

Triumph and Tragedy of Early Christianity

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Abstract

This research aims to elaborate on women's influence on the formations of Early Christianity and their underplayed role in affecting Europe's intellectual movements. Women, both prior to and during the formation of Christianity, had been fully capable and passionate in their subverted attempts to contribute to society through intellectual, religious, and philosophical means. In these beginning years, there was reason to believe that Christianity's success would allow for a gender equality that was formerly not seen throughout history. Unfortunately, Christianity's institutionalization created ideologies that fundamentally undermined women's validity by the writing and coercive use of biblical scripture. Regardless of this tragedy, women proved, both prior to and within Christianity's history, they deserved the same sort of intellectual and societal respect that men have historically received. In this respect, history and even contemporary society can be viewed as misrepresentation and hindering of humanity's progression as a whole.

Keywords: Christianity, patriarchy, religion, philosophy, history, women, gender studies

This work's labor is to show that women have played a highly respectable role in the development of Christianity and ought not be left unmentioned. As the history will show, early Christianity had the potential to change how women were societally understood and represented. But first, it is necessary to establish a brief vision of the Western World prior to Christianity with respect to the rights and roles of women. To retain a reasonable scope for that aim, I will be primarily concentrating on the affects of Greek and Roman paganism on Christianity's patriarchy. This isn't to deny Jewish tradition its essential role during this time in history, it is simply for brevity's sake. The upcoming loose narrative should be viewed as an allegorical as oppose to a summative illustration of this issue.

In the beginnings of Ancient Greece, the pantheon of gods as we recognize them today were significantly different. In its early formations, Goddesses were held in the high regard, deserving of grand shrines and

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frequent ceremonial worship. However, Greece's unification called for an assembling of diverse beliefs, which brought with it a patriarchal appropriation that we will later find is all too common with making religions mainstream. Historian Charlene Spretnak, elaborates on this:

The pre-Hellenic Goddesses are powerful and compassionate, yet those whom the Greeks incorporated into the new order were transformed severely. The Great Hera was made into a disagreeable, jealous wife; Athena was made into a cold, masculine daughter; Aphrodite into a frivolous sexual creature; Artemis was made into a quiet, forgettable sister of Apollo, and Pandora was made into a troublesome, treacherous source of human woes (18).

This altering of feminine archetypes extended beyond a religious context and dictated a woman's ability to be respected in various aspects of society.

Pagan philosophical schools in the 4th century B.C., and for many years prior, had been denying women entry into schooling. Women for centuries would have to take extravagant measures or be born into extraordinary circumstances in order to receive the teachings readily available for men of wealth. For instance, Axiothea of Philesia was a woman living in Arcadia at the time of Plato's publishing of *The Republic*. She traveled to Athens out of admiration of the increasingly famous and well-received philosophy. To gain admittance, Axiothea would dress as a man. However, she isn't unique in this respect, a woman named Lasthenia studied Plato by the same means (Waithe 197).

Although women suffered more oppressive cultural norms than we have today, they still courageously and passionately sought knowledge and expressed great wisdoms. Philosophy has long been considered a masculine practice. The term *philosophy* is derived from the two Greek terms φίλος (*filos*) and σοφία (*sofia*). The two terms, put in their original context, translate a "philosopher" to be a "friend of wisdom." The Greek language associates objects or concepts with masculine, feminine, or neutral traits. For example, the term for wisdom (*sofia*) is feminine. However, the term for friend (*filos*) is directed toward the masculine. To be overly literal, philosophy means "a male friend of female wisdom." By such context, a place for women is not allowed in the term *philosophy*, regardless of wisdom itself being inevitably feminine. In this way, the very conception of philosophy, and its rhetorical use in the modern day, continues one of the many indirect perpetuations of patriarchy.

The wisdom of women was reserved for frivolous expressions, most notably poetry. In Plato's lesser-known work, *Ion*, he adamantly distinguished poetry from philosophy for this very reason. Plato and his successors would continue to isolate women from any practices that held a semblance of seriousness: philosophy, politics, rhetoric, mathematics, etc.

In spite of such initiatives, we find plenty of exceptions in the Ancient Greek Era, such as Theano II, Perictione II, Aspasia, Diotima, and Hypatia of Alexandria (Waithe). However, the theme of such exceptions is that they are most often only known through reference. To contemporary knowledge, their written works don't exist, or at least not anymore. In either case, the influence of the feminine intellect was stifled.

With these grounds we can see a brief vision of the intellectual climate for women in Ancient Greece. Considering the inheritance of Greek ideologies to the Roman Empire it is fair to say that this particular attribute of systematically disempowering women hadn't been rectified.

Fast-forwarding to Rome, we see a strong case against such systemization in a woman named Marcia. Oddly enough, she manages to take up Lucius Annaeus Seneca (The Younger) as her philosophical tutor. Seneca has been known largely for his philosophies on anger brought about by his position as an advisor to Nero's fury ridden rule of the time. However, Seneca's true polemic work was his piece, "Of Consolation: To Marcia."

The whole work is Seneca reacting to the intuitive wisdom of his pupil, Marcia and consoling her many traumas. Throughout the book, and presumably some of his others, Seneca used Marcia's intellect as a proofreader and tester of his philosophical claims. The oddest circumstance of this piece is that Seneca wrote it specifically for Marcia, thus the name "Of Consolation: To Marcia". While this doesn't sound too extraordinary for our time, it was unheard of for theirs. Even more unheard of is his display of a mutual respect for women:

I know what you will say [Marcia], "You quote men as examples: you forget that it is a woman that you are trying to console." Yet who would say that nature has dealt grudgingly with the minds of women, and stunted their virtues? Believe me, they have the same intellectual power as men, and the same capacity for honourable and generous action. If trained to do so, they are just as able to endure sorrow or labour (Seneca, XVI).

Marcia, being the stereotypical image of a wretched old widow, immeasurably influenced Seneca's work by proving to him the philosophical merit a woman can bestow. With this consideration, one can begin to speculate on the true extent of women's influence on the great works of men that we still revere today.

The extent of women's influence is unknowable, because history, philosophy, religion, etc. has primarily received its testimony through men. With women's works being changed to male names out of coercion, women intentionally writing as men to be able to published, and women creating philosophies that men would display as their own, we can question what hasn't been influenced. Seneca's "Of Consolation: To Marcia," served as a call toward gender equality, but the systemic patriarchy of the time stifled its full impact. This is the state of women's influence during the time of Christianity's conception.

Roughly around this time, Mark and Luke record that a group of women had followed Jesus in his Galilean ministry, and that they were present at his execution and resurrection. However, his male disciples were absent with exception to John toward the end. Women saw the entirety of the crucifixion, carried Jesus to his tomb, and witnessed his resurrection. In this regard, Christianity's quintessential event, Jesus's murder and resurrection, reached the writers of the Bible most notably through the testimony of these women. Catherine Kroeger, a Christian History Institute academic, asserts women's strong influence during this crucial time in history:

"The proclamation of the astounding Easter event was entrusted to these women. The angel reminded them that they had already been instructed by Jesus about His death, burial and resurrection. The women remembered and hurried off to tell the men. Their witness remains an integral part of the gospel to this day. The early church considered Mary Magdalene an 'apostle to the apostles' and Luke relied heavily on the testimony of women as he wrote both Luke and Acts."

In the first few decades after these events transpired, women took a major part in Christianity's initial development. Some examples of this are: "Priscilla, Chloe, Lydia, Apphia, Nympha, the mother of John Mark, and possibly the 'elect lady' of John's second epistle" (Kroeger). It can be confidently said that a significant portion of Christianity's first true messengers were women.

However, Christianity from a philosophical stance was an odd set of beliefs when its preaching first met the ears of the masses. Its patrons accepted tragedy as inevitable, fiercely denied a large range of well-accepted ancient gods, and believed in a finite universe with a distinct beginning and end along with a strong duality of afterlives. Pagan beliefs held the contrary position in many respects but one of the strongest distinctions was whether the universe was created or eternal. For Christians, the Creator's authority is unchallenged making him absolutely supreme. It is easy to assume that the common pagans at the time must have viewed these early Christians as strange and obnoxious folk who most certainly threatened the status quo. This new belief's accommodation of women additionally disturbed the mainstream paganism of the day.

An emblematic example of this, St. Justin Martyr (roughly 105-165 A.D.) was born a pagan at Flavia Neapolis in Samaria. Martyr was first introduced to Stoicism, then Pythagoreanism, and then Platonism, but none of these offered the answers he craved. While he was still a young philosophy teacher, he met an aged Christian man as he walked upon the seashore. By chance, he became acquainted with this virtually unheard voice. This experience overwhelmed the young philosopher. He took on the new identity to the fullest extent. It should be noted how deeply Martyr was swayed. Martyr's deepest questions weren't found in the many beliefs well established in his time; Christianity gave him a solace he hadn't felt before (Kiefer). Such is illustrated by his actions from this point on.

He continued to teach traditional beliefs until he made the large move to open a school of Christian Philosophy, one of the first of its kind. He then began to challenge non-Christian figures to formal debates and was accredited with being a ferocious debater. He served as a polemic figure and helped make Christianity something worth recognizing in the ancient world.

While gaining local credibility, Martyr left for Rome and he engaged the Cynic philosopher Crescens. Martyr emerged victorious and Crescens was rumored to have denounced him to the Roman authorities out of spite. He was charged with practicing an unauthorized religion and was judged before the Roman prefect Rusticus. Upon his hearing he refused to renounce Christianity, and was put to death by beheading along with six of his students, one of them being a woman. This "martyrdom" curiously points to this nameless woman. It was strange in this to time to see a woman executed, not to mention present in a school.

This narrative shows how powerfully Christianity captured the populace. By the grace of not being well accepted, Christianity became a haven for women, finally allowing them to acknowledge their deepest

expressions and in some cases even die for their beliefs. As we saw with the Ancient Greeks, the normalizing of a religion seems to have a negative impact on systemic impressions toward women. Respecting women was secluded to the peripheral of society and Christianity's initial notoriety provided a means toward female representation.

Although many of the women formerly mentioned are more religious figures, we find a strong example of a woman contributing to the philosophical underpinnings of Christianity in Macrina the Younger (Waithe 139). All the philosophical writings attributed to her were given on her deathbed and recorded by her brother, bishop Gregory of Nyssa.

Macrina's paternal grandmother, Macrina the Older, was a pupil of Gregory Thaumaturgos, a man well versed in Greek and Early Christian philosophies, and assumedly this is where both Macrina the Younger and her brother Gregory received their names. This upbringing in Christian ideologies brought the family controversy and led them to a state of hiding prior to Constantine's rise in power. Macrina was educated by her mother, Emmelia, and did not receive formal schooling like her three brothers did in Athens. Nonetheless, she proved to bear a sharp mind and a strong grip of Greek philosophy.

Macrina's deathbed philosophical testaments dealt heavily with the nature of the soul. She proclaimed that the one-ness and indivisibility of the soul are the guarantee that it is indestructible. The soul itself is the principal of life and is thus immortal. To use the words given, "the un-composite will not perish when the composite perishes" (Waithe, 141).

Macrina conceived that the soul is made in "God's image" and thus cannot contain what she refers to as "pathe" (the essence of desire and anger). The inner workings of pathe in us are not of the soul's conjuring; they are merely incrustations of it. The soul's essence, as opposed to pathe's, is the faculty for thinking. To Macrina, the soul and the body essentially belong together. When one's mortal body perishes, the soul then utilizes its spiritual body. The soul is an intermediary of corporeal and incorporeal vessels but is never without a vessel. The physical body's means of creating new life out of the nothingness of non-existence is of the soul's doing (Waithe 167).

Through all of her philosophical claims, she took no opportunity to be spiteful of men's metaphysical nature. She never posed the masculine and feminine as above or below one another. She felt that all are made in the "image and likeness of God." Her brothers, in their written philosophies agreed with this belief. This idea, however, was not commonplace and would soon be more dangerous than ever.

Regardless, Macrina serves as a perfect example of a woman contributing to the structural beginnings of Christianity. Her beliefs and arguments offered a new philosophical system that blended the well-respected beliefs of pagans and the newly forming ideas of Christianity. Most importantly, her philosophies provided a gender-neutral orientation of Christianity.

By the 2nd century, records clearly state that women accompany men on mission trips, not as their marriage partners but as colleagues. This point can be viewed as the peak of female representation in the ancient world. Influence was gaining and women were able to finally foresee a future with their interests in mind.

This time in human history had the potential to change how women were societally represented. As Christianity became predominant, leaders became more aware of the apparent issue needing to be addressed. The nature of engendered souls and the identity of humanity as a whole were under question. Regretfully, the newly founded Antiochenes, a distinct band of male Christians inhabiting what we now consider Turkey in the 4th century, came to dictate this wide-reaching subject (Harrison). Many Early Christians were progressive enough to believe as Macrina and her siblings did, that women and men were equal in God's image but this populace was the exception, not the rule.

The Antiochenes, however, generally came to believe that women were not in the image of God, but an "image of an image." This gave men a distinctive advantage over women, being that only men were in God's true image. Their statement was backed by the idea that Adam played as a victim to Eve's corruption in Eden. This was exemplified by God declaring in Genesis 3:17 that Adam was being punished, "because you have listened to the voice of your wife..." Women's punishment for Eve's corruption was "...your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). This originating mythos is what helped pave way for other fundamentally derogatory interpretations of women and their place in this world.

Jesus was sent by God to do what Adam couldn't, transcend the world of sin. Women were credited for sharing a mutual humanity but discredited by their conception in Genesis from Adam's side. Being that man was made in the image of God, and women were made in the image of man, then women were an "image of an image." Diodore of Tarsus was one of the leading voices in the Antiochenes school of thought. Author Nonna Harrison paraphrases his beliefs,

For [Diodore] women and men are united in their common human nature, as shown by the creation of Eve from Adam's side, but they are divided by the fact that men possess authority and women do not. Thus the divine image actually serves to divide humankind rather than uniting it in a way that affirms the dignity of each person, as has become standard in mainstream Christian thought (Harrison 247).

Literal and out of proportion early Bible interpreters found the means to fundamentally undermine the idea of women. Such conclusions made it easy to force women into subordinate positions and deny their voices much like the pagans before them.

The depth of this issue is not solely dictated by just the tale of Adam and Eve. This rhetoric continues beyond the *Old Testament*. The true marking of Christianity is how it decided to distinguish itself with the New Testament. It is this moment, the pre-canonization, which held all the potentiality for reform on women's inherent worth. Viewing the compilations of the New Testament as the solidifying of Christianity as a mainstream religion, we see Christianity repeat the same misstep as the Greek Pantheon before them. This over-masculinization took the day and would affect the faithful indefinitely, such as in 1 Timothy 2:8-15:

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

With such scripture available and a rising authority given to them in the Christian faith, early Christian scholars canonized their ability to remain dominant over women. Their strong presence in the creation and proliferation of Christianity's story made no difference in this regard.

We see this same stance practiced elsewhere in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 we read,

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

So what is the underlying intention of such verses? To keep to the ideas presented, women are innately erratic and ought to be repressed by the superior minds of men. .

With Christianity now institutionalized in the European world, scribes had full access to nearly all the writings of the Ancients. Bearing the world's knowledge they could now negate a strong history of women's ingenuity. We see this in the case of the female apostle Junia. Certain translations, such as: the Living Bible (1971), the NIV of 1973, and the New Jerusalem Bible wrote Junia in as Junias or Junian. Some have speculated that this misrepresentation started with Giles of Rome's translation in 1298 (Benger). However, intermittently throughout history, and especially in the modern day, you can find translations that represent Junia appropriately.

As shown, in some cases they would change the names of female writers or historical figures to be henceforth considered male or completely remove all evidence of their works although the latter is difficult to prove. History, regardless of its magnitude, was altered to promote a male-dominated society. Historian Charlene Spretnak speaks on Christianity's effect on what was left of Goddess-centered religions,

The new, patriarchal religion [Christianity] co-opted the older mythic symbols and inverted their meaning: The female Eve, was now weak-willed and treacherous; the sacred bough was now forbidden; and the serpent, symbol of regeneration and renewal with its shredding skins, was now the embodiment of evil. The Goddess religion and its "pagan" worshippers were brutally conquered, co-opted, and destroyed in Old Europe, the Middle-East, and India by Indo-European invaders (Spretnak 26).

The effects of this collective effort reverberate all the way into the modern day.

However, it wouldn't be fair to not mention the contrast. Many strong women were preserved in the canon of Christianity. Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene played crucial and highly respectable roles in the narrative of the *New Testament*. Several other women received favorable references: Elizabeth, Anna, Claudia, Damaris, Lydia, Eunice, and Lois, just to name a few. In this case, it appears the *New Testament* did not have as much issue with specific women, more properly it rejected a system where men and women were put in equal bearing with one another.

With all of this in consideration, one can see that the history of Christianity is one of great triumph and great tragedy in regards to the fate of women. Its humble beginnings were one scarred by martyrdom and persecution yet it flourished so strongly that it overthrew ideologies that had been present for thousands of years as well as ideologies that bloomed from its own creation. The oppressed Christians, within a few hundred years, had managed to become the very thing that tormented them: the oppressor. With its new ideas causing inspiration among the masses, many ideas that we would consider ideal by today's standards were entertained. Its original conception reached the hearts of women and promised them a future that would be much more substantial than what the former pagan era allowed.

There was a time where women were gaining cultural respect that was well deserved with their avid contributions to the growing beliefs. But as history shows, the religion that they substantially helped create became twisted and manipulated to orient a system of beliefs that segregated and belittled the very women who fought direly to forge it and those who stood against it.

Through our contemporary ability, we can see that women played a highly respectable role in the development of the religion that is so commonly practiced today. The early figures of Christian belief, whether male or female, helped shape the foundation of which modern denominations bicker over. From Justin Martyr to Macrina the Younger, we see an ancient underdog belief system so potent that those cast under its spell would willingly give their lives in its honor and promise.

The tragedy of Christianity's institutionalization cost the world its mutual respect for women and traces of this still remain today. If we dare to question our own gender inequalities, we must question their origination and rationally see that the philosophical and biblical tenets that built this chasm between men and women are based on convoluted and coercive intentions. We should all come to know that history has generally and disturbingly undermined the integrity and worth of women all over the world, and this ought not be the case. If philosophy or religion cared for its own progression

toward truth, the idea of a majority of women's voices being intently unheard for the large extent of what we call "history" should shake its chambers. One should constantly re-contextualize the past and care to aid the voices of the underdogs of history and those among us today. Surely, we cannot arrive to a fully enlightened future without being able to represent the voices of all and any, with honest merit being our guide.

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