

‘God is a Man-Eater’¹: Consumption Rituals and the Creation of Christianity

Under Roman Persecution

Christianity has been the well-known persecutor of a plethora of groups across history. How interesting it is, then, to consider that the root of Christian identity can be traced back to their own persecution under Roman state rule in Late Antiquity. There is literature from both Roman and Christian scholars that support that the Roman government saw Christians as deviant marginal groups who threatened the stability of society,² and persecuted them as such. However, it is important to note that the persecution began as more of a political convenience than from any real popular discontent. Looking at the similarities between Christian and pagan consumption rituals as observed by Roman authorities, intellectuals, and populace, this paper will consider how they affected the reputation that Christians carried with them in their very early history and how it contributed to their being targeted for persecution. Additionally, it will explore the Christian adoption of the structure of Roman social groups, and how, despite this shared tradition and the similarities between several aspects of Christianity and the Roman pantheon of gods, these similarities would serve to be the foundations on which Christians would further develop and differentiate themselves from the established Roman religion and society. To contrast, I will briefly explore how the Christians turned to the Gnostics as scapegoats for the reputation that they had earned for being murders, cannibals, and sexual deviants, and the Gnostic reaction, or lack thereof, to this attention. Unlike the mainstream Christian groups, the Gnostics did not take this moment in the hot-seat as an opportunity to outline a fully defined, standardized doctrine. Rather, they

¹ From “The Gospel of Philip,” *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: the Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts*, edited by Marvin Meyer, (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 170.

² Evangelos Avdikos, “Vampire Stories in Greece and the Reinforcement of Socio-Cultural Norms,” *Folklore* 124 (December 2013), 316.

remained a private, esoteric group, and eventually faded into obscurity by the time the New Testament was being compiled at the numerous ecumenical councils later in the fourth century. This only further serves to support the idea that the Roman persecution of Christians, and the Christian response to that persecution, is largely responsible for the fundamental development of early Christianity.

One of the earliest known instances of the Romans taking note of the odd behaviour of the unregulated religious groups known as Christians—so called after their founder³—comes from a letter that Pliny the Younger wrote to the Emperor Trajan in 112CE. In this letter, Pliny asks Trajan for counsel on how to deal with the crimes committed by the Christians. No explanation of the crimes is given, and it can be surmised that Trajan was familiar with the issues regarding Christians in his empire and thus, did not need any in depth justification for the trials. Already, we can see that the general perception of the Christians as criminals was so deeply ingrained by this time that neither Trajan nor Pliny appear to be in anyway shocked by these events.⁴ This was by no means the origins of the Christian persecution, but only one of many instances of casual acknowledgement from Roman politicians and thinkers. The earliest instance of the Christians being singled out as a threat to the community comes in 64CE, under the Emperor Nero, who used their marginalized presence as an explanation for the Great Fire of Rome.⁵ The Christians already had a bad reputation at this time, simply due to their secretive nature and mysterious practices, and

³ Most social groups in Rome were named after their leader or the god they worshipped, thus those who followed Christ were known as Christians. Robert Louis Wilkens, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 33.

⁴ Robert Louis Wilkens, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 32.

⁵ Robert M Grant, “Charges of ‘Immorality’ Against Various Religious Groups in Antiquity,” in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, eds. R. Van Den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 163.

thus proved to be easy targets.⁶ At this time, and indeed until the second century, Romans knew very little about the Christians,⁷ and for the Emperor to suddenly single them out for being ‘other’ implied the existence of a social crisis.⁸ While there were many socio-religious groups active within Rome, and indeed Christianity could have easily been incorporated into any number of them,⁹ the Christians refused to pay for the same license that would allow them to meet legally,¹⁰ and this directly contributed to the initial othering that had followed the Christians even before the Great Fire. From the beginning, Christianity had set itself out to be distinct from whatever society surrounded it and this process of dividing and labelling, both internally and externally, contributed to the creation of clearly defined groups,¹¹ and further supported recurring persecutions. In 251CE the Emperor Decius would target the Christians in an effort to promote social cohesion, and though academics such as Gervase Phillips hold firm that Decius did not intentionally seek out the Christians as scapegoats,¹² his focus ultimately landed on them as their previous reputation for deviance made it an easy option.¹³ And indeed the cycle of persecution was only exacerbated further.¹⁴ While it certainly was not an easy time for Christianity, the support for their othering “reflected conventional attitudes [that] are neither inaccurate nor unfair,”¹⁵ and further allows the

⁶ Gervase Phillips, “Deviance, Persecution and the Roman Creation of Christianity,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 2 (June 2016), 256.

⁷ Bart Wagemakers, “Incest, Infanticide, and Cannibalism: Anti-Christian Imputations in the Roman Empire,” *Greece & Rome* 57, no. 2 (October 2010), 342.

⁸ Avdikos, “Vampire Stories,” 316.

⁹ Phillips, “Roman Creation of Christianity,” 259.

¹⁰ Wilkens, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 37-39.

¹¹ Phillips, “Roman Creation of Christianity,” 252.

¹² *Ibid.*, 255.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Wilkens, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 32.

historian to better appreciate the “complex transactional relationship”¹⁶ that contributed significantly to the development of Christian identity.¹⁷

Though there were many factors contributing to the persecution of Christians, this essay will focus primarily on their consumption rituals such as the Eucharist, and how, through a lack of understanding, Roman citizens of all status came to associate them with the cannibalistic rituals they were familiar with as practiced by outlawed pagan groups such as the Bacchus mystery cults.¹⁸ While by the second century intellectuals such as Galen, Celsus, and Tacitus¹⁹ had begun to undertake a deeper investigation into the exact nature of the Christian religion,²⁰ the scholarship does not point to any known origin for the rumours from which popular knowledge of so called Christian cannibalism derived.²¹ Presumably, it originated from daily observations that people took note of and spread around, however it is also not clear to what extent the average Roman knew of Christian practice. They did know that the Christians deviated from Roman society in several noticeable, though relatively innocuous manners, such as the rejection of established washings and rituals,²² and their odd preoccupation with resurrection and the body.²³ The very fact that the nature of early Christianity was shrouded in secrecy was suspicious enough on its own, especially so when considered in tandem with the perceived reality of these night time gatherings in basements.²⁴ They were deemed to be related more closely to mystery cults than any state

¹⁶ Phillips, “Roman Creation of Christianity,” 251.

¹⁷ Wilkens, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 32.

¹⁸ Grant, “Charges of ‘Immorality’,” 161.

¹⁹ Wagemakers, “Incest, Infanticide, and Cannibalism,” 347-349.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 346.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 341.

²² Pheme Perkins, “Creation of the Body in Gnosticism,” in *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*, edited by Jane Marie Law, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 21.

²³ Perkins, “Creation of the Body in Gnosticism,” 22.

²⁴ Wagemakers, “Incest, Infanticide, and Cannibalism,” 343.

religion,²⁵ and thus Christians were shunned as pagan barbarians.²⁶ Whispers of cannibalism could have initially been a large leap taken to spice up the local rumor mill, and were later confirmed by investigations launched by intellectuals more actively involved in the official persecution of Christians. While the language of body and blood as portrayed by the sacrament of the Eucharist imitated sacrificial meal rituals of Greco-Roman Paganism,²⁷ it also closely resembled the cannibalistic Bacchanalia feasts that had been suppressed in 186BCE,²⁸ and thus, when paired with their secretive nature, lead to the accusations of human sacrifice and subsequent drinking of the blood and eating of the flesh.²⁹

In response to the Roman persecution and accusations of immoral behaviour, Christians fully embraced those aspects that made them suspect³⁰ rather than further shroud themselves in secrecy for their own safety. Not that there was a sudden flaunting of their perceived oddities, as many texts still counselled that they “do [their] best to be careful not to communicate to many people this book that the Saviour did not want to communicate even to all of us.”³¹ But these rituals, especially that of the communal meal, became even more central to their social life and identity.³² As had been previously stated, these Christian meals were built upon already existing Roman traditions that would have been instantly recognizable to any citizen, however the

²⁵ Though as previously stated and supported by Gervase Philips, Christianity also bore similarities to the Roman pantheon that would have allowed for its easy incorporation into the state religion had the Christians allowed this to happen.

²⁶ Albert Henrichs, “Pagan Ritual and the Alleged Crimes of the Early Christians: a Reconsideration,” in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, eds. Patrick Granfield and Josef A. Jungmann, (Aschendorff: Munster Westfalen, 1970), 18.

²⁷ Andrew McGowan, “Rethinking Eucharistic Origins,” *Pacifica* 23 (June 2010), 189.

²⁸ Grant, “Charges of ‘Immorality’,” 161.

²⁹ Henrichs, “Pagan Ritual and the Alleged Crimes of the Early Christians,” 20.

³⁰ Phillips, “Roman Creation of Christianity,” 265.

³¹ “The Secret Book of James,” *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: the Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts*, ed. Marvin Meyer, (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 23.

³² McGowan, “Rethinking Eucharistic Origins,” 179.

Christians appropriated them for their own means in honor of the Last Supper,³³ which would prove to be the single most defining quality of the religion as a whole. Much of the secondary literature would suggest that, as the Romans knew enough of Christianity to know they worshipped Christ and to label them as such,³⁴ it would be reasonable to presume that they knew of Christ's sacrifice and its significance. To hear then, that Christ ordered his followers to eat of his flesh and drink his blood "for [his] flesh is true food and [his] blood is true drink,"³⁵ as not only a sort of initiation ritual but to also affirm their dedication to the movement, it is quite logical for the Romans to have linked that doctrine to the literal sacrificial cannibalistic practices that they were familiar with from the Bacchus mystery cults. Indeed, as Albert J. Harrill writes

"while derived from the ritual language of early Christian eucharistic practices, anthropophagy proved especially useful [...] because it also celebrated the very cultural idiom of factionalism that defined [the] community ... [and] revaluated the cultural taboo of cannibalism in positive terms as a means of self-definition."³⁶

And though it may seem contradictory to embrace this factor that lead to such brutal persecution, Christian writers were also able to use it to further emphasize their own piety and how that differentiated them from the pagan barbarians, as most clearly illustrated in 1 Corinthians 10:20 where it is clarified that "what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God."³⁷ Thus the Christians were able to directly reject of any associations with paganism while still embracing the sacrificial nature of their religion and reaffirming their god as the one true Divine Ruler. 1

³³ McGowan, "Rethinking Eucharistic Origins," 183.

³⁴ Wilkens, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 33.

³⁵ John 6:55, NRSV.

³⁶ Albert J. Harrill, "Cannibalistic Language in the Fourth Gospel and Greco-Roman Polemics of Factionalism (John 6:52-66)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 1 (2008), 136.

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:20, NRSV.

Corinthians further displays Christian hypocrisy for their shaming of cannibalistic practices when it states that “all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.”³⁸ This shows a direct acknowledgement of the cannibalistic reality of the Eucharist, despite the fact that Christian writers would continue to deny it as literal rather than symbolic when defending themselves against Roman intellectuals. However, the same book gives historians a glimpse into the mindset of Christian scripture viewing the movement as superior to the rest of humanity when it berates its followers for “behaving according to human inclinations”³⁹ when they create conflict amongst themselves. This idea of superiority will further be displayed when the mainstream Christian scholars turn to the ‘heretical’ Gnostic groups to explain the deviant reputation they had gained in society, despite Gnosticism being based from, and indeed in some cases very similar to, Christian scripture.

Perhaps it was luck, or merely a manufactured convenience, that there existed an additional marginal group within Christianity itself on which the origins of their misattributed deviance could be placed. The Gnostic sects,⁴⁰ odd as they were with their disregard for the sacred flesh,⁴¹ insisting that “what is better than flesh is what animates flesh,”⁴² provided a natural target onto whom Christianity could focus the accusations of immoral behaviour.⁴³ It is not clear in the secondary literature when Christian intellects became aware of Gnostic groups, and it is almost certain that

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:27, NRSV.

³⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:15, NRSV.

⁴⁰ Only occasionally does the secondary literature differentiate between Valentinian and Sethian Gnosticism. Justin Martyr refers to Simon, Marcion, and ‘magicians not trusted by Christians’ (Chapter XXVI). Tertullian directly names the Valentinians “On the Flesh of Christ,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, eds. Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1918), 534. All of the primary documents I will be looking at are Valentinian, but I will be using ‘Gnostic’ as an umbrella term.

⁴¹ Tertullian, “On the Flesh of Christ,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, eds. Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1918), 524.

⁴² “The Treatise on Resurrection,” *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: the Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts*, ed. Marvin Meyer, (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 54.

⁴³ Grant, “Charges of ‘Immorality’,” 165.

non-Christians were unaware of their existence prior to the second century.⁴⁴ Intellectuals such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Eusebus were adamant that “the rites of libertine Gnostics were the precedent”⁴⁵ on which the Romans unknowingly based their persecution, while Clement and Irenaeus specifically blamed the Carpocratians.⁴⁶ However, Justin Martyr was careful to keep a distance in his texts, writing that “whether they [Gnostic heretics] perpetuate those fabulous and shameful deeds—the upsetting of the lamp, and promiscuous intercourse, and eating human flesh—we know not; but we know that they are neither persecuted nor put to death by you”⁴⁷ so as to avoid being accused of knowing too much of these Gnostic practices. Justin also brings to the forefront another interesting problem when he complains that the Romans had largely ignored the Gnostics during their inquisitions. Though Christian writers tried to redirect Roman attention, it does not appear to have ever been successful. Additionally, though, it would almost appear as if the Gnostics viewed themselves as impervious to persecution, as the Secret Book of James instructs that so long as they “listen to the word, understand knowledge, love life, [...] no one will persecute you and no one will oppress you other than yourselves.”⁴⁸ It is an interesting conundrum for the Christians to find themselves in, and further reiterates how Christianity allowed themselves to be so intrinsically shaped by the persecution they faced, despite viewing themselves as the superior social group. It shows the reciprocal relationship of othering that Gervase Philips emphasizes,⁴⁹ and how the Gnostics were seemingly unaffected by it, despite the constant

⁴⁴ Plotinus’ *Enneads*, one of the most notable instances of a non-Christian discussing the Gnostics, was not compiled until 270 CE.

⁴⁵ Henrichs, “Crimes of the Early Christians,” 28.

⁴⁶ Grant, “Charges of ‘Immorality,’” 166-167.

⁴⁷ Justin Martyr, “First Apology of Justin,” Chapter XXVI.

⁴⁸ “The Secret Book of James,” 27.

⁴⁹ Phillips, “Roman Creation of Christianity,” 252-253.

accusations from the most prominent scholars of the time, perhaps proving that Christianity had no influence and served no purpose other than as a scapegoat within Roman society.

Roman persecution was essential to the development of what would come to be known as Orthodox Christianity. While many Christian rituals were built upon pre-existing Roman social clubs, the secrecy with which these groups conducted themselves, and their refusal to adhere to bureaucratic formalities, ultimately placed a target upon their backs that only proved to strengthen their bonds and theologies rather than destroy them, as had happened to various mystery cults which the Romans accused the Christians of emulating. Nero's choice to focus on this outlying group, and the resulting interest that came with this focus from intellectuals trying to understand the 'other,' lead not only to these groups being identified as 'Christians,' but also the further, more intricate defining of the exact nature of the beliefs and practices that they would, or rather, should, all follow. Attacks from Roman intellectuals led to a flurry of response from Christian apologists, and from there a further defining of an additional deviant Christian group, the Gnostics. While the Gnostics themselves did not feature largely within this essay except as a scapegoat through whom the Christians could avoid their own persecution, it is further proof that persecution leads to a focused interest on defining marginal groups. It is especially interesting that in the case of the Christians, it is not the Roman intellectuals or politicians who are doing the defining to further their polemics. Rather, it was the Christians who took this opportunity to set themselves on the way to a standardization of practice and belief that would be finalized during the later great councils in the fourth and fifth centuries. Indeed, especially when compared to Gnostics and other early mystery cults, that the Orthodox Christians would choose to strengthen their group identity by embracing the factors of their practice being attacked by the Romans stands out significantly. Except for defenses written by Justin Martyr and other apologists, and the blatant attempts at

separating themselves from the Gnostic heretics, there was little attempt from the Christians to better integrate themselves into Roman society to avoid further scrutiny. Rather, choosing to embrace the passage from Matthew 5:10 in which Jesus states “blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,”⁵⁰ the Roman persecution was taken as a inevitability necessary to the movement as described in both orthodox and heterodox texts such as The Letters of Peter to Philip, which states that that Christians must “fight against the rulers [...] arm[ed] with [the] Father’s power,”⁵¹ and thus supports the idea that as much as persecution fulfilled Roman purposes, it also fulfilled, if not more so, one of the core Christian principles of suffering in the name of faith.

⁵⁰ Matthew 5:10, NRSV.

⁵¹ “The Letter of Peter to Philip,” *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: the Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts*, ed. Marvin Meyer, (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 591.

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