Some Theological and Hermeneutical Developments of the Earliest Eucharist: Discerning a Case for Contextual Theology

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This paper is part of a larger work, and although specially adapted for this seminar, the topic is still very broad and admittedly it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to do full justice to all its different aspects within the limit of our time. I shall, for this same reason, limit myself to the general outline of the most of the issues that will be raised in this paper. The theological and hermeneutical aspects are intricately connected and we can do better holding the two together. I shall discuss this first, before raising a few questions regarding the relevance of the earliest Eucharist for a specific context.

1. Background

Let me give a broad overview of the different theories of the origin of the Eucharist by way of introduction. Only very few scholars will today unquestioningly accept the view that the Last Supper is the direct antecedent of what today we would call the Eucharist. The NT reflects an ongoing tradition of the celebration of the Eucharist but it says next to nothing about its actual origin. The Synoptic accounts (Mtt.26: 17-30; Mk.14: 12-26; Lk.22: 7-38) and Paul's admonishing of the church at Corinth (1Cor.11: 23-26) imply that the Last Supper provided a model for its celebration. The community of Acts seems to have had 'the breaking of bread' as central to their fellowship (2: 38-42), and a handful of other NT references indicate a possible tradition of some form of communal meals. [1]

The difficulty in reconciling the different accounts of the Eucharistic words, coupled with John's discrepant chronology [2]and Paul's appeal to a tradition allegedly received directly from the Lord, together complicate the vexed question of the origin of the Eucharist. This has led to endless search for the

possible antecedents of the Eucharist and formulations of numerous theories about its origin.

One or the other of the many Jewish meals has often been suggested as the possible precursor of the Eucharist. Hans Lietzmann, [3] for example, first suggested that Jesus and his disciples formed haburoth and the Eucharist was eventually modelled on their haburah meals. G.H.C. Box argues that the Last Supper was a Sabbath Kiddush, which gradually evolved into a distinctly Christian rite, the Eucharist.[4]Similar to this is the theory that the Last Supper was a special Passover Kiddush, [5] or probably another Jewish religious meal, the 'pure dinner' (Cena pura) [6] which like the Kiddush was also a weekly occasion. Recently Hartmut Gese has drawn attention to some fascinating parallels between the Eucharist and the OT Zebah-todah sacrifice. He argues that this OT ritual, which was current at the time of Christ, provided the actual matrix for the practice of the Eucharist. He identifies the Last Supper as Christ's todah sacrifice offered as a prayer for delivery from his imminent death. The subsequent shared meals became for his followers a means of participation in his death and resurrection.

A more historical approach to the problem is one that seeks the origin of the Eucharist not in the practice of ancient meals but in the nature and development of liturgies or early Christian traditions. H. Lietzmann building on an idea originally propounded by Friedric Spitta [7] proposed that the key to the puzzle of the origin of the practice lies with the earliest or the most primitive liturgies. He identified the Egyptian liturgy of Sarapion and the Roman liturgy of Hippolytus as possibly the two earliest Christian liturgies, which independently evolved and gave rise to two distinct Eucharistic practices. The Egyptian liturgy is indirectly derived from the 'breaking of bread' of Acts through the Didache. This tradition is neither connected with the Last supper nor the death of Christ. He associated it with the Jerusalem church, and asserts that it must have been in continuity with the ordinary meals, which the disciples normally had with Jesus while he was still with them. It was characterised by expectation of imminent Parousia and anticipation of the final Messianic banquet. Lietzmann associates the Hippolytan liturgy with Paul who, according to him, instituted it in accordance with a special revelation. Its

special features include the emphasis on the memorial aspect of both the Last supper and the death of Christ, and it must have dominated and finally replaced the other form. A third notable protagonist of this theory, which commonly came to be known as the 'double origin theory', is E. Lohmeyer. [8] He held that the Jerusalem and Galilean churches practised different forms of Eucharist, which resulted due to separate development despite a common origin.

Oscar Cullmann [9] contends that the meals which Jesus had with his disciples during the numerous post-resurrection christophanies, must have given rise to the fellowship meals in Acts. It was Paul who finally transformed it into a rite which came to be associated with the remembrance of Christ's death and the last supper. Paul Drews [10] argued that the Eucharist originated from the practice of Jewish Sabbath and other festive meals from which the traditional grace, or the prayer of thanksgiving, were adapted to form a new Eucharistic liturgy. He cites Didache 9 and 10 as a possible description of a Christian version of such Jewish meals with chapter 14 indicating a later development which saw the linking of the Eucharist with the last supper and the death of Christ. The most recent and perhaps the most novel theory is one proposed by Bruce Chilton. He thinks that Jesus instituted it in opposition to the corrupt temple worship. He sees this in what he called "Jesus' occupation of the temple" and 'his sacrificial program,' which arose out of Jesus' radical teaching of a new 'halakhah of purity.'[11]

The search for the origins of the Eucharist could be grouped into two. The first approach is that which seeks its provenance in Jewish meals with a view that at least one type evolved into becoming the Christian rite. The other sees the practice as directly going back to Jesus' meal tradition with his disciples. A few parallels and ingenious conjectures are about the best of evidence often advanced for either of this argument. A third way of looking at the problem is here proposed. It would be reasonable to recognize that there must have been a gradual development of a 'ritual dimension' of worship, as Christianity increasingly became a 'religious entity.' The growth must have taken different forms but the Eucharist eventually became the central rite replacing, or at least providing alternative to the symbolic and ritual function of the traditional

sacrifices. One biblical scholar who uses an approach based on the 'history of religious ideas' to explicate the rise of Christianity from its Judaic cradle into becoming an autonomous religious group is Gerd Theissen. His methodology, if not all of his conclusions, provides helpful insights if judiciously applied in tackling the contentious issue of the origin of the Eucharist.

2.1 Gerd Theissen: "The building of a semiotic cathedral."[12]

Theissen argues that Christianity became an independent religious entity owing to its successful construction of what he called "a new religious sign system" built on the foundation of the Jewish religion. He describes the process metaphorically as a "building of a semiotic cathedral," in which "its building material consists of signs in three different forms: a sign language consisting of myth and history; a prescriptive sign language consisting of imperatives and evaluations; and a ritual sign language consisting of the primitive Christian sacraments of baptism and Eucharist."[13] He argues that primitive Christianity developed a narrative, which effectively created a new and distinct mythical dimension of their religion, a ritual system, and set of ethical convictions, which gradually shaped the identity of the group as distinct and separate from Judaism its mother religion.
Theissen examines the origin and development of the ritual dimension of early Christianity in a much wider scope than just the development of the Eucharist. He outlines how, "the new ritual sign language of primitive Christianity arose out of prophetic symbolic actions with which John the Baptist and Jesus delivered their eschatological message (in latent opposition to the traditional rites)." [14] He asserts that the new ritual system only developed to contend with the traditional rituals because of the sacrificial interpretation of the death of Jesus, which became the basis and the theological reference for the new rites.

2.2 Eucharistic origin: a suggestion

We can postulate how the evolution of the Eucharist could possibly fit within Theissen's proposed 'building of the semiotic cathedral.' The first Christians

who met in each other's homes shared meals together. Opening their home to others, and sharing of food and other material belongings may have had hand in the rise of distinct groups like the 'community of goods' of Acts. The sharing of meals may initially have been naturally practised as an expression of acceptance, hospitality, love, and perhaps to help the poor as R. Davies [15]suggests. The fact that Jesus regularly shared meals with his followers may also have created a precedent to continue an already established table fellowship. [16]

It would be natural that such meals following the traditional patterns would have begun and concluded with prayers of thanksgiving. Since the believers have found a new focus of belief, Jesus Christ, in whose name they met, it is likely that the prayers of thanksgiving must have had some form of reference to him. [17]E. Kilmartin, drawing on parallels with Jewish prayers thinks that, "the early Christian version probably contained a brief benediction, followed by a thanksgiving prayer referring to Christ, and a petition for the coming of the kingdom." [18]Since the early Christians also gradually detached themselves from their traditional religious roots, such physical participation as in a meal in the context of socio-cum-religious gatherings must have played a psychological role in filling the vacuum created by the ritual dimension of the worship system that they left behind. The traditional ritual dimension of worship provided the means of atonement and union with God, and for the early Christianity to become a sustainable religious entity some aspect of their worship must have developed to provide this dimension.

3. Hermeneutical and theological development

Theissen sees the building of what he called the 'semiotic cathedral' in the wider context of a development of a whole 'ritual sign language' of which the birth and development of primitive Christian religion takes shape in the most simplistic narrative of Mark until a visible autonomy of Christianity as a religious system begins to emerge in John. The basic elements for him are baptism and the Eucharist, which in the light of the sacrificial interpretation of the death of Christ, became invested with the necessary weight and power to be able to replace the traditional 'sign system.' A close scrutiny shows that his proposal is a feasible hegemonic structure. We also need to point out that although the Christian 'sign system' was largely metaphorical, a literal aspect of the ritual of the shared meals gradually developed in 'conceptual correspondence' with the traditional rituals becoming a 'new form of religious rite.'

This aspect is present only in germ in the NT but is well articulated in most of the post-NT early Christian writings from about the end of the first century onwards. The NT, specifically the Pauline and Lukan narratives directly link the Eucharist with the Last Supper. The imperative 'do this' bears a liturgical connotation and it may be specifically cultic. The anamnetic injunction and the Passover setting also reveal a profound theological agenda. Despite the differences in the wordings and emphasis, an intricate interweaving of three hermeneutical features: the Christ event, the Hebrew Scriptures, and a cultic conceptual correspondence undergird the theology of the narratives. It is interesting to note that all these three factors, i.e. the death of Christ, the scriptures (particularly the Passover typology drawing mainly on the relevant Exodus pericope and the 'new covenant' motif from Jeremiah 31:31), and a liturgical framework drawing on traditional cultic concepts, betray sacrificial language. This suggests one important conclusion: that the growth towards an autonomous religious entity was greatly shaped by a conceptual framework deeply steeped in 1) the Hebrew Scriptures, 2) temporal and contextual environment but as continually reshaped by a third factor 3) a christocentric hermeneutic through which the old concepts were constantly refilled with new meanings. I shall very briefly mention how these factors were used in the building of a ritual system to which the Eucharist became central.

3.1 Context oriented use of cultic concepts

It is not clear how early the first Christians' realised the ultimate soteriological significance of the death of Christ. The book of Acts indicates a burst of evangelistic activity only after the Pentecost. The first recorded sermons do not seem to emphasis the death of Christ as much as it is keen in explicating his identity as the promised messiah and that salvation can only be found in the name of Jesus. The resultant community reflects the urgency with which the gospel was preached, devoting all their time in meeting with one another and sharing what they had perhaps in anticipation of the expected imminent return of the messiah. The 'breaking of bread,' one of the many things that they did together, seems to be a normal sharing of meals with no special ritual dimension to it. This is more so in the light of the fact that they, after all, continued temple worship. We observe a different scenario with the Gentile converts. Discouraged from participating in the Pagan cults and with no access to the Jewish worship, this must have spelt a new crisis for them. In a world saturated with sacrifices it must have been difficult for them accepting or coming into terms with worship without sacrifices.

Sacrifice been the principle means of atonement in the ancient world and more or less synonymous with worship, it is not in the least surprising that the gentile converts sort after communion with other gods, despite accepting the all-sufficiency of Christ's redemptive name. Theissen aptly summaries their dilemma: "As they separated from their old cults, they could no longer sacrifice in the framework these had provided. But at the same time, since they were uncircumcised, they had no access to the Jewish sacrificial cult in the temple. … The first Gentile Christians probably hoped that one day the temple would be open to them and that then they too could take part in Jewish sacrificial worship." [19] We know that this hope was never realised. Paul could have stepped in to provide his churches with a functional equivalent in the practice of the Eucharist, to meet the need of a ritual dimension of the new faith, but also to dissuade his converts from returning to the sacrificial cult of idol worship, i.e. the 'double communion' of which he speaks in his first Corinthian correspondence. The origin of the use of sacrificial interpretation with regard to the Eucharist can indeed be traced back to Paul with a fair degree of certitude.

3.1.1 "The Lord's supper" and "your own supper"

Scholarly search for the beginning of the use of sacrificial language in explicating the nature of the Eucharist, have often resorted to philological analysis of the terms and concepts used in the institutional narratives. Jesus' words of interpretation, blood, body coupled with concepts such as covenant and the anamnestic aspects, 'do this' and 'in memory of me,' could and have rightly been argued to bear sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist. I suggest, however, that what could be considered as the genesis of the idea of Eucharist as a sacrifice is adumbrated in Paul's first Corinthian correspondence. [20] The development is no more seminal than what could be concluded on the philological grounds but, nevertheless, the structure for the building of a 'ritual sign language' is here more visibly beginning to emerge in the practice and concept of the Eucharist. Paul's primary concern is ethical[21] but the picture he paints of the Eucharist, or rather what it ought to be is revealing. He compares the Christian Eucharist to the Exodus manna provisions but also to a sacrificial worship where eating what has been offered on the altar signifies a communion with the deity to whom the offering was made. [22] In his use of these analogous parallels Paul seems to anticipate the later Christian development, which, drawing on typological interpretation of the OT prophecy of the 'pure sacrifice' of Malachi 1:11, saw the Eucharist as the replacement of the sacrifices of the OT.[23]

In I Cor.11: 17-22 Paul contrasts what he calls "the Lord's supper" and "your own supper." (11:20, 21). Theissen observing this distinction argues that Paul

was attempting to offer a theological framework for the church's meal.[24]He also points out that the division was due to discrimination against the poor by the rich, with the latter keeping their contribution to themselves or sharing out too little or only food of poor quality. It is clear that the Corinthians behaved as though they did not recognise that what they brought to the church was no longer their "own supper," but the Lord's. Lietzmann, also noting this distinction writes that the meal degenerated from the Lord's Supper into an ordinary meal. [25] It could, however, be possible that Paul may be deliberately seizing an opportunity to aid a transition from a 'semi-religious' meal into a full and central ritual of worship. Paul seems to be arguing that the church meal should be treated as a religious rite. Seen against Paul's creative milieu, we know that the food, after due graces said, no longer belongs to the provider but becomes the possession of the deity with whom one enjoys communion. A cultic parallel, and possibly from a Hellenistic background, seems to be in view. The thought, for example, closely corresponds to a narrative in Oxyrhynchus Papyri where food brought by two friends, Chaeremon and Antonius, to dine together "at the table of Lord Serapis," ceases to be their own after the blessing. [26]

G.H.C. Macgregor, observing the striking parallel between this reference and Paul's arguments comments that, "Chaeremon and Antonius no doubt provide the food; but it has first been offered to the god, has been consecrated to him in sacrifice, and the table is therefore "the table of the Lord Serapis." So at the Supper the guests provide the bread and wine which when consecrated constitute the table and the Supper as "the Lord's." [27]The interchange between the 'Lord's Supper' and 'your own supper' infers different levels of interpretations. The 'dining with the Lord' imagery is a cultic category, which, whether Paul uses it consciously or unreflectively, nevertheless, betrays his understanding of the Christian sacrament as similar to those of his own, or at least his readers' background. [28]

Paul's idea of the oneness of the shared bread, similarly strikes a note with identifiable traditional Hellenistic cultic concepts. Dennis Smith and Hal Taussig in their book, Many Tables cite, for instance, specific meal traditions of Paul's day with which Paul's ideas regarding the 'oneness' of the common

bread, can be closely identified. We also know that, "Plutarch, for example, refers to the same idea in connection with the sharing of wine: [when he writes,] 'indeed, just as the wine must be common to all, so too the conversation must be one in which all will share.'" [29] Such meals were essentially sacrificial, and the participants believed that a table fellowship with a deity provides a mystical union with the god in whose honour the sacrifice is offered. It was a means of sharing in the immortal nature of the divine.

The parallel helps to elucidate the sense in which Paul contrasts the Corinthians' 'own supper' with what, following consecration, should have become 'the Lord's supper.' The thought could possibly also not be foreign to the Jewish mind as such phrase as "eating at the king's table," already present in Ezekiel (41:22) and recurring in some later Rabbinic writings[30], provides a close parallel. A similar thought is also found in Philo. [31] Paul could easily have had in mind such ideas from his own background or, using some foreign but familiar parallels if he may be "consciously digging in a field of thought that is not his own." [32]

In the light of this observation, Macgregor raises an important question: "Is it possible that we have here a hint of how it was that the Eucharist gradually came to be regarded as a sacrifice offered by the worshipper to God?" [33] This could, of course, be credited to a commonly shared conceptual frame of reference and potentially dismissible as a sheer coincidence. There is, however, a strong possibility that Paul's pagan converts, having come from such a background, could have made a cognitive transference of their traditional ritual practices and in some ways identified it with their experience in the Eucharist. The bringing of food and the dining together in a worship context identified very closely, at least in form, with their practice of the table fellowship in which they offered food as a means of participation in the altar of a deity. Paul certainly seems to confirm that the Eucharist (at least the meal) provided a parallel with the traditional sacrificial meal. His rhetorical questions, in the context of comparing Israel's "participation in the altar," and of "food sacrificed to idols" affirms this view. (10: 16-21). If Paul may be the originator of this idea, could he be deliberately advocating that the Eucharist be recognised as a Christian equivalent or as an alternative or replacement of

the traditional sacrifices? Could he be seen as clearly portraying an evangelistic motive by conscientiously providing a contextually appropriate furnishing to 'the semiotic cathedral?'

Austin Farrer argues that, although Paul compares the Eucharist with traditional sacrifices, the text in question contains no indication that the church at Corinth offered what they brought to the Church. In his criticism of Kilpatrick's essay, "The Eucharist in the NT" in Revue de théologie et de philosophie (Geneva, 1964), he asks: "How can we say that St. Paul's churches consecrated bread or wine by offering it to God, when, to all evidence, they did not offer it at all?" He further argues that, "At a later time when the people's gifts were brought to the altar purely for sacramental or for charitable use, it was very natural they should be seen as oblations. But St. Paul's Christians brought their dinner to the ecclesia, to eat it with their neighbours after due graces said. They did not offer anything; nor is there any suggestion of any such action, either in the Institution-Narrative or in St. Paul's comments." [34] Farrer's contention is clearly, and perhaps unfortunately the best example of a misguided anti-sacrificial reading of an ancient text through the eyes of the Reformation. When exactly was the transition made from the time when gifts were offered in the church and the assumed time when the practice was not yet in place? If he admits that it was natural for the people to have perceived their gifts as oblations at a later time, why would it not have been natural for the Corinthians, sharing food in a worship context, to understand their sharing of food as oblations?

The Corinthian meal was not, or at least it was not meant to be, an ordinary meal. It was shared, or was to be shared in a worship context. Although there could not have been a world of difference between a social or religious occasion, why would blessing over food, with possible reference to a 'new Lord,' lack some sacrificial connotations? Indeed as Léon-Dufour[35]argued, the early Eucharistic prayers show closer similarities in language with the hodayah / eucharistia more identifiable with the todah sacrifice than with ordinary Jewish meal graces. The Jewish meal-prayers, too, anyway, including the birkat-ha-mazon, carried sacrificial overtones, [36]and it is likely that the earliest meal-graces must have been influenced at least in their

wordings. Paul's emphasis on the supper as the Lord's and his advice that homes are the right places for ordinary meals, further suggests that a liturgical rite is expected to differentiate the 'Lord's supper' from the ordinary. [37]Not that this may necessarily imply a sacrifice, but the distinction, seen against Paul's use of cultic language and the religious background of his church, hints at early pointers towards the understanding of Eucharist as a sacrifice. After all worship setting of the meal itself reinforces such an understanding, even if it was not meant to be a sacrifice in the first place. If we would have had an opportunity to ask "some contemporary of St. Paul or Seneca," in the words of F.C. Burkitt, "what he understood by worship," the picture would not be "a group of little girls in the picturesque old-fashioned charity-children's costume, singing" but "much more like a butcher's shop or an open-air kitchen." Because "to the inhabitant of the ancient world worship and sacrifice were inseparably connected." [38]

Paul is clearly drawing on parallels, which place the Eucharist in the same conceptual framework as the 'forms' of the sacrificial parallelism he uses. It is likely that his Christians would share the same or a similar conceptual framework with him. As Macgregor in agreement with Ramsay[39] observes, the new Christians were naturally "inclined to regard the religious blessing offered by their new faith as substantially the same as that offered by other cults with which they were familiar - immortality through union with the god - and were still to seek multiplication of grace by participation in the rites of more than one cult."[40]Paul seems to bring to their attention that what they have in the Eucharist is sufficient and that the Corinthian supper was not meant to be their own but the Lord's. The church table of fellowship was meant to be "the Lord's table." From Paul's assumptions, there must have been some form of consecration, which marked the transfer of the meal to the Lord's possession. Given such close parallels from the worshipper's background, the Eucharist must have been perceived in parallelism with the traditional sacrifices, and possibly as an actual sacrifice, but definitely as providing a ritual 'functional equivalent' or an 'alternative' worship rite to the traditional sacrifices.

3.2 Hebrew Scriptures as proof texts

The evolution of the Christian social meal into becoming the Christian sacrifice must have initially been unique to Pauline churches. The Jerusalem churches never broke away from the temple worship and possibly the need for an alternative sacral meal was not an issue for them. The christological references in their communal meals must have concentrated on the memory of Christ's earthly life but more so his anticipated return. In the Pauline, mainly Gentile churches, what initially begun as social meals have by the end of the first century become the central rite of integration. It was open only to the initiates who after incorporation into the body of Christ through baptism, were in the fashion of the traditional mystery cults, allowed access of communion with the archetypal redeemer. In this sense it became a sacral meal marking what some scholars have called the 'intramural and extramural' boundaries. With time we observe an emergence of a distinctive hermeneutical development in effort to coordinate the evolved worship practice with theology. The meal tradition which in any case would have become ritualised through repeated practice in parallelism with traditional categories, and more so perhaps influenced in this direction by deliberate contextualisation, has by the end of the first century acquired a technical name, the Eucharist. Interesting to note is that by this time the Eucharist had become the accepted Christian material oblation par excellence. The Christians turned to the Hebrew Scriptures, (their official scriptures at the time), for proof texts to justify their practice of the Eucharistic sacrifice. One text, Mal.1: 10-14 became particularly helpful in this regard. I shall briefly say more on this text, but first let me mention, if only in passing, a few other references which shows how the OT sacrifices became a hermeneutical matrix for the Christian Eucharist.

One Christian writer, Clement of Rome, writing to the church at Corinth around about AD.96, exhorts that the Christian rite must be performed in accordance with strict ritual laws on the model of the OT rituals. He likens the Eucharistic celebrant to the OT priest and directs that the liturgical order, officiate, time, and place must all confirm to the Levitical pattern on which the Eucharistic sacrifice is supposedly modelled. [41]The Didache, another Christian writing from about the same time as Clement's letter, speaks of Christian high priests, prophets, priests and deacons and regards the Eucharist as a Christian sacrifice. Using also OT sacrifices as a type of the Christian service, it directs that "all the first fruit offering of the produce of the wine press and threshing floor, of cattle and sheep be given to the prophets, [and it adds] for they are your high priests."[42]The manual also takes over the OT ritual requirements of purity and liturgical preparations including confessions before communion, showing that its congregation adopted the Eucharist as the direct replacement of the OT sacrifices.

Justin Martyr writing in the mid second century also employs the OT cult as a hermeneutical framework to interpret the Eucharist. He taught that while the OT rituals sets a typological pattern, the Christian sacrifices fulfils and brings the old to completion. He specifically singles out the OT offering of minha and writes that, "the offering of fine flour that was prescribed for those cleansed of leprosy was a prefiguration of the bread of the Eucharist." Irenaeus similarly using the OT as the model for the Christian rite writes that the difference between the Christian sacrifice of the Eucharist and the OT offerings "is one of species, not genus." [43] For him, the Eucharist is the sacrifice of the 'new covenant.' The general use of the OT model shows how the Eucharist took the place of the traditional sacrifices, becoming a 'functional equivalent' for the new religion. A great need to emphasis the continuity arose to counteract accusations of human innovations. The Hebrew Scriptures proved a great source for the justification of a practice, which increasingly become the central rite of the Christian worship. Beside these typological references Mal 1: 10 -14 as earlier mentioned, perfectly met the need. The text reads: "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 [LXX -??s?a ?a?a??, 'pure sacrifice']; for my name is great among the nations says the Lord of hosts."

This OT prophecy has generally been accepted, in the words of Rowan Williams as, the 'roots of a metaphor' for the early Christians' Eucharistic sacrifice. [44] Williams assumes that the Fathers' fulfilment-interpretation of Malachi's 'pure sacrifice,' provided the early Christians with a metaphor for their sacrificial language, which came to be applied to the Eucharist. He is not alone in assuming that the early Christians' understanding of Eucharistic sacrifice was metaphorical or that Malachi's prophecy provided the thought form and the language in which the practice came to be expressed. E.M.B. Green, for example, in answer to the question of how the Fathers came to use sacrificial terms for their Eucharist, asserts that the precedent for such a language is lacking in either what Jesus taught or the NT, and that: "the fons et origo of the idea was a text in Malachi, which was widely regarded as a prophecy of the Eucharist in the second and third centuries." [45] This

argument easily overlooks the fact that this prophecy came only to be applied to what through repeated practice had become ritualised replacing traditional sacrifices.

The passage was indeed a scriptural proof text, which became handy only when a distinctive practice of ritual system was in place. It is interesting that its use only begins to appear at a time when Christianity seem to have separated itself from its Judaic root [46] and began to define itself as a distinct 'religious group.' The first direct quote is found in the Didache, it is alluded to in Clement's letter to the Corinthians, and reproduced verbatim by all leading second and third century writers including Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage. It seems likely that the text was not part of the raw material for the building of the 'semiotic cathedral' but a scriptural resource, which was appealed to, to justify the end of a process. Clearly the 'roots' or the source of the Eucharistic sacrificial language was in the context. The Christians' milieu and conceptual framework naturally influenced the language in which they expressed what they did in the Eucharist, but this had to be justified or authenticated in the light of the scripture.

3.3 The Death of Christ

Given that Christ was the key subject of early Christians' belief and discourse, it was only a matter of time before the practice of the Eucharist came to be interpreted in the light of the Christ event. The question of a perpetual sacrifice and the ephapax claim of the epistle of Hebrews may not have been a problem for a long time. It is, indeed, only with time that we see how the sacrifice of the Eucharist increasingly became linked with the sacrifice of the cross. The earliest documents, for example, the Didache, actually lacks any reference to the death of Christ in its Eucharistic prayers. This fact also makes it plain that the Luke-Paul narratives are the only explicit Eucharistic texts of the so-called institutional narratives. If Paul, as I pointed out, influenced the transformation of the social meals held in his churches into becoming a sacrificial communion meals, it is likely that the anamnestic injunction, and the whole Last Supper connection, must have been as a result of a conscious

theologising which provided the emergent practice with an aetiological framework, and therefore, a theological justification and authority.

From the beginning of the second century onwards, it seems to be commonly accepted that the offerings of the church, including both spiritual prayers and material oblations through the offerings of the Eucharist, provided the means of participation in the one ultimate sacrifice of Christ. Ignatius of Antioch, martyred some time towards the end of the second decade of the second century, explicitly links the Eucharist with the sacrifice of Christ, not that Christ is offered in the Eucharist but that the act of the Eucharist provides a salvific unity through participation in the death of Christ. Justin Martyr and Irenaeus notably reproduce the words of institutions, and both seem to follow Paul in their theological thoughts if not in exact wordings. In this connection, Justin emphasises the anamnestic function of the Eucharistic sacrifice but also appeals to the incarnation as a model to interpret what happens in the Eucharist, whereas the resurrection becomes the central focus for Irenaeus. Important to note for our purpose is that the christological interpretation only seems to arise at a secondary level of development. The basic or primary hermeneutical framework is provided by the early Christians' Sitz im Leben, or actual context. It was the Hebrew Scripture and the traditional conceptual framework that first and foremost shaped the evolution of the Eucharist into becoming a functional equivalent fulfilling a ritual dimension of the new religion. Justin, for example, appeals to Eucharistic practice in his argument against the charges of atheism. He argues that the Christians do offer sacrifices in the Eucharist, and that therefore, they are not atheists. The argument clearly draws on the traditional concept that sacrifice was more or less synonymous with worship. Irenaeus also emphasises the materiality of the Eucharist, drawing on parallels of first fruit offerings of the traditional sacrifices to refute the Gnostics' denial of humanity of Christ. It is, however, in bringing it into relationship with the Christ event that a distinctive Eucharistic theology seems to emerge. Its role, for example, in the divine economy of salvation gets clarified, and that its effectiveness as a ritual power is greater than that of the traditional rituals, which it replaces, because of its link with the ultimate and all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ.

4. Discerning a case for contextual theology

The foregoing discussion has been very sketchy but we can at least make the following key points. 1) The early Eucharist evolved into becoming a functional equivalent replacing the traditional sacrifices. As a ritual power, it played a key role in the definitive process that saw Christianity evolve into a distinct and viable 'religious entity.' 2) It provided a ritual dimension in the Christian's building of a semiotic system, which without it the Gentile Christians with no ritual alternative would have found it very difficult to make it a spiritual home. 3) As a ritual force, Eucharist met an intrinsic human need for communication and communion with the divine, as well as providing them with a hermeneutical key to interpret the reality of God's salvation. It is this aspect of ritual power that I would like to emphasis as a valuable contextual theological paradigm for any context today.

The early Christians intricately built a ritual world that they came to inhabit, as they left behind their traditional abode and gradually became a 'religious entity.' The Eucharist evolved from a social meal into a central rite of their worship, fulfilling an essential role in the divine-human relationship. It successfully provided a 'functional equivalent' to the traditional sacrifices. In the light of the Christians' use of 'scriptural proofs' to explain it, and not least the new hermeneutics that came to relate it to the sacrifice of Christ, the believers were convinced that the Eucharistic sacrifice did not only 'replace' the traditional sacrifices, but had more efficient 'ritual power' because of its relationship to the ultimate sacrifice.

By the fourth century, the thought of the Eucharist as a sacrifice was already strongly established. "The theological and liturgical trends in subsequent ages led to a particular concentration upon the Eucharist as the offering of the church or the priest." [47] This was the official view throughout the medieval church up to even the time of Reformation. Indeed with time the view was so taken for granted that it was never an issue as was, for example, the doctrine of real presence. The subject tops the agenda again only with the Reformation. What we see with the Reformation is that the concept of sacrifice was censored and almost totally eliminated. G. Aulen points out that

one common criticism of the Reformation is that, despite valuable achievement, "its polemic against Rome obscured the idea of sacrifice in the Lord's Supper and therefore lost something that was essential both for the ancient church and in the NT." [48] This is true such that even where the connection with the sacrifice of Calvary was in view, the use of sacrificial language was rendered superfluous unless as an expression of the human participation at a solely 'spiritualised' level. Christ is received not carnally but spiritually, not by mastication but by faith, and the elements are inconsequential beyond communicating such spiritual reality.

The legacy of the Reformation is that the ritual dimension of worship, which had intricately evolved around the offering of the Eucharist in the early church, was greatly undervalued, and its significance reduced to two aspects: a) symbolism or a testimony of salvation already achieved, and b) memorial of Calvary, incorporating some 'form' of communion. This development has enormous implications for faith and religious practice in general. What happens, for example, to the practical functions that ritual serves, including the shaping of a unique identity of its common participants, setting both intramural and extramural boundaries for such community, and defining and modelling social, moral, and spiritual dimensions that are essential constituents for a living faith?

The polemics against sacrifice that began in the ancient world among Pagan and Jews alike, never at any point succeeded in going beyond moralised spiritualization of the concept. The Reformation may be said to have succeeded in marginalizing ritual performances with regard to all forms of material offerings, at least within its particular church traditions. The doctrine of justification by faith and the finality of the cross were so rigidly interpreted that there could be no room for a human role in salvation except receiving it by faith and living it in thanksgiving. It is true to our day that many would be confused as to what connection there could possibly be between 'sacrifice' and the Eucharist. The concept of sacrifice, if not its practice, however, has shown enduring ability and defied inattention. R.J. Coates notes that modern times have not only seen "the revived interest in the doctrine of the Eucharistic sacrifice," but also that it has proved "the most debated

theological issue of our day." [49] Y. Brilioth, although lamenting that Christianity lost the centrality of such an important concept as sacrifice in the Reformation, nevertheless argues that, "any doctrine of a material presentation made by man to God must involve the paganising of the church's worship." [50] that any doctrine, which marginalizes the ritual dimension of worship, impoverishes the 'sacral act' to a point of 'secularising' it. There might be very little difference between a religious gathering that lacks a ritual dimension, and any common social gathering. - except probably in the nature of their discourse and the manner in which they conduct their business. Humans are by nature ritualistic, and need such a dimension to engage with the transcendent reality. P.J. Fitzpatrick rightly observes, "ritual involves the whole person, for it is the whole person that it summons to the journey it involves. The whole person involves heart as well as head, habit and association as well as articulated speech; and the whole person is summoned by a ritual within a tradition to which so many others have already belonged." [51] The Eucharist, in my view, has tremendous potential as a fruitful theological practice and wisdom, that can build and enrich a holistic, fulfilled personality in fellowship with the 'participatory community', if it is allowed to be the 'ritual that can summon the whole person.'

I come from a Kenyan context and belong to an evangelical tradition which pays very little attention to the 'ritual dimension' of worship. A great majority of Kenyans are first or second generation Christians, and many more are yet to be reached or are only beginning to 'seek' Christian faith. Many of these communities, either to date actively practice animal and other forms of material offerings or are only beginning to abandon such forms of worship. It could be true that even those who may have left it behind still ascribe to a religious conceptual reference that comprehends reality, both mundane and supramundane, and the relationship of one with the other in terms of 'ritual dynamics.' The alternative to their 'traditional religions,' if it is a Christian tradition which generally disparages or pays little attention to 'sacrifices' or the 'ritual dimension' of religion, often fails to provide adequate spiritual satisfaction because of its failure to identify and provide an appropriate 'functional equivalent.' The close association of worship with sacrifices or

generally with rituals in the traditional religions makes it very difficult for a 'convert' to comprehend or accept an alternative faith practice, which seems to lack or de-emphasises the ritual dimension of worship. It causes a confusion, which blurs an otherwise clear demarcation between the sacred and the secular. The crisis is comparable to that of the first Gentile Christian communities.

Such confusion carries a potential danger either leading to secularism or more likely a search for an alternative spiritual home in the wrong places. W.D. Spencer in a recent article [52] observes that, "in various African countries a revival of African traditional religions is happening under the political-cultural rubric of 'national identity,' and with them clandestine human sacrifices are being promoted." Asserting that the problem is not unique to Africa alone, he also observes that, western cultures too are similarly "experiencing a resurgence of paganism in the neo-pagan movements." [53] Unfortunately his suggestion for a solution is based on a typically rigid Protestant's application of the ephapax claim of Hebrews. His argument is that "Because Jesus Christ was sacrificed, no one needs to give sacrifice or to be sacrificed." He further asserts that, "Loss of this truth provides an explanation for both the continuation of demands for sacrifice and the reintroduction of such requirements today." [54] This argument combining some basic truths with serious misconceptions can be grossly misleading.

Conclusion

Unless there are suitable 'functional equivalents,' a search for a fulfilling ritual dimension of worship is bound to arise in any context. Ruth Gledhill, in an article entitled, "Our new Dark Age," in a recent Times Supplement, [55] which is indeed an adapted version of a lecture to be given, according to the Supplement, tomorrow at the university of Newcastle, writes that the Western world is coming close to a moral bankruptcy, increasingly "using up the moral capital laid down by past generations." She argues, that, "if the existence of religion suggests that man has a biological need to strive for something higher or beyond himself, the present vacuum in religious belief is frightening because nature abhors a vacuum." She observes how market capitalism has

taken over traditional images of the attributes of God, and how "Scientists are another set of new high priests, in exclusive possession of knowledge which is inaccessible to the majority of the population, much as literacy, and hence the bible, was out of the reach of the masses during the ages when monasticism held sway. My real concern, however, is the far more serious possibility of a return to and a belief in magic, animism and paganism." [56] Indeed her concern is confirmed by almost all-recent research on the subject. Loren Wilkinson, for example, in a recent article, expounds on the current trends of neo-pagan movements and explains the factors behind the rise of Paganism. [57] He observes how modernity and increasing secularisation have led to "a kind of inner Angst," and a quest for personal fulfilment and that "it is in such a search that 'neo-paganism' has surfaced for many as an attractive alternative." [58]

It is not too difficult to figure out why it has proved such an 'attractive alternative.' In the words of a self confessed pagan, listen to what it has to offer:

> "I am pagan. I celebrate the changing seasons, the turning of the wheel of the year. I celebrate with singing, dancing, feasting, rituals, and in other ways. I celebrate each turn of the wheel with personal spiritual practices and by taking part in community festivals." [59]

A reformed post-reformation Christianity has ever overemphasised the basic gospel truth of salvation by faith alone. Although it rightly fosters a strong doctrinal and ethical, and perhaps moral dimension, there is often very little reference to all other dimension of what a practical and a living faith should encompass. A practising believer may find satisfaction in ethical and moral principles to live by, but a faith that lacks a ritual dimension is only a step far from secularism - 'the vacuum that nature abhors.' One needs a means of communing with the divine to find a viable spiritual abode and a means to help realise the immanence of a transcendent God. There is a need to strengthen the ritual dimension of our faith. I suggest that the Eucharist is a powerful ritual and can also provide a 'hermeneutical effectiveness' to reveal and communicate the basis of Christian truth, and to shape and enrich our spirituality. The basic question is: how best can the 'Eucharistic sacrifice' be

interpreted 'contextually' in a way that it may provide a 'functional equivalent' for communities who on accepting Christianity are leaving behind a 'ritual key' into the understanding of their world? How best can the Eucharist be allowed to be the ritual that, in the words, of Fitzpatrick, 'summons the whole person?'

Notes:

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i[1] e.g. Heb.13: 10-16; 1Pt.2: 3; 1Jn.5: 8; Jude.12 and Rev.3: 20; 19;9. Strict moral conduct seem to have been required of the partakers and 1Cor.5: 11; 2Thes.3: 6, may suggest possible disciplinary measures for errant members. Such passages as 1Cor.16: 22 and Rev.22: 17-21 have been suggested to have formed a possible part of the earliest Eucharistic liturgy. cp. Marshall, I.H., Last Supper and Lord's Supper, (Exeter, 1980), pp.15-16

i[2] "According to the Synoptic narratives the event occurred on 'the first day of the unleavened bread when they sacrificed the Passover' (Mk.14:21; Lk.22:13; Matt.26:18), i.e. on the 15th of Nisan. The Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, without making any attempt to narrate the proceedings, maintains that the gathering took place 'before the feast of the Passover' (John.13:1), and alleges that the bodies were taken down from the crosses on the preparation to prevent their remaining at the scene of execution over the feast, 'for the day of that Sabbath was a high day' (19:31f; cf. 14; 18:28)" James, E.O., Christian Myth and Ritual (London, 1933), p.124

i[3] Mass and Lord's Supper. ET. Richardson, R.D., (Leiden: Brill, 1979 c.1926)

i[4] "The Jewish antecedents of the Eucharist," JTS, 1902 p.357-69

i[5] Oesterley, W.O.E., The Jewish Background of the Christian Liturgy (Oxford, 1925) pp.167-193

i[6] I am indebted to Prof. William Horbury for this reference.

i[7] 1893, cp. Bradshaw, P., The search for the Origins of Christian Worship (London, 1992) p.51; Lietzman's theory has received strong criticisms over the years, possibly the leading being Dix, G., The Shape of the Liturgy (London, 1945)

i[8] Galiläa und Jerusalem, (Göttingen 1936) and "Das Abendmahl in der Urgemeinde," JBL 56 1937:217-252

i[9] Early Christian Worship (London, 1953); Essays on the Lord's Supper (London, 1958)

i[10] Cited in Bradshaw, P., ibid, 1992, pp.133-4

i[11] The Temple of Jesus (Pennsylvania, 1992) especially chs.6-9; BiRev. Vol.x, no.6 (1994), 37, cp. 44

i[12] A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion, (London, 1999), p.121

i[13] ibid, p.121

i[14] ibid, p.126

i[15] The History, Origin and Development of the Eucharist (Launde Abbey, 1997), p.12

i[16] Jeremias, J., The Eucharistic Words of Jesus (London, 1964), suggests that "the earliest Christian meal celebrations were a continuation of the table fellowship of Jesus with his disciples." p.115. For details of his argument see p.66.

i[17] cp. Nock's suggestion that, "The Christians naturally emphasized above all their thankfulness for what God had done for them in recent times, and they added a new important element - their approach to God in prayer and praise through Jesus as servant (pais) or as Christ." Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic background (NY, 1964) cp. Louis Bouyer's study of the Didache, who argues that it is essentially Jewish but for the name of Jesus, that makes it specifically Christian. (Davies, ibid, p.11)

i[18] "The Eucharistic prayer," The Word in the World (Cambridge, MA 1973), 117-134

i[19] op. cit, pp.140-141

i[20]1Cor.10-11.

i[21]Nock, A.D., ibid, p.128; Macgregor, G.H.C., Eucharistic Origins (London, 1928) p.131; Frankland, W.B., The early Eucharist (London, 1901), 50

i[22]10:1-22

i[23]Cp. Nock, ibid, p.128

i[24] "Soziale Intergration und sakramentales Handeln. Eine Analyse von 1Cor.11:17-34," Nov.T 16:179-206, (1974)

i[25] Mass and Lord's Supper, 1955:207f; cp. Bornkamm, G., Early Christian (London, 1969), p.156, fn.8, citing many modern writers who subscribe to this view.

i[26] I am indebted to Macgregor, G.H.C., op. cit, p.34, citing Grenfell & Hunt, Ox. Pap, No.110 and No.523 cp. Morgan, W., Religion and Theology of Paul (Edinburgh, 1917), 213

i[27] ibid, pp.134 -5

i[28] I do not find Mark Harding's contention that "one cannot assume that Paul saw the believers as engaged in Christian cultic worship," in the least convincing. It falsely assumes a gross dichotomy between concepts and practice, to say the least. "Church and Gentile cults at Corinth," CTJ 10 (1989), 203-233

i[29] Many Tables (Philadelphia, 1990), 65, citing Table Talk 614E

i[30] See, Horbury, W., "Suffering and Messianism in Yose ben Yose," Suffering and Martyrdom (Cambridge, 1981), p.169

i[31]Spec. Leg.1:221 cp. Marshall, I.H., op. cit, p.122

i[32] Morgan, W., op. cit., p.226

i[33] ibid, p.135

i[34] "The Eucharist in 1 Corinthians," Eucharistic Theology (London, 1968) p.26-7

i[35] Sharing the Eucharistic Bread (NY, 1987) pp.41-5

i[36] Stevenson, K., Eucharist and offering (NY, 1986) p.12

i[37] cp. Macgregor, G.H.C., op. cit, p.136-7

i[38] Eucharist and Sacrifice (Cambridge, 1927)

i[39] Historical Commentary on the Epistles to the Corinthians, (London, 1899) xxxi.

i[40] Macgregor, G.H.C., op. cit, p.139

i[41] I Clement 40- 44

i[42]Daly, R., Christian Sacrifice: The Judeo-Christian Background (Washington, 1978), p.313

i[43]Daly, R., op.cit, pp.342

i[44] Eucharistic Sacrifice: The Roots of a Metaphor GLS, no.31 (Notts: Bramcote, 1982)

i[45] Green, E.M.B., "Eucharistic Sacrifice in the NT and the Early Fathers," Eucharistic sacrifice Packer, J.I. (ed.) p.71

i[46] Hanson, R.P.C., Eucharistic Offering, GLS no.19 (Notts:Bramcote, 1979), p.4

i[47] Heron, A., Table and Tradition (Edinburgh, 1983), p.103

i[48] Op. cit, p.80

i[49] "The doctrine of Eucharistic Sacrifice," in Eucharistic Sacrifice, Packer, J.I., (ed.), (London, 1962), pp.127-8

i[50] Op. cit, p.138

i[51] In Breaking of Bread (Cambridge, 1993), p.356

i[52] "Christ's Sacrifice as Apologetic: An application of Heb. 10:1-18," JETS 40/2 (1997), 189-197

i[53] ibid, 193

i[54] ibid, 189

i[55] The Times Wednesday February 21 2001 p.2

i[56] ibid

i[57] "Circles and the Cross: Reflections on Neo-paganism, Postmodernity, and Celtic Christianity," EvReTh 22:28-47; rp. From Crux 32:15-30 (1996)

i[58] ibid, p.28-9

i[59] ibid, p.32