

#### IV. Christianity

The Christian understanding of kinship first of all finds its specific origin in OT thought. Accordingly, the OT conceives of kinship as familial proximity to a person on the one hand, and in particular as kinship of the flesh on the other, just as is found in the creation narrative (Gen 2:24: "Therefore the man leaves father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh"). Kinship is thus decidedly not conceived of as blood kinship (Kornfeld: 70: blood, flesh, and bones). From a linguistic standpoint, this conception of kinship primarily includes the father and mother, as well as the daughter and brother. However, these terms do not only refer to the immediate family, but also to the extended family. In addition, Christian kinship thought, as formulated in the NT, is based on the idea of spiritual kinship. By including in his kinship "sisters and brothers in faith" instead of solely the members of his biological family, Jesus makes use of the OT idea of familial proximity and at the same time gets rid of the idea of kinship by descent.

In the early Middle Ages, these biblical ways of thinking continued to be the basis, but were further developed by integrating a Roman concept of kinship. This led to a considerable extension of the concept with respect to the type of person considered to be a relative, the "counting" or determining the degree of kinship, and to the equality between both the maternal and paternal lines of descent. To begin with, kinship was no longer understood as

the blood kinship of the agnatic line, as in Roman law, but was rather extended to all in-laws on both the maternal and paternal sides. Here too the creation account along with its inherent *una-caro* conception was used as the reason underlying this way of thinking. Since man and woman become one flesh in marriage, not only does each partner acquire in-laws through marriage, but the in-laws become each partner's direct blood relatives (*consanguinei*), such that "they share relatives on both sides" (Weber: 39). As a result, the bride becomes the very own sister of the groom's brother and her sisters become the sisters of the groom and his brother. Thus, by way of marriage each spouse's relatives become, as it were, each other's very own relatives, which had ramifications for the rules on incest (see "Incest"). In sum, all relatives are now viewed as members of the same biological family, such that from here on there no longer exists any qualitative difference between blood relatives and in-laws. From a lexical point of view all relatives are called *consanguinei* and the entire family network is called a *cognatio*, the term originally used in Roman law only to describe the mother's relatives. Even today, for example, both the father's and the mother's sisters are indiscriminately called "aunt."

A similar extension is also found regarding degrees of kinship. Whereas Christian theologians had previously followed the Roman way of counting degrees of kinship, during the Carolingian period the so-called "Germanic" system, actually also found in other cultural settings, began to be adopted (see "Incest"). The Roman system determined the degree of kinship by counting the sum of the generations born to the common ancestor until a particular descendant, whereby the degree of kinship resulted from adding up the number of generations on both sides of the family and subtracting the generation of the shared ancestor. The Germanic system, however, counted only one side of the family. In this system, if the distance to the shared ancestor differed on both sides of the family, as the degree of kinship was determined by the longer family line. Since the Roman system counted the sum of generations on both family lines, and the "Germanic" only the members of one line, the change-over from the first to the second system would have led to significantly enlarged family circles, ultimately doubling the number of relatives.

Furthermore, in the Carolingian period the godparents' roles also came to be interpreted according to both the NT idea of brothers and sisters in faith as well as to the OT conception of kinship as familial proximity to a person. Candidates for baptism and confirmation were joined to their godparents through a special spiritual bond, which obligated the godparent to adopt the child as his/her own and to take on a parental role in raising the child in faith. However, this special relationship

was not extended to the godparent's or the child's entire family. This was because beyond the godparent-child relationship, only the biological and spiritual parents were considered to be related to one another, and as such were reciprocally called "co-father" (*compater*) and "co-mother" (*comater*) (see "Incest").

On the whole, the Christian conception of kinship is based on biological, spiritual, and in-law relationships of individuals to one another (blood relatives, in-laws, stepfamilies, as well as godparents). It treats these individuals as equals and integrates both the paternal and maternal lines into one family unit to the point that kinship does not end, but rather it persists, even after the death of the spouse, which, has, of course, ramifications for possible remarriage within the family of kin (see "Incest").

**Bibliography:** ■ Jong, M. de, "To the Limits of Kinship: Anti-Incest Legislation in the Early Medieval West (500–900)," in *From Sappho to de Sade: Moments in the History of Sexuality* (ed. J. Bremmer; London/New York 1989) 36–59. ■ 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). ■ Mikat, P., *Die Inzestgesetzgebung der merowingisch-fränkischen Konzilien: 511–626/27* (RSWV.NF 74; Paderborn 1994). ■ 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).

Ines Weber

See also → Clan; → Family; → Genealogy,  
Genealogies; → Incest; → Marriage; → Tribe