

The Relation of Tertullian's Christology to Pagan Philosophy

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I

Tertullian is widely accorded the title of Father of Western Theology. He clearly merits this recognition because he began the task of making the transition from the spirituality of the apostolic church to the patristic period in which faith was informed by theological reflection. It was evident to Tertullian, when he began writing, that the immediacy of the consensus of faith had been broken by the appearance of heresies and schisms within the church, and that faith must be stabilized by the mediation of thought, which is able to give belief a necessary and universal form, and by the Catholic church, which has a special claim to power and authority as belonging to the apostolic tradition.¹ Tertullian articulated the position of the Catholic church as the sole authority with the empiric power to mediate between the individual and his salvation as the possessor of the *regula fidei* and as mediator between revealed truth and its interpretation.² He recognized the need for philosophy or theology as well as faith, and for the church to constitute itself as an ecclesiastical polity with a clerical order with power and authority over the laity. It is with Tertullian that one first encounters in Latin Christianity an attempt to explain how in thought and in the life of the church there can be a mediation of natural will and reason, of the letter and the spirit.

The division of inner freedom and external circumstance, of the universality of thought and natural particularity, which Hellenic culture had sought to contain within the unity of the Greek polity, in Tertullian's day had to be resolved beginning from the starting point of Hellenistic culture or human subjectivity.³ The

1. J. Quasten, *Patrology*, II (Westminster, Maryland, 1964), pp. 243-392 classifies Tertullian's writings into three divisions: apologetic, controversial or doctrinal, and disciplinary. Tertullian attempts to articulate the position of the Christian such that he can be conscious of who he is in his relation to and difference from the pagans, Jews, and heretics, on matters of discipline and doctrine.

2. See Hans von Campershausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power* (English trans. by J. A. Baker, Stanford, California, 1969), pp. 174 ff.

3. For a discussion of the relation of Hellenic and Hellenistic philosophy to the development of Patristic theology see J. A. Doull, "The Christian Origin of Contemporary Institutions", *Dionysius*, VI (1982), pp. 111-165. See also C. N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New York and

Christian individual required a knowledge of how he was to preserve his self-identity as a Christian, in the extreme conflict of his day, when preserving one's natural individuality and remaining faithful to God, were often posed in external reality as mutually exclusive alternatives.⁴ But unlike Hellenistic philosophy and Roman rule, which assumed the division of the human subject and his environment and then sought to overcome it by attaining to imperturbability and dominion in the world, Christian theology had to explicate as its beginning point and end an absolutely concrete principle—Christ as being perfectly united in Himself in the division of nature and reason.⁵ Human freedom was revealed in Christ to be realized and actual; what is called for is not a conquest of or retreat from the world but the conversion and reform of the human spirit.⁶ The love of God and one's neighbour replaced the law as something external to which individuals are subject.

Tertullian, in *Apologeticum* and *Ad Nationes*, calls for a total reform of the human spirit and concludes that man will be reconciled with man only to the extent that they are converted to Christianity.⁷ Doctrinally he attempts to refute the heresies of his day which in one form or another deny that Christ is fully God and fully man.⁸ In these activities Tertullian was moving in the direction which the Latin Fathers after him were to develop further.

II

But Tertullian is also the man who declared that there is no common ground between the philosopher and the Christian, science and faith, allegiance to the Caesars and to God.⁹ It is not until St. Augustine that it becomes possible to follow the guidance of St. Paul and say that the philosophers knew the end but not the way to it. The Platonists, Augustine argues, knew, however vaguely it was grasped, that the separation of man from God can only be overcome at the level of the division itself of nature and thought. The unification of human and divine requires that God be fully in unity with Himself in this division.¹⁰

London, 1957), pp. 114-176 and 213-249 and J.-C. Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris, 1972), pp. 235-254.

4. See *De Idololatria*, *Ad Martyras*, *Scorpiace*, *De fuga in Persecutione*, *Ad Scapulum*.

5. See Doull, pp. 151-165.

6. See G. B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform* (New York, Evanston, and London, 1987), pp. 10-62.

7. Tertullian, *Apol.* 25; *Ad Nat.* ii, 17.

8. See such treatises as *Adversus Marcionem*, *Adversus Hermogenem*, *Adversus Valentinianos*, and *Adversus Praxean*.

9. Tertullian, *Apol.* 46; *De Idol.* 18 and 19.

10. See my paper "St. Augustine's Account of the Relation of Platonism

Tertullian's attraction to Montanism is usually explained in terms of his personality and is regarded as only concerned with matters of 'discipline'.¹¹ The present paper argues that Tertullian's attraction to Montanism may be understood as consistently following from his doctrine on the nature of God incarnate. It is argued that he found in the Montanist conventicle a form of religious life which was in agreement with his own Christology. If the latter is the case, the Montanists found in Tertullian someone able to give their religious standpoint a theological foundation. It is in fact given expression in the defence of his view of the Trinity in the treatise *Adversus Praxean*, which he understood as sanctioned by the Montanist Paraclete, against the monarchian position adhered to by those in authority in the Catholic church.

In that treatise, Christ is not spoken of as united in Himself in the division of reason and nature, of his divinity and humanity.¹² Tertullian can only conceive of a unity of terms in the form of a synthesis in which the distinction of humanity and divinity is lost in the third term. Therefore he rejects the possibility that there could be a concretion of humanity and divinity in Christ.¹³ Rather Christ is a prolation or emanation from the Father. To know Christ in His unity is to refer Him back to the Father.¹⁴ Christ, as the prolated λόγος, is God in His extreme remove from Himself in the externality of space and time.¹⁵ There are two aspects to the prolated λόγος; His relation to His Father, wherein He is united in Himself, and His relation to the world, which involves Him in a negativity or alienation from His own inner identity as the unprolated λόγος. How the being and otherness of the prolated λόγος are to be connected, Tertullian can only express in images.¹⁶

to Christianity in *De Civitate Dei*", *Dionysius*, VII (1983), pp. 43-48.

11. The positions which Tertullian adopted from the Montanists - the condemnation of the existing regulations on fasting as too lax, disallowing of second marriages, forbidding of flight in persecution and rejection of the penitential discipline current at Rome for its leniency - are reasonably understood as concerned with matters of 'discipline' rather than 'doctrine'. The question of the authority and power of the bishop is at the centre of his disagreement on the issue of penitential discipline and the other regulations are concerned with how Christians should conduct themselves in their pilgrimage to salvation. The present paper explains Montanist position on matters of discipline as following consistently from his doctrine. See, for example, T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 131 ff. for an attempt to explain Tertullian's attraction to the Montanist position on matters of discipline in terms of Tertullian's personality.

12. For a detailed treatment of *Adversus Praxean* see B. B. Warfuekd, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine* (Westport, Connecticut, 1970), pp. 3-113.

13. Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 27.

14. Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 24.

15. Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 24.

16. Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 8, 24.

But the images of the relation express the notion of the prolate λόγος as reduced and derivative divinity which, on account of its involvement in the externality of the natural and particular, suffers as a river flowing from the pure fountainhead is soiled with mire and mud. This heretical view of the Son, as subordinate to the Father, it will be argued, is the central determination which runs through Tertullian's thought as it leads to his acceptance of Montanism.

Aristotle, starting from the Platonic division of reason and nature, form and content, leads the argument back to a prior principle, which is able to contain these distinctions as moments within its own intrinsic activity.¹⁷ Tertullian, in contrast, understood unity only to be realized at the level of the Father Who is perfectly united in Himself as beyond rather than as the unifying principle of finite division. There is in Tertullian no principle of the finite which would render it possible to have a relation to the realm of finite particular interest except as a falling into division and alienation. His position is not like that of Plato, whom he regards as the patriarch of all heresies, but rather is similar to the Stoic position which rejects as its starting the division of natural and rational.¹⁸

Tertullian's λόγος, like the Stoic λόγος, is not a principle of a determinate content, such as the human individual, family, and state, in relation to which the rational and natural are abstractions.¹⁹ The λόγος is either understood to be identical with the natural and particular (thus their materialism), or, so far as the λόγος stands in its difference from what it is a λόγος of, it is involved in what is unreal or illusory. The consequences for Tertullian and the Stoic are similar in the following ways:

a. The identification of the universal with the particular results in an ascetic moral legalism. What is natural and particular, in this view, must be brought under the direct rule of the abstract universal at the cost of human individuality.²⁰ What is lacking here, from a Christian standpoint, is the notion of man as spirit, and as such, subject only to the law of love, which unites man with man and man with God in their difference as well as their identity.²¹ In Hellenistic philosophy the human subject either identified himself with the side of the natural (Epicureanism), or with

17. See Doull, pp. 142-152; Aristotle, *Met.* III and the solution to the problems in the following books.

18. Tertullian, *De Anima*, 5, 18.

19. See Cochrane, pp. 165 ff. and 230 ff.

20. See J. von Arnim, *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* (Leipzig, 1924), III, 4. Referred to hereafter as SVF.

21. Tertullian's legalistic morality and materialism finds its most vivid expression in his conception of Hell (*De Spect.* 30). His anticipated delight

the side of the rational (Stoicism), or showed the nullity of either side and found in human subjectivity a principle prior to all such division (Academic or Pyrrhonian Scepticism).²² Tertullian does not come to the sceptical standpoint which leads the argument back to human subjectivity as prior to the division of reason and nature. Accordingly, the individual is understood by Tertullian as either belonging to the camp of light (of God as beyond all particular finite interest), or, one belongs to the camp of darkness (the unreal illusory realm of the natural will). In theory, according to Tertullian, the camps are mutually exclusive;²³ but in practice he recognizes the need for a severe discipline by which Christians purge themselves of finite interest and natural passion or feeling.²⁴ Rather than freeing himself of the world, Tertullian finds himself absorbed in it because he stands on one side of a finite division at war with the other side. The individual must seek unity with God by trying to identify directly with the will of the transcendent Father which he can only attempt to do by abiding by the spirit of Old Testament Law and detaching himself from the demands of his natural will.²⁵ His army is in an endless retreat and experiences the end it seeks only negatively as the sorrow of the world.

b. Tertullian regards all forms of secular power as not merely being alien from, but even hostile to, God. Service to God and to Caesar are mutually exclusive. There is, in his view, no possibility of a mediation of finite natural interest and a relation to the universal Good. The former is understood as an idolatrous distraction from the latter.²⁶ He consistently develops this argument into his view of the church when he becomes a Montanist. Power and authority belong only to God and not to the priest.²⁷ Clergy and laity are equal as having no authority and power.²⁸ In Tertullian's view one must look beyond the finite division of clergy and laity, of the church as having a relation to the world as well as to God (the church of the 'psychic' or 'physical man') to

in watching the heretics suffer physical torment is a consequence of the fact that he does not properly distinguish between the person and his position, the ideal and its mediation and realization at the level of man.

22. See St. Augustine's *Contra Academicos* for the relation of Academic Scepticism to Epicureanism and Stoicism, and philosophy as distinct from the former dogmatic standpoints. See also my article "A Note on Book III of St. Augustine's *Contra Academicos*", *Studia Patristica*, XVIII (1982).

23. Tertullian, *De Coron.* 13-15; *Ad Martyr.* 2.

24. Tertullian does allow that Christians should support the state to the extent of paying taxes and offering prayers. See *Apol.* 30, 42, 43, 44; *Scorp.* 14.

25. Tertullian, *De Orat.* 4, 2; *De Pudic.* 14, 16; *De Paen.* 8, 9.

26. *De Idol.* 15.

27. *De Pudic.* 1, 21.

28. *De Exhort. Cast.* 7.

the church as a whole which is not caught in the finitude of the opposition of subject and object, of ruler and ruled. The church as a whole is the church of the 'pneumatic' or spiritual man, who is only subject to the monarchic rule of God.²⁹ One is left with the mere idea of a church which is not an actually existing church in the world. In this regard it is very similar to the Stoic notion of a cosmopolis which is the state purified of all that is natural and particular in it — the empty abstract idea of a state, which cannot be as an actually existing state.³⁰

This is consistent with Tertullian's notion of the prolated λόγος which preserves itself in its self-identity to the extent that it is not diminished through its involvement in the natural and particular which is external and alien to it. Just as God, in this account, does not become incarnate as actually united in Himself in the flesh, so also the church does not actually exist in the world but only as the point of abstract identity between Christians, as pneumatics, who live in the expectation of the imminent end of the world and release from the external constraint of human institutions and nature.³¹

c. Tertullian maintains that there are two legitimate ways in which one may possess the truth: faith in what is revealed through prophecy, tradition, and Scripture, and as immediately present as the *testimonium animae naturaliter Christianae*. He opposes these relations to the truth to science as he opposes wisdom to foolishness.³²

The sense of his position may be understood in terms of Old Testament theology. When Job renounces his renunciation of God he attains to a knowledge of God as absolute causality and measure; as such God cannot be measured or conceived of as subject to any laws whether natural or rational.³³ Tertullian understands the wisdom of a simple faith to be the fear of God, which derives from the recognition of God the Father, in His absolute universality and sovereignty as transcendent of all finite division, as being the truth.³⁴

The alternative to faith, in his view, is pseudo-science, which declares that man is the measure of all things.³⁵ The standpoint of so-called science or sophistry is regarded by Tertullian as positively hostile to faith and God. His position follows consistently from the

29. See *De Monogamia*, *De Ieiunio Psychicos*, and *De Pudicitia*.

30. For Stoics see *SVF* III, 4; III, 323.

31. Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 1; *Adv. Marc.* IV, 22.

32. *De Praescript.* 7; *De Carne Christe*, 5.

33. *Job*, 40.

34. *Ad Nat.* II, 2.

35. *De Anima*, 1-2.

assumption that God is only united in Himself in His transcendent nature and not in the division of human finitude. Human wisdom can only attain to the knowledge that what is other than God is nothing in itself. In the condition of human finitude man can only passively receive the truth as revealed to him by God.

Tertullian's interest in the *testimonium animae naturaliter Christianae* is to show what the nature of the soul is in the pure potency of its being. What is the nature of the soul in its created nature prior to its constituting itself through its own self-conscious activity? Tertullian answers that the soul has as its immediate possession a knowledge of God as the undivided principle of the dividedness of finite human activity.³⁶ The soul in its pure potency has a grasp of the oneness of everything in God. The advance of the Christian, according to Tertullian's account, is from this natural state to the consciously passive relation of faith. Further advance is thought necessarily to involve the false appropriation by human subjectivity what can only belong to divine subjectivity.³⁷

Tertullian's position on law is that of the Old Testament. It takes no account of the revelation of Christ as perfectly united in Himself in the division of reason and nature. Tertullian, like the Stoics, cannot allow the possibility that at the level of human finitude there can be a unification of humanity and divinity, which preserves the distinction of the two natures. In the Stoic λόγος everything is identical; the Stoic must immediately identify himself with the λόγος since there is not a mediation of the natural and particular with the universal and rational, of humanity with divinity in the λόγος itself.³⁸ What Tertullian shares in common with the Stoics is his rejection of the notion of truth as involving mediation as well as immediacy.

III

Tertullian correctly understood the consequences of his own Christology when he revolted from the Catholic church to join the Montanist. He, according to the argument of the present paper, understood the source of heresy and evil to lie in human subjectivity which sought to appropriate for itself the role of mediator in the assumption of the power of the keys in the church, of secular rule in the world, and in the attempt to have a self-conscious relation to faith. In Montanism Tertullian found a religious standpoint which he could imagine had escaped these evils.

The Montanists responded to the fact that the consensus of

36. *De Testimonio Animae*, chs. 1 and 5.

37. *Apol.* 46; *De Praescript.* 7.

38. SVF III, 4.

faith of the apostolic church had been broken by heresy by maintaining that a basis for a new consensus was present which was in continuity with the old consensus: namely, recognition of revealed truth through the Paraclete's prophets which did not call for the mediation of human reflection and interpretation but simple faith.³⁹ Christians could remain in the immediate spirituality of the apostolic church and wait for the imminent end of the world and release from the constraints of the world and human institutions.⁴⁰ In Montanism he found both the rigorist discipline which sought to identify the spirit with the letter, and the implicit rejection of ecclesiastical authority. The Catholic church of his day was moving in the direction of constituting itself as a polity which claimed an essential role in mediating between the individual and God in man's salvation, and in allowing the spirit dominion over the letter to the point that the spirit was in danger of losing all definite content.⁴¹ The Montanists could appear to Tertullian as pre-political and pre-philosophical while being in full possession of the faith as revealed through the prophets, Scripture, and tradition.

The difficulty in this whole position is made explicit in the fact that Tertullian came to it through a self-conscious reflection of the division between pagan and Christian theologies. What Tertullian ironically effected in doing this was to move the camp of light and the camp of darkness from the external realm of the Roman Empire, in which the two camps may appear to be able to co-exist as mutually indifferent to each other, inward into the soul of the Christian where theologically and in the life of the Church the problem had to be solved. Appropriately therefore, he is celebrated as the founding Father of Latin theology in the West, while, guided by his own councils, he joined a sect doomed to obscurity.

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39. Hippolytus, *Refutatio* VIII, 13, 2; Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, V, 18, 2.

40. Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 1; *Adv. Marc.* IV, 22.

41. See A. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, II (English trans. by N. Buchanan, New York, 1961), p. 76 ff.