

Preface

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The present book is an attempt to reflect seriously on Tertullian's theology and its implications for Christian faith. It appears at a moment when the patristic writers are being increasingly attacked for having allowed their own intellectual and cultural presuppositions to penetrate and distort their spiritual understanding. It is perhaps too much to say that a good deal of current debate on the subject is ill-informed, but it is certainly true that it is often poorly documented, and that a contrary opinion is by no means excluded by the evidence. Sweeping judgments of the ancients are always dangerous, especially when they are made by scholars whose own position is fundamentally unsympathetic.

No one would question the fact that circumstances often exert considerable influence on even the most detached of writers, though it is perhaps less frequently realised that this particular limitation was not the exclusive preserve of the early Christians. The interaction of faith and culture during the first Christian centuries however is of particular interest, in that it was this period which witnessed the rise of the basic framework of classical dogmatic theology. The accusation that cultural relativism conditioned this development is almost always accompanied by an express desire to abandon traditional doctrines in favour of a radical reappraisal of Christian belief in which distinctions implied by a word like 'orthodoxy' would disappear.

In his *Method in Theology* Bernard Lonergan says that ancient structures of thought postulated the existence of absolute principles and values to which true human culture aspired. This objective approach, which Lonergan calls classicism, is no longer tenable in the light of modern theories of relativity. As Lonergan explains it, each culture has norms which are valid within its context, but which lose their relevance once this context is transcended or destroyed. It was the mistake of traditional Christianity to assume that Graeco-Roman culture was

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the universal norm, and that theological statements made within that culture had an eternal validity.

At first sight, Lonergan's thesis is very attractive, especially since it is undoubtedly true that the early Christians were products of a universalist education and could hardly escape the mental climate of the Roman world-empire. But true though this is, it is fatally easy to exaggerate the influence of such factors on the patristic writers. Almost from the beginning Christianity suffered persecution from the imperial authorities, and no Christian could fail to realise that his religion was diametrically opposed to the established order. Moreover, the substance of the faith came into the Graeco-Roman world from an essentially foreign milieu, and Hebraic notions of God were always held to be superior to their pagan counterparts, even by those writers who were most anxious to reconcile them as far as possible.

The concept of orthodoxy may be related to classical ideals, but this relationship does not depend on the influence of pagan philosophy. Christianity was radically different in that its doctrines were based on divine revelation rather than on human speculation. The normative character of the Scriptures as the Word of God made all the difference. However much the Fathers of the Church may have misinterpreted the Word in particular instances, they never lost sight of its objective character as the Christian's final authority in matters of faith. Their conviction that Scriptural revelation was the sum of all wisdom gave them a weapon which ultimately enabled them to conquer the whole of ancient thought.

It is a great pity that the study of this process in recent years has been marked by a tendency to underestimate the power of Christianity to convert the minds of men. Hardly any of the great thinkers of the first few centuries came from a Christian home; none lived in an environment in which Christianity was taken for granted. Whatever inducement there may have been to accept the new faith was more than offset by social and political pressures against it. In such an atmosphere it is inconceivable that a religion as strange to the Hellenistic mind as Christianity could have prospered, unless it had something to offer men which no other creed had. Christianity stands out in antiquity not because it successfully married Jewish with

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Hellenistic insights into God, but because it offered a faith more profound and more deeply satisfying than either of these.

To the Fathers of the Church, Christian theology was the work, of the converted mind seeking to get to grips with the teaching of Scripture. Compared with ancient philosophy, it contains little in the way of speculation, and even less diversity of approach. However different Antiochenes and Alexandrians, Apologists and Cappadocians may appear to us, to their non-Christian contemporaries they spoke as one voice. Later generations drew upon the work of earlier ones not as imperfect specimens of theological activity which required substantial revision in the light of subsequent reflection, but as models to be revered and imitated, even as they were expanded and developed further.

The position adopted in this book is that the early Christians must be allowed to speak as far as possible on their own terms. What presuppositions did an ancient writer bring to Christianity and how did these change when he was converted? What principles guided him as he sought to construct a theology? Are these principles still valid today? These are the questions we must bear in mind in our approach to the study of Tertullian.

Tertullian (*fl. circa* 195-212) is not an obvious choice in some ways, since his writings have always been controversial, and there are other ancient theologians whose work may be reckoned to have been of greater historical importance. But although there are certainly disadvantages to be overcome, a study of his writings will also yield us important benefits. For one thing, he is one of the few ancient Christian writers whose works survive almost intact, and who wrote with equal conviction against heretics on abstruse points of doctrine and against deviants at the most popular

level. In his treatises we meet the entire range of ecclesiastical life, which gives them a fullness often lacking in the more cerebral essays of other writers. We are therefore in a much better position to probe his cultural background and test the extent to which it influenced his thought.

A few remarks about the format of the work may be helpful to the reader. Quotations from French and German writers are given in English in the text, but in cases where there is no

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printed English translation available, the original is given in the notes. Latin quotations appear in full, with an English translation following in the text. In cases where the argument depends on the actual words of the Greek or Latin, and not on the general sense of the text, no translation has been given. Notes have been collected at the end.

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ad festam Pentecostes
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