

*What is the most underrated event of the past,  
and why is it so much more significant than people understand?*

When the Gregorian Reform was launched at the dawn of the second millennium, the papacy's agenda was unequivocal. In an effort to centralise power and re-establish authority, a succession of popes both before and after Gregory VII (d. 1085), the reform's namesake, introduced changes designed to free the Church from lay control. Secular rulers were stripped of their sacerdotal functions and clerics came to be the sole representatives of the Church, rather than the laity, as simony, investiture, and nicolaitism (i.e., clerical marriage) came under attack. The most far-reaching and long-lasting repercussions of these reforms, however, yet the most overlooked by historians, was the social upheaval caused by enforced clerical celibacy and its particularly devastating effect on women. The relentless onslaughts on clerical marriage instigated a social revolution that spanned the European continent, provoking riots for centuries, and, most perniciously, demonising half the world's population as the reformers campaigned against women in order to make marriage less appealing. Misogyny has been woven so deeply into history that its nuanced causes and effects at any given time can be difficult to discern. But an analysis of the rhetoric used by reformers to vilify clerical wives and women in general can trace the revitalised hostility towards women beginning in the High Middle Ages to these reforms.

For the first thousand years of Christianity, clerical marriage was common practice. Despite various church councils promulgating the ideal of celibacy, beginning with the Synod of Elvira in the fourth century which declared that all clerics were to "abstain from conjugal relations with their wives"<sup>1</sup>, deacons, priests, bishops, and even popes continued to marry and have children. The frequent repetition at subsequent councils of the need for celibacy evinces the lack of obedience to these decrees. Celibacy had not yet been declared superior to marriage and so married priests retained at least as many supporters as there were for celibate ones. Indeed, even celibacy advocates believed that a married priest should continue to care for his wife - but live with her like a sister - because ordination could not dissolve marriage.<sup>2</sup> Priests' wives enjoyed a respectable social status as clerical marriage was a recognised social institution. Furthermore,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, Uta Ranke-Heinemann, Penguin Books, 1991, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> *Gregorian Reform in Action: Clerical Marriage in England, 1050-1200*, Christopher N.L. Brooke, Cambridge Historical Journal Vol. 12 No. 1, Cambridge University Press, 1956, p.4.

women were given the final say as to whether or not their husbands could be ordained.<sup>3</sup> This interaction between male clergy and women encouraged healthy gender relations compared to the polarisation that occurred in later centuries, as shall be seen. In 829, the Reform Synod of Paris complained that “in some provinces it happens that women press around the altar, touch the holy vessels, hand the clerics the priestly vestments, indeed even dispense the body and blood of the Lord to the people.”<sup>4</sup> It was around this time that clerics’ wives were entitled deaconess, priestess, and bishopess. Although the dismay is unmissable, the Synod’s account attests to the greater role that women in the early medieval period played in religious spheres.

This all changed when the Gregorian Reform began. As the Church sought to sever ties with the laity and gain hierarchical control over its clergy, women became the greatest obstacle to reform since clerical marriage bridged the gap between ordained clerks and laypeople. Gregory VII’s aims involved “sundering the commerce between the clergy and women through an eternal anathema”<sup>5</sup> and in the end, women bore the brunt of it. The revived defamation of women began as the reform clergy’s propaganda fixated on female sexuality. Peter Damian set a high standard for the misogynistic slander that characterised their campaign:

I speak to you, O charmers of the clergy, appetising flesh of the devil, that castaway from Paradise, poison of minds, death of souls, companions of the very stuff of sin, the cause of our ruin... come now, hear me harlots, prostitutes, with your lascivious kisses, you wallowing places for fat pigs, couches for unclean spirits...<sup>6</sup>

The idea that women are “unclean” and, as such, impediments to righteousness lies at the heart of the Church’s denigration of women and has roots stretching back to ancient times. Soon after the Gregorian Reform began, the works of Aristotle returned to dominant thought and gave reformers fresh insight into the subordination of women. Aristotelian biology was met with unqualified acceptance by Church thinkers who had been surmising the inferiority of women since Gregory VII and his cohorts started their campaign against women. Aristotle’s hierarchy placed women beneath men as their faulty and unequal counterparts. Marriage was put forward as inferior to male communities of academia and monasticism as well as being the relationship of

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, Ranke-Heinemann, p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 100

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Women and Christianity: The First Thousand Years*, Mary T. Malone, The Columba Press, 2000, p. 18.

two unequal partners. As the years passed, generations of clergymen were brought up in an environment of not only contempt for women but fear of them and their sexuality as well.

Practical tactics accompanied the verbal slander. In 1089, princes were allowed to enslave the wives of clerics and a few years later, the Count of Flanders was given permission to imprison them.<sup>7</sup> In 1108, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, enabled bishops to seize the wives of priests as their property.<sup>8</sup> And as early as 1022, the wives of Hamburg canons were forced to leave their town.<sup>9</sup> The greatest blow, however, came in 1139 at the Second Lateran Council when, for the first time, marriage was not only forbidden but declared mutually exclusive to ordination. The sanctity of marriage completely disregarded, priestly marriages were now void and women who had been legal wives turned into concubines overnight.

Despite the “historical amnesia”, as Mary T. Malone says, “about the very vocal opposition to mandatory celibacy,”<sup>10</sup> there is overwhelming evidence of resistance to these reforms. The Anonymous of York, writing around 1100, provided outspoken support for married priests as well as the rights of their children to be legitimate. Even earlier, Lambert of Hersfeld ridiculed the papacy’s attempts to make priests live like angels and asserted that the clergy would rather give up their offices than their wives. He advised the pope to summon angels from heaven instead to take their places.<sup>11</sup> When emissaries across Europe were charged with the task of enforcing the celibacy decrees, they were met with an irate, and often violent, audience. The Bishop of Paris had to seek royal protection from the incensed clerics after he was driven out of a church “with jeers and blows”, the indignant clergy of Rouen assailed their Archbishop with stones when he tried to make them give up their wives, and Gregory VII reported that the infuriated Cambrai clergy had burnt a celibacy proponent alive.<sup>12</sup> Fearing for their lives, some bishops in Northern Italy refused to issue celibacy decrees.<sup>13</sup> Even after priestly marriage was nullified, clerks clung to the comforts of partnership for centuries. As late as 1542, Albrecht of Brandenburg lamented: “I know that all my priests are living in concubinage, but what should I

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> *The Secular Clergy in England, 1066-1216*, Hugh M. Thomas, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 159.

<sup>9</sup> *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, James A. Brundage, University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 218.

<sup>10</sup> *Women and Christianity: From 1000 to The Reformation*, Mary T. Malone, Orbis Books, 2002, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> *Clerical Celibacy in the West, C.1100-1700*, Helen L. Parish, Ashgate Publishing, 2010, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, Brundage, p. 221.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

do? If I forbid them, they either want to have wives or become Lutherans.”<sup>14</sup> After their attempts to enslave the concubines of priests, the reform clergy sought to get them excommunicated, forbidden church entry, and denied a church burial.

Clerical wives were not the only victims, however. Eventually all women were demonised for their sexuality, even celibate nuns. Prior to the reforms, women religious enjoyed a relative equality with monks. Double monasteries of men and women were frequently led by abbesses who were some of the most powerful women of the period. Convents enabled women to have authority over men, engage in *magisterium vocis* (public preaching), become familiar with scripture and the classics, and even hear confession, with no indication that witnesses like Bede viewed it as abnormal.<sup>15</sup> As more monks were ordained and came under greater influence of the papacy, however, they were further removed from the laity and wanted less and less to do with their female counterparts. As one abbot wrote:

We and our whole community of canons, recognizing that the wickedness of women is greater than all the other wickedness of the world... have unanimously decreed for the safety of our souls, no less than that of our bodies and goods, that we will on no account receive any more sisters to the increase of our perdition, but will avoid them like poisonous animals.<sup>16</sup>

Monks, priests, and bishops, who now saw women as opponents to the holy, took away their autonomy as women's orders fell under their supervision. Moving into the High Middle Ages, convents were no longer centres of education and activity but provided a cloistered and contemplative life for women. Even Hildegard of Bingen, the great German mystic, had to engage in a “rhetoric of diminishment” to downplay her sex by emphasising that her accomplishments came solely from visions.<sup>17</sup> The powerful abbesses of the early Middle Ages were now obsolescent.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, Ranke-Heinemann, p. 113.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Woman in Medieval Theology’, Eleanor C. McLaughlin. In: *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Rosemary R. Reuther (ed.), Simon and Schuster, 1974, p. 237; *A Brief History of Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice*, Jack Holland, Robinson, 2006, p. 105; *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, Margaret C. Schaus, Routledge, 2006, p. 737.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *Women and Christianity: From 1000 to The Reformation*, Malone, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Women and Christianity: The First Thousand Years*, Malone, p. 34.

The shift in attitude towards women is most telling in literature. Christopher Brooke describes a poetic genre in the twelfth century that debated whether or not the clerk was a better lover than the knight; the victor was usually the clerk since they were the ones composing the poems.<sup>18</sup> A couple centuries later, Chaucer reveals the changing attitudes of the clergy. Rather than wooing women, clerics spent their time defaming them as the frustrated Wife of Bath describes:

For take my word for it, there is no libel  
On women that the clergy will not paint,  
Except when writing of a woman-saint,  
But never good of other women, though.  
Who called the lion savage? Do you know?  
By God, if women had but written stories  
Like those the clergy keep in oratories,  
More had been written of man's wickedness  
Than all the sons of Adam could redress.<sup>19</sup>

Clerical animosity towards women became even more pronounced during the witch craze. "It was a short step from the idea that female sexuality was dangerous and an instrument of the devil to the idea that female sexuality itself could be a demonic power" as Karen Torjensen says.<sup>20</sup> It is hardly a coincidence that the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches) were clergymen. James Sprenger and Henry Kramer authored the witch-hunting manual at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century as they sought to prove that women were sleeping with the Devil.<sup>21</sup> Witchcraft was said to originate with carnal lust; the besmirching of female sexuality in the centuries leading up to the witch craze thus made women prime targets. When Pope Innocent VIII issued "The Witches' Bull" they barely stood a chance and hundreds of thousands of women were accused of witchcraft and burnt at the stake.

Misogyny is too widespread to be solely attributed to one event but the Gregorian Reform had clear consequences for women that carry on into the present day. The domestic tragedies that enforced clerical celibacy surely produced can only be imagined. On top of broken homes,

---

<sup>18</sup> *Gregorian Reform in Action*, Brooke, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer, translated by Nevill Coghill, Penguin Books, 1951, p. 295.

<sup>20</sup> *When Women Were Priests*, Karen Jo Torjesen, HarperCollins, 1993, p.228.

<sup>21</sup> *Misogyny*, Holland, p. 117

women lost the opportunity of living active, learned lives in convents and once Aristotle's ideas about marriage reemerged, domestic life was no doubt a disappointing alternative. The significance of these events today can be seen in the Catholic Church as the debate over clerical celibacy remains a highly controversial topic, and the suppression of women even more so. More broadly, there is still a fixation on female sexuality in secular culture as well as in the church. It is sorrowful to speculate what the last millennium might have been like if the increasing power of women in the early Middle Ages had not been reversed. Even so, there is a wealth of history to be discovered now that the past is open to feminist critique. The contributions made by women to the monastic revival and early religious orders, for example, can be fully appreciated as a female accomplishment rather than their involvement being a reflection of women's responses to ideals set up by men alone. Change in one's perception of the past is often the antecedent to change in one's vision for the future: a deeper understanding of misogyny, as seen in the Middle Ages, can help identify the problems still facing women today and encourage people to seek justice for all women in the future.

## Bibliography

- Brooke, Christopher N. L. *Gregorian Reform in Action: Clerical Marriage in England, 1050-1200*, Cambridge Historical Journal, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1956), Cambridge University Press, p. 1-21.
- Brundage, James A. *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Chadwick, Owen. *A History of Christianity*, Orion Publishing Group, 1997.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey (translated by Nevill Coghill). *The Canterbury Tales*, Penguin Books, 1951.
- Frassetto, Michael (ed.). *Medieval Purity and Piety: Essays on Medieval Clerical Celibacy and Religious Reform*, Taylor & Francis, 1998.
- Holland, Jack. *A Brief History of Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice*, Robinson, 2006.
- Johnson, Paul. *A History of Christianity*, Penguin Books, 1990.
- Malone, Mary T. *Women and Christianity: The First Thousand Years*, The Columba Press, 2000.
- . *Women and Christianity: From 1000 to the Reformation*, Orbis Books, 2002.
- McLaughlin, Eleanor C. 'Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Woman in Medieval Theology'. In: Ruether, Rosemary R. (ed.). *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Simon and Schuster, 1974, pp. 213-266.
- Parish, Helen L. *Clerical Celibacy in the West, C.1100-1700*, Ashgate Publishing, 2010.
- Plummer, Marjorie E. *From Priest's Whore to Pastor's Wife: Clerical Marriage and the Process of Reform in the Early German Reformation*, Ashgate Publishing, 2012.
- Ranke-Heinemann, Uta. *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, Penguin Books, 1991.
- Schaus, Margaret C. *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, Routledge, 2006.
- Schleich, Kathryn. *Hollywood and Catholic Women: Virgins, Whores, Mothers, and Other Images*, iUniverse, 2012.
- Stenton, Frank. *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Thomas, Hugh M. *The Secular Clergy in England, 1066-1216*, Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Thrupp, Sylvia L. *Change in Medieval Society: Europe North of the Alps, 1050-1500*, University of Toronto Press, 1988.
- Torjensen, Karen Jo. *When Women Were Priests*, HarperCollins, 1993.
- Wiesner, Merry E. *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.