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### Christians' Rejection of Sacrificial Incense (2-5<sup>th</sup> c)

This article aims to present an anomaly in this history of the use of incense in cultic practices, either offered as a sacrifice to please or appease deities or to communicate with heaven. The ascending smoke of incense was present during Roman religious ceremonies as well as later in the Middle Ages, when it carried the prayers of the faithful during Christian liturgies. For a few centuries, however, between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century, the sacrifice incense was rejected by Christians, denounced as a pagan idolatrous sacrifice or as an obsolete Jewish practice. Jesus himself had not denounced the use of sacrificial incense in the Temple of Jerusalem, still standing in his time. So, what were the motivations and arguments behind the formal rejection of the sacrifice of incense on the part of Christian Apologists and how did this rejection help them in building up a Christian identity. The rejection of sacrificial incense was instrumental in proving that orthodox Christianity had nothing to do with paganism, Judaism, or Gnosticism, and had, of course, no link at all with magic. So, for a few centuries, incense as a medium of communication with heaven was also condemned by prominent voices among Christian writers and its Biblical mentions interpreted and reduced as a symbol for prayers. This condemnation, however, can be considered as an anomaly in the long history of incense since, before and after this period of rejection, incense was widely used for its mediatory powers and its perfume. Besides, this stern condemnation of incense concerned its use as the matter of sacrifices, leaving untouched many other uses, which Christians continued to hold, in funerary or medical practices for example, because they thought that incense shared in the beneficial powers that fragrances were granted in the ancient world.

#### **The sacrifice of incense in the traditional cults of the Roman empire**

In the Roman world of the early Christian period, while incense was used in many circumstances, the odor of incense seem to have triggered the notion that a sacrifice was taking place. Athenaeus cites Xenophanes of Colophon to call frankincense, the sacred fragrance.<sup>1</sup> Although brought in at the end of the banquets and basically used to dispel the

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<sup>1</sup> Here is the description of the end of a banquet with its mixture of sacred and profane, cited in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, XI, 462, ed. Ch. B. Gulick, Cambridge, 1933, vol. 5, pp. 16-

odors of the meal, it nevertheless kept some religious value. This was still true in later centuries. As Tertullian writes in the *De idololatria*: "Most people simply think that idolatry is only then to be assumed, if somebody makes a burnt offering or brings a sacrifice..."<sup>2</sup> The fragrant smoke of incense had a religious dimension and for Christians and Jews of Late Antiquity, its presence in a space was a sign that a sacrifice was offered to the traditional deities of the Roman world. Cultic practices being performed in many different spaces, this reflex applied to incense burning in houses as well as in baths and of course in temples.<sup>3</sup> Throwing a few grains of incense into the fire or pouring some wine as a libation was usually all that was required for a domestic or private sacrifice. It was a very simple gesture. For Christians, however, it meant acknowledging another deity and falling into idolatry. In the *De lapsis*, Cyprian writes that a smoking altar is the devil's altar and has a foul smell, which Christians should loathe.<sup>4</sup> Incense was tainted by its association with sacrificial practices. When in the *History of Severus*, patriarch of Antioch, some pagans want to hide the entrance of the place in Menouthis where they secretly continue to sacrifice during the fifth century, they place in front of it a cupboard but because it is full of incense, it attracts the attention of

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17: "Now at last the floor is swept, and clean are the hands of all the guests, and their cups as well; one slave puts plaited wreaths on their heads, another offers sweet-smelling perfume in a saucer; the mixing-bowl stands full of good cheer; and other wine is ready, which promises never to give out - mellow wine in jars, redolent of its bouquet; and in the midst the frankincense sends forth its sacred fragrance."

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *De idolatria*, 2, 2: *Plerique idololatriam simpliciter existimant his solis modis interpretandam, si quid aut incendat aut immolet...*, ed. by J.H. Waszink and J.C.M. Winden, Leiden, 1987, p. 24-25.

<sup>3</sup> B. Caseau, « Spaces of Roman Religion and Christianity in Late Antiquity », *Oxford Handbook of Religious Space and Place*, ed. S. Graham (to be published)

<sup>4</sup> Cyprian, *De lapsis*, 8, ed. M. Lavarenne, *Sur ceux qui sont tombés pendant la persécution* (*De lapsis*), Clermont-Ferrand, 1940, p. 21 : « Non diaboli altare, quod faetore taetro fumare ac redolere conspexerat, uelut fumus et bustum uitae suae horrere ac fugere debebat. », Transl. : Ought he not to shudder at and flee from the devil's altar, which he had seen to smoke, and to be redolent of a foul rector, as if it were the funeral and sepulchre of his life? (transl. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050703.html>)

those searching for the secret cultic space.<sup>5</sup> Although incense was used as a pest repellent or as an air freshener, the quantity in the cupboard must have betrayed its probable religious use.

It has been argued that incense sacrifice was the most common form of sacrifices in Late Antiquity, certainly more prevalent than animal sacrifices.<sup>6</sup> Tertullian mentions all the occasions a woman would have to smell sacrificial incense in her home and argues against the marriage of a Christian woman with a pagan man: "The maiden of God lives with foreign lares; in their midst, she will be tormented by the vapor of incense each time the demons are honored, each solemn festivities in honor of the emperors<sup>7</sup>, each beginning of the year, each beginning of the month."<sup>8</sup>

For Ch. A. Faraone and F. S. Naiden, the burning of incense was required from all during the mandatory sacrifices of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, which proves it had become "the 'central' act of

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<sup>5</sup> Zacharie le Scholastique, *Vie de Sévère*, éd. M. A. Kugener, (P. O., 2) Paris 1904, 27-32 ; E. Wipscyska, "La christianisation de l'Égypte aux IV<sup>e</sup>-VI<sup>e</sup> siècles. Aspects sociaux et ethniques", *Aegyptus* 68 (1988) 117-164 ; Ch. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity. Topography and Social Conflict*, Baltimore 1997.

<sup>6</sup> M. P. Nilsson, "Pagan divine service in Late Antiquity", in *Harvard Theological Review*, 38, 1945, p. 65. Nilsson traces back to the Hellenistic period the first examples of daily offerings to the gods, including incense, and links the increasing popularity of incense offerings to the growing supply during the Roman Empire.

<sup>7</sup> The *Genius* of the emperor was to be honored with the domestic Lares in private houses. This was done particularly for the *natalis Caesaris*, birthday of the emperor, for the *natalis imperii*, anniversary of the accession to power, and for the health of the imperial family, at the *vota publica* each year, and at the *vota quinquennalia*; Tertullian, *Ad uxorem*, note on VI, 1, ed. Ch. Munier, SC 273, Paris, 1980, p.187.

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *Ad uxorem*, VI, 1, ed. Ch. Munier, SC 273, Paris, 1980, p.140: *Moratur Dei ancilla cum laribus alienis, et inter illos omnibus honoribus daemonorum, omnibus sollempnibus regum, incipiente anno, incipiente mense, nidore turis agitabitur.*

Roman self-identification”.<sup>9</sup> Indeed images of incense burning on an altar were more frequent and they illustrated the piety of emperors or aristocrats.<sup>10</sup>

## Image 1

### Altar sacrifice of incense emperors

It is difficult to assert that incense sacrifice was really more frequent than libations. Wine was probably more readily available than incense, but incense was more precious and therefore considered a fitting offering for the deities. It took also different forms, some coming from faraway lands, such as frankincense, others taken from local resinous trees. So, all incense was not imported and very cheap local resins could also be used as incense.

Availability of the product and ease to use were perhaps not the only reasons to favor incense sacrifice. The debate about blood sacrifices, and the reluctance or even disgust for these sacrifices by some persons quite critical of gore aspects of the cults may also explain the preference granted to vegetal sacrifices, easily performed at home as well as in temples. Athenagoras, for example, mentions with repulsion demons licking the blood of victims in front of pagan statues.<sup>11</sup>

Later, Porphyry, in the *De abstinentia*, explains that spiritual beings of an inferior nature, that he calls demons, are attracted on earth by blood sacrifices and feed on the smell of meats and blood.<sup>12</sup> He rejects haruspicy, in particular the examination of the dead animal entrails. In a similar rejection of animal sacrifices, when in 337, the little city of Hispellum solicited the right to build a temple in honor of the imperial family, Constantine agreed as long as the celebrations are not polluted by the fraud of a contagious superstition. (*contagiose*

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<sup>9</sup> Ch. A. Faraone, F. S. Naiden, *Greek and Roman Animal Sacrifice: Ancient Victim, Modern Observers*, Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> M. P. Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020 (OXFORD STUDIES IN LATE ANTIQUITY SERIES)

<sup>11</sup> Athénagore, *Supplique au sujet des chrétiens*, XXVI, 1, ed. and transl. B. Pouderon, Paris: Cerf, 1992. (SC 379), p.170-171.

<sup>12</sup>. PORPHYRE, *De abstinentia*, II, 42-43, ed. J. BOUFFARTIGUE, M. PATILLON, Paris, 1979, p. 109.

*superstitionis fraudibus polluatur*). This puzzling expression alludes to sacrifices.<sup>13</sup> Animal sacrifices have a polluting effect explains Firmicus Maternus.<sup>14</sup>

Fig 2 Albert & Victoria museum sacrifice incense

Vegetal sacrifices did not suffer the same rejection among philosophers and adepts of the traditional cults. This is why they probably became more prevalent during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. After the closing of the temples, convinced adepts of the traditional cults had moved their cultic practices to their homes. Libanius in the *Pro Templis* mentions that the burning of incense was still permitted by the emperors, even under Theodosius.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the rejection of sacrifices was still at the heart of imperial policy, including bloodless sacrifices.<sup>16</sup> In November 392 the emperors Theodosius, Arcadius and Honorius decided: "He shall not, by more secret wickedness venerate his lar with fire, his genius with wine, his penates with fragrant odors, he shall not burn lights to them, place incense before them, or suspend wreaths

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<sup>13</sup> J. Gascou, « Le rescrit d'Hispellum », *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'École Française de Rome*, 79, 1967, pp. 600-659 ; B. Caseau, « Trasformazione dei paesaggi sacri », *Bollettino per i beni culturali dell'Umbria*, 10, 2012 (Quaderno 6), Aurea Umbria. *Une regione dell'Impero nell'era di Costantino. Catalogo a cura di A. Bravi*, p. 209-216.

<sup>14</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*, V, 3, ed. and transl. P. MONAT, Paris, 1994 (CUF), p. 218: *pura mente et ab omni terrena conversatione se posita et cunctorum flagitiorum labe purgata hos Romanis tuis libros scripsimus*

<sup>15</sup> Libanios, *Pro Templis* Or 30, 7-8,

<sup>16</sup> N. Belayche, « *Ritus et cultus* ou *superstitio*? Comment les lois du Code Théodosien (IX & XVI) de Constantin à Théodose parlent des pratiques religieuses traditionnelles », in *Le code Théodosien: Diversité des approches et nouvelles perspectives*, ed. Sylvie Crogiez-Pétréquin and Pierre Jaillette, Rome: École française de Rome, 2009, p. 191–208 at p. 196 (Collection de l'École française de Rome 412) ; B. Caseau, « *Profanus* et *sacrilegus* dans le Code Théodosien XVI », *Empire chrétien et Église aux IV<sup>e</sup> et V<sup>e</sup> siècles. Intégration ou "concordat"? Le témoignage du Code Théodosien*, eds. J.-N. Guinot et F. Richard, Lyon : Institut des Sources chrétiennes, 2008, p. 195-210.

for them."<sup>17</sup> The penalty for placing incense before "images made by the work of mortals and destined to suffer the ravages of time"<sup>18</sup> was the forfeiture of the house or land that was used for such a practice.

Long before it was forbidden in Roman law, sacrificial incense had been the target of criticism and rejection on the part of Christians. The first and main reason Christians had to refuse incense was clearly its use in polytheist cults. Arnobius is clear on the absolute refusal for Christians to worship the gods: "True, we build no temples to them, and we do not worship their images; we sacrifice no victims, we pour out no incense and wines to them."<sup>19</sup>

### **idolatry**

Christianity presented itself as a different religion, and not as yet another cult that could be added to the numerous cults that had successfully gained a footing in the Roman world. It was a religion whose followers had to refuse any other form of worship and any participation in even the civic aspects of the other cults. From the Christian point of view, to offer incense to the gods and goddesses was an act of idolatry. It was recognizing other deities besides the one true God they worshipped. These gods praised in poetry are demons, claims Lactantius, therefore their cults are demonic.<sup>20</sup> Christian authors will dwell on this idea: incense is offered to the gods, the gods are demons, and therefore incense is offered to demons. An idea going back to the Jewish Apocalyptic literature, for example, the *Book of Enoch*, makes fallen angels responsible for teaching magic, especially knowledge about roots and woods.<sup>21</sup> Justin explains that men were taught how to offer sacrifices and incense by the fallen angels: "Moreover, they subsequently subjected the human race to themselves, partly by magic

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<sup>17</sup> C. Th., 16, 10, 12, addressed to Rufinus, Praetorian Prefect, 8 Nov. 392, transl. *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, transl. C. Pharr, Princeton, 1952, p. 473.

<sup>18</sup> C. Th, 16, 10, 12, 2, *ibidem*, p. 474.

<sup>19</sup> Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes*, VI, 3, ed. B. Fragu, Paris, 2010 (Belles Lettres).

<sup>20</sup> Lactantius, *Epitome of the Divinae Institutes*, 23, ed. M. Perrin, SC 335, Paris, 1987, p.108: *Hi sunt daemones, de quibus poetae saepe in carminibus loquuntur...*

<sup>21</sup> *Book of Enoch*, 7 and 19; The first burnt offerings were made of fragrant woods.

writings, partly by the fear they instilled into them and the punishments they inflicted upon them, and partly by instructing them in the use of sacrifices, incense, and libations."<sup>22</sup>

Incense sacrifice was, therefore, considered not only a practice from the past, abolished by Christ, but also as a demonic form of worship. Like the gods in Homeric poetry,<sup>23</sup> demons found their sustenance in sacrificial smoke. Origen develops this theme in his *Exhortation to the Martyrs*, explaining that people offering incense contribute to detaining demons on earth. Porphyry later developed the idea that only specters and evil spirits like odors and incense.<sup>24</sup> Some among the Church Fathers refer to Porphyry or to Hermes Trismegistus to justify their position and exclude incense from worship.<sup>25</sup> Lactantius cites Hermes Trismegistus in the *Divine Institutes* "When he had heard Asclepius seeking from his son whether it pleases his father to be offered incense and other perfumes used for the worship of the god, he cried out: 'Be well advised, O Asclepius. It is the greater impiety to bring into the mind any such thing about that one and singular good. These things and things like to them are not appropriate for him. [...] Benediction alone is his sacrifice."<sup>26</sup>

A radical Christian, such as Tertullian, not only condemns sacrificing with incense, but even the participation of Christians to the trade of incense - because by selling incense, Christians would contribute to supporting idolatry -. He writes: "if a supplier of public victims joins the faith, will you allow him to remain in that trade? Or if somebody who is already a believer has taken up this occupation, will you think that he is to be retained in the Church? No, I think, unless somebody will shut his eyes also in the case of the incense-dealer. For the

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<sup>22</sup> Justin, *Apologia*, II, 5, transl. Th. Falls, in *Saint Justin Martyr*, New-York, 1948, p.124; ed. L. Pautigny, Paris, 1904, p.158.

<sup>23</sup> S. Lilja, *The treatment of Odours in the Poetry of Antiquity*, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum, 49, Helsinki, 1972.

<sup>24</sup> Porphyry, *De Abstinentia*, II, 42: {the malefic demons} "These are they that rejoice in libations, and the savour of sacrifices, through which their pneumatic vehicle is fattened; for this vehicle lives through vapours and exhalations, and the life of it is various through various exhalations," transl. Th. Taylor, *Porphyry. On Abstinence from Animal Food*, London, 1965, p.95.

<sup>25</sup> Eusebius, *De demonstratione evangelica*, IV, 10, PG 22, 256; 13, 10, PG 22, 93.

<sup>26</sup> Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, transl. M.F. McDonald, Washington, p.468-469.



one is concerned with the supplying of blood, the other with that of perfumes. If a still formless idolatry was practiced with the help of these wares before the idols were in the world, and if nowadays, too, the work of idolatry is almost carried out without an idol by means of the burning of incense, does not then the incense-dealer also do a greater service to the demons?"<sup>27</sup> Tertullian expresses the idea that burning incense is in itself a sacrifice, which does not require an image or the statue of a deity.

Christians inherited their notion of idolatry from Jews. Both religions forbade offering sacrifices to the traditional deities. In the Bible, the sacrifices which are always denounced as ungodly are those offered to the Baals of the Near East. The Jewish law was very clear that no sacrifice can be made to another deity. Jews offered sacrifices in their Temple but they were never allowed to sacrifice outside of their own Temple. Both Jews and Christians refused to participate in Roman ceremonies involving a sacrifice. They excluded themselves from civic festivals which always has a religious dimension. Both used monotheism and the rejection of idolatry as the reason not to participate, yet they diverged on the meaning of sacrifices. Jews did not reject sacrifices *pe se*, but only those performed outside the Temple of Jerusalem.

Jews refused to sacrifice to idols or to the genius of the emperor,<sup>28</sup> while Christians refused all forms of sacrifices on the grounds that these were based on a misunderstanding of God's nature. They insist that God does not need to be fed or offered animal parts<sup>29</sup> or incense. So, the rejection of sacrifices by Christians was very different from the Jewish refusal to sacrifice to any other deity than their own. On top of the refusal to worship another deity, it was also based on a reevaluation of the relation between the worshipper and God. Christian Apologists presented themselves as philosophers who denounced the anthropomorphic conceptions of the deity (or zoomorphic in some Egyptian cases) and insisted on the spiritual, ethereal nature of God. In his *Apologia*, written between 124-140 AD, Aristides of Athens insists that God does not need either sacrifices or libations. In fact, he does not need anything from the visible

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<sup>27</sup> Tertullian, *De idololatria*, 11, 6, transl. by J.H. Waszink and J.C.M. Winden, Leiden, 1987, p.43.

<sup>28</sup> On the Apologists' attitude concerning the imperial cult and the question of apotheosis, cf. J. Beaujeu, "Les Apologètes et le culte du souverain", in *Le culte des souverains dans l'Empire romain*, Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique, t.XIX, Vandoeuvres-Genève, 1973, pp.103-136.

<sup>29</sup> D. Ullucci, *The Christian rejection of animal sacrifice*, Oxford, 2012.

world.<sup>30</sup> Irenaeus explains that God does not need to be served by men.<sup>31</sup> Arnobius develops the same argument for the gods that he uses for God: if they are incorporeal beings, "odors and perfumes can have no effect on them, since corporeal substances cannot affect incorporeal beings."<sup>32</sup>

Pseudo-Basil goes even further, when he states that "Corporeal incense that affects nostrils and moves the senses is by a necessary consequence regarded as an abomination to a Being that is incorporeal."<sup>33</sup> For Eusebius of Caesarea, God "does not make great account of ointments and incense."<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein, Lactantius writes : "those offerings made with the fingers (i.e. incense), or exterior to a man, are inappropriate, fragile and unwelcome. The true sacrifice is not to be taken out of a box, but out of the heart."<sup>35</sup>

This Christian point of view fits in with contemporary debates about the role of sacrifices and cultic practices in general, which opposed these material gestures to "spiritual" worship. To a certain extent, a similar debate also appeared among polytheist philosophers on the nature of true religion.<sup>36</sup> Criticisms of the anthropomorphic depiction of the gods in poetry appear in Lucian or in Dio Chrysostom.<sup>37</sup> Concepts of incorporeal, desireless divinities living in perfect happiness can be found in Apuleius. Lucian believed that the gods do not need

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<sup>30</sup> Aristides of Athens, *Apologia*, 1, 3, ed. C. Alpigiano, Firenze, 1988, p.56.

<sup>31</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 32, ed. A. Rousseau, SC 100, Paris, 1965, p.800 : "*non enim indiget Deus ab hominibus servitute*"

<sup>32</sup> Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes*, VII, 26-28.

<sup>33</sup> Pseudo-Basil, *Comment. in Isaiam Prophetam*, 1, 13-14, PG 30, 178.

<sup>34</sup> Eusebius, *De demonstratione evangelica*, IV, 15, PG 22, 292.

<sup>35</sup> Lactantius, *Epitome of the Divinae Institutes*, 53, 3, ed. M. Perrin, SC 335, Paris, 1987, p.208-209: *Nam illa quae aut digitis fiunt aut extra hominem sunt, inepta fragilia ingrata sunt. Hoc est sacrificium verum, non quod ex arca, sed quod ex corde profertur...*

<sup>36</sup> H. W. Attridge, "The philosophical critique of religion under the early Empire", ANRW, II, 16, 1, 1978; S. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge, Cambridge university Press, 1984, p. 228; G. Stroumsa, *La fin du sacrifice. Les mutations religieuses de l'Antiquité tardive*, Paris, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Lucian, *De sacr.*, 1 and 4; Dio Chrys., *Or.* 11:19

sacrifices and have no taste for incense.<sup>38</sup> The exact same questions concerning what constitutes spiritual worship were raised by contemporary rabbis, after the fall of the Temple and often with the same allegations made about God's expectations. The cult practiced in the synagogue, and particularly the absence of sacrifices including the sacrifice of incense is based on a reflection concerning spiritual worship. Incense shovels were represented among other instruments of sacrifices, but sacrificial offerings were replaced by prayer. There is a very real parallel between the way contemporary Jews and Christians presented what was, in their eyes, a true worship, and how a cult should be rendered to God.<sup>39</sup> Spiritual worship made of readings and prayers was all that mattered to God and provided atonement for the whole community if accompanied by almsgiving<sup>40</sup> and fasting.<sup>41</sup> "Busy yourself with the words of the Law, for they are equivalent to sacrifices and they will atone for you," remarks the Midrash Tanhuma after the destruction of the Temple. "Almsgiving is greater than all the sacrifices", explains Rabbi Eliezer.<sup>42</sup> Prayers are superior to sacrifices, and replace the daily sacrifices.<sup>43</sup> It seems that prayers in the synagogue were set to last the same length of time as sacrifices in the Temple.<sup>44</sup> Such statements attest to the existence of a debate on the role and the value of material sacrifice in the eyes of God. They strike a familiar note when compared with contemporary Christian Apologists.

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<sup>38</sup> Lucian, *De sacr.*, 9

<sup>39</sup> E. Meyers comes to the same conclusion from the archaeological point of view: "The ancient synagogue, therefore, need not be viewed in isolation either as architectural entity or as religious institution.", in "Ancient Gush Halav (Giscala), Palestinian Synagogues and the Eastern Diaspora", in *Ancient Synagogues. The State of Research*, ed. J. Gutmann, [Brown Judaic Studies, 22], Ann Arbor, 1981, p.74.

<sup>40</sup> J.R Brown, *Temple and Sacrifice in Rabbinic Judaism*, The Winslow Lectures, 1963, Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Evanston, 1963, p.27. cites Baba Bathra 9a

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p.27: Rab Sheshet of Babylonia in the third century equates the fat lost through fasting with a sacrifice made upon an altar. = Berakhot 17a

<sup>42</sup> Sukkah, 49b

<sup>43</sup> Berakhot 26b

<sup>44</sup> J. R. Brown, *Temple and Sacrifice in Rabbinic Judaism*, The Winslow Lectures, 1963, Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Evanston, 1963, p. 30

Fig. 3 : incense shovel from a synagogue

To justify their refusal of sacrifices and idol worship, Christians could rely on Biblical texts denouncing sacrifices offered by disobedient Jews.<sup>45</sup> Such offerings were abominations by which Israel was said to anger God. Christian Apologists inherited and made a wide use of the long Biblical tradition of criticism of sacrifices.<sup>46</sup> One can read in the book of Jeremiah: "To what purpose does frankincense comes to me from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land. Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices pleasing to me."<sup>47</sup>

Most of the time, the crucial point is the fact that sacrifices are offered to God by a disobedient people, and atonement offerings are made without repentance from the heart... "They have not given heed to my words; and as for my law, they have rejected it", complains God through Jeremiah.<sup>48</sup>

Prophetic outcries against these unacceptable sacrifices were reinterpreted by Talmudic scholars considering new circumstances forbidding Temple sacrifices. After the destruction of the Temple and even more after the repressed revolt of A.D. 132, a reevaluation of the importance of sacrifices as compared to prayer and observance of the Law was proposed by the rabbis. However, there was no formal criticism of sacrifices per se by the rabbis,<sup>49</sup> while Christian Old Testament commentators used those same Biblical passages to condemn sacrifices as obsolete and even as misunderstanding the will of God. To illustrate the rejection of incense sacrifice by God, for example, they made an extensive use of one sentence of

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<sup>45</sup> For example: Ez., 8: 11 and 15.

<sup>46</sup> For example : Is., 66: 3 : "He who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like him who breaks a dog's neck; he who presents a cereal offering, like him who offers swine's blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like him who blesses an idol. They have chosen their own way and their soul delights in their abominations."

<sup>47</sup> Jer 6: 20

<sup>48</sup> Jer., 6: 19

<sup>49</sup> And the utensils of the cult, including the incense shovel are present to decorate synagogues as a reminder of Temple rituals, E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, New York, 1974, vol. IV: *The Problem of Method. Symbols from Jewish Cult*, p.195-196.

Isaiah calling incense: "an abomination unto God."<sup>50</sup> These sentences against incense were usually not considered in their context of criticism of disobedience to God or lack of repentance, but they were excerpted and taken as absolute condemnation of incense. They often refuse to consider that, in the prophetic texts, sacrifices are displeasing to God whenever they are offered by an unobservant and disobedient people.

So, for all these Christian commentators, God, as a spiritual being, finds only spiritual offerings agreeable to Him and he rejects material sacrifices. The Christian, explains Tertullian, offers to God "that costly and noble sacrifice of prayer from a chaste body, a pure soul and a hallowed spirit: but not a few grains of incense that one gets for a farthing, the tears of an Arabian-tree, not a few drops of wine, not the blood of some worthless beast to which death comes as a relief."<sup>51</sup> God only wants "spiritual worship, pure and holy" writes Lactantius.<sup>52</sup> Following Isaiah, he also asserts that God wants justice and that incense as well as other offerings are useless if the heart of the donor is not pure.<sup>53</sup> Incense is an abomination to me, says the Lord in Isaiah 1: 13.<sup>54</sup> Lactantius follows an already ancient tradition since the *Epistle of Saint Barnabas* which cites Isaiah 1: 11-13 to claim that God has

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<sup>50</sup> Isaiah, 1: 13: "Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of the assemblies - I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly."

<sup>51</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 30 : *ei offero opimam et majorem hostiam [...] orationem de carne pudica, de anima innocenti, de spirito sancto profectam ; non grana thuris unius assis, non arabicae arboris lacrymas, nec duas meri guttas, nec sanguinem reprobis bovis mori optantis.*

<sup>52</sup> Lactantius, *Epitome of the Divinae Institutes*, 53, 3, ed. M. Perrin, SC 335, Paris, 1987, pp.206-207.

<sup>53</sup> Lactantius, *Epitome of the Divinae Institutes*, 53, 4, ed. M. Perrin, SC 335, Paris, 1987, pp.208-209: *Nam quid hostiae, quid tura, quid argentum, quid pretiosi lapides conferunt, si colentis pura mens non est ? Sola ergo iustitia est quam deus expetit : in hac sacrificium, in hac dei cultus est.*

<sup>54</sup> Θυμίαμα βδέλυγμά μοι ἐστίν. Biblindex provides a list of Christian authors using this text: [https://www.biblindex.org/citation\\_biblique/?lang=en](https://www.biblindex.org/citation_biblique/?lang=en)

abolished material sacrifices, incense and the Sabbath.<sup>55</sup> Isaiah 1: 13 continues to be called forth to condemn sacrificial incense and ask for spiritual offering instead. This is the case in Cyril of Alexandria<sup>56</sup> and, later, in John Chrysostom<sup>57</sup>.

### **Symbolic interpretation of incense : incense means prayer**

Christian exegetes also had to deal with the considerable number of texts of the Old Testament that presented incense as a sacrifice pleasing to God. In the Temple of Jerusalem, up to 70 A.D., incense was regularly offered to God, following the prescriptions of the Law. A new set of interpretations was elaborated by Christian Apologists to overcome the difficulty of dealing with cultic prescriptions approved by God. Since Christians received the Old Testament as inspired by God, a new exegesis had to be created to give a Christian meaning to those texts.

They opted either for an historical interpretation - numerous treatises and homilies *adversus Iudaeos* comment on the abolition by Christ of material offerings as well as of other specific Jewish practices - or they favored an allegorical interpretation: incense was thought of as a metaphor for something else, such as prayer or charity.

When they opted for the historical interpretation, the Apologists pointed out that these texts of the Old Testament concerning incense offerings were rulings written for the Jews and particularly for the Temple of Jerusalem. The new spiritual worship inspired by Christ had rendered them obsolete, especially since the destruction of the Temple. Athenagoras spelled out that "The Creator and Father of this Universe needs neither blood nor the savor of sacrifices, nor the fragrances of flowers and incense, Himself being perfect fragrance."<sup>58</sup> This theme of the new replacing the old can be read in Pseudo Cyprian when he asserts that

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<sup>55</sup> *Epistle of St Barnabas*, 2, 4-5, ed. R. A. Kraft, transl. P. Prigent, *Épître de Barnabé*, Paris, 1971, p. 82-83 (SC 172).

<sup>56</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. in Esaiam*, 1, *Oratio 1*, PG 70, 36.

<sup>57</sup> John Chrysostom, *Hom. Adversus Iudaeos*, 1, 7, PG 48, 853.

<sup>58</sup> Athenagoras, *Embassy for the Christians*, XIII, 2, trans. in Atchley; written around 177; ed. B. Pouderon, *Athénagore, Supplique au sujet des Chrétiens et Sur la résurrection des morts*, SC, 379, Paris, 1992, p.110.

incense is abandoned because the old sacrifice is rejected and the new is celebrated.<sup>59</sup> In this line of exegesis, even the gifts brought by the Magi to the infant Christ came under scrutiny from some authors such as Tertullian : they were treated as the last of those Old Testament sacrifices that Christ had come to abolish. He could write in the *De Idolatria*: "For they also presented the incense, myrrh and gold to the then new-born Lord as a termination of worldly offerings and glory, with which Christ was about to do away."<sup>60</sup>

### **Incense as a metaphor for prayer**

When interpreting texts praising the offering of incense, Christian writers often chose to provide a symbolic interpretation. In Malachi, for example, the sacrifice of incense is considered a pure offering in honor of God's name.<sup>61</sup> Commenting on this verse of Malachi, while at the same time rejecting incense was not a simple task for Christian exegetes. They either simply ignored the word incense<sup>62</sup> or explained that incense was a metaphor for prayer, often using the juxtaposition of incense with prayer in the Book of Revelation: "The four creatures and the twenty-four elders felt down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." (*Rev.* 5, 8) "And the smoke

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<sup>59</sup> Pseudo Cyprian, *Adversus Iudaeos*, I, 16: "*quod sacrificium vetus evacuetur et novum celebratur.*"

<sup>60</sup> Tertullian, *De idololatria*, 9, 3: *Nam et tus illud et myrram et aurum ideo infanti tunc domino obtulerunt quasi clausulam sacrificiationis et gloriae saecularis, quam Christus erat adempturus*, ed. by J.H. Waszink and J.C.M. Winden, Leiden/New-York, 1987, pp.36-37.

<sup>61</sup> Malachi, 1: 11: "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering." In Irenaeus Latin version of the *Adversus Haereses* the text of Malachi is translated: "*Quoniam ab ortu solis usque ad occasum nomen meum clarificatur inter gentes, et in omni loco incensum offertur nomini meo et sacrificium purum.*" (in Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 17, 5) It should be noted that the Vulgate translates the notion of incense offering (thymiama) by the notion of sacrifice: *in omni loco sacrificatur*. So that Latin commentators of Malachi using the Vulgate are not concerned by the debate.

<sup>62</sup> Justin, *Dial. cum Tryphone*, 28, 41 and 117; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 17, 5. Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, II, 22: in the sacrifices, including those of sweet smell (*suavis olentiae*), God looks for the intention to honor him.

of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand." (*Rev.* 8, 4).<sup>63</sup> Irenaeus, for example, clearly refers to the Book of Revelation to fusion incense and prayers: *Incensa autem Johannes in Apocalypsi orationes ait esse sanctorum.*"<sup>64</sup>

Another Biblical reference speaking of incense in a positive manner is found in Psalm 141: "Let my prayer be set before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." Origen writes that for a Christian "altars are the spirit of each of the just, from which ascends incenses truly and intelligibly sweet-smelling - the prayers from a pure conscience. Wherefore it is said by John in the Apocalypse, 'incenses are the prayers of the saints', and by the Psalmist, 'Let my prayer be as an incense before thee.'"<sup>65</sup>

This association of incense with prayer, although used mainly to reject real incense and to assert the difference between Christians and Jews or pagans, invokes the basic meaning of incense as the medium by which the worship communicates with God. Because the smoke of incense reaches up to the sky, because it is a transformation of solid matter into immaterial sweet fragrance, it is the perfect metaphor for human prayer. In the same way as gold signifies and symbolizes divine light,<sup>66</sup> incense signifies and symbolizes the elevation of the soul in prayer towards God. "An odor of sweet fragrance, writes Clement of Alexandria, is the heart that glorifies Him who made it. These are the crowns and sacrifices, the fragrant perfumes and flowers of God." Barnabas cites the rejection of incense formulated in Isaiah, then he adds: "To us He accordingly speaks thus: "A contrite heart is a sacrifice to the Lord; an odor of sweetness to the Lord is a heart which glorifies his Maker,"<sup>67</sup> In the same vein, Augustine

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<sup>63</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 17, 6; Eusebius, *De demonstratione evangelica*, IV, 10, PG 22, 256; Jerome, *Commentarium in Ps. XLV*, 15, PL 26, 1068: incense = *cum acceptabili orationis odore*.

<sup>64</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 17, 6, ed. A. Rousseau, SC 100, Paris, 1965, p.594-595.

<sup>65</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 8, 17, ed. M. Borret, Paris, 1969, p..210. (SC 150)

<sup>66</sup> S. Averincev, "Le symbole de l'or dans la culture protobyzantine", *Studi Medievali*, 20, 3, 1979, p.54. It is not surprising that the altar of perfumes in Exodus, 30, is covered with gold. Another association of gold and perfume is in Gen. II, 10-14: in paradise, in the country of Hevilath the best gold as well as bdellium, an aromatic gum, can be found.

<sup>67</sup> *Letter of Barnabas*, 2, tr. F. X. Glimm, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Fathers of the Church, Washington, 1947, p.193.



comments on Psalm 49: "Render unto the most High thy prayers, for in this odor is the Lord's delight."<sup>68</sup> Even at a time when incense was used in some Christian liturgies, the true incense that was pleasing to God was thought to be the prayers and spiritual thinking of the faithful. John Chrysostom can, in the same sentence, mention the burning censers of a funeral procession and the living censers that accompany it: "Let us fill the highway with incense, for the road will not appear so decorous although someone set censers all along the way to perfume the air with sweet odor, as it will appear now, if those who pass along it, relating among themselves the contests of the martyrs, return home, each making his tongue a censer."<sup>69</sup>

### **Rejection of Incense by Christians: the persecutions as a turning point**

The real turning point in the appearance of a hostile discourse towards incense can be linked to the difficult time of the persecutions and the question of the *lapsi*, fallen Christians who had sacrificed. Accusations made by Christians against other Christians led to a hardening of the discourse against pagan practices.<sup>70</sup> This discourse had the purpose of explaining to the rest of the world the high spiritual value of Christian worship and of maintaining the strict boundary between it and all forms of idolatrous rituals. The main concern of the Church Fathers for those converts who came from paganism, was to teach them how to keep away from the strength of habits and social links that might lead them to fall back into common forms of polytheistic worship. The models proposed to the new Christians were those Christian believers who had interiorized the necessity of a total rupture with idolatrous practices to the point of accepting death, - that is, the martyrs. A new literature written partly at the time, but also two or three centuries after the persecutions, emphasized all the tortures which these heroes of the faith had suffered in order not to offer sacrificial incense to the gods or to the genius of the emperor. It is no wonder that this literature cast a dark shadow on the use of incense in Christian ceremonies during this period, especially in those Christian communities who kept the uncomfortable recollection that some leaders had failed to live up to the heroic model and had sacrificed with incense. Such was the case for the

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<sup>68</sup> Augustine, *Ennaratio in Ps. 49*, 21

<sup>69</sup> John Chrysostom, *Hom. 1*, PG, 50, 583.

<sup>70</sup> On these accusations, cf Justin, *First Apology*, 26 and *Dialogue with Trypho*, 10; For the hardening of Christian discourse against the Pagan world and its practices, cf. Ch. Pietri, "Mythe et réalité de l'Eglise constantinienne", in *Les Quatre Fleuves*, 3, 1974, pp.25-26.

Church of Rome, when writings spread the rumor of the *turificatio* - the incense burning - of one of its bishops. This may be one likely reason for the long reluctance to use incense in the Roman liturgy.

### **Christians and *turificatio***

During the persecutions, one of the main ways to put Christians to the test was to ask them to throw some incense into the fire, as a sacrifice to the gods or to the genius of the emperor. If we follow G. de Ste. Croix, this "sacrifice test" was meant to save those falsely accused of being Christians;<sup>71</sup> Pliny would have used it only on those who said they were not Christians.<sup>72</sup> It was imposed on everybody by Decius, in the spring of 251, then by one of Diocletian's edicts, that demanded that all inhabitants of the Empire should sacrifice to the gods on pain of death,<sup>73</sup> then again, in 306, Maximin ordered cities to enforce general sacrifice at the temples. Incense was not the only acceptable sacrifice - libations were also accepted - but the sacrifice of incense was easy to do and is often mentioned in the *Passiones*.<sup>74</sup> An inscription from Numidia even calls those days: "*in diebus turificationis*".<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, "Aspects of the "Great" Persecution", in *Harvard Theological Review*, 47, 1954, pp.75-113.

<sup>72</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* X, 96, ed. W. Melmoth, vol. II, Cambridge/ London, 1958, p.404: "Those who denied they were, or had been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ - none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing - these I thought it proper to discharge. Others who were named by that informer at first, confessed themselves Christians, and then denied it; true, they had been of that persuasion but they had quitted it, some three years, others many years, and a few as much as twenty-five years ago."

<sup>73</sup> It may not have been promulgated in the West. Pressure to sacrifice was nevertheless present in the Western part of the Empire and in 306 Maximin ordered cities to enforce general sacrifice: G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, "Aspects of the "Great" Persecution", in *Harvard Theological Review*, 47, 1954, pp. 75-113.

<sup>74</sup> Moreover it is attested as the standard sacrifice to the emperor: "Imperial sacrifices were made on a variety of occasions, public and private, by individuals or by representatives of city or province. Sometimes libations or ritual cakes were offered, but the burning of incense, perhaps on special altars, or the killing of an animal, normally a bull, were the standard

Governors tried to persuade Christians to do this simple gesture and show obedience to the emperors. Some time before November 303<sup>76</sup> and after the publication of at least the first edict of persecution in February 303, Valerius Florus, *praeses Numidiae*,<sup>77</sup> asked Donatus, the bishop of Mascuda<sup>78</sup> to offer incense. Later charged on the ground of *traditio*, he answered the group of Numidian bishops gathered at Cirta in March 305: "*Scis quantum me quaesivit Florus ut turificarem, et non me tradidit deus in manibus eius, frater*".<sup>79</sup> This example shows that at least some Christians escaped without sacrificing in the early phase of the "Great" persecution, while others faced death for refusing to do so. *Libelli*, false certificates of sacrifice could be bought by Christians to avoid further trouble with the authorities.<sup>80</sup> Many, however, found it simpler and less troublesome to offer incense to the gods. It seems that mass apostasies<sup>81</sup> for fear of persecution especially took the form of offerings of incense.

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offerings at public festivals.", S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge, 1984, p. 208.

<sup>75</sup> *CIL* VIII, 6700 and 19353 add. p. 965 (Diehl 2100), Inscription found near Constantine, at Castellum Elephantum = Ebn Ziad (Algeria).

<sup>76</sup> Florus has been replaced by Aurelius Quintianus by the time of Diocletian's *vincennalia* in November 303, cf *CIL* VIII 4764. G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, "Aspects of the "Great" Persecution", in *Harvard Theological Review*, 47, 1954, p.90

<sup>77</sup> Cf. A. Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire. Afrique (303-533)*, Paris, 1982: Valerius Florus 1, p.477

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, Donatus 2, pp.290-291.

<sup>79</sup> Augustine, *Contra Cresconium*, III, 27 (30), CSEL 52, p.436.

<sup>80</sup> Some of these have been found on papyrus, but for the Decian persecution only, cf J.R. Knipfing, "The libelli of the Decian Persecution", in *Harvard Theological Review*, 16, 1923, pp.345-390.

<sup>81</sup> Cyprian, *The lapsed*, 8, transl. R. J. Deferrari, in Saint Cyprian, *Treatises*, Fathers of the Church, New-York, 1958, p.63: "They did not wait at least to ascend when apprehended, to deny when questioned. Many were conquered before the battle, were prostrated without a conflict, and they did not leave this for themselves - to seem to sacrifice unwillingly. Moreover they ran to the market place..." (i.e. to buy the necessary for sacrificial offering). Canon 6 of the council of Ancyra alludes to the same category of *lapsi*: "As to those who

Such Christians were called *turificati*. Incense became clearly associated with the persecutions and with the *lapsi*.

The question of what should be done with Christians who had offered incense to "the demons" led the different Churches of the fourth century to much dispute. In Africa particularly, where the question of the forgiveness of the *lapsi* was exceptionally acute,<sup>82</sup> the offering of incense was considered as serious an offense as was the handing over of sacred books and vessels to the Roman authorities. A bishop of Numidia, commenting on John 15, 1-2 before a council of bishops at Carthage around 311-312, said: "In the same manner that branches that bear no fruit are pruned and thrown away, men who offer incense, who hand out (sacred books) and those who hate God, cannot stay in God's church, unless, their cries having been heard, their penance grants them reconciliation."<sup>83</sup> Degrees of penance, depending on the position in the Church and the circumstances of the fall, were set for the *lapsi*. Whether or not the sacrifice had been made willingly or under physical constraint was one of the crucial distinctions. We have, on this subject, the canons of the council held at Ancyra, in 314, to determine the conduct the Churches should hold towards the *lapsi*. Canon 3 admits the same rule for laity and clergy against whom violence was used: "Those who have borne with resignation the confiscation of their property, tortures and imprisonment, declaring

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yielded on the first threat of punishment and of the confiscation of their property, or of exile, and who have sacrificed...", in Hefele (Ch. J.), *A History of the Christian Councils from the Original Documents, To the Close of the Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325*, transl. W.R. Clark, Edimburgh, 1871, p.207.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Cyprian, *Ep. 27*, III, 1. ed. by chanoine Bayard, "Les Belles Lettres", Paris, 1961 (2), p.66: *Denique huius seditionis origo iam coepit*. Some of the confessors gave their peace to the *lapsi*, an attitude Cyprian does not approve, partly because it caused dissension among the faithful, partly because it seemed to overrule the power of bishops to decide about the appropriate penance for the *lapsi*, and finally also because it seemed to down play penance itself.

<sup>83</sup> Ps-Augustinus, *Adversus Fulgentium Donatistam*, 24, in C. Lambot, "L'écrit attribué à Saint Augustin *Adversus Fulgentium Donatistam*", in *RB*, 58, 1948, p.221: *Sicut ergo palmites infructuosi amputati proiciuntur, ita turificati, traditores, abhorrentes deo manere in ecclesia dei non possunt, nisi cognito ululatu suo per paenitentiam reconcilientur*. The purpose of that discourse is to invalidate the election of Caecilianus as the new bishop of Carthage.

themselves to be Christians, but who have subsequently been vanquished, whether their oppressors have by force put incense into their hands, or have compelled them to take in their mouth the meat offered to idols, [...] are not to be deprived of the communion of the Church."<sup>84</sup> Canon 14 of the Encyclical Letter of Peter, bishop of Alexandria, written in 306, had adopted the same line of conduct for those Christians who were forced to sacrifice against their will, under torture.<sup>85</sup> Twelfth century Byzantine commentators of this canon tried to recapture how Christians were forced to offer incense: "they placed hot coals in their hands along with incense and - in very truth - made them sacrifice." (Balsamon),<sup>86</sup> "they also put incense into their hands and dragged them to the altar where they violently seized their hands and poured the incense upon the altar, or else they placed burning coals along with incense in their hands so that they would not be able to bear the pain caused by the burning and would let go of the incense along with the coals over the altar." (Zonaras)<sup>87</sup>

The very real tortures endured by those who had failed to resist imperial authorities did not matter for those who, at the same period, wrote the heroic tales of the martyrs, of men, women and children alike, who had stood firm unto death in their refusal to sacrifice. The adoption of penance to reconcile those Christians who had sacrificed was not accepted by

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<sup>84</sup> Hefele (Ch. J.), *A History of the Christian Councils from the original documents, To the Close of the Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325*, transl. W.R. Clark, Edimburgh, 1871, p.204.

<sup>85</sup> "Some have suffered great violence and torture and have had chains put in their mouths; through the working of their faith they have steadfastly endured having their hands burned when they were forced, against their will, to offer unholy sacrifice. [...] They were mortified through many tortures, and no longer had the strength to speak or even utter a sound or make any movement of resistance against those who in vain were acting violently against them. They did not assent to their brutal conduct," transl. in T. Vivian, *St. Peter of Alexandria, Bishop and Martyr*, Philadelphia, 1988, p.192.

<sup>86</sup> Theodore Balsamon (c.1140- after 1195), PG 18, 505 C, transl. in T. Vivian, *St. Peter of Alexandria, Bishop and Martyr*, Philadelphia, 1988, p.215.

<sup>87</sup> John Zonaras (12th c., or 13 th c.), PG 18, 508 A, transl. in T. Vivian, *St. Peter of Alexandria, Bishop and Martyr*, Philadelphia, 1988, p.216.

everyone as a fair solution. "*Turificatores*" was a common insult among some groups of Christians who refused reconciliation, such as the Donatists.<sup>88</sup>

The problem of reconciliation was acute for the clergy and particularly for the bishops.<sup>89</sup> The persecution of Valerian in A.D. 257-259 was specially targeted at the clergy. Priests and bishops were ordered to sacrifice to the gods on pain of exile or death. Making the head of a Church sacrifice was the goal of many magistrates, who thought rightly that it would lead the rest of the community to comply with the imperial orders.<sup>90</sup> Cyprian congratulates Cornelius, bishop of Rome, for his courage in confessing the faith, because by being firm and by showing the good example, he has helped his flock do the same: "*confessorem populum suaseris fieri, dum primus paratus es pro omnibus confiteri*".<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, accusing a bishop of *turificatio*, or even spreading the rumor of it, could harm his memory significantly and that of his Church. The case is obvious for Marcellinus, bishop of Rome. Late documents, among them the inauthentic *Acts* of the synod of Sinuessa, built a case against Marcellinus. The *Acts* tell that, pressed by the emperor Diocletian, Marcellinus had entered the temple of Vesta and Isis and there, he had offered incense to the idols. Pressured by three hundred bishops gathered at Sinuessa in 303, Marcellinus recognized that he had been bribed to do so. These *Acts* invent a new date for Marcellinus' death and are unlikely to have any truth to them. They are, however, very revealing of what could be done

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<sup>88</sup> *Traditores turificatores persecutores" verba sunt hominum contra homines*, writes Augustine in his *Contra Litteras Petiliani*, Liber II, LXXXIV, 187, ed. G. Finaert, in *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, 30, Traités Anti-Donatistes, vol. III, Paris, 1967, p.454.

<sup>89</sup> In the *Canonical Letter* of Peter, bishop of Alexandria, lapsed clergy should do penance as laymen and not retain their offices, cf Canon 10: "Therefore it is not fair that those who of their own accord deserted and fell from the [ranks of the] clergy and [later] took up the struggle again remain any longer in church office," transl. in T. Vivian, *St. Peter of Alexandria, Bishop and Martyr*, Philadelphia, 1988, p.189.

<sup>90</sup> An example is given by the case of Donatus, bishop of Masculis, under the Diocletian persecution: "*scis quantum me quaesivit Florus ut turificarem*", in Augustine, *Contra Cresconium*, III, 27, 30, transl. G. Finaert, *Traités Anti-Donatistes*, IV, Bibliothèque Augustinienne, Paris, 1968, pp.324. On magistrates who enforced the law with or without zeal, cf. C. Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique chrétienne*, Paris, 1979, pp.337-341.

<sup>91</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 60, ed. by the chanoine Bayard, Paris, 1961 (2), p.191.

with the accusations of *turificatio*. They amount to a *damnatio memoriae* of the late pope.<sup>92</sup> It would be interesting to know exactly when they were written.<sup>93</sup> Most modern authors have linked them to the Donatist community in Rome who had a great interest in spreading rumors on how badly the Roman clergy had acted during the persecution. After sending *interventores* to make an inquest on what had happened, the Donatists had elected Victor of Garba as bishop of Rome<sup>94</sup> and established there a parallel hierarchy that lasted for a century. The *turificatio* of Marcellinus served the purpose of Church politics. In their opinion, since the see of Rome had failed during the persecution, it was to rank below the primates of Carthage and Numidia.<sup>95</sup>

The story of Marcellinus' weakness was far more than an anecdote. It was used in the same way as stories about the martyrs' courage were used: to build up the collective memory of the community. Such negative tales were at least as important as were the positive ones to justify keeping an opposing Church at a distance. In the early fifth century, the accusations against Marcellinus, *turificatio* or *traditio*, were kept very much alive in Africa, where they were used to consolidate the Donatist position in a time of persecution. Petilianus, in Augustine's treatise *Contra Litteras Petiliani*, accuses Marcellinus of giving orders to offer incense and to give out the Sacred Scriptures.<sup>96</sup> The *Liber Genealogus*, a product of this

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<sup>92</sup> This *damnatio memoriae* was very effective: the name of Marcellinus is omitted from many documents concerning popes and Roman martyrs. His name is absent of the Hieronimian Martyrologe, from a list of bishops and martyrs of Rome written in 336 and completed in 354. Mgr L. Duchesne links this omission to the rumors spread about Marcellinus' *turificatio*, in *Liber Pontificalis*, p.LXXI

<sup>93</sup> Mgr L. Duchesne suggests that they were written in 501 or soon after during the dispute between Symmachus and Laurentius, in *Liber Pontificalis*, p.LXXIV

<sup>94</sup> Optatus, II, 4, CSEL 26, pp.37-39. On the date of this event, after 314, cf. A. Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire. Afrique (303-533)*, Paris, 1982: Victor 3, pp.1153-1154.

<sup>95</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, Oxford, 1952, p.164

<sup>96</sup> Augustine, *Contra Litteras Petiliani*, *Liber II*, XCII, 202, ed. G. Finaert, in *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, 30, *Traité Anti-Donatistes*, vol. III, Paris, 1967, p.474-476.

"intense literary warfare,"<sup>97</sup> also notes that Marcellinus had offered incense to the idols.<sup>98</sup> Originally written by a Catholic at the end of the fourth century, the *Liber Genealogus*, received additions from Donatists' hands between 405 and 463.<sup>99</sup>

If the rumor of Marcellinus' *turificatio* was a tale invented or spread by the Donatists, it was a successful one since it was accepted as true by the compiler of the *Liber Pontificalis* in the sixth century: "*Ipse Marcellinus ad sacrificium ductus est ut thurificaret, quod et fecit*".<sup>100</sup> The official version was now that the bishop had lapsed, then repented, and that he had finished his life as a martyr.

These texts placed the act of burning incense under the spotlight as a very powerful negative symbol. Mentioning incense without any context seemed to have been equivalent to referring to pagan worship as a whole. This simple gesture of throwing incense in the fire was soon considered to be the archetype of idolatry in the eyes of Christians. In a letter addressed to Heliodorus, Jerome tries to convince him that idolatry is everywhere, in impurity, bad desires... and not only in taking some incense and throwing it into the fire,<sup>101</sup> which means that by the fourth century equating incense burning with idolatry was a commonplace.

## Conclusion

From the first century to the fifth century, both in the East and in the West, a concert of voices was raised in unison by Christian writers against sacrificial incense offerings. The Apologists, and Church Fathers after them, wished to point out that Christians were different: they were neither polytheists, nor Jews. The refusal of incense sacrifice in Christian worship was one of the features that allowed the Apologists to emphasize the difference between Christianity and

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<sup>97</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, Oxford, 1952, p.268.

<sup>98</sup> *Liber Genealogus*, ed. Th. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora*, I, MGH IX, Berlin, 1892, p.196.

<sup>99</sup> P. Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique Chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu' à l'invasion arabe*, t. IV, *Le Donatisme*, Paris, 1912, pp.101-102

<sup>100</sup> *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne, I, p.162-163.

<sup>101</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 14: *Non est tantum in eo seruitus idoli, si quis duobus digitulis tura comprehensa in bustum arae iaciat aut haustum patera fundat merum.* ed. J. Labourt, Paris, "Les Belles Lettres", vol. 1, 1982, p. 38.



pre-Christian religions. This is why it recurs so often in their writings. But their general reprobation of material sacrifices should not hide the fact that pagan and Jewish sacrifices were not exactly on the same level. With polytheism, the Apologists of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries had to confront a set of cults actually present in various forms and approved by a majority of citizens. They also had to deal with imperial orders for a mandatory general sacrifice, which led to the death of some Christians. With Judaism, Christian Apologists felt that they had to discuss the validity of a cult which had ceased to exist with the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, but which had once been approved of by God himself. In order to justify their rejection of incense, Christians wished to base their line of arguments on the Sacred Scriptures. They found texts criticizing incense and they made wide use of them, often out of context. Biblical authors usually link the acceptance of sacrifices to obedience to God and a rejection of sacrifices, including incense when the people disobey. Christian authors extracted some of these texts to reject animal and vegetal sacrifices. To justify their refusal of sacrifice while dismissing the accusation of impiety,<sup>102</sup> Christian Apologists adopted whatever they could find in ancient literature that condemned incense. One of the arguments was historical: incense and perfume offerings were a novelty and not in the true Roman tradition. They also gathered texts opposing incense and reflecting on true worship from philosophers and established their own version of what constitutes divine nature. The texts against pagan offerings of incense are also clearly linked to the cruel effects of the persecutions. Cyprian wrote an emotional chapter on the spiritual death that the *lapsi* had freely brought upon themselves: "You yourself have come to the altars as a sacrificial offering, you yourself as a victim; you have immolated your salvation there, your hope; there you have cremated your faith in those fires."<sup>103</sup> The stage is set for sharp criticism of, and even for strong official disapproval of incense. The sweet smell of incense is called a "foul fetor" rising from "the altar of the devil".

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<sup>102</sup> Justinus, *Apologia*, I, 13

<sup>103</sup> Cyprian, *The Lapsed*, 8, transl. R. J. Deferrari, in Saint Cyprian, *Treatises*, Fathers of the Church, New-York, 1958, p.64.