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MARRIAGE AND VIRGINITY, DEATH AND IMMORTALITY

The subject of this article is the relation between marriage, death and immortality (or resurrection) on the one hand, and the link between virginity and immortality (or resurrection) on the other. The theme of immortality by posterity will be dealt with, and the terminology of immortality and incorruptibility in connexion with virginity will be discussed.

It covers the first four centuries of the Christian Church in the East, and deals with a variety of texts, ranging from apocryphal Gospels and Acts to the theological treatises of Gregory of Nyssa. But we shall have to start, long before the beginning of the christian era, with some texts of Plato and Aristotle, that bear directly on our subject, and that, to a certain extent, are echoed in the christian tradition. In a second chapter we shall consider a number of texts that have originated in an encratite or gnosticizing milieu, and in which marriage and Eros are nearly exclusively linked with death.

In a third chapter we shall see that, in the writings of some important ecclesiastical theologians, this negative view, though not completely abandoned, is counterbalanced by a more positive conception, in which immortality is linked with both marriage and virginity.

I. PLATO AND ARISTOTLE.

For our purpose two texts of Plato are relevant: Symp. 206B-209D and Nom. 4, 721C¹. The passage of the Symp. deals with Eros, which Plato defines as follows: Eros tends to the eternal possession of the good (ἔστιν...ὁ ἔρως τοῦ τὸ ἀγαθὸν αὐτῷ εἶναι ἀεὶ 206A and 207A). That is why Eros aims at immortality (τῆς ἀθανασίας τὸν ἔρωτα εἶναι 207A). The only means by which mortal nature can satisfy its desire for immortality is the begetting (γέννησις), for this is, for mortal man, something eternal and immortal (ἀειγενές καὶ ἀθάνατον ὡς θνητῷ 206D). Absolute identity (τὸ αὐτὸ ἀεὶ εἶναι) is the privilege of the divine; in the realm of mortal nature a sort of identity, or rather, continuity is safeguarded by succession and replacement; the leaving behind of a new being instead of the old is the only way in which the mortal partakes in immortality (207CD; 208B). This explains man's natural care for all what he engenders. As examples of this strife for the immortal Plato adduces: ambition, becoming famous, earning glory that is immortal for all eternity (κλέος εἰς τὸν ἀεὶ χρόνον ἀθάνατον καταθέσθαι 208C), and heroic achieve-

1. I am indebted to prof. L. M. DE RIJK (Leyden) for some advice on the first part.



