Christianity and slavery: towards an entangled history?[*]

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Περίληψη: Αυτό το άρθρο διερευνά ένα παράδοξο. Από τη μία πλευρά, ο Χριστιανισμός θεωρούσε τη δουλεία δεδομένη και δεν είχε καμία πρόθεση ούτε καν να υποστηρίξει θεωρητικά την κατάργησή της. Από την άλλη πλευρά, ο Χριστιανισμός δημιούργησε μια μορφή υποκειμενικότητας που ήταν κατ 'αρχήν καθολική, αν και οι γυναίκες και οι δούλοι αντιμετώπισαν σοβαρούς περιορισμούς στην άσκηση αυτής της υποκειμενικότητας. Οι χριστιανοί στοχαστές και οι εκκλησιαστικές αρχές τις περισσότερες φορές απλώς αγνόησαν τους περιορισμούς της υπόδουλης χριστιανικής υποκειμενικότητας, αλλά υπήρχαν συγκεκριμένα πλαίσια στα οποία ο συνδυασμός των χριστιανικών Λόγων, της αυτενέργειας των δούλων και συγκεκριμένων συγκυριών οδήγησε σε σημαντικές αλλαγές στην ιστορική πορεία της δουλείας. Το άρθρο εξετάζει τρία βασικά πλαίσια: τους χριστιανικούς τρόπους ζωής, εστιάζοντας στο σεξ και το γάμο και την τήρηση της Κυριακής· τη συμμετοχή στους θεσμούς των χριστιανικών κοινοτήτων, ιδιαίτερα στη χειροτονία των ιερέων και των μοναχών· και τις θρησκευτικές συγκρούσεις μεταξύ των διαφόρων χριστιανικών κοινοτήτων, των ειδωλολατρών και των Εβραίων. Αυτές οι αλλαγές ήταν σπάνια μη αναστρέψιμες· θα διερευνήσουμε τη συνεχή σύγκρουση ως αποτέλεσμα των διαφόρων πιέσεων, συμφερόντων και παραγόντων που εμπλέκονταν. Καμία από αυτές τις αλλαγές δεν περιελάμβανε μια γενική ιδεολογική αντίθεση στη δουλεία ή αποσκοπούσε στην κατάργηση της δουλείας· παρ' όλα αυτά, είχαν ουσιαστικά αποτελέσματα για εκατομμύρια δούλους, αν και αυτά τα αποτελέσματα δεν ήταν τα ίδια για όλες τις περιόδους, τα μέρη και τις ομάδες δούλων.

Abstract: This contribution explores a paradox. On the one hand, Christianity took slavery for granted and had no intention of even arguing in favour of its abolition. On the other hand, Christianity created a form of subjectivity that was in principle universal, although women and slaves faced severe constraints in exercising this subjectivity. Christian thinkers and Church authorities most of the time simply ignored the constraints of enslaved Christian subjectivity; but there were specific contexts in which the combination of Christian discourses, slave agency and particular conjunctures led to significant changes in the historical trajectory of slavery. The article examines three major contexts: Christian lifeways, focusing on sex and marriage and Sunday observance; participation in the institutions of Christian communities, in particular ordination as priests and monks; and religious conflicts between the various Christian denominations, pagans, and Jews. These changes were hardly irreversible; we will explore the continuous tug-of-war as a result of the various pressures, interests and

agents involved. None of these changes involved a principled opposition to slavery as such or aimed to abolish slavery; but they had substantial effects for millions of slaves, although these effects were not the same for all periods, places and groups of slaves.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: δουλεία, Χριστιανισμός, θρησκευτικές συγκρούσεις, αυτενέργεια των δούλων, μονοθεϊστικές κοινωνίες

Key words: Slavery, Christianity, slave agency, religious conflict, monotheist societies

I first came across Dimitris Kyrtatas in the late 90s, as a young undergraduate who was interested in the history of ancient slavery. Back then there only existed two or three books on ancient slavery in Greek, and Dimitris' book was the one most concerned with the wider theoretical issues I was interested in.[1] This initial introduction to his work soon brought me to his various books on the history of early Christianity and late antiquity. I was hooked; it was the first time that I came into contact with a deeply fascinating world, explored from a historical point of view and narrated in a thoroughly engaging manner.[2] This was a major reason I decided to apply for my MA degree to the University of Crete, where Dimitris was then teaching; it was definitely the wisest decision I have ever made in my life. The two years I spent in Crete were the most stimulating intellectual and social experiences I have ever had; during my time there and in the years that have passed since Dimitris proved to be a thought-provoking teacher, an excellent mentor and a great friend. It is therefore a great joy to offer him a small counter-gift, by contributing to this issue in his honour. I have chosen as my theme the link between two phenomena that have been at the centre of Dimitris' work: Christianity and slavery.

Did Christianity affect the history of slavery?

The study of the link between Christianity and slavery has a long history; but with the emergence of abolitionism in the late eighteenth century, it became a prominent topic of study in the course of the nineteenth century. Defenders of slavery could point out the support provided by the Bible and the Church Fathers to the institution of slavery; but, given the prominent role of Christians among abolitionists and the ultimate triumph of abolitionism, it was the latter group that ultimately shaped how the link between Christianity and slavery would be studied until fairly recently.[3] According to their views, Christianity was opposed to slavery and gradually managed to ameliorate slavery, until it was finally extinguished from most of Europe by the latter Middle

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[1] Kyrtatas 1987.

[2] Kyrtatas 1992 and 1994 are still my favourites among his early works.

[3] For an overview, see Kyrtatas 1992: 21-37.

Ages.[4] A permutation of this view emerged in the later nineteenth century, when a number of thinkers started to propose that early Christians were overwhelmingly proletarians and slaves; accordingly, it was possible to describe Christianity as a religion of slaves, a fact that could explain its negative stance towards slavery.[5]

It was only in the last few decades that the explosion in the study of ancient slavery led to a fundamental reconfiguration of the study of the link between Christianity and slavery. A series of studies have established beyond reasonable doubt that already from its beginnings Christianity took slavery for granted and had no intention to argue in favour of abolition or even to effect a substantial amelioration of the institution.[6] On the contrary, recent scholarship has devoted major attention to the fundamental role of slavery in how Christians conceptualized their identity or their relationship with God.[7] Furthermore, studies of early Christian communities have also radically modified our understanding of their social composition: while Christian communities included people from all social classes, their membership consisted primarily of petty artisans, shopkeepers and other similar urban groups; while only a few early Christians were rich or powerful, most of them were not the destitute proletarians that earlier scholarship had imagined. Accordingly, while early Christian communities undoubtedly included slaves, Christianity was by no means a religious movement of slaves.[8]

The creation of this consensus was a major achievement of current scholarship. But given this consensus, did Christianity had any major effect on the history of slavery? Much of current scholarship is still content simply to deny the ameliorist narrative of earlier approaches: either Christianity made no difference whatsoever, or, in fact, its only contribution was to provide a theological justification for slavery that convinced some slaves to accept their lot.[9] Is this the full story? Or can we construct a more complicated narrative, in which the overall acceptance of slavery by Christianity and by Christian societies and states can be combined with another story in which *some* aspects of Christianity in *certain* contexts and for *diverse* reasons had important consequences for *various* groups of slaves, whose Christian identity enabled them to use it in order to achieve certain *limited*, but still important aims?

The problem in this respect is the lack of historical perspective in the global study of slavery until fairly recently. Historians of ancient slavery tend to adopt a comparative perspective in regards to other periods and areas: they are happy to compare ancient slave systems with early modern slave systems, most commonly with that of the US South, but they rarely enquire about the historical trajectory that led from the slave systems of the ancient Mediterranean into those of the early modern

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[4] See the major contribution of Wallon 1847.

[5] Allard 1876.

[6] Gülzow 1969; Laub 1982; Klein 1988, 2000; Garnsey 1996; Grieser 1997; Glancy 2002, 2011a; Harrill 2006c.

[7] Martin 1990; Combes 1998; Byron 2003; Harrill 2006c; de Wet 2015, 2018; Kartzow 2018; Charles 2020.

[8] Kyrtatas 1992 was a seminal contribution, alongside Meeks 2003; see also Flexsenhar 2019; Sommar 2020.

[9] See e.g. de Ste. Croix 1981: 420; Garnsey 1996: 237-43; Glancy 2011b; cf. Bonnassie 1991: 25-32.

Atlantic. Ancient historians often note that one of the major differences between ancient and early modern slave systems is the dominant role of race in the latter; but they have not wondered through what processes the link between race and slavery became such a dominant feature of the early modern Atlantic. The relative neglect of the study of slavery in the Middle Ages until very recently has been a major obstacle in this respect; by turning the temporal link between ancient and early modern slavery into a terra incognita, it has turned the methodology of the ahistorical comparison into effectively the only choice available to students of slavery. It is this neglect of the global historical trajectory of slavery that stands in the way of understanding the impact of Christianity and other monotheistic religions. Fortunately, the situation is radically changing due to two converging factors: on the one hand, a growing number of major studies have modified significantly our understanding of medieval slavery, raising important new questions about our understanding of slavery cross-culturally;[10] on the other hand, instead of sociological analyses of slavery as a global phenomenon, a series of recent syntheses have started to explore the global historical trajectory of slavery.[11]

It is within this new framework of the global historical trajectory of slavery that we should explore the link between Christianity and slavery.[12] If we move forward to around 1100 CE we can observe two major developments. The first one concerns enslavement: for thousands of years communities and rulers considered legitimate the enslavement of their opponents in war. The Christianisation of the Roman Empire and the barbarian kingdoms made for long no difference in this respect; but around 1100 CE we can observe among both Catholic and Orthodox Christians the entrenchment of a radical new idea: that the enslavement of members of the same religious faith is illegitimate. This was not simply an ideal: Christians continued to fight, kill, maim and conquer each other, but they no longer enslaved their coreligionists.[13] Who counted as coreligionist was not immediately obvious; whether Catholics accepted the Orthodox as coreligionists and vice versa was a matter of debate; but the principle was accepted by all sides.[14] As a result, enslavement was now restricted to religious outsiders; this created large no-slaving zones based on religion, with major consequences for global history.[15] The Christianisation of the Slavs and the Scandinavians turned central and northern Europe into a Catholic *oecumene*, and, as a result, warfare no longer resulted in enslavement; gradually, and in combination with other factors, this led to the extinction of slavery from this huge area.[16] In the Mediterranean, where Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims continued to clash for

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[10] Pelteret 2001; Hammer 2002; Blumenthal 2009; Rotman 2009; Bondue 2011; Carrier 2012; Hanß and Schiel 2014; Phillips 2014; Sutt 2015; Rio 2017.
[11] Miller 2012; Zeuske 2013; Grenouilleau 2014.
[12] For the consequences of the study of medieval slavery and the global history of slavery, see Vlassopoulos 2016, 2021.
[13] For Catholic Europe, see Strickland 1992; Gillingham 2012, 2015. For Orthodox Byzantium, see Köpstein 1966: 56-8; Rotman 2009: 25-81; Pahlitzsch 2017: 164.
[14] Barker 2018.
[15] Fynn-Paul 2009; Fynn-Paul and Pargas 2018.
[16] Bartlett 1993.

centuries, slavery continued to be an important phenomenon, though it acquired new features as a result of the connection between enslavement and religious outsiders.[17]

The second major phenomenon concerned slave marriage. Orlando Patterson famously argued that natal alienation was an inherent feature of slavery globally: although slaves had families, slave systems refused to acknowledge slave marriages and kinship, and as a result offered little if any legal protection to slave families.[18] For ancient societies, marriage was largely a means of producing progeny and transmitting property; given the purposes, it is unsurprising that marriages among slaves were often unimportant and without legal effect. This situation changed with the emergence of monotheistic religions like Christianity; marriage became ultimately not merely a means of getting heirs and transmitting property, but a form of regulating sexuality and arranging relations between humans and God which was valuable in itself. This meant that marriage gradually became a sacrament and something desirable for all members of the monotheistic community, irrespective of their legal status.[19] As a result, by the twelfth century CE slave marriage was legally recognised in both Byzantium and Catholic Europe: for Catholics, the recognition of slave marriage was defended in Gratian's famous *Decretum* in the 1140s and accepted into canonical law by a decretal of Pope Adrian IV in the 1150s.[20] In Byzantium slave marriage was recognised by a law of emperor Alexius I in 1095.[21] It is truly remarkable that Patterson's theory of natal alienation as an essential aspect of slavery has managed to become entrenched in slavery studies without any serious engagement with such obvious countervailing facts and their important theoretical consequences.[22]

These important developments require some qualifications. There should be no doubt that these two developments were hugely beneficial for millions of people: not being liable to enslavement or having a recognised marriage and its various legal consequences were clearly advances in whatever way one sees them. But it would be a mistake to ignore that these positive developments had also fatal consequences. The creation of no-slaving zones based on religion and empire in medieval Western Eurasia meant that large-scale enslavement was ultimately restricted to areas that were not dominated by monotheistic religions and empires, where the enslavement of defeated opponents remained without limits, as in the ancient world. The Black Sea and sub-Saharan Africa became the two major slaving zones of Christian and Islamic societies in the late Middle Ages; once Ottoman conquest limited the availability of the Black Sea for the Christian slave trade, sub-Saharan Africa became the single area of the European slave trade and the fatal road to the emergence of racial slavery became widely open.[23]

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[17] Blumenthal 2009; Amitai and Cluse 2017.
[18] Patterson 1982.
[19] Brundage 1987; Reynolds 1994, 2016.
[20] Landau 1967; Gilchrist 1976; Verlinden 1977; Sheehan 1988; Sahaydachny 1994; Winroth 2006, 2009; dÁvray 2012; Stone 2021.
[21] Köpstein 1980; Brand 1996; Rotman 2009: 141-4.
[22] For an important critique of the essentialist logic of Patterson's theory of natal alienation, see Brown 2009.
[23] Eltis 2000.

The second important point is the need to avoid Hegelian teleology. There is no doubt that the recognition of slave marriage and the prohibition of enslaving coreligionists were based on Christian religious ideas; but it took a thousand years for the Christian Churches and Christian societies to enforce these ideas. It should therefore be obvious that there was no inherent and unavoidable link between Christian religious ideas and their effects on slavery;[24] while we should by no means dismiss the significance of religious ideas for the history of slavery, we should also explore the historical processes and conjunctures in which these ideas became materialised in actual practices and institutions and created historical change. Finally, I have so far focused on Christianity, but the prohibition of the enslavement of coreligionists and the recognition of slave marriage are also clearly attested during the same time scale in Islam, the other major late-antique monotheistic religion.[25] Historians of slavery urgently need new concepts for understanding the impact of monotheistic religions on societies, economies and polities and how they have affected the global history of slavery.

Some readers may think that these are undoubtedly important developments, but they strictly concern medieval history and slavery in the Middle Ages. Even if Christianity emerged in the first three centuries CE and was a major feature of the history of late antiquity, it is possible to argue that during the course of antiquity it did not have any major impact on slavery. Perhaps it is also possible to link this with the famous distinction between societies with slaves and slave societies. Classical Athens and Roman Italy belonged to the rare species of slave societies, where slavery played a major role in their economic, social, political and cultural structures; as a result, Christianity could have had little effect on such a major structural factor of ancient societies. But once ancient slave societies were transformed into early medieval societies with slaves, where slavery was no longer a dominant phenomenon, perhaps it was now possible for phenomena like those we examined above to emerge.[26]

This is a very misleading understanding of early medieval slavery, as recent studies have shown.[27] But perhaps a single example is sufficient to dispel the misguided logic of the objection we have described above. In 306 CE, during Diocletian's major persecution of Christian communities, Peter, bishop of Alexandria, wrote a letter that attempted to shape how his Church should treat those penitent Christians who had fallen away from the Church during the persecutions by sacrificing to the pagan gods, or by sending their slaves to do so in their place:[28]

> Concerning those who submitted their Christian slaves in their place. The
> slaves, since they were as if under the hand of their masters and had

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[24] Glancy 2018.

[25] For slave marriage in Islam, see Ali 2010; for Islam and the enslavement of religious outsiders, see Freamon 2019.

[26] For the debate on the distinction between slave societies and societies with slaves, see most recently Lenski and Cameron 2018; Vlassopoulos 2021. Harper 2011 rightly stresses that slavery remained a dominant feature of the Roman Empire till the early fifth-century CE; but he also posits that early medieval Europe was transformed into societies with slaves.

[27] See in particular Rio 2017.

[28] Peter of Alexandria, *Canonical letter* 6-7; see the excellent analysis of Vaucher 2018.

themselves in a way been imprisoned by their masters and threatened greatly by them, and since they have come to this and made this slip because of fear of their masters, shall demonstrate the works of penitence for one year. In future, they should learn to do 'the will of God' as slaves of Christ[29] and fear Him, keeping in mind especially that 'the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free'.[30] The free, however, shall be put under a three-year scrutiny of their penitence, because of their dissimulation and because they forced their fellow-slaves to sacrifice, hence disobeying the apostle, who wished masters should treat their slaves in the same way, without threatening them. 'Since you know' he says 'that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him'. And if we all have one master who shows no favouritism and since 'Christ is all, and is in all', in barbarians and Scythians, in slave and free,[31] they should examine what they did when they wished to save their own lives. They dragged our fellow-slaves towards idolatry, although the slaves too could have escaped, if they had provided them with 'justice and equality', as the apostle also says.[32]

The passage is an excellent illustration of the complex ways in which Christianity was linked to slavery. Christian masters attempted to save their souls and maintain their relationship to the Church by forcing their Christian slaves to sacrifice on their behalf: this is a clear example of how ancient masters considered slaves an extension of their own bodies, and how Christian masters could apply the same principles in regards to their own slaves, even if (some) of these slaves were Christians themselves and faced the same spiritual dangers as their masters. A major part of the historical relationship between Christianity and slavery consists of recurrent episodes in which the rights of masters over their human property effectively obliterated the spiritual life of slaves and enslaved Christians.[33]

But that is only part of the story. A second important aspect concerns Peter's punishment of the Christian slaves and its intellectual presuppositions. Peter recognises that the actions of the Christian slaves to offer pagan sacrifice were constrained, as they were forced by their Christian masters to do so; but at the same time, he does not absolve the slaves from responsibility for their actions, notwithstanding the constraints under which they acted. The reason for this is clearly stated: it is the concept of human free will, and the ability of slaves to do the right thing even in conditions of severe constraint. As Kyle Harper has rightly stressed, the concept of the free will as a universal feature of the human condition irrespective of ethnicity, class and gender is one of the most potent intellectual accomplishments of ancient Christianity.[34] By universalising free will, Christianity could conceptualise a

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[29] A reference to *Ephesians* 6:4.
[30] A reference to *Ephesians* 6:8.
[31] A reference to *Colossians* 3:11.
[32] A reference to *Colossians* 4:2.
[33] Glancy 1998, 2002; Cobb 2017.
[34] Harper 2013: 80-133, 2016.

mode of life that was applicable to every single person by virtue of the mere fact that they were human. This approach to free will could ignore the systemic constraints of gender and class that many Christians faced, take them into account, or reform them to create equal spiritual opportunities for everyone. In this particular case, Peter clearly takes into account the constraints that enslaved Christians faced, by enforcing on them a lesser penalty (one year of excommunication) in relation to their masters (three years) for exactly the same religious transgression.

The third important aspect is precisely Peter's harsher punishment of Christian masters and his justification for it. Christian masters assumed that their Christian slaves operated as their bodily extensions and had no independent religious existence, or at least that the slaves' religious existence was of marginal importance; Peter clearly states that slaves were members of the Christian community to the same extent as their masters and on the same principles, and their religious lives could not be sacrificed in order to serve the needs of their Christian masters. It is important to stress that this text is not a moral exhortation or wishful thinking: it is an example of how religious principles shaped the promulgation of practical policies with actual effects on a significant number of people. Needless to say, Peter was no abolitionist or egalitarian; but it is equally clear that Christian ideas had a practical effect on relationships between masters and slaves in the context of an ancient slaveholding society. The trajectory that led to the prohibition of the enslavement of coreligionists, or the recognition of slave marriage, is not an exclusively medieval phenomenon; it can be traced back to Christianity's emergence in the early Roman Empire and its triumph in the course of late antiquity.

We need therefore a new framework for studying the interconnections between Christianity and slavery.[35] I would like to propose that this framework should contain the following main aspects: Christian discourses and subjectivities; slave agency; and conjunctures and long-term processes. The combination of these various issues created a number of major contexts within which Christianity affected slaves and slavery: Christian lifeways; participation in the institutions of Christian communities; and religious conflicts.

Frameworks: discourses, subjectivities, slave agency and conjunctures

Christianity conceptualised lifeways that were in principle universal and irrespective of ethnicity, gender and status.[36] The eschatological character of the original Jesus movement and the first-century CE Christian communities probably was the major reason for this important novelty.[37] But it is important to balance this observation with the realisation that the subjectivity invoked by early Christian thinkers and communities was not really egalitarian; it rather consisted of subsuming weaker subjectivities (those of e.g. women and slaves) into the stronger subjectivity of free

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[35] For a number of recent studies which try to forge a new framework, see Harper 2011, 2016; Briggs 2013; Spléndido 2013; Herrmann-Otto 2017; Vaucher 2017.
[36] Lampe 2003.
[37] Neutel 2015.

males; it effectively posited a process of masculinisation, in which women and slaves could overcome or set aside the systemic constraints and the stereotypes associated with their subjectivities and reach the ideal free male subjectivity.[38]

The formation of this peculiar Christian subjectivity could therefore lead to diverse outcomes. A common answer was to ignore the systemic constraints that women and slaves faced in order to achieve Christian subjectivity and either do nothing about these obstacles, or in fact use them to exclude slaves from Christian communities. While the common meal was one of the most significant practices of early Christianity, stressing in particular the brotherhood of the Christian community, slaves are generally absent from early Christian descriptions of such meals, unless they are present as servants. This illustrates the indifference of many Christian communities towards enabling their enslaved members to participate fully in communal practices.[39] To give another example, many scholars have emphasised the silence of Christian texts from the first three centuries CE as regards the sexual exploitation of slaves by their own masters. The strict sexual standards of Christian morality required exclusive monogamous relations from both husbands and wives and prohibited the wide range of extramarital sex with dishonoured women like slaves and prostitutes that Greco-Roman societies habitually accorded to free men (what Christians described as *porneia*);[40] given that Christian communities clearly included slave women, it is truly remarkable that early Christian texts do not include any advice on how female Christian slaves could maintain their sexual morality and male Christian masters should behave towards their female slaves. It is possible that this reflects a selective silence on a difficult issue from a community that saw itself as a persecuted minority; it is equally possible that the forced sexual promiscuity of female slaves constituted a major obstacle for their participation in Christian communities.[41]

Another answer was to take into account the obstacles that slaves faced in terms of achieving Christian subjectivity. A telling example comes from a sermon by Basil of Caesarea:

> For while the slave woman who was sold to a pimp is in sin by necessity, she who happens to belong to a wellborn mistress was raised with sexual modesty, and on this account the one is shown mercy, the other condemned.[42]

This is one of the earliest examples in which Christian authors recognise the systemic constraints of slave subjectivity: in line with the concept of free will that we examined above in the case of Peter of Alexandria, Basil recognises the free will of female slaves who were raised with sexual modesty by their mistresses, but chose the path of sexual sin; but he distinguishes them from slave prostitutes, who had no choice in the matter of their sexual behaviour and should therefore be shown mercy.[43] We shall

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[38] Martin 2006: 77-90; de Wet 2015: 63-4.
[39] Vaucher 2019.
[40] On Christian *porneia* and slavery, see the debate between Harper 2012 and Glancy 2015.
[41] Glancy 1998, 2010c; Osiek 2003; Harper 2013, 2016: 134-7; Vaucher 2017: 232-56.
[42] Basil of Caesarea, *Homilies on the Psalms* 32.5.
[43] On Basil and slavery, see Klein 2000; Brooten 2013; Hasse-Ungeheuer 2016.

examine below multiple examples in which certain Christian thinkers and Church authorities tried to take the constrained subjectivity of enslaved Christians into account.

But slavery affected Christian subjectivity from a different perspective as well. A significant number of studies have explored what Chris de Wet has described as 'doulomorphism', the use of the figure of slave as a means of conceptualising Christian subjectivity and the relationship between believers and God.[44] Most of the attention has been devoted to the 'slave of God' image, tracing its antecedents in Judaism and exploring its adoption by Paul and its subsequent reception in Christian thought.[45] These works have pointed out various important elements: the heteronomy of the human body, which is always ruled by another power, and the choice Christians perceived between slavery to sin and slavery to God; or the significance of the link between a powerful master and his slaves, and therefore the special status of slaves of God. The conceptualisation of Christians as slaves of a divine master is not particularly different from other forms of doulomorphism we can find in ancient literature.[46] What seems to be quite different are forms of doulomorphism employed to describe God: the depiction of Christ as a slave who suffered and was crucified in order to save humanity from sin opens a very different vista.[47] The image of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and advising them to adopt humility and serve each other,[48] or Paul's visual depiction of his suffering through his body marked with the evidence of servile punishment are completely unprecedented in ancient literature.[49] Humility and the suffering self are important conceptual innovations that Christianity adopted and widely diffused;[50] it is such features that led Nietzsche to famously characterise Christianity as a servile religion.[51] Such features raise important questions in particular in regards to slave agency and the religious subjectivity of enslaved Christians, as we shall see below.

Finally, it is worth pointing out the various ways in which Christianity could affect slaves, slavery and slaveholding societies. The development of Churches as distinct organisations with their own hierarchies, structures and forms of trans-local coordination was particularly important. The relative autonomy of Churches in regards to both states and social groups could enable them to develop their own internal rules and pursue their own agendas. This is reflected in the emergence of Church orders, texts which used pseudo-apostolic authority in order to project their own model of how Christian communities should be organised; Church synods and their canonical decisions continued the same project in subsequent centuries.[52] A second form of influence concerned the attempt of Christian leaders to modify and

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[44] De Wet 2015: 3.
[45] Martin 1990; Combes 1998; Byron 2003; Harrill 2005; de Wet 2010; Kaneen 2017.
[46] See the seminal study of Fitzgerald 2000.
[47] *Philippians* 2:6-11; see Briggs 1989; cf. de Wet 2018: 40-77.
[48] *Gospel of Mark* 10:43-4; see Glancy 2010b: 48-50.
[49] *2 Corinthians* 11:23-5; see Glancy 2004.
[50] Perkins 1995; Shaw 1996; Briggs 2010.
[51] For Nietzsche and ancient slavery, see Deissler 2001; for Nietzsche's conceptualization of Christianity as a servile religion, see the comments of Harper 2016.
[52] For Church orders, see Vaucher 2017.

supervise the behaviour of Christians through various means: one example consists of the sermons addressed to mass audiences, like the famous sermons of John Chrysostom; another example is that of early medieval penitentials, books who aimed to advise priests on what forms of penance to impose on their flock for various sins;[53] a third example concerns hagiological literature, and its attempt to use saints as models of Christian life.[54] Finally, we need to distinguish the ways in which Christian discourses and ideas affected state policies and legislation and the extent to which Christian thinkers and Church authorities tried to consciously shape such policies in regards to slavery.[55] We need to distinguish carefully between these various ways in which Christianity could have affected slavery; while they might be interconnected, it is equally possible that there were significant differences between them, in particular across space and time.

Most scholarship on the link between Christianity and ancient slavery focused on how Christian thinkers and Church authorities conceived of slavery, and whether Christian masters treated slaves better than pagans; and it has rightly concluded that Christians had no interest in the abolition of slavery or even in its amelioration. What has not been sufficiently explored until recently was the role of slave agency in the link between Christianity and slavery. Once we dispose of the idea that Christianity was a religion of slaves, how exactly should we approach the identity of enslaved Christians and the ways in which slaves made use of Christianity for their own purposes?[56] Given the nature of our sources, this question is not easy to answer. But it is important to point out that Christian subjectivity created sources in which it is possible to hear the voice of slaves in ways which are unimaginable for most of ancient literature. It is not I think accidental that the closest thing we have to slave autobiographies from the ancient world are Christian texts: I am referring to Saint Patrick's famous fifth-century CE *Confession*, which includes a first-person narrative of his experience of enslavement, life in slavery in Ireland and escape from slavery,[57] and Jerome's fourth-century CE *Life of Malchus*, in which he purports to transcribe Malchus' first-person narrative of his enslavement by and escape from the Saracens.[58]

Such texts offer tantalising glimpses of how enslaved Christians perceived their identity and the link between Christianity and slavery. And it is fairly obvious that their pre-existing Christian identity offered Patrick and Malchus a powerful tool for making sense of their condition and directing their actions. On the one hand, their Christian identity conditioned them to conceive of their enslavement as punishment for their sins;[59] it also inclined them to offer obedience to their masters, in accordance

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[53] For penitentials, see Morabito 1990; Jurasinski 2010, 2015; Winnebeck 2020.

[54] For a study that examines hagiological literature and slavery in detail, see Grieser 1997.

[55] Harper 2011.

[56] Shaner 2018 is a step in the right direction; it is also telling to note the difference between Kyrtatas 1992, where slave agency plays little role, and the attention given to slave agency in Kyrtatas 2020: 116-23.

[57] See McLuhan 2001; Palmbush 2014; Beavis 2020.

[58] For the text, see Gray 2015; for the wider context, see Lenski 2011a.

[59] St Patrick, *Confession* 1.

with numerous Biblical texts.[60] And yet, at the same time Christian subjectivity also encouraged them to successfully undertake the most radical action a slave could take short of a slave revolt: flight. We should accordingly recognize the contradictory ways in which an identity could affect and motivate slaves. In this respect, it is worth focusing on one particular passage from *1 Peter*, which is usually interpreted alongside the other Household codes, which advise slaves to show obedience to their masters:

> Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.[61]

In contrast to other Household codes, in this case there is no exhortation to masters to behave humanely towards their slaves. Furthermore, the focus of *1 Peter* is not the justification of slave obedience, as found in the other Household codes, but the theological interpretation of slave suffering: the image of Christ, who suffered in order to save humanity, is used as a model that slaves should follow.[62] This is clearly no call to slave resistance against injustice; but we should not miss its potential importance for slaves. It offered a way of making sense of the continuous suffering that was usually the lot of most slaves; instead of an endless series of misfortunes and evils without meaning or purpose, they could now reimagined as a test for more valuable things. Given the overall balance of power between masters and slaves, this understanding could be particularly valuable for everyday slave survival. And in specific contexts, like that of religious conflicts we shall examine below, it could become a call for very different forms of behaviour from slaves.

At the same time, the concept of Christian brotherhood irrespective of gender, status and ethnicity could be understood by slaves in ways that were not welcome by many Christian thinkers and leaders:

> Those who have believing masters should not show them disrespect just because they are fellow believers. Instead, they should serve them even better because their masters are dear to them as fellow believers and are devoted to the welfare of their slaves.[63]

Scholars have rightly stressed that the Christian authors of this and other similar texts have clearly chosen to teach slaves obedience, rather than to attack the injustices of slavery. But the need to point out to slaves that they should not disrespect their

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[60] Jerome, *Life of Malchus* 6.
[61] *1 Peter* 2:18-21.
[62] De Wet 2013; Moxnes 2014.
[63] *1 Timothy* 6:2.

masters simply because they were fellow Christian brothers makes sense if some slaves had interpreted it in precisely such a manner. We need therefore to read Christian texts against the grain, if we are to recover how ancient slaves interpreted what they heard and read. One of the most interesting recent attempts to uncover the perspectives of enslaved Christians comprises intersectional approaches, which explore the intersection between class, gender and ethnicity; while Household codes address distinct pairs of husbands and wives, masters and slaves, and parents and children, intersectional analysis explores how e.g. enslaved mothers would have heard the admonitions towards wives, given the constraints imposed on them by slavery.[64]

While most Christian leaders chose to subordinate enslaved Christian subjectivity to the property rights of Christian and even pagan masters, it is also possible to find examples in which some Christian communities took a different path. One canon of the Church synod at Gangra in the 340s CE presents us with a fascinating example:

> If one, on the pretext of piety, incites a slave to despise his master and leave his service, instead of serving his master in good will and with every honour, let him be excommunicated.[65]

This ruling concerned the followers of Eustathius, bishop of Sebaste in Armenia; they were condemned for violating norms of gender and mastery. It is unlikely that the Eustathians were abolitionists, or taught that all slaves should flee from their masters; I find it more likely that their views concerned slaves who were members of their group.[66] This is evidence of a wider phenomenon that we will examine below, in regards to the institutions of Christian communities and religious conflicts: namely, that, at least on certain occasions, some Christian communities were willing to prioritise membership of the group over the property rights of masters. This was potentially very important for slaves, as it offered an ideological standpoint that was shared by non-slaves, from which the obedience due to masters could be challenged. We shall see below multiple examples in which slaves could make use of Christian discourses and practices and the institutional presence of the Church in order to protect their families and have them recognised, to escape from their masters, and to gain their freedom.

But it would be misleading to assume that the agency of enslaved Christians was tantamount to resistance to slavery under a new guise. Scholars find currently quite difficult to comprehend the forms of Christian enslaved agency that were not incompatible with slavery as a dominant feature of ancient societies.[67] Out of various possible aspects that could be discussed, I will solely focus on the agency of enslaved persons as a means of Christianisation. We do not need to believe that Christianity was a religion of slaves in order to pay the necessary attention to the role of slaves in religious conversion and expansion. We have already mentioned Patrick, whose

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[64] Kartzow 2010, 2018; Brooten 2013, 2015; cf. Charles 2020.
[65] *Synodal Letter of the Council of Gangra*, canon 3.
[66] De Churruca 1982; Grieser 2001; Filippini 2015.
[67] See the valuable comments of Glancy 2013.

enslavement in Ireland ultimately led to his Christianising mission to the island, and we shall encounter below the persecuted slaves in Vandal Africa who converted many of the Moors. Examples can be multiplied: the Ethiopian eunuch, probably a royal slave, who was the first gentile convert to Christianity;[68] the captive women who played an important role in the Christianisation of Armenia and Georgia;[69] the captives from Asia Minor who created the first Christian communities among the Goths, and whose descendant, Ulfilas, played a key role in the Christianisation of the Goths;[70] and the Syrian captives who created the first Christian communities in the Sassanian Empire.[71] Captivity and enslavement constituted one of the many paths of religious conversion in ancient societies.[72]

The final aspect of our framework concerns conjunctures and long-term processes. Ancient slavery has been studied in a static and synchronic manner as a result of a number of factors. The bottom-up approach that has been dominant until recently has understood slavery as a relationship unilaterally defined by the masters; ancient societies and economies are usually conceived as monolithic and coherent structures with slavery as one of their defining features, rather than as agglomerations of complementing and conflicting strategies, which showed both equilibria and constant tensions; the employment of synchronic analysis for the study of ancient slavery to the almost complete abandonment of eventful narratives has favoured static approaches; and the monolithic concepts of slave societies and societies with slaves has also encouraged the belief that there were hardly any significant changes in the millennium of ancient history between the emergence of slave societies in the archaic period and their putative transformation into societies with slaves in the course of late antiquity.[73]

Harper's recent synthesis on slavery in the long fourth century CE has been a seminal contribution to reorienting the study of ancient slavery towards the incorporation of tensions, conflicts, conjunctures, diachrony and long-term changes in our frameworks and narratives. The history of slavery was shaped by diverse agents: the various kinds of slaveholders (magnates, the middling sort, institutional slaveholders) and their diverse slaving strategies; states, and their often conflicting aims: supporting the interests of slaveholders, balancing the interests of different groups, prioritising state interests, and devising policies influenced by ideological concerns; the diverse religious groups, including Christian Churches, heterodox movements, Jewish and pagan communities, and their attempts to pursue their own aims and shape the wider society; and of course enslaved persons and their multiple identities and forms of agency. Given the variety of groups and aims, we should envisage constant tensions in the balance of forces between the different interests. Harper has documented the continuous tug-of-war and the constant back and forth of

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[68] *Acts of the Apostles* 8:27-38; see Ismard 2017: 120-5.
[69] Sterk 2010.
[70] Lenski 1995.
[71] Mosig-Walburg 2010; Smith 2016.
[72] For the many paths of Christian conversion, see Kyrtatas 2020; for the role of captives in cultural transmission and change cross-culturally, see Cameron 2016.
[73] For a critique of these approaches, see Vlassopoulos 2021.

Roman imperial policies in regards to a variety of issues: the legality of self-sale; the status of exposed infants; the status of freedpersons; mixed marriages; forced prostitution.[74] As a result, particular conjunctures had a major impact on the history of ancient slavery, as they shaped the balance of forces in particular directions.

Historians of ancient slavery need to incorporate conjunctures into their narratives: they could learn a lot from e.g. studies have explored the impact of large-scale violence associated with the creation of the barbarian kingdoms in the West on Christian discourses and policies on sexual morality.[75] The history of the link between Christianity and slavery needs to be told as a narrative of how the variety of actors and conjunctures shaped particular aspects, in processes that included changes, regressions and compromises. In this article I have chosen to give an overview of some major contexts in which Christianity and slavery were interrelated and some contours of change, as a means of reorienting the debate; but for each of these issues we need detailed case studies that will examine the impact of particular conjunctures on each issue and how developments in each field might have been interrelated.

Christian lifeways

One of the most significant aspects of monotheistic religions like Christianity was their creation of distinctive lifeways for their devotees and the constant tension between these lifeways and the actual living circumstances and experiences of their devotees. Out of the many issues in which Christian leaders, thinkers and communities tried to create Christian lifeways, I will focus on two important examples: the first is the issue of sexuality and marriage, while the second concerns Sunday observance and repose from labour. In both case, the wish to modify the behaviour of Christians in ways that were considered desirable by Christian ideals ended up having a significant impact on slave life.

Sexuality and marriage are among the main areas in which Christianisation gradually had a major effect. Ancient societies generally recognised the right of male masters to have sex with their female slaves, if they chose so; furthermore, masters could profit handsomely from the forced sexual exploitation of their female slaves in the sex trade; the characteristic double standards of ancient patriarchal societies meant that sexual relationships between mistresses and their male slaves were frowned upon or legally punished, while masters could freely have sexual relationships with dishonoured women.[76] Finally, most ancient societies did not legally recognise slave marriages and did not accord them any legal protection.[77] As dishonoured persons, slaves were not accorded any benefits that accrued from possessing sexual honour.[78]

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[74] Harper 2011; see also Lenski 2011b.
[75] See e.g. Vihervalli 2017.
[76] For the sexual exploitation of slaves in the Roman world, see Glancy 2002: 21-4; Harper 2013: 19-79; for the double standards as regards mistresses and their slaves, see Evans Grubbs 1993.
[77] For slave marriage and family in Roman law, see Willvonseder 2010.
[78] Harper 2017.

Christianity challenged various aspects of ancient sexual economies and moralities. Christians proclaimed that sexual exclusivity within marriage was not applicable only to women, but should also apply to men; as a result, Christian leaders decried male sexual encounters with female slaves and prostitutes. While Christian sexual moralities comprised from early on a powerful current of sexual renunciation, gradually Christian communities came to perceive marriage as the ideal social arrangement for all human beings, apart from the few ascetics who could practice renunciation. As a result, Christian sexual moralities affected slavery in three important respects: the sexual exploitation of female slaves from their own masters; the forced prostitution of female slaves; and the recognition of mixed marriages between free and slave and of slave marriages.

As we have mentioned above, Christian texts from the first three centuries CE are generally silent as regards the sexual exploitation of slaves. But after the adoption of Christianity by the Roman emperors, the process of the Christianisation of Roman society gave the issue a significant amount of attention from Christian leaders and their communities. Christian leaders like John Chrysostom constantly criticised the sexual morality of their flocks and decried masters who had sex with their slaves.[79] The main issue in these discourses is often not the sexual exploitation that female slaves suffered; it is rather the morality of the masters and the need to avoid committing sinful actions. This is undoubtedly an important observation, as it illustrates the indifference towards the constraints of enslaved Christian subjectivity which pervades most of Christian literature. Nevertheless, irrespective of the motives for which masters were urged not to sexually exploit their female slaves, the consequences for female slaves could be undoubtedly beneficial. An interesting example comes from a sixth-century CE Irish penitential:

> If any layman with a wife of his own penetrates his female slave, the procedure is this: the female slave is to be sold, and he himself shall have no intercourse with his own wife for an entire year. But if he begets by this female slave one, two, or three children, he is to set her free, and if he wishes to sell her, it shall not be permitted to him, but they shall be separated from each other, and he shall do penance an entire year on an allowance of bread and water; and he shall have no further intercourse with his concubine but be joined to his own wife.[80]

The penitential rules are focused on the morality of the master; this is evident from the fact that the rule concerns married masters and the injunction to sell the slave: the point was to protect the marriages of masters, rather than to protect female slaves from exploitation. However, the fact that masters are obliged to manumit female slaves if they give birth shows that Christian morality could have a real impact on slave lives.

Prostitution was a major nexus between ancient sexual economies and slavery. Since prostitution involved by definition women without sexual honour, ancient

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[79] De Wet 2015: 220-70.
[80] *Paenitentiale Vinniani* 39-40; see Winnebeck 2020: 6-7.

societies considered it a wholly legitimate practice; moral concerns about prostitution concerned the self-control of male customers and the avoidance of profligacy, not the morality of casual sex or the sexual exploitation of slave women. Roman law enabled masters to prohibit heirs or future owners of a female slave from prostituting her, but this was a privilege for a select few slaves.[81] Christian morality decried prostitution as an immoral sexual practice, though its interest was primarily in the morals of male customers. Nevertheless, prostitution remained legal in late antique and early medieval societies, despite Christian critique and opposition. What is quite remarkable is a series of late Roman laws that attempt to prohibit the forced prostitution of free and slave women. A law of Theodosius II from 428 CE is characteristic for the discourse it employs:

> We cannot suffer for pimps, fathers, and slave owners, who impose the necessity of sinning on their daughters or slave women, to enjoy the right of power over them, nor to indulge freely in such crime. Thus it pleases us that these men are subjected to such disdain that they may not be able to benefit from the right of power nor may anything be thus acquired by them. It is to be granted to the slaves and daughters and others who have hired themselves out on account of their poverty (whose humble lot has damned them), should they so will, to be relieved of every necessity of this misery by appealing to the succour of bishops, judges, or even defensors.[82]

The subjectivity invoked by Christianity concerned not only free men and women, but also slave women; the fight to avoid sexual sin led to the recognition of the constraints upon enslaved subjectivity and a set of practical measures to reform those constraints.[83] The success of such laws in eliminating forced prostitution of slaves was probably limited; but the novel conceptualisation of enslaved subjectivity is notable.

The position of Christian Churches on slave marriages shows a mixture of conflicting elements.[84] On the one hand, there are countless examples in which Christian thinkers and Church rulings explicitly accept the viewpoint of Roman law, which did not recognise slave marriages. Among the clearest statements appears in a letter of Pope Leo I (458-9 CE):

> Not every woman joined to a man is the man's wife, because not every son is the father's heir. Moreover, matrimonial contracts are valid between free people who are of equal standing; the Lord decided this very thing long before the beginning of Roman law existed. Thus, a wife is one thing, a concubine another; just as a slave woman is one thing, a free woman another.[85]

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[81] McGinn 1990.
[82] *Theodosian Code* 15.8.2.
[83] Harper 2013: 181-9.
[84] Reynolds 1994: 156-72; Grieser 1997: 99-101; Stone 2021.
[85] Leo I, *Epistles* 167, response 4; see Evans Grubbs 2019.

Leo's ruling concerned a relationship between a free man and a slave concubine; and it is hardly surprising that mixed marriages between free and slave played a major role in ultimately opening the path for the recognition of slave marriages as well.[86] In the early third century CE a rival Christian source accused Pope Callistus, who started life as a slave, of accepting as legitimate unions between upper-class Christian ladies and slaves.[87] Given the hostility of the source, it is difficult to interpret Callistus' ruling; but it is also probable that it illustrates a dilemma that many Christian leaders and communities faced in subsequent centuries, in trying to balance between the legal prohibition of such unions and the Christian wish to promote monogamous unions for all Church members.[88] The seventh-century CE English penitential of Theodore of Tarsus is another characteristic example of the contradictions and compromises of Christian theory and practice. On the one hand, in the case of slave married couples in which one of the two spouses was subsequently manumitted and the other cannot gain freedom, the penitential allows the emancipated spouse to divorce and marry a free person; in this case, the status distinction between free and slave is more important than the indissolubility of marriage.[89] On the other hand, in the case of a consensual marriage between a free man and a slave woman, the free husband is not allowed to divorce his slave wife; in this case, the mixed marriage is clearly considered important and indissoluble.[90]

Slave agency played an important role in the process that led to the recognition of slave marriages by Church authorities and by secular law influenced by Christian ideas. The Council of Orleans in 541 CE faced a dilemma posed by slave agency. Some married slaves fled to Churches in order to seek their help in protecting their unions: the Council declared that such slaves should be returned to their masters; their unions could only be recognised if they were manumitted.[91] In this particular case Church authorities chose to maintain the preponderance of the property rights of masters over other considerations and the Roman conception of marriage as something exclusively available to free people. But it is also possible to find examples in which Christian ideas about subjectivity and sexual morality led to the recognition of slave marriages. A law of the Lombard king Liutprand (713-735 CE) is one of the earliest recognitions of slave marriage:

> If a free man who owns a married couple of either slaves or people of a semi-free status (*aldii*) and, instigated by the Enemy of the human race, has had sexual intercourse with the same female slave who has his male slave as her husband, or with the *aldia* who is the partner of his *aldius*, he has committed adultery. Hence we decree the following: this man should lose his male slave or his *aldius*, with whose wife he committed adultery, and,

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[86] For mixed marriages, late Roman law and Christianity, see Evans Grubbs 1995: 261-316; for early medieval Bavaria, see Hammer 1995b; for early medieval Gaul, see Grieser 1997: 101-6.
[87] Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutation of all heresies* 9.12.24-5; for Callistus, see Gülzow 1967.
[88] Gaudemet 1956.
[89] *Penitential of Theodore* 2.13.4.
[90] *Penitential of Theodore* 2.13.5.
[91] Stone 2021: 9.

similarly, the woman herself too. And they may go away wherever they want as free people (*fulcfree*) and be released from bonds according to the law of the folk, as if they had been released formally, through public procedure. For it is not pleasing to God that any man should have sexual intercourse with the wife of another.[92]

The law circumscribes the right of male masters to sexually exploit their female slaves; in the case of married slaves, whose union has clearly legal consequences, the protection of the marriage is more significant than the property rights of masters. Accordingly, masters who had intercourse with married female slaves faced a stiff penalty, by having to manumit the slave couple and lose the rights of patronage over their freedpeople. The law makes clear its religious motivation; in the eyes of the Christian god, female slaves were now persons whose marriages were worth protecting.[93] The Church council at Chalons in 813 CE is the first to explicitly discusses the sanctity of slave marriages:

We hear that certain people by some presumption of power part legitimate marriages of slaves, not paying attention to that gospel statement: 'What God has joined, let man not separate'.[94] Whence it seems to us that the unions of the unfree should not be parted, even if they have different masters. But remaining in the union, let them serve their masters. And this is to be observed in those cases where the union was legal and by the wish of the masters.[95]

The ruling offers effective protection to slave marriages by forbidding the separation of slave spouses.[96] However, the ruling also requires the permission of the masters; this was clearly an important obstacle for slave marriages, in particular when spouses belonged to different masters.[97] But it also needs to be set in a wider framework: the consent of parents and masters was long required by Christian leaders and secular authorities;[98] it was only in the twelfth century CE that the Catholic Church would accept that spousal consent is the only requirement for a lawful marriage.[99]

We can now move to the issue of Sunday observance. Slaves in ancient societies had an irregular number of holidays. Public festivals could include holidays for slaves, and some festivals like the Roman Saturnalia had slave holidays as one of their main elements; overwhelmingly, though, slave holidays depended on the whims of their masters and the series of accommodations worked out between particular masters and their slaves.[100] The Christianisation of late antique and early medieval

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[92] *Laws of Liutprand* 140.
[93] Verlinden 1977: 572-3.
[94] A reference to *Gospel of Matthew* 19:6.
[95] Council of Chalons, canon 30.
[96] Stone 2021.
[97] See e.g. Tertullian, *To his wife* 2.8.1.
[98] See Brooten 2013 on Basil of Caesarea, slave marriages and the consent of masters. See also Hammer 1995a.
[99] Winroth 2009.
[100] Bradley 1979.

societies had also significant effects on slave holidays. The Christian Church debated for centuries whether it would accept the Jewish logic of the Sabbath and prohibit most activities during that day, or whether it would allow most activities, but encourage Christians to pray and take part in the Sunday service as something of particular importance. In the end, many Christian societies ended up adopting the Jewish concept of the Sabbath and prohibit *opera servilia* (slave work) during Sunday.[101]

We can again find a range of ways in which this prohibition was enforced. The Church councils of the Merovingian Church passed a series of decisions that enforced the observance of Sunday rest with serious penalties for defaulters; at the same time, hagiological sources from early medieval Gaul include various stories in which saints punish slaves for failing to observe the Sunday rest.[102] What is remarkable is the lack of interest in the issues raised by constrained subjectivity; these sources do not take into account the possibility that slaves were forced to work on a Sunday by their masters, nor do they consider Sunday rest a slave right. Sunday rest is an obligation of all members of a Christian society, and the focus of these sources is on the punishment of infractions, rather than the causes of infractions, or the religious subjectivity of slaves.

On the other hand, we can find other Christian sources that focus on the link between Sunday observance and slave rest. We can start with Basil of Caesarea, who raised some important points in one of his sermons on fasting:

> The cook's knife has stopped; the table is content to bear only foods that grow of themselves. The Sabbath was given to the Jews, so that 'your beast of burden and your slave can rest',[103] it says. Let fasting become a rest from their continuous toils for the slaves serving you all year long. Give a rest to your cook, a break to your waiter; let the hand of the cupbearer pause; let also him who bakes your dainties stop at last. And let your house be still for once from the myriads of noises, the smoke, the odour of roasting meat, and from those running up and down, serving the belly as if it were an inexorable mistress.[104]

Basil emphasises the link between fasting and slave rest; fasting presents an opportunity for Christian masters to limit their material requirements, while also offering a respite to their slaves.[105] While Basil is not strictly concerned with the Sunday rest, the late fourth-century CE *Apostolic Constitutions* emphasise this link:[106]

> Let the slaves work five days; but on the Sabbath-day and the Lord's day let them have leisure to go to church for instruction in piety. We have said that the Sabbath is on account of the creation, and the Lord's day of the

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[101] McReavy 1935; Pettirsch 1947.
[102] See the discussion in Grieser 1997: 61-2.
[103] A reference to *Exodus* 23:12.
[104] Basil of Caesarea, *Homilies on Fasting* 1.7.
[105] Cf. de Wet 2015: 160.
[106] For this Church order, see Vaucher 2017: 15-23.

resurrection. Let slaves rest from their work all the great week, and that which follows it - for the one in memory of the passion, and the other of the resurrection; and there is need they should be instructed who it is that suffered and rose again, and who it is permitted Him to suffer, and raised Him again. Let them have rest from their work on the Ascension, because it was the conclusion of the dispensation by Christ. Let them rest at Pentecost, because of the coming of the Holy Spirit, which was given to those that believed in Christ. Let them rest on the festival of His birth, because on it the unexpected favour was granted to men, that Jesus Christ, the Logos of God, should be born of the Virgin Mary, for the salvation of the world. Let them rest on the festival of Epiphany, because on it a manifestation took place of the divinity of Christ, for the Father bore testimony to Him at the baptism; and the Paraclete, in the form of a dove, pointed out to the bystanders Him to whom testimony was borne. Let them rest on the days of the apostles: for they were appointed your teachers to bring you to Christ, and made you worthy of the Spirit. Let them rest on the day of the first martyr Stephen, and of the other holy martyrs who preferred Christ to their own life.[107]

In this particular case, the two-day holiday for slaves during every week is both an occasion for them to rest, as well as an opportunity for their religious instruction. In this case, the religious subjectivity of enslaved Christians is at the very centre of attention. Finally, we can turn to sources that explicitly focus on the problems faced by enslaved Christians in fulfilling their religious obligation of Sunday observance. The late seventh-century CE legislation of King Ine of Wessex offers an eloquent example:

> If a slave works on Sunday by his lord's command, he shall become free, and the lord shall pay a fine of 30 shillings. §1. If, however, the slave works without the cognizance of his master, he shall undergo the lash or pay the fine in lieu thereof. §2. If, however, a freeman works on that day, except by his lord's command, he shall be reduced to slavery, or [pay a fine of] 60 shillings.[108]

Ine distinguishes between slaves who worked on a Sunday on their own initiative, in which case they have to pay a fine or be whipped, and slaves forced to do so by their masters, in which case the slaves win their freedom. Irrespective of whether the law was actually enforced in this way, and what social consequences it might have had, it is obvious that the recognition of the constraints on slave subjectivity could lead to very beneficial results for slaves and even to the ultimate acknowledgement of Sunday rest as a slave right. Public slave holidays in ancient societies were relatively

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[107] *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.33.
[108] *Laws of Ine* §3; see Jurasinski 2015: 100-9.

few; incorporating a slave holiday within a fixed weekly calendar could be a major benefit for Christian slaves.[109]

Participation in the institutions of Christian communities

Christian communities gradually developed their own institutions, positions and hierarchies: this process included the various positions and functions of the Church hierarchy (deacons, lectors, presbyters, bishops), as well as the positions and hierarchies related to male and female monasticism. The question whether slaves were eligible to participate in these institutions and offices was not necessarily incompatible with the institution of slavery; if their masters assented, the ordination of slaves as priests and monks was relatively unproblematic, though it would create potential issues concerning the primary loyalty of slaves towards the Church or their masters and patrons. But it was often the case that the ordination of slaves as priests and monks could create important disjunctures between the Christian subjectivity of slaves and the property rights of masters.[110]

Early Christian communities of the first and second centuries had slaves who operated in various roles within the primitive hierarchy of the churches. Many of them helped Christian religious leaders by performing mundane tasks like serving the communal meal; the terminology employed for such functions (*diakonoi*, *ministri/ae*) was similar to that used for slaves performing similar tasks within Greco-Roman associations, and it is likely that such slaves were often the personal slaves of Christian religious leaders.[111] But it is also likely that some of them had leadership positions within the early Churches. The prescriptions of early Christian texts, like *1 Timothy*, that only free householders were eligible for the function of the *diakonos*, could be read as evidence of conflicts about the eligibility of slaves for such functions.[112]

Once priesthood gradually became a clearly defined position, we start to find evidence for the definite exclusion of slaves from such positions. The earliest relevant evidence comes in a letter by Pope Stephanus (254-7 CE), addressed to a fellow bishop, who enquired which persons were eligible to become priests; slaves were to be excluded, unless they were manumitted. The question might indicate that the exclusion of slaves was not a settled issue; but the authenticity of the letter has been disputed, and it would be unwise to make a case on this basis.[113] The fourth-century CE church order *Canons of the Apostles* attempts to prescribe various aspects of Church organisation and Christian life;[114] its ruling on slave priests is revealing:

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[109] Cf. the case of New World British colonies: Beasley 2007.
[110] Jonkers 1942; Perentidis 1981; Klein 1991; Manfredini 1995; Melluso 2000: 199-215; for the later Middle Ages, see Landau 1991.
[111] Vaucher 2017: 139-44; cf. Harrill 2006a.
[112] Shaner 2018: 87-109.
[113] Vaucher 2017: 145-6.
[114] Vaucher 2017: 15-23.

> We do not permit slaves to be ordained into the clergy without their masters' consent; for this would grieve those that owned them. For such a practice would occasion the subversion of families. But if at any time a slave appears worthy to be ordained into a high office, such as our Onesimus appeared to be,[115] and if his master allows of it, and gives him his freedom, and dismisses him from his house, let him be ordained.[116]

The ruling prohibits the ordination of slave priests without the master's consent and explicitly gives the property rights of masters as the reason for this prohibition. Even more telling is a ruling by Pope Leo I in 440 CE:

> Men are admitted commonly to the Sacred Order who are not qualified by any dignity of birth or character: even some who have failed to obtain their liberty from their masters are raised to the rank of the priesthood, as if sorry slaves were fit for that honour; and it is believed that a man can be approved of God who has not yet been able to approve himself to his master. And so the cause for complaint is twofold in this matter, because both the sacred ministry is polluted by such poor partners in it, and the rights of masters are infringed so far as unlawful possession is rashly taken of them.[117]

In this case, the exclusion of slaves is not merely a pragmatic reaction to the property rights of masters; Leo justifies it on the basis of slave dishonour and the slave lack of appropriate dignity for the position of the priest. The conflation of master and Lord is made explicit; slaves who had not even convinced their master to manumit them, were not worthy of serving God. But Leo's letter also documents that despite these rulings, slaves were indeed ordained as priests.[118]

Evidence from the fourth-century CE gives us some concrete examples of this alternative reaction and illustrates the problems that the above rulings were trying to sort out.[119] In one of his letters, Jerome defends himself from various charges made against him by an opponent:

> One of his charges is that we have allowed a slave to be ordained. Yet he himself has clergymen of the same class, and he must have read of Onesimus who, being made regenerate by Paul in prison, from a slave became a deacon.[120]

Jerome does not deny the charge, but makes two counterarguments; on the one hand, he accuses his opponent of resorting to the same practice, but on the other hand he presents a theological justification of the ordination of slave priests. Jerome used the very same figure of Onesimus mentioned above by the *Canons of the Apostles* to defend the prohibition of ordaining slave priests without the master's consent, in order to defend exactly the opposite; he refers to the extra-biblical tradition about

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[115] A reference to Paul's *Letter to Philemon*; see Barclay 1991; Tolmie and Friedl 2010; Roth 2014.
[116] *Canons of the Apostles* 82.
[117] Leo I, *Epistles* 4.
[118] Sessa 2011: 155-61.
[119] Jonkers 1942: 286-7.
[120] Jerome, *Epistles* 82.6.

Onesimus, which posited that he was ultimately consecrated as a bishop.[121] Another interesting case can be reconstructed on the basis of the letters of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus. Basil had ordained as priest a slave belonging to a certain Simplicia, and reacted scathingly to her protest against his act;[122] after Basil's death, Simplicia reopened the issue by communicating with Gregory, who defended the act and advised Simplicia that the Christian thing would be to accept it.[123] These three letters do not give us enough evidence to reconstruct why these two particulars slaves managed to become ordained by Jerome and Basil respectively; but there should be no doubt that without slave agency the problem faced by these Church fathers would have probably never emerged. At the same time, it is clear that Church authorities faced a contradictory situation; on the one hand, respect for the status quo and property rights could make Church authorities to negate the spiritual wishes of enslaved Christians; on the other hand, slave agency could create circumstances in which some Christian leaders might employ certain elements of Christian discourses in order to defend enslaved subjectivity.[124]

The emergence of monasticism in its various forms from the late third century CE onwards created another context of debate, probably on a scale much larger than that of the ordination of priests.[125] Secular and church authorities debated for centuries how to deal with slaves who flew to monasteries and attempted to start a new life as monks.[126] In this particular case our sources put at the centre of their attention the issue of slave agency; a novel of the emperor Valentinian III from 452 CE is quite telling:

> No person of ignoble status, an *inquilinus*, a slave, or a *colonus*, shall undertake the duties of clerics, nor shall he be united with the monks or monasteries, in order that he may evade the bond of his due condition.[127]

The law assumes that the motive of slaves for becoming priests or monks was to escape their condition and live under better circumstances. A novel of Justinian from 535 CE rules that slaves who had become monks were thus released from their slave status; if the slaves subsequently abandoned the monastic life, they could be reclaimed by their former owners; the law again assumes that slaves used monasteries as an intermediate stage in escaping from their masters' power, before resuming new secular lives.[128] It is probable that the slave motives assumed by these laws can indeed be attributed to many ancient slaves; but at the same time, there is also sufficient evidence to show that many slaves wanted to join the monastic life from religious motivations.

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[121] For the post-biblical reception of the *Letter to Philemon*, see Mitchell 1995; Grieser and Priesching 2016.

[122] Basil of Caesarea, *Epistles* 115.

[123] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistles* 79.

[124] See the interesting comments of Perentidis 1981.

[125] For an overview, see Grieser 2016; cf. de Wet 2017a.

[126] Bellen 1971: 78-92; Melluso 2002; Grieser 2016.

[127] *Novels of Valentinian* 35.3.

[128] *Novels of Justinian* 5.2.3.

How did Church authorities deal with this form of constrained Christian subjectivity? From the above examples it is obvious that a common answer was to prioritise the property rights of owners and prohibit slaves to join monasteries without the consent of their masters. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE explicitly forbade monasteries to accept slaves as monks without the consent of their masters and threatened to excommunicate any monks that would violate the rule.[129] Clearly, not every Christian would accept this ruling, and the monastic rules penned by Basil of Caesarea in the fourth century CE are a good illustration of the dilemmas faced by Christian authorities:

> Slaves still under the yoke who take refuge in the communities should be cautioned and restored to their masters in a better state of mind. In so doing we imitate the blessed Paul, who, though he had begotten Onesimus[130] through the Gospel, nevertheless sent him back to Philemon, assuring the slave that the yoke of slavery borne in a manner well pleasing to the Lord would render him worthy of the Kingdom of heaven. Yet he also exhorted the master not only to desist from his threat against Onesimus, remembering what his true Lord said: 'If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive your trespasses',[131] but to adopt kindlier dispositions towards him. Thus he wrote: 'For perhaps he was parted from you for a season, that you should have him back for ever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother'.[132] However, if he is a base type of master, giving lawless commands and forcing the slave to transgress the commandment of the true Master, our Lord Jesus Christ, then it is necessary to put up a fight that the name of God may not be blasphemed through that slave's doing anything displeasing to God. This will consist in preparing that slave to endure the sufferings that will be inflicted on him if he is to obey God rather than man, as it is written, or in the acceptance by those who have received him of the troubles that may come upon them on his account, as it pleases God.[133]

On the one hand, Basil uses the example of Onesimus in order to suggest that monasteries should return slaves to their masters, while also advising masters to treat them in the proper way. On the other hand, Basil also examines the possibility that a bad master would force a slave to do things that violated Christian beliefs and offers two possibilities: in the first case, the slave should be prepare to endure the suffering that would result from disobeying any orders that violated Christian beliefs, in the manner advised by *1 Peter* that we examined above; in the second case, and rather cryptically, Basil suggests that the monastery could opt to retain the slave and face the consequences that could result from the master's reaction. Under certain

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[129] Council of Chalcedon, canon 4.
[130] A reference to *Philemon* 10.
[131] A reference to *Gospel of Matthew* 6:14.
[132] A reference to *Philemon* 15-6.
[133] Basil of Caesarea, *Longer Asceticon* 11; Silvas 2005: 196-7.

circumstances, therefore, Christian leaders were willing to defend the Christian subjectivity of slaves and come into conflict with masters and the state. Augustine confirms that some people in monastic circles would consider a heavy sin not to admit pious slaves as monks:

> But now there come into this profession of the service of God, both persons from the condition of slaves, or also freedmen, or persons on this account freed by their masters or about to be freed, likewise from the life of peasants, and from the exercise and plebeian labour of handicraftsmen, persons whose bringing up doubtless has been all the better for them, the harder it has been: whom not to admit, is a heavy sin. For many of that sort have turned out truly great men and should be imitated.[134]

It is telling that Augustine makes exactly the opposite argument from that of Pope Leo that we saw above; not only are slaves not considered unworthy of becoming priests, but their servile condition might have been an excellent preparation for becoming monks. Some Christian hagiographies present fascinating examples of slaves who escaped their masters and sought the support of abbots in order to join the monastic life.[135] The life of Hypatius narrates the story of five slaves of the praetorian prefect Monaxius (early fifth century CE), who escaped to Hypatius' monastery near Chalcedon. While Monaxius tried to reclaim them, Hypatius defended them successfully with the following argument:

> If you consider the things of men, they are reasonably your slaves; but if you consider not the things of men, but the things of God, they are not your slaves, but fellow slaves. So, if you hinder them from your common master, God, what will He do to you? Will His anger not burn you?[136]

This is an interesting case in which the discourse of Christians as fellow slaves of God is employed to successfully defend the religious subjectivity of enslaved Christians against the interests of their Christian masters.

Finally, it is important to note that these ideas did not remain the pious ideals of Christian hagiographies, but ended up shaping secular laws. The language used by the novel of Justinian we mentioned above is telling:

> The condition of individual monks must now be considered by Us, and what must be done to enable slaves as well as freemen to be admitted to the order. Divine grace considers all men equal, declaring openly that, so far as the worship of God is concerned, no difference exists between male and female, freeman or slave, for all of them receive the same reward in Christ.[137]

This is an explicit recognition of the universality of Christian subjectivity and of the need to take measures to enable enslaved Christians to achieve their religious aims. The law institutes a three-year testing period for prospective monks, during which

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[134] Augustine, *On the work of monks* 25.
[135] Bellen 1971: 85-6.
[136] Callinicus, *Life of St. Hypatius* 78.
[137] *Novels of Justinian* 5.2.prologue.

abbots can test the genuine religious motives of free or slave novices and ascertain their status. If masters did not attempt to reclaim their slaves within the three-year period, the slaves became monks and could no longer be re-enslaved. If masters attempted to reclaim their slaves within the three-year period, their property rights did not automatically prevail. If they were able to prove that the slaves had stolen property or had no genuine motive to become monks, they could reclaim the slaves. But the law entertained another possibility:

> Where, however, he who alleges that he is his master does not prove this, and he who is accused under such circumstances shows by his conduct that he is honest and kind, and can establish by the testimony of others that while he was with his master he was obedient and a lover of virtue, even if the term of three years has not elapsed, he shall, nevertheless, remain in the monastery and be released from the control of those who wish to remove him.[138]

It is remarkable that a slave can use his proper conduct while serving his master in order to escape from the master's clutches. While the law clearly did not protect rebellious slaves who wished to escape from their masters, it clearly prioritized the religious needs of pious Christian slaves over the property rights and wishes of their masters. A later novel of Justinian from 541 CE omits explicit reference to this second possibility and rules that masters who claimed within the three-year period that their slaves had sought to become monks because they wished to avoid punishment or to change their mode of life would be able to recover them.[139] This is a telling example of the continuous tug-of-war between the various agents and claims that comprised the link between Christianity and slavery.

Religious conflicts

From the emergence of the Jesus movement and the earliest Christian communities in the first century CE conflict between religious groups was a constant phenomenon of the early imperial, late antique and early medieval periods. The contours of these religious conflicts changed in important ways in the course of the first millennium CE; while the various early Christian communities were in constant conflict with each other, they also faced pagan communities, the Roman imperial state and even the various Jewish communities from a position of clear weakness;[140] after the adoption of Christianity by the Roman emperors and the gradual Christianisation of the population and the institutions of the Roman Empire, some Christian communities in certain periods could find themselves in positions of superiority towards pagans, Jews, and Christians of other denominations, while these same communities could be persecuted by other Christian denominations in different periods or areas;[141] finally,

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[138] *Novels of Justinian* 5.2.3.
[139] *Novels of Justinian* 123.25.
[140] Vaucher 2017: 23-39.
[141] Shaw 2011; Sizgorich 2012.

the emergence of Islam in the seventh century CE created a new monotheistic religion which could compete with Christianity on equal terms, or even subjugate many Christian communities.[142]

While all Christian communities accepted slavery in principle and without major misgivings, the conflict between religious groups created circumstances in which free Christians could strongly identify with Christian slaves of the same denomination, or even take practical measures to support Christian slaves of their own denomination against masters belonging to other religious groups or denominations. This was clearly no general Christian stance against slavery or in support of slaves; the motive of this Christian stance had little to do with Christian views on slavery and most to do with religious conflict; but many slaves were able to benefit in important ways from these circumstances, which need to be analysed in detail.

Scholars have long realised that early Christian communities were organised around family churches; the households of prosperous Christians provided the nucleus around which wider congregations were constructed.[143] These prosperous Christians were overwhelmingly slaveholders, and many slaves became Christians in the process of the religious conversion of their masters' household.[144] It is therefore unsurprising that the authority of masters over slaves was taken for granted in Christian communities, as is attested already from the earliest Christian texts that have survived. The so-called Household codes included in Deutero-Pauline and other late first-century Christian texts, like the *Letter to Barnabas*, prescribe the obedience that slaves owe to their masters.[145] But while the majority of Christian slaves had probably Christian masters, it is also undeniable that some slaves joined Christian communities on their own, and not as part of the conversion of their masters' household; accordingly, these slaves had pagan masters. Slaves who converted to Christianity could clash with their pagan masters.[146] As a result, conversion to Christianity by women and slaves on their own could potentially destabilise kyriarchy, the combination of patriarchy and mastery.[147] Already from the first century CE some of the Household codes advise Christian slaves to obey their pagan masters in order to avoid that the Christian religion would face *blasphemy*: i.e. that Christianity would not acquire a bad name as a revolutionary creed and that Christian communities would not face persecution from pagans and the Roman state for undermining the property rights of masters.[148] In fact, some Christian church orders even reach the point of forbidding slaves to join Christian communities if their pagan masters did not know and acquiesce with the slaves' wish.[149]

But that is by no means the full story. By creating a subjectivity and a mode of life that were in principle available to every human being, Christianity created

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[142] Tannous 2018; Weitz 2018.
[143] Meeks 2003.
[144] Kyrtatas 1992: 59-106; Grieser 2008.
[145] E.g. *Colossians* 3:22-4.1; see Crouch 1972; Balch 1981; MacDonald 2007; de Wet 2012.
[146] See e.g. Tertullian, *To the nations* 1.4.13.
[147] Sandnes 1997.
[148] *1 Timothy* 6:1-2.
[149] *Apostolic Tradition* 15; see Vaucher 2017: 126-30.

circumstances in which the requirements of belief could potentially clash with the power and wishes of the masters. In certain circumstances, therefore, some Christians were willing to prioritise the religious choices and wishes of Christian slaves than the requirements of property rights and the laws of the state. Tertullian did not have a positive view of slaves, and accepted the legitimacy of slavery without second thoughts;[150] but he also argued that Christian slaves should obey their masters, unless the master ordered them to do something that was against the dictates of the Christian religion.[151] Religious persecution was obviously a particular potent circumstance for such dilemmas. Some early Christian martyrological texts present slave women, like Blandina and Felicitas, as suffering valiantly for their religious views; but in these cases their Christian owners are either fellow martyrs, or are absent from the text's narrative.[152]

A particularly interesting text is the *Martyrium of Saint Ariadne*, the slave of a certain Tertullus; the text was originally written in Greek, but has also been preserved in Latin and Syriac versions.[153] In contrast with other martyrological texts which narrate actual persecutions with often impressive detail, this text clearly narrates a fictional story: in fact, in the end of the story a series of miracles save Ariadne from execution and further persecution. But what is particularly interesting about this story is the fact that Ariadne is the slave child of Christian slaves, and faces punishment from her pagan masters for openly expressing her Christian identity and refusing to obey orders that clash with it. In a case like this, Christians are encouraged to identify with the Christian slave as she opposes her pagan master. [154]

The adoption of Christianity by the Roman state did not end religious persecution for Christian communities; depending on the religious affiliation of the rulers, Christian groups which belonged to different denominations could find themselves persecuted. To give an interesting example, Victor of Vita's narrative concerns the religious persecution of Catholic Christians in fifth-century CE North Africa by their Vandal rulers, who belonged to the Arian denomination. Among many stories, Victor narrates the travails of four slave brothers and a female slave, who escaped from their Vandal master to join a monastery; after continuous tortures, whose scars were miraculously healed, the female slave was ultimately allowed to become a nun, while the four brothers were handed over to a king of the Moors, where they converted large numbers to the Catholic faith and founded a church, before being finally executed. Victor and his readers identified with the slaves who shared their religious affiliation, rather than with the heterodox masters.[155]

The adoption of Christianity by the Roman emperors might not have ended religious conflict, but it created a new phenomenon: the intervention of the Roman state in the theoretically unmediated relationship between masters and slaves in order

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[150] Harrill 2006b.
[151] Tertullian, *On idolatry* 17; see Vaucher 2017: 109.
[152] Gülzow 1969: 133-41; cf. Glancy 2010b: 56-61.
[153] The Latin and Syriac translations call the slave Maria.
[154] Seeliger 2001.
[155] Victor of Vita, *History of the Vandal persecution* 1.30-8; see Diesner 1962.

to protect the religious subjectivity of slaves with the 'right' religious affiliation, who happened to have masters with the 'wrong' religious affiliation. A series of laws, starting already with Constantine, attempt to regulate the possession of Christians slaves by Jewish masters; later laws extended the prohibition to pagan and heterodox masters. At the centre of these laws is the danger of the religious conversion of Christian slaves by their non-Christian or heterodox masters and the ability of Christian slaves to exercise their religious rights.[156] In his biography of Constantine, Eusebius offers an interpretation of the law's motivation:

> He also made a law that no Christian was to be a slave to Jews, on the ground that it was not right that those redeemed by the Saviour should be subjected by the yoke of bondage to the slayers of the prophets and the murderers of the Lord.[157]

Irrespective of whether Eusebius accurately renders Constantine's motivation, his interpretation shows eloquently how religious conflict could provide grounds for undermining the property rights of religious outsiders. As with all other changes discussed here, imperial legislation records a continual back and forth, based on the influence of different principles and the pressure of different groups. Early laws by Constantine (336 CE) and Constantius (339 CE) prohibited Jews from buying and circumcising Christians slaves, while a law of Honorius and Theodosius (415 CE) permitted Jews to own Christian slaves, but prohibited their conversion to Judaism.[158] A later law by the same emperors in 417 CE restricted the earlier permission, by allowing Jews to inherit or own Christian slaves, but forbidding them to purchase new ones.[159] A law of Justinian in 534 CE provides a clear illustration of the potential conflict between religious affiliation and property rights. It rules that slaves of Jews, pagans of heterodox Christians who wished to convert to Orthodoxy would gain their freedom, even if their masters subsequently converted to Orthodoxy as well.[160] But the most characteristic example of a change of priorities in the context of religious conflict is expressed in a law of 405 CE that supports the Catholic Church in Africa against the rival 'Donatist' Church:

> Moreover, in order that no person may be permitted to conceal with secrecy and silence the guilty knowledge of a sinful shame perpetrated within domestic walls, if perchance any slaves should be forced to rebaptism, they shall have the right to take refuge in a Catholic Church, so that they shall be defended by its protection against the authors of this crime and association, by the protection of a grant of freedom. Under this condition, they shall be permitted to defend the faith which the masters have attempted to wrest from them against their will. Defenders of the Catholic dogma must not be

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[156] De Bonfils 1992, 1995; Glancy 2018: 39-40; see also Serfass 2006 for Pope Gregory the Great's reaction to the issue.
[157] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4.27.1.
[158] *Theodosian Code* 16.9.3.
[159] *Theodosian Code* 16.9.4.
[160] *Code of Justinian* 1.3.54.

> constrained to the commission of a crime by the law with which all other men are bound who are placed under the power of another, and it is essentially fitting that all men, without any distinction of condition or status, shall be custodians of a celestially imparted sanctity.[161]

Should a Donatist master attempt to baptise a Catholic slave, the slave was allowed to flee in a Catholic Church to present his case and gain his freedom. The law explicitly states that the seriousness of the religious conflict necessitated putting aside the power of masters to give orders to their slaves; Catholic subjectivity, irrespective of social class, is more important than the property rights of masters. It should be obvious that slaves could take advantage of the openings created by these conflicts; the law of 415 CE mentioned above instructs judges to verify the veracity of accusations made against Jewish masters, presumably by slaves wishing to benefit from these laws.

Jennifer Glancy has rightly argued that for centuries Christians expressed no visible concern about Christians enslaving or selling fellow Christians; the ultimate prohibition of these practices that we discussed above cannot be seen as a natural outcome of Christian doctrine, but needs a specific context and conjuncture in order to understand why Christian thinking took this turn. Despite the importance of the issue, it has never been examined in detail; but Glancy has suggested that it was religious conflict that activated concerns about the religious subjectivity of enslaved Christians which ultimately led to the prohibition of the enslavement of coreligionists.[162] High demand from Muslim communities led to the growth of the early medieval slave trade involving pagan and Christian slaves.[163] Church councils made rulings against the practice, while a series of treaties between Carolingian kings and Venice attempted to restrict the sale of Christians to Muslims.[164] Wulfstan, archbishop of York and a major player in the English kingdom around 1000 CE, played a seminal role in the prohibition of selling English people abroad, in particular to pagans.[165] The long-term consequences of religious conflict for the history of slavery need to be studied in a systematic and detailed manner.

Conclusion

Abolitionism was one of the greatest achievements of human history. Unfortunately, its very success has created a major obstacle for the study of discourses and debates concerning slavery before the eighteenth century; we continue to analyse ancient, medieval and early modern discourses in terms of whether they defend or attack slavery, and in the quest for the origins of abolitionist thought.[166] This is in my view a red herring from whose pursuit we need to finally free ourselves. The intellectual

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[161] *Theodosian Code* 16.6.4.2.
[162] Glancy 2018.
[163] MacMaster 2016.
[164] Rio 2017: 20-1.
[165] Pelteret 2001: 89-101.
[166] For studies of intellectual history which are defined by this framework, see Garnsey 1996; Ramelli 2016.

history of slavery needs to explore two distinct, but interrelated themes. The first is to reconstruct the actual contexts within which ancient thinkers debated slavery. There is practically no ancient debate which is about slavery per se; they are rather debates about power, wealth, will, justice, war, virtue, self-control, desire, citizenship or identity, within which slavery is inscribed. Without the reconstruction of these contexts, we are likely to go seriously astray. The second theme concerns the particular social, economic and political contexts in which these debates took place and which they in turn influenced.

In this contribution I have tried to explore a paradox. On the one hand, Christianity took slavery for granted and had no intention of even arguing in favour of its abolition. On the other hand, Christianity created a form of subjectivity that was in principle universal, although women and slaves faced severe constraints in exercising this subjectivity. Christian thinkers and Church authorities most of the time simply ignored the constraints of enslaved Christian subjectivity; but there were specific contexts in which the combination of Christian discourses, slave agency and particular conjunctures led to significant changes in the historical trajectory of slavery. These changes were hardly irreversible; we have explored the continuous tug-of-war as a result of the various pressures, interests and agents involved. None of these changes involved a principled opposition to slavery as such or aimed to abolish slavery; but they had substantial effects for millions of slaves, although these effects were not the same for all periods, places and groups of slaves. I have merely sketched a number of contexts and major themes; each of them requires detailed study in chronological order, rather than the impressionistic selection of examples I have largely used in this essay.

A final note is in order. The modern discussion of the link between Christianity and slavery has been based to a very important extent on continuous discussion and reinterpretation of a small set of key texts and thinkers (Paul, the Deutero-Pauline texts, Ignatius, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine). To some extent this is unavoidable, given the influence of these texts and thinkers; but at the same time, the sizable volume of early Christian and patristic literature includes a large number of texts that have never been examined in detail, or even brought into the discussion. The canonical letter of Peter of Alexandria, with which this chapter commenced, is a characteristic example of the numerous sources that have not been accorded a more important role in modern discussions. Luckily, over the last twenty years a growing body of scholarship has started to explore this extensive literature with very stimulating results.[167] The combination of new frameworks of study with detailed treatment of new texts and thinkers can potentially transform the study of Christianity and slavery and allow us to create a new narrative of the entangled history of Christianity and slavery. The history of ancient slavery needs more attention to events, conjunctures and intellectual discourses; and, of course, slave agency.

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[167] For studies of less well-known texts and writers, see Klein 1982, 2004; Seeliger 2001; Glancy 2012; Vaucher 2017, 2018; de Wet 2017b, 2018; Charles 2020; Winnebeck 2020.

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