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A Divisive Intellectualist Leader

Cyprian's Management of a Heterarchical Crisis

Emiliano R. Urciuoli

Abstract

Initially, the article concentrates on a major change in ancient Mediterranean religions that can be understood as an "intellectualization of religion." Focusing on the text-based practices of early Christian religious specialists, it looks at this phenomenon as a facet of an urban religion rather than an inherent quality of early Christ religion. The article goes on to address heterarchy, i.e., the tendency toward a nonhierarchical arrangement of power, as a further element that characterizes city life as well as relations among cities. Not linearly ranked and topographically fractionated, the first urban Christ groups also constituted heterarchical formations shaped by the assorted types of power coalescing in urban environments. Zooming in on the imperial city of Carthage in the mid-3rd century, the article then analyzes the intersection of the two phenomena. It demonstrates the effects that the enforcement of a textually designed and conceptually sophisticated project of Church order produced on the Christ networks by arguing that, in urban contexts characterized by a host of powers, authority claims, and forms of capital, Cyprian's intellectualized religion contributed to breaking apart existing coalescences of people united by religion.

Keywords

Christ religion – urban religion – intellectualization – heterarchy – Cyprian of Carthage

> And there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down (γράφηται), I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.
>
> JOHN 21.25

1 The Christian Urban Religious Intellectualism: Theory and Context

As a few snapshots of social science literature can show, intellectualism, religion, and the city have been frequently and differently interconnected. Marx and Engels related the genesis of "mental labor" (*geistige Arbeit*) and thereby the real basis of ideology, including religious ideology, to the separation of town and country (Marx and Engels 1976: 64) as a civilizational event that "mutilates and impedes the social totality" (Lefebvre 2016: 37). Max Weber argued that the earliest urbanization processes and their related socioeconomical transformations – first and foremost, commerce and craftsmanship – developed parallel to the "internalizations and rationalizations of religiosity" (*Verinnerlichungen und Rationalisierungen des Religiösen*). Both phenomena are linked to the emergence of priesthoods as bodies of specialists responsible for "the transfiguration of gods into ethical powers" (Weber 1978: 1179). Released from the daily round of subsistence labor, this class of individuals producing new worldviews out of the systematization and rationalization, i.e. "intellectualization" (*Intellektualisierung*) (Weber 1978: 1178), of the theory and practice of life of others is placed by Weber under his broad, Germanized, and functionalist category of "intellectuals" (Markschies 2020). Shifting the focus from the Neolithic age to that of industrial capitalism, secularization theories have retained the nexus between intellectualism and the city by uncoupling both from religion (Strhan 2015: 34–38). Georg Simmel shared with Weber an epochmaking diagnosis of the modern city as religiously disenchanted social formation, thus intrinsically connecting the intensified "intellectualistic character" (*intellektualistische*[*n*] *Charakter*) of the metropolitan dweller to money economy (Simmel 1950: 411–413). Recent ethnographies of postsecular urbanism have reset the discourse and reinstated the intellectualism-religion-city triad. A good representative of the cross-disciplinary research field on "urban religion" (Garbin and Strhan 2017: 4–7), the "Cities and Fundamentalisms Project"

initiated by Nezar AlSayyad foregrounds both the intellectual upbringing and the urban nesting of fundamentalist religious thinking and forms of activisms (AlSayyad and Massoumi 2010).

The first urban Christ groups sprung up in the mid-1st century C.E., that is, circa four millennia after the earliest documented entanglements of urban, religious, and intellectual life (M. Smith 2019). They spread at a time when the Eastern Mediterranean, the Italian Peninsula, and North Africa were long and deeply urbanized. Moreover, full of spatially distributed and functionally differentiated gods, ancient Mediterranean cities teemed with a whole range of specialized religious knowledge featuring "as a series of claims about expertise, experience, and exceptionality" (C. Smith 2020). This profitable set of religious commodities was only partly institutionalized and even less monopolized. The appearance of Jesus followers was rather coterminous with an explosion of a self-authorized and increasingly diversified array of religious expertise based on a most manageable material medium: books.

At the time Paul of Tarsus penned the earliest surviving Christian writing, the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, religion was pervasively produced as well as largely distributed and consumed as a "specialized textual practice" (Wendt 2016: 129) to be intellectually worked out by literate experts. Not only cosmologies and narratives, but also knowledge about rituals, had disengaged themselves from traditional cult spaces and authorized performers, thereby becoming the subject matters of texts traveling in the form of parchment or papyrus rolls and codices (Petridou and Rüpke 2021). While established textual practices such as professional exegeses, translations, oracle prophesies, and spell manuals gained new impetus, new textualized genres engaging religion – like "institution-related histories" and "biographies" revolving around revered individuals – flourished and spread throughout the Mediterranean (Rüpke 2018a: 336–337).[1]

With regard to its transcendentalist ontology and ethics (Strathern 2019: 47–63), the text-centered religious engagement of first-century Christ believers like Paul and his addressees followed from the most famous and incessantly revised intellectualizing turn in history of religion: the "Axial Age."[2] Yet the wider scriptographic culture that practitioners of Christ religion lived in, and

1 A redescriptive category, religion is abstracted here from other communicative, sociospatial practices because of the direct enlistment of, and extension of the activity to, special agents and addressees (gods, ancestors, daemons, spirits, celestial bodies, etc.). See Wendt 2016: 11; Rüpke 2018a: 37.

2 Subsequent literacy-related processes such as the "canonization" of texts (Assmann 2012: 390–395) and the "professionalization" of their authorized interpreters, too, can be factored in the intellectualist breakthrough time and again associated with this formula (Strathern

a few literate adherents lived off, was not the outcome of an Axial civilization. It was the product of the urban society of a specific spatiotemporal context. The whole gamut of specialized knowledge and interlocking social behaviors this culture brought about was such that it characterized both religious and nonreligious, immanentist and transcendentalist traditions competing within and traveling across, between, and beyond urban environments. The Christian intellectualism examined in this article is therefore a result of a recent variant of "transcendentalism" as much as an offshoot of Mediterranean urbanity.[3] It belongs to a broad class of religious activities that were: (a) all the more *intellectualized* as their function was the rationalization and systematization of text-based knowledge; (b) all the more *religious* as their performance demanded the direct enlistment of special, i.e., superhuman, agents and addressees; (c) all the more *urban* as the authority and legitimacy of the purveyors hinged upon resources that were independent from the traditionally agricultural sources of wealth, power, and prestige.

Scholar of religion Stanley Stowers has interpreted this urban religious intellectualism as a time-honored mode of religiosity. He calls it "the religion of literate cultural producers," a "religion of meanings" that could not exist "without writings, high literacy, networks of literate exchange, and various textually oriented interpretive practices" (2011a: 41). In an article embedded in Bourdieu's field theory, Stowers traces back the genesis of the religious capital of these specialists to an ancient Mediterranean field of cultural production that is characterized (also) by relations of exchange and competition over forms of religious authority grounded in literate practices (2011a, 2016). Itinerant preachers like Paul of Tarsus belonged to the autonomous pole of this field, represented by entrepreneurial operators independent of political and social patronage and lacking institutional affiliations. Following up on Stowers' taxonomy, Heidi Wendt has mapped out the apparent abundance of such religious entrepreneurs in the first two centuries of the Roman empire, emphasized their common "freelance" condition,[4] and called them "intellectualizing," "intellectually oriented," or "textualizing religious experts" (2016, 2018). Jörg

2019: 63–70). Religious studies literature on the "Axial Age" is legion. For a restatement of old problems (including urbanization) and new approaches, see Sanderson 2017.

3 For a reassessment of the characteristics of transcendentalist vis-à-vis immanentist religious traditions – starting with the opening of an "ontological breach" cutting previously monistic worldviews in two – see Strathern 2019: 47–81.

4 This emphatically etic term tries "to capture any self-authorized purveyor of religious teachings and other practices who drew upon such abilities in pursuit of various social benefits and often more transparent forms of profit" (Wendt 2016: 10). Stowers uses the same term but operates it within a much stronger Bourdieuian framework (Stowers 2016).

Rüpke, too, speaks of the "intellectualization" (2018b: 48–49) or "textualization of religion" (2018a: 336) in relation to the expansion of the Roman empire.

In two recent publications on "urban religion," both Rüpke and Wendt have foregrounded the city as the sociospatial condition of possibility for these changes in the production of religious authority (Wendt 2020: 99; Rüpke 2020: 9, 2018b: 46–50). A partial checklist of items might include: the presence of an educational establishment providing good quality teaching; a ramified system of commercial production, distribution, and storage of books (König, Oikonomopoulou, and Woolf 2013); a sizable concentration of literate and semi-literate people (from high literacy rates to basic reading and writing capabilities), and both long- and short-range networks of textual exchange (Johnson 2010); a wide and assorted variety of "reading events" (Johnson 2000) enabled by the contiguity of intersecting social formations based on, or potentially including, intellectual and/or textually-based relationships (master-disciple, patron-client reader-audience); the accessibility of religious group styles and settings beyond kinship-based domestic rituals, on the one hand, and communal ceremonies in monumental buildings, on the other.

The small-group entrepreneurs and literate experts in Christ religion managed to leverage all these urban features to generate new textual practices and appropriate some of the existing literary traditions (see Bremmer 2021: 242–244). They stood out as self-conscious producers of a distinct type of ancient biography (Walsh 2021), writers and dispatchers of letters (Neil and Allen 2015), re-enactors of visions (Arcari 2020), virtuosi of the textual controversy, forgers, and counter-forgers (Ehrman 2013), interpolators and text-brokers (Snyder 2000), and compilers and collectors of holy scripts. They earned a living and, occasionally, a reputation as teachers and philosophers. Most recent publications (Ayres and Ward 2020) do not hesitate to apply to potentially all Christian cultural producers engaging in literary practices a broad, Weberian-styled category of "intellectual" – whose use was formerly restricted to a few philosophically trained imperial writers and the literate elite from the Gnostic spectrum.[5]

How and to what extent illiterate rank-and-file followers participated in the textualized type of knowledge, experience, rituals, and sociability produced by this intellectualizing niche is a disputed matter. Since the late 1990s it has become commonplace to look at illiterate, semi-literate, and literate Christ believers clustering together around authorialized texts, pseudonymous scripts, or anonymous writings as pioneering members of "textual communities"

5 Yet, see the use of a more specific taxonomy of intellectual such as the Gramscian concept of "organic intellectual" in Rivas Rebaque 2020.

(Heath 2019) – a concept coined in 1983 by Canadian historian Brian Stock for the study of heterodox and reform movements of the 11th and 12th centuries (Stock 1983).[6] Indeed, the cultural transformations stirred by the rise of literacy in Europe in the Middle Ages provide useful analogies with the textualized ways in which religious knowledge, experiences, and allegiances were patterned by the early Christians (Stock 1990: 156–158). Yet, more recently the tendency of over-emphasizing the role of literate media and text-based practices in creating, furthering, binding together, and bordering the Christ groups has been seriously questioned. On the one hand, there were expressions of Christian religiosity that did not require extensive written textuality (Heath 2019: 13; Wendt 2020: 101) as well as practices of "popular everyday religiosity" (prayers, dreams, meals) that would always elude the control of literate experts and the hermeneutical framing of an "intellectualizing and textualizing religion" (Stowers 2016: 150–152). On the other hand, not only are texts engaging religion and/or used for religious purposes hardly sufficient evidence for "communities" in the sense of doctrinally cohesive and bounded established groups (Urciuoli 2013; Stowers 2011), but a comparative analysis of contemporary literary practices within ancient Mediterranean book culture suggests that "writers need not be a part of a religious community in order to write about Jesus, for example, but they must be a part of a social network that is in a position to circulate or publish their works" (Walsh 2021: 17). Scripts nested in or traveling out of urban environments could cut across religious groups, enjoy wide diffusion, and effect different, more or less transient audiences; at the other pole of the spectrum there were texts that stayed within elite confines, operated within very small local networks, and remained unknown to proximate like-minded people. In general, the role played by texts in activating religious communication, generating audiences, and stimulating religious grouping cannot be reduced to their occasional, context-specific power to draw boundaries and strengthen bonds of existing groups (Rüpke 2018a: 332–339).

To conclude this part, I advance three summarizing arguments. First, the intellectualization of religion designates a text-based and -centered mode of

6 A "textual community" is a community whose life, thought, sense of identity and relations with outsiders are organized around an authoritative text. The way it plays that role is through education and religion. The text is at the heart of the community's faith and piety; education contributes in a twofold sense: a *literate education* is important for those who take the lead within the group in interpreting the text; meanwhile the rest of the community receives a *textual education through socialization* within the group, even if they remain illiterate themselves. One of the principal consequences of this definition is that it is possible for a textual community to exist in a society with high levels of illiteracy.

HEATH 2019, 5 (original emphasis)

religiosity, technology of religious knowledge, and form of religious authority that, in the early imperial period, had generated a diffuse landscape of competing totalizing claims about religion. Second, intellectualization could not do without texts (textualization) but the contrary is not true.[7] Third, the intellectualization of religion neither necessarily nor preferably fostered the creation, the strengthening, and the expansion of close-knit "communities" – whether locally effected or translocally imagined; on the contrary, as we will see, it could weaken and split previously larger networks. This article seeks to make plausible this latter argument by intersecting intellectualization with a second element that markedly shaped early Christ religion as an urban religion. I refer to the capacity of urban nodes and networks to both produce and function as heterarchies.

2 Urban Heterarchies and Heterarchical Christ Groups

In the introduction to this issue, I quoted Carole L. Crumley's definition of heterarchy as "the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they have the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways, depending on systemic requirements" (1979: 144).[8] I also noted that cities can be related to heterarchical arrangements of power at many levels: supra-urban (i.e., global, national, regional), inter-urban, and intra-urban. Urban space and life, past and present, are both marked by and generate heterarchies. Therefore, besides intellectualization, another way of approaching early Christ religion as an urban religion is to look at how, and how significantly, Christian religious communication and the related social formations grew out of urban heterarchies of power and, in turn, produced new heterarchical forms. What follows is an incomplete list of examples representing both sides of the dialectic.

– The Christian authors recognize the Roman Empire as the project of a culturally smoothened (i.e., Romanized) and politically ranked urbanized space. They also acknowledge that cities can either validate or challenge this order by offering – even embodying, like Jerusalem – alternative systems of ranking. Paul's awareness of the "play between hierarchy and heterarchy" (Crumley 1987: 163) at the imperial level influenced a "mission strategy" (Rabens 2017) that applied different criteria for the selection of

7 "The impetus to textualize need not correlate with literacy … Nor was the impetus to specialize restricted to the realms of religious intellectual pursuits" (Wendt 2020: 104, 106).

8 For a taxonomy of possible heterarchical "structural forms," see Brumfiel 1995.

the missionized cities and included long-term stays at "non-typical" places (Magda 2009: 86–96).

- Rather than signaling the inversion of the city/country hierarchy, the tension between the rural ambiance and the anti-urban tones, on the one hand, and the description of the manifold impairments of the peasant bodies in the gospel narratives – especially Mark – on the other, documents the existence of heterarchical relations between ideals of urbanity and rurality within an urban ideology (Boer and Petterson 2017: 160–161).[9]
- Cooperation and counterpoise among wealthy donors, as well as between these latter and the religious leaders, were necessary for the material maintenance of sizable congregations at a citywide level. On the contrary, situations characterized by conflict, mutual ignorance, or independent patronizing activity on the part of holders of same or different species of capital were conducive to diverse spatial, cultic, and doctrinal arrangements of the local Christ groups (Urciuoli 2018: 143–163).
- Christ-group leaders themselves did not hesitate to leverage the heterarchical dimension of their assemblies to invert systems of ranking that tended to subordinate or disadvantage them in relation to other influential agents within the same groups. To this end, they proposed other schemes of evaluation and principles of organization that privileged qualities they possessed or claimed to possess. Paul was a virtuoso of this art (Blanton 2017: 104–133).
- The quality of the relations between leaders of the Christ groups and representatives of the urban ruling elite varied individually, temporally, and locally. Ranging from reciprocal support among peers to head-on collision between enemies, through mutual indifference and quiet coexistence, this unranked interaction could go as far as to affect the local enforcement of state-led "persecutions" (Urciuoli 2018: 261–267). Martyrdom stories tell about the Roman state's endeavors to control the heterarchical situation in the cities by forcefully trying to integrate, or being ready to execute, the most unruly elements.
- Crumley herself once defined early Christ religion as a "heterarchically organized religious movement" that, with the waning of the Roman power as integrative state apparatus, "became increasingly hierarchical" (1987: 164).[10] This simplistically sketched trajectory – from a host of fractionated local

9 "This is not to say that Mark offers a ruling class perspective per se, but that the ideological framework of representation is one informed by the polis" (Boer and Petterson 2017: 161).

10 It is not clear, however, whether she suggests a cause-effect relationship between the two phenomena.

groups of believers to a trans-regionally ranked Church order – corresponds to the consensus scholarly view of the rise of a most durable heterarchical factor in European history: (mon)episcopacy (Stewart 2014).
– The manifold efforts of early Christian writers and/or leaders to overmaster religious heterarchy by incorporation or expulsion of doctrinal differences resulted in the successful invention and re-semantization of hierarchical concepts. Some of them, like "heresy" (King 2003; Le Boulluec 1985) and "magic" (Otto 2011), have become scholarly categories for ordering religious opposition and ranking religious deviance.

That being said, the last part of this article will seek to fine-tune our understanding of the urban making of early Christ religion by exploring empirically the connection between intellectualization and heterarchy. This interplay can be viewed and addressed from different angles in relation with different spatiotemporal contexts leading to different outcomes. I chose one of them, which is related to a major episode of the early "Church history."

3 When Intellectualism Confronts Heterarchy: The Case of Cyprian of Carthage

3.1 *A Heterarchical Shock*

The events examined in this section unfold in Carthage, the capital of the Roman province of Africa, in the middle of the 3rd century CE. The well-educated leader of the citywide Christian congregation is an affluent patron named Cyprian. For months Cyprian has been busy writing, copying, commenting upon, circulating, and exchanging letters, mostly addressed to other Christian religious specialists based in the city, in Rome, and in other regions of the empire. The incident that catalyzed the bishop's intense epistolographic activity was the promulgation of an edict by the ruling emperor, Decius, in late 249 that bid all Roman citizens – men, women, and children – to participate in a sacrificial rite, the enforcement of which throughout the empire had to be organized and supervised by appointed local commissioners.[11] Early Christianity scholar Allen Brent describes the bureaucratic implementation of this procedure as follows:

> Every citizen of the empire, whose citizenship had been made universal by the decree of [Caracalla] (AD 212), was to gather at the central shrines of the gods of the Roman state and to perform a propitiatory sacrifice at

11 For the exceptions, see Selinger 2002: 59–60.

their altars. In return he was to receive a certificate (*libellus*) to the effect that he had so performed.

BRENT 2010: 6–7

This unprecedented legal combination of a nondiscursive religious ritual (sacrifice) with a textual attestation for its performance (certificate) cannot be said to be an intellectualizing religious practice in the sense explained above. Yet it triggered reactions that led to a remarkable example thereof. Whereas Cyprian, like others, took flight to escape the command, most Christ believers simply conformed to the requirements and sacrificed.[12] Others bribed their way out of sacrificing or delegated the task to a proxy. A few believers neither sacrificed nor fled or confessed, but somehow escaped the eye of the magistrates (Rebillard 2012: 50–53). Some Christians, nevertheless, stood fast, refused to sacrifice, and were imprisoned. Of these latter, some – the "martyrs" – died,[13] while others, the "confessors," managed to survive detention and were set free when the effects of the decree died down (by early 251).

Having endured sufferance and captivity, the confessors claimed a special and exclusive fellowship with the martyrs and formed a recognizable group that immediately gained prestige within the Christian local and translocal networks. Moreover, the ideas and actions of some of such faith heroes became prominent in the disciplinary disputes that quickly arose as to whether, how, by whom, and with which authority penance had to be imposed on the many – the *lapsi* – who had conformed to the imperial order in different manners. Being credited with soteriological power, already from prison some of the confessors had started writing and circulating certificates of absolution (*libelli pacis*) to several supplicants (Cyprian, *Letter* 15.4). Some representatives of the Carthaginian clergy conformed to this policy by either imposing no conditions for the continuation of membership in regular cult gatherings (Rebillard 2012: 54), or accepting the certificates issued by the confessors as valid "access passes" (Cyprian, *Letter* 14.4). Conscious of their well-deserved popularity, Cyprian did not dare to alienate the confessors: in fact, while his own religious capital as a self-exiled bishop had weakened, the spiritual capital of the confessors had skyrocketed.[14] At the same time, he made clear that their *libelli* had to be taken as merely requests to the bishop (Brent 2010: 251), and that the policy

12 *Ex maxima parte*: Cyprian, *Letter* 14.1.1, 11.1.2; *maximus numerus*: Cyprian, *The Lapsed* 7.

13 On martyrdom as an urban religious event, see Urciuoli 2021: 101–112; Bowersock 1995: 41–57.

14 For a serviceable distinction between "religious" and "spiritual capital" within a Bourdieuian framework for the sociological study of religion, see Verter 2003.

of reconciliation needed to be treated and worked out jointly in a dedicated assembly of the clergy (*Letter* 14.4).

All in all, due to the implications of Decius's edict, the power relations within the Carthaginian congregation underwent an abrupt heterarchical shock. This sudden fluidity of religious power was incompatible with Cyprian's practical interests and intellectual ambitions to enforce and stabilize a distinct Church order. Cyprian's traffic of letters before, during, and after his flight from Carthage acknowledged and acted on an animated power scene where the effects of public documents concerning rituals (i.e., certificates of sacrifice) were countered and reversed by unofficial scripts functioning as rituals (i.e., certificates of absolution) (Brent 2010: 210).[15] Adding to this confrontational employment of textuality, Cyprian's writing activity was aimed to either promote or discredit ideas, persons, events, and decisions that could either support or jeopardize his all-embracing vision of a doctrinally bounded translocal community of Christians, and reflected his ambition to bring his vision to bear on the specific disciplinary guidelines he was promoting in order to resolve the crisis.

In addition to the letters, Cyprian penned a first treatise on *The Lapsed* (*De Lapsis*), which was directed against those who took a minimalist/overindulgent approach to the disciplinary consequences of sacrificial involvement and thus reconciled those who had obeyed the imperial command without requiring any penance or bothering to ask the bishop – that is, Cyprian himself.[16] Then he wrote a second pamphlet on *The Unity of the Universal Church* (*De catholicae ecclesiae unitate*), which was aimed to impeach the competing authority structures set up initially in Rome by those who advocated a maximalist/rigorist policy on the lapsed and thus disavowed the local leadership for its lenient attitude.[17] As the title shows, this text chastises division and calls for the unity of Christians based upon the territorial jurisdictions of bishops appointed by stable procedures, sharing the same body of beliefs, and eventually agreeing on the same rules of discipline – that is, Cyprian's own beliefs and rules.

Cyprian's intellectual engagement, diplomatic efforts, and political action went hand in hand. During the first half of 251 he first personally called and

15 I draw here on Jeppe S. Jensen's conceptualization of the pragmatics of ritual as "a workshop for maintaining, controlling, changing and repairing those things in the world that are outside the ordinary practical and instrumental reach of humans" (Jensen 2014: 106).

16 For some glimpses into the treatment of the *lapsi* of another city (Smyrna), see Ameling 2008.

17 Differently from their Carthaginian homologues, the Roman confessors took a rigorist position.

hosted in Carthage a provincial gathering of bishops that would outlaw and exclude from the local congregation the representatives of the minimalist position ("Felicissimus' party"; *Letter* 45.4.1). Then, while laboring to discredit the leader of the Roman maximalist group, Novatian, among his fellow bishops, he lobbied strongly to have him and his followers eventually condemned in a large transregional assembly of clerics held in Rome in the same year (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.43).[18] All the decisions that Cyprian made or endorsed were reviewed and conveyed via letters and emissaries in order to gain consent and produce consequences overseas – a praxis shared with other protagonists of the conflicts. The two tracts also were sermonized and read out on occasion, or copied and sent around for others to read (Cyprian, *Letter* 54.3.4).

The eventual outcome of this manifold, full-scale attempt to enforce the model of one doctrinally unified and orderly led community of Christians was the production and stabilization of no less than three discrete, ritually demarcated and competing groups of Christians.[19] The Carthaginian Christian network, which had probably no more than a dozen cult specialists during the decade of Cyprian's leadership (Clarke 1984: 39–44), broke down into three rival authority structures, with the result of a significant increase of institutional division. Traditionally sympathetic to the religious concerns and priorities of the "Church Father," modern scholarship on Cyprian usually points out that "Cyprian and his colleagues were under assault from both sides" (Burns 2002: 7). However, as Allen Brent has remarked, the greatest responsibility for this splintered outcome falls upon Cyprian himself. In a situation characterized by acute internal disorder and authority breakdown, his ramified and incessant maneuvers aimed at opposing the system's drift toward heterarchy "had simply succeeded in creating three rival churches" (Brent 2010: 13). By enforcing his centrist agenda,[20] he may well have wanted to bring about harmony and unity – as his ecclesiastical treatise claims, his first biographer confirms (Pontius, *Life of Cyprian* 7.5), and Cyprian scholars certify (Rives 1995: 297). Yet

18 For the examination of the role played and the vocabulary used by Cyprian in the "vilification of Novatian," see Marcos 2019 (based on Cyprian, *Letters* 44–55).

19 Whereas the laxist group led by Felicissimus seems to have become extinct quite soon, the "Novatianists" persisted into the 4th century. During the first centuries of the Christian empire, their rigorist position will be *de facto* taken over by the Donatists.

20 "Centrist" in a twofold sense: (a) it occupied the middle camp between two extremes; (b) its main interpreter, Cyprian, will become a prime representative of the orthodox tradition as retrospectively constructed by the type of Christianity that will win imperial support (Mack 1995: 6–8).

he ended up accruing discordance and stabilizing division. His hardline quest for disciplinary and doctrinal uniformity contributed to pulling believers apart.

3.2 *Intellectualism Backfired: From Fluid Power Relations to Discrete Hierarchies*

This brief synthesis of the events already suggests that the confrontational character of Cyprian's "call to order" (Bourdieu 1996: 68) is coupled with another paramount aspect: its intellectualist quality. To start with, Cyprian's centrist position was far from being "cognitively and socially basic" like that of the indulgent front, which anchored the martyrs' and confessors' superhuman power to grant absolution to the intuitive logic of reciprocity typical of the popular "religion of everyday social exchange" (Stowers 2016: 150, 2011a: 36–41). Nor was it religiously drastic and straightforward like the restrictive policy endorsed by the rigorists, which simply banned all the believers accountable for cultic misbehaviors and contested a number of Christian established authorities in the name of the graspable and appealing values of "disinterestedness" and "purity" (Bourdieu 1996: 68). In a nutshell, Cyprian's midway stance was neither fish nor fowl and, more importantly, it was byzantine in its complexity. For the most part, lived – or, as Brent puts it, "popular" – Christ religion was practiced and organized in forms that "knew few of the fine distinctions drawn at the reflective and more theoretical level espoused" by well-educated professional ecclesiastics and theologians like Cyprian (Brent 2010: 237–238, 228). Whether they sympathized or not with the emperor's aim, most Christians were ignorant of, or at least confused about, what a consistent "Christian response" to a one-off imperial call for a sacrificial ritual that aimed "to achieve metaphysical peace" was supposed to imply (ibid.: 228).[21] Moreover, the way in which Cyprian's discriminating view and management of the sacrificial crisis intersected with his equally sophisticated idea of a unified Church order and the related ambition to reduce heterarchy did not make things easier.

Following up on Brent's analysis of Cyprian's failed attempt to relate his model of ecclesiastical unity to the implementation of a uniform articulate policy of penance, my argument seeks to broaden the scope of the investigation. Not only Cyprian's eventually unworkable project, but the whole chain of events, would have been unthinkable in a context where religion and religious

21 An analysis in terms of multiple memberships (or identities) is more economical. "The idea that the lapsed did not activate their Christian membership in the context of their participation in this civic ceremony does away with the impossible task of defining what is religious for them" (Rebillard 2012: 51).

authority were not so acutely and decidedly intellectualized. In the religious world not so distantly preceding Cyprian's age, the idea of a private individual endowed with the authority to publish scripts, circulate letters overseas, and dispatch emissaries in order to induce other individuals to think and act in the way a translocal religious organization expect them to do would have looked extremely weird.[22] The distinctively urban interplay of intellectualization and heterarchy as factors underlying the events reflects this sea-change in religion.

Occasioned by and forged under the unanticipated circumstances of Decius's edict,[23] Cyprian's articulated view of the ecclesiastical order combines hierarchical and heterarchical principles of organization, or, better, is designed as a social entity that assumes a hierarchical form at one level and a heterarchical form at another. At a lower level, indeed, power is rigidly ranked along a formal "control hierarchy" (Crumley 1995: 2). Doctrinally homogenous local congregations are liturgically assigned to appointed presbyters, who, in turn, are ordained by the local bishop and put under his territorially based jurisdiction. The decisions made by these latter affect the operations of the priests and the laypersons as well.[24] At the highest level, by contrast, power is shared and checked within an apostolically validated fellowship of bishops who bestow religious capital upon each other by consecration; at the top of the structure, therefore, the ecclesiastical unity consists in a "closed network of episcopal interrelations and mutual recognitions" (Brent 2010: 17). Slowness in decision-making is a typical disadvantage of heterarchical polities (Crumley 2003: 138). However, insofar as they receive and pass down the "true faith" along unbroken lines of succession, the shared apostolic pedigree of this corporate body should ideally prevent cacophonous voices from complicating the achievement of consensus.

Such a structurally hybrid and ramified power apparatus was not meant to be the purely intellectual pastime of a bureaucrat. Rather, it was the ambition of its designer to have it fully implemented. Theoretical performances and normative aims were inseparable from pragmatic needs. On the one hand, the sophisticated and discriminating penance system that Cyprian had designed

22 See Petridou and Rüpke 2021: 239–244. As Bourdieu puts it, the genesis of this kind of religious authority goes hand in hand with the development of the "minimum religious competence" that is necessary for the members of the same religious field "to feel the specific need" for its textual products (Bourdieu 1971: 320).

23 Cyprian was appointed bishop in 248–9 C.E., that is, only roughly two years before the beginning of enforcement of the edict in Africa. Scholars agree that the theological and procedural niceties of Cyprian's ecclesiastical order were largely a product of the events.

24 "The clergy may proffer counsel, the people may voice agreement, but the bishop decides" (Clarke 1984: 268). See also Bévenot 1971: 16.

to sort out the sacrificial affair rested entirely on the reliability of this Church order. In fact, the idea of establishing two penance treatments of different duration, which had to be applied case by case to two forms of culpability (*sacrificati* and *libellatici*) depending on the degree of fulfillment of the edict (*Letter* 55.17.3),[25] would make no sense if nobody were in charge of supervising and enforcing such an elaborate disciplinary ruling. On the other hand, the methodical accomplishment of the penitential procedures was instrumental in attesting the universal validity of the Church order. A duly and orderly consecrated bishop alone must have the authority to readmit and reconcile within his jurisdiction (*Letter* 55.21.2) by following the guidelines jointly issued by his peers.

The greatest challenge to Cyprian's master plan, during and in the aftermath of the implementation of Decius's edict, can be summarized as follows: how and by which means could this multi-level and transregional design of an ecclesiastical power apparatus operate in a situation of acute heterarchical crisis of the existing decision-making system? Two main difficulties can be identified. First, the Christians' varied responses to the imperial command to sacrifice had multiplied the loci of distributed religious power: new authority claims were made by previously incapacitated laypersons (confessors), while several members of the clergy were either empowered by their own confession or weakened due to their own surrender. Second, the penal implications of the imperial law had long impeded the free movement of self-exiled and imprisoned bishops, thus deferring the achievement of a collegial decision on penance as urged by Cyprian.[26]

Cyprian was a man of means. A distinguished member of the local property class, right from the start of his Christian career he channeled a significant share of his wealth into the local Christ group and turned that into social capital to gain religious power and ensure ecclesiastical discipline.[27] Yet the

25 *Sacrificati* referred to those who fully accomplished the animal sacrifice, while *libellatici* designated those who managed to get the certificate of sacrifice without actually performing it, because they either bribed the magistrates or were able to sacrifice by proxy. The bishops gathered by Cyprian in Carthage in spring 251 decided that the penitents among the latter had to be reconciled after individual examination, while the readmission of the former must be granted only in point of death after a life of penance. The Roman council of the same year agreed on the same verdict (*Letter* 55.6.2).

26 The earliest of Cyprian's letters that mentions his intention to gather a provincial synod is dated to the early part of 250 (*Letter* 14.4). The bishops assembled in March 251.

27 As duly recorded by his biographer, Cyprian's perfection was faster as Christian benefactor than as Christ believer (*praepropera velocitate pietatis paene ante coepit perfectus esse quam disceret*). The first patronal act directed to the local congregation occurred on his conversion and consisted in the distribution among the poor believers of the profits

resources he repeatedly invested in an extended network of patron-client relationships (e.g., Bobertz 1992; Stewart-Sykes 2002; Brent 2010: 69–74) were limited – both financially and territorially. His patronal capacity could be well strengthened through strategic clerical appointments (Cyprian, *Letters* 38–40; see Bobertz 1997) but not continually reproduced and expanded. Therefore, for everything beyond the reach of his connections and wealth, Cyprian depended on less incontestable assets, such as his finely educated mind, argumentative ability, rhetoric prowess, and intellectual energy as mainly materialized in textual products, letters, and treatises. Along with the character assassination of enemies and the praise given to deceased heroes and living allies, Cyprian's letters served especially to create, reinforce, or undo coalitions within the episcopal network and the larger club of entitled religious specialists. His treatises, instead, were aimed at more widely communicating and systematically espousing theological-disciplinary positions that targeted specific adversaries. They served also to set up the agenda (*The Lapsed*) or advertise the outcome (*The Unity of the Universal Church*) of the clergy assemblies that were continually held in those years – no fewer than seven between 251 and 256 C.E.

Eventually, however, both textual practices revealed themselves as largely ineffective in generating a widely held and durable agreement on Cyprian's program. The doctrinal and disciplinary uniformity called for by his imagined ecclesiastical order could only be gained to the detriment of its unity. I will conclude the article by hinting at two reasons why the implementation of Cyprian's model failed the reality test.

Human beings are passing and unstable allies. Alliances with other bishops or influential members of local congregations did not easily survive the periodic replacement of the religious personnel involved in the communication exchange and decision-making processes. A newly ordained bishop could have practical interests in, and sincere commitment to, a different agenda than the one his predecessor had set in agreement with Cyprian or that Cyprian himself had developed in the meantime. The case of the revised version of chapter 4 of the *De Unitate* is illuminating on this point. After publishing this text, in view of the fact that the new leader of the Roman congregation, Stephen, had started opposing some recently developed branches of Cyprian's theory of the ecclesiastic order – dealing with the "rebaptism of heretics" (see Cyprian,

coming from the sale of his possessions (*tota pretia dispensans*) and, in particular, of his estate (*horti*), which would be later somehow returned to him (Pontius, *Life of Cyprian* 2.7 and 15.1). On this, see Alciati and Urciuoli 2021: 27–31.

Letters 69–75)[28] – Cyprian returned to his own script and revised his view of the role of the bishop of Rome within the episcopal web of relations. Since Stephen was not thinking and acting as he was expected to do, Cyprian subtly downgraded the see of Peter from being the "source of unity" and "guiding principle" of the Church (*et unitatis originem atque rationem*), as we can read in the first edition (*The Unity of the Universal Church* 4: Primacy Text), to being a simple "starting point" (*exordium*) from which the "equal consort" (*pari consortio*) of the apostles/bishops begins to form its unity, as the second edition puts it (*The Unity of the Universal Church* 4: Textus Receptus) (Brent 2010: 314–316; similarly Bévenot 1971: x–xv).[29] The references to the "primacy" (*primatus*) and exemplarity of the Petrine Church were also removed, so that a consensus against Rome could be found without undermining the unity of those bishops whose chairs were established later in time (also Cyprian, *Letter* 71.3.1). Cornered by Cyprian's energetic campaign and unrivaled use of letters, councils, and pamphleteering, Stephen stopped holding communion with the churches that practiced rebaptism (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.5.4). He ended up being excommunicated by a wide section of the episcopal network, but the issue remained globally unresolved.

Finally, Cyprian's casuistry was simply overpowered by the complexity of the reality on the ground. I refer here to the abovementioned distinction between *sacrificati* and *libellatici* that was first agreed upon in the African council of 251 and then ratified by the Roman gathering of the same year (Cyprian, *Letter* 55.6.2). The first term was devised to designate those who fully accomplished the animal sacrifice; the second applied to those who managed to get a certificate of sacrifice without actually performing it, because they either bribed the magistrates or delegated the task to someone else. As Brent notes, the chances to bribe officials or delegate some non-Christian proxies were contingent on the situation. Moreover, as Cyprian himself recognizes (*Letter* 55.13.2), several mitigating circumstances for sacrificing made the severity of

28 This is another of Cyprian's innovations for which rhetoric is abundantly spent in order to compensate for the absence of a long-standing, authoritative tradition supporting his agenda.

29 The change occurred at some point during the dispute with Stephen about the rebaptism of the followers of Novatian who sought to return to the former flock (ca. 254–256). The first version was aimed at refuting Novatian's separatist claims against the former bishop of Rome, Cornelius, who was in line with Cyprian. The second version targeted the new bishop, Stephen, whose sacramental policy on the reconciliation of the followers of Novatian (i.e., no baptism is needed but a simple imposition of episcopal hands) conflicted with Cyprian's guidelines (i.e., baptism is needed because the rite administered by heretics and schismatics is nothing but a sacramentally void, "profane washing"; *Letter* 69.1.1). For a different interpretation and dating, see Hall 2004.

penance treatment inflicted on the *sacrificati* both unjustifiable and unworkable (Brent 2010: 12–13). Lastly, since, in some cases, more lenient magistrates allowed incense to be offered instead of the animal sacrifice expressly required by the emperor's edict, a third neologism, the *turificati* (Cyprian, *Letter* 55.2.1), had to be coined and a further category of culpability devised and discussed.[30] Proving to be inapplicable after all, the initial penitential distinction was officially abandoned only two years after Cyprian's equally official acceptance (253 C.E.; *Letter* 57),[31] but the splinter group it had created remained. Textualized theories can be recast and renounced if they turn out to be practically inconvenient. Yet the material effects of unviable conceptual models are much harder to wipe out.

4 Conclusion

This analysis of Cyprian's management of the situation arising out of the Christians' varied different responses to Decius's sacrificial command set out to foreground the implications of the intersection of two urban factors, intellectualized religion and heterarchy, in the whole sequence of events. To do so, I followed up on previous research that has persuasively challenged the self-styled description and scholarly received opinion of Cyprian as advocate of Church unity, by showing that his ecclesiastic construct of Christ religion, which was related to a brand-new taxonomy of culpability and penance, in reality brought about the creation of three discrete translocal Christ groups. I argued that, in urban contexts characterized by a host of powers, authority claims, and forms of capital, Cyprian's intellectualized religion contributed to breaking apart existing coalescences of people united by religion. Institutionally and socially stronger than a freelance religious expert, but lacking the organized political power of a state-supported religious establishment, Cyprian had enough resources to engineer a church order and coordinate a corporate claim to "the monopoly of the formulation of true practice and doctrine" (Stowers 2016: 153). The result of his efforts, however, was a sequence of institutionalized divisions within formerly coordinated networks.

Although I hinted at it in reference to Cyprians' revision of chapter 4 of the *De Unitate*, I could not expand here on the second act of the sacrificial

30 Most likely, they were initially submitted to the same penitential treatment as the *libellatici* (see Cyprian, *Letter* 55.11.3).

31 The stated motivation for a general reconciliation of the penitents was the prospect of an imminent "second outbreak of hostility" against the believers (*Letter* 57.1.2).

crisis triggered by Decius's edict, which similarly affected the translocal alliances among the Christ groups' leaders. I refer to the even more theoretically laden "baptismal dispute" that, in early 254 C.E., Cyprian started with the new bishop of Rome, Stephen. The analysis of this conflict, which broke off a few years later due to the death of both the protagonists, would simply confirm the verdict. Cyprian's unifying systematic worldview, which relied on sophisticated conceptualizations, strategies of ranking, and principles of order- and boundary-making, produced the following effect: the fractionation of prior and more fluidly organized social entities into mutually unranked rival hierarchies resting on the same territories, and/or battling on a wider scale. Seeking to control and reduce the number of authorities involved in the decision-making process, Cyprian's intellectualized project of power relations brought about a multiplication of mutually separated groups, authority structures, and related lines of command. Whether this outcome is to be read as an achievement of theological order or an increase of socioreligious chaos is in the eye of the beholder. Yet, technically, it is the production of a new form of heterarchy.[32]

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32 Notably "the existence of two or more discrete hierarchies that interact as equals" (Brumfiel 1995: 124).

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