e.g. of anger, but just simply. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 7.1148a3-12)

Consequently, temperance (*σωφροσύνη*) is the ideal for Aristotle, and it is marked by the person who does not give in to the extremes of excess or deprivation (though he admits that finding someone who embraces the extreme of deprivation in regards to sexuality is hard to find)³¹¹ and who only engages in those activities in the proper manner and for appropriate reasons. “The temperate man (*ὁ σωφρων*),” Aristotle says,

keeps a middle course in these matters. He takes no pleasure at all in the things that the self-indulgent man (*ἀκολαστος*) enjoys most, on the contrary he positively rejects them; nor in general does he find pleasure in wrong things, nor excessive pleasure in anything of this sort; nor does he feel pain or desire when they are lacking, or only in a moderate degree, not more than is right, nor at the wrong time, et cetera. But such pleasures as conduce health and fitness he will try to obtain in a moderate and right degree; as also other pleasures so far as they are not detrimental to health and fitness, and not ignoble, nor beyond his means. Not so the temperate man; he only cares for them as right principle enjoins. (*Nicomachean Ethics* III.1119a12-21)

As can be seen, Aristotle sees the use of bodily pleasure to be a matter of extent, where the moderate person who engages in sexual pursuits for the sake of health and fitness, or for procreation, is perfectly acceptable, but once it moves into the realm of excess it is clearly harmful.

While Plato warned against the dangers of a soul overly focused on the body, where it is contaminated and led away from its source (i.e. the One Good), Aristotle is concerned with the functions of the body and soul being performed properly and appropriately. Having eliminated the supersensible from the equation, Aristotle focuses

³¹¹ Aristotle writes “Men erring on the side of deficiency as regards pleasures (*hedona*), and taking less than the proper amount of enjoyment in them, scarcely occur; insensibility is not human.” (*Nicomachean Ethics* III 1119a5-7)

upon the material existence of the person and ensures that happiness is achieved in the present sensible life. That means that the soul, with its three faculties, needs to find the best and most appropriate way of performing its sexual functions. In short, the rational faculty of the soul must reason the proper amount of sexual activity that is appropriate for good health and fitness, while simultaneously preventing a slide into excess. “The incontinent man, knowing that what he does is bad, does it as a result of passion, while the continent man, knowing that his appetites are bad, refuses on account of his rational principle to follow them. (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1145b12-15) For Aristotle, temperance is a matter of letting the reasoning faculty of the soul provide proper guidance for the lower faculties.

Temperance, then, is achieved through the same sort of self-mastery (ἐγκράτεια) that Plato encouraged. Most of Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is, in fact, a discussion of Aristotle’s views on *enkrateia*, and Aristotle is quite clear that the success of a person’s attempts at self-mastery are due to the extent to which they are guided by reason. Those guided by reason can easily master the passions of the body, and in this way, Aristotle is quite different from Plato. The body has no ability to contaminate or delude the rational part of the soul. Instead, an unrestrained person falls into two categories: 1) the person who gives in to the passions out of weakness and ignorance, and 2) those that in their strength and knowledge choose to give in to excess. The first group may be weak in their mind’s ability to reason and are simply overpowered by passion, or, they may be able to reason, but are not sufficiently attenuated to the mind and do not deliberate at all.³¹² For these, Aristotle has much patience and compassion, but for the second group he has only scorn. This second group is able to reason well in their mind

³¹² *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1150b19-28.

and do not lack strength to overcome the bodily passions, yet they choose to continue in the excess because of a lack of character.³¹³ These people have moved up into the category of vice. Both groups, however, are capable of reformation and indeed, every person should from a young age embrace a kind of training that will allow the mind to reason well in regards to the bodily pleasures. Good habits can be formed and reformed in all, and the mind should be trained by a continued engagement with those things which need to be resisted. For example, Aristotle writes:

But not only are the virtues both generated and fostered on the one hand, and destroyed on the other, from and by the same actions, but they will also find their full exercise in the same actions. This is clearly the case with the other more visible qualities, such as bodily strength: for strength is produced by taking much food and undergoing much exertion, while also it is the strong man who will be able to eat most food and endure most exertion. The same holds good with the virtues. We become temperate by abstaining from pleasures, and at the same time we are best able to abstain from pleasures when we have become temperate. (*Nicomachean Ethics* II. 1104a27-35)

In this way, though motivated by a different concept of body and soul, Aristotle is very similar to general Greek philosophical patterns of thought about sexuality. Done in excess, sexual behaviour is harmful and disruptive to the social order, but if done in moderate and appropriate ways, it is a healthy and natural part of life. Each situation must be judged upon its own merit. To prevent falling into excess, a person should engage in a proper training of both the mind and the body, working hard to find the “just mean.”³¹⁴ However, the motivation of his more material-oriented cosmology establishes Aristotle as somewhat less concerned by sexuality than the metaphysical stream. The dualism found in Plato, Pythagoras, and Plotinus places sexual behaviour in a much more negative light

³¹³ *Nicomachean Ethics* VII 1151a.

³¹⁴ Here the classic survey of both the training and vast array of diets, regimens and rules appropriate to sexual behaviour in the ancient world is M. Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1985).

since it is, directly or indirectly, capable of creating an insurmountable chasm between the soul and the One. But Aristotle's cosmology, by placing sexual behaviour in the natural realm of the sentient faculty of the soul, sees it as simply an aspect of life that needs to be ordered properly by reason. Hence, the intense rhetoric of Plato is to be found nowhere within the even-handed explorations of Aristotle. Instead, Aristotle is able to simply state that the nature of a person comes from what they do, and if what a person does is ordered by reason, then their nature will be good. All it takes is a lot of hard work:

Mark me, my friend, 'tis long-continued training,
And training in the end becomes man's nature.

(Aristotle quoting Evenus,
Nicomachean Ethics VII.1152a36-37)

B. Stoicism

Cosmology

The school of thought founded by Zeno and his students, who met under the porch (stoa) of the Academy to discuss their philosophy, represents a full rejection of Plato's metaphysics that goes one step beyond Aristotle. Along with the Epicureans, who will be discussed next, the Stoics completely rejected the idea that there was any portion of reality that was not made up of physical matter. There was no metaphysical reality in their thought, no first Principles, Forms or eternal Mind, only material substance. Obviously influenced by Heraclitus, Zeno conceived of God and the universe as essentially made up of the element of *fire*.³¹⁵ God was the impersonal but purely rational "body" of fire that permeated and ordered all existence, and all that exists is partly made up of this divine fire. Everything that exists, then, is made up of a mixture of the three

³¹⁵ "The Stoics make God out to be intelligent, a designing fire which methodically proceeds towards creation of the world, and encompasses all the seminal principles ..." (Aetius, *de Placita* 1.7.33) See also, Reale, *Volume III*, p. 213.

remaining elements (earth, air, water), which are passive, and the fiery part of its make up which is an active, rational part of God that has given it shape and form. As Diogenes reports:

According to the Stoics there are two principles in the universe, the active and the passive. The passive principle is a substance without quality, matter; the active principle is the reason in matter, that is, God. And God which is eternal is the creative craftsman of all things in the extent of matter.” (Diogenes Laertius, *Philosophoi Bioi*, 7.134)

This materialism is essentially the earliest Western expression of pantheism, a reality permeated by God and organized according to reason (*logos*).³¹⁶

In addition, in response to metaphysical opponents, the Stoics argued that the rational qualities and ideas that are seemingly present in all things are actually concepts of the mind. Since matter cannot exist without form and quality, what are called Ideas in Platonic circles are actually just the mind’s recognition of reason (*logos*) expressed in matter’s existence. For example, an extract from a Stoic treatise in Stobaeus reads:

Concepts are neither substances nor qualities, but mental images similar to substances and qualities. They are what the ancients called “Ideas.” In fact we can speak of Ideas for each thing offered to us in the form of a concept, as for example, men, horses, and in general all animals and all beings of which it is said there are ideas. The Ideas do not have their existence in themselves; we ourselves participate in the formation of concepts and find the terms of the language, the so-called appellatives. (Stobaeus, *Anthology*, 1.136.21)

It is only the mental images that the mind creates in recognition of qualities and forms that made the metaphysical theorist believe that Ideas exist independently. However, the Stoic understands that the rational part of the person recognizes the same rational workmanship of God, whom Zeno often stylized as a “craftsman” that works out the order of the universe, but also knows that should the substance not exist, neither will the

³¹⁶ Reale, *Volume III*, p. 214.

form. In short, substance and form are ontologically bound in Zeno's thought, neither existing without the other, and form does not exist as a real metaphysical substance.

Body and Soul

For the Stoics, then, the relationship between body and soul is relatively simple, at least compared with the metaphysics of Plato or Aristotle. According to Zeno, since all reality is material in existence, so too the soul as well as the body.³¹⁷ The soul is made up of fire and Aristotle's fifth element, *pneuma*, the same fire of which God is made.³¹⁸ Varro writes, "For Zeno the seed of life is fire, which is soul and intelligence,"³¹⁹ and Diogenes agrees: "Zeno of Citium defines the soul as fiery breath (*pneuma*)."³²⁰ In the same way that the fiery substance of God is the active, rational principle that organizes the passive matter of the universe, the soul is the fiery substance that is the active, rational part of the human being which orders its passive material substance. The soul is the intelligent agent that permeates and orders the body, but also thinks, perceives, desires and reasons. Moreover, beyond death, the soul may survive for a period of time, possibly in a place of punishment or reward,³²¹ until it finally perishes and dissipates into a reunion with the fiery matter of God. The first century writer Aetius says:

The Stoics say that the soul does not die leaving the body but remains in itself and by itself for a certain time. But a soul which is weaker (that is, the

³¹⁷ Theaetetus, in Plato's dialogue the *Sophist*, says of the Stoics: "The soul itself, they think, does possess a sort of body, but when it comes to wisdom or any of the other things you asked about [i.e. justice, wisdom, foolishness], they have not the face either to accept the inference that they have no place among real things or to persist in maintaining that they are all bodies." (246e-247b) Notice that Plato argues that if the soul is matter in Stoic thought that other Ideas should be matter as well. However, as was discussed, the Stoics would consider issues of justice and wisdom to be mental constructs that are appellative of the rational form created by God.

³¹⁸ For a full discussion of this element of Stoic conception of the soul see A.A. Long's article "Soul and Body in Stoicism" in *Phronesis* 27 (1982): 34-57.

³¹⁹ Varro, *De lingua lat.* 5.59.

³²⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Philosophoi Bioi*, 7.157.

³²¹ Lactantius reports, "The Stoic Zeno taught that the infernal regions exist and that the place of good men is apart from impious men: the sages live in pleasant peaceful places while others suffer their punishment in a dreadful abyss of mud." (*Div.Inst.* 7.720).

uneducated one) remains for a short time. On the contrary, the souls of the wise men which are more worthwhile remain even until the conflagration.”³²² (Aetius, *de Placita*, 4.7.3)

Simply put, in Stoic thought the soul is part of the rational fire of the universe, and while in the body it provides order and reason to the person, but it will ultimately return to its source.

Important for this discussion is how the Stoics understand the operations of the soul and body. Like all philosophers of the age, the Stoics believed that the purpose of the soul was to know the truth, and like Aristotle, the Stoics believed that the soul came to knowledge of things via sensible reality (i.e. materialist). As noted above, the Stoics also believed that the soul was composed of matter, and the natural result is that Stoics argued that the assent to truth lies in the soul’s interaction with sensible reality via the body. The Stoic Cleanthes said:

Alterations and affections are not communicated from corporeal things into incorporeal things and vice versa, but the soul suffers together with the body, participating in its pain if it is struck, wounded or tortured; the body participates with the soul in its sadness if it is afflicted by troubles, anxiety, love as it felt a force associated with it, failing of which it shows the shame and fear by its blush and its pallor. (Cleanthes quoted by Nemesius, *De nat. hom.*, 32)

For the Stoics, the soul and body affected each other directly through their association with one another, especially since both were material, corporeal realities. Whatever was experienced by one was also experienced by the other; but the body could only experience sensation, while the reason of the soul could contemplate the sensation as well as experience it.

³²² The Stoics believed that at the completion of time there would be a conflagration where a general combustion of all things by God will occur, purifying all things and starting a new cycle of cosmic generation. If found to be wise, the soul will survive until that moment and then be drawn back into the eternal fire of God. See Reale, *Vol. III*, pp. 256-57.

What is key for the Stoics is that through the body the soul receives the information required to make a judgment about truth. The soul permeates the body and receives sensation through the senses,³²³ and then interprets and makes judgments about that information through its connection with the divine Logos (i.e. the fiery reason of God). For the Stoics, this sensation has a two-fold movement. First the sensation is received by the body and is transmitted in an *impression* (i.e. motion) to the soul; second, the soul receives the impression as a *presentation*, like wax receiving the impression of a seal. The soul is then able to reason the truthfulness of what has been communicated through the senses. Diogenes explains:

The Stoics agree to put in the forefront the doctrine of presentation and sensation, inasmuch as the standard by which the truth of things is tested is generically a presentation, and again, the theory of assent and that of apprehension and thought, which precedes all the rest, cannot be stated apart from the presentation. For presentation comes first, then thought, which is capable of expressing itself, puts it into the form of a proposition that which the subject receives from a presentation. (Diogenes Laertius quoting Diocles of Magnesia, *Philosophoi Bioi*, 7.48)

The result of the soul's consideration of the impression and presentation is essentially an impulse to pursue some course of action in response to it. The "assent" of the reasoned faculty of the soul to the presentation upon it will create some reciprocal response which could include such things as desire, emotion or aversion, which in turn motivates an

³²³ Aetius gives a good summary: "The Stoics say that the commanding-faculty is the soul's highest part, which produces impressions, assents, perceptions and impulses. They also call it the reasoning faculty. From the commanding-faculty there are seven parts of the soul which grow out and stretch out into the body, like the tentacles of an octopus. Five of these are the senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. ... Of the remainder, one is called seed, and this is breath extending from the commanding-faculty to the genitals. The other ... which they call utterance, is breath extending from the commanding-faculty to the pharynx, tongue, and appropriate organs...." (Aetius, *de Placia* 4.21.1-4)

intentional action.³²⁴ Without that reasoned response to the presentation within the soul, there can be no impulse or action, either good or bad, by the person.³²⁵

Ethics

Along with all other Greek philosophies, Stoic ethics pursue the goal (*telos*) of happiness (*eudaimonia*) through virtue. However, the nature of the soul's relation to the body means that the impulses and actions of the person are the result of the reasoning faculty of the soul making a proper judgment concerning what has been communicated to it through the senses.³²⁶ The happiness of both individual and community then depend upon the ability to reason properly in response to the senses. If the rational faculty of the soul gives assent to an impression/presentation without proper reasoning, it is possible that the impulse generated by that bad judgment would be equally bad. Specifically, when assent is given to an impression an emotion is at the heart of the impulse generated. For Stoics, desire and pleasure are emotions of less and more intense approval of a thing as good; desire is the impulse to achieve that thing and pleasure is elation at its attainment. Similarly, fear and pain are less and more intense rejections of a thing as bad, with fear being the impulse to avoid the thing, and pain being the suffering we experience should the thing occur.³²⁷ There is nothing inherently or intrinsically "bad" about any one of those emotions. Rather it is the judgment made concerning the emotions produced by

³²⁴ See T. Brennan's article "Stoic Moral Psychology" In *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 164-167.

³²⁵ For example, Plutarch comments "What is the subject most argued about by Chrysippus himself and Antipater in their disputes with the Academics? The doctrine that without ASSENT there is neither action nor impulsion, and that they are talking nonsense and empty assumptions who claim that, when an appropriate impulsion occurs, impulsion ensues at once without people first having yielded or given their assent." (Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1057a).

³²⁶ M. Schofield rightly points out that it is the "impulse" of human behaviour that is the starting point for Stoic ethics, and not a broader conception of good and evil. See his article "Stoic Ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 237-38.

³²⁷ Brennan, *Stoic Moral Psychology*, pp. 269-70.

sensible impressions that is at the heart of an ethical choice. According to the Stoics, one can *reason* poorly or well in response to any impression, and the value of that reasoning is central to moral determination.

With the impressions and presentations the soul receives being basically neutral in Stoic ethics, there is never any sense that any action is bad in itself. An unethical or immoral action depends upon two related issues. First, if the sensations received by the soul are inordinately focused upon, they may carry more significance and power than is necessary for self preservation, and can produce inordinate impulses that are hard to judge rationally. Cicero, for example, writes:

A living creature feels an attachment for itself, and an impulse to preserve itself and to feel affection for its own constitution and for those things which preserve its constitution; while on the other hand it conceives an antipathy to destruction and those things which appear to threaten destruction. (Cicero, *De finibus*, 3.5.16)

This inclination of attachment to oneself, and the things associated with preserving or threatening its survival, has a natural power to create emotions and impulses that can affect behaviour. To avoid negative behaviours related to such impulses, the Stoics recommended their famous appeal to a) *diafora*, or “indifference.”³²⁸ In order to avoid being overly influenced by those powers associated with self-attachment, one must naturally be as little attached to oneself as possible. Therefore, the Stoics encourage a detached indifference to the things associated with self-preservation like birth, death, food, pain, pleasure, riches, poverty, health and so on. Those things have no moral value in themselves, but if one is attached to them, their power to create impressions and impulses upon the soul is obviously great. The surest and safest attitude towards them is

³²⁸ For a full discussion see Brennan’s “Stoic Moral Psychology”.

consequently a) *diafora*, or indifference. One should simply not allow those things to be too great a concern.

Second, along the same lines as Aristotle, the Stoics argued that the good of a thing lay in being “according to its nature.” Thus the Stoic not only cultivates a) *diafora* in response to his natural attachments but he also strives to live according to nature.³²⁹ What, then, is the nature of humanity in Stoic thought? Seneca repeats the ancient Stoic doctrine:

What quality is best in man? It is reason; by virtue of reason he surpasses the animals, and is surpassed only by the gods. Perfect reason is therefore the particular good of man; all other qualities he shares in some degree with animals and plants...Hence, if everything is praiseworthy and has arrived at the end intended by its nature, when it has brought its peculiar good to perfection, and if man’s peculiar good is reason, then if a man has brought his reason to perfection, he is praiseworthy and has reached the end suited to his nature. (Seneca, *Epistles*, 76.9)

Reason becomes the highest good man can perform, and the Stoics revere rational behaviour as the exclusive good and irrational behaviour exclusively as evil.³³⁰ For in Stoic thought, anything that aids in the perfection of nature is “good”, while anything that damages or diminishes it is “evil.” The result is a tripartite moral system with “goods”, “evils” and “indifferents”. Stobaeus records:

“Things are divided into goods, evils and indifferents. Good things are intelligence, temperance, justice, fortitude, and whatever is virtue or participates in virtue [i.e. the perfection of nature]. Bad things are stupidity, dissoluteness, injustice, cowardice, and whatever is vice or participates in vice [i.e. the destruction of nature]. Indifferent things are life and death, being well-known and being obscure, pain and pleasure, riches and poverty, infirmity and good health, and similars.” (Stobaeus, *Anthology*, 2.57.19)

Stoic ethics become a matter of being a) *diafora* towards the “indifferents”, and being positively aggressive in the pursuit of logic and rational behaviour.

³²⁹ Reale, *Volume III*, pp. 261-64; Schoffield, *Stoic Ethics*, p. 242.

³³⁰ Reale, *Volume III*, p. 265.

The language of self-mastery (εγκράτεια) is also used by the Stoics, only it has lost any sense of the conflict found in Plato, and definitely embraces Aristotle's sense of the hard work needed to achieve virtue.³³¹ The rational function of the soul can be trained and exercised until it is able to effortlessly give assent only to those things which perfect human nature. The Stoic sage must work constantly to order the factors that determine assent, becoming self-sufficient in regards to the indifferents, and wise in regards to virtue. Moreover, this wisdom and virtue is achieved through the exercise of logic and rational thought, in essence, a *science*:

Wisdom is the science of what we need to do, of what we do not need and what is not either in one or in the other condition, or the science of good and evil and things naturally indifferent for the man living in community... .
Temperance (σωφροσύνη) is the science of what is desirable, of what is to be avoided and what is neither one or the other; justice is the science of giving to each person what is his due; fortitude is the science of what is fearful and what is not as well as what belongs to neither category; silliness is the ignorance of good and evil and of indifferent things; intemperance is ignorance of things to choose or avoid and whatever is neither to be chosen nor avoided; injustice is the ignorance which is not capable of giving each person what is his due; cowardice is ignorance of what to fear and not to fear, of what is neither fearful nor to be feared. (Stobaeus, Anthology, 2.59.4)

Virtue is simply the practice of good science, the use of proper knowledge; vice is ignorance of what is the best course of action to take. Vice is always manageable, since it is only a matter of education in order to encourage rational and reasonable behaviour. In fact, there is no fixed ethical or moral value to any particular behaviour, only a proper use that can be deemed ethical or unethical depending upon its relation to a reasoned impulse. For the Stoics, morality is the science of good and evil, and wisdom is a reasoned choice.

Sexual Ethics

³³¹ See K. Campbell's "Self-Mastery and Stoic Ethics" in *Philosophy* 60 (1985): 327-340.

Recently, scholars have been rectifying an overgeneralization about Stoic sexual ethics prevalent in earlier research. The generalization made by scholars was an ahistorical one, where Stoic sexual ethics were represented as uniform across the centuries from the time of Zeno until the collapse of the Roman Empire.³³² The tendency was to assume that the sexual ethics of later Stoics such as Seneca, Musonius and Epictetus were representative of all Stoic sexual ethics from Zeno on down. However, it has been shown that the sexual ethics of early Stoics, though having obvious similarities to later views, were less conservative. Therefore it is necessary to examine both early and later Stoic views of sexuality. However, before we look at the specific areas of difference between early and later Stoic views of sexuality, we will begin with an examination of the general reasoning behind both views. K. Gaca summarizes the Stoic view nicely:

All Stoics, be they early or later, agree that people should choose to refrain from eros and sexual activity to the extent that *eros* is a passion, for passions in the technical Stoic sense are undesirable on several grounds. Passions, as ‘excessive and unnatural soul impulses’, are contrary to right evaluative reasoning, lead to uncontrolled and unreflective actions, damage one’s well being, and conflict with human nature. They thereby preclude the attainment of right reasoning, which is the one virtue recognized by Stoicism.³³³

As noted above, the Stoics viewed ethical matters as the rational course of action judged to be appropriate in response to an impulse created by the body’s senses. Rational actions were judged to be good, while irrational ones were judged to be evil, and some actions, mostly having to do with self-preservation, were judged to be indifferent. In Stoic thought, the passions associated with sexuality were an indifferent, since they

³³² See K.L. Gaca, “Early Stoic Eros: The Sexual Ethics of Zeno and Chrysippus and their Evaluation of the Greek Erotic Tradition.” in *Aperion* 33 (2000): 207-238, and G. Boys-Stones, “Eros in Government: Zeno and the Virtuous City” in *Classical Quarterly* 48/1 (1998): 168-174.

³³³ Gaca, *Early Stoic Eros*, pp. 208-09.

pertained to the preservation of the body and the species,³³⁴ but were also dangerous because the *force* that they could generate upon the soul could be inordinate, and lead the soul to make irrational (i.e. evil or bad) decisions. For example:

“Passion...according to Zeno is either a movement of the soul, irrational and contrary to nature, or an excessive impulse.” (Diogenes Laertius, *Philosophoi Bioi*, 7.110)

And likewise:

“Zeno defines passion thus: passion – what is called pathos (παθος) – is an emotion which is separate from reason and contrary to nature that is produced in the soul.”(Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.*, 4.5.11)

The impulse created by the body’s sensation of physical arousal in turn creates an “excessive” impulse, one that is contrary to the nature of the soul (i.e. irrational). The excessive nature of the impulse can then have the potential to mislead the rational mechanisms of the soul. Note here that the Stoics are similar to Platonists in that the impulses of the passions do not *overpower* the soul but create a *false judgment by the soul* about what is real and true.³³⁵

As an indifferent with the potential for creating false judgments, the passions are handled with care by the Stoics, but not with the same level of concern as one finds in the metaphysical circles. An appropriate level of a) *diaphora* is required of the Stoic sage, placing an acceptable distance between the soul and the impulses of the body. In this regard, it is a matter of judging the right time and amount of sexual activity in order that passionate impulses do not create false judgments that might lead a person into vice, or

³³⁴ Boys-Stones, *Eros in Government*, p. 168.

³³⁵ Reale, *Volume III*, p. 286.

worse, into an evil action.³³⁶ Engaging in sexual activity is not inherently right or wrong depending upon the action, but *can* be right or wrong depending upon the judgment made by the soul. If the soul has falsely judged an activity as good, then it is obviously to be avoided. In addition, for the Stoics the soul can be trained to be more rational and to reason better concerning the impulses of the senses.³³⁷ For the Stoic, the rational nature of the soul was infinitely superior to the impulses of the senses, and with the proper training anyone could achieve a level of self-mastery (εγκράτεια) that could even judge rightly concerning the passions. Consequently, the Stoic never completely avoids sexual activity, but refrains from it to a degree that will ensure that the soul is capable of the appropriate *adiaphora* required to keep the passions in check.

The difference between earlier and later Stoic views of sexuality is basically political. In the view of earlier Stoics such as Zeno and Chrysippus, the political organization of the ideal city-state was represented as an association of virtuous (i.e. rational) citizens who lived in mutual friendship and benefit. What is unique about the Stoic City is that Zeno envisioned it as a place where marriage did not exist, and indicated that the patron deity of the city was Eros. Athenaeus reports:

Pontianus said that Zeno of Citium took Eros to be the god of love and freedom, and even the provider of concord, but nothing else. This is why he said in his *Republic* that Eros was the god who contributed to the safety of the city. (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 561d)

It seems that the early Stoics viewed Eros not as a god of passion but as a cosmological deity that was rich in fire, reason and harmony.³³⁸ The harmony of the city-state was in

³³⁶ For an excellent survey of the more technical aspects of Stoic logic on achieving the appropriate “indifference” to the passions see M. Nussbaum’s article “The Stoics and the Extirpation of the Passions” in *Apieron* 20 (1987): 129-177.

³³⁷ See K. Campbell’s “Self-Mastery and Stoic Ethics” in *Philosophy* 60 (1985): 327-340.

³³⁸ Boys-Stones explains that there were two separate traditions concerning the identity of Eros, one cosmological and the other the more popular conception of Eros as a god of uncontrolled passions. The

the hands of Eros, whose nature was the fire of the cosmos, and similarly rational and beautiful. In addition, Plutarch tells us “Zeno, among others, reckoned that the happiness of the whole city, like the happiness in the life of a single man, comes from virtue and harmony with itself.” (*Lycurgus* 31, 59A) If a man is virtuous by living in freedom according to nature, then so too must the city-state. As such, the inhabitants of the Stoic City would be guided by reason and live in a harmony with themselves. They must live in a state where the freedom of their reason is never thwarted or threatened, while encouraging the harmony of friendship and mutual benefit.

Practically, this meant that the early Stoics were able to eliminate marriage as the only proper moral realm for sexual activity. The jealousies and passions aroused by the possessive nature of marriage relationships would be harmful to the city-state, and the rational members of the Stoic *Republic* would freely engage in intercourse for the purpose of reproduction, without forming couple relationships. Diogenes reports:

It is also their doctrine that amongst the wise there should be a community of wives with free choice of partners, as Zeno says in his *Republic* and Chrysippus in his treatise *On Government* (and not only they, but also Diogenes the Cynic and Plato). Under such circumstances we shall feel paternal affection for all children alike, and there will be an end of the jealousies arising from adultery.” (Diogenes Laertius, *Philosophoi Bioi*, 7.131)

In addition, like Plato, Zeno and the Stoics saw homoerotic relationships between older and younger males (as well as females) in a pedagogical light.³³⁹ However, unlike the ideal relationships of Plato, those of the Stoics were supposed to be devoid of sexual passion and focused upon the freedom found in beauty as a first step toward teaching the

early Stoics obviously considered the cosmological tradition more accurate and felt that Eros was representative of the fire that bound the cosmos together. As such, he would be the ideal deity for the Stoic city; his beauty, fire and reason would be the inspiration for the behaviour of the inhabitants and it is easy to see why Zeno would suggest the safety of the city was in Eros’ hands. See *Eros in Government*, pp. 170-72.

³³⁹ Boys-Stones, *Eros in Government*, p.169.

citizens of the Stoic state the rudiments of harmony and friendship. For the early Stoics, then, sexual relations were appropriate in a much wider scope, so long as those actions were pursued for reproduction or as a means to solidify harmony and friendship.

Later Stoics, however, tend to be much more conservative in their sexual ethics. Any sense of the earlier ideal freedom of the Stoic City has disappeared altogether. By the time of the Caesars, the only concern remained the general Stoic avoidance of passion and the single proper realm for sexual activity was within marriage. The shift probably occurred because most of the later Stoics were Romans, and being Roman, they were influenced by the Roman spirit which was both practical and open to a syncretistic approach to philosophy and politics.³⁴⁰ As such, Roman ethical concerns, as well as the views of Plato and Aristotle, influenced Stoic views of sexuality, and a shift occurred wherein human nature was no longer viewed as communal, but adapted to live in pairs.³⁴¹ Hierocles writes, “Nature has made us not only gregarious but also disposed to live in pairs.”³⁴² Musonius, too, writes “For what other reason [than marriage] did the demiurge cut apart our race and make two sets of genitals, male and female, and instill a strong desire and longing for association and common relationship with one another?”³⁴³ In short, the great Stoic value of living according to nature had been blended with the more Roman ideal of family and marriage as the bastion of the city-state.

In practice, this meant that later Stoic sexual ethics condemned sexual activity outside of marriage, because it was contrary to the nature of man to form community in pairs. Moreover, it stressed the formation of a marriage bond as the ideal form of

³⁴⁰ Reale, *Volume IV*, p. 54.

³⁴¹ Gaca, *Making of Fornication*, pp. 82-83.

³⁴² Stobaeus, *Anthology*, 4.502.15-19.

³⁴³ Musonius, *Treatises and Fragments*, 92.8-17. Notice the assimilation of Plato’s explanation of how the genders were “cut apart”.

friendship, and proclaimed marriage as a key stage in the formation of virtue in the individual.³⁴⁴ Now, it was the unmarried male who was a danger to the community, for he had neither achieved personal virtue, nor participated in the preservation of the city-state. He had failed to reason properly, and had failed to do his duty, endangering the very survival of city and race. Musonius writes, “The man who does away with the human institution of marriage does away with the home, does away with the city, and does away with the entire human race.”³⁴⁵ Although Stoics such as Epictetus and Seneca were willing to say that, on rare occasions, a single individual might rise above even the passions of marriage to be single,³⁴⁶ this concern for the well-being of the state dominated later Stoic thought on sexual behaviour. To engage in sexual behaviour outside of marriage was both irrational and contrary to the nature of man.

Stoic sexual ethics, then, are marked by an avoidance of or indifference to (a) *diafora*) the passionate impulses of the senses. The soul’s ability to judge wisely (i.e. rationally) concerning those impulses determines the appropriateness of a particular sexual action. In early Stoic values, if sexual activity was performed in the pursuit of either a harmonious friendship or a pedagogical relationship, that activity was considered appropriate and good. Only when that activity had crossed into a false understanding of the passions as good would sexual intercourse then need to be avoided. Later Stoic views take on Roman, Aristotelian and Platonic values and restrict the natural functions of sexual activity to marriage. Indeed, wisdom in regard to sex is the reasoned acceptance of duty for the sake of the city-state, where all individuals were expected to pair off and

³⁴⁴ Gaca, *Making of Fornication*, p. 83.

³⁴⁵ Musonius, *Treatises and Fragments*, 92.35-36.

³⁴⁶ Epictetus argues that the miseries associated with having a family, such as sickness, disagreements, death, and so on, should also be avoided by the Stoic sage. See Epictetus, *Discourses* I, xi.

reproduce. All other sexual activity in later Stoic thought was contrary to human nature and the good of the community.

C. Epicurean Philosophy

Along with the Stoics, the other main materialist school of thought in the ancient academy was the Epicureans. Founded upon the thought of Epicurus (341-270 BCE), this school is famous for its “hedonistic” outlook on life, and equally as famous for the great scorn levelled at it by contemporaries.³⁴⁷ That scorn, although expressed in slanderous accounts of Epicurus’ “hedonism”, is actually based upon the fact that Epicurean philosophy is founded upon a reversal of ontological method, and upon the rejection of the *polis* oriented social ethos of the period. In essence, Epicurus’ philosophy is an individualist system of thought, and his ethical concerns are similar to the “situational ethics” one might find in the modern era.

Epistemology

It is well known that prior to becoming a philosopher Epicurus’ life was marked by difficult health, family financial difficulties and social alienation.³⁴⁸ Due to financial hard times, his family had been forced to take on the status of colonial settlers on the island of Samos, an Athenian colony. The resulting “outsettler” status meant a considerable decrease in citizen rights, as well as additional social stigma that lowered the social status of a once important Athenian family. In addition, upon the defeat of Athens at the hands of the Macedonians, he and his family were forced into a refugee-like state of exile, with Athens offering no help to its “second class” citizens. The former

³⁴⁷ In his biography of Epicurus, Diogenes Laertius reports that many had slandered Epicurus as a sensual man with a penchant for over-indulgence. In general, there seemed to be no middle ground concerning opinions of Epicurus; either he was agreed with and followed, or despised intensely. See Diogenes, *Philosophoi Bio.*, X.

³⁴⁸ See J.M. Byant, *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece* (New York: State University Press, 1996), pp. 402-404.

democracy, which existed under Athenian tutelage, now became a Macedonian oligarchy, where Epicurus' few rights had now been obliterated. This series of unfortunate events led the young Epicurus to dismiss the polis-oriented ethos of politics and ethics as obviously unsuccessful and unjust. Also influenced by a seemingly unending series of health issues, Epicurus abandoned the ethical systems of his contemporaries that focused on virtue as a means to protect and preserve the polis in favour of an ethical system that would be more just in alleviating his suffering as an individual.

That being said, *ethics* becomes the starting place of Epicurean thought.³⁴⁹ Happiness (*eu0daimonia*), the goal reached in other views through living in accordance with nature, and described differently according to cosmology, is essentially for Epicurus the avoidance of pain. Epicurus experienced the sensation of pain, both physical and mental, and from that sensation Epicurus draws an epistemological conclusion, which, in turn, leads him down cosmological and ontological paths as a secondary result. In his view, the sensations of the body give the truest knowledge of reality:

Every sensation, he [Epicurus] says, is a rational and does not participate in memory; it is not produced from itself, nor is it produced from some other thing, nor is it capable of adding or subtracting anything from. Nor is there anything which can refute sensation: an homogenous sensation can not be refuted by another, because both have the same validity; nor can a heterogeneous one, because the objects judged are not the same; nor again can reason refute them, because all reasoning depends on sensation; nor finally can one sensation refute another, because we attend to all equally. It is only the fact that sensations are something existent which guarantees the veracity of the senses. It is a real fact that we see and hear, just as is the reality of feeling pain. (Diogenes Laertius, *Philosoph. Biol.*, X. 31ff.)

Indeed, all philosophy should be driven, at least in his mind, by the ethical concern of achieving *eu0daimonia* and bent upon avoiding pain. "Vain is the word of a

³⁴⁹ Reale, *Volume III*, pp.118-19; Bryant, *Moral Codes*, p.405.

philosopher,” Epicurus writes, “that does not heal any human suffering; for just as there is no benefit in medicine if it does not expel diseases from the body, so there is no benefit in philosophy if it does not expel suffering from the soul.”³⁵⁰ With this epistemological leap taken, Epicurus proceeds to build his cosmology and ontology from the inside out.

Cosmology

If the sensible is the epistemological starting point for Epicurus, it is a logical step for him to say that only what is sensible is real. And if only what is sensible is real, then there can be nothing real that cannot be sensed. Hence, like the Stoics, Epicurus rejects completely any notion of the metaphysical; everything that is real is matter, and the supersensible realities of Plato’s Forms, the Pythagorean One, and Aristotle’s Mind are categorically rejected. However, the starting point of Epicurus’ physics is not Heraclitus (as with the Stoics), but Democritus and Parmenides, who were pre-Socratic Atomists. The Atomist position was that physical reality was made up of indivisible units (atoms) that could vary in shape, size and weight, but were only visible in conglomerates and compounds that were the sensible building blocks of the universe. Epicurus adopted a similar position, with only a slight alteration of allowing *void* to exist, as well as atoms.³⁵¹ For him, everything that was real was made up of atoms that could be sensed through the body and interpreted by the soul, which was material as well. In this respect, there is definitely a cross over with Stoic thought, though the two schools tended to be vehemently opposed to one another.

The opposition lay in the fact that Epicurus saw the sensation of pain and pleasure as ontologically superior to the rational interpretation of the mind. Whereas the Stoics

³⁵⁰ Epicurus, *Fragments*, Frag. 221.

³⁵¹ Reale, *Volume III*, pp. 140-41.

saw sensation as a source of impulses that needed to be judged by the mind, Epicurus argues that the very nature of a sensation's pleasure or pain is the truest indication of its veracity and appropriateness. For Epicurus, feelings of pain and pleasure were simply sensations that were in accordance with nature (pleasure) or against it (pain):

We say that pleasure is a principle and goal of living happily. We consider it in fact as a primary good which is connatural to us, and from it we move in the taking of any position of choice or of its rejection, and to it we return again judging every good on the basis of the criterion of affection. (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 128ff.)

The Stoics found such claims to be illogical and, indeed, Epicurus was very dogmatic in his assertions concerning the veracity of sensation. He would only admit that a false judgment occurs because of a false opinion (i.e. claiming knowledge without sensation), poor reasoning concerning multiple experiences of the same sensation, or simply that the atoms which had originated³⁵² from an object had been altered in their motion towards the sensing being. To Epicurus, sensations are always, every one of them, true without exception. Cicero comments: "To such a point does Epicurus reach that, he says, if one sensation for one time in a lifetime were to induce error, there would be no possibility of giving credence to any sensation."³⁵³

For Epicurus the soul is material, but a blend of rational and irrational elements. It is made up of fiery, windy and gaseous kinds of atoms that are the irrational (αλογος) part of the soul, as well as an unnamed, unspecified sort of atom which makes up the rational part.

³⁵² Epicurus' atomistic views held that all things emanated atoms from their structure in small amounts. These atoms carried information to the senses but could be affected midway between object and sensing organ. The alteration could be responsible for a misconception about the object's true nature. Atoms also had an unpredictable capacity to randomly change direction or "swerve." This "swerve" accounted for unpredictable occurrences as well as mistaken perceptions of reality. See Reale, *Vol. III*, p. 142-43.

³⁵³ Cicero, *Acad. Pr.*, 2.25.79.

Next, keeping in view our perceptions and feelings, we must recognize generally that the soul is a corporeal thing, composed of fine particles (atoms), dispersed all over the frame, most nearly resembling wind with an admixture of heat, in some respects like wind, in some respects like heat. But again, there is the third part which exceeds the other two in fineness of its particles and thereby keeps closer touch with the rest of the frame. And this is shown by the mental faculties and feelings, by ease with which the mind moves, and by thoughts, and by all those things the loss of which causes death. (Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 63)

Like the Stoics, Epicurus has adopted a tripartite psychology of the soul, but he has further made the rational atoms of the soul an indescribable sort of unit that is unfortunately never explained clearly, and naturally incurs a variety of criticisms from opponents.³⁵⁴ However, Epicurus is quite clear that upon death this unnamed substance, along with all the atoms that make up the irrational and framing parts of the soul, are dispersed, to be reformed later into a new substance. Hence, this is one more element of Epicurus' thought – the mortality of the soul – that leads his ethical stance to be concerned with the present existence of the person. With the breakdown of the body and soul into its constituent atoms, and the corresponding dissolution of the consciousness of the person, there is simply nothing to worry about beyond death. “Death is nothing for us,” he writes, “for what has dissolved has no sensation, what has no sensation is nothing to us.”³⁵⁵

Epicurean Ethics

As stated earlier, the core of Epicurean thought is a concern for ethics rooted in the experience of the individual. Unlike other philosophies, Epicurean thought does not take its ethical cues from its cosmology, but forms its cosmology from its ethics.

³⁵⁴ Plutarch notes with scorn that “The part with which the soul judges, remembers, loves, hates, in general the thinking part or reason, [the Epicureans] say in fact is composed of a substance without a name. And we know this nameless substance is nothing other except a confession of shameless ignorance, based on the fact that it does not know how to name what it does not succeed in comprehending.” (Plutarch, *Adv. Colot.* 20.1118d)

³⁵⁵ Epicurus, *Kuriai Doxai*, II.

Consequently, for Epicurus and his followers, the material and atomistic nature of reality did not inspire its ethics. Rather, it was the conviction that sensations are the clearest indicator of truth that led to Epicurus' famous hedonistic ethics. As touched on above, to Epicurus the pain or pleasure a person senses is an indication of whether or not that person is living in accordance with nature. Cicero comments on Epicurus:

This he [Epicurus] sets out to prove as follows: every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the chief good, while it recoils from pain as the chief evil and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things which need to be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them.... Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does nature perceive or what does judge of, besides pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and avoidance? (Cicero, *De finibus*, 1.9.30)

If someone experiences pain, which includes all aspects of mental or emotional pain as well as the physical, that person is not living according to nature. If that same person experiences pleasure, again mentally and emotionally in addition to the physical, that person is living according to nature, and in tune with the way they ought to be. The concerns of Epicurean ethics, then, are centered on the avoidance of pain, which is evil, and the attainment of pleasure, which is good and the means to happiness (eu0daimonia).

At first glance, this sort of approach would seem to be an indulgent rationalization of sensuality, and Epicurus' opponents certainly worked hard to portray him in that light; but Epicurus' conception of "pleasure" is far from a concern for the pursuit of sensual delight. For Epicurus, pleasure (h (donh) is actually a term denoting the absence of pain

and the general sense of satisfaction one experiences when the natural needs of body and soul are filled. Epicurus explains in his *Letter to Menoeceus*:

Whenever we say, then, that pleasure is the *telos*, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those consisting in sensual enjoyment, as is supposed by some who are ignorant of our teachings or who disagree or misinterpret them, but by pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of disturbance in the soul. (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 131)

Or again:

He who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion towards securing health of body and tranquility of mind, seeing that this is the end of a blessed life. For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid, seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the body and the soul will be fulfilled. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and only then, do we feel the need for pleasure. (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 128)

Epicurus, then, argues that ethics are a matter of avoiding things which cause pain and doing what is appropriate in order to achieve the “pleasure” of having one’s natural needs filled, and anything beyond need is simply excess.

Epicurus’ first concern, then, lies in the avoidance of pain (*aponia*). Most importantly, the mental and emotional pains of life are more disturbing to the soul than the physical ones. For Epicurus, the fears and negative emotions associated with life are to be avoided, and a state of *autarcheia* (*autarkeia*) - “untroubledness” or “tranquility” - is the goal of that avoidance. As such, Epicurus was opposed to, for example, the popular conceptions of the gods or fate, which instilled great fear and anxiety in people.³⁵⁶ Similarly, in Epicurus’ view any element of life that caused pain should be eliminated, especially life within the *polis*, for political life was entirely

³⁵⁶ Reale, *Volume III*, pp. 154-55.

unnatural.³⁵⁷ Instead of preserving happiness (*eudaimonia*), political life causes immense suffering through violence, stress, economic deprivation and war. In addition, men of the *polis* seek fame, power and honour, which are not necessary items for natural existence. The result of all this is that Epicureans placed more value upon the individual life and they sought to “live hidden” as Epicurus encouraged: “We must release ourselves in good time from the prison of our daily concerns and politics.”³⁵⁸ He also states, “The time when you should most of all withdraw into yourself is when you are forced to be in a crowd.”³⁵⁹ On the whole, Epicureans sought to live individually, freeing their life from all sources of pain (*aponia*) and suffering to achieve a state of *autarcheia*.

The other element to Epicurus’ search for happiness (*eudaimonia*) was the embrace of pleasure as the provision of an individual’s natural needs. As such, he divided all things into three categories: 1) Things that are both natural and necessary, 2) Things that are natural, but unnecessary, and 3) Things that are both unnatural and unnecessary. Into the first category Epicurus placed only those things that are necessary to the body, such as food, drink and sleep. Into the second category he placed things that a person might do naturally, but are not necessary for survival, such as sexual intercourse, friendly associations, or a natural action whose extent was unnecessary (i.e. eating *nice* foods, or having *beautiful* clothing). Finally, into the third category he placed such things as wealth, honour, power and all *vain* instances of human pursuits. Basically, Epicurus felt that only the pursuit of what was natural was needed, and unnecessary things (if they are natural) should be pursued only if they do not cause more pain in the pursuit of them. The natural result of this was a situation where Epicureans would seek only to pursue

³⁵⁷ Reale, *Volume III*, pp. 176-77.

³⁵⁸ Epicurus, *Sententiae Vaticanae*, 58.

³⁵⁹ Seneca quoting Epicurus. Seneca, *Epistles*, 25.6.

activities that were natural and unharmed. "My body exalts," Epicurus writes, "in living delicately on bread and water and it rejects the pleasures of luxury, not in themselves, but in the trouble that follows upon them."³⁶⁰

Moreover, Epicurus believed that pleasure had a finite limit; the needs of an individual could not be filled more than what was needed, and neither time nor quantity could increase pleasure beyond the feeling of general satisfaction at satiation of need.³⁶¹ In addition, how could pleasure be increased once pain had ceased? For Epicurus, this means that there is no rational reason why a person might pursue the sensual appetites since once the natural need is satiated, no *more* happiness can be achieved through excess. To those who would argue that his hedonistic theory provides opportunity for debauchery, Epicurus would reply:

We must not violate nature, but obey her; and we shall obey her if we fulfill the necessary desires and also the physical, *if they bring no harm to us, but sternly reject the harmful.* (Epicurus, *Principle Doctrines*, 24)

An action is only valid if it fulfills a natural need, *and* does not produce further pain and suffering. For example, Epicurus says "No one was ever the better for sexual indulgence, and it is well if he be not the worse!"³⁶² It is clear that for Epicurus, many actions may be natural, but if pursued in excess they will cause more harm than good.

The main concern for Epicurean ethics, then, is basically *prudence*. All ethical behaviour is essentially the process of discernment wherein the individual reasons whether a particular action is both natural and unharmed. "It is," Epicurus says,

by measuring against another, and by looking at conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged. Sometimes we treat

³⁶⁰ Epicurus quoted in Stobaeus, *Anthology*, 3.17.33.

³⁶¹ Reale, *Volume III*, pp.171-72.

³⁶² Diogenes Laertius, *Philosoph. Bioi*, X.118.

the good as an evil, and the evil, on the contrary, as good. (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 130)

Prudence is simply the virtue of having made an appropriate decision, and only actions of Epicurus' third category of pleasures (i.e. vain and unnatural ones) are inherently evil.

Thus, a person's pursuit of a natural action could be *either* good or bad depending upon the perceived results of the action. G.K. Strodach describes this ethical stance in action:

A young couple, deeply in love, are unable to marry because of financial obstacles. They decide nevertheless to enjoy premarital intercourse for the two or three-year period before they marry. Is this act moral or immoral [according to Epicurus]? Again, there are alternatives: a) The couple may wish to enjoy each other sexually but be severely inhibited by feelings of guilt traceable in the one case to a frigid mother and in the other to a tyrannical father. Their pleasure has a deep overlay of pain, and the act is consequently immoral. b) The couple may have no feelings of guilt, and their sex pleasure may be unadulterated; furthermore, their tensions are successfully relieved by this periodic indulgence. They later marry and live happily ever after. In this case the act is clearly moral. c) If this couple does not marry, because they tire of each other after two years, their later sex life may be rendered unstable and promiscuous, with the result that each may have two marriages and two divorces. These later painful consequences may be traceable to the early affair. Once again, the long term effects must be viewed before any ethical judgment can be arrived at.³⁶³

In short, Epicurean ethics are similar to modern situational ethics where the result of the action is the foundation of a moral judgment. This allowed Epicureans to judge each action according to the standards of pain and pleasure instead of on the basis of other cosmological considerations. For Epicurus, wisdom (*fronhsij*) is strictly instrumental.

In regard to sexual conduct, Epicureans tended to be practical but not constrained by societal boundaries. As mentioned above, Epicurus writes "No one was ever the better for sexual indulgence, and it is well if he be not the worse!" This clearly shows that Epicureans saw the inherent dangers of sexual overindulgence and accordingly rejected it

³⁶³ G.K. Strodach, *The Philosophy of Epicurus* (Chicago: Northwestern University press, 1963), pp. 74-75.

as harmful, though obviously natural. However, since Epicureans had rejected the *polis*-oriented ethos of their contemporaries, they felt much freer to engage in sexual activities outside of marriage, so long as it was not harmful. Thus, the Garden³⁶⁴ was known to have had periodic symposia where married and unmarried partners among the inner circle were swapped in free intercourse.³⁶⁵ The logic behind this was that if no one took offense, there was no harm, and therefore the act was not immoral. While this produced fits among other schools of philosophy, especially the Stoics, Epicureans found this to be perfectly acceptable behaviour, and would only avoid it if someone in their own circle was harmed or offended.

The picture of sexual ethics amongst the Epicureans, then, is one of practical *autarcheia*. Sexual intercourse is natural, but not necessary, and should therefore be engaged in according to the rule of *aponia*, or avoidance of pain. Could a sexual act be performed without the obvious troubles of over-indulgence or pain of broken relationship? If it was, it was moral. If there was over-indulgence or harm done, then it was clearly immoral. In this regard, other than having little respect for acceptable social boundaries, Epicureans were indulgent, but not too indulgent. They freely engaged in casual sexual intercourse and it obviously did not carry the same sort of stigma for them that it did in other philosophical circles. Ultimately, Epicurean views,³⁶⁶ which showed

³⁶⁴ The Garden was the nickname given to the Epicurean school of philosophy, as well as the literal location where the followers of Epicurus gathered in Athens. When Epicurus settled in Athens, he experienced some difficulty in finding a location to teach and live out his individualistic lifestyle. Seeking a place of isolation and quiet he settled upon a garden in a remote area in the city, where his followers soon began to gather in order to learn and form a community.

³⁶⁵ See Bryant, *Moral Codes*, p. 411.

³⁶⁶ It is important to note here that Epicurean views of sex were remarkably uniform with Epicurus himself through to the end of the Empire. For a survey of Lucretius' strict adherence to Epicurean views see B. Arkins article "Beyond Obsession and Lust: Lucretius' Geneology of Love" *Apeiron* 22 (1989), 1-59.

no concern for procreation or metaphysical reality, were free to approach sexuality from a very simplified and practical point of view of prudence in all things, including sex.

IV. Conclusion

It is clear that the philosophical outlook on sexuality in the Roman period was well-reasoned and stood in continuity with the Hellenistic systems of previous generations. Both the metaphysical and materialist schools had elaborate and well-reasoned ethical motivations that were strongly linked to the cosmological and teleological perspectives of their philosophies. On the one hand, the metaphysical schools of the Platonists, Pythagoreans and Neo-Platonists show a clear concern for harmony and union with the higher metaphysical realities that are at the core of the universe. For them, the natural desire found in the soul can be misled, and not only fool a person into irrational and harmful behaviour in the present existence, but can also derail the soul's ascent back to its metaphysical source, which is its truest happiness (*eudaimonia*). Sexual activity must, then, be curbed under firm restrictions that limit exposure primarily to the natural function of reproduction within the bonds of marriage. The extent to which it was limited varied depending upon the ontological status granted to the material world (e.g. a distraction vs. an evil), but the metaphysical schools all converge in that they tended to exhibit a more intense rhetoric of sexual austerity that generated fervent moral condemnation upon those who overindulged.

On the other hand, the materialist schools of Aristotelian, Stoic and Epicurean thought rejected the notion of metaphysical causality in the universe. By embracing a materialist orientation to the universe, they argued that the happiness (*eudaimonia*) of both individual and community lay in living according to nature. For Aristotle and the

Stoics, life according to nature was living according to rational principles, while for Epicureans, life according to nature meant living free of pain and suffering. In all three cases, the emphasis was upon happiness in the present existence with the rational faculty of the soul being superior to the desiring faculty. Reason and rationality, when properly trained, would then free the individual to make proper decisions regarding sexual activity. In general, Aristotelians and Stoics would argue for communally oriented ethics, where sexual activity was possibly a danger to the individual's pursuit of virtue and the harmony of the community. Consequently, for them, sexual activity should be limited to the natural function of reproduction, and clearly kept within the bounds of marriage. The Epicureans, too, resisted the notion of overindulgence, but were driven by their individualist hedonistic epistemology that freed them from the conventional social boundary of marriage. Although they would never encourage overindulgence because of its inherent pain-generating potential, they were nonetheless free to engage in casual sexual intercourse, and judge all sexual actions on a situational basis.

On the whole, then, the philosophical views of the Roman world were primarily concerned with over-indulgence. All schools saw the inherent danger of sexual desire and placed precautionary boundaries, varying in degree depending upon cosmological outlook, in order to prevent any harm from befalling the individual or community. However, it is also clear, despite the regular use of strong rhetoric, that sexual desire was not inherently wrong or immoral. It was, instead, a dangerous thing that needed to be monitored and controlled for the sake of the soul's health, as it had the potential to deflect the soul from the ultimate goal of happiness (*eudaimonia*). To keep that danger from becoming real, the general rule of the philosophers was to limit sexual activity to the

realm of its natural function, again in varying degrees. Practically this meant, with a few well-reasoned exceptions (e.g. Platonic/Early Stoic ideal city-states or pedagogical erotic relations), sexual intercourse was limited ideally to marriage, but never completely avoided for the sake of one's health. It was really only in the extent to which a school might be lenient that we find any real disagreement. Pythagoreans, Neo-Platonists and later Stoics would be firm in their marriage-oriented procreationist stance, while Platonists, Aristotelians, early Stoics and Epicureans would allow more room, if still highly controlled, for erotic activity outside of marriage, and for the sake of enjoyment.

It remains, then, for the next chapter of this thesis to compare the rationale of sexual ethics in Greco-Roman philosophy with the early Christian rationale behind their engagement in celibacy. It will be important in that study to ensure that both the cosmological and teleological views of Christianity be examined in relation to their views of sexual desire. For despite the obvious use of similar philosophical terms and language (*epiqumia*, *h(donh*, *swfrosunh*, *e)gkrateia*, *au)tarkeia*) by Christian thinkers of the third, fourth and fifth centuries, it must be recognized that the cosmological and teleological considerations of Christian theology will influence their use in the same way that those considerations did for the individual schools of Greco-Roman philosophy. In order to answer why it is that Greek and Roman Christians (who would likely have agreed with philosophical warning against over-indulgence) would shift in their views of sexual desire to the point where complete (or nearly complete) renunciation becomes the ideal, we must take seriously the apparent fact that something about Christian thought uniquely altered the cultural view of sexuality. In this respect, the next task will be to contrast Christian reasoning with the reasoning of ancient philosophy.

The differences, I think, will highlight the sources and motivations of Christianity more distinctly.

Chapter Four - The Transformation of Human Nature: Theological Motives for Early Christian Celibacy

I. Introduction

Now that the extent of celibacy prior to the middle of the third century has been demonstrated and the cultural perspectives on sexuality in the Greco-Roman world have been explored, we can now turn to an exploration of the motivations behind early Christian celibacy. Essentially, the key to understanding the motivations behind the earliest Christian celibacy is to be found, not in viewing celibacy through the theoretical lenses of social theory, but in comparing it to the broader theological and philosophical perspectives of both the early Christian community and the culture in which it existed. As was explored in chapter one, for many recent scholars, the crux of the issue of asceticism in the early church seems to rest in understanding the extent to which early Christianity either resisted or depended upon the broader culture in the development of its identity. In that regard, some scholars see in early Christian celibacy resistance to Roman culture and social structures, while others see early Christianity adapting the philosophical and moral perspectives of the broader culture. However, though giving insight into possible social consequences of ascetic practice, and showing the interdependence ascetic practice often has with culture, both theories have inherent weaknesses that prevent a better understanding of asceticism's motivations. In both cases, the weak link lies in a false assumption that connects correlation and compatibility with causality.

Social theory, for example, assumes the need for agents of social resistance and change, but incorrectly assumes that asceticism's compatibility as an agent of social change is its defining characteristic. However, many practices and institutions are

compatible with forces which redistribute social power, but that does not by definition establish the capability of effecting social change as the motivation behind ascetic behaviour. Similarly, some scholars, who argue that early Christian asceticism shows dependence upon philosophical or medical models of the Greco Roman culture, assume that the compatibility of early Christian celibacy with the broader cultural perspectives on sexuality indicates a borrowing of ideals from that culture as a source of its motivation. However, simple compatibility with ideals of the culture does not indicate historical dependency, or attempt a more sensitive understanding of how early Christian celibacy was related to Greco-Roman sexuality. In contrast to such views, the goal of this chapter is to demonstrate how early Christian celibacy relates to Greco-Roman sexuality without placing it under the constraints of social theory or arguing for an indemonstrable or oversimplified dependency. In addition, assuming the redefinition of asceticism as an elite practice within a given religious tradition, this chapter will attempt to understand the ideal of early Christian celibacy as it relates to broader early Christian perspectives on sexuality.

To begin, it must be noted that if early Christian celibacy and Greco-Roman philosophical perspectives on sexuality are compared, an immediate difference can be detected. As was demonstrated in chapter three, Greco-Roman perspectives on sexuality regarded sexual intercourse as a natural but dangerous activity due to the possibility of the soul being misled or overcome by its connection with the body. Consequently, depending upon how their cosmological views understood human nature (e.g. material or metaphysical), the majority of ancient philosophical schools encouraged sexual austerity as a virtue, and largely recommended sexual intercourse only for the sake of reproduction

while placing strict controls on sexual behaviour engaged in for other purposes (i.e. pleasure). However, despite the fact that early Christianity and Greco-Roman philosophy shared the view that sex was intended for procreation, and that both placed strict controls upon sexual intercourse, with few exceptions,³⁶⁷ the Greco-Roman world did not encourage *abstinence* as a viable solution to the dangers of sexual activity. Indeed, only if medical concerns dictated, should a person avoid sex completely,³⁶⁸ and, if not medically necessary, only the most mature and wise of philosophers were capable of successfully disengaging their sexual drives for the sake of achieving the virtue of true philosophy.³⁶⁹ Desire (*epithumia*) was part of the natural functions built into the body and soul, and for both the materialist and metaphysical schools of thought, to avoid desire and sexual activity altogether was to engage in a very unnatural existence. Sexual intercourse, and its accompanying desires, could only be controlled and the responsible

³⁶⁷ For example, the first century Pythagorean philosopher Apollonius of Tyana was said to have been one of the few who had mastered his passions completely. The author of his biography, Philostratus, records "And as Pythagoras was commended for his saying that "a man should have no intercourse except with his own wife," he [Apollonius] declared that this was intended by Pythagoras for others than himself, for that he was resolved never to wed nor have any connexion whatever with women. In laying such restraint on himself he surpassed Sophocles, who only said that in reaching old age he had escaped from a mad and cruel master; but Apollonius by dint of virtue and temperance never even in his youth was so overcome. While still a mere stripling, in full enjoyment of his bodily vigour, he mastered and gained control of the maddening passion." *Life of Apollonius*, I. 13. In addition, a number of Olympian athletes were known to have abstained from sexual intercourse as part of their training. Their aim, it seems, was to keep their vital energies contained in the body, and sexual intercourse would have been a waste of such energy. See Plato, *Republic*, IX, 591c-d.

³⁶⁸ According to ancient Greek medical knowledge, both over-indulgence and under-indulgence of sexual intercourse could cause physical illnesses of all sorts. In the case of under-indulgence, the danger was rooted in the unrelieved build up of "heats" or "vital energies" in the body that then caused forms of madness or physical problems. Plato, for example, notes that according to doctors of his age, too much heat brought on fever, too much air resulted in bubbles forming in the blood, which in turn formed phlegm and bile, too little water, of course, results in acidic and saline phlegm. (*Timaeus*, 82-87). In these cases, a harmless "venting" was suggested through some appropriate form of intercourse. Other diseases, however, such as problems with the gall bladder or blood circulation sometimes required short periods of abstinence in order to let the body regain its balance of energies. For a fuller discussion see M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, Vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 97-139.

³⁶⁹ For example, the Socrates of Plato's *Symposium* was one of the few well known for his self-control, which was so extreme that he even turned down the propositions of the handsome Alcibiades (*Symposium* 217a-219e) and remained sexually abstinent except to bear children.

individual accepted the duty to place firm boundaries upon body and soul, both for the sake of individual virtue and for social benefit.

Yet, in early Christian practice, there was a similar point of view that produced a significantly different ideal in regard to sexual intercourse. Indeed, early Christians also viewed sex as a natural function for the purpose of procreation, and placed strict controls on sexual behaviour rooted in pleasure. Early Christians also felt the need to place controls on sexual behaviour for the sake of individual virtue, and for the sake of social responsibility. Why, then, did early Christianity idealize celibacy within a culture that already idealized austerity, and while the majority of Christians already engaged in sexual austerity as well? And why did early Christianity produce people who felt that celibacy could be achieved in a culture that considered it an almost completely unattainable and unnecessary goal?

First, the confusion is rooted partly in the obvious similarities between the early Christian position and the Greco-Roman one, and, second, in early Christianity's employment of Greco-Roman sources and wisdom to justify their position. If it is not assumed that correlation necessarily indicates causality, then the similarities between early Christian sexual concerns and those of the broader culture can be examined to discern a more complex relationship between them. Consequently, when early Christians occasionally appealed to contemporary philosophical wisdom or cultural knowledge it cannot be assumed to be a wholesale adoption of Greco-Roman perspectives. Otherwise, would not early Christians have simply accepted and engaged in the sexual austerity of their cultural counterparts, and indeed, did not the majority of early Christians do just that? Rather, because some early Christians embraced sexual renunciation as an ideal

practice, it would be more accurate to think that there would have been some distinctly Christian motivation for their embrace of celibacy. The key to understanding that motivation, and how early Christians justified that shift, should be apparent from both early Christian speculation on celibacy and how they employed the wisdom of the culture to defend it. In that respect, it would be more proper to say that early Christians did not adopt, but *adapted*, cultural perspectives according to their theological and teleological views.

Therefore, the crux of the issue is to be found in the extent to which early Christians adapted the broader cultural perspectives to their own. That is, what did early Christians assimilate and accept from the culture? And what, and how much, did they change according to their own views? And, how did they manage to adapt their views to each other, and with what success? Moreover, assuming that asceticism primarily reflects the internal dialogues of a religious community, how did ascetics and celibates differ from other early Christians in their perspectives?

II. The Early Christian World View

To begin, the early Christian worldview must be examined as a starting point for understanding the motivations for celibacy. In the same way that chapter three examined the relationship between Greco-Roman cosmological and teleological speculation, and how those speculations determined anthropological models and ethical considerations, the early Christian understanding of the origins of the universe and how they informed early Christian ethics must be surveyed briefly. In particular, how much of the early Christian worldview was an adaptation of the Greco-Roman worldview will be explored, and we will attempt to discover what concepts can be considered *sui generis* of early

Christianity. With this in hand, early Christian perspectives on sexuality can then be examined more closely in preparation for looking at the motives behind celibacy. To be sure, this survey must be brief out of necessity, but it will still examine the broader early Christian worldview as represented by the same texts that were examined in chapter two. As such, this survey will examine the perspectives of the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr and the apologists, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria. In addition, this survey will highlight the minor differences in these early Christian perspectives, which should both show some of the diversity of thought in the early church, and, more importantly, give insight into some of the key issues that were at the heart of the ascetic motivations for the practice of celibacy.

Beginning with cosmology, the New Testament understanding of the origins of the universe is firmly rooted in its Jewish heritage. While the Greco-Roman schools of philosophy saw the origins of the universe initiated by the first movement of the Demiurge (material schools), or as the emanations of the One true reality (metaphysical schools), the New Testament Christians viewed the universe, like their Jewish predecessors, as the creation of a divine being. In that regard, the early Christians had a good deal more in common with the broader culture that did not have a systematic explanation for the origins of the universe but still linked the existence of the world to the actions and manifestations of divine beings.³⁷⁰ However, early Christians, of course,

³⁷⁰ However, as will be shown in this chapter, the apologists of the second century made great efforts to distinguish the God of early Christianity from the divine beings found in Greco-Roman mythology. The goal of the apologists was to preserve the notion that a divine being had created the world, but that the God of early Christianity was nothing like the foolish and lustful gods of the Greco-Roman world. In addition to joining in with the philosophers in their mockery of the gods, the apologists distance God and Christ from the pagan gods primarily through an association of Christ with the *logos*, thus personalizing the rational principle of the universe in Christ and providing God's character with rational and reasonable qualities.

adhered to the Jewish position of monotheism³⁷¹ and considered the entirety of the universe, both material and metaphysical realities, to have been created by a single good divine being who was alone the God of the universe and separate from his creation.

Interestingly, in contrast to the Greeks, Judaism's perception of the origins of the universe during the Second Temple period did not include much ontological speculation. Rather, as Lester Graabe points out, the issue of greatest concern for Judaism during the period when Christianity appeared was its adherence to monotheism in the polytheistic context of the Greek and Roman empires.³⁷² The only innovations of cosmological significance in Judaism during this period were the development of a spirit world of intermediaries between God and the world,³⁷³ and appearance of the figure of wisdom (Sophia or *logos*)³⁷⁴ as a personification of God's activity in the world. On the one hand, the angelic figures of the Old Testament, who were primarily messengers and helpers of God, expanded their role to that of those who are responsible for the workings of the cosmos and performing divine tasks in the human sphere.³⁷⁵ In addition, these angelic figures took on moral traits, being portrayed as good in their obedience to God or evil in their rebellion against him.³⁷⁶ On the other hand, under what appears to be the influence of Hellenization, a stream of thought in Jewish cosmology emphasized the figure of

³⁷¹ In referring to "monotheism" it is, of course, an oversimplification of the reality of Yahweh worship in the history of the Hebrew and Jewish people. As is clear from the Old Testament, the ability and determination of the Israelites and their descendents to remain totally monotheistic was less than exemplary, and as will be discussed shortly, the wisdom tradition of the Second Temple period often blurred the lines of a purely monotheistic conception of the divine at work in the cosmos.

³⁷² See L. Graabe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice from the Exile to the Yavneh* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 212-15.

³⁷³ Graabe, *Judaic Religion*, pp. 219-25.

³⁷⁴ Graabe, *Judaic Religion*, pp. 225-30.

³⁷⁵ Graabe, *Judaic Religion*, p. 224.

³⁷⁶ For example, in the book of Tobit, it is the wicked spirit Asmodeus who is the source of all of Tobit's problems as he kills the men Tobit has betrothed to his daughter (Tobit 3:8), while the angel Raphael is sent to Tobit and his daughter to heal them after their appeal to God for help (Tobit 3:16-17), and to provide a solution for them to defeat Asmodeus (6:16-18; 8:2-3).

wisdom active in the cosmos. The wisdom tradition found in Old Testament texts such as Proverbs and Job was picked up by a number of the pseudographical works and personified into “Lady Wisdom”, who speaks with God’s voice as a personal messenger from God. Likewise, Philo’s obviously Hellenized speculations adapted the *logos* tradition from Greco-Roman philosophy and applied it to the Old Testament tradition of “the word of Yahweh” being given to his people.³⁷⁷ For Philo, the *logos* was the reason or mind of God that ordered the universe and actually bridged the gap between his limited creation and his unknowable nature.³⁷⁸ However, beyond those speculations,³⁷⁹ the broader cosmological concerns of Judaism were to remain monotheistic in faith and worship.

New Testament Christianity, then, adopts similar perspectives on the origins of the universe, and the New Testament assumes the broader Jewish monotheistic perspective of a single good creator God separate from his creation. What is more interesting is that the New Testament also gives indication that early Christians also accepted the cosmological speculations of Second Temple Judaism. First, the presence of the spirit world is prevalent, with good and evil beings involved in the cosmos and human affairs. For example, good angels bring the message of the messiah’s birth to Mary and others (Matthew and Luke) or inform the apostles of Jesus’ resurrection (Luke), or help set Peter free from prison (Acts). Similarly, evil spirits possess people in the gospels and are cast

³⁷⁷ Graabe, *Judaic Religion*, p. 228.

³⁷⁸ Graabe, *Judaic Religion*, p. 229. Graabe explains that for Philo, God’s people is able to know him through the *logos*, which is the first emanation from God. Philo explains that the *logos* then divides into two powers, an active power that creates the universe, and a passive royal power that communicates God’s glory. Thus the *logos* makes God known through creation and by appearing in glory, two Old Testament themes now adapted to middle platonic speculation.

³⁷⁹ For a more in depth discussion of Second Temple Jewish speculation on divine agents in the spirit world and the personification of divine wisdom, see L. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

out by Jesus and his disciples, the most evil opponent of God and his people is the fallen angel, Satan, (Matthew), and Paul refers to Jesus' victory over heavenly, earthly and subterranean beings (Phil. 2:10), or evil powers and authorities in the heavens (Col. 2:10, Eph. 6:12). Second, the New Testament writers also picked up the personification of God working in the world through divine wisdom or *logos*. The best known example, of course, is the gospel of John's appropriation of the term *logos* in the opening chapter to describe the incarnation and work of Christ. In addition, Jesus himself refers to wisdom personified in his sayings (Matt.11:19, Lk.11:49) with many scholars even detecting linguistic parallels in the gospels that are meant to echo that wisdom was now personified in Jesus.³⁸⁰ Regardless, it is clear to see that primitive Christianity adopted the broader monotheistic position of Judaism, as well as the innovations of Second Temple Judaism.

A similar situation appears to have been the case in regard to Jewish and New Testament concepts of human anthropology. The origins, goals and nature of humankind were, of course, found in Genesis 1-3, and both ancient Israelite religion and Second Temple Judaism showed continued interest in those narratives. In their view, humankind was created "in the image of God" and placed in the world to both serve God in obedience and receive his blessings. In addition, when tempted to disobedience by the serpent, humanity rebelled against its creator and was subsequently expelled from the garden. Therefore, humanity was left to seek salvation through obedience to God and to hope for a restoration of their honoured place in creation through worship of God alone. In that regard, while Greeks and Romans sought the *telos* of happiness (*eudaimonia*) in their present existence as the most appropriate function of human nature as it had been

³⁸⁰ See G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 51, and B. Witherington III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 166.

manifest by the universe, Jews and Christians sought to fulfill their created purpose of obedience and service to God. More importantly, in the Old Testament narratives the *telos* of human existence included only a limited connection between human anthropology and the sin of disobedience, and as a result the nature of body and soul, and how they related to the cosmos, remained largely undeveloped.

In particular, the Jewish (and subsequent early Christian) worldview differed from Greco-Roman philosophical speculation in that although having an extensive narrative cosmology, it did not engage in much additional ontological exploration. The difference I wish to emphasize here is that a cosmology is a theory of the universe as a whole, its parts and its laws, possibly being expressed in any number of forms (e.g. philosophical speculation, narrative, mythology), while an ontology describes the specific existential nature of a thing and the causal links that are associated with that nature in regard to the broader cosmology. Thus a cosmology could be philosophically speculative or an aetiological narrative, but subsumed into each might be a whole series of ontologies describing the specific nature of things and how they are causally related to certain actions or occurrences within the cosmology. What is important to note is that Jewish cosmology is primarily a narrative describing human rebellion against their creator, and contains little ontological speculation about human nature and its relationship to human actions. Instead, in Jewish thought the *telos* of human existence is focused on simply aligning one's behaviour with obedience to God, and the concepts of body and soul are only narrowly and imprecisely developed as limited secondary concerns of a worldview dominated by issues of proper worship and moral behaviour defined in relation to God.

Indeed, as Graabe points out, the Old Testament does not envisage an afterlife of any sort, nor explain the relationship between body and soul, or develop any concept of material and metaphysical realities.³⁸¹ There is simply God and everything else he has created, both earthly and heavenly, and no explanation is ever given to the nature of how those beings exist ontologically. There is some minor recognition of a spirit or soul living within a body, and that the spirit may continue to exist in some limited form after the death of the body in a shadowy existence known as *sheol*. But far more important for the Old Testament was a cosmic eschatology that anticipates the “day of Yahweh” where individuals and peoples will be judged, and then rewarded for their obedience or punished for their sin. Otherwise, the Old Testament speaks little of whether that day of judgement will be for an individual soul and/or body, and largely speaks in terms of the salvation of Israel as a unified, obedient people under the full reign of God. Graabe also explains that it was actually only in the post-exilic and Second Temple period of Judaism that the concept of an immortal soul first appears, but the many and ambiguous varieties of expression for this concept make it difficult to speak of a unified “Jewish” concept of the body and soul.³⁸² During this period, Graabe shows, some Jewish texts refer to the resurrection of the body alone, some of the soul alone and some of both together. Likewise, some refer to resurrection into a new earthly paradise, or into a heavenly one. Some even refer to an “eternal” life granted to the righteous, but without any reference to a resurrection, and a destruction of the wicked without any mention of body or soul. Even texts under the influence of Hellenistic thought, such as Philo or the *Wisdom of Solomon*, simply adapt middle-platonic concepts that see death itself as a punishment

³⁸¹ Graabe, *Judaic Religion*, pp. 258-59.

³⁸² Graabe, *Judaic Religion*, pp. 259-68.

executed through the body to separate the soul from God and the Cosmos. Josephus, surprisingly, believes in the transmigration of souls,³⁸³ with good souls being rewarded and evil ones punished following the final eschatological day of judgement. So, by the end of the Second Temple period, Judaism did have an ambiguous concept of body and soul, but largely continued to emphasize obedience to God for salvation without ontologically linking ethics to body and soul as the Greeks did.

New Testament Christians, as well, generally adopted the views of Second Temple Judaism in regard to anthropology and teleology, though now obviously reworked through their understanding of Christ. There clearly is an adoption of the concept of body and soul, with both being ultimately saved through faith and resurrection. Similar to contemporary Jewish precepts, the New Testament is somewhat ambiguous with its terminology, using *psyche* (soul) and *pneuma* (spirit) for the “inner” portion of a human being, and *soma* (body) and *sarx* (flesh) to describe the “outer” physical portion.³⁸⁴ In addition, the relationship between the two is often unclear, and the terms are used interchangeably to describe concepts from the simple constitution of the human being (i.e. what we would understand together as body and soul) to an expression of the conflict between the forces of God and the forces of the world (flesh versus spirit), and how individual existence is caught up in that conflict.³⁸⁵ The goal of human

³⁸³ Graabe explains that Josephus felt the soul was released from the body at death and then reborn into a new body, with the process repeating itself until the day of judgement (a cosmic end to the age where Rome would be destroyed by divine intervention) when God would reward good souls and punish evil ones. See Graabe, *Judaic Religion*, p. 263.

³⁸⁴ Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 499-520.

³⁸⁵ See Ladd’s discussion of the different interpretations of the flesh vs. Spirit element of Pauline thought. *New Testament Theology*, pp. 509-17. Ladd shows that the “ethical” use of the term flesh (*sarx*) has been interpreted generally as the force in the world and within the individual that is opposed to God and lives in opposition to the Spirit, which is God’s agent working in the world. In terms of understanding human nature, Ladd summarizes four positions: 1) flesh and spirit represent a dualism between sinful human nature and the sanctified human nature under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (e.g. H.W. Robinson, Davies), 2) a duality within human nature where the higher (spirit) principles are constantly at war with the lower

existence, too, is found also in obedience to God, but now through Christ, and eternal life can be granted to both body and soul through resurrection and union with Christ,³⁸⁶ with wrath and divine destruction for those who remain disobedient through their rejection of Christ.³⁸⁷

III. Early Christian Sexual Ethics: The New Testament

In regard to sexual behaviour, Second Temple Judaism both inherited Old Testament Law, and produced innovations that responded to contemporary pressures of Hellenization. More importantly, their attitudes towards sexuality reflected the same focus upon obedience that was apparent in their cosmological, anthropological and teleological perspectives, and the same absence of ontological concern in regard to body and soul as well. In this way, it was obedience to God that directed Jewish sexual attitudes, and from the Old Testament came both positive and negative commands in regard to sexual behaviour. As Anderson demonstrates, marriage and sexual intercourse were seen as a positive part of humanity fulfilling their covenant with God and obeying the command to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28), and the midrash, targums and pseudopigrapha dating from this era depict marriage and children as a blessing and joy from God.³⁸⁸ Indeed, in the right context of a marriage and the fulfillment of God's

(flesh) principles, requiring a progressive sanctification of human nature where the higher spirit rules over the lower flesh (Beyschlag, Stevens), 3) an existential dualism where human nature, both body and soul, is in conflict over the focus of its attention, either towards the transitory/earthly (flesh) or the transcendent/eternal (spirit), and lives in either power or weakness depending on the object of influence (Bultmann, J.A.T. Robinson, Conzelmann), and 4) an eschatological dualism which broadens the dualism beyond the individual, and represents a contrast between unregenerate humanity opposed to God prior to Christ and the sanctified, regenerated humanity following the coming of the Holy Spirit. (Ladd) More recently, one could add G. Fee and B. Witherington to supporters of option number four. See G. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), and B. Witherington III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994).

³⁸⁶ Romans 5-8.

³⁸⁷ I Thessalonians 1:10, 4:16.

³⁸⁸ See G. Anderson, "Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden? Reflections on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden." *Harvard Theological Review* 82.2 (1989): 121-48.

covenant duties, sexuality was never considered a sin but a commandment from God.³⁸⁹ Negatively, the Torah also demanded obedience in regard to ritual purity and the avoidance of idolatry. Indeed, there were laws to order sexual behaviour in regard to nearly every area of life, from marriage to worship to family relations. Again, it must be noted that these rules are not based on ontological considerations, but upon the need for obedience to God.³⁹⁰

In addition, during the Second Temple period the pressures of Hellenization led to an intensified emphasis on the need for obedience that Judaism had inherited from the literature of the Old Testament. As Brown convincingly demonstrates, despite its appropriate power for procreation, Jews of that era were leery of sexual indulgence because of its capability of deflecting the individual from a single-minded devotion to God.³⁹¹ Within the unknown and hidden areas of the heart was the danger of a will bent to disobedience to God, and if prompted into activity by indulgent sexual behaviour, it could lead to strife between family and community, or worse, a blurring of the person's distinct identity as a part of God's chosen people.³⁹² K. Gaca, as well, has demonstrated that the Septuagint, which was used by most Diaspora Jews during this period, showed a great concern for remaining pure and obedient amidst the Gentile culture, as well as a

³⁸⁹ Anderson, "Celibacy or Consummation", p. 122.

³⁹⁰ We must, of course, allow for the possibility that some of those rules were strongly affected by social discourses, and as a means of social control. Graabe points out that while the oversimplified model of "oppressor and oppressed" is a caricature that does not grasp the subtleties and nuances of sexual rules in a predominantly patriarchal society, there is simply too much clear evidence to not recognize that many sexual rules were influenced by the advantageous position of males in ancient society. (See Graabe, *Judaic Religion*, pp. 300-304). However, as was argued in chapter one, the primary motivation for such rules is more likely to be found in the ritual or moral requirements of the religious belief system, though also clearly being susceptible to secondary social consequences or goals.

³⁹¹ P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 33-44.

³⁹² Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 40.

concern to continue avoiding idolatry caused by contact with pagan worship.³⁹³ In particular, Gaca shows that the Septuagint intensifies the language of prohibition in regard to any sexual activity that threatens strict devotion and honour to God, and does so through the classification of such behaviour as *porneia*.³⁹⁴ Thus if a sexual activity brings an individual into contact with pagan worship through inter-marriage, or through sexual contact with those involved in pagan worship (i.e. temple prostitutes), then the act was considered *porneia*. In addition, any sexual act that was not devoted strictly to reproduction and obedience to God was also classified as *porneia*, thus casting doubt upon sexual indulgence as well. In short, any sexual act that did not show honour to God, who is to be worshipped exclusively, was condemned, but no ontological connection was made between sexual sin and human nature.

The New Testament adopts similar prohibitions, and continues to generally disregard any ontological speculation about the body, the soul and sexuality. In particular, the New Testament contains strong warnings against *porneia* (Rom. 1:29, I Cor. 6:9, Gal. 5:19, Eph. 5:3-5, Col. 3:5, I Thes. 4:3, Jude 7), usually translated as

³⁹³ See K. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Sexuality and Early Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 119-217.

³⁹⁴ See Gaca, *The Making of Fornication*, pp. 122-131. Gaca distinguishes between, 1) sexual acts that involved idolatry, thus breaking the first commandment to worship God alone, and 2) sexual acts that are defiling in the eyes of God, or an “abomination” (gk. *bdelygma*). In regard to idolatry, the Septuagint is largely concerned with intermarriage and participation in pagan cultic rituals that involved sexual intercourse. In regard to defiling sexual acts, the Septuagint does not clearly outline the criteria by which a sexual act is classified as an abomination, but Gaca convincingly argues that the kinds of acts found in this category can largely be described as those that reflect a rebellious attitude towards God. The Septuagint, she argues, classifies any sexual act that is not done out of obedience and devotion to God as *porneia*, and the offenders are considered “defiled” in the eyes of God and clearly associated with the rebellion of polytheistic ritual and worship. Thus adultery, homosexual behaviour, incest, and the like are all considered a kind of rebellion against God because they reflect the kind of activities only found among Gentiles, who by definition are in rebellion against God. As Gaca puts it, the Septuagint demands, “The people must relinquish in perpetuity the ability to act on their own cognizance religiously and sexually, for in order to have no other gods but God, they must make love, reproduce, and raise children for the Lord alone.” (p. 128) Thus any sexual activity linked to idolatry, or one that reflects rebelliousness against God, is considered *porneia*, though aside from associating those behaviours with the Gentiles it is still a puzzle as to why they are perceived to be prohibited by God initially.

“fornication”, and continues to refer to prohibited sexual acts on the same terms as the Septuagint. Indeed, the references to *porneia* in the New Testament show a similar pattern of usage as found in the Septuagint, describing either a direct violation of the commandment not to worship other gods, or used to describe any sexual act that clearly dishonours God, his people or the self, which should belong solely to God. On the one hand, in the New Testament, *porneia* clearly refers to any sexual activity done in honour of gods other than the one God of Israel, or coming into contact with anyone who has done a sexual act connected to idolatry. For example, the *porneia* of Christians having intercourse with temple prostitutes in Corinth (I Cor 6:12-20) drew Paul’s rebuke, as did attendance of Christians at pagan worship, where sexual activity was part of the idolatrous ritual (I Cor 10:8).³⁹⁵ In addition, Paul’s association of homosexual desire with Gentile idolatry in Romans 1³⁹⁶ culminates in verses 28-29 with Paul arguing that God had turned the Gentiles over to immoral behaviour (*porneia*) as a result of their idolatry.³⁹⁷ In addition, the association of *porneia* with idolatry also was employed by

³⁹⁵ For a fuller discussion of the issues around the Corinthians attending pagan cultic rituals that involved both eating food sacrificed to idols and sexual intercourse that was part of the post-meal ritual see G. Fee, *I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 455-56.

³⁹⁶ See Romans 1:18-32. Paul’s argument is that despite the fact that God’s power and nature are visible in creation, the gentiles have rebelliously turned away from their creator and begun to worship idols. As a consequence, God has turned them over to their desire (*epithumia*), which has resulted in unnatural homosexual passions among both men and women, thus making them the Gentiles guilty of *porneia* as well as idolatry.

³⁹⁷ There is a textual concern in this passage that bears upon this discussion. The UBS textual apparatus indicates that the inclusion of *porneia* in the text of Rom. 1:29 contains a considerable degree of doubt, so much so that most modern English translations (NIV, NRSV) omit *porneia* from the text. The earliest manuscripts (a, A, B, C, D) all lack *porneia* in the list of sins found in the text, while the vast majority of later texts (a revision of D, G, L, γ, 88, a majority of minuscules), as well as the Syriac texts and the majority of Byzantine Lectionaries, include it. The difficulty lies in the attestation of the church Fathers, which have *both* forms of the text being used by Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Therodoret, and other Fathers using only either of the two (e.g. Origen omits it, Euthalius includes it). In his *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971) Metzger argues that although *porneia* could have accidentally fallen out in transcription, he thinks it more likely that *porneia* was added accidentally when *poneria*, *ponhria*, (“wickedness”) was erroneously transcribed as *porneia*, *porneia*, “fornication”, or deliberately added by scribes who noted its presence in some of the older forms of the text. In addition, he comments “The fact, however, that Paul argues (verses 24-25) that such vices as listed

other New Testament writers. For example, the author of Acts records that at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where it was decreed that Gentile Christians were not be burdened with the full adherence to the Law, early Christians still maintained the Old Testament strictures against idolatry. In particular, this included avoiding meat sacrificed to idols and the avoidance of *porneia*, or sexual idolatry, associated with pagan worship (Acts 15:29). Also, Revelation's letters to Pergamum and Thyatira rebuke these churches for engaging in *porneia*, along with the consumption of food sacrificed to idols (Rev. 2:14, 20-21). The clear implication of many New Testament passages, then, is that like Second Temple Jewish ideals, the concept of *porneia* included any sexual activity that led to idolatry.

On the other hand, the term *porneia* could be used by the New Testament writers to refer to any kind of sexual behaviour that was not worthy of their status as God's people. In the same way that the Septuagint emphasized sexual acts that were by nature rebellious to God (without necessarily including idolatry) as *porneia*, the New Testament also classified certain sexual behaviours clearly rebellious to God as *porneia*, and as the kinds of activities one only finds among the Gentiles. Paul is the most vocal of the New

here issue from the licentious practices of idolatry, makes it unlikely that he would have included *porneia* within the list itself." (p. 506) Considering the recent studies on the connection between *porneia* and idolatry (see Gaca, *et. al.*), Metzger's comment seems prematurely mistaken. Indeed, his argument that *porneia* was added accidentally when *poneria* was misread is unconvincing, since if it had been misread one would expect to find texts with only *porneia*. However, the Textus Receptus and the majority of texts have *both* *porneia* and *ponhria*, and the early texts that lack *porneia* still have *ponhria*. In addition, it is difficult to argue that the inversion of "hr" would also include the transformation of the Eta (h) into an Epsilon (e). This more likely indicates a kind of error where the scribe's eye, beginning one word (*porneia*), looked away to write, looked back and continued the word only now having skipped ahead (*ponhria*) after relocating the visual cue (po) incorrectly. The insertion of *porneia* in the later manuscripts is then easily explained as the correction of a previous mistake in the manuscript tradition, and it is only an insertion of *porneia* and not the replacement of *ponhria* because both were likely in the original. Moreover, the fact that several of the church fathers cite both manuscript traditions indicates that *porneia* was likely dropped accidentally in some manuscript families but retained in others, likely the eastern families. Finally, Metzger's comment that Paul would not have included *porneia* in a list of vices related to idolatry is simply mistaken. In fact, it makes more sense that *porneia* should be included *because* Paul is making the link between idolatry and immoral sexual conduct. Thus, I argue that Romans 1:29 is another New Testament example of the use of *porneia* in connection with idolatry.

Testament writers on this subject. Not only does he include *porneia* in the sense of “sexual immorality” among the lists of vices that prevent inheritance of God’s kingdom (II Cor 12:21, Gal 5:19, Eph 5:3, Col 3:5, I Tim 1:10), and considers it a word to describe any sexual behaviour that dishonours God, he also uses *porneia* as a term to describe the sexual immorality of the Gentiles, which should be left behind by Gentile Christians who are now part of God’s people. In I Thess 4:1-5, as well, Paul urges his congregation to resist the lustful passions (*epithumia*) which mark the Gentiles who are rebellious to God, and to abstain from *porneia* as a kind of sexual immorality that does not please their Lord. Indeed, in I Cor 5, Paul criticizes the church in Corinth for allowing a man to live with his father’s wife, an action that amounts to nothing short of incest, and sarcastically points out that this is a sexual practice of such clear immorality that it is not even found among the Gentiles! (I Cor. 5:1-2). Other New Testament writers, as well, pick up the use of *porneia* for sexual immorality unbecoming of God’s people. The author of John’s gospel, for example, has the Jews protesting Jesus’ disregard for their claim to a spiritual heritage through Abraham by asserting the fact that they were not born “from fornication” (ἐκ πορνείας, John 8:41), as he was.³⁹⁸ Jude 7 warns of the punishment that awaits Sodom and Gomorrah for their *porneia*, and as the NRSV puts it, their pursuit of “unnatural lusts.” Finally, Revelation 21:8 lists those who engage in sexual immorality (*porneis*), along with idolaters and murderers as those who will burn in the

³⁹⁸ D.A. Carson points out that many scholars argue that this protest by the Jews misses Jesus’ point that their *conduct* has disqualified them from Abraham’s inheritance. Rather, the Jews continue to assert their claims to inherited election based upon the purity of their birth while pointing to the irregularities connected with Jesus’ birth in order to undermine his authority. In addition Carson thinks it possible that v.41 anticipates v.48 where Jesus is charged with being a “Samaritan”. In that way, Carson argues, when the Jews assert they have not been born “from fornication” they may be pointing to the fact that they have no intermarriage with Gentiles in their lineage (i.e. no *porneia*), unlike the Samaritans and other Diaspora Jews. It is then possible that it could be interpreted as a slight against Jesus for siding with the Samaritans. See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 352.

lake of fire, and 22:15 lists those who engage in *porneia* as those who cannot enter the heavenly city.

It is clear, then, that the New Testament generally adopted the Jewish sexual prohibitions of the Second Temple period and conceived of *porneia* as both sexual activities that involved one in idolatrous practices, and as the sexually rebellious activities of those whose actions dishonoured God and themselves as God's people. In many ways, however, early Christian adoption of Jewish views of sexuality was a limited and complex adoption, and two issues also strongly influenced early Christian attitudes about sexuality. While certainly retaining the monotheistic worldview and clear concerns for sexual morality as a key element in obedience to God, early Christianity found itself developing as a religion with its own theological perspectives and doing so in an atmosphere that was increasingly Greco-Roman and less Jewish in context. Although the churches of the New Testament period were obviously steeped in the Jewish narrative thought world, the numbers of Gentiles in the churches began to quickly outnumber those of Jewish heritage,³⁹⁹ and the issues over adherence to the Torah soon led to a sharp break where Christianity left Judaism behind to develop an identity of its own. As Frend correctly points out, by the turn of the first century, many Jews saw Christians who remained within the sphere of Judaism as a despised minority who had abandoned the inconvenient parts of the Law, while growing numbers of Gentile Christians, who still admired Jewish monotheism and ethics, found many aspects of the Jewish Law to be absurd and distasteful.⁴⁰⁰ Consequently, by the turn of the first century, many early

³⁹⁹ See H. Conzelmann and A. Lindemann, *Interpreting the New Testament: An Introduction to the Principles and Methods of N.T. Exegesis*, translated by S. S. Schatzmann from the 8th rev. German Edition (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988), pp. 373-75.

⁴⁰⁰ W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 35-36.

Christians had not only developed a distinctively Christian worldview (albeit still in the process of long refinement on the basis of contextual realities), but had largely moved out from under Judaism's sphere of influence.⁴⁰¹

This historical movement is actually one of the keys to understanding the emergence of the early Christian world view, as well as celibacy, as it was a turning point when early Christianity was adapting inherited Jewish perspectives to its own developing Christian theology, while simultaneously expanding beyond the sphere of Jewish cultural and theological perspectives. Simply put, what Jewish cosmological and anthropological speculation did exist was being adapted to Christian theology, and where Jewish and Christian speculation did not provide answers, the early Christians turned to the commonly acknowledged wisdom of the broader culture to fill in the gaps. Indeed, in

⁴⁰¹ In recent years the matter of the continuing relationship between Judaism and early Christianity is much debated. Currently, many scholars blur the lines between early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, arguing that Christians were not a distinctly identifiable group separate from Judaism until well into the third century, possibly even the fourth. See for example D. Boyarin, "Semantic Differences; or, 'Judaism'/'Christianity'" in *The Ways that Never Parted. Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, A. Becker and A. Yoshiko Reed, eds. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 65-85, or his *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). See also P. Fredriksen, "What 'Parting of the Ways'? Jews, Gentiles and the Ancient Mediterranean City." in *The Ways that Never Parted. Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, A. Becker and A. Yoshiko Reed, eds. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 35-63, and R. R. Ruether, "Judaism and Christianity: Two Fourth-Century Religions." *SR* 2 (1972): 1-10. The result has been a debate over the semantics of identity where the terminology used to label early Christianity and Judaism has been repeatedly redefined in an attempt to justify relocating the date for the "parting of ways" between Christianity and Judaism. In particular, it is argued that there is a difference between the image of self-identity created by a social group and the reality of its true social position. It has been argued, then, that early Christian self-presentation, which identified Christians as distinct from both Jews and "pagans," was really only an image that was fostered for the sake of encouraging group solidarity, when the reality was that Christians could not be differentiated from Jews. Consequently, the tendency among these scholars is to argue that early Christianity did not develop as a distinct social force until the third century. For a good survey and critique of this trend see T.A. Robinson's upcoming book *Ignatius and the Way that Parted: The Formation of Early Christian Identity* (Forthcoming, 2007). Robinson correctly points out that despite emphasizing appropriate cautions against portraying early Christianity and Judaism in monolithic terms, these scholars have ignored or dismissed the earliest historical data that unquestionably demonstrates that early Christianity portrayed itself and Judaism as two distinct groups. Using the letters of Ignatius, Robinson convincingly shows that by the early part of the first century, early Christians and Jews, regardless of the obvious continuity between them, still had clearly defined identity boundaries and did not consider themselves to be part of the same group. This thesis obviously takes the position that the break between Judaism and early Christianity was early, and no later than the first quarter of the second century.

comparison to the philosophical speculations of the Greeks and Romans, Jewish and Christian speculations were rudimentary, primarily focussing upon the relationship between the Creator and his Creation, and including little consideration of ontological matters in regard to body, soul and ethics. As Frend points out, with the revitalization of Judaism from the council of Jamnia (ca.90CE)⁴⁰² on into the second century, the fluidity between Judaism and Christianity came to an end.⁴⁰³ Early Christian claims to being the “new Israel”, which Frend argues were tenaciously clung to between ca. 65-100 CE, had

⁴⁰² This is the council where the infamous “curse” against the *minim* was added to the Shemoneh Esrei (Benediction of Eighteen Prayers), assumed to be in response to heightened tensions between the early Christians and Jews. According to the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*, the term *min* is likely rooted in the Hebrew term for “species,” and came to mean Jewish sectaries (not non-Jews). Rabbinic sources indicate that at the time of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, there were no fewer than twenty four kinds of *minim*, including Christians, Nazarenes, Sadducees and Samaritans. It was at the request of Gamaliel II that the twelfth benediction changed the curse from being against Nazarenes alone, to being against the broader *minim*, or sectaries, because early Christians had protested the Jewish label of all Christians being Nazarenes. The conservative response, then, was to broaden the category to be more inclusive of those that did not agree with rabbinic orthodoxy. The ostracism that came with the curse was severe, as the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* describes: “It was forbidden to partake of meat, bread, and wine with the *min*. Scrolls of the Law, tefillin, and mezuzot written by a *min* were burned (Giṭ. 45b; Yer. Shab. 14b; 'Ab. Zarah 40b; Shul'ān 'Aruk, Oraḥ 'ayyim, 39, 1; *ib.* Yoreh De'ah, 281, 1). An animal slaughtered by a *min* was forbidden food (Ḥul. 13a). The relatives of the *min* were not permitted to observe the laws of mourning after his death, but were required to assume festive garments and rejoice (Sem. ii. 10; Yoreh De'ah, 345). The testimony of the *min* was not admitted in evidence in Jewish courts (Shulḥan 'Aruk, Ḥoshen Mishpaṭ, 34, 22); and an Israelite who found anything belonging to one who was a *min* was forbidden to return it to him (see Ḥoshen Mishpaṭ, 266, 2).” See “Min” in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia: A descriptive Record of the History, Religion Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times*, Vol. VIII (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1906), pp. 594-95. More recent studies on the curse focus on the extent to which it reflected a division between Judaism and Christianity at that point in history. For example, many scholars such as G. Bornkamm, J.P. Meier and K. Stendahl have accepted the traditional interpretation of Jamnia’s curse as a reflection of an early conflict and split between Jews and Christians, even suggesting that the Gospel of Matthew may have been published in reaction to Jamnia. See A. Finkel’s summary of the argument in “Yavneh’s Liturgy and Early Christianity” *Journal of Ecclesiastical Studies* 18.2 (1981): 231-50. Others, however, argue that the curse does not reflect a split so much as tension between two groups within the same community. For example, Finkel’s article “Yavneh’s Liturgy and Early Christianity” argues that the evidence which describes animosity between the groups, and characterizes the curse as an “excommunication” of sorts, dates from later Rabbinic materials that reflect the later conflict between the two. Another example is S. Katz’s article “Issues in the Separation of Judaism and Christianity after 70 C.E.: A Reconsideration” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103.1 (1984): 43-76. Katz argues that the kind of “ban” (he identifies it as *herem*) that encompassed “excommunication” did not exist until after 200 C.E., but a less severe “ban” of thirty days of non-participation in synagogue worship (he identifies it as *niddui*) did exist, and it “was a means of communal discipline used to support and defend halakic decisions against recalcitrant members.” (p. 48) As such, Katz argues that the curse of Jamnia represents a disciplinary action taken against Jewish Christians who had become recalcitrant with issues of the Law, but was by no means an excommunication from the Jewish community.

⁴⁰³ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 120-126.

been largely abandoned as allegorical by the time of Ignatius (ca. 110 CE), and the “Christian synagogue” vanished as the larger proportion of early Christians were ethnically non-Jewish and began to compete with Jews for converts across the empire.⁴⁰⁴

With the influence of Judaism waning, then, and with Christians developing their own theological concerns, early Christianity also moved into the sphere of Greco-Roman perspectives, which they often relied upon when their own perspectives, either inherited or *sui generis*, had not yet developed answers to ontological questions. By this it is not meant that because the majority of Christians were now Gentiles that early Christianity completely lost any connection to Jewish theology. On the contrary, their use of the Jewish scriptures continued to steep them in Jewish thought, as did the use of their own developing canon of texts, which also was rooted in a shared Jewish theological perspective. However, sensitivity is needed to discern the extent to which uniquely Christian theological perspectives were interpreted through Jewish theology or Greco-Roman philosophical speculation, and in detecting which interpretive matrix carried more weight in regard to various issues. Indeed, as will be shown, there was a spectrum across the early Christian communities that reflected a variety of positions that showed different degrees of integration of new Christian theology, older Jewish theology and Greco-Roman philosophical perspectives. The broader pattern, I think, shows a concern for the primacy of Christian theology, which is in turn interpreted and developed through a recognized continuity with Jewish theology, but where Jewish speculation was rejected or lacking, Greco-Roman philosophical concepts could be employed to further justify or interpret Christian theology. However, in regard to specific issues that were being

⁴⁰⁴ Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp. 124-25.

considered, a variety of outcomes could have been possible depending upon which interpretive worldview was granted the most authority.

With this in mind, the development of the early Christian worldview can also be seen as having a certain level of flexibility as it evolved into the second century. When looking at the early Christian texts of the first and second century, a pattern can be detected wherein the early Christians adapted the Jewish worldview in continuity with their own theological perspectives, while rejecting elements of Judaism, such as certain requirements of the Law that were not compatible with their beliefs about Christ. Similarly, where early Christianity came into contact with the Greco-Roman culture, early Christians considered the broader philosophical perspectives of the empire in the light of their faith. The key for this study is to recognize that early Christians were able to adopt and adapt those perspectives of the broader culture that did not conflict with their theological perspectives, while feeling free to reject what did conflict. Since the majority of early Christians were Greco-Romans with a greater interest in ontological speculation than what could be found in the Jewish heritage of early Christianity, it would have been natural for early Christians to default to the ontological speculation of the culture to answer questions the scriptures did not. More importantly, the variety of speculation within the Greco-Roman world meant that a number of ontological views would have been available to early Christians during the growth and expansion of their worldview. Thus, though having core theological and cosmological views, early Christians would have had many perspectives from Greco-Roman philosophy open to them for use in their speculations, and would therefore have also naturally had opportunity to argue and disagree.

Broadly speaking, then, the contribution of early Christian theology to cosmological speculation was to be found in its developing understanding of Christ and the Holy Spirit in relation to the divine. Although the early church was not to develop a full-blown “Trinitarian” theology until the fourth century, it is still obvious that from the New Testament period onward the early Christians considered both Christ and the Holy Spirit to be manifestations of God in the processes of salvation and redemption of his people. While the relationship between Christ, the Spirit and God was not speculated upon in much detail philosophically until into the third century, it is clear from the documents of the early Church that both Christ and the Holy Spirit were perceived to relate to the believer in the process of salvation, and that they were responsible in many ways for effecting the work of God in both the individual and the church. What is important for this study is to recognize the role that Christ and the Spirit played in the expanding early Christian cosmology, anthropology, and teleology. In addition, it must be noted elements of early Christian theology remained open to interpretation through Greco-Roman paradigms as early Christianity broke away from Judaism.

Beginning again with cosmology, the early Christian theological adaptation of the Jewish narrative was to involve Christ and the Holy Spirit in the process of creation and salvation.⁴⁰⁵ The gospel of John’s well known introduction associates Christ with the *logos* “through” which the world has been made, and Paul, too, mentions Christ as the agent of Creation who works for God, for whose glory it was created (I Cor. 6:8, Col.

⁴⁰⁵ Although early Christian speculation on the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation is quite significant, the role of the Holy Spirit in creation seems to develop slowly as an element in early Christian theology. The Spirit’s role seems to be primarily be linked to the “breath of life” given to humankind in the Garden (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.1.3), and limited to an acknowledgement of its participation in creation by association as a part of the Godhead (see Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*). In early Christianity, the Holy Spirit is far more important in its eschatological work as a sanctifier of human beings in the new eschatological age, and as the “founder” of the Church. Otherwise, it is early Christian association of Christ with the *logos* that plays the largest role in terms of the creation of the universe.

1:15-17). Moreover, for Paul and the Gospels there is an eschatological component to cosmology, one where Christ and the Spirit stand at an interval between the two ages, this “present” age and the “age to come”.⁴⁰⁶ Thus, the Gospels present the coming of Jesus as the inauguration of a new age of faith that replaces an older age where Israel continually failed to be obedient. Paul, as well, speaks of the present age dominated by sin and death (Eph. 1:21, Gal. 1:4) where the world itself is affected by the sin of humanity, leaving it in futility and corruption (Rom 8:20-21). Paul’s eschatological hope, then, was obviously found in Christ who will deliver humankind and creation from sin (Rom. 8:19-24, I Cor. 15:20-28) and destroy everything that exists in opposition to God. The book of Revelation, as well, shows most clearly the eschatological perspective of the New Testament churches, which see their salvation occurring simultaneously with the end of the present sinful age and the destruction of evil, followed by a new age where God’s Kingdom reigns supremely with redeemed humanity granted access to the heavenly city.⁴⁰⁷

This broad cosmological and eschatological perspective continues to be central to early Christian texts in the centuries to follow, but since space is limited, it best serves the purposes of this study to move on to the early Christian conception of human nature. In essence, for early Christians the creation, redemption and salvation of humanity through Christ and the Holy Spirit as God’s agents informed their understanding of human nature. In that regard, human anthropology, Christian teleology and Christian sexual ethics were an interrelated series of speculations that formed during the New Testament period and continued through well into the fourth century when monasticism appeared. As noted

⁴⁰⁶ Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, p. 402.

⁴⁰⁷ For a good survey of the eschatological perspective of Revelation see R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

earlier, the early Christians had adopted the perspectives of their Jewish heritage where humankind was created by God in his image, had subsequently rebelled and had needed to be obedient to God in order to avoid his wrath. It is clear that early Christian sexual ethics also adopted the Jewish concern for avoiding idolatry and behaviour dishonouring of God. However, unlike its Jewish heritage, early Christian theological speculation did in fact create an ontological link between sin, human nature, redemption and morality, largely because of the roles attributed to Christ and the Holy Spirit. It was through their activity that sin was overcome, and their presence in the individual was the mark of God's image restored in humanity.

In particular, Paul's connection of sin with human nature both stands in continuity with the ancient Jewish narrative of Genesis and also employs the philosophical language of Greco-Roman morality. On the one hand, he clearly links sin with the fall of Adam in Genesis, and the continuation of sin in the present era with the reign of sin within the individual. In both Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15, Paul argues that sin, in the sense of an inherent tendency that rebels against God,⁴⁰⁸ found its origins in Adam's rebellion in the Garden and spread to all of humanity through their heritage with the first human. Again, though, in typical Jewish fashion, Paul does not include any ontological speculation about how sin is spread through humanity or how it exercises power over the individual. It is clear, too, that Paul conceives of the human individual as an amalgamation of an inner spiritual component and an outer physical component (I Cor. 7:34, II Cor. 7:1, Rom 8:10-11), and that salvation through Christ occurs in regard to both

⁴⁰⁸ Christian theologians and secular scholars have endlessly debated the nature of this inherent sinful tendency, but the fact is that Paul does not elaborate on it enough to establish a clear definition, or even to understand what Paul understood it to be. For a good survey of the nature of sin in Paul's letters see B.N. Fisk, "PORNEUEIN AS body Violation: The Unique Nature of Sexual Sin in I Corinthians 6.18", *New Testament Studies* 42 (1996): 540-58.

body and soul. However, the crux of the issue for Paul is the eschatological delay that has occurred in the process of salvation and redemption. In essence, Christ's death and resurrection overcame the sin (and its consequences) that exists within the body (Rom. 8:1-4, I Cor. 15:42-49), and the coming of the Holy Spirit to the individual has solved the problem of sin's existence within the soul (Rom. 8:5-8, I Cor. 6:19, I Cor 15:45) by providing a union with Christ's spirit. Yet despite the fact that the human spirit has been renewed by its union with Christ through faith (Gal. 2:20, Rom. 8:9-11), the physical resurrection of the believer's body is still to come at the day of Judgement (I Cor. 15:50-52). For Paul, this means that the transformation of the human soul is immanent and present, while the transformation of the body is yet to come with the future resurrection guaranteed by Christ's resurrection (I Cor. 15:12-19).

While this survey of Paul's theology may have seemed superfluous, it is actually very important to the present study. For in reminding ourselves of Paul's eschatological delay for the salvation of the body we can see the root of how sin and the body become connected ontologically in Paul's thought. While the Holy Spirit has provided for the redemption and sanctification of the soul, the body still remains a dangerous component of the human person that has yet to be fully sanctified.⁴⁰⁹ Sin still remains in the body, though again, unexplained in any comprehensive way by Paul, and he requires that the body be controlled in order to prevent that sin from regaining sovereignty over the individual. For example, in Romans 6, after associating the believer's baptism with the death of Christ, Paul argues that there is still a danger for sin to return to "exercise dominion in your mortal bodies" (Rom. 6:12) because the believer has yet to attain the final bodily resurrection of Christ. Further, in trying to come to terms with the sinful

⁴⁰⁹ Witherington, *Tapestry*, p. 25.

impulses of the believer, and how those impulses relate to the Law, Paul describes the powerful force of sin within himself (Rom 7:14-25) that exists primarily in his body (*soma*) and flesh (*sarx*).⁴¹⁰ The body, then, must be considered “dead” with Christ and be submitted to the Holy Spirit in order to produce righteousness (Rom 8: 9-13). Similarly, in I Corinthians, Paul also argues that the freedom that Christ and the Spirit have provided to the soul by no means liberates the body to be abused or licentious,⁴¹¹ and the body must be recognized as the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (6:19) and duly “offered” in honour of God lest the sin that still dwells there prevents the inheritance of God’s kingdom (6:9). In Galatians, as well, Paul warns against using the freedom found in Christ for the soul as an opportunity for self-indulgence (5:13). Rather, the believer should submit the whole person, body and soul, to the Holy Spirit, which still competes with the sin that yet dwells in the body before resurrection (Gal. 5:16-26).

What is of great interest to our study is that in his warnings against the sin that continues to remain in the body prior to final resurrection, Paul’s language emphasizes the danger of the body and flesh. For example, here is a list of Pauline texts, which make clear reference to sin, and its connection with the body:

⁴¹⁰ There are a variety of interpretations of this passage, with scholars being primarily concerned with identifying the “I” to which Paul refers. Does the “I” refer to an autobiographical expression of Paul? Does it refer to pre-conversion existence or post-conversion existence? Does it refer to existence under the Law or after the gift of the Holy Spirit? Does it refer to Jews or Christians? For a survey of the many solutions to this question see J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 469-72, or J. Lambrecht, *The Wretched “I” and its Liberation: Paul in Romans 7 and 8* (Louvain: Peeters, 1992).

What is important for this study is that, whether referring to an “unregenerate” or “regenerate” experience, Paul makes an ontological connection between sin and the body. If interpreted as “I” under the Law (prior to faith in Christ), sin dwelling in the body was aroused by the Law (7:5,17), and if the “I” is in Christ (under the power of the Spirit) one should not submit to the sin that still exists in the body (8:13). In either interpretation it is still clear that Paul sees sin as an element of human anthropology that affects the body.

⁴¹¹ In I Corinthians 6:12-13 Paul writes: “ ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything. ‘Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,’ and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication (*porneia*) but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. (Romans 6:6-12, NRSV)

While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. (Romans 7:5-14, NRSV)⁴¹²

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to

⁴¹² See n. 413.

the flesh, to live according to the flesh - for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:3-13, NRSV)

"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (I Corinthians 6:12-20, NRSV)

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. (I Corinthians 15:50-53, NRSV)

If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:15-21, NRSV)

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion,

like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. (I Thessalonians 4:1-5, NRSV)

This by no means indicates that Paul considered the body alone to be the locus of sin in the individual; he also considered the soul or spirit of the person to have had sin dwelling in it and in need of redemption (e.g. Rom. 7:22-23, 8:10; II Cor. 5:6-8). However, due to the delay of the eschatological salvation of the body, it is clear for Paul that the body remains a place of danger for sin to reassert its sovereignty in the present. In Paul's mind, one must submit to the work of the Holy Spirit to make one's union with Christ complete, both in body and soul, and moreover, to give in to bodily desire is to give into the sin that still remains in the body.

The most fascinating aspect of Pauline theology is that while retaining a uniquely Christian interpretation of Jewish salvation, and without extensive cosmological and ontological speculation similar to that which the Greco-Roman world engaged in, Paul has presented the body as a location of danger. In addition, Paul does not create a systematic ontology of the relationship between the body and soul, nor give a philosophical explanation of human nature. What he does do is present a unique interpretation of the Jewish worldview as it is now understood in light of the salvation of Christ and the operation of the Holy Spirit. For Paul, the sin of disobedience found in the Garden of Eden becomes the key element of human existence that Christ overcomes, and it has existed in humankind since the Fall. Salvation, then, includes the Jewish notions of avoiding God's wrath and re-establishing human obedience to God, but it also includes the *transformation of human nature* through union with Christ and responsiveness to the

presence of the Holy Spirit. That transformation, then, is both imminent and delayed, as the soul is transformed in the present, but the body must wait until resurrection for its transformation into a “spiritual body” (I Cor.15: 43-44).⁴¹³ In terms of sexual behaviour, then, Paul thinks that those who live outside of God’s salvation in Christ and the Spirit, such as the Gentiles, continue to live under the sovereignty of sin and their sexual behaviour reflects their obviously immoral nature. Thus, as has been discussed, *porneia*, or behaviour such as incest, adultery, homosexual behaviour, visitation of prostitutes and licentiousness in general, is a reflection of the domination of sin found within the body and soul.

It is ironic, then, that early Christianity developed an ethic of sexual austerity alongside their Greco-Roman counterparts, but based upon an entirely different set of cosmological, anthropological and teleological speculations. While the Greco-Roman world developed highly speculative systems of philosophy to determine the nature of the universe and, therefore, how to live compatibly in it to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*), the early Christians saw the Christ event and the appearance of the Holy Spirit in continuity with the Jewish narrative where humanity and the world attempted to live faithfully to their Creator. Indeed, during the middle of the second century, it is precisely over this narrative that the Gnostic controversy occurred, with many early Christians attempting to blend the philosophical speculation of the Greco-Roman world with the early Christian narrative of salvation. Regardless, early Christianity generally continued to appeal to the New Testament’s perspectives on the nature of the universe, humankind

⁴¹³ The term “spiritual body” (*σῶμα πνευματικόν*) is intended to represent the physical body that has been resurrected without the sinful tendency to rebellion, and which is now ruled by the Holy Spirit. See Fee, *I Corinthians*, p.787-88.

and God's plans for salvation, and in addition, early Christianity through into the end of the third century continued to adhere to an austere sexual ethic as a whole.

IV. The Sexual Ethics of Early Christianity: The Apostolic Fathers

It has been mentioned several times thus far that early Christianity in the New Testament period did not possess an elaborate or extensive ontology of body and soul that linked anthropology to sexual ethics. The ambiguous nature of the New Testament's speculation on body and soul, as well, though obviously locating a tendency for sinful disobedience somewhere in human nature, only suggested to early Christians that until the body achieved full resurrection, sin still lay active within the body and needed to be subject to the soul, which had been redeemed by the work of Christ and lived in the present empowered by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, early Christians were left to simply assume their sexual conduct should reflect obedience to God, as well as the physical and spiritual transformation of their nature that, to some extent, still had sinful tendencies due to its unfulfilled eschatological state. What is striking, as well, is the similarity of early Christian sexual ethics to the Greco-Roman positions on sexuality. For Greeks and Romans, too, the body should be controlled by the soul, but instead of being inspired by the need for obedience to God, their goal was to direct the individual towards a rational virtue as opposed to an irrational complex of vice. For many scholars this similarity indicates a dependence of early Christianity upon the culture for its sexual norms. But as has now been demonstrated in this chapter, though arriving at similar position on sexuality, early Christians did so via a completely different avenue of adapting the Jewish narratives about a monotheistic worldview to their theological considerations about Christ and the Spirit instead of ontological and cosmological speculation.

Moreover, the fact that early Christians often used Greco-Roman wisdom to defend, explain or justify their beliefs and practices does not imply a causal relationship, but a relationship of convenience. First, out of the necessities of communication, early Christians needed to find a commonly understood language in order to communicate their message. In that regard, since early Christianity happened to be steeped in Jewish narratives and not Greco-Roman philosophical speculation, it would have been necessary to adopt a certain amount of common Hellenistic symbolic language in order to be understood by those outside their group. Second, in a culture where a group is facing persecution, or simply needing to gain credibility, it would be advantageous to demonstrate the compatibility of their worldview with the accepted philosophical wisdom of the broader culture. In that respect, for example, if early Christians can speak of their own faith and practices in the terms of, say Platonic or Aristotelian philosophy, then those Christian beliefs would seem to agree with the wisdom of the culture, or at the very least, seem less alien to observers and increase Christian credibility and authority. In the case of early Christianity, considering its quick spread into non-Jewish areas of the culture and assuming its relatively quick break from Judaism by the early part of the second century, it is reasonable to argue that early Christians used Greco-Roman language as a cross-cultural tool to gain converts, as a means of adapting early Christian theology to a non-Jewish context and as a tool to defend itself from attacks upon its credibility. The difficulty early Christianity faced, then, was in working out just how much of the Greco-Roman worldview could be adapted without compromising its identity found in its Jewish heritage and its developing theological perspectives on Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, when it comes to the early Christian perspectives on sexuality during the first three centuries of the Common Era, the similarities with Greco-Roman perspectives continued to remain present. Both argued for restraint, both argued that the purpose of sexual intercourse was for procreation, both appealed to the need for personal virtue and both appealed to the need for sexual responsibility in the community. More importantly, the early Christian texts also show a concern for preserving the uniquely Christian perspective on sexuality while incorporating the language of the Greco-Roman world in order to give their view authority. In particular, while simultaneously urging the Judeo-Christian restraint to avoid *porneia*, the early Christian texts appealing for sexual restraint also began to echo the Greco-Roman terminology that located the root of irrational behaviour in the desire (*epithumia*) linked to the natural functions of the body, and the temperance (*sophrosune*) that results from self control. For example, the Didache explains that the “Way of Life” includes abstinence from “fleshly and bodily lusts” (τῶν σαρκικῶν καὶ σωματικῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν),⁴¹⁴ something easily understood by Greeks and Romans, but also includes among a list of prohibited behaviours the *porneia* associated with idolatrous sexual behaviour.⁴¹⁵ Moreover, the Didache even connects the two, stating “be not lustful for lust leads to fornication” (μη γίνου ἐπιθυμητῆς, ὁρθηγεῖς γὰρ ἡ ἐπιθυμία προῖ τῆν πορνείαν), obviously including the New Testament’s use of *porneia* for sexual conduct that dishonours God. Clement of Rome, too, points to desire (*epithumia*) as the root of wickedness and locates the achievement of temperance (*sophrosune*) in the soul’s mastery of the flesh:

⁴¹⁴ *Didache* 1.4.

⁴¹⁵ *Didache* II.2.

May God, who sees all things, and who is the Ruler of all spirits and the Lord of all flesh — who chose our Lord Jesus Christ and us through Him to be a peculiar people — grant to every soul that calls upon His glorious and holy Name, faith, fear, peace, patience, long-suffering, self-control (ε)γκρατεϊαν), purity (α)γνεϊαν), and sobriety (σφροσύνη), to the well-pleasing of His Name, through our High Priest and Protector, Jesus Christ, by whom be to Him glory, and majesty, and power, and honor, both now and for evermore. Amen.⁴¹⁶

He also sees sexual immorality rooted in youthful lust (*epithumia*) which can be overcome through meekness of spirit and continence (*enkrateia*), though here *enkrateia* clearly does not refer to celibacy.⁴¹⁷

Polycarp's letter to the Philippians, which is one of the earliest indications of the presence of celibacy, also sees virtue as partly rooted in self control (*enkrateia*) and Polycarp's encouragements for sexual purity for virgins also included an exhortation to young men to be blameless by avoiding desire (*epithumia*), since it wars against the Spirit to produce *porneia*:

In like manner, let the young men also be blameless in all things, being especially careful to preserve purity, and keeping themselves in, as with a bridle, from every kind of evil. For it is well that they should be cut off from the lusts that are in the world, since every lust (*epithumia*) wars against the Spirit; “and “neither fornicators (*pornoi*), nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, shall inherit the kingdom of God,” nor those who do things inconsistent and unbecoming. Wherefore, it is needful to abstain from all these things, being subject to the presbyters and deacons, as unto God and Christ. The virgins also must walk in a blameless and pure conscience.⁴¹⁸

Clearly Polycarp is picking up Paul's language in Galatians, as well as Paul's concern for moral purity that avoids both idolatry and sexual behaviour that dishonours God. Indeed, one could even argue that this passage is ambiguous in its reference to celibacy, as “virgins” in this case could be taken straightforwardly as simply unmarried girls who

⁴¹⁶ *I Clem.* III.4.

⁴¹⁷ *I Clem.* XXX. Clement uses the term *enkrateia* for both sexual restraint and for celibate continence.

⁴¹⁸ Polycarp, *To the Philippians*, 5.

must also avoid disobedience to God and the violation of their sanctity. Still, one cannot help notice the adoption of the Greco-Roman language of virtue and self-mastery (*enkrateia*) in regard to sexual ethics.

Looking to the apologists in the second century, it can be seen that the early Christians were appealing to their sexual austerity to demonstrate the credibility of their faith amidst persecution and ridicule. The apology of Justin Martyr has already been examined for its witness to the presence of celibates,⁴¹⁹ but it also bears witness to the continuing sexual austerity found among the early Christians. In particular, he appeals to the early Christian rejection of lust (*epithumia*) as being similar to the philosophical standards of the culture, and superior to the mythological standards of the popular traditions of the people. For example, in his *First Apology* Justin appeals to the high standards set by Jesus, where even looking upon a woman with lust (*epithumia*) is adultery. In addition, he also points to how many formerly immoral pagans had converted to Christianity and now been able to reform their intemperate sexual habits.⁴²⁰ In his *Discourse to the Greeks*, as well, he asserts that Christ, the divine *logos*, is the means to fulfill the highest calling of philosophy where the passions and desires of the body are overcome, the soul purified, and the desire (*epithumia*) that is at the root of every evil is banished, leaving the soul at peace and serene.⁴²¹ In addition, Justin is quick to point out

⁴¹⁹ See Chapter Two, p. 66.

⁴²⁰ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, XV also mentions celibates. “And many, both men and women, who have been Christ’s disciples from childhood, remain pure at the age of sixty or seventy years; and I boast that I could produce such from every race of men. For what shall I say, too, of the countless multitude of those who have reformed intemperate habits, and learned these things? For Christ called not the just nor the chaste to repentance, but the ungodly, and the licentious, and the unjust; His words being, ‘I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’”

⁴²¹ Justin Martyr, *Discourse to the Greeks* 5, “Come, be taught; become as I am, for I, too, was as you are. These have conquered me — the divinity of the instruction, and the power of the Word: for as a skilled serpent-charmer lures the terrible reptile from his den and causes it to flee, so the Word drives the fearful passions of our sensual nature from the very recesses of the soul; first driving forth lust, through which every ill is begotten — hatreds, strife, envy, emulations, anger, and such like. Lust being once banished, the

the superiority of Christian sexual morality over against the broader culture. He refutes the pagan mockery of the virgin birth by arguing that the virginity of Mary insured that the incarnation of Christ was not founded upon lust (*epithumia*), whereas the divine children of Jupiter could make no such claim.⁴²² Moreover, the Greeks and Romans had been enslaved to lustful passions by fallen angels, whom early Christians now considered demons the Greeks worshipped as gods.⁴²³ Even the epics of Homer are not spared by Justin, and he lists the numerous lusts of the epic heroes that led to war and immorality; “of such virtue,” he comments, “I am not covetous”.⁴²⁴ In short, Justin attempted to prove that early Christian sexual morals were equal to those of the culture’s best thinkers, and far superior to the realities of the popular culture.

Justin Martyr is typical of the kinds of comments found among the apologists. Athenagoras (ca. 170 CE), for example, in his *Plea for the Christians*, argues that the stories and myths of the gods are absurd because anything truly divine would not engage in the lustful activities one finds among the gods, or be found with attributes such as anger, appetite or sexual desire.⁴²⁵ The apologist Theophilus, as well, condemns Saturn

soul becomes calm and serene. And being set free from the ills in which it was sunk up to the neck, it returns to Him who made it. For it is fit that it be restored to that state whence it departed, whence every soul was or is.”

⁴²² Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, XXXIII.

⁴²³ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, V. “But the angels transgressed this appointment, and were captivated by love of women, and begat children who are those that are called demons; and besides, they afterwards subdued the human race to themselves, partly by magical writings, and partly by fears and punishments they occasioned, and partly by teaching them to offer sacrifices, and incense, and libations, of which things they stood in need after they were enslaved by lustful passions; and among men they sowed murders, wars, adulteries, intemperate deeds, and all wickedness. Whence also the poets and mythologists, not knowing that it was the angels and those demons who had been begotten by them that did these things to men, and women, and cities, and nations, which they related, ascribed them to God himself, and to those who were accounted to be his very offspring, and to the offspring of those who were called his brothers, Neptune and Pluto, and to the children again of these their offspring. For whatever name each of the angels had given to himself and his children, by that name they called them.”

⁴²⁴ Justin Martyr, *Discourse to the Greeks*, I.

⁴²⁵ Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians*, XXI. Athenagoras presents an extensive set of quotes from Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* demonstrating the sexual immorality of the gods.

and Jupiter for their incest, lust and adultery,⁴²⁶ and mocks Greek creation stories for their speculation that the world had come into existence as the by-product of the sexual exploits of the gods.⁴²⁷ Athenagoras also defends the Christians against the charges of sexual immorality by reminding Marcus Aurelius that the Christians are in agreement with the philosophers of his age who mock the promiscuity of the gods and the broader populace of the empire.⁴²⁸ As Justin Martyr did, both Athenagoras and Theophilus also appeal to the superior standards of Christian sexual ethics, asserting that even lust with the heart is a violation,⁴²⁹ and, interestingly, Athenagoras mentions an early Christian prohibition that condemns any who perform the “holy kiss” a second time as one who has sinned under the influence of desire and pleasure.⁴³⁰ Finally, he even makes it clear that Christians placed boundaries on their sexual appetites by allowing intercourse only for the purpose of procreation,⁴³¹ which was undoubtedly familiar to Marcus Aurelius who was known for his philosophical knowledge and activities.

⁴²⁶ Theophilus, *Letter to Autolytus*, 1.9.

⁴²⁷ Theophilus, *Letter to Autolytus*, 2.12. Here Theophilus mentions Erebus, the son of Chaos, who in turn fathered a series of other primordial gods that emerged as metaphysical manifestations of the universe, and that the God of the Christians would never have stooped to use pleasure or desire as a means of creating the world.

⁴²⁸ Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians*, XXXIV.

⁴²⁹ For example, Theophilus, *Letter to Autolytus* III.13, “And concerning chastity, the holy word teaches us not only not to sin in act, but not even in thought, not even in the heart to think of any evil, nor look on another man’s wife with our eyes to lust after her.” Also III. 15, “But far be it from Christians to conceive any such deeds; for with them temperance dwells, self-restraint is practiced, monogamy is observed, chastity is guarded, iniquity exterminated, sin extirpated, righteousness exercised, law administered, worship performed, God acknowledged: truth governs, grace guards, peace screens them; the holy word guides, wisdom teaches, life directs, God reigns.”

⁴³⁰ In defending against accusations of incest, Athenagoras writes “On behalf of those, then, to whom we apply the names of brothers and sisters, and other designations of relationship, we exercise the greatest care that their bodies should remain undefiled and uncorrupted; for the Logos again says to us, “If any one kiss a second time because it has given him pleasure, [he sins];” adding, “Therefore the kiss, or rather the salutation, should be given with the greatest care, since, if there be mixed with it the least defilement of thought, it excludes us from eternal life.” *Plea for the Christians*, 32.

⁴³¹ Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians*, XXXIII. “Therefore, having the hope of eternal life, we despise the things of this life, even to the pleasures of the soul, each of us reckoning her his wife whom he has married according to the laws laid down by us, and that only for the purpose of having children. For as the husbandman throwing the seed into the ground awaits the harvest, not sowing more upon it, so to us the procreation of children is the measure of our indulgence in appetite.”

There is little need beyond this point to demonstrate the austerity of the early Christian sexual ethic. The importance of this discussion, however, is two-fold. First, it demonstrated that while very compatible with the Greco-Roman sexual ideals, the early Christian sexual ethic was motivated by its own theological adaptation of the Jewish concern for avoiding idolatry and behaving with conduct that does not dishonour God. In addition, it was the belief in the sanctification of body and soul through union with Christ and empowerment by the Holy Spirit that not only led the early Christians to feel the need to avoid idolatry and behaviour dishonouring to God, but also to feel that their behaviours should reflect the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the transformation of their own nature. The adaptation of the Greco-Roman language pertaining to sexuality was not born out of an adoption of Greco-Roman philosophical speculation, but out of a need to communicate cross culturally with credibility. With this in mind, it is difficult to agree with scholars, such as Brown or Shaw,⁴³² who see the origins of Christian sexual sensibilities as a simple adoption of the broader Greco-Roman perspectives. Second, this discussion also should have demonstrated that social theories that define ascetic behaviour as resistance to cultural norms, or as forces for change within a given power structure, are not supported by the historical data, at least in terms of early Christianity. Rather than resisting the Greco-Roman norms of sexual austerity and advocacy of sex for procreation, early Christianity, through a process of its own, engaged in a set of norms that were not only in complete agreement with the culture, but in some cases even more strict in their enforcement of those norms. There was simply no challenge by early Christians to the sexual sensibilities found in the philosophical writings of the culture. Working from the redefinition of asceticism developed in chapter one, it must also be

⁴³² See Chapter One, pp. 28-29.

remember that ascetics make up only a *minority* of the population within a given religious group. If that is the case, then, the engagement of celibacy by that minority of early Christians did not challenge either the broader sexual ethic of early Christianity or the broader sexual ethics of the Roman Empire. Rather, as will be demonstrated, the asceticism of early Christianity embraced the sexual austerity of the early Christian church, and attempted to make the reality of the transformation of human nature in Christ a present and immanent reality through the ascetic discipline of body and soul.

V. Theological Motivations for Early Christian Celibacy

In searching for the motives of early Christian celibacy it is critical to focus the examination of the early Christian texts upon the distinction between sexual morality that would be expected of all early Christians and the ideal of celibacy associated with ascetic discipline and effort. Recalling the redefinition of asceticism offered in chapter one, it must be remembered that the negative renunciation of a permissible natural act is one of the central elements of ascetic behaviour. In the case of early Christian celibacy, the key question is to ask what would motivate an early Christian to renounce sexual intercourse when it was a permissible (within the proper bounds of marriage) and expected part of fulfilling God's command to procreate? If it were possible, as early Christian texts seem to argue, for every Christian to avoid sexual activity that was connected with idolatry, or a clear dishonour to God, why would sexual activity be renounced altogether? And, if the dangers of sin associated with the pre-resurrection body could be overcome through one's union with Christ and submission to the Holy Spirit, why would some early Christians still feel it necessary to be celibate as well? In short, if sexual intercourse would be safely conducted within the proper boundaries set by theology and devotion to God, why

give it up completely? The answer to these questions can be found by a review of the texts that were examined in chapter two, but now they are to be examined in the light of the proper early Christian context where the ambiguities of the texts can be gleaned for the early Christian motivation for celibacy.

A. The New Testament Texts and the Apostolic Fathers

The first group of texts examined were those from the New Testament and from the period of the Apostolic Fathers. Knowing that these texts worked from an assumed sexual austerity rooted in the avoidance of idolatry and dishonourable conduct, and from a distinctly Christian expectation that human nature could be transformed through Christ and the Holy Spirit, we can see that for early Christians living before the mid-second century, sexual abstinence was embraced as part of the broader Christian expectation of sexual purity or as a choice in the hopes of making the sanctification of their human nature, both physical and spiritual, a more imminent reality in the present. For example, in I Cor. 7, all Christians were expected to abstain from improper intercourse out of the obligation to avoid *porneia*, including young people who had not married, those who had married but now remained abstinent or had divorced, and widowed individuals as well.⁴³³ Yet there was another group who had chosen to embrace celibacy *unnecessarily*, and had either divorced over the matter and had attempted to convince others to do the same or go unmarried, apparently defending their actions on the basis that “it is well for a man not to

⁴³³ In this instance, Paul is using *enkrateia* to simply refer to sexual control, and not celibacy. For example, in I Cor. 7:8-9, Paul encourages the unmarried and widows who cannot exercise *enkrateia* to marry. At this point, Paul does not (intentionally, I think) make a distinction between sexual renunciation as an ascetic practice and avoiding sexual intercourse as moral expectation of all members of the church in order to prevent *porneia*. Ultimately, he sees advantages for celibacy in its ability to allow undistracted devotion and sanctification in Christ, but self-control (*enkrateia*) is expected of everyone in the church. In that respect, Paul does but does not think that abstinence is required for sanctification of the body to happen, and the use of the term *enkrateia* by the celibates in Corinth to mean complete sexual renunciation is “allowed” by Paul so long as they do not attempt to enforce it unnecessarily upon others.

touch a woman”(I Cor. 7:1). Paul’s apparent lack of response is puzzling, as he simply agrees that it is better to be unmarried, since to be unmarried leaves the individual free from “anxiety” about “the affairs of the Lord” (7:32-35). However, Gordon Fee argues that Paul’s statement is made in continuity with 7:29-31 and its clear presentation of eschatological immanence, and, therefore, the “anxiety about the affairs of the Lord (τὰ τῶν κυρίου) more properly reflects a concern over their new eschatological existence in Christ.⁴³⁴ Under this interpretation, it could be said that those who chose celibacy were concerned for the state of their eschatological existence, and felt that only the unmarried were free to be completely “holy in body and spirit” (v.34), while attempting to enforce celibacy on those who could not, or did not, want to be celibate. Still, the celibates in Corinth, it seems, felt the need to abstain from intercourse in order to achieve more fully the sanctification of body and soul in the present prior to the return of Christ.

I Timothy, as well, reflects a similar situation. There were widows who obviously no longer needed to be sexually active for procreation, and therefore were required to avoid sexual conduct to prevent *porneia*, as any Christian should. But, there also seemed to be young women choosing celibacy and wishing to be enrolled in the class of widows, likely in order to receive the same charity that the widows did since they did not have families of their own. The author of I Timothy shows a clear concern that a young girl or widow might still be under the influence of “sensual desire,”⁴³⁵ which would lead her to an alienation from Christ. Assuming a similar eschatological interpretation as the one used for I Cor. 7, and knowing that I Tim. 4:3 indicates that eschatological fervour had

⁴³⁴ Fee, *I Corinthians*, p. 343.

⁴³⁵ The Greek term here for “sensual desire” is *katastrhniaσwsin*, from *strhniaw*, which according to Bauer’s *Greek-English Lexicon* and Liddel & Scott was a rare word used to convey the image of “running riot” or “wanton sensuality.”

also led some to reject marriage,⁴³⁶ it makes sense to argue that in Asia Minor also some Christians had chosen to renounce sexual intercourse in order to aid in the sanctification of their nature. In this case, though, the author of I Timothy seems sceptical that the desires and sin of the body have lost their potency until age and maturity in Christ have proven it.⁴³⁷

The passage in Revelation 14, as well, though not indicating any concern for the broader sexual norms of the early Christian communities, does indicate that the practice of sexual renunciation was meant to be an aid to the transformation of body and soul. The one hundred and forty four thousand that had remained faithful in John's apocalyptic vision were described as those "who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins" (Rev. 14:4). While the argument made earlier was that though this reference is clearly not historical in nature, it does reflect the honour granted to celibates, in that "virgins" were included in a literary representation of God's redeemed people. The passage also gives support to the thesis that celibacy was thought to aid in the transformation of the individual into the eschatologically redeemed person in Christ. The full description of these "virgins" in Rev. 14:13 follows: "they have been redeemed from humankind as the first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth was no lie found; they are blameless." This description, in fact, is classic early Christian language of the results of God's transformation of his people through Christ. They are the first fruits of a

⁴³⁶ I Tim. 4:1-3 reads "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth."

⁴³⁷ I Tim 5: 9-10: "Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way."

new creation⁴³⁸ and their nature has been transformed to the point where there is no guile in them whatsoever and they are considered pure as one who is blameless. Again, though not historical, this passage does show that within some areas of the early church, at least in the areas of Asia Minor where the letter would have been read, the practice of celibacy was clearly understood as one that aids in the transformation and sanctification of the individual in God's kingdom.

The concern for the sanctification of both body and soul is carried forward into the texts of the Apostolic Fathers, as well, and so is every indication that some Christians considered celibacy as a means of present and immanent transformation of their nature. In his appeal for unity in the Church at Corinth, Clement asks that those who dwell in continence refrain from boasting since it is a gift granted to them by God. What is of interest for this study is that immediately following this appeal, Clement justifies it by reminding those who boast to have humility in light of the dramatic transformation that has taken place in them:

Let him that is pure in the flesh not grow proud of it, and boast, knowing that it was another who bestowed on him the gift of continence (*enkrateia*). Let us consider, then, brethren, of what matter we were made, who and what manner of beings we came into the world, as it were out of a sepulcher, and from utter darkness. He who made us and fashioned us, having prepared His bountiful gifts for us before we were born, introduced us into His world. Since, therefore, we receive all these things from Him, we ought for everything to give Him thanks; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.⁴³⁹

Note how he focuses on the constitution of their nature prior to Christ, and the darkness from which they were saved. Again, some early Christians in Corinth were connecting celibacy with the transformation of the individual as part of salvation. Granted,

⁴³⁸ The connection between the redemption of the body and soul is often made by comparing the redeemed in Christ and the Spirit to the "first fruits", the best of the harvest offered to God. See especially, Rom. 8:23, 11:16; I Cor. 15:20-23; 2 Thess. 2:2.

⁴³⁹ I Clement, 38.

Clement's comments do not contain the imminence of eschatological expectations found in the New Testament, but it is safe to assume that the goal was still the transformation of the individual in the present.

Likewise Ignatius and Polycarp show that celibacy was rooted in the transformation of the individual in Christ. Ignatius' letter to Polycarp, like Clement, warns against celibates boasting in their achievement, lest their boasting undo the transformation that celibacy has granted. Ignatius writes "If he [the celibate one] boast, he is lost, and if it be made known to any except the bishop, he is polluted. (εὐφάρται)"⁴⁴⁰ The language of pollution (ἕξειρω)⁴⁴¹ is a clear indication of a detriment to one's nature, the opposite of purity in fact, showing celibacy's ability to affect personal purity and spiritual sanctity. Similarly, Polycarp's letter to the Philippians,⁴⁴² though ambiguous in its reference to celibates in his church,⁴⁴³ associates being cut off from lust (*epithumia*) as the root of purity and the transformation of the individual by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, he too quotes Paul's letter to the Galatians and how the spirit transforms the individual to naturally curb evil and lust, and how those lusts, which remain in the individual, war against the spirit. Whether his reference to virgins and young men who remain pure is an indication of celibacy as an ascetic practice or simply the sexual austerity expected of the unmarried is unclear, but his understanding of how life in Christ and the Spirit makes human nature pure is difficult to dismiss.

⁴⁴⁰ Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp*, V.

⁴⁴¹ According to Liddel & Scott, the Greek verb ἕξειρω, connotes a breaking down or disintegration, a corruption of some thing's being or makeup. Likewise, Kittel (*TDNT*, Vol. IX, p. 97) notes that Aristotle used the word as the antithesis of γίνομαι, or the acts of becoming, and Plato uses the negated form, α) ἕξειρω, as the conceptual marker for his indestructible soul (γυχη).

⁴⁴² Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians*, V.

⁴⁴³ See Chapter Two, p. 61ff.

Up to this point in early Christian history, around the first third of the second century, the speculation of the ontological relationship between the body and soul, lust, sin, and sanctification remained relatively simple. As we have seen from the New Testament and the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, the expectation is simply that transformation of the body and soul in Christ is a given, and should result in holiness in both body and soul. The delayed eschatological fulfillment of bodily resurrection meant that the body, and the sin that still remained there, made the “lusts” of the body an immanent danger, and every Christian was expected to walk carefully in regard to the desires of the body. However, there were, it seems, a small number of early Christians who believed that despite the fact that resurrection had not yet occurred, it was still possible to discipline the body to align its nature with the new nature granted to the soul through Christ and the Spirit. In that respect, the *enkrateia*, or self-mastery, expected of all Christians came to mean complete continence for some of them. Thus, in the texts of the early stages of Christian history, we see *enkrateia* being used to describe *both* the self-control expected of all Christians, and, occasionally, to describe the specific practice of sexual renunciation. As well, there is evidence of disagreements about the “superiority” of celibacy over the accepted sexual austerity of the broader population of early Christians, and whether it truly could transform nature in the way that the proponents of celibacy argued. Indeed, Paul’s comments in Corinthians demonstrate that some felt was celibacy superior while others did not. I Timothy shows a decided pessimism about celibacy’s superiority since young celibates were prohibited from being included on the list of widows until their “superiority” was proven through maturity and service. Revelation is fairly positive of celibacy’s potency and places the “virgins”

among the 144,000 among God's elect. Finally, Ignatius warns against boasting of superiority on the basis of celibacy, since it is a gift from God, but Hermas includes it among the chief of virtues.⁴⁴⁴

B. Mid to Late Second Century Texts

The historical picture, then, is one where by the early part of the second century there is some minor dispute over whether celibacy provides a superior purity or holiness to the body, with some engaging in it and the majority not. However, the picture of celibacy given by the apologists of the mid to late second century shows that a shift had occurred in the perception of celibacy in the early Christian church. In essence, celibacy had come to be accepted as superior to sexual austerity, and the discussion in the early church would move to another level where it was debated whether celibacy was *necessary* for the true Christian who had been transformed by Christ and the Holy Spirit. We know that this shift had occurred for two reasons. First, as we saw from chapter two of this thesis, we know that by the middle of the second century there were celibate Christians nearly everywhere that Christians existed, many of whom had been celibate all their lives. In addition, non-Christians, such as Galen, identified Christians by their embrace of celibacy, which would have been unusual even to the sexually austere Greeks and Romans, thus making the early Christian celibates quite unique. Second, early Christian texts on celibacy from the mid to late second century show the development of philosophical, theological and popular literature that was dialoguing intensely over the issue of celibacy as a necessity for true Christian transformation.

As the early Christians began to debate whether celibacy was a necessary element of sanctification, the nature of the debate also changed due to the fact that early

⁴⁴⁴ See Chapter Two, p. 65ff.

Christianity had lost its connection with Judaism early in the second century. The most important change was that in order to argue for or against the necessity of celibacy, an ontology of body and soul more sophisticated than the relatively simple speculations inherited from Judaism needed to be developed and incorporated with the early Christian teleology of salvation. What is interesting for this study is that since the early Christians did not have a complex ontology of human anthropology, or at least had only a very simple one inherited from Judaism, they seemed to have turned to the “default” ontology of human anthropology found in the Greco-Roman philosophy. Consequently, many of the positions on body and soul found in Greco-Roman philosophical speculation were employed by the early Christians of the second century in their debates over celibacy. Not only would this be natural for them, as the weakness of sin found in the body in Christian theology is more than compatible and similar with the weakness of the body accepted by Greco-Roman schools of philosophy, it would also lend credibility to their arguments as they could support their positions with the wisdom accepted by the culture as well as scripture. The result of this new situation in the second century was an increased sophistication of early Christian speculation and theology concerning the body and soul, and an intense debate over celibacy that contained a unique blend of early Christian theological argument and Greco-Roman philosophical perspectives.

First, before demonstrating the nature of the more sophisticated speculation on celibacy, it is important to remember that though employing the language of Greco-Roman philosophy to prove their positions, early Christians who held to the superiority of celibacy still understood it primarily in the light of salvation and a transformed existence. Looking again at the *Apocryphal Acts*, which date from the mid second to the early third

century, it is clear that while the more educated elements of early Christianity began to debate the matter of celibacy using the language and wisdom of Greco-Roman philosophy, the broader population of early Christianity retained the simpler view of the New Testament and Apostolic fathers. Looking through the texts of the *Apocryphal Acts*, which scholars generally agree represent popular notions of celibacy,⁴⁴⁵ a straightforward connection between celibacy and early Christian ideas about salvation is clearly detectable. For example, the story of Paul and Thecla included a sermon preached by Paul that was basically an adaptation of the Sermon on the Mount, only now praising celibacy.⁴⁴⁶ In it there was a clear reference to individuals who had remained chaste instead of marrying, as well as those who “have wives as not having them”, that is remain celibate even within marriage. More importantly, “Paul’s” sermon makes clear connections between celibacy and the teleological concepts of early Christian theology. His sermon links self-control (*enkrateia*) with the resurrection, grants the blessing of God’s presence to the chaste since they are God’s temple, and claims that the purity of the virgin is a work of salvation that will protect the celibate from the judgement of Christ.⁴⁴⁷ Moreover, the transformation of Thecla as a heroic individual is all the more potent due to her virginity, and her days as a celibate ascetic are marked by extra long life and the ability to heal.⁴⁴⁸ While not elaborating any ontology of body and soul in great detail, this story shows that celibacy was popularly seen as connected to the resurrection, salvation and the transformation of the individual. Paul and Thecla of the *Acts* are

⁴⁴⁵ See Chapter Two, pp. 71-75.

⁴⁴⁶ See Chapter Two, pp. 73-74.

⁴⁴⁷ *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 2:5-6.

⁴⁴⁸ A number of the manuscripts of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* contain stories of her performing miracles and healings, most ending their accounts with Thecla having spent seventy-two years as a celibate living in a cave.

literary characters designed to show the superiority of celibacy, and it is clear that many early Christian saw celibacy as a sign of a truly transformed life.

Carrying on, the centrality of the issue of living a transformed life in the present is also apparent from the more sophisticated speculations of early Christians of the educated and clerical classes. On the one hand, a more sophisticated speculation about how celibacy aids in the present transformation of human nature was based in the adaptation of Greco-Roman philosophical proofs concerning the body and soul. There was already a deep suspicion of the inherent weaknesses of the body and a soul could be led astray through sensation and the experience of pleasure, and early Christian apologists could easily appeal to that suspicion to support the practice of celibacy. Athenagoras, for example, in describing the sexual practices of Christians to Marcus Aurelius,⁴⁴⁹ tells the emperor that in hopes of gaining the teleological goal of “eternal life,” the early Christians despised the “pleasures of the soul,”⁴⁵⁰ and encouraged married men to relate to their wives “with a view to nothing more than procreation,” as the “limit set for the indulgence of lust (*epithumia*).” As was demonstrated in chapter three, to place firm boundaries on pleasure and desire and to engage in sexual activity for the sake of procreation was accepted as virtue in every major philosophical school, and Athenagoras knew that the Christian position would have be duly impressive since it agreed with the wisdom of Greece and Rome. Moreover, when Athenagoras mentions the celibates among the early Christians, he informs us that they have renounced sexual intercourse,

⁴⁴⁹ Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians*, 33-35.

⁴⁵⁰ Note the connection of pleasure with the *soul*. The early Christians have adopted the Greco-Roman notion that the source of desire and pleasure is the soul, and not the body. More will be said when the works of Clement of Alexandria are examined.

not only to be virtuous, but also “in the hope of being united more closely with God”.

Indeed, Athenagoras continues:

But if remaining in virginity and in the state of a eunuch brings [one] nearer to God, while the indulgence of carnal thought and desire leads away from Him, in those cases in which we shun the thoughts, much more do we reject the deeds.⁴⁵¹

In that regard, Athenagoras clearly shows that some early Christian celibates expected a transformation of their nature that included both the extirpation of lustful thoughts, as well as lustful deeds. It is easy to see, then, the adaptation of Greek philosophical language to explain a Christian theological perspective.

Justin Martyr, as well, engages his audience using Greek philosophical language to defend early Christian celibacy. The text examined in chapter two of this thesis from his *On the Resurrection* is a good example.⁴⁵² In describing celibate Christians who had refrained from sexual intercourse for their entire lives, Justin brings the discussion firmly into the Aristotelian speculation on the sexual appetites of the body. For Aristotle, the sexual appetites (*epithumia*) were present due to the function of the body for reproduction, and in Aristotle’s view the appropriate use of sexual intercourse should be based upon fulfilling that function and for no other reason.⁴⁵³ Thus Aristotle would see sexual intercourse in a controlled manner as a necessary part of human nature. Justin, however, indicates that some early Christians had considered human nature in light of eschatological salvation, and deemed the natural function of the sexual appetites to no longer be necessary. Indeed, for Justin, celibacy demonstrated that Aristotle did not understand that the natural function of a body part does not make its employment

⁴⁵¹ Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians*, 33.

⁴⁵² See Chapter Two, pp. 66-67.

⁴⁵³ See Chapter Three, pp. 138-44.

necessary. Justin defends the early Christians who practice celibacy by arguing that now that sexual desire is no longer necessary for those redeemed in Christ, desire has been made “lawless” for some, since it has no purpose in the new eschatological era. Indeed, Jesus was the ultimate example in that his coming was intended to destroy “lawless desire,”⁴⁵⁴ and though he submitted himself to other conditions of the body, that is, the need for food, drink and clothing, he did not submit to sexual desire because it was no longer necessary. Thus Justin adapts the Aristotelian view of the natural functions of the body in order to demonstrate that celibacy reflects the sanctification of the body, which is normally to be fully realized in the final resurrection, but now made immanently present through sexual renunciation. In that regard, Justin is very positive in his assessment of the possibility of eschatological transformation of the body in the present era.

On the other hand, there were also early Christians who developed a more sophisticated defence of celibacy on the basis of theological speculation, again firmly rooted in the idea that the practice of sexual renunciation reflected a sanctification of body in the present. A good example of this would be Eusebius’ account of the letter by Dionysius written to Pinytas, the second century Bishop of Corinth, asking Pinytas to refrain from making celibacy compulsory in his parish.⁴⁵⁵ Dionysius appeals to Pinytas’

⁴⁵⁴ “And our Lord Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, for no other reason than that He might destroy the begetting by lawless desire, and might show to the ruler that the formation of man was possible to God without human intervention. And when He had been born, and had submitted to the other conditions of the flesh, — I mean food, drink, and clothing, — this one condition only of discharging the sexual function He did not submit to; for, regarding the desires of the flesh, He accepted some as necessary, while others, which were unnecessary, He did not submit to. For if the flesh were deprived of food, drink, and clothing, it would be destroyed; but being deprived of lawless desire, it suffers no harm.” *On the Resurrection*, III.

⁴⁵⁵ Eusebius writes “Among these is inserted also another epistle addressed to the Cnosians, in which he exhorts Pinytus, bishop of the parish, not to lay upon the brethren a grievous and compulsory burden in regard to chastity, but to have regard to the weakness of the multitude. Pinytus, replying to this epistle, admires and commends Dionysius, but exhorts him in turn to impart some time more solid food, and to feed the people under him when he wrote again, with more advanced teaching, that they might not be fed continually on these milky doctrines and imperceptibly grow old under a training calculated for children. In this epistle also Pinytus’

pity to have compassion on the weakness of the average person, while Pinytus respectfully replies that Dionysius should allow the members of his congregation to grow in maturity. By using Paul's metaphor that a child can only consume milk but an adult can eat meat (I Cor. 3:1-2), and that the child can be ready for meat only after it has matured, Pinytas implies that celibacy represents the practice of those who have matured as individuals. Consequently, he encourages Dionysius to let his congregation mature instead of letting them "grow old under a training calculated for children." Interestingly, this passage shows that while debating whether celibacy was necessary for the mature Christian, it reveals that the crux of the issue seemed to be whether the body could be redeemed through "training" to such an extent in everyone, or only in the few. Dionysius seems to be sceptical of the redemption of the body among the broader population of early Christians, while Pinytus is more optimistic that all Christians should be capable of it.

Irenaeus seems to agree with Pinytus, but in a conditional manner based upon the most extensively systemized theological speculation in early Christianity to that point in Christian history. John Behr has provided the most recent scholarly summary of Irenaeus' theology and how it relates to asceticism,⁴⁵⁶ and lacking the space to explore Irenaeus' theology fully, it must suffice to summarize Irenaeus' views. Behr summarizes Irenaeus' theology as an "economy" of salvation where the development of the human race is an intentional series of acts by God in order to create humans fully in his image through a progressive program of maturation. In essence, God created humans knowing

orthodoxy in the faith and his care for the welfare of those placed under him, his learning and his comprehension of divine things, are revealed as in a most perfect image." *Church History*, IV. 23. 6-10.

⁴⁵⁶ See J. Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) and his article "Irenaeus AH 3.23.5 and the Ascetic Ideal" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37.4 (1993): 305-13.

that they would sin and fall, but that the process of redemption is what fully produces the image of God in freedom to love and serve God.⁴⁵⁷ In particular, both body and soul are sinful, but both are redeemed through Christ and the Holy Spirit. In that regard, for Irenaeus, Christ and the Spirit were both present to humankind at creation, though in a limited capacity during the previous sinful era, but only became fully present to them at the incarnation, resurrection and Pentecost.⁴⁵⁸ For Irenaeus, Behr argues, Christ and the Spirit are then fully engaged in the present eschatological era in the regeneration of both body and soul. Every individual, from birth to death to final resurrection, is in a process of growth, and for Irenaeus, the role of asceticism is a positive one, but conditional upon one's stage in the progress of growth and regeneration.⁴⁵⁹ For Irenaeus, if asceticism is

⁴⁵⁷ Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology*, pp. 68-85. Behr shows that Irenaeus saw human nature as slowly being perfected by the Holy Spirit as people became slowly accustomed to bearing the image of God, which they were clearly unready for in the Garden. For Irenaeus, through the gift of communion with the Spirit, humanity is progressively transformed into the image of God: "But we do now receive a certain portion of His Spirit, tending towards perfection, and preparing us for incorruption, being little by little accustomed to receive and bear God; which also the apostle terms "an earnest," that is, a part of the honor which has been promised us by God, where he says in the Epistle to the Ephesians, "In which you also, having heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation, believing in which we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance." This earnest, therefore, thus dwelling in us, renders us spiritual even now, and the mortal is swallowed up by immortality. "For you," he declares, "are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you." This, however does not take place by a casting away of the flesh, but by the impartation of the Spirit. For those to whom he was writing were not without flesh, but they were those who had received the Spirit of God, "by which we cry, Abba, Father." If therefore, at the present time, having the earnest, we do cry, "Abba, Father," what shall it be when, on rising again, we behold Him face to face; when all the members shall burst out into a continuous hymn of triumph, glorifying Him who raised them from the dead, and gave the gift of eternal life? For if the earnest, gathering man into itself, does even now cause him to cry, "Abba, Father," what shall the complete grace of the Spirit effect, which shall be given to men by God? It will render us like unto Him, and accomplish the will of the Father; for it shall make man after the image and likeness of God." (*Against Heresies*, 5.8.1)

⁴⁵⁸ Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology*, p. 59. Behr notes that for Irenaeus there is a distinct difference between the "animation" provided by the Holy Spirit to humankind in the Garden, and the "vivification", or formation of a truly real life lived in the Spirit. Speaking of the Gnostic Ebionites, Irenaeus writes: "... they remain in that Adam who had been conquered and was expelled from paradise: not considering that, at the beginning of our formation in Adam, that breath of life which proceeded from God, having been united to what had been fashioned, animated the man, and manifested him as a being endowed with reason; so also, in [the times of] the end, the Word of the Father and the Spirit of God, having become united with the ancient substance of Adam's formation, rendered man living and perfect, receptive of the perfect Father, in order that as in the natural [Adam] we all were dead, so in the spiritual we may all be made alive." (*Against Heresies*, 5.1.3)

⁴⁵⁹ Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology*, pp. 111-15.

engaged before one is ready, or before a full knowledge and union with Christ has occurred, asceticism is of no avail to the individual. Thus, in his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus speaks of Encratites in the church⁴⁶⁰ and how they attributed sin to the body and God's creation without the possibility of redemption. Further, Irenaeus explains that the Encratites are simply immature and not ready for asceticism, as they do not fully understand God yet, nor the role asceticism plays in the maturity of the individual. As such, the Encratites engage their asceticism with their immature minds and bodies and, in his opinion, shown a counterfeit repentance that seeks to punish the body instead of humbly accepting regeneration.⁴⁶¹ The true celibate simply responds to the Spirit, in both body and soul, and the harshness of the Encratites' position simply reflects a nature that has not yet been truly transformed. In that regard, Irenaeus is quite positive about the possibility of human nature being transformed in Christ and the Spirit, but insistent upon patience and wisdom to determine whether one is mature enough to engage in celibacy.⁴⁶²

The most important witness to all of this, however, is Clement of Alexandria. Writing as a contemporary of Irenaeus and Athenagoras, Clement was well versed in both early Christian theology and in the philosophy of the empire. Therefore, he was in a unique position to summarize and explain the variety of positions of celibacy, as well as comment on their theological and philosophical motivations. The key text is book III of

⁴⁶⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.28.1.

⁴⁶¹ Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology*, 118-21. In particular, Irenaeus is keen to note that the Encratites miss the point of the Genesis story, that the sin of Adam was rooted in the transgression of disobedience, not a following after the lusts of the body. As Behr points out, for Irenaeus, "It is the transgression which results in the loss of the childlike mind and so the 'lustful propensity of the flesh', and it is this which confused Adam, mistaking the symptom for the cause, then tries to control or negate [sin & guilt] by adopting a state of continence, one which 'gnaws and frets the body'." (p. 119)

⁴⁶² For Irenaeus, the key difference between "good" asceticism and "bad" asceticism seems to be whether the asceticism is "self-imposed" or out of a "natural" response to the Holy Spirit. In that way, the Encratites perform a "self-imposed" form asceticism that actually misses out on the blessings and joys of creation, while "natural" asceticism is marked by a reasoned response to the Holy Spirit that inspires continence out of freedom and obedience. In essence, For Irenaeus, only the mature believer was capable of responding to the Spirit to produce a reasonable asceticism. See Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology*, pp. 120-22.

his *Stromaties*, which is essentially a treatise addressing the issue of celibacy in the latter part of the second century. Clement is yet another witness of both the sexual austerity expected of all Christians and the practice of celibacy in the early church. More importantly, his discussion gives insight into the motivations behind celibacy as well as some indication of what issue was at the centre of the argument put forward by some early Christians that celibacy was a necessary part of the Christian life.

Book three of the *Stromaties* is basically divided into three parts: 1) a description and summary of the various “heresies” regarding celibacy, 2) a refutation of those “heresies”, and 3) a description of the proper function and practice of celibacy as Clement understands it. Essentially, Clement divides the “heretics” into two groups:

Accordingly we may divide all the heresies into two groups in making answer to them. Either they teach that one ought to live on the principle that it is a matter of indifference whether one does right or wrong, or they set a too ascetic tone and proclaim the necessity of continence on the ground of opinions which are godless and arise from hatred of what God has created. First we may discuss the former group.⁴⁶³

What is interesting is that in his lengthy discussions of these groups, it is apparent to Clement that the reasoning behind the actions of the “heretics” was rooted in their understanding of human nature, and the extent to which Christ and the Holy Spirit, in whatever way they understand them (i.e. Gnostic or orthodox), are able to redeem and sanctify human nature. For Clement, then, the two poles of opinion on celibacy are the libertine pole, which assumes that human nature in Christ has been redeemed completely and therefore no longer needs boundaries placed upon it, and the Encratite pole, which assumed that the body, either by remaining in a pre-eschatological state of non-resurrection, or by being subsumed in the Gnostic conception of evil material existence,

⁴⁶³ *Stromaties*, III. 40.

must be disciplined as a necessary part of controlling sin until the soul is either freed from the body (Gnostic position) or the body is resurrected (orthodox position).

Looking at the Libertine position, Clement argues against early Christian thinkers such as Basilides, Carpocrates and Epiphanes as examples of those who have come to consider that their salvation had overcome the power of sin, and, therefore, they thought themselves free to live sexually unrestrained. For example, Clement points out that Basilides and his followers suppose that because of their salvation in Christ “either that they have the power to commit sin because of their perfection, or indeed that they will be saved by nature even if they sin in this life because they possess an innate election.”⁴⁶⁴ Clement notes that the followers of Prodicus, who participated in common sexual intercourse as a “mystery of communion,” thought to possess the freedom of Christ in their redeemed state and that sin no longer bound them under the Law.⁴⁶⁵ Clement’s judgement is that the libertine argument results in them “living lewder lives than the most uncontrolled heathen,” and that they bring a terrible blasphemy upon the name of Christ.⁴⁶⁶ In that respect, we see Clement both concerned for sexual immorality as activities that dishonour God, and for the misconception of the Libertine Christians that salvation has completely eliminated the effects and consequences of sin for human nature.

Similarly, according to Clement, the father and son duo of Carpocrates and Epiphanes, under the influences of Gnostic thought, convinced a small number of early Christians to hold their wives in common, including for sexual intercourse.⁴⁶⁷ In essence,

⁴⁶⁴ *Stromaties*, III. 3.

⁴⁶⁵ *Stromaties*, III. 27-31.

⁴⁶⁶ *Stromaties*, III. 3.

⁴⁶⁷ *Stromaties*, III. 5.

Carpocrates embraced a Gnostic conception of God where the entire universe, including human nature, emanated from the one God and therefore possessed a similar nature. As the argument goes, his son Epiphanes suggested that because God's righteousness was fair and equal,⁴⁶⁸ so human nature (as an emanation of the divine) must be fair and equal as well. In that way, the manifest universality of God's fairness could never encourage monogamy since "all beings beget and give birth alike, having received by God's righteousness an innate equality."⁴⁶⁹ It was only human sin that sought to create the inequality that produced laws against adultery when, in fact, all men were free to take the females of the community "just as the other animals do."⁴⁷⁰ Clement's response is pure condemnation, since Epiphanes has clearly abolished "both law and gospel" by his position.⁴⁷¹ Rather, Clement argues, the prohibitions against adultery and *porneia* are absolutely clear from scripture, and both Jesus and Paul even go so far as to warn against the desire (*epithumia*) that lingers dangerously in the body. Clement gives two examples: Jesus had claimed that even to look upon a woman with desire was committing adultery, and Paul warned the Romans of the covetousness of desire (*epithumia*) that wars with the spirit (Rom. 7).⁴⁷² In that regard, for Clement to deal with the libertine groups of early

⁴⁶⁸ *Stromaties*, III. 6.

⁴⁶⁹ *Stromaties*, III. 7.

⁴⁷⁰ *Stromaties*, III. 8.

⁴⁷¹ *Stromaties*, III. 8.

⁴⁷² Many of the ascetic texts of the early church appeal to the New Testament's use of the verb "to desire" (*επιθυμειν*) to translate "covet" when citing the commandment "Thou shalt not covet." In reality, Paul (Rom. 7) and the synoptic authors had simply quoted the LXX text of the Decalogue. For a good survey of the effects of this on New Testament sexuality see W. Loader, *The Septuagint, Sexuality and the New Testament: Case Studies on the Impact of the LXX in Philo and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). In the case of ascetic use of scripture, Jesus' instruction that to look upon a woman with lust is to commit adultery is understood to mean, "Thou shalt not lust", without an object of desire (e.g. Clement, *Stromaties*, III.31; III.71). In addition, for ascetics in the early church, because Paul had used *επιθυμειν* to translate "covet," the command of the Decalogue also becomes "thou shalt not lust" without an object, in complete agreement with Jesus. For example, Clement writes "While on this point I think I must not commit mention of the fact that the apostle declares that the same God is the God of the law, the prophets, and the gospel. In the Epistle to the Romans he quotes the gospel saying "Thou shalt not

Christians, it was simply a matter of showing them that sin obviously still existed within their nature and they were by no means free to let it run rampant.

Although recognising a number of different groups that had altogether rejected marriage and sexual intercourse as sinful,⁴⁷³ Marcion was the epitome of Encratites for Clement, and much of Book III of the *Stromaties* addressed Marcion's doctrines. In essence, Clement argues that the Marcionites have focused heavily upon on several philosophical concepts found in the metaphysical schools of Greek philosophy. In particular, the Platonic and Pythagorean concept of the embodiment of a soul as a divine punishment had been over-emphasized by Marcion⁴⁷⁴ and resulted in Marcion's denial of Creation as good and his emphasis on the need to purify the soul from the body. Clement argues that Plato's reference of the body as a prison for the soul (Phaedo), and the Pythagorean reference to the body as a tomb,⁴⁷⁵ have been plucked from the broader context of the cosmologies of those schools. In Clement's view, Plato and Pythagoras gave no opening for the view that matter is evil, since both saw the goodness of the universe as emanating from the goodness of first principles of their systems of thought.⁴⁷⁶ In addition, Clement argues that Marcion's interpretation of scripture, especially of Paul, is largely a misinterpretation that encourages Christians to punish the body to control its

lust" as if it were from the law, knowing that it is the one Father who is preached by the law and the prophets. For he says: "What shall we say? Is the law sin? God forbid. I had not known sin except through the law; and I had not known lust unless the law had said, Thou shalt not lust.' Even if the heretics who are opposed to the Creator suppose that in the next sentence Paul was speaking against him when he says, 'I know that in me, that is in my flesh, there dwells no good thing,' yet let them read what precedes and follows this. For before it he says, 'But sin which dwells in me,' which explains why it was appropriate for him to say, 'in my flesh dwells no good thing.'" (*Stromaties*, III. 76) In this way, many of early Christian texts commenting on Romans 7:7 or Matt. 5:27-28 argue that Jesus' and Paul's use of ἐπιθυμία showed that the more accurate intention of the commandment was to extirpate desire (*epithumia*) altogether.

⁴⁷³ Clement refers to the Encratism of Marcion, Tatian and Julius Cassianus, the founder of Docetism, and others of whom he only speaks of in general.

⁴⁷⁴ *Stromaties*, III. 12-26.

⁴⁷⁵ *Stromaties*, III. 17.

⁴⁷⁶ *Stromaties*, III. 19.

sinful impulses rather than submitting to the Spirit.⁴⁷⁷ Sexual renunciation, then, is Marcion's way of controlling an unredeemable and sinful human body that could not be sanctified until resurrection. Indeed, Clement notes that Marcion argued of himself : "how could he [Marcion] have a body of flesh that is not a corpse?" Further, Clement notes that Marcion also believed that "Because he [Marcion] rose from the tomb when the Lord killed his passions, that he began to live unto Christ."⁴⁷⁸ Thus, Marcion saw sin and death reigning in his body, and that his sanctification began with the death of his sinful bodily passions.

For Clement, Marcion also makes another philosophical error that leads to his heretical conclusions. In over-emphasising the body and matter as evil, Clement argues that Marcion misses the important fact that "desire is not a bodily thing, though it occurs because of the body."⁴⁷⁹ Clement is more than aware that all the major philosophical schools see desire (*epithumia*) located in the soul, and, as we saw in chapter three, both the metaphysical schools and material schools saw the inherent danger of body in being the object of the soul's desire (*epithumia*), not the *source* of its weakness. Indeed, the soul, whether metaphysical or corporeal, was always held to be superior, only it could be too easily led astray by focusing its contemplation on the body or mistaking physical sensations as a true representation of reality. Clement, therefore, shows that the Encratites mistakenly linked sin and evil to the body, when sin and evil dwell in the soul, and the soul causes the body to fall into debauchery, or just as easily can act to keep the body pure. In that regard, Clement can accuse the Encratites of abusing their freedom

⁴⁷⁷ *Stromaties*, III. 18. Note the similarity with Irenaeus' view.

⁴⁷⁸ *Stromaties*, III. 25.

⁴⁷⁹ *Stromaties*, III. 34. See also III.59.

and, ironically, being enslaved to the body through obsession with a mistaken understanding of the flesh. Clement writes:

He who indulges his pleasures gratifies his body; but he who is controlled liberates from its passions *his soul*, which is master of the body. And if they tell us that we are called to freedom, only let us not use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, as the apostle says.⁴⁸⁰

The Encratites, then, did not comprehend that the body was not evil by nature, or that it was not unredeemable through its relationship to the soul, which could be sanctified in the present by Christ and the Spirit. In that regard, the Encratites had a very negative view of the extent to which the body can be redeemed in the present eschatological era.

Having shown that the heretical positions of libertine and Encratite Christians were based in a misconception of the nature of the body, and the extent to which salvation in Christ and the Spirit has redeemed the body in the present, Clement moves on to an exploration of what a true celibate understands about his or her nature. In essence, Clement argues that the soul of the individual has been saved and regenerated by Christ and the Holy Spirit, and that while waiting for the full redemption of the body, celibacy is the superior path for the regenerated Christian, but not necessary for all, since not all have matured enough to be capable of it. However, Clement is very positive in his estimation of the capacity for regeneration of the body in Christ and the Spirit, and therefore would expect all Christians to engage in asceticism on some level. Indeed, if a Christian does not embrace a vowed, unmarried celibacy, Clement at the very least expected that “a man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice continence so that it is not desire (*epithumia*) he feels for his wife, whom he ought to

⁴⁸⁰ *Stromatias* III. 41.

love, and that he may beget children with a chaste and controlled will."⁴⁸¹ In that regard, Clement, though describing the weakness of sin in the body in the very terms of Greco-Roman philosophy, is absolutely convinced of the possibility that human nature, including the passions of the body, can be redeemed and sanctified.

First and foremost, like Irenaeus, Clement sees the transformation of the body and soul linked to their union with Christ and with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Quoting Paul, Clement writes:

So then, "if any man be in Christ he is a new creation," no longer inclined to sin; "old things are passed away," we have washed off the old life; "behold new things have happened," there is chastity instead of fornication, continence instead of incontinence; righteousness instead of unrighteousness.⁴⁸²

Likewise, Clement also writes:

In what follows he [Paul] continues, "But if I do that which I do not wish to do, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells in me," which being at war with the law of God and "of my mind," he says, "makes me captive by the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death." And again (for he does not become in the least weary of being helpful) he does not hesitate to add, "For the law of the Spirit has set me free from the law of sin and death," since by his Son "God condemned sin in the flesh that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit." In addition to this he makes the point still clearer by saying emphatically, "The body is dead because of sin," indicating that if it is not the temple, it is still the tomb of the soul. For when it is dedicated to God, he adds, "the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, who shall also make alive your mortal bodies through his Spirit dwelling in you."⁴⁸³

And again, interpreting Paul:

"The mind of the flesh is death because those who live according to the flesh mind the things of the flesh, and the mind of the flesh is enmity against God. For it is not subject to the law of God. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God," not in the sense in which some teach, but in the sense which we

⁴⁸¹ *Stromaties* III, 58. See also, III, 71.

⁴⁸² *Stromaties*, III, 62.

⁴⁸³ *Stromaties*, III, 77.

have already explained. Then by contrast to this he says to the Church: "But you are not in the flesh but in the spirit, if the Spirit of God dwells in you. If any man has not Christ's Spirit, he is none of his. But if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. So then, brethren, we are under an obligation, not to the flesh to live after the flesh. If you live after the flesh you shall die. But if by the Spirit you mortify the deeds of the body, you shall live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."⁴⁸⁴

The union of Christ and the Spirit with the body creates a "new creation," a resurrection,⁴⁸⁵ where the old passes away and the Spirit reigns in the body and soul in complete opposition to what used to be – sin, "the soul's corruption."⁴⁸⁶ Moreover, for Clement the union with Christ is not only in his resurrection, but in his death, meaning that what was considered the old man, who lived in rebellion and sin, should be considered "dead" with Christ:

So also the admirable Peter says: "Beloved, I exhort you as strangers and pilgrims, to abstain from carnal lusts, which war against the soul, and conduct yourselves well among the heathen; for this is the will of God that by doing good you should put to silence the activity of foolish men, as free and not using your freedom as a covering for evil, but as God's slaves." Likewise also Paul in the Epistle to the Romans writes: "We who are dead to sin, how shall we any longer live in it? Because our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed," down to the words, "do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin."⁴⁸⁷

Most importantly, for Clement this transformation creates a contrast between human anthropology before Christ and human anthropology after salvation and regeneration. Before union with Christ the sinful individual was marked by disobedience to God,⁴⁸⁸ and the irrational behaviour of a nature dominated by desire (*epithumia*). For example, Clement interprets Paul's statement from Galatians thus: " 'I am crucified with Christ, it

⁴⁸⁴ *Stromaties*, III. 78.

⁴⁸⁵ *Stromaties*, III. 87.

⁴⁸⁶ *Stromaties*, III. 63.

⁴⁸⁷ *Stromaties*, III. 75.

⁴⁸⁸ *Stromaties*, III. 94-95.

is no longer I who live' meaning that I used to live according to my lusts (*epithumia*), but Christ lives in me."⁴⁸⁹ Or similarly, he interprets Jesus' saying that in the age to come after resurrection and judgement there will be no marriage (Matt. 22:30) as proof that prior to salvation the soul and body were ruled by carnal desire.⁴⁹⁰

After union with Christ and the Spirit, human nature should be transformed into one that is obedient to God,⁴⁹¹ but also, now portrayed by Clement with the philosophical language of the desire (*epithumia*) that looms in body and soul, a nature that sin no longer dominates. For Clement, this is primarily achieved through redemption of the soul that has already begun its transformation through participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. "For in truth," Clement writes, "he [the Lord] did destroy the works of desire (*epithumia*), love of money, contentiousness, vanity, mad lust for women, pederasty, gluttony, licentiousness and similar vices. Their birth is the soul's corruption, since we are "dead in sins."⁴⁹² With the soul regenerated, the body must continue to submit to the soul to be "both pure and reasonable,"⁴⁹³ and one should live as though sin and desire no longer remain since Christ has destroyed them through his death.

So far, Clement's argument is similar to the general position of early Christianity on sexual restraint. The individual must live in a sexually austere manner, which reveals both an obedient nature and a life that is pure and an honour to God. Life in Christ and the Holy Spirit should transform both body and soul, and for Clement, he is very positive

⁴⁸⁹ *Stromaties*, III. 106.

⁴⁹⁰ *Stromaties*, III. 87.

⁴⁹¹ *Stromaties*, III. 95.

⁴⁹² *Stromaties*, III. 63.

⁴⁹³ *Stromaties*, III. 79. Note that the use of "pure and rational" covers both the moral expectations passed down from early Christianity's Jewish heritage (i.e. purity), and the moral expectations of the philosophy of the Empire (i.e. rational virtue).

about the extent that the desires of the body, though still deeply shaped by sin, can be sanctified in the present age. Therefore, he can say:

The human ideal of continence (*enkrateia*), I mean that which is set forth by Greek philosophers, teaches that one should fight desire and not be subservient to it so as to bring it to practical effect. *But our ideal is not to experience desire at all. Our aim is not that while a man feels desire he should get the better of it, but that he should be continent even respecting desire itself.*⁴⁹⁴

For Clement, it seems, the transformation of the body and soul in Christ can be of such thoroughness, that even what the Greeks and Romans would have considered the inherent natural functions of desire (*epithumia*) in human anthropology could not only be controlled, but eliminated altogether. However, in arguing against the heretical positions of some early Christian groups, Clement is keen to preserve the notion that while the practice of celibacy can indeed aid in the transformation of human nature, it must also be practiced in maturity and in freedom.

First, Clement argues that celibacy cannot be enforced as a necessity because the process of regeneration for the body and soul is an ongoing set of works by Christ and the Spirit. For Clement, the first movement of regeneration for the body and soul is to engage in the use of the soul's powers in an appropriate manner, which can then grow into full asceticism only after further maturation where desire has been extirpated completely. For example, Clement writes:

He, then, who uses the soul's natural powers as is right, desires those things which are appropriate, and hates what is harmful, as the commandments prescribe: "Thou shalt bless him who blesses thee and curse him who curses thee." But when he has risen above these, passion and desire, and in very deed has begun to love the creation of the God and Creator of all things, then he will live a Gnostic life, as he has become like the Saviour and has attained to a state of continence no longer maintained with difficulty. He has united knowledge, faith, and love. Thenceforth he is one in his judgment and truly

⁴⁹⁴ *Stromaties*, III. 57.

spiritual, wholly incapable of thoughts arising from passion and desire, one who is to be made perfect after the image of the Lord by the artist himself, a perfect man, already worthy to be called a brother to the Lord as well as his friend and son. Thus the "two" and the "three" come together into one and the same thing -- a Gnostic man.⁴⁹⁵

The transformation into the "true Gnostic" is for one to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, where the image of God has been made perfect and the soul is no longer capable of passion and desire, yet united to God in love of the creator.⁴⁹⁶ Thus, unlike the Encratites of Gnostic character, celibacy was to proceed from a love of God and not contempt of creation, and could only be achieved as one grew in faith, knowledge and love of God.⁴⁹⁷

Second, Clement is adamant that Christians must have the freedom to mature at the pace chosen by them by God, though obviously recognizing the superiority of celibacy. For example, Clement writes:

If it is lawful to live any sort of life one likes, obviously one may live in continence; or if any kind of life has no dangers for the elect, obviously one of virtue and self-control is far less dangerous. If the "lord of the Sabbath" has been given the right to pass uncorrected if he lives an immoral life, a fortiori there will be no correction for him who behaves decently. "All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient," says the apostle. If all things are lawful, obviously this includes self-control. Therefore if one who uses his power to live a virtuous life receives praise, then much more worthy of reverence and honour is he who has given us this free and sovereign power and has allowed us to live as we choose, not allowing us to become enslaved and subjected to necessity by our acts of choice and rejection. But both can

⁴⁹⁵ *Stromatias*, III. 69.

⁴⁹⁶ Love is without passion for Clement, for love is a reflection of the divine, which is also without passion. Perfected love, then, is rooted in the enjoyment of, and longing for, the fulfillment of union with God. In such a state, the desires of body and soul simply do not exist as human nature has been transformed into the likeness of God's (i.e. without passions). *Stromatias*, VI. 71-77. For a brief but solid discussion of Clement's "apathetic" love, see A. Louth, "Apathetic Love in Clement of Alexandria" in E.A. Livingstone, ed., *Papers of the 1983 Oxford Patristic Conference* (Oxford, 1983), reprinted in *International Conference on Patristic Studies*, Vol. 18.3 (1989): 413-419.

⁴⁹⁷ *Stromatias*, III. 51: "Therefore there is nothing meritorious about abstinence from marriage unless it arises from love to God."

have no anxiety, he who chooses incontinence [i.e. marriage] and he who chooses abstinence, yet the honour is not equal.⁴⁹⁸

And again:

In general all the epistles of the apostle teach self-control and continence and contain numerous instructions about marriage, begetting children, and domestic life. But they nowhere rule out self-controlled marriage. Rather they preserve the harmony of the law and the gospel and approve both the man who with thanks to God enters upon marriage with sobriety and the man who in accordance with the Lord's will lives as a celibate, even as each individual is caned,⁴⁹⁹ making his choice without blemish and in perfection.⁵⁰⁰

Moreover, Clement is angered that an individual might choose celibacy on the basis of an unfounded rejection of marriage as a sin, or reject celibacy because he does not want to live alone.⁵⁰¹ For Clement, if done with self-control (*enkratia*), both marriage and celibacy are choices to be made by the individual in response to the will of the Holy Spirit and according to the grace given to them by God.⁵⁰² Some may choose celibacy, some may choose marriage; both are good, neither to be enforced, and Clement concludes:

Celibacy may lawfully be chosen according to the sound rule, with godly reasons, provided that the person gives thanks for the grace God has granted, and does not hate the creation or reckon married people to be of no account. For the world is created: celibacy is also created. Let both give

⁴⁹⁸ *Stromaties*, III. 40-41.

⁴⁹⁹ This rather arcane translation of J.Oulton and H. Chadwick (see *The Library of Christian Classics: Volume II, Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) employs the word "caned", which refers to an older English usage of weaving or furnishing something from cane fibres, such as the seat of a chair. A more contemporary translation might substituted "woven" or "formed."

⁵⁰⁰ *Stromaties*, III. 86.

⁵⁰¹ *Stromaties*, III. 67: "Therefore a man ought not to think that marriage on rational principles is a sin, supposing that he does not look on the bringing up of children as being bitter (on the contrary to many childlessness is most grievous); but if a man regards the rearing of children as bitter because it distracts him from the things of God on account of the time it takes up, he may yet desire to marry because he does not take easily to a bachelor's life. What he wants to do is not harmful if it is done with self-control; and each one of us is master of his own will in deciding whether to beget children."

⁵⁰² *Stromaties* III. 57: "This chastity cannot be attained in any other way except by God's grace. That was why he said 'Ask and it shall be given you.' This grace was received even by Moses, though clothed in his needy body, so that for forty days he felt neither thirst nor hunger."

thanks for their appointed state, if they know to what state they are appointed.⁵⁰³

C. Third Century Texts

Up to this point in the chapter, the early Christian texts on celibacy have been surveyed to about the end of the second century in the hopes of finding the origins and motivations behind celibacy prior to the explosion of monasticism in the early fourth century. Interestingly, it is the texts of the third century that provide the least evidence to help continue the exploration of the origins of celibacy in the early Church. First, from the turn of the third century until the turn of the fourth century there is a small number of texts dealing with celibacy, and what does exist does not go into the kind of detail that would be helpful for our study. For example, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and *Apostolic Constitutions* simply provide rules for the interaction of celibates with members of their churches and in relation to the clergy, especially for women celibates, and the language used to describe them simply refers to them in terms of their purity.⁵⁰⁴ Interestingly, other texts that may provide help in understanding the motivations of celibacy into the third century primarily show a concern for identifying “true” virgins among pretenders, and for proper modes of interaction with each other and within the church. For example, the two pseudonymous *Letters to Virgins* from the mid to late third century primarily show a concern for how celibates should conduct themselves within the church and out in the non-Christian world,⁵⁰⁵ and a concern that the “true” virgin is one who serves the church and does not live in idleness or compete for honours.⁵⁰⁶ Not surprisingly, what the letters do tell of their motivations describes the laying aside of desire that is at war with the

⁵⁰³ *Stromaties*, III. 105.

⁵⁰⁴ See Chapter Two, pp. 86-88.

⁵⁰⁵ See Chapter Two, p. 91, n. 225.

⁵⁰⁶ Letter I.11, I. 7.

Holy Spirit,⁵⁰⁷ and the transformation of their nature through the imitation of Christ and the sanctification of the Spirit⁵⁰⁸ in order to produce self-denial and good works.⁵⁰⁹ Even the Syrian *Demonstrations of Aphrahat* and *Letter to Publius* are primarily concerned with proper conduct of virgins,⁵¹⁰ and the “true” identity of virgins being revealed in good works and reputation.⁵¹¹ The canons of the early church councils, too, only showed a similar concern for proper conduct among the churches and in regard to the clergy, and say nothing of early Christian motives for celibacy.

However, we do know a little of early Christian motivations for celibacy by the third century from a few texts. Tertullian, for example, in his works *On Chastity* and *On the Veiling of Virgins*, discusses the matter of celibacy in regard to local problems or personal questions,⁵¹² though he says very little about the motivations behind it. Indeed, in his *On Chastity*, aside from acknowledging the three “species” of celibates in the church, he says nothing about the motivations of celibacy, but spends the duration of the

⁵⁰⁷ Letter I.8.

⁵⁰⁸ Letter I.7: “Those, therefore, who imitate Christ, imitate Him earnestly. For those who have “put on Christ” in truth, express His likeness in their thoughts, and in their whole life, and in all their behaviour: in word, and in deeds, and in patience, and in fortitude, and in knowledge, and in chastity, and in long-suffering, and in a pure heart, and in faith, and in hope, and in full and perfect love towards God. No virgin, therefore, unless they be in everything as Christ, and as those “who are Christ’s,” can be saved. For every virgin who is in God is holy in her body and in her spirit, and is constant in the service of her Lord, not turning away from it any whither, but waiting upon Him always in purity and holiness in the Spirit of God, being “solicitous how she may please her Lord,” by living purely and without stain, and solicitous to be pleasing before Him in every thing. She who is such does not withdraw from our Lord, but in spirit is *ever* with her Lord: as it is written, “Be ye holy, as I am holy, saith the Lord.”

⁵⁰⁹ Letter I.1, I.3, I.9.

⁵¹⁰ S.H. Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism” in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush, & R. Valantasis, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 235-36. For example, Aphrahat is particularly concerned with the cohabitation of male and female celibates.

⁵¹¹ Griffith, *Asceticism in the Church of Syria*, p. 236. Griffiths quotes Ephraem’s *Letter to Publius*, where a vision of the next life showed who the true virgin was at judgement: “I saw there pure virgins whose virginity had been rejected because it had not been adorned with the good oil of excellent works....I also saw there those who did not have the title of virginity, but who were crowned with victorious deeds, their conduct having filled the place of virginity.... Let no man any longer trust the chaste reputation alone of virginity when it is deprived of the works which constitute the oil of the lamps.” See translation of text by S. Brock in “Ephrem’s Letter to Publius,” *Le Museon* 89 (1976): 286-87.

⁵¹² See Chapter Two, pp. 82-85.

text arguing against second marriage as an option for the widower who has written him.

What he does say simply substantiates what is already apparent about the motivations for celibacy up until then:

The will of God is our sanctification, for He wishes His "image" – that is, us - to become likewise His "likeness;" that we may be "holy" just as Himself is "holy." That good - sanctification, I mean - I distribute into several species, that in some one of those species we may be found. The first species is, virginity from one's birth: the second, virginity from one's birth, that is, from the font; which (second virginity) either in the marriage state keeps (its subject) pure by mutual compact, or else perseveres in widowhood from choice: a third grade remains, monogamy, when, after the interception of a marriage once contracted, there is thereafter a renunciation of sexual connection. The first virginity is (the virginity) of happiness, (and consists in) total ignorance of that from which you will afterwards wish to be freed: the second, of virtue, (and consists in) contemning that the power of which you know full well: the remaining species, (that) of marrying no more after the disjunction of matrimony by death, besides being the glory of virtue, is (the glory) of moderation likewise; for moderation is the not regretting a thing which has been taken away, and taken away by the Lord God, without whose will neither does a leaf glide down from a tree, nor a sparrow of one farthing's worth fall to the earth.⁵¹³

Similarly, when Tertullian argues against male celibates who seek to have an outward sign of their virginity in the same way that the female celibates did with the veil, he says:

To what purpose, then, do they [male celibates] thrust their glory out of sight abroad, but expose it in the church? I demand a reason. Is it to please the brethren, or God Himself? If God Himself, He is as capable of beholding whatever is done in secret, as He is just to remunerate what is done for His sole honour. In fine, He enjoins us not to trumpet forth any one of those things which will merit reward in His sight, nor get compensation for them from men. But if we are prohibited from letting "our left hand know" when we bestow the gift of a single halfpenny, or any eleemosynary⁵¹⁴ bounty whatever, *how deep should be the darkness in which we ought to enshroud ourselves when we are offering God so great an oblation of our very body and our very spirit--when we are consecrating to Him our very nature!* It follows, therefore, that what cannot appear to be done for God's sake (because God wills not that it be done in such a way) is done for the sake of men,--a thing, of course, primarily unlawful, as betraying a lust of glory.⁵¹⁵

⁵¹³ Tertullian, *On Chastity*, 1.

⁵¹⁴ An old Latin term meaning "of relating to, or supported by charity."

⁵¹⁵ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, XIII.

The male celibates, then, are seeking glory instead of receiving what honour God would give them for the offering of their bodies in a transformed nature. In that way, Tertullian simply acknowledges the accepted motivations of celibacy passed down from the second century: the sanctification of the individual and the transformation of human nature into the image of God.

Similarly, as Sydney Griffiths has shown, the *ihîdāyā*⁵¹⁶ celibates of Syria showed concerns for purity and the transformation of their nature to that of the Christ.⁵¹⁷ In particular, the *ihîdāyā* saw Christ as the heavenly *Ihîdāyā*, the only begotten Son of God who is singularly devoted to the Father and held in the bosom of God.⁵¹⁸ Their goal, then, was to be imitators of Christ so that their nature would be transformed into one similar to Christ's, thus bringing them into relationship with the Father where they, too, were held intimately in the heart of God. Practically, this seems to have meant that at their baptism they sought to "put on" Christ, as well as the very divinity found in the nature of God's son. In that way, we see in a hymn written by Ephraem these themes merging in poetic form:

You to be baptized, who found this kingdom
 In the very bosom of Baptism,
 Step down, put on the *Ihîdāyā*
 Who is Lord of the kingdom.
 Blessed are you who have been crowned.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁶ The term *ihîdāyā*, roughly translated "single", does not refer to the solitary nature of the monastic, but to "singular" devotion to God. See Chapter Two, p. 89.

⁵¹⁷ S.H. Griffiths, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism" in *Asceticism*, V.L. Wimbush & R. Valantasis, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 220-245.

⁵¹⁸ Griffiths, *Asceticism in the Church of Syria*, pp. 225-27.

⁵¹⁹ This is Griffiths translation of the text found in E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem Des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*, CSCO, vol. 174 (Louvain, 1957), p. 191. Whether it is from Beck's German or the original Syriac is unclear. Griffiths also seems to think that this was one of many hymns composed specifically for those embracing celibacy at their baptism, though he does acknowledge that other scholars have argued that these hymns may have been addressed to all baptized persons regardless of whether they were ascetics. However, Griffiths argues that if that were the case, the ascetic *ihîdāyā* were still likely regarded as the higher ranked of the community of *ihîdāyā* because of their unique dedication

Moreover, to become like Christ was to take upon oneself the nature of Christ in his sacrifice and resurrection, and to stand as a type or example of Christ.⁵²⁰ In that way, the *ihîdāyā* were expected to show transformation into the image of Christ, and visibly express that image through service, devotion and good works in their community.⁵²¹

While space has limited our survey of early to mid third century texts, which are cursory at best, it is clear that the perceived motivations behind celibacy, when discernable, were the same as those of their first and second century counterparts. The celibates were concerned for continued purity and the transformation of their nature, only now the texts reveal a concern for engaging asceticism in a genuine manner, and this is not surprising since in chapter two we saw several instances of celibates inappropriately receiving honour due to others or unnecessarily taking advantage of the church's charity for personal gain. Otherwise, what is most interesting is the lack of discussion over the matter of celibacy compared to the second century texts, and the texts that do speak of celibacy are concerned primarily with correcting the behaviour of celibates. What this shows is not a lack of interest in celibacy, but that by the beginning of third century celibacy had come to be accepted as a genuine means of sanctification in the church. Now that there was no dispute that it was an appropriate and superior path to follow, though not necessary for salvation, what remains of many of the third century texts is simply the early church's attempts to place proper boundaries on the practice as it became commonplace in the church.

and role in the church, and therefore granted the right to carry the term *ihîdāyā* as a title. See Griffiths, *Asceticism in the Church of Syria*, pp. 226-27.

⁵²⁰ Griffiths, *Asceticism in the Church of Syria*, pp. 231-34.

⁵²¹ Griffiths, *Asceticism in the Church of Syria*, pp. 235-38.

VI. Conclusion

A summary of the data, then, would look as follows: the cosmological and anthropological views of the early church, inherited from Judaism, would have naturally placed boundaries on early Christian activity due to the need to avoid *porneia*, which included sexual activity associated with idolatry and sexual behaviour that dishonoured God. Those concerns are apparent in the New Testament, and the New Testament Christians adopted many of the legal prohibitions from the Old Testament. In addition, the developing theology of the early church also placed an emphasis upon the transformation of sinful human nature through a union with Christ and under the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. In early Christian theology, the eschatological expectations of salvation occurring in the present age opened up the possibility that the body could be transformed in the present to conform to the future resurrected “spiritual body.” The result was a few isolated incidences of early Christians practicing celibacy (I Cor 7, I Tim 4-5) and a stream of thought making its way among the primitive church associating celibacy with the state of those redeemed at the future judgement (Rev 14). By the turn of the first century, it is clear that while sexual austerity was expected of all Christians in order to avoid *porneia*, a small number of early Christians still argued that human nature could be transformed in the present, and argued that it was a superior path, causing concern for church leaders such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp who felt the celibates had no right to boast. By this point in history, the break with Judaism, assuming it was early, had left a speculative opening in the early church, which was by now largely non-Jewish. The fact that early Christian sexual morals were very

compatible with Greco-Roman philosophical ideals encouraged the apologists to appeal to the morality of Christians in their defences of the faith, even mentioning those lifelong celibates as example of their superior morality in regard to the empire. So, too, the *Apocryphal Acts* showed that for some early Christians celibacy had gained a status of superior spiritual pursuit by the mid to late second century. Indeed, celibacy had gained so much popularity that a minority of ascetic celibates, under various influences of both orthodox and Gnostic thought, suggested that sexual renunciation might be necessary to live out a fully transformed life.

At this point in early Christian history, by mid to late second century, there were four opinions across a spectrum of speculative thought concerning the present sanctification and transformation of the body. For some, the body had been transformed by Christ and the Spirit, and been granted the power of resurrection, and, therefore, sexual behaviour was inconsequential, with libertine expressions of sexuality as the result. At the other end of the spectrum there were those who were entirely pessimistic of any transformation of the body in its pre-resurrected state, even considering the body as sinful in its own right under Gnostic influences. For these, celibacy was a necessary part of the process of salvation, both for orthodox Christians who still felt sin's power in the body or for Gnostics Christians who saw the body as part of the evil of material reality. In the middle of this spectrum there were those who were cautiously optimistic about the body's transformation, such as the author of I Timothy, the bishop Dionysius, Irenaeus and Tertullian, who felt celibacy could be helpful but only for those who had matured, but that celibacy could certainly never eliminate the dangers of sin and desire in human nature. Finally, a happily optimistic group of celibates in the early church felt that,

though never being able to completely extirpate desire and sin from the body and soul, celibacy could go a long way to achieving the present sanctification of the body. Thus, Clement of Alexandria could say that early Christians attempted to eliminate desire altogether, and although acknowledging the goodness of creation, marriage and sex for procreation, he also suggested that within marriage couples should remain celibate after producing children.

In addition, the early church had largely adopted the language of ancient philosophy in its discussions over the extent to which celibacy transformed, or reflected the transformation of, human nature. However, this does not mean that the motives of celibates in the early church were solely historically dependent upon an adoption of Greco-Roman sexual ideals. Rather, the sexual ethics of the Greek and Roman philosophical traditions and the sexual morals of early Christians were very compatible, but derived from two very different sets of cosmological and teleological speculation. The *telos* of Greco-Roman speculation was to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*) through alignment of human behaviour with human nature as it was defined by ontological and cosmological speculation. The *telos* of early Christianity was salvation of body and soul from sin and death, and this too was achieved through both an alignment of human behaviour, but now alignment with an attitude that reflected faith, humility and obedience to their Creator. Moreover, Greco-Roman speculation saw no potential for the transformation of human nature, only the potential to live out human nature to its fullest and truest expression. But early Christians, now considering the death and resurrection of Christ, saw potential for the transformation of human nature as it was united with the Son of God and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In that regard, the theological speculations of

early Christians allowed for a situation where the sexual austerity found in the empire *could* be both achieved by the majority and surpassed by a minority whose union with Christ and the Spirit had caused their very natures to be transformed.

It is, then, the development of *celibacy* as an early Christian practice that reflects one area of early Christian thought on which the speculations of the Greco-Roman world had a great effect. With its limited ontology of the human anthropology received from its Jewish heritage, early Christianity often accepted and transformed Greco-Roman philosophical speculation to answer questions about the body and soul, and it was those speculations on human anthropology that allowed for a variety of positions concerning the extent of sanctification in the present. The irony, in fact, is that depending upon what sort of speculation an individual accepted concerning the present sanctification of body and soul, an early Christian could, in theory, engage in libertine or Encratite positions, or adopt the more or less optimistic middle way that the early church largely accepted, and could defend those practices with the same scriptures or philosophical perspectives.⁵²²

Thus, both orthodox and Gnostic Christians could adopt an overly harsh or overly liberal position on sexuality, and in the second century one could likely find orthodox Encratites, Gnostics Encratites, orthodox libertines and Gnostics libertines, and very likely, every position in between.

By the turn of the third century, then, it seems that the early church had largely agreed that sexual renunciation was superior to marriage, though not necessary or appropriate for all believers. Indeed, the goal of transformation was now recognized to be an arduous process for those who truly embarked upon that path, and celibates began

⁵²² For an excellent survey on how the various positions of sexual renunciation were defended with scripture, and how the scriptures were used and abused by adherents of celibacy, see E. Clark's *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

to serve their congregations (e.g. widows, *apotaktikoi*, *ihîdāyā*) in the third century as a reward for their obvious sanctification. However, the key issue was always the possibility of immanent present sanctification, and argument over the matter would continue into the following centuries. Only the libertine position was far more conservative and the issues seemed to be around living arrangements and conduct among celibates, and the Encratite position, though re-appearing occasionally⁵²³ was condemned by the canons of the early church. Consequently, one of the larger concerns of the early church in the late third, fourth and fifth century, was to place proper boundaries on the practice of celibacy and correct the abuses and negative consequences that ascetic practice was having on the early church.

In particular, after the peace of Constantine monasticism included a new political element, and rather than describing the growth of asceticism as a largely “new” development in early Christian history, as some scholars have, it is far more accurate to describe the explosion of monasticism in the fourth century as a *shift* in already accepted ascetic practices in the early church. Of the three classic markers of monasticism—*enkrateia*, *askesis* and *anachoresis* – the first two had existed in the early church since the first century. The question that remains is why and how did withdrawal, or *anachoresis*, become entangled with early Christian asceticism? And why did a clear ascetic minority in the early church experience such growth in numbers during the fourth century, with the ideals of celibacy gaining such rhetorical urgency in the church’s doctrines and canons? Those questions, however, are for another study.

⁵²³ For example, an Armenian bishop, Eustathius, was condemned by the Council of Gangra in the mid fourth century for excessive encratism. See Sozomen, *Church History*, III.14, Socrates, *Church History*, II.43.

It is clear, however, that while a simple correlation of sexual morality between pagans and Christians could lead to the conclusions that early Christianity stood in continuity and dependence with the Greco-Roman culture, a closer look has revealed a *sui generis* set of propositions within early Christianity that led to the ascendancy of celibacy as an ideal practice in the early church. Moreover, it is the theological concerns for the salvation, transformation and sanctification of body and soul in early Christian theology that were at the heart of the origins and motives for early Christian celibacy. Certainly, the practice of celibacy had natural sociological consequences for the distribution of social power, but it is largely inaccurate to see a conflict over social power as the cause of ascetic practice in the early church. Rather, early Christian celibates were in the business of saving their bodies and souls through the discipline (*askesis*) of negative mortification of the sinful passions of the body, and positive recreation of their nature in Christ and the Spirit.

Richard Valantasis' 1995 article "Constructions of Power in Asceticism"⁵²⁴ begins with a quotation of a passage from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the great collection of sayings from the early fathers of the desert:

Abba Lot received Abba Joseph and said to him: "Abba, according to my ability I perform my order of prayer a little, my fast a little, the prayer, the meditation and the silence, and according to my ability the cleansing of my thoughts. What more remains, then, that I must perform?" When the old man arose, he stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became as then lamps of fire, and he said to him "If you wish, become entirely as fire!"⁵²⁵

For Valantasis, the passage is full of constructions of power; power being desired, power being possessed power being transferred, and in asceticism he sees only performances

⁵²⁴ R. Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 63 (1995): 775-821.

⁵²⁵ Saying 7, *Apophthegmata Agian Pateron* (Athens: Aster Publishing House, 1970), p. 53.

done to shift the social environment to create new subjectivities, different social relations and an alternative symbolic universe. However, if read in the light of asceticism defined as an act that brings a teleological goal into immanent existence through discipline, this text seems more likely to be the culmination of three centuries of ascetic imagination where the desert was full of early Christians whose very nature had been transformed into something nearly divine. Asceticism in early Christianity, and in other times and traditions, was not the construction of cultural discourse and conflict over social relations and the distribution of power, but the natural result of the belief that the teleological goals of that religious tradition could be achieved in the present. Asceticism, then, is the hard practice that accompanies the theological and cosmological speculations of a tradition, and reflects the attitudes of the few that try to make the most difficult and significant transformations of the individual a reality. It is only appropriate then, that it captures the imagination of the participants as they seek to transform their very natures: “If you wish, become entirely as fire!”

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