

TON H.C. VAN EIJK

MARRIAGE AND VIRGINITY, DEATH AND IMMORTALITY

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

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

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

I. PLATO AND ARISTOTLE.

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

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

ments. There are, in general, two ways of being ἐρωτικός: κατὰ τὸ σῶμα and κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν (206 BC); the author leaves no doubt, that the latter is the superior way; those who are pregnant κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν engender φρόνησις and other virtues; but those who are bodily pregnant turn to the women, and are ἐρωτικός in this way: by begetting children they acquire an immortality (ἀθανασίαν), a memorial, and a state of bliss, which in their imagination they for all succeeding time procure (208E). This passage from the Symp. shows that one of the ways, and certainly not the most superior, in which the Eros for immortality seeks satisfaction, is the begetting of children. Mortal man has a kind of identity by the continuous succession of generations. Actually, though the emphasis in the argument clearly lies on the Eros of the individual, there is no question here of personal immortality. The immortality in which individual man has part, is, in fact, the immortality of the human race, which in its turn is based on the eternity and immortality of the process of γέννησις.

This idea is more clearly expressed in Nom. 4, 721C; in this passage Plato deals with the marriage-laws, which should be the first laws in the state. Marriage, it is argued here, is the way by which the human race, by nature's ordinance, shares in immortality, a thing for which nature has implanted in everyone a keen desire. The desire to win glory, instead of being anonymous after one's death, aims at such an object. He then goes on:

“Thus mankind is by nature coeval (συμφυῆς) with the whole of time, in that it accompanies it continually both now and in the future; and the means by which it is immortal is this: by leaving behind it children's children and continuing ever one and the same, it thus by reproduction (γένεσι) shares in immortality”².

Here again, the personal desire (ἐπιθυμία) for immortality is not entirely absent; but the fulfilment of this desire is only safeguarded by the identity of the human race itself, i.e. the identity that is characteristic of mortal nature, based on the process of successive generation in time. In another passage of Nom. Plato compares this process with the passing on of torches (6, 776B).

We deduce from these texts that, at least in this context, sharing in immortality means: contributing to the process of γέννησις which guarantees the identity-through-successive-generation of the human race. At the root of this contribution lies Eros as a desire for immortality.

There is another interesting point in the text from Nom. that needs to be underlined. Plato says, that the human race is coeval with the whole of time; he seems to suggest, that there is a link between partaking in immortality by means of engendering on the one hand, and the motion of time on the other. We do not go too far, therefore, if we admit that this view of time and immortality by the process of reproduction, as developed in Symp. and Nom., has to be connected with what the same author says in Tim. 37D-38C on the origin of time—in spite of the difference in terminology (eternity in Tim., immortality in Symp. and Nom.) The Father of the world wants it to be what he himself is as its model: eternal (αἰδιον), but this was impossible; that is why he devised to make a movable image of moveless eternity: this image is what we call time. Change and γένεσις do not apply to eternity, but they are characteristic of time. This conception of time as an image of eternity, implies also a positive appreciation of the realm of γένεσις. It seems to me, that the passage from Tim. explains why in Symp. the process of γένεσις (or γέννησις) can be seen as the way to immortality that is fitting for mortal nature. There is some analogy between the identity (τὸ παντάπασιν τὸ αὐτὸ εἶναι Symp. 208A) of the divine, or the eternal living, and the identity-by-successive-engendering of mortal nature, i.e. between eternity

2. The translation is R. G. BURY's, in the *Loeb Classical Libr.*, London, 1926, p. 313.