



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



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Author(s): Rodney Stark

Source: *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 229-244

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3711820>

Accessed: 12/11/2014 19:00

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The 1994 Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture

Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women

Rodney Stark[†]

University of Washington

Modern and ancient historians agree that women were especially responsive to the early Christian movement. It also is agreed that women were accorded considerably higher status within Christian circles than in the surrounding pagan societies. In this essay I first explain how these two aspects of the early church were connected. Then I explain how an excess of women in the Christian subcultures, combined with a great excess of males in the world around them, would have resulted in a substantial rate of intermarriage. Finally, I show how this would have maintained early Christianity as an open network thereby able to sustain the attachments to non-members needed for continued growth.

Intermittently during the past few years I have utilized social scientific theories and methods to attempt to reconstruct the rise of Christianity. My goal is to gain a fundamental understanding of how it all came about — to explain how a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman Empire dislodged classical paganism and became the dominant faith of Western Civilization. There is no single answer to why Christianity succeeded; a whole series of factors were involved. I hope soon to complete an integrated reconstruction of at least the most important of these factors, but meanwhile I have been publishing portions of the larger project as I go along (Stark 1992, 1991a, 1991b, 1987, 1986a, 1986b). Today's 1994 Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture continues this process. In it I shall suggest that gender holds one of the answers to how it was done — that women played a critical role in the rise of Christianity.

However, before any useful social scientific work can proceed on the question of how it all came about, it first is necessary to eliminate the oldest and still-dominant explanation — that the Greco-Roman world was saved by mass conversions in response to public preaching and miracle working. From earliest days, mass conversions have been central to the Christian story: Crowds have gathered, listened, marveled, and been saved. Thus Acts 2:41 reports that after Peter preached to a multitude “there were added that day about three thousand souls.”

[†] Direct all correspondence to Rodney Stark, University of Washington DK-40, Seattle, WA 98195.

Writing in about 325, Eusebius (III 37.3) tells us that "at first hearing whole multitudes in a body eagerly embraced in their souls piety towards the Creator of the universe."

That mass conversions built Christianity has seemed obvious. Adolf Harnack (1908:2:335-36) put it plainly: How else can we understand the "inconceivable rapidity" of Christian growth and "astonishing expansion" of the movement? Indeed, Harnack (fn.335) reminded his readers of St. Augustine's insight that the greatest miracle of all would have been for Christianity to grow as rapidly as it did without the aid of miracles. In his distinguished recent study, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, Ramsay MacMullen (1984:29) also stressed the arithmetical necessity for mass conversions. Because "very large numbers are obviously involved," Christian growth could not have been limited to an individual mode of conversion, but requires "successes en masse."

This is all very troublesome because modern social science lacks any theoretical propositions to deal with spontaneous mass conversions. Instead, conversion is explained by social science as the result of interaction processes within networks of interpersonal attachments whereby people come to accept new faiths in response to their social ties to those who already believe (Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1980, 1985, 1987; Kox, Meeus, and t'Hart 1991). Thus, from the perspective of modern social science, the kind of mass conversions described by Eusebius and accepted by historians ever since would indeed be miraculous. And if the rise of Christianity can be explained only by resort to miracles, then social science would seem to have little to contribute.

Fortunately, the "facts" justifying the miraculous assumption were wrong. The only reason people believed that there was an arithmetic need for mass conversion was because no one ever bothered to do the actual arithmetic. I have done so in considerable detail, taking care to verify my results with the pertinent literature (Stark 1996). A brief summary suffices here.

There is general agreement among scholars that Christians in the Greco-Roman world numbered somewhere between 5 and 7 million in the year 300. How this total was reached from a tiny starting point of, say, 1,000 Christians in the year 40 is the arithmetic challenge. At first glance, growth of this magnitude might seem a miraculous achievement. But, suppose we assume that the Christian rate of growth during this period was similar to that of the Mormon rate of growth over the past century, which has been approximately 40 percent per decade (Stark 1984, 1994). If the early Christians were able to match the Mormon growth rate, then their "miracle" is fully accomplished in the time history allows. That is, from a starting point of 1,000 Christians in the year 40, a growth rate of 40 percent per decade (or 3.4 percent per year) results in a total of 6,299,832 Christians in the year 300. Moreover, because compounded rates result in exponential growth, there is a huge numerical increase from slightly more than 1 million Christians in the year 250 to more than 6 million in 300. This gives further confidence in the projections since historians have long believed that a rapid increase in numerical growth occurred at this time (cf. Gager 1975).

The rise of Mormonism has been very carefully documented and their growth has been based on the conventional network processes understood by social science, while mass conversions to the Mormon faith of the kind described

by Eusebius are unknown (Stark 1984, 1994; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Clearly, then, the rise of Christianity could easily have been accomplished in accord with our current understanding of why and how conversion takes place and social science is sufficient unto the task at hand.

So, let me now return to my primary thesis: that women were crucial to the success of the Christian movement.

WOMEN AND CHRISTIAN GROWTH

Amidst contemporary denunciations of Christianity as patriarchal and sexist, it easily is forgotten that the early church was so especially attractive to women that in 370 the Emperor Valentinian issued a written order to Pope Damasus I requiring the Christian missionaries to cease calling at the homes of pagan women. Although some classical writers claimed that women were easy prey for *any* "foreign superstition," most recognized that Christianity was unusually appealing because within the Christian subculture women enjoyed far higher status than did women in the Greco-Roman world at large (Fox 1987; Chadwick 1967; Harnack 1908).

But if historians have long noted this fact, they have made no serious efforts to explain it. Why were women accorded higher status in Christian circles than elsewhere in the classical world? In what follows I shall attempt to link the increased power and privilege of Christian women to a very major shift in sex ratios. I show that an initial shift in sex ratios resulted from Christian doctrines prohibiting infanticide and abortion and then show how the initial shift would have been amplified by a subsequent tendency to over-recruit women. Along the way I shall summarize evidence from ancient sources as well as from modern archeology and historical demography concerning the status of women in the early church. Finally, I shall explore the relatively high rates of exogenous marriages by Christian women and suggest how these would have generated many "secondary" conversions to Christianity.

CHRISTIAN AND PAGAN SEX RATIOS

Men greatly outnumbered women in the Greco-Roman world. Cassius Dio (1987), writing in about 200 C.E., attributed the declining population of the Empire to the extreme shortage of females. In his classic work on ancient and medieval populations, J. C. Russell (1958) estimated that there were 131 males per 100 females in the city of Rome and 140 males per 100 females in Italy, Asia Minor, and North Africa. Russell noted in passing that sex ratios this extreme can only occur when there is "some tampering with human life" (1958:14). And tampering there was. Exposure of unwanted female infants and deformed male infants was legal, morally accepted, and widely practiced by all social classes in the Greco-Roman world (Fox 1987; Gorman 1982; Pomeroy 1975; Russell 1958). Lindsay (1968:168) reported that even in large families "more than one daughter was practically never reared." A study of inscriptions at Delphi made it possible to reconstruct 600 families. Of these, only six had raised more than one daughter (Lindsay 1968).

I will pursue the subject of female infanticide at length in a subsequent study of Christian fertility. For now, consider a letter, written by one Hilarion to his pregnant wife Alis, which has been reported by many authors because of the quite extraordinary contrast between his deep concern for his wife and his hoped-for son, and his utter callousness towards a possible daughter.

Know that I am still in Alexandria. And do not worry if they all come back and I remain in Alexandria. I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I shall send it up to you. If you are delivered of a child [before I come home], if it is a boy keep it, if a girl discard it. You have sent me word, "Don't forget me." How can I forget you. I beg you not to worry (in Lewis 1985:54).

This letter dates from the year 1 B.C.E., but these patterns persisted among pagans far into the Christian era. Given these practices, even in childhood, before the onset of the high female mortality associated with fertility in pre-modern times, females were substantially outnumbered among pagans in the Greco-Roman world. Moreover, it wasn't just the high mortality from child birth that continued to increase the sex ratios among adults. As I shall document at length elsewhere (Stark 1996) abortion was a major cause of death of women in this era. That is, abortion was widely practiced and the methods were barbaric and deadly.

However, things were different among Christians as their distinctive subculture began to emerge. There is little hard data on the sex composition of Christian communities. In his *Epistle to the Romans* Paul sent personal greetings to 15 women and 18 men. If, as seems likely, there were proportionately more men than women among those Christians of sufficient prominence to merit Paul's special attention, then the congregation in Rome must already have been predominately female. A second basis for inference is an inventory of property removed from a Christian house-church in the North African town of Cirta during a persecution in 303. Among the clothes the Christians had collected for distribution to the needy were 16 men's tunics and 82 women's tunics as well as 47 pairs of female slippers (Frend 1984; Fox 1987). Presumably this partly reflects the ratio of men to women among the donors. But, even though better statistics are lacking, the predominance of women in the membership of the churches was, as Fox (1987:308) reported, "recognized to be so by Christians and pagans." Indeed, Harnack (1908:2:73) noted that the ancient sources:

... simply swarm with tales of how women of all ranks were converted in Rome and in the provinces; although the details of these stories are untrustworthy, they express correctly enough the general truth that Christianity was laid hold of by women in particular, and also that the percentage of Christian women, especially among the upper classes, was larger than that of men.

These conclusions about Christian sex ratios merit our confidence when we examine *why* sex ratios should have been so different among the Christians. First, by prohibiting all forms of infanticide and abortion, Christians removed major causes of the gender imbalance that existed among pagans. Even so, changes in mortality alone probably could not have resulted in Christian women

coming to outnumber Christian men. However, there was a second factor influencing Christian sex ratios: Women were more likely than men to become Christians. This, combined with the reduction in female mortality, *would* have caused a surplus of women in the Christian subcultures.

SEX BIAS IN CONVERSION

In his widely-admired monograph on the early church, the British historian Henry Chadwick noted that "Christianity seems to have been especially successful among women. It was often through the wives that it penetrated the upper classes of society in the first instance" (1967:56). Peter Brown (1988:151) noted that "women were prominent" among upper-class Christians and that "such women could influence their husbands to protect the church." Marcia, concubine of the Emperor Commodus, managed to convince him to free Callistus, a future Pope, from a sentence of hard labor in the mines of Sardinia (Brown 1988). Although Marcia failed to secure the conversion of Commodus, other upper class women often did bring husbands and admirers to faith.

It will be helpful here to distinguish between primary and secondary conversions. In *primary conversion*, the convert takes an active role in his or her own conversion, becoming a committed adherent based on positive evaluations of the particular faith, albeit that attachments to members play a major role in the formation of a positive evaluation. *Secondary conversion* is more passive and involves somewhat reluctant acceptance of a faith on the basis of attachments to a primary convert. For example, after person A converted to a new faith, that person's spouse agreed to "go along" with the choice, but was not eager to do so and very likely would not have done so otherwise. The latter is a secondary convert. In the example offered by Chadwick, upper class wives were primary converts and some of their husbands (often grudgingly) became secondary converts. Indeed, it frequently occurred that when the master of a large household became a Christian, all members of the household, including the servants and slaves, were expected to do so too. Keep in mind that once immersed in the Christian subculture, even quite reluctant secondary converts can become ardent participants.

The ancient sources and modern historians agree that primary conversion to Christianity was far more prevalent among females than among males. Moreover, this appears to be typical of new religious movements in recent times. By examining manuscript census returns for the latter half of the nineteenth century, Bainbridge (1982) found that approximately two-thirds of the Shakers were female. Data on religious movements included in the 1926 census of religious bodies show that 75 percent of Christian Scientists were women, as were more than 60 percent of Theosophists, Swedenborgians, and Spiritualists (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). The same is true of the immense wave of Protestant conversions taking place in Latin America. In fact, David Martin (1990) suggests that a substantial proportion of male Protestants in Latin America are secondary converts.

This is not an appropriate place to speculate on the reasons why women in many different times and places seem to be far more responsive to religion. Our

interests are sufficiently served by exploring the impact of differential conversion rates on the sex ratios of the Christian subcultures in the Greco-Roman world. Given several reasonable assumptions, simple arithmetic suffices to assess the magnitude of the changes differential conversion rates could have produce.

Let's begin with a Christian population that is equally male and female — a sex ratio of 100. Let us assume a growth rate from *conversion alone* of 30 percent per decade. That is, for the moment we will ignore any natural increase and assume that births equal deaths. Let us also suppose that the sex ratio among converts is two women for every man. As noted above, this is entirely in line with recent experience. Given these reasonable assumptions we can easily calculate that it will take only 50 years for this Christian population to be 62 percent female. Or if we assume a growth rate of 40 percent per decade, the Christian population will be 64 percent female in 50 years.

If we were to factor in reasonable assumptions about natural increase and differential mortality we would decrease this sex ratio to some extent. But even so, the Christian subcultures would have had a substantial surplus of women in a world accustomed to a vast surplus of men. Later I shall consider how a surplus of women should have resulted in substantial secondary conversions via marriages to pagans. But for now I wish to focus on the simple conclusion that there are abundant reasons to accept that Christian women enjoyed a favorable sex ratio and to show how that resulted in Christian women enjoying superior status in comparison with their pagan counterparts.

SEX RATIOS AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

One of the more significant and original contributions to social thought in recent years is the Guttentag and Secord (1983) theory linking cross-cultural variations in the status of women to cross-cultural variations in sex ratios. The theory involves a remarkably subtle linking of dyadic and social structural power and dependency. For purposes of this essay it is sufficient merely to note that Guttentag and Secord conclude that to the extent males outnumber females, women will be enclosed in repressive sex roles as men treat them as “scarce goods.” Conversely, to the extent that females outnumber males, the Guttentag and Secord theory predicts that women will enjoy relatively greater power and freedom.

As they applied their theory to various societies in different eras, Guttentag and Secord noted that it illuminated the marked differences in the relative status and power of Athenian and Spartan women. That is, *within* the classical world, the status of women varied substantially in response to variations in sex ratios.

In Athens, women were in relatively short supply due to female infanticide, practiced by all classes, and from additional deaths caused by abortion. The status of Athenian women was very low. Girls received little or no education. Typically, Athenian females were married at puberty and often before. Under Athenian law a woman was classified as a child, regardless of age, and therefore was the legal property of some man at all stages in her life. Males could divorce by simply ordering a wife out of the household. Moreover, if a woman were seduced or raped, her husband was legally compelled to divorce her. If a woman

wanted a divorce she had to have her father or some other man bring her case before a judge. Finally, Athenian women could own property, but control of the property always was vested in the male to whom she “belonged” (Guttentag and Secord 1983; Finley 1982; Pomeroy 1975).

Spartans also practiced infanticide, but without gender bias — only healthy, well-formed babies were allowed to live. Since males are more subject to birth defects and are more apt to be sickly infants, the result was a slight excess of females from infancy, a trend that accelerated with age because of male mortality from military life and warfare. Keep in mind that mortality rates in military encampments far surpassed civilian rates until well into the twentieth century. At age 7 all Spartan boys left home for military boarding schools and all were required to serve in the army until age 30 when they passed into the active reserve where they remained until age 60. A subjugated peasantry known as helots supplied all of the males in the domestic labor force. Although men could marry at age 20, they could not live with their wives until they left the active army at age 30.

Spartan women enjoyed status and power unknown in the rest of the classical world. They not only controlled their own property, they controlled that of their male relatives when they were away with the army. It is estimated that women were the sole owners of a least 40 percent of all land and property in Sparta (Pomeroy 1975). The laws concerning divorce were the same for men and women. Women received as much education as men and Spartan women received a substantial amount of physical education and gymnastic training. Spartan women seldom married before age 20 and, unlike Athenian sisters who wore heavy, concealing gowns and seldom were seen by males outside their household, Spartan women wore short dresses and went where they pleased (Guttentag and Secord 1983; Finley 1982; Pomeroy 1975).

RELATIVE STATUS OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN

If Guttentag and Secord's theory is correct, then we would have to predict that the status of Christian women in the Greco-Roman world would more closely approximate that of Spartan women than that of women in Athens. Although I began with the assertion that Christian women did indeed enjoy considerably greater status and power than did pagan women, this needs to be demonstrated at greater length. The discussion will focus on two primary aspects of female status: within the family and within the religious community.

Wives, Widows, and Brides

First of all, a major aspect of the improved status of women in the Christian subculture is that Christians did not condone female infanticide. Granted that this was the result of the prohibition of *all* infanticide. But, the more favorable Christian view of women also is demonstrated in their condemnation of divorce, incest, marital infidelity, and polygamy. As Fox (1987:354) put it, “fidelity, without divorce, was expected of every Christian.” Moreover, although rules prohibiting divorce and remarriage evolved slowly, the earliest church councils

ruled that "twice-married Christians" could not hold church office (Fox 1987). Like pagans, early Christians prized female chastity, but unlike pagans they rejected the double standard which gave pagan men so much sexual license (Sandison 1967). Christian men were urged to remain virgins until marriage (Fox 1987) and extra-marital sex was condemned as adultery. Chadwick (1967: 59) noted that Christianity "regarded unchastity in a husband as no less serious a breach of loyalty and trust than unfaithfulness in a wife." Even the great Greek physician Galen was prompted to remark on Christian "restraint in cohabitation" (in Benko 1986:142).

Should they be widowed, Christian women also enjoyed very substantial advantages. Pagan widows faced great social pressure to remarry. Augustus even had widows fined if they failed to remarry within two years (Fox 1987). Of course, when a pagan widow did remarry she lost all of her inheritance, it becoming the property of her new husband. In contrast, among Christians, widowhood was highly respected and remarriage was, if anything, mildly discouraged. Thus, not only were well-to-do Christian widows enabled to keep their husband's estate, the church stood ready to sustain poor widows, thus allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry. Eusebius (1965:282) provides a letter from Cornelius, Bishop of Rome, written in 251 to Bishop Fabius of Antioch, in which he reported that "more than fifteen hundred widows and distressed persons" were in the care of the local congregation, which may have included about 30,000 members at this time.

In all these ways the Christian woman enjoyed far greater marital security and equality than did her pagan neighbor. But there was another major marital aspect to the benefits women gained from being Christians. They were married at a substantially older age and had more choice about whom they married. Since, as we shall see, pagan women frequently were forced into pre-pubertal, consummated marriages, this was no small matter.

In a now-classic article, the historical demographer Keith Hopkins (1965a) surveyed a century of research on the age of marriage of Roman women — girls actually, most of them. The evidence is both literary and quantitative. In addition to the standard classical histories, the literary evidence consists of writings by lawyers and physicians. The quantitative data are based on inscriptions, most of them funerary, from which the age at marriage can be calculated (cf. Harkness 1896).

As to the histories, silence offers strong testimony that Roman girls married young, very often before puberty. It is possible to calculate that many famous Roman women married at a tender age: Octavia and Agrippina married at 11 and 12, Quintilian's wife bore him a son when she was 13, Tacitus wed a girl of 13, and so on. But in reviewing the writing about all of these aristocratic Romans, Hopkins (1965) found only one case where the ancient writer mentioned the age of the bride — and this biographer was himself a Christian ascetic! Clearly, having been a child bride was not thought worth mentioning by ancient biographers. Beyond silence, however, the Greek historian Plutarch reported that Romans "gave their girls in marriage when they were twelve years old, or even younger" (in Hopkins 1965a). Cassius Dio, also a Greek writing

Roman history, agreed: "girls are considered . . . to have reached marriageable age on completion of their twelfth year" (Dio 1987:170).

Roman law set 12 as the minimum age at which girls could marry. But the law carried no penalties and legal commentaries from the time include such advice as: "A girl who has married before 12 will be a legitimate wife, when she becomes 12." Another held that when girls under age 12 married, for legal purposes they should be considered engaged until they reached 12. Hopkins (1965a:314) concluded:

... we have no means of knowing whether lawyers represented advanced, typical, or conservative opinions in these matters. What we do know is that in the fragments of their opinions that survive there is no sneer or censure against marriages before 12, and there are no teeth in the laws [against it].

The quantitative data are based on several studies of Roman inscriptions, combined by Hopkins (1965a), from which age at marriage could be calculated. Hopkins also was able to separate these Roman women on the basis of religion. He found that pagans were three times as likely as Christians to have married before age 13 (10 percent were wed by age 11). Nearly half (44 percent) of pagans had married by age 14, compared with 20 percent of Christians. In contrast, nearly half (48 percent) of Christian females had not wed before age 18, compared with a third (37 percent) of pagans.

Those differences are highly significant statistically. But, they seem of even greater social significance when we discover that a substantial proportion of pagan Roman girls not only were married before the onset of puberty, to men far older than themselves, but that these marriages typically were consummated at once.

When the French historian Durry (1955) first reported his findings that Roman marriages involving child brides normally were consummated even if the bride had not yet achieved puberty, he acknowledged that this ran counter to deeply held ideas about the classical world. But there is ample literary evidence that consummation of these marriages was taken for granted. Hopkins (1965) noted that one Roman law did deal with the marriage of girls under age 12 and intercourse, but was concerned only with the question of her adultery. Several Roman physicians suggested that it might be wise to defer intercourse until menarche, but did not stress the matter (Hopkins 1965a).

Unfortunately, the literary sources offer little information about how pre-pubertal girls felt about these practices, although Plutarch regarded it as a cruel custom and reported "the hatred and fear of girls forced contrary to nature." I suggest that, even in the absence of better evidence and even allowing for substantial cultural differences, it seems likely that many Roman girls responded as Plutarch claimed. Thus, here too Christian girls enjoyed a substantial advantage.

Gender and Religious Roles

It is well-known that the early church attracted an unusual number of high status women (Fox 1987; Grant 1970, 1977; Harnack 1908). But the matter of

interest here has to do with the roles occupied by women *within* early Christian congregations. Let me emphasize that by early Christianity I mean the period covering approximately the first five centuries. After that, as Christianity became the dominant faith of the empire and as sex ratios responded to the decline in the differential conversion of women, the roles open to women became far more limited.

As to the status of women in the early church, there has been far too much reliance on *I Corinthians* 14:34-36 where Paul *appears* to prohibit women even from speaking in church. Laurence Iannaccone (1982) has made a compelling case that these verses were the opposite of Paul's position and were in fact a quotation of claims being made at Corinth that Paul then refuted. Certainly the statement is at variance with everything else Paul wrote about the proper role for women in the church. Moreover, Paul several times acknowledged women in leadership positions in various congregations.

In *I Romans* 16:1-2 Paul introduces and commends to the Roman congregation "our sister Phoebe" who is a "deaconess of the church at Cenchrea," and who had been of great help to him. Deacons were of considerable importance in the early church. They assisted at liturgical functions and administered the benevolent and charitable activities of the church. Clearly, Paul regarded it as entirely proper for a woman to hold that position. Nor was this an isolated case. Clement of Alexandria wrote of "women deacons" and in 451 the Council of Chalcedon specified that henceforth a deaconess must be at least 40 and unmarried (Ferguson 1990). From the pagan side, in his famous letter to the Emperor Trajan, Pliny the Younger (1943) reported that he had tortured two young Christian women "who were called deaconesses."

Not only did Paul commend Phoebe the deaconess to the Romans, he also sent his greetings to prominent woman in the Roman congregation: to Priscilla, whom he acknowledges for having "risked her neck" on his behalf, to Mary, "who has worked so hard among you," and to several other women (*I Romans* 16:1-15). Moreover, in *I Timothy* 3:11 Paul again mentions women in the role of deacons, noting that to qualify for such an appointment women must be "serious, no slanderers, but temperate and faithful in all things."

That women often served as deacons in the early church was long obscured because the translators of the King James version chose to refer to Pheobe as merely a "servant" of the church, not as a deacon, and to transform Paul's words in *I Timothy* into a comment directed towards the *wives* of deacons.¹ But this reflects the sexist norms of the seventeenth century, not the realities of early Christian communities. Indeed, early in the third century the great Christian intellectual Origen wrote the following comment on Paul's letter to the Romans:

This text teaches with the authority of the Apostle that . . . there are, as we have already said, women deacons in the Church, and that the women, who have given assistance to so many people and who by their good works deserve to be praised by the Apostle, ought to be accepted in the diaconate (in Gyron 1976:134).

¹ I am indebted to Laurence R. Iannaccone for pointing out this feature of the King James Version.

All important modern translations of the Bible now restore the original language used by Paul in these two letters, but somehow the illusions fostered by the King James falsifications remain the common wisdom. Nevertheless, there is virtual consensus among historians of the early church as well as biblical scholars that women held positions of honor and authority within early Christianity (Frend 1984; Gryson 1976; Cadoux 1925). Peter Brown (1988: 144-45) noted that not only did Christians differ from pagans in this respect, but from Jews:

The Christian clergy . . . took a step that separated them from the rabbis of Palestine. . . they welcomed women as patrons and even offered women roles in which they could act as collaborators.

And none of his colleagues would have regarded the following claim by the distinguished Wayne Meeks (1983:71) as controversial:

Women . . . are Paul's fellow workers as evangelists and teachers. Both in terms of their position in the larger society and in terms of their participation in the Christian communities, then, a number of women broke through the normal expectations of female roles.

Close examination of Roman persecutions also suggest that women held positions of power and status within the Christian churches. The actual number of Christians martyred by the Romans was quite small (MacMullen 1984; Grant 1977) and the majority of those executed were officials, including bishops. That a very significant proportion of martyrs were women led Bonnie Bowman Thurston (1989) to suggest that they also must have been regarded by the Romans as holding some sort of official standing. This is consistent with the fact the women tortured and then probably executed by Pliny were deaconesses.

Thus, just as the Guttentag and Secord theory predicts, the very favorable sex ratio enjoyed by Christian women soon was translated into substantially more status and power, both within the family and within the religious subculture, than was enjoyed by pagan women. Let me note that women in Rome and in Roman cities, in contrast with women in the Greek cities of the empire, enjoyed greater freedom and power (MacMullen 1984). However, it was in the Greek cities of Asia Minor and North Africa that Christianity made its greatest, early headway and it is these communities that are the focus of this analysis. Granted that even in this part of the empire, pagan women sometimes held important positions within various mystery cults and shrines. However, these religious groups and centers were themselves relatively peripheral to power within pagan society, for authority was vested primarily in secular roles. In contrast, the church was the primary social structure of the Christian sub-culture. Daily life revolved around the church, and power resided in church offices. To the extent that women held significant roles within the church, they enjoyed greater power and status than did pagan women. Consider that participation in Mithraism, which often has been regarded as early Christianity's major competitor, was limited to males (Ferguson 1990).

Before I conclude this lecture I would like to pursue an additional and equally remarkable consequence of the very different sex ratios prevailing among pagans and Christians. In the pagan world that surrounded the early Christians,

an excess number of men caused wives to be in short supply. But within the Christian subculture it was husbands who were in short supply. Herein lay an excellent opportunity for gaining secondary converts.

EXOGENOUS MARRIAGE AND SECONDARY CONVERSION

Both Peter and Paul sanctioned marriage between Christians and pagans. Peter advised women, whose husbands did not believe, to be submissive so that the husbands might be won to faith "when they see your reverent and chaste behavior" (*I Peter* 3:1-2). Paul gives similar advice, noting that "an unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife" (*I Corinthians* 7:13-14). Both passages commonly are interpreted as directed towards persons whose conversion postdated their marriage. In such circumstances, as Wayne Meeks (1983:101) explained, the Christian "divorce rule takes precedence over the preference for group endogamy." But, I suggest these passages may have reflected a far greater tolerance for exogenous marriage than has been recognized. My reasons are several.

We know there was a very substantial over-supply of marriageable Christian women and that this was acknowledged to be a problem. Fox (1987:309) reported the concern among church leaders "to match an excess of Christian women to a deficiency of Christian men." Indeed, in about the year 200, Callistus, Bishop of Rome, upset many of his fellow clerics when he ruled that Christian women could live in "just concubinage" without entering into marriage (Brown 1988; Fox 1987; Latourette 1937). Although Hippolytus and other contemporaries denounced the Pope's action as giving license to adultery, Harnack defended Callistus on the basis of the circumstances he faced.

These circumstances arose from the fact of Christian girls in the church outnumbering youths; the indulgence of Callistus itself proving unmistakably the female element in the church, so far as the better classes were concerned, was in the majority (1908:2:83-84).

In particular, Callistus was trying to deal with the problem facing upper class women whose only marital options *within* the Christian community were to men of far inferior rank. Should they have entered into legal marriages with such men, high-born women would have lost many legal privileges and control of their wealth. If high-born Christian women found it so difficult to find grooms that the Bishop of Rome permitted "just concubinage," how was he to condemn middle- and lower-class Christian women who wed pagans, especially if they did so within the church guidelines concerning the religious training of the children? The case of Pomponia Graecina, an aristocrat and a very early convert, is instructive. It is uncertain whether her husband Plautius ever became a Christian, although he carefully shielded her from gossip, but there seems to be no doubt her children were raised as Christians. According to Marta Sordi (1986:27) "in the second century [her family] were practicing Christians (a member of the family is buried in the catacomb of St. Callistus)." I shall demonstrate in subsequent work that superior fertility played a decisive role in the rise of Christianity. But had the oversupply of Christian women resulted in an over-

supply of unwed, childless women, their potential fertility would have been denied to Christian growth. Summing up his long study of the sources, Harnack (1908:2:79) noted that many mixed marriages were reported and that in virtually all cases "the husband was a pagan, while the wife was a Christian."

Finally, the frequency with which early church fathers condemned marriage to pagans *could* demonstrate that Christians "refused their sons and daughters in marriage to nonmembers" (MacMullen 1984:103). But it could also reflect the reverse, since people tend not to keep harping on matters that aren't significant. Tertullian offers an interesting example. Writing in about the year 200 he violently condemned Christian women who married pagans, describing the latter as "slaves of the Devil" (in Fox 1987:308). He also wrote two angry treatises condemning the use of make-up, hair dye, fancy clothes, and jewelry by Christian women (1959). I certainly would not conclude from the latter that most Christian women in Tertullian's time dressed plainly and rejected cosmetics. Were that the case, Tertullian would have been an irrelevant fool — which he so obviously was not. I incline to a similar interpretation of his attack on Christian women for marrying pagans — Tertullian's anger reflects that such marriages were frequent. In fact, Tertullian felt it necessary to acknowledge that one of his colleagues claimed that "while marriage to a pagan was certainly an offence, it was an extremely trivial offence" (in Harnack 1908:2:82). Michael Walsh (1986) seems to agree that intermarriage was common. Commenting upon a proposal by Ignatius of Antioch that Christians should marry only with the permission of their local bishop, Walsh wrote:

Ignatius' proposal may have been an attempt to encourage marriage between Christians, for inevitably marriages between Christians and pagans were common, especially in the early years. The Church did not at first discourage this practice, which had its advantages: It might bring others into the fold (p. 216).

This is further encouraged by the lack of concern in early Christian sources about losing members via marriage to pagans. Peter and Paul hoped that Christians would bring their spouses into the church, but neither seemed to have the slightest worry that Christians would revert to, or convert to, paganism. Moreover, pagan sources agree. The composure of the Christian martyrs amazed and unsettled many pagans. Pliny (1943) noted the "stubbornness and unbending obstinacy" of the Christians brought before him — under threat of death they would not recant. The Emperor Marcus Aurelius (1916:295) also remarked on the obstinacy of Christian martyrs. And Galen wrote of Christians that "their contempt of death (and of its sequel) is patent to us every day" (in Benko 1984:141). Galen's reference was to the willingness of Christians to nurse the sick during the great plague that struck the empire at this time, killing millions, including Marcus Aurelius (Stark 1992). The high levels of commitment that the early church generated among its members should have made it safe for them to enter exogenous marriages.

That Christians seldom lost out via exogenous marriages also is in keeping with modern observations of high tension religious movements. Female Jehovah's Witnesses frequently marry outside the group (Heaton 1990). Seldom

does this result in their defection and it often results in the conversion of the spouse. Indeed, this phenomenon is so general that Andrew Greeley (1970) has proposed the rule that whenever a mixed marriage occurs, the less religious person usually will join the religion of the more religious member.

But how much intermarriage was there and how much did it matter in terms of producing secondary converts? What we do know is that secondary conversion was quite frequent among the Roman upper classes (Fox 1987; Chadwick 1967). This was partly because many married upper-class women became Christians and then managed to convert their spouses — this was especially common by the fourth century. But it also occurred because many upper-class Christian women did marry pagans, some of whom they subsequently were able to convert (Harnack 1908). Indeed, Peter Brown (1988:154) wrote of Christian women as a “gateway” into pagan families where “they were the wives, servants, and nurses of unbelievers.”

In truth, there is no abundance of direct evidence that intermarriages between Christian women and pagan men were widespread. But in my judgment, a compelling case can be made by resort to reason. It is reasonable to assume that:

1. Given the great surplus of marriageable Christian women, existing in the midst of a world in which women were in short supply;
2. Given that Christians seem not to have feared that intermarriage would result in their daughters abandoning their faith;
3. Such marriages ought to have been common.
4. From what we know about conversion mechanisms, these intermarriages ought to have resulted in a lot of secondary conversions.

As discussed earlier, conversion is a network phenomenon based on interpersonal attachments. People join movements to align their religious status with that of their friends and relatives who already belong. Hence, in order to offer plausible accounts of the rise of Christianity, we need to discover mechanisms by which Christians formed attachments with pagans. Put another way, we need to discover how Christians managed to remain an *open network*, able to keep building bonds with outsiders, rather than to have become a closed community of believers. A high rate of exogenous marriage is one such mechanism. And I think it was crucial to the rise of Christianity.

CONCLUSION

Here I have attempted to establish three things. First, that Christian subcultures in the ancient world rapidly developed a very substantial surplus of females, while in the pagan world around them males greatly outnumbered females. This shift was the result of Christian prohibitions against infanticide and abortion and of substantial sex bias in conversion. Second, fully in accord with Guttentag and Secord's theory linking the status of women to sex ratios, Christian women enjoyed substantially higher status within the Christian subcultures than pagan women did in the world at large. This was especially marked vis-à-vis gender relations within the family, but women also filled leadership positions within the church. Third, given a surplus of Christian women and a surplus of pagan men, a

substantial amount of exogenous marriage took place, thus providing the early church with a steady flow of secondary converts.

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