Sacrifice in Early Christianity: The Social Dimensions of a Metaphor

Gerard Rouwhorst

1 Introduction

For centuries, the use of the word ‘sacrifice’ in relation to Christianity has sparked off fierce debates among both Christians and scholars who studied Christianity. As is often the case with much discussed terms, the word ‘sacrifice’ has given rise to misunderstandings and confusion. This is for one part due to the complexity of the ritual practices to which the term primarily refers.1 It may refer to blood sacrifices, in particular to the ritual slaughter of animals – upon which most research and discussions have concentrated – but also to vegetal offerings. Further, sacrifices can involve a variety of ritual activities and elements: The preparation of the sacrificial substance or animal, the killing (when the sacrifice that will be offered is an animal), the offering itself, the apportionment and the consumption. Moreover, just like all other rituals, sacrifices can be studied from various angles.2 One may focus on the details of the ritual performance, on the religious meanings that are attributed to the sacrificial actions by the participants, and on the social or psychological functions they fulfill. One of the major pitfalls of the study of sacrificial practices consists in thinking in terms of a typical, more or less universal type of sacrificial ritual – for instance, the ritual slaughter of animals – and, on that basis, drawing conclusions about ‘sacrifice’ as a universal human activity.

A further source of confusion with respect to the word ‘sacrifice’ in the Christian tradition lies in the fact that originally the term sacrifice was used in a metaphorical way as referring to non-ritual activities and realities. The key

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1 See for the variety of sacrificial rituals and the elements they involve especially: Kathryn McClymond, Beyond Sacred Violence. A Comparative Study of Sacrifice (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

2 See for an overview of the various scientific approaches to sacrifice and the major theories: McClymond, Beyond Sacred Violence, 3–17. See further Maria-Zoe Petropolou, Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism, and Christianity, 100 BC to AD 200 (Oxford Classical Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–31, and Jonathan Klawans, Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple. Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17–48.
to this metaphorical interpretation is to be found in the life and the death of Jesus Christ, which are understood as a self-offering and constitute the model of the Christian way of life. All sacrifices described in the Hebrew Bible, both the animal sacrifices and the vegetal offerings, were viewed through this metaphorical lens.

Of course the word sacrifice and sacrificial terminology were soon used to designate new Christian rituals that were considered sacrifices and offerings – in particular, the Eucharist. Yet the Christian metaphorical interpretation of the pre-Christian sacrificial rituals has left its mark on those Christian rituals as well; and it should not be overlooked that, in spite of the frequent use of sacrificial metaphors and of terms derived from sacrificial cults, they were essentially different from the sacrifices known from Greek and Roman religion as well as from the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.\(^3\)

\[\text{Social Structures of Early Christian Communities}\]

Although the Christian concept of sacrifice has played a crucial role throughout the history of Christianity and has always been one of the leitmotifs of Christian theology and liturgy, it has simultaneously undergone continual metamorphoses. The term ‘sacrifice’ and related terms have been used to designate a great variety of theological ideas, moral virtues, and ritual practices. Various factors have played a role in the transformations of the metaphor of sacrifice throughout the centuries and in the disputes to which it has given rise. These transformations were of course closely connected with the history of Christian theological doctrine and were profoundly affected by it. Still, one should not overlook the importance of non-theological aspects. Especially, the social structures of Christian communities, which throughout the history of Christianity have continuously been changing, deserve attention. In fact, if sacrifice is associated with the notion of giving or offering oneself – as it is the case in Christianity – the question arises who is supposed to give himself or herself to whom and for what purpose. Is the individual Christian supposed to sacrifice him- or herself for the sake of the community, or should s/he rather do so in order to achieve a higher spiritual goal? Much will depend on the

\(^3\) Cf. for the origins and history of the Christian concept of sacrifice Robert Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled. The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice*, (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2009). See also Frances Young, *The Use of Sacrificial Ideas in Greek Christian Writers from the New Testament to John Chrysostom* (Patristic Monograph Series 5; The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd, 1979); Idem, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (London: SPCK, 1975).
relationship between the individual and society and more specifically on the group cohesiveness. To what extent does a Christian community offer a sense of security and the feeling of having a home? And what claims does that community have on someone?

There is a second reason why insight in the structures of Christian communities is important for understanding the role of the concept of sacrifice in the history of Christianity. We have already alluded to the complicated process of de-ritualizing and ritualizing which was instigated by the Christian concept of sacrifice. Initially, the ritual practice to which the term ‘sacrifice’ primarily referred was rejected as being tied up with the Temple cult and with paganism. However, the concept of sacrifice rather soon became applied to Christian rituals and began influencing Christian processes of ritualizing.

Rituals have a markedly social dimension and fulfill social functions. More specifically, they may serve to mark what the British anthropologist Mary Douglas has called the group and the grid dimension of communities, that is to say, respectively, the external boundaries which separate the members of a community from those who do not belong to it, and the internal boundaries: The social roles to which the members are supposed to conform and the hierarchical divisions they are asked to respect. Conversely, the importance which is given to rituals and the way they function, is strongly dependent on those internal and external boundaries.

In the following, I will try to illustrate the interrelatedness between the development of the Christian concept of sacrifice and the changing social structures of Christian communities, making use of the group and grid distinction. I will focus on the period of early Christianity when the contours of the Christian concept of sacrifice started becoming visible and the social structures of the Christian communities began taking shape.

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4 See for the concepts of group and grid as developed by Mary Douglas especially the following books of this anthropologist: *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) *Natural Symbols* (London: Barrie and Rockliff/Cresset Press, 1970; new edition with new introduction: New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); *Cultural Bias* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. Occasional paper 35, 1978); reprinted in *In the Active Voice* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 183–254. See further various articles collected in *Implicit Meanings. Selected Essays in Anthropology* (London & New York: Routledge, Second Edition, 1999). See for the person and the work of Mary Douglas: Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
Three Types of Early Christian Communities

While studying early Christian communities, one is at first sight confronted with a confusing plurality of social structures. However, at closer inspection, it turns out that this variety can be reduced to three major types of communities. Two of them we mainly, though not exclusively, encounter in the three centuries before Constantine when Christians constituted a small minority in the Roman Empire. The third type appears in the fourth century when Christianity gradually grows into the public majority religion of the Empire.

3.1 The First Communal Structures

The first type of community is characterized by the combination of its small-size and well-demarcated external boundaries on the one hand and rather loosely organized structures on the other hand. Speaking in sociological terms, they exhibited the features of ‘sects’, small communities which find themselves in a high state of tension with their environment. The members of those communities met in private houses (house churches) and were highly critical of the morals, principles and beliefs as generally accepted by the (Greco-Roman) society in which they were living. They refused to participate in the rituals and feasts which fulfilled both religious and social functions in that society. Christians belonging to these small churches considered their communities holy. Their emphasis on the holiness of the community was clearly reflected in their rituals. The rules for partaking in their communal meals – often called ‘Eucharists’ – were strict. To be admitted to them, one needed to have been purified by baptism. Compared to the group dimension, the internal boundaries (‘grid’) were less clearly demarcated. The roles and the tasks of the community leaders and of those who were presiding the liturgical meetings were often not very clearly defined. Finally, apart from baptism and communal meals, there were rather few rituals. The liturgical year, for instance, was in an embryonic stage of development.

5 Cf. for the following my article “Christian Initiation in Early Christianity,” Questions liturgiques 87 (2006): 100–119 (= Initiation chrétienne et la liturgie. Hommage au Prof. Em. Dr. Jozef Lamberts (Textes et études liturgiques XXII) (ed. L. Leijssen; Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 104–123.

6 Thus Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), 25.

7 Cf. Wayne Meeks’ characterization of the Lord’s Supper in the Pauline letters as a ‘ritual of solidarity’. Wayne Meeks, The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 157–162. See also my article “Table Community in Early Christianity,” in A Holy People. Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Religious Communal Identity (eds M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 69–84.
3.2 “Spiritual Searchers”

The second community model I want to distinguish is that of the “spiritual searchers”, who emphasized the importance of individual religious and spiritual growth. To this category the great variety of movements belonged which are commonly labeled as Gnostic. Using Douglas’ group-grid model, one may characterize them as a “weak group” and a “weak grid”. Christians belonging to this category had in common with members of the first type of Christian community that they were very critical of the society in which they were living. They rejected its way of life as well as its institutions. What made them different was that they stressed the importance of the soul’s spiritual journey rather than the fact of belonging to a church. These Christians formed communities, but the type of community they were looking for consisted of like-minded spiritually advanced searchers. At least some of these Christians were highly critical of ecclesiastical institutions and hierarchical structures. When not rejected outright, the importance of collective rituals was at best minimized. In any case, emphasis was laid on the spiritual meaning and the spiritual attitude of the individual who participated in the rituals rather than on the objective performance of the rituals.

3.3 Post-Fourth-Century Church Communities

From the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century, the number of Christians increased considerably, and, what is even more important, the relationship between Christianity and its environment changed (especially so after the conversion of Constantine). This development resulted in the third, more stratified church model. The Christian communities of the fourth century included various categories of faithful that may be distinguished on the basis of their participation in church life. Thus there were 1) catechumens who had enrolled themselves as candidate Christians, but had not yet been baptized; 2) Christians who had been initiated and were full members of the Christian communities; 3) penitents, people who had been baptized, but by committing a grave sin had temporarily been regressed to the status of catechumens, and finally 4) men and women who were leading a monastic life and strived for a more radical Christian life than the rest of the baptized Christians. Apart from this differentiation, the fact that the number of Christians increased necessitated a further structuring of the leadership of the Church: The roles and the tasks of the ordained leaders (bishops, presbyters, deacons) and their position vis-à-vis the lay people became more precisely defined and demarcated. In terms of group and grid, the group boundaries became more differentiated and the grid became stronger. More or less simultaneously with this process of differentiation and stratification, a rather spectacular increase
4 Metaphors of Sacrifice

Obviously, this subdivision of early Christian communities into three major types involves a certain simplification. Still, it may be helpful in providing insight in many aspects of early Christianity, especially the various ways in which the metaphor of sacrifice was used and ritualized.

4.1 Sacrificial Metaphors in Small-Scale Early Christian Communities

In sources derived from small-scale, mostly egalitarian, tightly cohesive Christian communities from the period before Constantine, sacrificial motifs, ideas and terms appear frequently and play an important role. On the one hand, they are to be found in numerous anti-sacrifice polemics that are directed against both pagan and Jewish sacrifices, for example, the Epistle of Barnabas, the writings of Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. At the same time, both the New Testament itself and numerous writings dating from the second and third centuries testify to the tendency to ‘spiritualize’ motifs that are related to the Jewish sacrificial cult. That is, instead of being rejected outright, these motifs are considered to be referring to the self-giving of Christ and the way of life Christians are supposed to lead. In this way, they are used to develop the Christian concept of sacrifice I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Even if this is hardly surprising and fits in with the overall character of early Christianity, one may note some tendencies which appear typical of the first three centuries of Christianity.

Firstly, sacrificial terminology is rarely used in texts dealing with the liturgical traditions of early Christians. In so far as sacrificial concepts and metaphors from the Hebrew Bible are used to indicate Christian rituals, this often seems to be done with a supersessionist purpose, namely with the intention to emphasize that (Jewish) sacrifices are no longer of any use and have been replaced with alternative Christian ‘sacrifices’. These texts do not explicitly deal with the question what these alternative rituals might have in common.

8 See in this connection John F. Baldovin, “The Empire Baptized,” in The Oxford History of Christian Worship (eds G. Wainwright and K. B. Westerfield; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 77–132.

9 See for references to the relevant sources Young, The Use of Sacrificial Ideas, 79–96.
with sacrifices and might justify their description in sacrificial terms. The most telling case in point is the use of sacrificial terminology with regard to the early Christian Eucharist.\textsuperscript{10} It often appears in the context of anti-sacrificial polemics in which the Eucharist is contrasted with the sacrifices of the Hebrew Bible. It does not always become clear, however, to what degree and in what respect the Eucharist itself is considered a sacrifice. Furthermore, it should be noted that when the Eucharist is described in sacrificial terms, reference is exclusively or primarily made to the (offering of) prayers, especially the giving of thanks, not to the bread and wine. Also how this sacrifice of prayer did relate to the self-offering of Christ, which is at the center of the New Testament institution narratives, remains somewhat unclear. It seems that theological reflection on this question developed and crystallized only gradually. Moreover, this process appears to have run parallel to the elaboration of the ritual of the Eucharist, in particular to the incorporation of the institution narrative in the Eucharistic prayer, which, according to recent liturgical scholarship, is nowhere evidenced before the middle of the third century and in several places even occurred much later.\textsuperscript{11}

Secondly, at least as remarkable as the relatively scarce evidence of the use of sacrificial concepts in the description of early Christian rituals is the prominent role these concepts play in some early Christian texts dealing with martyrdom. First of all, there is Ignatius of Antioch’s Letter to the Romans in which the author, longing to become a martyr, asks that it be granted to be poured out as a libation on an altar (2,2) and to become a sacrifice (2,4).\textsuperscript{12} Further, the idea that martyrdom is the ultimate sacrifice also appears in the Martyrdom of

\begin{enumerate}
\item See in particular Kenneth Stevenson, \textit{Eucharist and Offering} (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986), 10–37. Cf. Young, \textit{The Use of Sacrificial Ideas}, 256–266.
\item See Robert Taft, “Mass without the Consecration? The Historic Agreement on the Eucharist between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East Promulgated 26 October 2001,” \textit{Centro pro Unione. Semi-annual Bulletin}, 63 (Spring 2003): 15–27 = \textit{Worship} 77 (2003): 482–509; Paul Bradshaw, “Did Jesus institute the Eucharist at the Last Supper?,” in \textit{Issues in Eucharistic Praying in East and West. Essays in Liturgical and Theological Analysis} (ed. M. E. Johnson; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 1–19 (published also in: Paul Bradshaw, \textit{Reconstructing Early Christian Worship} (London: SPCK, 2009), 3–19. The question arises whether other aspects of the Early Christian Eucharist, especially the breaking of the bread, may have involved a sacrificial connotation. Cf. my article « Faire mémoire par un geste : la fraction du pain » in « Faire mémoire. L’anamnèse dans la liturgie », Conférences Saint Serge LVIe Semaine d’Études Liturgiques Paris, 29 juin–2 juillet 2009” (eds A. Lossky and M. Sodi; Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), 75–86.
\item Edition of the Greek text: Karl Bihlmeyer, Wilhelm Schneemelcher, \textit{Die apostolischen Väter} (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1956\textsuperscript{2}), 98–99.
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Polycarp. When Polycarp is on the brink of being burnt alive, he is compared with a ram taken from a flock for sacrifice and he is called a well-prepared burnt offering (ch. 14). Moreover, he asked to be received by God as a rich and acceptable sacrifice and when he is surrounded by the flames, he is said to have spread an overwhelming fragrance like that of frankincense (ch. 15).

In order to assess the historical significance of these passages, it is important to realize that these stories – and more in particular the Martyr Passions – did not just give accounts, historically correct or not, of the events described, but were primarily meant to be read in Christian communities. The heroes who suffered martyrdom functioned as examples of endurance and courage for the members of those communities.

4.2 Anti-Sacrificial Polemics in Gnosticism

In some respects, the attitude towards sacrifices displayed by early Christian communities belonging to the second model – in particular, Gnostic groups – is comparable to the one predominant in the small-scale churches dealt with in the preceding section. Both categories had at least two things in common: a) A rejection of sacrifices, especially bloody animal sacrifices, as they were practiced in Judaism prior to the destruction of the Second Temple and continued to be practiced in pagan temples; and b) the notion of a spiritual sacrifice which is offered by the (Gnostic) Christian who offers himself to the Highest God, in particular by addressing prayers of thanksgiving to Him. However, there are also some striking differences.

Firstly, the rejection of the Hebrew Bible sacrifices is more radical in so far as, according to Gnostic beliefs, those sacrifices were not offered to the Highest God, but to powers (archons) or demons who tried to get human beings imprisoned and enslaved in a world created by an inferior god.

Secondly, in some Gnostic sources critique of sacrifices is combined with polemic against non-Gnostic Christians, especially their leaders, who are

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13 Edition and English translation: Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 2–21.

14 The idea that the martyr’s death is a sacrifice is also found in the writings of Origen, especially in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*. Cf. for this passage as well as for references to other texts of Origen: Young, *The Use of Sacrificial Ideas*, 228–230.

15 See *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* (NH VI, 6), ch. 59–60 and *Melchizedek* (NH IX, 1), ch. 16. English translation: *The Nag Hammadi Library*. Translated into English under the editorship of James M. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 295–296 and 402.

16 See *On the Origin of the World*, 123 (NH XI, 5 and XIII, 2). English translation: *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 156–157. Cf. *Gospel of Philip* (NH XI, 3), 54–55 and 63 (*Nag Hammadi Library*, 133 and 138); *Melchizedek* (NH IX, 1), ch. 6–7 (*Nag Hammadi Library*, 401).
blamed for continuing “the detestable sacrificial practices” of the Jewish Temple. A clear example of this polemic is to be found in the recently discovered Gospel of Judas. The text contains a passage in which the disciples of Jesus tell him that they had a vision of the Temple and of twelve priests who were standing at an altar and were offering animal sacrifices. The interpretation of the passage concerned gives rise to several difficulties, but it is clear that the sacrificial cult is rejected as being highly immoral and abhorrent. Even more remarkable is the way in which the vision of the disciples is explained by Jesus: The priests offering the sacrifices turn out to be none other than the disciples themselves. There can be no doubt that these disciples, for their part, symbolize the leaders of the (second century) orthodox Church which is attacked by the author of the Gospel of Judas. The passage certainly implies a severe criticism of some ritual practices that must have been current in that Church (although it remains hard to establish which Christian practices the author precisely had in mind).

Thirdly, it is striking that, in Gnostic writings, the Hebrew Bible sacrifices are only exceptionally associated with the death of Christ, while this death is not described in sacrificial terms nor interpreted as a sacrifice brought for the redemption of the Christians.

And finally, in Gnostic literature, one encounters astonishingly diverse and even opposite attitudes towards martyrdom. Whereas some Gnostic texts hold martyrs in high esteem, in other Gnostic sources the ideal of martyrdom is

17 Gospel of Judas, 38–41. Edition of the Coptic text and English translation: The Gospel of Judas together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and a Book of Allogenes from Codex Tchacos. Critical Edition (eds R. Kasser, M. Meyer, G. Wurst, and F. Gaudard; Washington DC: National Geographic, 2007), 195–201.
18 Cf. for the interpretation of this passage my article “The Gospel of Judas and the Early Christian Eucharist,” in In Search of Truth: Augustine, Manichaeism and other Gnosticism. Studies for Johannes van Oort at Sixty (eds J. van den Berg, A. Kotzé, T. Nicklas, M. Scopello; Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, 74; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 611–626.
19 It has been argued that the Gospel would be attacking a sort of early Christian Eucharist which was primarily considered as a commemoration of the sacrificial death of Christ and, moreover, was closely connected with a high esteem of the ideal of martyrdom. See in particular Elaine Pagels/Karen King, Reading Judas. The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity (London: Penguin books, 2007), 51–52. Elsewhere, I have argued that this theory is based upon an anachronistic view of the development of the Eucharist in the first two or three centuries of the history of Christianity (Rouwhorst, “The Gospel of Judas”).
20 See Apocryphon of James (NH 1,2), 4–6 (Nag Hammadi Library, 31–32). Cf. for the interpretation of this passage the footnotes added by Donald Rouleau to his French translation of the Apocryphon of James published in Ecrits gnostiques. La bibliothèque de Nag
put into perspective.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, the Valentinian Gnostic Heracleon minimizes the importance of confessing Christ before the magistrates, arguing that such a confession can be only outward and even hypocritical and that the real thing asked from Christians is to confess Christ by their faith and their everyday conduct.\textsuperscript{22} Some Gnostics even went so far as to straightforwardly criticize the propaganda for martyrdom and reject martyrdom itself. In the Gnostic writing which is known as the \textit{Testimony of Truth}, martyrs are explicitly denounced and even ridiculed. They are called “foolish people” who “surrender themselves to ignorance without knowing where they are going and without knowing Christ” and as people who “do not bear witness to nobody but themselves” and who mistakenly believe that they will be saved by surrendering themselves to death because of the Name (of God).\textsuperscript{23} The fierce rejection of martyrdom recalls a passage of Irenaeus’ \textit{Adversus haereses} in which Gnostic opponents (Valentinians) are accused of scorning and despising the martyrs (III, 18, 5).\textsuperscript{24} All in all, although it remains difficult to obtain an exact idea of the various Gnostic positions, there can be no doubt that the ideal of martyrdom was considered with suspicion by many Gnostics. And at least to some of them, martyrdom must have been as repugnant as sacrificial rituals were to all Gnostics.

\textbf{4.3 Excursus: The Writings of Cyprian of Carthago}

Before we will turn to the third community model, which begins developing in the fourth century and is characterized by an increasing internal stratification, some remarks are in order about the writings of Cyprian, which date from the mid-third century. Although Cyprian is often considered to be a typical representative of (orthodox or mainstream) Christianity of the first three centuries,
his ideas about sacrifice appear to be unique for that period and do not easily fit in with either of the community models we have distinguished.25

To begin with, there are probably no other writings dating from this period in which sacrificial metaphors occur more frequently than those of Cyprian. Even more striking is, however, the important role those metaphors play in his theological views on the Eucharist. According to Cyprian, the Eucharist is a sacrifice offered by the Church and this is the case because it is the commemoration of the voluntary Passion of the Lord, which was the acme of true sacrifice. Furthermore, the commemoration and the offering of this sacrifice by the Church – which is carried out by the bishop who imitates Christ – should be actualized in the Christian way of life which in specific cases may lead to martyrdom.

How to account for the emphasis which Cyprian places on the sacrificial character of the Eucharist? At first sight, one might argue that this is due to the persecutions of Christians in the middle of the third century – during the reigns of the emperors Decian and Valerian – when Cyprian was active as a bishop and was confronted with Christians who tried to escape from martyrdom. There can be no doubt that Cyprian held martyrs in high esteem – he exhorted Christians to stand firm during persecutions – and that he died as a martyr himself (in 258 CE). Still, contrary to what we found in the writings of Ignatius and some of the Martyr Passions martyrdom is rarely described as a sacrifice by Cyprian. There must be a more important reason why the sacrificial character of the Eucharist is so detailed and stressed in Cyprian’s writings. The explanation is the authoritative character ascribed to the Last Supper tradition which serves as the model and archetype of the Eucharist. Tellingly, the mere fact that Christ had mixed water with wine is used by Cyprian as an argument in his refutation of Christians who defend the custom – apparently existing in North Africa – of drinking only water during the Eucharist.26 For the rest, it can be no coincidence that Cyprian is the first early Christian author to unambiguously attest the recitation of the institution narrative during the Eucharist! The increasing emphasis on the tradition of the Last Supper and the insertion of the institution narrative in the Eucharistic

25 Cf. for the following Cyprian, Epistula 63 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 3, 2; Vienna, 1871), 4, 372–389. See also Raymond Johanny, “Cyprien de Carthage,” in L’eucharistie des premiers chrétiens (ed. R. Johanny; Paris: Beauchesne, 1976), 151–175; David Power, The Eucharistic Mystery. Revitalizing the Tradition (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1992), 107–108; Enrico Mazza, L’action eucharistique. Origine, développement, interprétation (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1999), 141–154.

26 See Epistula, 63.
prayer are primarily the result of a process of ritualizing which began to manifest itself in the third century and would gain momentum in the fourth century when the stratified church model developed and became prominent.

4.4 The Stratified Church Model and Christian Ritualizing of the Sacrifice Metaphor

It is impossible to chart the use of sacrificial motifs in fourth century Christian literature, which is much more extensive than that of the first three centuries. I shall limit myself to two developments which reveal a marked difference with the preceding period.

In the first place, although persecutions of Christians had become past events, the stories about martyrs and their heroic deeds remained an important part of the collective Christian memory. Accounts of martyrdom proliferated. The endurance and the courage of the martyrs, the often gruesome tortures and the excruciating pains they underwent, as well as the savagery of their persecutors, continued to supply material for sermons and to stimulate the imagination of the preachers and their audience. Apart from the huge production of narrative sources, mention should be made of another phenomenon in connection with it: The rapid development of the cult of the martyrs from the middle of the fourth century onward. This involved the veneration of their dead bodies and their tombs, the transportation of their bones and other relics to churches, the foundation of special shrines which attracted large groups of people, and the institution of yearly commemorations.

At the same time, traditions about martyrs and martyrdoms began fulfilling other functions than in the first three centuries. As long as there was a serious risk of persecution, one of the effects of the passion narratives was that they confronted the Christians with the possibility of martyrdom and encouraged them to stand firm. Once that risk was over and the distance from the historical events grew, martyrs continued to serve as role models for Christians, but they did so in different ways. Their heroic lives and the intrepidity with which

27 See Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Martyr Passions and Hagiography,” in The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies (ed. S. Ashbrook Harvey and D. Hunter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 602–627 (604–607).

28 Cf. H. Delehaye, Les origines du culte des martyrs (Subsidia hagiographica 20; Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1933); Peter Brown, The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981). Cf. further Johan Leemans, “General Introduction,” in Let us die that we may live. Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor. Palestine and Syria (c. AD 35–AD 450) (eds J. Leemans, W. Mayer, P. Allen, and B. Dehandschutter; London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 3–52 (5–14).
they had faced tortures and death were exploited by numerous homilists\textsuperscript{29} to warn fourth-century Christians against the risk of taking Christianity and its demands too easily. Essential to the transformation the narrative traditions concerning the martyrs underwent in the fourth century was a tendency to ‘spiritualize’ the ideal of martyrdom. Martyrs were for instance viewed as models for ascetics, who were fighting against the passions and the temptations of demons.\textsuperscript{30} But they also could serve as examples for the ‘ordinary’ Christians who were exhorted by the homilists to lead virtuous lives and to train themselves for the battles they had to wage in their lives.\textsuperscript{31} The transformation of the ideal of martyrdom naturally had implications for the ways in which sacrificial motifs were interpreted in sources dealing with martyrs.\textsuperscript{32} In so far as sacrificial themes were considered as metaphors of martyrdom, they were indirectly affected by the spiritualizing tendencies the ideal of martyrdom itself underwent. They became metaphors of the virtues with which this ideal was associated.

A second and even more remarkable phenomenon which should be mentioned in this connection is the growing impact that the sacrificial metaphor had on the interpretation and especially on the gradual ritualizing of the Eucharist. Two ritual developments are of crucial importance: On the one hand the ritualizing of the preparation of bread and wine and, on the other, the tendency to consider the Last Supper as the model and archetype of the Eucharist

\textsuperscript{29} See for selections of interesting homilies and other sources connected with the cult of the martyrs and dating from the middle of the fourth century: Leemans et al., \textit{Let us die}; see also St. John Chrysostom, \textit{The Cult of the Saints. Select homilies and letters introduced, translated, and annotated by Wendy Mayer with Brown Neil} (Popular Patristic Series; New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{30} See Edward Malone, \textit{The Monk and the Martyr: The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr} (Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity 12; Washington DC.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950).

\textsuperscript{31} Cf. the article I have written about three homilies (of Gregorius of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and Augustine) dealing with the Maccabean Martyrs: “The Emergence of the Cult of the Maccabean Martyrs in Late Antique Christianity” in \textit{More than a Memory. The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity} (ed. J. Leemans; Leuven-Paris-Dudley: Peeters, 2005), 81–96. Cf. also: Raphaëlle Ziadé, \textit{Les martyrs Maccabées: de l’histoire juive au culte chrétien} (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 80; Leiden-Boston: Brill 2007), 258–288.

\textsuperscript{32} Sacrificial themes appear in several fourth- and fifth-century martyr homilies. I limit myself to some examples: Basil of Caesarea’s \textit{Homily on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste}, ch. 6 (PG 31, 508–526; Leemans, \textit{Let us die}, 68–76 (73); Gregory of Nazianzus, \textit{Homily 15 on the Maccabean Martyrs} (PG 35, 912–933; French translation: Ziadé, \textit{Les martyrs Maccabées}, 301–311).
(a phenomenon which we also encountered in the writings of Cyprian). The preparation of bread and wine at the beginning of the Eucharist is more and more explicitly considered to be an offering (brought by the faithful or the deacons) and often takes the character of an offering procession. Almost everywhere, the growing emphasis on the commemoration of the sacrificial death of Christ resulted in – and at the same time was further strengthened by – the insertion of the institution narrative. As a result of both developments greater prominence was given to the sacrificial character of the Eucharist.

5 Conclusion

Let me take stock of the foregoing observations about the function of the sacrificial metaphor in the three types of community in relation to the social structures that were characteristic of these communities, especially their group and grid dimensions. My overall impression is that there exists a notable congruence between these two factors.

1. The first two groups have a negative attitude in common towards the sacrificial rituals of both Judaism and the Roman Hellenistic world. Moreover, insofar as they were familiar with Christian rituals, these were rarely described in sacrificial terms. Obviously, there is a relationship between the rejection of the sacrificial rituals, especially those of the Jewish Temple, and the fact that early Christian communities tried to distinguish themselves from Judaism. Moreover, sacrificial motifs were only rarely associated with early Christian rituals because these rituals had hardly come into development. Still, the rejection of the Temple cult and of rituals fits in remarkably well with the ways in which the communities were structured, in particular with the weakness of the grid dimension in both types. The reason why the Gnostic groups in general were more fiercely anti-ritualistic than most other communities may

33 See for the Byzantine tradition, Robert Taft, The Great Entrance. A History of the Transfer of Gifts and other Pre-anaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 200; Roma: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1978); see for the Roman tradition: Josef Jungmann, Missarum sollemnia, 11, (Wien: Verlag Herder, 1952), 3–125 (3–34). Cf. for a comparison between Eastern and Western liturgical traditions: Gerard Rouwhorst, “The preparation of the gifts in the eucharistic liturgy,” jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek, 17 (2001), 213–236 (221–227).

34 See for instance Baldovin, “The Empire baptized,” 98–105.
be that not only the grid, but also the group dimension was weakly developed here, whereas it was very strong in the other communities.

2. The first two types differ most explicitly with regard to their attitude towards martyrdom, in spite of the fact that both were faced with it. I would suggest that this difference is closely connected with the strength of the group dimension in the first category and the weakness of it in the second. In case of external threat and persecution, strong group solidarity may strengthen the willingness to sacrifice one’s life for God or a higher purpose (and also for the sake of the ‘holy’ community), whereas a loosely knit community of spiritual searchers, which emphasizes the importance of finding one’s own spiritual path, will question the relevance of this ideal, or even ridicule it.

3. The spiritualizing of the ideal of martyrdom, which appears to be typical of stratified fourth-century churches, accords well with a community which is no longer threatened by persecution and begins feeling more at ease in society.

4. The fact that in these increasingly large-scale and stratified churches sacrificial notions are more frequently and explicitly applied to Christian rituals is first of all due to the spectacular growth of rituals in the fourth century, which stimulated the use of ritual terminology in general and sacrificial terminology in particular. This phenomenon, for its part, is closely related to the fact that fourth-century church communities became larger and were forced to strengthen their grid dimension.