

### III. Christianity

Incest, the prohibition against marrying a close relative, pervades all cultural systems as a universal principle and as a foundation of human existence; only the particular characteristics differ – in scope as well as sanctions. The coherences as well as the reasons for this prohibition have not yet been clarified. Sociologists and social anthropologists speculate that incest prohibitions generated a particular family system, particularly to avoid the jumbling of social roles. Because certain persons among one's relatives are excluded from marriage, one must marry outside of the circle of these persons. To take one example, someone who is already a mother cannot through marriage re-mother a child from another sexual relationship.

Historians and theologians discuss other models for the Christian culture of northwestern Europe. Incest prohibitions as a prevention of kinship-alliances, or to generate the spousal-centered nuclear family, are two explanations; “to prevent the regionalization of the elite after the decay of Roman rule” (Ubl: 498), to bring about transregional kingdoms, is another. Due to the patriarchal

structure and its system of patrilineal residence, most women eligible for marriage lived in the houses of the respective *paterfamilias*. Once they were placed under taboo, the incest prohibition not only stabilized internal order and social peace, but it also promoted social mobility. Supporting adherence to the incest prohibitions belonged to a Christian way of life because these were divine commands (see above “I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament”). One may also want to pursue that explanation further. Incest is “no biological fact,” “but a way of thinking about social relationships” (Jussen: 40), more precisely relationships pertaining to relatives and kin. At the same time, the forbidden persons are not always entirely congruent with the circle of people who are perceived as relatives. Rather, the circle of the persons whom it would be incestuous to marry is considerably smaller. Thus in the OT in the book of Leviticus, the list of prohibitive instructions does not name all female relatives or all women related by marriage in the command not “to allow the approaching of blood relatives” (Lev 18:6), but rather it refers to the “polygamous extended family of small cattle nomads, four generations living together, namely the patriarch (or head of the family), his parents, his children and his children’s children” (Kornfeld: 70). In the NT, only Paul touches upon the prohibition of incest, in the debate against marrying one’s mother-in-law (1 Cor 5). Fundamental changes do not appear in Christianity until the 4th century. Gradually, the circle of persons under taboo was expanded. Initially the provisions of the OT were taken together with Roman Law, so agnatic relatives up to the fourth degree by the Roman counting were excluded. From the 5th century on, not only were the blood relatives from the paternal line prohibited, but also those of maternal line – and of both sexes – and likewise all those related by marriage (in-law and step-)relatives up to seventh degree in the direct line and up to the second degree in the collateral branch, even after the death of the spouse. It was no longer counted according to the Roman mode of calculation, but rather according to the so-called German/Canonic (see also “Kinship”), which led to a vast expansion. Spiritual relatives as well as those consecrated then came under taboo: godmothers/godfathers and the baptized as well as spiritual parents could not enter into marriage or entertain sexual relations. Marriage or sexual relations with a spiritual devotee or a nun/monk were also considered incestuous. The way of thinking about relatives (see also “Kinship”) would seem to explain this practice. All those who became brothers and sisters by marriage, with baptism, by consecration, or by entrance into the cloister, could no longer be sexual partners. The punishment was in proportion to the severity of the offense: in other words, the closer the persons are related to each

other, the more serious the offense and the higher one’s penance. No fundamental changes were made until the New Canon law of 1983. Now relatives are no longer counted by the German Canon counting, but rather according to the Roman, and the prohibition against marrying spiritual relatives has fallen by the wayside, although adoptive relationships are still considered an impediment to marriage.

**Bibliography:** ■ Jussen, B., “Künstliche und natürliche Verwandtschaft? Biologismen in den kulturwissenschaftlichen Konzepten von Verwandtschaft,” in *Das Individuum und die Seinen: Individualität in der okzidentalen und in der russischen Kultur in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit* (ed. Y.L. Bessmertny/O. G. Oexle; VMPIG 163; Göttingen 2001) 39–58. ■ Kornfeld, W., *Leviticus* (NEB.AT 6; Würzburg 1983). ■ Ubl, K., *Inzestverbot und Gesetzgebung: Die Konstruktion eines Verbrechens (300–1100)* (Millennium-Studien zur Kultur und Geschichte des ersten Jahrtausends n.Chr. 20; Berlin/New York 2008). ■ Weber, I., *Ein Gesetz für Männer und Frauen: Die frühmittelalterliche Ehe zwischen Religion, Gesellschaft und Kultur*, 2 vols. (Mittelalter-Forschungen 24.1–2; Ostfildern 2008).

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