Short Essay:

The Premodern Christian View on Marriage

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The inquiry into whether premodern Christianity viewed marriage positively or negatively initially hinged on the perspectives of individuals queried. Consulting Jerome (d. 420) would yield a negative stance: "If we are to pray always, it follows that we must never be in the bondage of wedlock, for as often as I render my wife her due, I cannot pray" (Against Jovinianus, Book 1:7). Marriage entailed obligations such as partnership, parenthood (albeit in a chaste union), and sexual relations—considered wasted time of prayer. Understood by theologian perspectives, sex and marriage were closely tied, thus marriage was the implication of sex and childbearing (Karras and Pierpont 2023: 98). Sex in isolation was deemed impure or as a failure of controlling primal desires. To surrender virginity and engage in sex was a disservice to oneself, and brought impurity in the face of god, contributing to the rise of monasticism and the leading negative perspective on marriage.

In contrast, questioning Jovinian (d. 405) the same would result in a neutral, if not positive response. He held the belief that virgins, widowed and married were equal under god. Regarding marital status, he held a positive outlook that was contested by Jerome, reflected in his words 'Marriage replenishes earth, virginity fills paradise' (Against Jovinian, Book 1:16). Augustine of Hippo (d.430), however, would nuance marriage, particularly in its sexuality, that if held forth within its sanctioned boundaries, marital relations carry no blame and allowed for procreation, even if to fulfill lust—it is only venial blame. However, if that marriage is at all betrayed by sex outside of its bounds: adultery or fornication, it leads to mortal sin (On the Good of Marriage, Chapter 7, p. 15). Augustine upheld a positive view of marriage, emphasizing its virtues of childbirth, fidelity, and Sacramentum, asserting that 'to increase and multiply and replenish the earth in virtue of the blessing of God, is a gift of marriage' (City of God, Book 14, Chapter 22). Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) claimed 'there are three professions in the Holy Catholic

Church: virgins, widows, and the married. Virgins produce a hundredfold reward, widows sixtyfold, the married indeed thirtyfold', providing the married are only thirty percent of that of a virgin, where they are not negatively attributed, are still inferior (as cited in Karras and Pierpont 2023: 54).

However, these theological viewpoints do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of the average medieval individual. 'Priests up until eleventh century could marry if they so wished' suggesting the church itself was lenient to marriage before the instillation of clerical celibacy (Muessig 2024a). Karras and Pierpont argue that 'chastity was a sexual identity that was constitutive of how individuals would have understood themselves and their role in life' (2023: 64). Moreover, the disparity in social standing among those quoted introduces complexity to the prevailing social hierarchy, casting doubt on whether the average person truly adhered to the ideals proposed by scholars. Additionally, marriage was generally mandated not just by religious doctrine but also by the geographic-cultural contexts. 'In the early Middle Ages, there was a bewildering variety of marriage practices', and accounts of Christian men performing polygamy or remarriage (Lynch 2014: 297).

Marriage was considered one of the Seven Sacraments—a reality of faith (Rogier 1440-1445). While marriage was overseen by the church, underlying its importance to Christianity, it was also personal, with the priest's role only being witness to the parties' consent (Lynch 2014: 299). Canon Law of the Church divisively set out a positive front for marriage, despite ongoing debates regarding the moral implications of sexual activity. Marriage was deemed 'suitable for Christians' on the focus of a spiritual union for, ideally, the purpose of procreation (Brundage 1987: 235). The issue of whether consummation was necessary for a valid marriage divided canonists, further fueling the discourse on the role of marriage in Christianity

(Brundage 1987: 279). For one would claim if sex was required for a legal marriage, yet inherently sinful, then marriage was also sinful by extension. Even still, Gratian's Decretum would posit validity was based upon consensual consummation, which upheld the sanctity of both marriage and sexual intercourse within the religion (Brundage 1987: 236-237).

Although the positionality of marriage was prolonged and contentious, historical evolution eventually tilted towards a positive appraisal, epitomized by its idealization in modern society. Nevertheless, lingering negative perceptions surrounding marriage, particularly regarding the pursuit of pleasure through sexual intercourse, persisted, influencing those who entered into marital unions (Muessig 2024b). Ultimately, the thread between marriage and sex was fueled to such extreme opposition by some but was overshadowed by the natural conclusion of prioritizing procreation, facilitating the prevailing positive outlook on marriage.

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