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Incense in Ante-Nicene Christianity

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Introduction

The ante-Nicene Christian documents that have come down to us indicate that ancient Christians did not use incense in their worship at so early a period. On the contrary, it was expressly prohibited. Some church fathers merely state this in passing as a simple item of information while the same or other authors expressly condemn censuring. References to it are unaccountably absent where one would most expect to find them if it had a place in Christian worship in the first three centuries. Early exegetes uniformly allegorised Scripture references to incense as having a spiritual rather than literal meaning. There is one exception to this exclusion of incense from ancient Christian rites, but it is of dubious authority and does not purport to represent actual practice.

Passing Comments

In describing Christianity to a pagan audience in the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr wrote that ‘because Christians are reasonable and intelligent people, they know that God has no need of incense and therefore worship him with prayer and thanksgiving instead’.¹ A few years later Athenagoras in a presentation of Christianity to pagans explained that Christians do not offer sacrifices because the Creator does not require blood nor the smell of burnt offerings or incense, God himself being ‘the perfect fragrance’.² Also in the second century, the Letter of Barnabas called incense ‘a vain abomination’ which God has abolished from worship.³

Toward the end of the ante-Nicene period, Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea repeated this thought. In the early A.D. 300s Lactantius wrote that God is pleased only by incorporeal gifts such as praise and virtues, and that whoever tries to worship him with incense is ignorant of his nature.⁴ He further stated that incense is unacceptable and ineffectual because God requires not aromas but justice.⁵ Slightly later, Eusebius quoted the pagan philosopher Porphyry in support of the proposition that nothing perceptible to the senses is to be offered to God, especially not by burning; the proper offerings are pure thoughts, the state of grace and self-discipline.⁶ By adopting

Porphyry's statement, Eusebius indicated that Christians believed that incense played no part in divine service. When addressing the Council of Nicaea or similar assembly around A.D. 325, the Emperor Constantine said of the commemorations of martyrs—'a sacrifice of thanksgiving is offered...wherein is no need of the fragrant frankincense, no need of fire'.⁷

Express Condemnations

Stronger statements in the same period unmistakably disclose that Christians regarded incense to be totally forbidden for worship, both for themselves and for pagans. Justin Martyr wrote that incense was introduced to humanity by wicked angels in order to win their allegiance away from God.⁸ Tertullian discountenanced censuring in three treatises in the early A.D. 200s. His *Apologeticus* denounces buying incense as wasteful, saying that the Christian practice is to spend money on burying their dead instead of 'the fumigating of the gods'.⁹ In place of 'the few grains of incense a farthing buys—tears of an Arabian tree', Christians are to make 'that costly and noble sacrifice of prayer'.¹⁰ In *De corona* he conceded that animals can be killed and incense burned for secular purposes but not for worship.¹¹ Such secular purposes would include those now performed by scented aerosol sprays and other deodorizers in the kitchen and bathroom. Such disguising scents were more necessary before refrigeration and modern standards of cleanliness and garbage removal. *On Idolatry* allows incense for 'medicinal ointments' and 'solaces of sepulture' but otherwise deprecates its use in any kind of devotions.¹² Tertullian even believed it was sinful for a Christian merchant to sell incense because of its use in pagan rites.¹³

Arnobius

In *Against the Heathen*, his only extant book on Christianity, Arnobius of Sicca in north Africa wrote more about incense than all other ante-Nicene Christians combined. All his comments condemned censuring. Writing sometime between A.D. 304 and 311, he denounced it as heathen folly incompatible with true worship. He stated that 'piles of incense to be burned with fire' had no part in true devotion.¹⁴ He wrote that Christians 'do not build altars, do not offer the blood of creatures slain in sacrifices, incense, nor sacrificial meal'.¹⁵

In addition, Arnobius devoted three chapters of his work to an uninterrupted attack against incense in religious ceremonies, even heathen ones.¹⁶

Condemnation follows ridicule follows argument, all against what he called ‘reeking fumes’ and against the belief that God would be influenced ‘a thousand pounds of the finest incense, and the whole sky clouded with the darkness of abundant vapours’.¹⁷ Arnobius asserted that censuring was a recent innovation even in Roman worship, unknown in the golden ages from which Latin pagans claimed to derive their traditions¹⁸

it is almost a novelty; and there is no endless succession of years since it began to be known in these parts, and won its way into the shines of the gods. For neither in the heroic ages, as it is believed and declared, was it known what incense was, as is proved by the ancient writers, in whose books is found no mention of it...

The implication was that if incense was forbidden to pagans as contrary to tradition, it would be more so for Christians.

Absence of Expected Evidence

There are no references to censuring in Christian worship where they are to be most expected: descriptions of the liturgy and commentaries on Scripture passages that mention incense. The earliest descriptions are Pliny the Younger’s *Letter* 10.96, Justin Martyr’s *1 Apology* 61, 65-67, the *Didache* (chs. 8–10), and the *Apostolic Tradition*’ of *Hippolytus*. The only physical substances in the first three works are bread, wine and baptismal water, but it may be argued that Pliny and Justin could be expected to have omitted incense even if it had been used because of the special purposes for which their two works were written. As an investigating magistrate,¹⁹ Pliny was interested only in whether Christians were engaged in subversive activities or planning public disorders. He was not concerned with the fine points of rituals that did not inflict injury or disturb the peace. Silence on the subject can also be expected from Justin because he was giving a brief overview of Christian worship as part of assuring his readers in the higher echelons of government that his co-religionists did not occupy their time together in illegal or seditious activities.

On the other hand, at least allusions to incense are to be expected in the detailed instructions for Christian worship such as the *Didache* and the *Apostolic Tradition*, yet it is absent from both works. Indeed, in the *Apostolic Tradition* Hippolytus delved into such minutiae as exorcism by breathing prior

to baptism,²⁰ liturgical use of oil,²¹ water at the Eucharist,²² milk and honey accompanying the bread and wine at Communion,²³ blessing of designated species of fruit,²⁴ offerings of specific kinds of flowers,²⁵ and blessing of cheese and olives.²⁶ Omission of incense in such an exhaustive treatment of tangible materials in church is inexplicable if it had actually been employed.

Incense in Ante-Nicene Exegesis

The Old Testament contains a number of passages that mention incense. Some encourage its use while others censure it. Early Christian opposition to it is also revealed by the church fathers' treatment of these passages, especially the former.

The Old Testament verses condemning incense are Isaiah 1:1-14 and Isaiah 43:23. The former deprecates the sacrifices in the Temple, with God stating that 'incense is an abomination to me'.²⁷ The *Letter of Barnabas* adopts the strictures in 1:1-14 at face value.²⁸ Like Irenaeus,²⁹ Clement of Alexandria took the position that the 'odour of a sweet fragrance' commanded in Scripture is 'the heart that glorifies Him who made it.'³⁰ As with a similar sentiment in Isaiah 43:23 and other references to incense in Scripture, Irenaeus' interpretation was that the cultic provisions of the Mosaic Law are to be interpreted figuratively, with 'incense' meaning faith, obedience and justice or the prayers of Christians.³¹

Because the extant ante-Nicene Christian writers thought that Malachi 1.33 could be interpreted to advocate the use of incense in worship, they took pains to demonstrate that it was not part of the Christian cultus. In shaming the Jerusalem priests, Malachi had contrasted their indifference to the more reverent attitude of the Gentiles and the Jewish laity: 'my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.' Irenaeus' exegesis was that the 'name' which is 'great among the nations' is that of Jesus, through whom pure offerings are made, and that the 'offerings' are 'the prayers of saints'.³² Eusebius interpreted Malachi's 'incense' to be Christian prayer³³ or the fragrant fruit of the word which Christians offer through prayer.³⁴ The Christian way of offering incense is by celebrating the Eucharist, keeping one's body free from sin, worshipping God and accepting orthodox doctrine.³⁵ As a proof-text Eusebius quoted Psalm 141.2a: 'Let my

prayer be counted as incense before thee.’

In his *Commentary on Canticles* Hippolytus many times touched on the incense referred to in the Song of Songs, especially 1.12-13 and 3.6. He always interpreted it as a symbol of the church and individual Christians, e.g., it is people who do Jesus’ will who are a fragrant savour to God.³⁶ From the extensive reference to literal incense in this Commentary, we should expect at least one allusion to its use in Christian worship if it had had a place there.

In his *Blessings of Moses* also, Hippolytus stated that in Scripture ‘incense’ means ‘prayer’.³⁷ This was also the interpretation of Tertullian,³⁸ Clement of Alexandria³⁹ and Eusebius.⁴⁰ Eusebius also connected it with the Eucharist,⁴¹ while Clement gave the additional interpretation of ‘love’.⁴² Origen taught that it symbolizes justice, piety, chastity, prudence and related virtues.⁴³

One of the longest ante-Nicene exegesis of a Scripture passage on incense is Homily 9.8-9 in Origen’s *Homilies on Leviticus*. There Origen taught that the ‘incense’ of Leviticus 16:12 represents particular virtues, and that a literal interpretation of the verse would be crass and carnal,⁴⁴ and therefore incorrect. The various kinds of incense in the passage are allegories of orderliness and honesty.⁴⁵ According to his Homily on Leviticus 13, the incense of Leviticus 24:7 symbolizes prayer from a pure heart and upright conscience; Christians are not to believe that God commanded them to use material incense.⁴⁶

Like Eusebius, Origen cited Psalm 141:2a as an authority against the use of material incense in Christian devotions.⁴⁷ In discussing a New Testament narrative depicting Christian use of incense, Irenaeus and Origen also considered the ‘golden bowls of incense’ in Revelation 5:8 to be the prayers of the saints and used this verse as a general proof-text that Christians are to offer not a physical fragrance but a spiritual one.⁴⁸

The Exception

At his disciples’ baptism Jesus made an offering of incense and prayed to his Father and Zorokothra Melchisedek. Then he clothed them in white linen while holding the cipher of the Seven Voices, being the number nine thousand eight hundred seventy nine.⁴⁹ To further help them attain the mysteries of the Treasury of Light, he ritually offered incense to remove the maleficent

influence of the Archons. He had an incense altar built and placed on it frankincense, various plants, agates and asbestos(!). The disciples were crowned with mugwort and had frankincense placed in their mouths.⁵⁰ The incense was to help them ascend to Jeu (Yahwoh) through twelve stages, receiving the seal, mystery and name appropriate to each stage.

The foregoing account is from the Second Book of Jeu, an anonymous Christian work of the first or second century A.D. Its reference to Seventy-two Archons, the Eight Powers, the Sons of the Pleroma, the Twelve Divine Aeons and emanations amply indicate that it is a Gnostic work. Moreover, the seals, mysteries and names in stages of the ascent, mystic numbers and the obligation of secrecy more resemble the hidden signs, grips, and passwords of a mystery religion or a fraternal society than mainstream Christian practices or symbolism. This book is therefore of negligible weight against the otherwise unanimous testimony of the first three centuries. For that matter, it is not evidence of censuring in actual Christian worship: 2 Jeu states only that Jesus burned incense (and asbestos!) on only one occasion; it does not state that censuring was part of the early worship of the church. Jesus did many things, such as healing and raising the dead, which no Anglican alleges to be a proper part of Christian liturgy.

Some historians of liturgy⁵² identify the first known instance of incense in Christian use to have been in the funeral procession of Patriarch Peter of Alexandria in A.D. 311, i.e., within the ante-Nicene period. However, records on which these historians rely were ‘compiled in their present form only in the seventh century [and] they are quite unreliable for a detail of this kind’.⁵³ A similar retrojection into earlier times by a later author accounts for Constantine’s alleged donation of endowments for incense to be burnt on Christian altars. The earliest record of this is found in the sixth-century *Liber Pontificalis*, which internal evidence reveals not to antedate the fifth century.

Nor do the Apostolic Canons establish liturgical use of incense in the first three Christian centuries. Although earlier scholars would allow an ante-Nicene date,⁵⁵ later ones opt for the late fourth century.⁵⁶ Moreover, the Canons’ list of what may be offered on the Lord’s table directly contradict those in Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition*, which is admitted on all hands to date from the second decade of the third century. While permitting incense to be

offered,⁵⁷ the Canons forbid milk and honey⁵⁸ whereas Hippolytus gave instructions concerning offering the latter,⁵⁹ thus allowing in ante-Nicene times what the later Canons forbade. The author(s) of the Canons could have had no respect for the earlier tradition and quite possibly was/were unaware of its provisions.

Conclusion

With one Gnostic exception, the extant Christian writings of the first three centuries regard incense as alien to, and forbidden in, the worship of the church or even in pagan rites. Authors in Carthage, Rome, Alexandria, Greece, Syria, Gaul and Palestine were unanimous in excluding its use from the Christian liturgy. This unanimity shows that the church of these authors was one; their concern with the worship of God and their striving to present his will shows that it was holy; the agreement of sources from all over the then-Christian world show that it was catholic (universal); and their early date implies that it was apostolic. Thus, opposition to incense in worship was the position of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

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ENDNOTES

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1. Justin Martyr, 1 *Apologia* 13.
2. *Athenagoras Legatio pro Christianis* 13. Trans. B. P. Pratten under title *A Plea for the Christians* in *ANF* 2:135.
3. *Epistula Barnabae* 2.5. Trans. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *Epistle of Barnabas* in *ANF* 1:138.
4. Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* 6.25; Lactantius *De ira dei* 21.
5. Lactantius, *Epitome* 58.

6. Eusebius *DE (Eusebius Demonstratio evangelica)* 3.3.
7. Constantine, *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum* 12. Trans. E. C. Richardson under the title "The Oration of Constantine," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series (N.Y.: Christian Literature Co; Oxford & London: Parker, 1890. Reprinted Edinburgh: T & T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), vol. 1, p. 571.
8. Justin Martyr, 2 *Apoloogia* 5.
9. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 42. Trans S. Thelwall under title *Apology* in *ANF* 3:49.
10. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 30. Trans S. Thelwall in *ANF* 3:42.
11. Tertullian, *De corona* 10.
12. Tertullian, *De idolatria* 11. Trans S. Thelwall under title *On Idolatry* in *ANF* 3:67.
13. Tertullian, *De idolatria* 11.
14. Arnobius, *AG (Arnobius of Sicca Adversus gentes, Trans. H. Bryce and H. Campbell under title Arnobius Against the Heathen)* 4.30 in *ANF* 6:486.
15. Arnobius, *AG* 6.1. Trans H. Bryce and H. Campbell in *ANF* 6:506.
16. Arnobius, *AG* 7.26-28.
17. Arnobius, *AG* 7.28. Trans H. Bryce and H. Campbell in *ANF* 6:529.
18. Arnobius, *AG* 7.26. Trans H. Bryce and H. Campbell in *ANF* 6:528.
19. In the Continental sense, e.g., a juge d'instruction in France.
20. Hippolytus, *TA (Hippolytus Traditio apostolica)* 20.8.
21. Hippolytus, *TA* 5; 21.6-8, 10, 19; 22.2.
22. Hippolytus, *TA* 23.3, 7.
23. Hippolytus, *TA* 23.2.
24. Hippolytus, *TA* 2 8.1-6.
25. Hippolytus, *TA* 28.7
26. Hippolytus, *TA* 6.
27. Isaiah 1.13.
28. *Epistula Barnabae* 2.4-5.
29. Irenaeus, *AH (Irenaeus Adversus haereses)* 4. 17.2.
30. Clement of Alexandria, *Pasdagogus* 3.12. Trans. W. Wilson under title *The Instructor* in *ANF* 2:293.
31. Irenaeus, *AH* 4. 17.3-6.
32. Irenaeus, *AH* 4.17.6. Trans W. H. Rambaut under title *Irenaeus Against Heresies* in *ANF* 1:484.
33. Eusebius, *DE* 1.6.
34. Euseblus, *DE* 1.10.
35. Eusebius, *DE* 1.10.
36. Hippolytus, *Interpretatio Cantici canticorum (De cantico) passim.*

37. Hippolytus, *Benedictiones Moysis. Levi*.
38. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 30.
39. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.6.
40. Eusebius, *DE* 1.10; Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 10.4.68.
41. Eusebius, *DE* 1.10 .
42. Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogus* 2.8.
43. Origen, *Levit (Homiliae in Leviticum)* 9.8.2.
44. Origen, *Levit* 9.8.3.
45. Origen, *Levit* 9.8.4.
46. Origen, *Levit* 13.5.2.
47. Origen, *Levit* 9.8.1; 13.5.2.
48. Irenaeus, *AH* 4.17.6; Origen *Homiliae in Ezechielem* 7.4.1-4; Origen *Contra Ceelum* 8.17.
49. 2 Jeu 4 7.
50. 2 Jeu 4 8.
51. 2 Jeu 50.
52. E. G. Cuthbert, F. Atchley, *A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship* (London: Longmans, Green, 1909), p. [97]; Thomas A. Marsh, 'Incense, Uses of' *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* Peter E. Fink SJ, ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 595.
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56. George D. Dragas, "Apostolic Constitutions" in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* Everett Ferguson, ed., (N.Y.: & London: Garland, 1990), pp. 75-6; R. Hugh Connolly "Introduction," in *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929), pp. xx-xxi; Burton Scott Easton, "Introduction," in *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (N.Y., Macmillan: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), pp. 12-3.
57. "Apostolic Constitutions" 8.47.4.
58. "Apostolic Constitutions" 8.47.3.
59. Hippolytus, *TA* 23.2, 7.