

Tertullian: Victim of Caricature

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In the early days of New England the use of the pillory was not uncommon. Offenders were held up to public ridicule and abuse in order that the onlookers might be guided into right paths and avoid moral pitfalls. This practice has been discontinued for the most part, but it is certainly to be found in many branches of modern scholarship and pedagogy.

The worst feature of the use of the pillory lies in the feeling of superiority on the part of onlookers at the expense of the accused. What is still worse in the application of the pillory technique in scholarship is the fact that the accused is represented only by his accusers. Moreover, the accusers have a special purpose of their own in this: the placing of their own position in a better light by contrast to the hopelessness and sad inadequacies of the position being pilloried.

By way of illustration we shall consider Tertullian. In many studies in apologetics and philosophy of religion Tertullian receives attention as a horrible example of irrationalism, of opposition to philosophy and culture. The position that finds faith in opposition to reason is attributed to Tertullian. The usual procedure, then, is to refute this position and castigate Tertullian.

It is not difficult to find such treatment of Tertullian.

It is, however, a hard position (Tertullian's) to maintain, for to open one's mouth in rational speech is to involve religion in rational categories. The alternative is silence!¹

He has no sympathy with the efforts of some Christians of his time to point out positive connections between their faith and the ideas of the Greek philosophers.... There is a tendency in the radical movement to use the word "reason" to designate the methods and the content of knowledge to be found in a cultural society; "revelation" to indicate that Christian knowledge of God and deity that is derived from Jesus Christ and resident in the Christian society. These definitions, then, are connected with the denigration of reason and the exaltation of revelation.... Tertullian, of course, is the stock example in history of the position that substitutes revelation for reason.... Human reason as it flourishes in culture is for these men not only inadequate because it does not lead to a knowledge of God and the truth necessary to salvation; but it is also erroneous and deceptive.²

Admittedly sympathy for Tertullian is not easy to generate. There is hardly a figure in the history of Christian thought more angular, more unattractive to the contemporary mind. On one count or another Tertullian seems to have alienated most people who have taken the trouble to inform themselves about him. His strict, unbending asceticism, his schismatic departure into Montanism, his penchant for narrowly literalistic interpretation of Scripture, his role as a contentious controversialist; these build walls between Tertullian and most moderns.

¹ John A. Hutchison, *Faith, Reason, and Existence*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 98, 99.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York; Harper and Bros., 1951), pp. 54, 76, 77.

In order to give a fairer hearing to Tertullian two questions will be considered in this order: (1) What is Tertullian's position as regards philosophy and the philosophers of his day? (2) Is Tertullian's position irrationalistic?

TERTULLIAN ON PHILOSOPHY

It is clear that Tertullian was one of the best educated Christian writers of his day. He was thoroughly versed in philosophy and the intellectual emphases of the age. There is abundant evidence that Tertullian wished to warn Christians against the grave dangers of philosophy and the philosophers.

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What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?³

Unhappy Aristotle! who invented for these men dialectics, the art of building up and pulling down; an act so evasive in its propositions, so far-fetched in its conjectures, so harsh in its arguments, so productive of contentions embarrassing even to itself, and really treating of nothing.⁴

Now, pray tell me, what wisdom is there in this hankering after conjectural speculations? What proof is afforded to us, notwithstanding the strong confidence of its assertions, by the useless affectation of a scrupulous curiosity, which is tricked out with an artful show of language? It therefore served Thales of Miletus quite right, then, staring as he walked with all the eyes he had, he had the mortification of falling into a well.... His fall, therefore, is a figurative picture of the philosophers; of those, I mean, who persist in applying their studies to a vain purpose, since they indulge a stupid curiosity on natural objects, which they ought rather to their Creator and Governor.⁵

The truth which philosophers, these mockers and corrupters of it, with hostile ends merely affect to hold, and in doing so deprave, caring for nought but glory. Christians... long for and maintain in its integrity.... So, then, where is there any likeness between the Christian and the philosophers? between the disciple of Greece and of heaven? between the man whose object is fame, and whose object is life? between the talker and the doer? between the man who builds up and the man who pulls down? between the friend and the foe of error? between the one who corrupts the truth and the one who restores and teaches it? between its thief and its custodian.⁶

On repeated occasions Tertullian refers to the Greek philosophers as "those patriarchs of all heresy."⁷ It is by no means clear, however, that Tertullian simply opposes and negates philosophy and the philosophers.

³ Tertullian, *DE PRAESCRPTIONE HAERETICORUM*, 7. The citations from the writings of Tertullian will be treated, as in this case, by mentioning the familiar Latin title of the work and the chapter number. Where there is a book number as well as a chapter number, the former will appear as Roman numerals. With some alteration the translations used are those of Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, (Buffalo: Christian Pub. Co., 1887).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Tertullian, *AD NATIONES*, II, 4.

⁶ Tertullian, *APOLOGIA*, 46.

⁷ Tertullian, *ADVERSUS HERMOGONEM*, 8 and *DES PRAESCRPTIONE HAERETICORUM*, 7.

Note, for instance, that even in his negation of philosophy, Tertullian is primarily concerned about the danger of speculative departures from true Christian faith.

Our instruction comes from "the porch of Solomon" (where the Apostles taught, Acts 3:5), who had himself taught that "the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart." Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith we desire no further belief.⁸

For, so, too, if the truth was distinguished by its simplicity, the more on that account the fastidiousness of man, too proud to believe, set to altering it; so that even what they found certain they made uncertain by their admixtures. Finding a simple revelation of God, they proceeded to dispute about Him.... According to each one's fancy he has introduced either something new, or refashioned the old. Nor need we wonder if the speculations of philosophers have perverted the older Scriptures (idea that the Greeks had received what little truth they had from the Old Testament). Some of their brood, with their opinions, have even adulterated our new-given Christian revelation, and corrupted it into a system of philosophic doctrines.⁹

These and many related passages in Tertullian suggest that his main protest is not so much against philosophers per se as against the widespread syncretism of Greek philosophy and Christian thought. As we know from Clement of Alexandria and the Gnostics, there was a real place for just such warnings as Tertullian gives. Neander points out the appropriateness of Tertullian's strong protests:

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When Tertullian says, referring to Hermogenes, that the philosophers are the patriarchs of heretics, and reproaches him with having changed from a Christian to a philosopher, there is certainly so far truth in the allegation, that the doctrine of Hermogenes resulted from a mingling of philosophy and Christianity—of the speculative and the religious interest.¹⁰

Tertullian does seem intemperately outspoken against philosophy and philosophers. It is in this matter that some criticism of Tertullian finds adequate basis. It might be helpful, however, not only to recall that Tertullian sought to speak out against the all-too-common syncretism of his day, but also to note that in some of his most vigorous protests against philosophy he cites the Apostle Paul. Quoting Colossians 2:8 Tertullian comments:

'See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.' He had been at Athens, and had in his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, whilst it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects.¹¹

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Tertullian, APOLOGIA, 47.

¹⁰ Augustus Neander, *History of the Christian Church*, trans. J. E. Ryland, "Antignostikus", (London: George Bell and Sons, 1876), p. 155.

¹¹ Tertullian, DE PRAESCRPTIONE HAERETICORUM, 7. Similarly cited are I Timothy 4:1; I Corinthians 3:18, 25; I Corinthians chapters 1, 2.

We observe that while his comment goes beyond the thought of the Apostle, Tertullian speaks in the same vein as the Apostle here (as over against Clement of Alexandria). We ought not to omit noting that Tertullian occasionally speaks of agreement with and even commendation of the philosophers. He declares that he shares Plato's views on the immortality of the soul and the soul as composed of two parts.¹²

Generally unrecognized is the fact that Tertullian presents reasons for his opposition to the philosophers. He argues that philosophy is intellectually unsatisfying because of the widespread variety of opinion and disagreement among the most reputable philosophers. In several places he gives extensive documentation for this diversity.¹³ Tertullian also charges the philosophers with ignorance and unwarranted skepticism on the most crucial of questions.¹⁴ In one place he criticizes the Academy for perversity and for blindly denying common sense conclusions about the nature of things in the world.¹⁵ Such complaints as these are framed by Tertullian in a perspective of objectivity for which he is not ordinarily credited. Most of what he says about philosophy and philosophers is negative, but it does not follow that this opposition is blind, unreasoned or merely subjective.

TERTULLIAN ON IRRATIONALISM

The Father of Latin theology is known to many today only as the outstanding example of Christian irrationalism. Tertullian is customarily pictured as teaching that faith, in order to be genuinely Christian, must contradict human reason.

There is a perfectly good proof text to support this judgment. Unquestionably this is the most widely known statement of Tertullian.

The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed, because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd (INEPTUM). And He was buried and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible (IMPOSSIBLE).¹⁶

At first blush this passage certainly seems to justify the label of irrationalism. The setting of these lines is of considerable interest in understanding the issue. Tertullian is here engaged in a dispute with Marcion, the Gnostic, on the doctrine of the person of Christ. Marcion defends the docetist (or phantom humanity view) Christology; while Tertullian is insistent on a more orthodox view. Consequently the work in which we find this passage bears the title, *On the Flesh of Christ*.

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When we remember that Tertullian frequently gives vent to strong feelings in his writings and that the doctrine of the Person of Christ is at the center of his religious commitment we shall not be quite so startled at the vehemence of his expression. We should realize that Tertullian's main complaint about Marcion's Christology is that Marcion had altered the Christian confession about Jesus Christ in the direction of making it more believable, more

¹² Tertullian, DE RESURRECTIONE CARNIS, 3; DE ANIMA, 16.

¹³ Tertullian, DE ANIMA, 2; AD NATIONES, II, 2.

¹⁴ Tertullian, AD NATIONES, II, 2.

¹⁵ Tertullian, DE ANIMA, 17.

¹⁶ Tertullian, DE CARNE CHRISTI, 5.

rationally acceptable. We must also bring to mind the basic fact that all orthodox Christologies come to grips with the miraculous character of the Incarnation and the unexplained union of the two natures in one Person.

In this same chapter of *On the Flesh of Christ*, moreover, Tertullian speaks further about the Incarnation in these more measured words:

...in one respect born, in the other unborn; in one respect fleshly, in the other spiritual; in one sense weak, in the other exceeding strong; in one sense dying, in the other living. This property of the two states—the divine and the human—is distinctly asserted with equal truth in both natures alike, with the same belief both in respect of the Spirit (in Tertullian, a technical designation for "divine nature") and of the flesh.

Toward the end of this same passage we note Tertullian's argument to the effect that Marcion's Christology is logically inconsistent. If Christ is only spirit and not flesh, as Marcion says, then Christ cannot suffer and die. But, argues Tertullian, Marcion does teach that Christ suffered and, thus, ends in contradictions. In view of these considerations Cochrane's judgment about this famous "irrationalism" passage seems quite plausible. Cochrane suggests that here we see how Tertullian "states the doctrine of the incarnation in a most provocative way."¹⁷

With the possible exception on one other section¹⁸ this writer finds no other "irrationalist" passages in the rather extensive writings of Tertullian. Is it possible that too hasty a judgment has been rendered on this question? It begins to look as though we might have reason to reconsider the "irrationalist" label for Tertullian. When the Apostle Paul urges "the foolishness of God" over "the wisdom of men" in the First Epistle to the Corinthians he is not ordinarily dismissed as anti-rational. Commentators generally are careful to take into account the whole sweep of Paul's thought as well as the significance of the immediate context.¹⁹ We note incidentally that in this offending chapter of *On the Flesh of Christ* Tertullian quotes the Apostle specifically concerning "the foolish things of God."

One need not look very far into Tertullian to discover other reasons for reconsidering the charge of "irrationalism". What should be quite obvious is Tertullian's great importance as a Christian apologist. It would indeed be odd if the significant apologetic writings of Tertullian were characterized by an essential opposition to human reason and reasoning. What we actually find is that his chief apologetic weapon lies in showing how his opponents fall into confusion, inconsistency and absurdity. Virtually hundreds of pages of Tertullian's argumentation seek to make this kind of point. For instance, he puts the rhetorical question to the Valentinians: "For what can be right in a system which is propounded with such absurd particulars?"²⁰

¹⁷ Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, (London; Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 223.

¹⁸ Tertullian, DE BAPTISMO, 2.

¹⁹ Clarence Tucker Craig, "First Corinthians", "Exegesis", *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. X, (New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1953), p. 31.

²⁰ Tertullian, ADVERSUS VALENTINIANOS, 35. We might mention several other passages which illustrate this kind of argument. AD VALENTINIANOS, 6, 19; ADVERSUS HERMOGONEM, 7-17, 19; DE ANIMA, 24; ADVERSUS MARCIONEM, 1, 25, and III, 8, 11, AD NATIONES, I, 2-4; DE SPECTACULIS, 20, 21.

At times his logic becomes strained in apologetic argumentation. In one place Tertullian pleads that since Nero was bad, and since he also persecuted and opposed Christians, it follows that Christians are good.

If he was just, if he was pure, then Christians are unjust and impure; ... what sort of men we are, our persecutor himself shows, since he of course punished what produced hostility to himself.²¹

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Tertullian is in good company in having flaws in his reasoning, but this is not the same as being anti-rational in intent.

There are several passages in Tertullian, furthermore, that seem distinctly contrary to any form of irrationalism. In one place he criticizes Marcion's God as irrational. This comes from the period after Tertullian had turned Montanist.

All the properties of God ought to be as rational as they are natural. I require reason in His goodness, because nothing else can properly be accounted good than that which is rationally good; much less can goodness itself be detected in any irrationality.²²

Frequently Tertullian urges his readers to seek the truth of God and expect to find it, "without regard to the rule of reason".²³ It is his usual practice, however, when discussing the validity of Christian doctrine, to give consideration to what could be called rational evidences, including the following:

1. Argument that Christ's nativity is both "possible and becoming".²⁴
2. Analogies from nature which corroborate Christian doctrine.
3. The simple testimony of the soul to its Creator.²⁵
4. The superior morality of the Christians.²⁶
5. The greater antiquity of Christian truth to all contrary beliefs.²⁷
6. The inadequacy and inconsistency of all competing views.²⁸

Whether or not all of these are valid or convincing reasons for the truth of the Christian faith would make an interesting discussion in itself, but the important observation to be made here is that Tertullian does present them seriously. These arguments and reasons assume that objective rational judgment can be made by his readers.

Similarly we find that Tertullian is rather critical of blind faith on the part of Christians.

A treatise on this matter (baptism) will not be superfluous; instructing such as are just becoming formed (in the faith), but them who, content with having simply believed,

²¹ Tertullian, *AD NATIONES*, I, 7.

²² Tertullian, *ADVERSUS MARCIONEM*, I, 23.

²³ Tertullian, *DE PRAESCRIPTIONE HAERETICORUM*, 9.

²⁴ Tertullian, *DE CARNE CHRISTI, DE RESURRECTIONE CARNIS, et alia*.

²⁵ Tertullian, *DE TESTIMONIO ANIMAE*, all six brief chapters.

²⁶ Tertullian, *APOLOGIA*, 44, 45.

²⁷ Tertullian, *Ibid.*, 47; *DE TESTIMONIO ANIMAE*, 5.

²⁸ Tertullian, *AD NATIONES*, 1-3.

without full examination of the grounds (RATIONALI BUS) of the traditions, carry (in mind) through ignorance, an untried though probable faith.²⁹

One who has "simply believed" without examining or inquiring into the grounds of his faith, according to Tertullian, is in a precarious position.

These observations lead to the conclusion that Tertullian cannot rightly be called anti-rational. It is true that he seems to be guilty of various kinds of extremism, and violent expression, inconsistencies, etc., but there is nothing remarkable in that. Tertullian's outlook and emphases are clearly rational.

Tertullian may now be seen as a classic example, not of irrationalism, but as a victim of the pillory-technique in scholarship. What seems to have taken place regarding the customary estimate of Tertullian can be true to a greater or lesser degree of other men and ideas of the past and present. Both Christian principles and scholarly integrity would demand caution.

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Prepared for the Web in February 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw

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²⁹ Tertullian, DE BAPTISMO, 1.