

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Past and Present*

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In the long history of the Western Church, there can be few figures who have been the object of such enduring fascination as Tertullian. For centuries churchmen and lay scholars have pondered the writings of this trenchant yet elusive controversialist, and discussed whether they are orthodox, heretical, a bit of both or somewhere in between. Has his influence on the Church been harmful or beneficial, or have the two tendencies cancelled one another out? The question has seldom received a clearcut answer, and certainly none which has ever proved to be definitive. Then as now, Tertullian has been a borderline figure, neither officially recognised as a saint nor explicitly condemned as a heretic. In the East, apart from a few brief references in Eusebius,<sup>1</sup> Tertullian has been very largely ignored—the fate of anyone who chose to write in Latin. But in the West, his influence has left an indelible mark on the history of the Church. It is certainly true that he has not been adulated like the great luminaries of the fourth century, but leaving aside the issue of his orthodoxy, the comparison is surely unfair. For if both Jerome and Augustine can point to an impressive following down the centuries, we must remember that it was their intention, after all, to give the Church a cultural and intellectual foundation which would stand the test of time. Furthermore, their labours were always widely supported, and not only by the Church; the State and the social climate in general were on their side. The difficulties and opposition which they did encounter seem insignificant in comparison with the troubles which afflicted the whole Church in the centuries of persecution. From the moment they began to write, both Jerome and Augustine enjoyed an audience which (in the West at any rate) was universal. Equally important, they had the benefit of a large number of illustrious predecessors, both Greek and Latin, whose ideas they could borrow and whose mistakes they could avoid. All these advantages were denied

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Tertullian. It was his lot to blaze trails for others to follow, and we must not blame him too severely if succeeding generations sometimes found firmer ground to tread on.

Tertullian lived in an age which, in spite of all its enlightenment, remained curiously frightened and consequently intolerant of that inexplicable religious novelty men called Christianity. He knew only too well how ludicrously unjust was the persecution meted out to Christians, but he also knew that prejudice had dulled the wits of otherwise sensible men, and that their blindness was invincible. At times we get an impression in his writings of a deeper malaise. The late second century was a time of growing insecurity, characterised by a loss of faith in the traditional values of Hellenism. The classical virtues of justice and reason, to which Tertullian appealed in his defence of the Christians, were fighting a losing battle against this rising current of doubt and anxiety. Christians did well to tremble at the news of fresh disaster. In a society beset with fears for its very existence, they appeared as a subversive element which eagerly awaited the prospect of imminent collapse. Such people were unlikely to be spared the wrath of a mob determined to vent its frustration on the first

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* ii.2.4; iii.20.7; 33.3; v.5.6.

available victim. Tertullian paints the scene vividly, and even when allowance is made for rhetorical flourish, the picture is grim enough (see, e.g., *Apol.* 40. 1-2). In these circumstances it is surprising that Tertullian was able to write at all. Yet when we remember that it was he more than anyone who captured the world of Latin letters for the faith of Christ, we may begin to appreciate how great and how lasting his achievement was.

His extant works are thirty-one in number, and these will easily fill two large volumes. No other Latin Christian writer from the age of persecution has left us anything like as much, and we must remember that the surviving texts may represent as little as half the total number of his compositions. We know that some of his treatises were written in Greek, but these no longer survive. There are also a number of works to which his name has been attached, but which, in the opinion of most scholars, are unauthentic. These include a stirring account of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity, which occurred in AD 203, a short treatise against heresies, and a poem attacking the heretic Marcion.

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But even if we leave these aside, the extent and range of the surviving corpus is still remarkable. Lack of sufficient information makes it impossible to say for certain how long Tertullian's literary career lasted, but the bulk of his writings seem to be datable to the reigns of the African emperor Septimius Severus (AD 193-211) and of his son Caracalla (AD 211-17). It therefore seems likely that he must have written on average two books a year, a considerable achievement even in an age when a 'book' was often little more than a short pamphlet. These books may be divided according to content into five broad categories, two of which may then be further subdivided in line with Tertullian's special interests.

The first, and in some ways most appealing of these, is apologetic. Its most substantial representative is a lengthy treatise called simply *Apologeticum*, which is now extant in two separate recensions. Closely related to it is an earlier work *Ad nationes*, of which *Apologeticum* was probably a later expansion. In these books Tertullian undertakes a thorough-going defence of Christians in the face of pagan prejudice and persecution. He points out that the popular belief that Christians were members of an immoral secret society, bent on the destruction of the Empire, has no basis in fact, and goes on to argue for the reasonableness and historical certainty of Christian truth as opposed to the irrationality of paganism. His emphasis is everywhere on people and events rather than on theories and doctrines, and it is this which continues to give *Apologeticum* a wide popular appeal. As a source-book for early Christian life and attitudes it is invaluable, though some of the factual details it records may have suffered distortion in the course of argument.

Two smaller works in a similar vein are a short treatise on the testimony of the soul (*De testimonio animae*), which outlines Tertullian's belief that the natural man is subconsciously aware of Christian truth despite his outward profession of paganism, and a rhetorical address to Scapula, Roman governor of Africa in AD 212, in which he argues against the legal disabilities imposed on Christians.

A second category of works takes up the theme of persecution and deals with it from the standpoint of the confessing Christian. Tertullian stresses the virtues of fortitude and exhorts

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the martyrs to die a death worthy of their faith. At times he leaves the impression of vacillation on certain points, particularly on the validity of flight in persecution. Sometimes he allows for this and advises on the conduct proper to a refugee, but we must remember that elsewhere he explicitly condemns it in a special treatise devoted to the subject (*De fuga in persecutione*). The general impression is that whilst he may have accepted such realities when they did not impinge on the main issue under discussion, his own sympathies inclined him towards an unrelenting rigorism in the face of the ultimate test of a Christian's religious sincerity.

Next comes a series of tracts dealing with various aspects of Christian piety and practice. There are short treatises on prayer (*De oratione*), fasting (*De ieiunio*), long-suffering (*De patientia*) and repentance (*De paenitentia*). These are chiefly of interest for the line they take—or seem to take—on such matters as the possibility of forgiveness for sins committed after baptism. This is another subject where Tertullian is inconsistent, though once again it is largely a question of priorities. As with flight in persecution, Tertullian shows a remarkable ability to insist on the strictest possible discipline in principle, and yet adjust it under the pressure of circumstances to the point where he almost ignores it completely. Scholars usually explain these discrepancies in his teaching by assigning the more tolerant passages to an early stage of his career, before he came into contact with the extremism of the Montanists. Such a theory is plausible, but unnecessary. Tertullian's examples of tolerance are all circumstantial and deal with actual cases, whilst his doctrinaire attitudes normally come out only when he is stating a general principle. May it not be that with him, as with so many others, theoretical justice was tempered with practical mercy, without any consciousness of these two things being fundamentally incompatible?

Of particular importance is his work on baptism (*De baptismo*) in which he examines the sacrament at length. It seems that many people were questioning the need for such a rite, and Tertullian goes into great detail about the purifying effects of consecrated water on sinful human flesh. To us his language sounds almost magical, but we should remember that his main concern was to counter a spiritualising tendency which

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degraded the material world and put it outside the sphere of redemption. In his treatise Tertullian criticises the widespread practice of infant baptism, on the ground that it fails to take account of a child's propensity to sin without knowing it. For in Tertullian's theology of baptism, a baptised child who committed a sin, even without knowing it, would lose his eternal salvation, unless he could redeem himself by the blood of martyrdom.

Also in this category was a work on ecstasy (*De extasi*), which is unfortunately no longer extant. Tertullian makes casual allusions to ecstatic activity in other treatises, and these have often been advanced as evidence that he shared a 'charismatic' kind of piety. The loss of *De extasi* is therefore a matter of some regret, as it would probably have enabled us to view this whole question in greater perspective. As it is, we know that he was certainly well-disposed towards those who had had unusual spiritual experiences, even when these bordered on the paranormal, but we cannot say for certain whether or to what extent he participated in such activity himself. There is no doubt that he accepted such things as necessary in the life of the

Church, but there is no evidence to indicate that he regarded them as mandatory for, or usual among individual believers.

The fourth category of his writings, which may be subdivided into two, concerns the individual Christian's piety in relation to the surrounding world. Some of these writings deal with general subjects like public entertainments (*De spectaculis*), idolatry (*De idololatria*), and the crown which soldiers wore to celebrate victories and special imperial favours (*De corona*). The greater number, however, are concerned with the place of women in the Church. Tertullian was preoccupied with this subject to the point of obsession, and returned to it whenever he could. He exhorted Christian women to live modestly, particularly in matters of dress and adornment, and ruled out the possibility of second marriages in this life. He regarded sexual intercourse as sinful and encouraged believers to forgo the joys of parenthood on the ground that Christ would soon return and bring the world to an end. Marriage he tolerated, in line with biblical teaching, but it was to be a purely spiritual affair. It is odd, though extremely significant, that this lack of enthusiasm for marriage and procreation was in spite of

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his general tendency to exalt the created world as a gift of a beneficent God.

The fifth and last major category is doctrinal. This too, may be subdivided, according to whether a particular work is positive or negative in intention. The treatises with a positive bent deal mostly with the nature of man and the incarnation of Christ. The most important of them, and the most intellectual of all Tertullian's writings, is *De anima*, which presents a Christian critique of various philosophical ideas concerning the nature of the human soul. In it he argues against the Platonists' doctrine of the soul's incorporeality, and favours the Stoic teaching instead. For this reason he has sometimes been called a 'materialist', though to say this is to misunderstand his use of the term 'body'. For Tertullian a 'body' was not necessarily material in substance, and much of *De anima* is taken up with what amounts in effect to a refutation of this assumption. Of all Tertullian's treatises, *De anima* is the one which is most unjustly neglected today, in spite of a masterly edition of it by Jan Waszink (Amsterdam, 1947).

The union of spirit and matter forms the underlying theme of two other works, both of them substantial. *De carne Christi* asserts the reality of the incarnation, and may fairly be claimed to be Chalcedonian *avant la lettre*, while its sequel, *De resurrectione carnis* (or *mortuorum*) examines in detail what is meant by the resurrection of the flesh. All these treatises display a wealth of biological knowledge unusual in a theologian, and it is remarkable how little in them seems dated, even to a modern reader.

On the negative side are Tertullian's numerous treatises against heretics of various kinds. He was at great pains to condemn the dualism of Hermogenes, who apparently believed that matter was evil, and also the fanciful speculations of the Valentinians, who constructed a hierarchy of supernatural beings out of such abstract terms as Wisdom, Fullness (*Pleroma*) and Mind (*Nous*). His main attack, however, was reserved for Marcion, a trader from the Black Sea who had tried to downgrade the Old Testament and had so purged the New as to leave almost nothing but Luke's Gospel and the Pauline Epistles. In answering him, Tertullian took five books, in which he demonstrated how even Marcion's reduced canon

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could not be understood without the Old Testament, and how true Christian faith involved an integrated world-view in which the same God was both Creator and Redeemer.

But the most famous anti-heretical treatise of all is undoubtedly the one against Praxeas, an unknown Greek who claimed that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were but names to distinguish the different operations of the one God. This teaching, which in Tertullian's phrase, 'crucified the Father', led him to develop the first full-length doctrine of the Trinity. To a later generation it appears to have traces of subordinationism (the belief that the Son and the Spirit are inferior to the Father), but in the context of its time it is a triumphant statement of orthodoxy, and one which can still provoke debate today.

Also in this category is a long study of heresy in the abstract. *De praescriptione haereticorum* is an attempt to isolate the root cause of heresy and to guard against it. Much of Tertullian's argument concerns the interpretation of Scripture, which he insists must be read as an organic whole within the context of the (apostolic) Rule of Faith. This argument is unlikely to sound very convincing to a modern reader, but it is of great interest for the light which it sheds on the state of Christian doctrine around the year 200.

Tertullian also wrote against the Jews (*Adversus Iudaeos*), though the text of this work is clearly composite. Probably some of it comes from other hands, though we cannot be sure whether Tertullian reworked existing material or whether others edited an unfinished work of his.

When discussing Tertullian's polemical works, it is only fair to remember that he seldom if ever indulged in personal attacks or backbiting of the kind so frequent in writers like Jerome. Certainly he had harsh things to say about certain individuals, but their offence was invariably against Christian truth, not against him personally. Furthermore, the only people he condemned by name were heretics whom the Church had already condemned; when this was not the case, he tended to resort to anonymity. Thus his harsh criticism of the 'bishop of bishops' (*De pud.* 20.21) leaves us guessing his identity, and even his see, which may have been Rome or (as Barnes thinks) Carthage. The only possible exception to this rule

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is Praxeas, but it is far from certain that this was his real name, since it could well be a Greek nickname meaning 'busybody'.

Outside all categories is the last and most enigmatic of Tertullian's writings, *De pallio*. This is a tongue-in-cheek study of ancient habits of dress, in which the noble Roman toga is compared unfavourably with the pallium of the Greek philosophers. Many Romans were taking to the latter as a sign of learning, though it was also popular with the Christians, and would a cautious Roman risk being associated with such disreputable people? *De pallio* stands out as an oddity, so much so that some have even claimed that it antedates Tertullian's conversion. This, however, is unlikely. Like so much else in his writings, *De pallio* proves nothing but that he was a great thinker and writer, capable of unusual versatility and gifted with a somewhat untheological sense of humour.

Tertullian's achievement as a writer was immense. His wide-ranging doctrinal studies offered valuable ammunition to the Christians, and enabled them to take the offensive at all levels of ancient society. Tertullian put Christianity on the cultural map in a way which it had never been before, and his writings were the staple diet of Latin Christianity until at least the fourth century. As a moralist, he strikes us as puritanical, but this must be seen in perspective. Most early Christian writers had leanings towards asceticism, and Tertullian is sweet reasonableness when set alongside Jerome, or the Desert Fathers. Even after he fell victim to the charge of heresy, his writings were too valuable to be burned, and that in itself is a tribute to his lasting greatness as a Christian theologian and apologist.

### TERTULLIAN IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

For centuries the critical study of Tertullian's works, such as it was, was the exclusive preserve of the Church. In the age of persecution, however, there was no time to spare in which to write a biography of a controversial figure who to all appearances was not even a martyr, with the result that contemporary records are blank. Tertullian himself never dwelt on autobiographical details, and there is remarkably little which can be deduced with certainty from his writings, despite long and

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acrimonious controversies, many of them quite fruitless, which have raged over various 'clues' which they have been supposed to provide. In the end all we can really say about Tertullian's life is that we know virtually nothing about it, and whatever mark he may have left on his own time and society has escaped the notice of posterity.

On the whole, Tertullian's works have survived not because of the secular achievements of their author, but because their intrinsic merit and interest has earned them a place in Christian tradition. It was their theological value (despite the taint of heresy) and not their literary worth which ensured their survival. The Ciceronian revival which permeated Latin letters in the fourth century ensured that Tertullian's reputation as a classicist was never very high. Even a Christian writer like Lactantius (*Inst. div.* v. I.3) felt free to disapprove of his style, and had it not been for the subsequent triumph of Christianity his fame would almost certainly have gone the way of many another second-century rhetorician, his talent unsung by a forgetful posterity.

Tertullian ostensibly wrote many of his works, and especially the famous *Apologeticum*, for a largely pagan audience whom he hoped to reach with the Gospel. Whatever success he may have had in this attempt has escaped the notice of history, but there is no doubt that from a very early date his writings were required reading in the North African Church. Cyprian, who was bishop of Carthage a generation or so after Tertullian's death, apparently read the 'master' every day, if Jerome (*De vir. ill.* 53) can be believed. His writings certainly betray a considerable indebtedness to those of his illustrious predecessor, and the same may be said of Novatian and even of his critic Lactantius.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cyprian borrowed extensively from Tertullian in his *De oratione dominica*, *De bono paenitentiae* and *De habitu virginum*. Novatian used the *Adversus Praxean* when composing his *De trinitate* and Lactantius often alludes to such works as the *Apologeticum*, the *Adversus Praxean* and the *Ad Scapulam*.

It was not until Tertullian was being widely read and imitated in the Western Church that doubts concerning his orthodoxy began to be expressed. Hilary of Poitiers, for example, remarks on the excellence of Tertullian's commentary on the Beatitudes (now lost), adding however that its authority was lessened by the author's subsequent lapse into heresy.<sup>3</sup> Jerome is more precise—he claims that Tertullian became a Montanist in middle age, but puts the blame for this squarely on the envy and insults of the Roman clergy.<sup>4</sup> This sympathetic

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attitude had worn thin by the end of the fourth century, however, and Tertullian's writings were no longer read and copied with the same interest as before.

We cannot now retrace in detail the steps which led to the final condemnation of Tertullian's works at the end of the fifth century, though no doubt one important factor was the use which dissident movements had been able to make of them. Indeed, it may well have been schisms in the North African Church which brought him under suspicion of heresy in the first place. It is generally thought that the reluctance of early writers to mention him by name is evidence that they regarded him as a heretic from whom they wished to dissociate themselves as much as possible, but this is by no means obvious. It was not unusual to borrow from earlier writers without mentioning their names; Tertullian himself made veiled references to other Christian authors, and he certainly did not regard them as heretical.<sup>5</sup> It is also difficult to imagine how, if this were indeed the case, an impeccably orthodox Churchman like Cyprian could have esteemed him as highly as he did—'master' is not the sort of word Cyprian would have reserved for someone who was a notorious schismatic. It is also somewhat surprising that Eusebius betrays no knowledge of the fact. Surely it cannot be coincidence that clear references to Tertullian's heresy begin to appear only after the disruption in the North African Church caused by the Donatist schism. This suspicion is strengthened by Augustine, who mentions Tertullian's heresy in connection with the sect of the Tertullianistae, a small body which he helped to reintegrate into the Catholic Church. According to Augustine, the sect was a lingering survival of a dissenting movement led by Tertullian himself, but although this may have been sincerely believed on both sides, it is on balance unlikely. More probably the Tertullianistae came into being early in the fourth century. In the charged atmosphere of the time, when the members of the African Church had to choose between a newly legalised, semi-official Christianity and the stricter traditions of the ancient brotherhood of martyrs, what could have been more natural than for a small group to declare its loyalty to the greatest figure their Church had produced, and to seek to rally men to his teachings as the authentic way of faith? Certainly the ease with which they were later

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<sup>3</sup> *Comm. in S. Matt. v.1: Tertullianus hinc volumen aptissimum scripserit, sed consequens error hominis detraxit scriptis probabilius auctoritatem.*

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit. '...usque ad mediam aetatem presbyter Ecclesiae permansisset, invidia postea et contumeliis clericorum Romanae Ecclesiae, ad Montani dogma delapsus...'*

<sup>5</sup> T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian. A Historical and Literary Survey*, Oxford, 1971, p. 108, lists instances in the *Apologeticum* where Tertullian seems to have borrowed from Justin Martyr, Theophilus, Tatian and Apollinaris. Of course these borrowings are conjectural, although in the case of Justin at least, by no means improbable. Other unacknowledged borrowings from Theophilus, Justin and Irenaeus have been suggested by H. Tränkle, *Q.S.F. Tertullians Adversus Iudaeos*, Wiesbaden, 1964; G. Quispel, *De bronnen van Tertullianus' Adversus Marcionem*, Leiden, 1943, and most recently by C. Moreschini, 'L'Adversus Marcionem nell' ambito dell'attività letteraria di Tertulliano', *Ommagio a E. Fraenkel*, 1968, pp. 113 ff.

reincorporated into the Great Church makes it highly unlikely that they were Montanists in any recognisable sense.

Tertullian's writings became controversial at the very moment when his works were more widely circulated and more generally read than ever before. The objection made was not that they taught false doctrine—Augustine was at pains to point out that they did not<sup>6</sup>—but that they portrayed the Church as an exclusive body of saints which rejected any kind of compromise with the world. This was a conception which appealed to the Donatists and their sympathisers, but which was fundamentally out of tune with a Church which was rapidly acquiring a religious monopoly within the Empire, and which was accordingly obliged to widen its horizons (or lower its standards, depending on the point of view). In such a climate, the man who had exalted martyrdom as the norm for Christians, and who had backed dissident minorities against central authority, could not escape censure. Perhaps it was in this way that Tertullian's fate was finally sealed.

All the same, condemnation was slow in coming and seems not to have been very effective. Writing against the Donatists, Optatus of Milevis (*De sch. Don.* i. 9) was able to claim Tertullian's support, and it was not until the publication of the famous *Decretum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, attributed, probably erroneously, to Pope Gelasius I (d. 496), that his writings were finally proscribed. But even in the sixth century he was still being mentioned, evidently with approval, by Isidore of Seville (*Chron.* 81). After Isidore's time, however, Tertullian drops out of sight. The triumph of Augustinianism was not favourable to him, and his writings contained little of value which by that time could not be found elsewhere. Portions of his writings were still copied from time to time, and the extant manuscript tradition can be traced to the ninth century. General interest in Tertullian, however, seems to have revived in the late Middle Ages—there are no fewer than twenty manuscripts from the fifteenth century—after an apparent gap of three hundred years. This renewed interest coincided with the religious ferment building up in Europe at this period, and the violence of Tertullian's anti-Roman polemic came into its own at the Reformation. As the structure of the mediaeval Church was shaken to its foundations, the writings of the early

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Fathers took on a new importance. Protestants naturally found his invective against the Roman establishment a veritable godsend, although his brilliance and wit found admirers among the adherents of the old religion too—notably Jacques Bossuet.

The Reformation, however, did not alter the traditional picture of Tertullian given by Jerome and Augustine. In fact, churchmen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were as ambiguous in their appreciation of his genius as their fourth-century predecessors had been. Antiquarians though they were almost to a man, their interest in Tertullian was not historical in the modern sense. The Early Church period was of interest to them because it bore direct relevance to their own age and its problems. Tertullian was important chiefly because he could be quoted as an authoritative witness in the debate about papal claims or the

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<sup>6</sup> *De haer.* 86: *Tertullianus ergo, sicut scripta eius indicant, animam dicit immortalem quidem, sed eam corpus esse contendit: neque hanc tantum, sed ipsum etiam Deum. Nec tamers hinc haereticus dicitur factus. Posset enim quoquo modo putari ipsam naturam substantiamque divinam corpus vocari... non ergo ideo est Tertullianus factus haereticus; sed quia transiens ad Cataphrygas... sua conventicula propagavit.*

sacraments. These debates seem remote from us now, but their legacy still casts its shadow over academic study. Scholars still speak, for instance, of Tertullian's 'Catholic' period, with more than a hint that there was a time in his career when his pen was unquestioningly at the service of the Pope in the defence of post-Tridentine dogma. The decrees of the First Vatican Council (1870) and the subsequent strenuous efforts of Rome to counteract the effects of modern scholarship have kept alive the traditional picture of Tertullian, the priest gone wrong. Even as reputable a scholar as the late Cardinal Daniélou, in a review of T. D. Barnes' book, expressed surprise that Barnes should have made Tertullian seem more like a parson than a cure, so difficult was it for him to escape the clerical image.<sup>7</sup> At a more fundamental level, the basic differences between Protestantism and post-Tridentine Catholicism have produced two separate traditions of scholarship, a fact of major importance in the development of modern research.

But despite all the efforts, of Rome in particular, to counteract modern thought, there can be no doubt that the traditional Christian view of Tertullian no longer dominates the academic scene. It still survives of course in those manuals of devotion written by non-specialists for the edification of the unlearned, and it is occasionally found in polemical works which like to quote his opinion on baptism, or the gifts of the Spirit. But on the whole, the traditional view of his work no longer carries

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weight in scholarly circles. The secularisation of Western culture has produced a generation with a different mind, and another set of questions. It is to these questions and the outlook behind them that we must now turn our attention.

### SECULARISATION AND ITS EFFECTS

By the late seventeenth century, the wars of religion had ended, and the general climate of theological reaction had set the stage between the Protestant freethinkers and the Platonic humanism which the Reformation had temporarily eclipsed. The new rationalists, however, were not on the whole atheists. Most of them clung to a nominal Christianity and attempted to secure intellectual independence by positing that faith and reason were distinct though not incompatible modes of thought. In their scheme of things rational logic could lead a man to Christian faith as surely—nay, more surely—than humble acceptance of Divine Revelation. For Revelation, as found in Scripture, had necessarily been obliged to accommodate itself to the age of ignorance, with its superstitious cast of mind. To them evil spirits, miracles, indeed anything that was supernatural, represented an alien accretion to the primitive faith of mankind. The new age of 'enlightenment' had begun.

As a counterweight to rationalism there emerged an emotionally powerful para-ecclesiastical Pietism, which by 1750 was becoming a major religious force throughout Protestant Europe. The pietists were not ignorant men, nor were they indifferent to Christian doctrine—Wesley' for example, spent a good deal of energy attacking the Calvinist teaching on predestination—but the heart of their religion lay in religious experience. As long as a man knew what it was to be 'born again', the niceties of doctrinal definition could be put to one side. The readiness of pietists to soft-pedal dogmatic questions was the key to the later

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<sup>7</sup> J. Daniélou, in *Recherches de sciences religieuses* 61, 1973, pp. 254-6.

alliance between them and the rationalists of the Enlightenment, and this has been a major factor in the growth of modern biblical and patristic scholarship.

David Hume helped this process forward by pointing out that there was nothing in the universe which made the chain of cause and effect necessary; he maintained that logical patterns were the result of observational habit, and depended

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on psychological factors found only in man himself.<sup>8</sup> Hume was certainly not a pietist, but he opened the way for man's non-rational faculties to play a role in philosophical speculation.

Rousseau took up Hume's challenge and was followed by Kant. Kant was acquainted with Pietism and saw that it made a powerful appeal to the emotions, although his rationalistic bias made him unsympathetic to its base in supernatural religion. To Kant, the passions, the spirit and the moral sense in man could all be explained as natural phenomena, without reference to God. He took over Hume's empiricism and added to it an integrated moral and spiritual dimension. In his system the human mind was the focus on which all man's faculties and impulses converged. The human mind was itself a microcosm of the supreme mind which, for those so inclined, could be called 'God'. Thus a knowledge of the microcosmic self was the key to a knowledge of God. He thus effectively removed any need for Christianity and prepared the way for a synthesis of Pietism and rationalism on a secular, rather than on a Christian, foundation.

It was Friedrich Schleiermacher who first realised the danger Kant's philosophy contained for the Church, and who tried to counter its subversive effects with a theory of his own. He accepted Kant's epistemological method but argued that the religious element in human life, far from being a primitive substitute for rationalism, was the supreme expression of man's moral and spiritual instincts. Wherever there was religion this truth could be detected, even if it was coated with a layer of corruption which obscured the essence. It was Christianity, argued Schleiermacher, which had achieved the highest expression of man's nature. He admitted that it too had suffered corruption in its development, but despite everything, Christianity, in its German and Protestant form, was the highest form of religion which had *evolved* up to then. In a very real sense Schleiermacher completed the marriage between Pietism and rationalism on a humanistic foundation, and the fruits of this union have dominated theological studies ever since.

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### **FROM NEANDER TO HARNACK**

At first it seemed as if Schleiermacher's ideas would be stillborn. Rationalists like Goethe rejected them out of hand<sup>9</sup> and the pietists were not interested. For a time they passed into oblivion, only to reappear suddenly in the writings of one of Schleiermacher's pupils, August Neander. Neander had been born a Jew, but converted to Christianity while still a youth. As a

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Treatise* i.4.2: 'To begin with the senses, 'tis evident these faculties are incapable of giving rise to the notion of the *continued* existence of their objects, after they no longer appear to the senses. For that is a contradiction in terms...' And also (ibid.) i.4.1: '...belief is more properly an act of the sensitive part than of the cogitative part of our nature.'

<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt, dated 22nd August, 1806.

theological student in Halle, he attended Schleiermacher's lectures and was deeply impressed by the strength of his master's attacks on godless rationalism, a subject which greatly preoccupied him at the time. As a result of this, Neander came to believe that Christian history was the struggle for spiritual freedom against the chains of legalism and philosophy. While still a student, he determined to prove his thesis by a detailed study of the Church's history. Neander realised that the early centuries were of crucial importance for this, as it was against the familiar background of scepticism and rationalistic deism that Christianity spread across the Roman world. Neander emphasised the parallels between the Early Church period and the Germany of his own day, in order to demonstrate that Christianity could overcome modern atheism as successfully as it had defeated its ancient equivalent. As a prelude to this great history, Neander resolved to concentrate his attention on certain individuals whose lives seemed to him to exemplify in miniature the struggle of the whole Church. Interestingly enough, the first man he chose to study was Tertullian.

The appearance of *Antignosticus, Geist des Tertullians* in 1825 may fairly be said to mark the beginning of modern scholarly work on Tertullian. Much of the book was unexceptional, even traditional in tone. Following the canons laid down by Scholasticism, Neander divided the works into polemical, disciplinary and dogmatic treatises. Within each of these categories there was a further subdivision of works belonging to the 'pre-Montanist' and the 'Montanist' phases of his career. Neander's historical outlook was conservative, tending to follow the received opinions of ancient and renaissance commentators. Had his research gone no further, his book would have attracted little attention. But, of course, the traditional framework which Neander adopted was secondary to his real aims. Having been

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convinced by Schleiermacher that it was a man's personality and feelings which determined his outlook in matters of religion, Neander gave full weight to this aspect of Tertullian's character. Thus his lapse into Montanism was explained in terms of a rigorous and uncompromising temperament rather than as the outcome of an ecclesiastical or doctrinal dispute. As Neander says:

Of Tertullian it especially holds good that he can be understood only from within—that we must possess a mental consanguinity with the spirit which dwelt in him, in order to recognize in the defective form, that higher quality which it contains, and to set it free from that confined form, which is always the business of genuine historical composition... Tertullian, in the later part of his life, joined the sect of Montanus. As we have already remarked, it has been attempted, very erroneously, to explain this change by outward causes, instead of accounting for it by an internal congeniality of mind. If we go through his writings according to the various subjects of which they treat, the relation of the earlier writings of Tertullian to those in which he advocates Montanistic views, will be most clearly exhibited.<sup>10</sup>

In some respects Neander was a much more orthodox Christian than Schleiermacher had been. In particular he contended that Christianity was a unique phenomenon, not to be explained away by a theory of religious evolution. But at the same time he also championed the view that there was a sharp division between the New Testament period and later centuries, in which the Church lost its early perfection and became increasingly worldly and

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<sup>10</sup> A. Neander, *Antignosticus, Geist des Tertullians*, second edition 1849, English translation 1851, p, 206.

corrupt. According to Neander, things were so bad in the second century that even churchmen were accommodating the Faith to the prevailing rationalism of the day—an obvious parallel with contemporary Germany. It was this tendency which lay at the root of ‘gnosticism’, a vague concept to which Neander imparted new form and substance.<sup>11</sup> According to him, Tertullian was a spiritually minded Christian in the apostolic tradition who, seeing the danger to the Church, devoted his life to the fight for spiritual purity. Unfortunately an inherent bias towards legalism and an unfor-

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giving nature led him to espouse an unbiblical perfectionism which eventually drove him to heresy.

It is difficult to give a fair assessment of Neander’s achievement. Certainly his success in liberating Tertullian from the confines of Scholasticism was a real gain for scholarship. Although he was influenced in this by Schleiermacher, he managed to avoid his master’s worst excesses and did much to remind the academic world that the workings of Divine Providence could not be reduced to a few logical formulae. On the other hand, his obsessive opposition to contemporary rationalism often drove him to conclusions which ill accorded with a truly scholarly approach. This was particularly true of his definition of gnosticism. In making Tertullian out to be its great enemy, Neander was using him as a foil for his own protest against philosophical trends in nineteenth-century Germany, a fact which inevitably compromised the book’s value as a contribution to scholarship. On the whole, therefore, it must be said that *Antignosticus* belongs not so much to the field of patristic studies as to the world of German romanticism, from which it drew its chief aims and inspiration.

Neander’s subjectivist approach made a great impression and was not seriously challenged for about a generation. Eventually, however, there came a renewed attempt to establish a satisfactory objective criterion by which Tertullian’s works could be assessed. Reflecting the secularism which by then dominated the German universities, the criterion sought was evolution. In 1848 an unknown student by the name of Karl Hesselberg<sup>12</sup> submitted an inaugural dissertation to the University of Dorpat (now Tartu, in Estonia), in which he outlined a scheme of dating which he hoped would arrange Tertullian’s treatises in chronological sequence. Hesselberg never doubted that Tertullian’s intellectual development followed a logical pattern of evolution, and this rather naive assumption led him to assign dates to individual treatises on the basis of the ideas they contained rather than on any hard evidence. Despite the obvious weakness which this thesis contained, it was taken up by a succession of scholars<sup>13</sup> and elaborated to absurd lengths. Every scrap of evidence was culled from the texts in an effort to construct a viable framework for Tertullian’s life. The testimony of other ancient

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Gnosticism’ as recorded by the ancients was but one obscure sect among many; cf. Augustine, *De haer.* 6.

<sup>12</sup> K. Hesselberg, *Tertullians Lehre aus seinen Schriften entwickelt*, Dorpat, 1848.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., G. Uhlhorn, *Fundamenta Chronologiae Tertullianae*, Göttingen, 1852; H. Grotemeyer, *Ueber Tertullians Leben und Schriften*, Kempen, 1863; K. G. H. Kellner, ‘Ueber Tertullians Abhandlung *De pallio* and das Jahr seines Uebertrittes zum Christentum’, *Theologische Quartalschrift* 52, 1870, pp. 547-66; A. Hauck, *Tertullians Leben und Schriften*, Erlangen, 1877; G. N. Bonwetsch, *Die Schriften Tertullians nach der Zeit ihrer Abfassung untersucht*, Bonn, 1878.

writers was pressed into service, often without sufficient critical examination. The end result of all this research was Ernst Noeldechen's definitive biography, *Tertullian dargestellt*, which appeared in 1890. By that time, however, the chronological, objectivist school had largely run out of steam. Its position as the dominant school of thought had been taken over by the neo-romanticism of Adolf Harnack.

Harnack successfully challenged the feasibility of a thoroughgoing chronological systematisation of Tertullian's works, and pointed scholars back again to the outlook and ideas of Neander.<sup>14</sup> Dissatisfied with the excesses of the dating scheme proposed by Bonwetsch, he replied with a detailed criticism of Hesselberg's original thesis and pointed out the curious mixture of fact and speculation it contained. Harnack of course did not deny the value of chronological study, though occasionally the conclusions he drew were at variance with accepted notion and were certainly far less rigid than those of Hesselberg and his followers. His main objective was to demonstrate that a fixed chronology was not possible in Tertullian's case, and therefore could not offer an objective criterion for interpreting his work. It was useful as a supplementary aid to study, but could never supplant Neander's thesis that it was Tertullian's personality which provided the key to understanding his writings.

But although Harnack followed Neander's main thesis, his work was far from being a carbon-copy of *Antignosticus*. Harnack selected his themes carefully and pursued them to conclusions which Neander would scarcely have recognised. For example, he borrowed the theme of gnosticism which he found in Neander, but unlike him did not restrict the phenomenon to a number of recognised heresies. In Harnack's opinion even the doctrinal statements of the orthodox party represented a rationalistic 'gnostic' corruption of the True Faith. The following passage from *A History of Dogma* (II.2)) gives a fair sampling of his attitude:

How great the innovations actually were, however, may be measured by the fact that they signified a scholastic tutelage of the faith of the individual Christian, and restricted the immediateness of religious feelings and ideas to

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the narrowest limits. But the conflict with the so-called Montanism showed that there were still a considerable number of Christians who valued that immediateness and freedom; these were, however, defeated. The fixing of the tradition under the title of apostolic necessarily led to the assumption that whoever held the apostolic doctrine was also essentially a Christian in the apostolic sense. This assumption, quite apart from the innovations which were legitimised by tracing them to the apostles, meant the separation of doctrine and conduct, the preference of the former to the latter, and the transformation of a fellowship of faith, hope and discipline into a communion *eiusdem sacramenti*, that is, into a union which, like the philosophical schools, rested on a doctrinal law, and which was subject to a legal code of divine institution.

From his favourable attitude to the Montanists, it might be thought that Harnack would have followed Neander in portraying Tertullian as the great defender of the true spirit of Christianity. But this was not the case. Harnack did not dispute Tertullian's conversion to Montanism, but he glossed over this rather quickly in order to justify his main thesis which was that Tertullian too was infected by philosophy—in his case, Stoicism—and that it was this, together with his legal training, which determined his approach to Christianity.

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<sup>14</sup> A. Harnack, 'Zur Chronologie der Schriften Tertullians', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 2, 1878, p. 572.

Fundamentally, therefore, Tertullian had been committed to an alien dogmatism every bit as much as the Greek apologists and the gnostics had been (*ibid.*, p. 79).

Harnack's attacks on Tertullian were accompanied by a rabid anti-Catholicism which was to provoke the ire of Rome<sup>15</sup> and contribute, at least in part, to the unfortunate connection which many Roman Catholics have made between Protestantism and modernism. It is only fair to remember, however, that Harnack's thesis was strongly opposed by competent scholars within the Lutheran Church. His contemporary Siegmund Schlossmann<sup>16</sup> made a detailed study of Tertullian's use of the terms *persona* and *substantia* in the formulation of Trinitarian dogma, and rejected Harnack's thesis that these words were of legal provenance. He claimed instead that ordinary rhetorical usage was sufficient to explain their meaning. Schlossmann was

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soon followed by H. Koch,<sup>17</sup> who even denied that Tertullian had been a priest, as was generally supposed. Yet although many of Harnack's conclusions were dangerous generalisations, and despite the objections made by fellow scholars, the influence of his thesis has been immense. The combination of a romantic pietism with empirical science caught the mood of the late nineteenth century, with its buoyant, self-confident liberalism. The only opposition, at least in the Protestant world, came from men like Benjamin Warfield,<sup>18</sup> who were clearly swimming against the tide. Everywhere Harnack's views were triumphant—everywhere that is, except in France. The French had preserved a scholarship which could not only rival the German, but which had developed an independent academic tradition only marginally influenced by developments beyond the Rhine.

### THE FRENCH ALTERNATIVE

The intellectual forces at work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries spread all over Europe, and France felt the impact of the new thought as much as any nation. The reaction there, however, was different from elsewhere, and the consequences for scholarship have made the French tradition unique. The Reformation had left France deeply divided. For a time it had seemed as if the Protestant cause must triumph, but in the end an uneasy truce upheld the Roman establishment, while at the same time granting a considerable measure of toleration to Protestants. Ironically, France thus became the first country in Europe to accept religious pluralism, although the Roman Church never reconciled itself to the fact and regarded the Edict of Nantes as a temporary concession to be withdrawn as soon as it was expedient to do so. The opportunity came in 1685 when Louis XIV, then at the height of his power, decided to crush all possible opposition to his rule. The Protestants were expelled and even the Roman Church was reduced to little more than a department of state. The practical effect of this was to rule out the possibility of a Christian opposition to the monarchy. Grievances henceforth could find an outlet only within a context of secular humanism,

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<sup>15</sup> See esp. J. Lortz, 'Vernunft and Offenbarung bei Tertullian', *Der Katholik*, II, 1913, pp. 124-40.

<sup>16</sup> S. Schlossmann, 'Tertullian im Lichte der Jurisprudenz', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 27, 1906, pp. 251-75, 407-30; *Praescriptiones and Praescripta Verba*, Leipzig, 1907.

<sup>17</sup> H. Koch, 'War Tertullian Priester?', *Historisches Jahrbuch der Görresgesellschaft* 28, 1907, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*, New York, 1930.

a fact which goes far to explain the violently anti-Christian character of the French Revolution.

Throughout the nineteenth century France was plagued by an intermittent civil war with Catholic royalists on one side and atheistic republicans on the other. Battle-lines were firmly drawn, and the compromise which eventually prevailed in Protestant lands was excluded from the start. Faced with open confrontation, the Church had to establish its authority as firmly as possible. Thus it was that with each successive stage of its political collapse, the Roman Church moved one step closer to claiming supreme spiritual authority for itself. The process culminated in 1870, with the fall of Rome following hard on the proclamation of papal infallibility. At the same time, the collapse of the Second Empire in France signalled the victory of the anti-Catholic party, and the long struggle for supremacy entered its final phase. The renewed emphasis on the Pope's spiritual authority was heavily influenced by developments within French Catholicism, and it was in France that the new dogma was most rigorously defended. The keystone in this defence was the claim that the Roman Church alone was authentically apostolic. This claim naturally led to a renewed emphasis on the origins of the Latin Church and this in turn focused attention once more on Tertullian.

The years after 1870 witnessed a spate of theological treatises pouring forth from French seminaries in a concerted effort to establish the perennality of post-Tridentine Catholic dogma.<sup>19</sup> Although their aims were diametrically opposed to those of their German contemporaries, the strength of mutual indifference was such that no conflict occurred. This phase lasted until about 1890 when the dominance of the ultramontane party began to weaken. German ideas remained only marginally influential, but the liberals of the French Church, tinged as they were with the sociological theories of Auguste Comte and others, had little need of them. In the field of patristic scholarship the new liberalism found its champion in the great historian Paul Monceaux, whose monumental *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne* (1901) has never been surpassed. In this massive work, Monceaux developed the thesis that the North African Church was a sociological entity enjoying a spirituality and culture quite distinct from that of Italy

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or Gaul. Monceaux began his study, naturally enough, with Tertullian, whom he inclined to regard as the archetype of later Africans. In particular he interpreted Tertullian's flirtation with Montanism as typical of an inherent tendency towards schism which he considered characteristic of African Christianity. Later this tendency gave rise to Donatism, which Monceaux thought was rooted in social and political causes, not theological ones. Monceaux also drew heavily on Tertullian for his portrait of the North African Church as a savagely persecuted body, which compensated for its sufferings with an exaggerated cult of martyrs and martyrdom. His work is invaluable for its breadth and wealth of detail, but it suffers from the limitations of its methodology. In all probability persecution was no more severe in North Africa than elsewhere—certainly Tertullian himself seems never to have suffered from it. Furthermore, its importance in literature has sound theological reasons behind it, and there is no need to posit a North African 'personality' to explain the phenomenon. To prove

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<sup>19</sup> See e.g., G. Liquier, *L'Apologétique de Tertullien*, Montauban, 1870; A. Jundt, *Argumenti ratio*, etc., Montauban, 1875; J. Condamin, *De Q.S.F. Tertulliano vexatae religionis patrono*, etc.. Lyons, 1877; Mgr Freppel, *Tertullien*, Paris, 1887.

Monceaux' thesis it would be necessary to demonstrate not only that Africa exhibited a high degree of individuality and uniformity over a long period, but also that this has been accurately reflected in the surviving literature. Unfortunately neither of these things is at all obvious. The writers of the North African Church participated fully in the life of the Oecumene and showed little inclination to develop their separate provincial identity. Their writings are preoccupied with theological matters and other problems are always seen in this light. It is possible that if the whole corpus of Christian literature, and especially of heretical writings, were available to us, we might be able to substantiate Monceaux' claims. But since this is far from being the case at present, his theories must remain highly tentative at best.

In spite of these deficiencies, however, Monceaux' work has exercised a considerable influence on more recent scholarship. Although he professed to be a Catholic, he refused to follow the Church's official teaching and based his research on what were in essence secularist presuppositions. For him, Christianity was not an exclusive system of revealed truth, but a cultural phenomenon which provided an outlet for the religious needs of the people of North Africa from *c.* AD 150 to *c.* AD 700.

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His English disciple W. H. C. Frend has gone so far as to suggest that there was a fundamental religious continuity between paganism, Christianity and Islam in North Africa. According to him, Christianity failed because it was too closely associated with the power of Rome which the North Africans finally 'rejected' in the eighth century.<sup>20</sup> To this we can only reply that the early Christians were highly conscious that theirs was not a folk-religion, and that they were called to create a new society fundamentally incompatible with the existing culture. It was not pre-existing sociological factors but a consciousness of the living God giving men a burning desire for holiness which decided their outlook. Especially was this true in North Africa, and in the writings of Tertullian in particular. The final triumph of Islam was not coincident with the collapse of Roman power and must be ascribed to other factors, notably the spiritual weakness of the Church long before the Arab conquest and the superficiality of much popular worship, both Donatist and Catholic. Frend's secular viewpoint will not suffice to explain what is in essence a spiritual phenomenon.

Monceaux's liberalism struck at the point where the intellectual armour of Rome was weakest—in its quasi-dualistic conception of 'nature' and 'grace'. Rome, it appeared, could accept a sociological interpretation of the Church as long as it confined itself to the 'natural' realm and left the 'supernatural' side intact. Gaston Boissier, for instance, disapproved of Tertullian's rabid anti-paganism (*La fen du paganisme*, Paris, 1894, Vol. I, p. 270), which he interpreted as a rejection of the good element in 'nature'. According to Boissier, Tertullian fell into heresy because he championed a society built entirely on 'grace'. He saw in him a primitive Jansenist, and contrasted this attitude unfavourably with that of the more liberal Jesuits. Boissier thought Tertullian would have done better had he been willing to adapt pagan customs progressively to Christian needs, instead of rejecting them outright. Boissier claimed to be a good Catholic, but his views scarcely differed from those of Monceaux.

In the years between the appearance of the *Histoire litteraire* and the outbreak of World War I, two important studies of Tertullian appeared. In 1905 came *La théologie de Tertullien* which was modelled on an earlier work by Mgr Freppel. The

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<sup>20</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, Oxford, 1952, pp. 333 ff.

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author, Adhemar d'Ales, stood in the Catholic tradition more firmly than Monceaux, though his work was admirably free of the sort of bias found in Boissier. In his treatment of Tertullian's trinitarian doctrine, for example, d'Ales was careful to point out that post-Nicene categories of thought were inappropriate as guidelines for the earlier period (*ibid.*, p. 103), an admission scarcely calculated to please the more stringent Catholics. He was sceptical too of the real influence of Montanism at Carthage—an interesting point which indicates that he was prepared to question the traditional view that Tertullian had been converted to that heresy (*ibid.*, p. 144).

A few years later the whole question of Tertullian's relationship to Montanism was taken up and examined by Pierre de Labriolle.<sup>21</sup> From the vantage point of Fribourg (Freiburg/Schweiz) de Labriolle pointed out that Montanism in its Asiatic form had many features which Tertullian would have found repellent. In particular he mentioned the prominence of women in the sect, its lack of discipline and its extreme millenarianism as uncongenial elements. De Labriolle therefore said that it had not been for doctrinal reasons that Tertullian had become a Montanist, but because he had felt a spiritual affinity with the sect's uncompromising demands. De Labriolle provided a link between French and German thought, and was fully conversant with developments in Germany.<sup>22</sup> His methods of research, however, were much more scientific than either Neander's or Harnack's and his conclusions, though less original, are more substantial and deserving of trust.

The only French patristic scholar of the pre-war period who followed the German school more or less faithfully was a professed agnostic, Charles Guignebert.<sup>23</sup> Guignebert's agnosticism is interesting because it shows that Harnack's rabid Protestantism was really superfluous to his argument. Guignebert showed a certain sympathy for Harnack's view that Tertullian's was an authentic evangelical voice of protest against increasing clericalisation, but he did not conclude from this that he ought to become a Protestant. Guignebert undercut Harnack by saying that Protestantism was just as bad as Catholicism, and that only agnosticism could ensure a 'neutral' objectivity. Naturally enough Guignebert's views were attacked on all sides, though subsequent developments have confirmed his approach as the

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dominant one. Since his time confessional presuppositions have virtually disappeared from scholarly study and a supposedly 'neutral', though in fact secular, methodology has taken their place.

### THE AFTERMATH OF LIBERALISM

As is well known, it was the spiritual and intellectual crisis of World War I which broke the back of liberal Protestantism. It was not merely that manuscripts shelved in 1914 seemed out of date four years later; when they emerged again the cultural climate of most of Europe had

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<sup>21</sup> P. de Labriolle, *La crise montaniste*, Paris, 1913; *Les sources de l'histoire du Montanisme*, Fribourg, 1913.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., his review of G. Esser, *Wer war Praxeas?*, in *Bulletin d'ancienne littérature et d'archéologie chrétienne* I, 1911, p. 228.

<sup>23</sup> C. Guignebert, *Tertullien, études sur ses sentiments à l'égard de Pemprise de la société civile*, Paris, 1901.

changed beyond recognition. The unholy alliance of throne and altar, which Karl Barth had so strongly criticised in 1914, collapsed as thrones were toppled and altars deserted by a generation whose attempts to manipulate God had proved so catastrophically futile. Nowhere was the débâcle more evident or more fateful than in Germany, home of liberalism and the Enlightenment. The attempts made by nineteenth-century churchmen to accommodate the 'new thought' to the ancient faith were repudiated when it was realised that what they had done had been to offer religion as a moral adhesive for a state-centred humanism.

The post-war reaction against this type of religion produced a crisis in the theological faculties of Germany. Fundamentally it arose from the age-old problem of reconciling 'nature' and 'grace'. The nineteenth-century liberals had laid heavy stress on the former and were constantly embarrassed by what they regarded as the intrusion of the supernatural into the real world. After the war Karl Barth turned liberalism on its head by stressing 'grace' over 'nature' to the point where the latter almost disappeared from view. Barth's reaction was healthy in that it led theologians back to a more orthodox faith, but his failure to attack and overcome the false distinction between 'nature' and 'grace' meant that his theology never really lost its character as a protest movement. In the end it was unable to counteract the liberalism Barth himself so strongly opposed.

As far as patristic studies were concerned, Barth more or less agreed with Harnack's contention that as time went on the Early Church grew increasingly corrupt. His emphasis was

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squarely on biblical theology, and under his influence Protestant scholarship turned increasingly away from the Fathers to concentrate exclusively on the Bible. Patristic studies were left, on the whole, to Roman Catholics and those within the Protestant Churches who sympathised with their outlook. Rome had suffered less from liberalism, and the post-war reaction was correspondingly less severe. But even the Roman Church could not impose Tridentine uniformity for ever. The conservatism of the hierarchy concealed both the intellectual barrenness of traditional dogmatics and the new currents of thought which were at work behind the scenes among Catholics dissatisfied with the *status quo*. For a time it seemed that neo-Thomism, which in the early decades of the twentieth century had managed to attract some of the most brilliant minds in France, might counter the drift, but this hope proved to be ephemeral. Like Barthianism, neo-Thomism failed to tackle the problem of the division between 'nature' and 'grace', and in the long term it was used not to oppose but to legitimise the penetration of naturalistic ideas into the Church.

The Roman surrender to secularism can be seen in the development of the *Sondersprache* school in Holland. Under the leadership of Mgr Schrijnen of Nijmegen, this school held that the early Christians used a distinct language of their own to express the mysteries of the Christian faith.

Schrijnen's principal work, *Charakteristik des chnstlichen Lateins*, appeared in 1932. In it he elaborated his theory that the early Christians were an underground sect which evolved a kind of code language scarcely intelligible to the average pagan Roman. This theory would not have carried much weight had the 'language' been restricted to theological and liturgical terms, which a new religion would bring with it in any case, but Schrijnen and his disciples,

among whom Christine Mohrmann is now the leading representative, have pieced together a lengthy vocabulary of *secular* terms, which because they are found only in Christian writers, are assumed to represent the language of this Christian counter-culture.

Schrijnen, however, did not stop here. Within 'Christian Latin' he attempted to distinguish vernacular, ecclesiastical and liturgical varieties, each with its own spirit and sphere of influence. Perhaps the best comment on this attempt has

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come from L. R. Palmer in *The Latin Language* (London, 1954), p. 195:

It is difficult to see what useful purpose is served by this terminological hair-splitting. Nor need we linger over the problem whether the 'Christianisms' established form merely an 'agglomeration' or constitute a system 'sensiblement une'. It is one more of the pseudo-problems created by de Saussure's fatal dichotomy between 'la parole' and 'la langue'.

Palmer writes from a purely linguistic standpoint and does not discuss the theological implications of Schrijnen's theory, but these are very considerable indeed. For in place of a rational religious movement, attacking and conquering the intellectual bastions of pagan society on the strength of verifiable merit, we have a secret sect which sought to overthrow not merely pagan religious beliefs and customs, but even the very structure of logical thought which had prevailed up to then. Furthermore, if Palmer is right in linking Schrijnen's theory to the ideas of de Saussure, then there is clear evidence that the *Sondersprache* school is deeply rooted in a world of romantic humanism, not Christianity. From here it is but a short step to the belief that the human mind, accustomed to 'ordinary' speech, is an inappropriate instrument for comprehending religious truth. We need not wonder that existentialism found such fertile soil in Catholic circles, nor that there should have been such an apparently sudden *rapprochement* between Catholic and secular thinkers.

Naturally Tertullian, as the earliest major Latin Christian writer whose works are largely extant, has occupied a position of particular prominence in the *Sondersprache* scheme. Before Schrijnen scholars had generally assumed that Tertullian's neologisms were either his own invention or else represented borrowings from other disciplines, notably the law, which he adapted to theological use. Harnack, for instance, supposed that Tertullian had lifted words like *persona* and *substantia* from the technical vocabulary of Roman contract law.<sup>24</sup> Schrijnen, however, put forward a theory that these words in Tertullian were no more than the *first recorded instance* of a special Christian

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vocabulary which had been developing independently of Roman law and classical rhetoric.

Schrijnen's views on Tertullian were elaborated by his colleague Stephan Teeuwen and soon word-studies of various key terms were pouring out.<sup>25</sup> There was even a journal, *Vigiliae*

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<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., pp. 282 ff.

<sup>25</sup> S. Teeuwen, *Sprachlicher Bedeutungswandel bei Tertullian. Ein Beitrag zum Studium derchristlichen Sondersprache*, Paderborn, 1926; also, C. Spicq, 'Hypomonē—Patientia', *Revue des sciences philologiques* 19,

*Christianae*, which was founded in 1947 partly to propagate the school's ideas. By then, however, the original *Sondersprache* theory was beginning to lose ground. Carl Becker<sup>26</sup> disputed the notion that Tertullian's neologisms were transcriptions of a well-known oral vocabulary, and not long afterwards René Braun<sup>27</sup> was giving the school's assumptions and methods a radical reappraisal. Braun realised that the lack of evidence made it pointless to argue about neologisms or a distinct Christian language. He preferred to compromise by saying that Christians adapted existing words to specialised religious uses. Fundamentally, however, although he did not follow the advocates of *Sondersprache* all the way, he agreed with them that the best approach to Tertullian's work lay in a minute analysis of his vocabulary. His own work attracted a number of disciples, mostly in France, and these perpetuate the tradition of linguistic analysis.

Lexical study now plays such an important role in any research on Tertullian that it is difficult to examine it critically or propose an acceptable alternative. Yet the approach contains such obvious weaknesses that some attempt must be made to do this. The *Sondersprache* school and its descendants assumed too readily that individual words possess fixed meanings which make studying them in isolation profitable for elucidating the development of a theological system. In fact, of course, linguistic precision was just what did not exist much before Nicaea, and it was this lack which contributed so much to the dogmatic debates of the third and fourth centuries. The difficulty which Tertullian experienced in trying to find a suitable Latin translation for the Greek *logos*—surely a key concept—is sufficient reminder that the 'Church language' posited by Schrijnen has little basis in fact.<sup>28</sup>

It is a pity that patristic scholarship has not yet found a James Barr to perform the work of demolition these lexical theories so urgently need. It is simply not true to say that the early Christians used a separate language in theology and

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worship. Their Latin was the common speech of all Romans and followed the same general evolution. The many Graecisms and neologisms which occur in their writings are typical of the period, as a perusal of Juvenal or Martial will testify. To some extent the needs of popular propaganda emancipated them from the norms of classical style, but this was only to bring them closer to popular speech and did not produce an esoteric vocabulary. Naturally, since Christianity was a new and distinctive religion with a Semitic, rather than a Graeco-Roman background, Christian writers found themselves introducing new words and speech-patterns into Latin. Some established words took on new shades of meaning as they were adapted to Christian theology. But it cannot be stressed too strongly that this adaptation almost invariably followed the native genius of the language and did no more than exploit possibilities and tendencies latent within it. The Fathers always sought the most appropriate existing words in which to express their thoughts, and coined new ones only when this was

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1930, pp. 95-106; H. Janssen, *Kultur und Sprache*, Nijmegen, 1938; F. de Pauw, 'Lajustification des traditions non-écrites chez Tertullien', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 19, 1942, pp. 5-46; V. Morel, 'Disciplina, let mot et l'idée représentée par lui Bans les oeuvres de Tertullien', *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 40, 1944-5, pp. 5-46, etc.

<sup>26</sup> C. Becker, *Tertullians Apologeticum: Werden and Leistung*, München, 1954.

<sup>27</sup> R. Braun, *Deus Christianorum: Recherches sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullien*, Paris, 1962.

<sup>28</sup> He had to make do with a combination of *sermo* and *ratio*, and occasionally *verbum*. Cf. *Adv. Prax.* 5.3; *Apol.* 21.10; 21.17.

necessary. It is no exaggeration to say that their entire mental outlook on this matter was diametrically opposed to any theory of a *Sondersprache*.

It is in their ideas, not in their vocabulary, that the mind of the Latin Fathers is to be sought. A fundamental principle of the Incarnation is that the Divine has been expressed in terms which men can understand, without either compromising the transcendence of the former or belittling the autonomy of the latter. In other words, the truth about God may be accurately expressed in human words and thought-patterns, although these can never contain or limit the nature of God. This point is important because it is here that modern theologians of the 'radical' kind differ most profoundly from their ancient counterparts. Unless the implications of the Incarnation for the intellect are understood, it is impossible to comprehend a man like Tertullian. The linguistic analysis of his works is pointless in itself, since unlike modern scholars, Tertullian did not have a superstitious reverence for his vocabulary. Nor was he interested in writing in a language which only the initiated could understand. His aim was always to express in the common tongue the great truths of the Gospel, so that the whole of Roman life and thought might be

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brought into subjection to Christ. In this sense it may truly be said that his work had one underlying purpose—to conform the tangible pagan world to the principles of Christ. Any theory, therefore, which proposes the existence of a separate religious language must be rejected, in that it is incompatible with Tertullian's basic aims. Had such a language existed, Christianity would have been little different from one of the; mystery religions, and in the long term it probably would have suffered the same fate as they did.

### THE CURRENT SCENE

The dominance which the *Sondersprache* school has maintained until quite recently is symptomatic of the current state of Tertullian studies. Even those who have criticised its lexical approach have been deeply influenced by it, and the general taste for technicalities continues unabated. Timothy Barnes expressed it well when he said of Tertullian that '...for the most part, the task of setting him in his historical context or cultural milieu has been shirked. Scholarly attention has been happily engrossed on peripheral problems or isolated aspects of Tertullian's thought and writings'.<sup>29</sup>

With a clarity of purpose which is admirable in any scholar, Barnes set out to remedy this defect in an extensive study of his own, which touches on every aspect of Tertullian's life. Barnes has brought together many of the isolated studies which he mentions, and in this book attempts to put them in perspective. He is fully aware that lack of evidence makes it impossible to write a biography of the man in the usual sense, and he has made no attempt to do this. Instead, he has sketched for us the main factors at work in Tertullian's spiritual and cultural formation, including such important things as persecution, martyrdom and the syllabus of a pagan schoolboy's education. Inevitably, this approach takes us beyond what we can glean from Tertullian's writings alone, and the composite picture which Barnes has drawn is a possible reconstruction rather than a documented history.

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<sup>29</sup> T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, Oxford, 1971, p. 1.

In itself, this is not necessarily a bad thing, and much of what Barnes has to say offers a valuable corrective to the popular notion that Tertullian was a lawyer-priest who left the

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Church just as he was about to be excommunicated for heresy. Some of his hypotheses are questionable, like his assertion that the unknown bishop attacked in *De pudicitia* was a bishop of Carthage, and others are purely guesswork, as when he suggests that Tertullian was born about AD 170 (when most scholars prefer a date *c.* AD 155), but these are minor idiosyncracies on points where no real knowledge is possible.

A more serious criticism of Barnes' approach is that by centring interest on Tertullian's intellectual and cultural background he has executed a portrait of the man which is out of focus. Like it or not, we know almost nothing of Tertullian beyond the texts which he has left us, and the living power of his mind can only be sought in them, not around them. Barnes has used Tertullian's writings as a quarry from which to extract material suitable for building a framework of his own design; he has not illuminated the inner structure of Tertullian's own thought. The result is that the texts have been plundered in what (to an outside observer) is a haphazard fashion.

The simple fact is that Tertullian's writings cannot be understood from a study of his background and circumstances alone. It is no accident that the modern scholar finds it difficult to extract reliable information of this kind from the texts; Tertullian himself would not have wished it otherwise. Conscious as he was of the impermanence of this world's glory, it was never his desire to speak of his own record and achievements. For him the only thing which mattered in life was to know God in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, and as St Paul says in Philippians 3.9, to be found in him, not having his own righteousness, but that which is through faith in Christ. The student who would understand Tertullian must understand above all that his life was the pursuit of holiness in the presence of the living God. It is this crying need which his writings seek to impress on their readers, and which gives to his genius a universality which none of his contemporaries, despite their similar background and experiences, managed to achieve. It is therefore as we study his struggle for sanctification that our mind reaches out to one who has walked before us in the early pilgrimage of faith and gives us a deeper awareness of his true stature as a writer and a Christian.

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