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***Theology and the Philosophical Climate:  
Case-Studies from  
the Second Century AD (Part 1)***

**Alan P. F. Sell**

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Some fifty years ago Dr. J. Vernon Bartlet expressed the view that 'in the Parable of the Sower the truth emerges, that the actual harvest is the result, not only of the seed planted, but also of the special state of the soil... historical Christianity is like a plant whose nature indeed depends upon forces inherent in the seed, but whose actual fashion at any given time depends also upon the environment in which it grows.'<sup>1</sup> This delicate and intricate relationship between seed and soil gives rise to some fascinating problems in historical theology. Not indeed that the issues are of academic interest only. That the question of the nature of the seed to be sown is a practical enough matter has been appreciated by all who have been concerned with Christian mission, from the early apostles who found that their soil included Judaism, Hellenism, gnosticism, and so on, to contemporary Christians who find world religions other than Christianity, and such movements as humanism and communism, in the cultural soil with themselves.

In the interests of communication, contact is an inescapable necessity. But the matter is more complicated than at first appears, for the seed is ever received by men against the background of their own age—as any who have sought literally to reproduce the patterns of thought or the lifestyle of the early Christians have swiftly discovered. Moreover, the seed affects the soil no less than it is influenced by it; and again, we who seek to assess the contributions of those of earlier ages are probably as blinkered as we are liberated by virtue of our participation in our times. Despite the difficulties, the questions press. How is Christianity to be distinguished from other faiths? What is the essence of the gospel—and what does that question mean? What are the implications for theology of the difference between the radical commitment of faith and the provisional articulation of a Christian perspective? And in the course of the latter enterprise, how far may Christians employ the concepts of others in the prosecution of their work, and are there any reductionist dangers to be guarded against? It is with these questions in mind that we turn to the work of four second-century Fathers. We cannot hope to provide final answers to all of these questions in this article, but we may at least find that the circumstances of these 'pre-Christendom' apologists suggest interesting parallels with our own 'post-Christendom' apologetic situation; and from the work of these men we may gather something concern-

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ing the path to be followed and the pitfalls to be avoided as we seek to communicate the gospel in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> J. V. Bartlet, *Early Church History* (London rev. ed. 1925) 12-13.

We turn first to Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165), the Apologist whose works have come down most completely to us, and whose attempt to reckon with the philosophical thought of his day is not only the first major example of its kind, but also bears the seeds of later theological debate. The idea of employing Greek concepts in the service of first the Hebrew and then the Christian traditions was not new—as witness, for example, the LXX and the contribution of the Alexandrian Jew, Philo (c.20 BC-AD c.50). But of those who sought to work out in detail the relations between Christian and Greek thought, Justin was among the first. (Not indeed that this was all he sought to do. He conceived of himself primarily as being an expositor of Scripture, and he was quite as concerned to commend Christ to Jew as to Greek. But it is in relation to the Greek air he breathed that his liberalism emerges, and we shall concentrate upon this.)

A large part of the fascination of Justin resides in the ambivalent attitude he adopted towards Greek thought. On the one hand he appears to make many concessions to the philosophers, whilst at the same time denouncing their errors; but, on the other hand, he finds them in the last report inadequate and unnecessary on the ground that the true Christian has no need of the philosopher's offerings. We should thus be guilty of over-simplification were we to suggest that Justin finds Greek philosophy lying at his elbow, employs its conceptual apparatus in the exposition of Christianity, and distorts the latter in the process. The situation is much more intricate than that. Justin is convinced that there must ultimately be harmony between Christianity and philosophy, since the latter no less than the former depends upon the Word as found in Scripture. He discusses at length Plato's patriarchal borrowings, of which a prime example is said to be Plato's doctrine of creation, throughout adhering to the view that ultimate authority resides in Scripture. To the degree that heathen insights are worthy, they originate in the Logos; to the degree that they are misguided, the demons have been at work.<sup>2</sup> In a word, as far as Justin is concerned, it is not in the last analysis the Christians who need the support of the philosophers; rather, the philosophers are debtors to Christ. Hence Justin's liberalism emerges not only because he borrows, and insufficiently refines, Greek concepts and ideas, but because his hospitable mind prevents him from emphasising certain fundamental aspects of the Christian revelation. We shall hope to make good this claim, Justin's affirmation of such Christian doctrines as that of the resurrection of the body—a doctrine naturally inimical to the Greek mind—notwithstanding.

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Justin asserts the existence of common ground between Christians and both non-Christians and pre-Christians. This common ground is provided by the operations of the Logos, whose light is imparted in some measure to all men *qua* men. It is no accident that Christian teachings coincide at certain points with those of heathen philosophers so that, for example, 'while we say that all things have been produced and arranged into a world by God, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of Plato; and while we say that there will be a burning up of all, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of the Stoics...'<sup>3</sup> For in fact 'those who lived reasonably (i.e. μετὰ λόγου) are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the

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<sup>2</sup> *I Apology*, XLIV and LIX. Quotations from the Fathers are taken from the relevant volumes of the *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh 1867-97). A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (London 1896) II. 185 n., considers the possibility that Justin's view is that demonic activity may have been so intense as to nullify the (unaided) σπέρμα λόγου ἔμφροτον. This would explain his emphasis upon the borrowings of heathen poets and philosophers from the Old Testament. But Harnack does not think that this less liberal attitude is the essential one in the Apology.

<sup>3</sup> *I Apol.* XX.

Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham... and many others...'.<sup>4</sup> In short, 'Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians'.<sup>5</sup>

For all that, however, 'Our doctrines... appear to be greater than all human teaching; because Christ, who appeared for our sakes, became the whole rational being, both body, and reason, and soul. For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word. But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves.'<sup>6</sup> Christians therefore 'claim to be acknowledged, not because we say the same things as these writers said, but because we say true things.'<sup>7</sup> And they say true things because they have owned Christ-as-Logos, the supreme authority. Such value as heathen writings possess is derived from Christ—via the Old Testament in the case of such pre-Christian works as those of Plato,<sup>8</sup> whilst the errors and inconsistencies there displayed are directly attributable to evil spirits.<sup>9</sup> Although 'philosophy is, in fact, the greatest possession, and most honourable before God, to whom it leads us and alone commends us',<sup>10</sup> heathen philosophy is finally inadequate, and the Christian philosophy only is 'safe and profitable'.<sup>11</sup> But if, as these words may suggest, and as such commentators as Bartlet maintain, Justin was 'a man in search of *the true philosophy*',<sup>12</sup> we must not suppose that his grasp of Christianity was exclusively intellectualistic. On the contrary, his appeals to his readers frequently partake of the flavour of the evangelical mission rather than of the seminar: 'Know Christ; and behold the fallow ground, good, good and fat, is in your hearts.'<sup>13</sup> And Justin's ultimately negative answer to the question of the 'certain old man', 'Will the mind of man see God at any time, if it is uninstructed by the Holy Spirit?'<sup>14</sup> betokens a further limitation of philosophy's powers.

Despite these qualifications, Professor Chadwick's remark is just: 'Of all the early Christian theologians Justin is the most optimistic about the harmony of Christianity and Greek philosophy.'<sup>15</sup> But since Justin regards the philosophical quest as being at the same time religious, and in view of the evangelical and pneumatic strands in his thinking to which we

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have briefly referred, it is not entirely fair to state baldly, as some have, that for Justin Christianity is but a speculative philosophy and not a religion of redemption. It is, however, undeniable that his openness in respect of heathen philosophies caused him to play down the redemptive significance of Christ, as we shall proceed to show.

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* XLVI.

<sup>5</sup> *II Apol.* XIII.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* X.

<sup>7</sup> *I Apol.* XXIII.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* LIX, LX.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* LVI.

<sup>10</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho* II.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* VIII.

<sup>12</sup> Bartlet, *op. cit.* 117.

<sup>13</sup> *Dial.* XXVIII.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* IV.

<sup>15</sup> H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford 1966) 10.

Justin informs us that having approached a Stoic, a Peripatetic, and a Pythagorean, he at last found the goal of his pre-conversion philosophical pilgrimage in Platonism.<sup>16</sup> We are not surprised, therefore, to find that after his conversion he continued to attach great importance to the idea of God's transcendence, for in Greek thought the deity 'was more impersonal than personal, a regulative notion rather than a conscious reason and an active will. This was equally true whether the Divine was with Plato conceived under the form of the Good or the True, or with Aristotle, of the End or the Reason, or with the Stoic, of Law or the immanent Order.'<sup>17</sup> Hence Justin's emphasis upon the Logos-Son as being the necessary intermediary between God and men. As already noted, Justin maintains that the divine wisdom is shared by all men to some degree, and it is for this reason that he can call Socrates a Christian. But the question arises, in what manner do all men participate in the Logos? Justin's answer is that it is by the activity of the *σπερματικὸς λόγος* that such participation is assured; and in this phrase we see the influence of Middle Platonism upon an originally Stoic concept. For Justin is not here claiming, as the Stoics did, that human reason and divine Logos are identical, and that the spirit brings the seeds of the Word to perfection; but rather that the seeds are that imperfect knowledge which requires to be perfected by the incarnate Word.<sup>18</sup> Christians, he says, 'live not according to a part only of the word diffused (i.e. the *λόγος σπερματικὸς*)... but by the knowledge and contemplation of the whole Word, which is Christ.'<sup>19</sup> This Logos is 'begotten of the Father by an act of will',<sup>20</sup> (cf the Platonic world-soul); and knowledge of the Logos is the gift of God, who transcends both man's sensory and mental abilities—and not the former only, as in Platonic thought. Thus far it appears that for all his religious attachment to Christ, Justin thinks of Christ as supremely providing the fullest measure of knowledge: he surpasses and fulfils, yet is continuous with what has gone before. We shall have cause to question this position, and shall suggest that the weaker the emphasis upon soteriological considerations the more tenable it becomes. Does Justin reduce Christ?

Professor Chadwick gives a negative answer: 'there is nothing reduced about Justin's estimate of the person of Christ. Christ, he declares, is not only man but God... there is nothing whatever in the traditional pattern of Christian teaching which he feels it necessary to explain away or even to mute... There is no sign in Justin of any tendency to mitigate or to attenuate traditional beliefs, above all, his doctrines of Creation, revelation in history, and eschatology, in order to meet philosophical

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criticism.'<sup>21</sup> Yet Chadwick himself doubts whether, in Justin's view, Christ is divine in a fully scriptural sense. The difficulty arises because Justin's understanding of the ineffable God will

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<sup>16</sup> *Dial.* II.

<sup>17</sup> A. M. Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (London 1894) 64 It is important to note the relativity in Fairbairn's statement. As Professor Armstrong has written, 'It would be an entirely misleading generalization to say that the Greek philosophical conception of God is impersonal; rather, there is a continual tension and interplay between personal and impersonal ways of thinking about God...' See A. H. Armstrong and R. A. Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* (London 1960) 14. Cf A. E. Taylor's view of the Platonism of the first two Christian centuries: 'The most striking feature of this popularised Platonism is its combination of Plato's doctrine about God and the "intelligible Forms" with the Aristotelian conception of an eternal "formless" matter as the substratum upon which God impresses, or from which He educes, the various "forms" of things'. A. E. Taylor, *Platonism and its Influence* (New York 1932) 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> See Harnack, *op.cit.* II 183-4n.; J. Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (London 1973) 43-4.

<sup>19</sup> *II Apol.* VIII.

<sup>20</sup> *Dial.* LXI.

<sup>21</sup> Chadwick, *op.cit.* 17, 18, 19.

not easily allow him to believe that that God could have genuine dealings with mere men. Thus, for example, he maintains that the divinity who appeared to the Hebrew patriarchs can only have been the Logos-Son, and not the eternal One: 'there is... another God and Lord subject to the Maker of all things; who is also called an Angel, because He announces to men whatsoever the Maker of all things—above whom there is no other God—wishes to announce to them.'<sup>22</sup> Hence, 'neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor Jacob, nor any other man, saw the Father and ineffable Lord of all, and also of Christ, but [saw] Him who was according to His will His son...'<sup>23</sup> And after all, 'that that which is begotten is numerically distinct from that which begets, any one will admit.'<sup>24</sup> Hence although, as Professor Wiles has pointed out, Justin might legitimately appeal to the double sense of 'Logos', and contend that the term denotes both God's outgoing Word and his eternal reason,<sup>25</sup> it is difficult to resist Chadwick's conclusion that 'the presuppositions of the argument led with a virtually irresistible force straight to Arianism... and it must be pronounced a *faux pas* for which [Justin's] successors had to pay a high price in blood and tears.'<sup>26</sup> Commentators ancient and modern agree. As pseudo-Athanasius declared, 'He who says two Gods, Hellenizes.'<sup>27</sup> Or again, 'if the Logos be defined as *caused* by God, it becomes plain that the subordination which, in one sense, is an authentically New Testament idea, is on the point of passing into essential dualism and inferiority. So that in certain ways Justin may be said to have anticipated Arius, as moving too much on the same cosmological plane.'<sup>28</sup>

The term 'cosmological' is the operative one. Justin's Logos is, in the last resort, a device designed to effect a link between the ineffable God and his creation, since for him the disjunction 'either ingenerate or generate' is a strong one.<sup>29</sup> Certainly his Logos is not the Johannine Word-made-flesh: 'In St. John the term Logos is obviously defined by relation to the more fundamental "Son" ...In the Apologists this relation is turned the other way.'<sup>30</sup> Here, then, at a crucial point, Justin errs in not sufficiently subjecting the tradition whose air he breathed to close scriptural scrutiny. He does not adequately re-baptize his term for use in its Christian context. But, as we suggested earlier, there are sins of omission too.

Chadwick contends that Justin felt no need 'even to mute' anything in the traditional Christian teaching, and in the list of unmuted doctrines provided we find creation, revelation in history, and eschatology, but not the doctrines of atonement, man and sin. This is ominous, for on all these topics Justin is less than satisfactory. We may note in the first place Justin's great

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<sup>22</sup> *Dial.* LVI.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* CXXVII.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* CXXIX.

<sup>25</sup> M. Wiles, *The Christian Fathers* (London 1966) 27.

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick, *op.cit.* 16.

<sup>27</sup> *Oratio IV contra Arianos* 10.

<sup>28</sup> H. R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh 1912) 143; cf Danielou, *op.cit.* 346. We must, however, in fairness recall Justin's motive here: 'Justin does not speak of the logos as creator or maker of all things, lest he give the slightest support to Marcion. The logos is subordinate to the creator and tells men whatever the creator wishes'. So E. F. Osborn, *Justin Martyr* (Tubingen 1973) 36.

<sup>29</sup> Two quotations provided by H. R. Mackintosh in a footnote (*op.cit.* 144) will bear reproduction: 'For the domestic interests of the faith, the use of this word [*i.e.* Logos] is not indispensable. The Church has framed all her great creeds without employing it'. R. Rainy, *The Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh 1902) 205; 'If Christianity had depended on the Logos, it would have followed the Logos to the limbo whither went Aeon and Aporrhia and Spermaticos Logos. But that the Logos has not perished is due to the one fact that it has been borne through the ages on the shoulders of Jesus'. T. R. Glover, *The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire* (London 1909) 303-4.

<sup>30</sup> Mackintosh, *op.cit.* 143.

emphasis upon the incarnation of Christ. It is not surprising that he should attach great importance to this doctrine—a

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‘stumbling-block’ to the Greeks both because of the ineffability of their deity, and because of the Platonist view that the human body, if not actually evil, ‘was more of a hindrance than a help to the soul in the attainment of virtue and wisdom.’<sup>31</sup> Christ is the ‘Son of God, who was before the morning star and the moon, and submitted to become incarnate, and be born of this virgin of the family of David, in order that, by this dispensation, the serpent that sinned from the beginning, and the angels like him, may be destroyed, and that death may be contemned...’<sup>32</sup> At this point we might expect some reference to the moral redemption wrought by Christ, but it is not forthcoming. Instead Justin claims eternity for those who ‘believe in Him and live acceptably.’<sup>33</sup> These words betoken, in the first place, Justin’s great difficulty in rising above the conception of Christ as being, as he calls him, ‘the new Lawgiver.’<sup>34</sup> He speaks typically when he refers to Christ thus: ‘becoming man according to His [i.e. God’s] will, He taught us these things for the conversion and restoration of the human race.’<sup>35</sup> In the second place, the words quoted imply man’s ability to obey Christ’s precepts, and it is at this point that the clues which Justin provides as to his understanding of human autonomy become important. He says, for example, ‘In the beginning He made the human race with the power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right, so that all men are without excuse before God...’<sup>36</sup> Indeed, ‘unless the human race have the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions, of whatever kind they be.’<sup>37</sup> In short, ‘this is the nature of all that is made, to be capable of vice and virtue.’<sup>38</sup> It would be unjust (as well as anachronistic) to charge Justin with Pelagianism here—and it is interesting to note that the staunch Calvinist, William Cunningham, is not uncharitable on this point.<sup>39</sup> Further, we must bear in mind Justin’s eagerness to counter the gnostic determinism of his day, and that this consideration may well have influenced his mode of expression. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to understand why in later periods some have looked back to Justin and detected the flavour of salvation by works in his writings. The upshot is that the principle of continuity is emphasised in Justin’s soteriology no less than in his epistemology. Just as Christ is the fount and the coping stone of true thought, so he is the inspiration and the goal of right living. (In fact, in Justin the Logos-Son fulfils this last function, traditionally that of the Holy Spirit, to the detriment of the latter.)

We cannot resist the conclusion that Justin is some distance from Paul’s understanding of sin and grace, and there is little to suggest that in Justin’s view Christ in his passion does something in principle new. All of which helps to explain the Montanist’s ‘primitive’ reaction against the Apologists generally. Certainly Justin’s identification of sin with an ignorance which was non-culpable because it was the work of demons, leaves him as far from Paul as his understanding of Logos leaves him

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<sup>31</sup> Armstrong, *op.cit.* 46.

<sup>32</sup> *Dial.* XLV.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* XVIII.

<sup>35</sup> *I Apol.* XXIII.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* XXVIII.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* XLIII.

<sup>38</sup> *II Apol.* VII.

<sup>39</sup> William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (1862, repub. London 1960) I. 136-7.

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from John. There are foretastes in Justin of the doctrine of recapitulation (ἀνακεφαλαιώσεις), which was later to be propounded more fully by Origen: 'He became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin.'<sup>40</sup> But the manner and the cost of the recapitulation are not expounded. In all, Justin's Saviour is more restorative than radically redemptive. Thus, although he speaks of Christ's suffering to save the inhabitants of all the earth,<sup>41</sup> and although he can declare that 'our Christ, by being crucified on the tree, and by purifying [us] with water, has redeemed us, though plunged in the direst offences which we have committed, and has made [us] a house of prayer and adoration';<sup>42</sup> the impact of Christ's atoning work, and its relation to the needs of sinful men, is not spelled out. There is, therefore, a large measure of justice in Harnack's judgment to the effect that 'in the discussions which set forth in a more intelligible way the significance of Christ, definite facts from history have no place at all, and Justin nowhere gives any indication of seeing in the death of Christ more than the mystery of the Old Testament, and the confirmation of its trustworthiness.'<sup>43</sup> Justin leaves us with a doctrine of salvation by free volitional association and by obedience.

Lest this conclusion appear unduly harsh we hasten to concur in a further remark of Harnack:

What formed the strength of the apologetic philosophy was the proclamation that Christianity both contained the highest truth, as men already supposed it to be and as they had discovered it in their own minds, and the absolutely reliable guarantee that was desired for this truth [i.e., that it accorded with reason]. To the quality which makes it appear meagre to us it owed its impressiveness. The fact of its falling in with the general spiritual current of the time and making no attempt to satisfy special and deeper needs enabled it to plead the cause of spiritual monotheism and to oppose the worship of idols in the manner most easily understood.<sup>44</sup>

By borrowing, or at least by utilizing, Greek concepts, and by failing adequately to modify them in the light of the full-orbed revelation in Scripture, Justin raises the methodological question. Moreover, his omissions and silences raise the question, what may we *not* omit if we are fully to present the gospel? More particularly, we find in Justin the seeds of that exaltation of man which was to work such havoc in later times upon the soteriological aspects of the faith, and upon the conception of God's transcendence. Again, in the Greek attitude which lies behind Justin's 'loan' theory we have an interesting harbinger of that contemporary panentheism which properly will not permit God to be excluded from any part of his creation, but which then does not always know quite what to say concerning the relations between Christianity and other

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<sup>40</sup> *Dial. C.*

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* LXXIV.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* LXXXVI.

<sup>43</sup> Harnack, *op.cit.* I 203n. cf A.C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York 1, 1932) 117: 'Justin's general conception of Christianity was such as to afford no reason why Christ should have died'.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* II 171. Cf Osborn, *op.cit.* 84, and especially the concerns expressed by the gnostic writer of 'The Gospel of Truth'—i.e. section II of the *Jung Codex*, discovered in 1945—for which see H. C. Puech, G. Quispel and W. C. van Unnik, *The Jung Codex: a newly recovered gnostic papyrus*, trans. and ed. F. L. Cross (London 1955).



world religions and quasi-religions. All such questions are raised by what we have called the liberal approach—that hospitable approach which seeks God everywhere because it first believes that everything is in him.

A. M. Fairbairn's terse assessment of the Apostolic Fathers was that 'In measuring in the region of theology the difference between the Apostolic and the sub-Apostolic age, two standards must be employed—the quality of the thought that is absent, and the inadequate quality of what is present.'<sup>45</sup> Of the Apologists he said, 'they exhibit Christianity in process of assimilation by philosophic minds, but the last thing that can be claimed for them is that their theology is Apostolic.'<sup>46</sup> It is difficult not to agree. But at the same time—and this is no afterthought—Justin, by his commitment to Christ and by his self-sacrifice for Christ, reminds us of the important distinction which we must ever draw between a man's religion and his theology.

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We turn next to Irenaeus (c.130-c.200) and Tertullian (c.160-c.220), not indeed because of any overt liberal openness on their part to the thought forms around them, but rather because of their cautionary use in reminding us that, however disenchanting theologians may be with the thought of their age, the pervasive influence of that thought is very hard to resist. Unlike Justin who preceded them, and Clement of Alexandria and Origen who followed them, Irenaeus and Tertullian both expressed a hostility towards philosophy which they could not maintain absolutely, with the result that a certain ambivalence remains in their thought. Thus, whilst the judgment of H. von Campenhausen to the effect that Irenaeus 'had no wish to be a philosopher but rather a disciple of the earlier Fathers, an inspired guardian of the authentic apostolic tradition'<sup>47</sup> is sound as far as it goes, it is also true that Irenaeus valued reason's powers of reflection upon the faith, and that at certain points he is theologically inconsistent as a result of an incomplete break with philosophy.

Irenaeus, unlike Justin, was not a convert to Christianity. He had been nurtured in the faith from his earliest days. For all that, the speculative environment in which he lived made a considerable impression upon him. When it suits his purpose he can quote Greek philosophers with approval: he praises Plato, for example, for having recognized that a wedge may not be driven between the concepts of God's justice and goodness.<sup>48</sup> But, more characteristically, he thinks of the philosophers as being those who are ignorant of God. Thus the followers of the gnostic Valentinus 'are convicted of bringing forward... those things which are to be found among the comic poets, but they also bring together the things which have been said by all those who were ignorant of God, and who are termed philosophers...'<sup>49</sup>

Irenaeus's root objection to the heathen philosophers is that they are

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<sup>45</sup> Fairbairn, *op.cit.* 56 n.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* 66.

<sup>47</sup> H. von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Creek Church* (London 1963) 16.

<sup>48</sup> *Against Heresies* III xxv 5.

<sup>49</sup> *AH* II xiv 2.

not anchored in the Scriptures and the churchly tradition. These guarantee the truth of the faith, and render the pursuit of the philosophers unnecessary: 'Since therefore we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek the truth among others which it is easy to obtain from the church; since the apostles... lodged in her hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth: so that every man, whosoever will, can draw from her the water of life.'<sup>50</sup> Again, 'Where the church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth.'<sup>51</sup> All of which prompts the methodological conservatism of Irenaeus. He takes his stand on 'the faith once delivered to the saints', and maintains that the clearest answer to the gnostics resides in the demonstrable continuity of Christian belief, to which the gospels and the churchly tradition testify: 'The church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it.'<sup>52</sup> Since the preservation of the truth entails the defeat of truth's assailants, Irenaeus assumes the 'complex and multiform' task of detecting and convicting all the heretics.<sup>53</sup>

In view of their attempts to hellenize the gospel, Harnack called the gnostics 'the Theologians of the first century'.<sup>54</sup> To this Dr. James Orr replied: 'There is theology and theology. There is a theology which keeps true to the basis of Christian facts, and seeks to interpret them to knowledge; and there is a theology, the centre of gravity of which lies outside of Christianity altogether, which would subvert these facts, and dissipate Christianity into a cloudland of human imaginations... The fault of the Gnostic did not lie in his questions, but in his answers—in the unsoundness of his methods, and the vain conceits of his own fancy which he put in place of knowledge.'<sup>55</sup> Irenaeus would have sided with Orr. He found the gnostics wanting in several respects. In the first place, and at the most emotive level, he charges Valentinus and his colleagues with deriving their systematic principles from heathen philosophers,<sup>56</sup> and since he has already disowned such thinkers, the gnostics stand condemned by association. Moreover, he deems the gnostics culpable in their attitude towards Scripture and tradition: 'When... they are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same Scriptures, as if they were not correct, nor of authority, and [assert] that they are ambiguous, and, that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of tradition... they object to tradition, saying that they themselves are wiser not merely than the presbyters, but even than the apostles, because they have discovered the unadulterated truth.'<sup>57</sup> On such grounds as these Irenaeus likens the gnostics to 'slippery serpents' who endeavour 'to escape at all points'.<sup>58</sup>

Having persuaded himself of the inadequacy of gnostic methodology, Irenaeus, not surprisingly, attacks gnostic conclusions. He criticizes gnostic dualism on the basis that in canvassing the existence of two gods,

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<sup>50</sup> *AH* III iv 1.

<sup>51</sup> *AH* III xxiv 1.

<sup>52</sup> *AH* I x 2.

<sup>53</sup> *AH* I xxii 2.

<sup>54</sup> Harnack, *op.cit.* I 228.

<sup>55</sup> James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, (London n.d. but preface has 1901) 55, 58.

<sup>56</sup> *AH* II xiv.

<sup>57</sup> *AH* III ii 1-2.

<sup>58</sup> *AH* III ii 3.

one concerned with redemption and the other with creation, gnosticism undermines the true conception of the godhead. For Irenaeus, 'the supreme God is the Holy and Redeeming One. Hence the identity of the creator of the world and the supreme God also denotes the unity of nature, morality, and revelation.'<sup>59</sup> Or, in Irenaeus's own words: 'How can there be any other Fulness, of Principle, or Power, or God, above Him, since it is matter of necessity that God, the Pleroma (Fulness) of all these, should contain all things in His immensity, and should be contained by no one?'<sup>60</sup> Furthermore,

Our Lord... being the truth, did not speak lies; and... He never would have acknowledged as God... Him who was without the Pleroma as Him who was within it. Neither did His disciples make mention of any other God, or term any other Lord, except Him, who was truly the God and Lord of all...<sup>61</sup>

Turning to the Logos doctrine, we find that Irenaeus, in his desire to offer no concessions to the gnostics, is much more cautious—and Johannine—than was Justin. Christ is the enfleshed Logos. But Irenaeus does not wish to appropriate a concept which might in any way suggest a division of the deity; though, as H. R. Mackintosh wondered, 'Might this idea of a God-man not imperil the unity of God, not perhaps in a way resembling Gnosticism, but after the debasing fashion of pagan polytheisms?'<sup>62</sup> That Irenaeus himself was somewhat uncertain on the point is clear from passages in which he suggests that the Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to both.<sup>63</sup> In the main, however, he stands by the god-manhood of Christ, and this not only for ontological reasons but for soteriological reasons too. For fundamental to Irenaeus' thought is his doctrine of *recapitulatio*.<sup>64</sup> He elaborates and refines that Pauline notion,<sup>65</sup> whose import Justin had glimpsed, and makes it central to his theology. Jesus *must* be the god-man if he is, as Second Adam, to reverse the process by which mankind fell in Adam, and to make possible mankind's restoration. No other could effect the redemption of the race. Christ's person is inseparable from his work. The Son of God was with the Father from the beginning; 'But when He became incarnate, and was made man, He commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us, in a brief, comprehensive manner, with salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam—namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God—that we might recover in Christ Jesus.'<sup>66</sup> Christ is no mode, or emanation; he is 'the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.'<sup>67</sup> Hence as Dr. Norris has said, Irenaeus 'tries to make of the Logos not a buffer between the ingenerate God and the generate world, but the presence within the world of the Godhead itself.'<sup>68</sup>

It is Irenaeus's contention that the gnostics undermine the necessity of

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<sup>59</sup> Harnack, *op.cit.* II 237 n. 1.

<sup>60</sup> *AH* II 2.

<sup>61</sup> *AH* III v 1.

<sup>62</sup> Mackintosh, *op.cit.* 147.

<sup>63</sup> e.g. *AH* V xviii 2.

<sup>64</sup> See especially *AH* V xxi 1-2. For a full discussion of *recapitulatio* see J. Danielou, *op.cit.* 166-183.

<sup>65</sup> *Eph.* 1:10.

<sup>66</sup> *AH* III xviii 1.

<sup>67</sup> *AH* V, Preface.

<sup>68</sup> R. A. Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology* (London 1966) 72: cf A. C. McGiffert, *op.cit.* I 143-4.

the incarnation, and of redemption itself, for if they really knew the truth already, 'then the descent of the Saviour into this world was superfluous... If, on the other hand, these men did *not* know it, then how is it that, while you express yourselves in the same terms as those who knew not the truth, ye boast that yourselves alone possess that knowledge which is above all things, although they who are ignorant of God [likewise] possess it?'<sup>69</sup> The truth of the matter is that the Lord has 'redeemed us through His own blood, giving His soul for our souls, and His flesh for our flesh, and has also poured out the Spirit of the Father for the union and communion of God and man, imparting indeed God to men by means of the Spirit, and, on the other hand, attaching man to God by His own incarnation, and bestowing at His coming immortality durably and truly, by means of communion with God'. Therefore, 'all the doctrines of the heretics fall to ruin'.<sup>70</sup>

The emphasis which Irenaeus places upon the incarnation does, according to some scholars, lead him into certain difficulties. These arise, it is alleged, because running through his mind (and for all his overt opposition to Greek philosophy) is the Greek idea of the deification of man and the removal of incorruptibility, rather than the scriptural understanding of man's need of moral redemption and of the atoning work of Christ. This, no doubt, is among the considerations which led Harnack to assert that 'Irenaeus and Hippolytus have been rightly named Scripture theologians; but it is a strange infatuation to think that this designation characterises them as evangelical.'<sup>71</sup> Quite certainly it was the lingering influence of the Greek idea of the imparting of incorruptibility which prompted R. S. Franks to spell out the difference between Paul and Irenaeus: 'In Paul's conception of salvation as union with Christ in His death and resurrection we have the idea of salvation as a victory over death and an establishment of eternal life, both already given in principle in Christ and imparted by faith and baptism to the Christian. It is, however, a development which carries us beyond the Pauline doctrine, when Irenaeus goes back behind Christ's death and resurrection and views salvation as already given in the Incarnation itself.'<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, support from Irenaeus himself can readily be found for the view that although the incarnation was of crucial importance in his doctrine of redemption, 'the Incarnate One still had a *work* to do, which invested His life on earth with real soteriological meaning'.<sup>73</sup> This is clearly shown by the successive stages of the recapitulation doctrine. We may therefore agree that undue stress upon the incarnation *could*, and, in some theologies, *has* made the cross appear redundant. In balance, however, we feel that the total sweep of the recapitulation doctrine preserves incarnation and atonement in perspective. We are conscious of the greatest uneasiness in the realm of anthropology, where the question is whether man needs education or moral redemption.

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Against the gnostic, dualistic contrast between the natural and the spiritual man Irenaeus advocates man's unity. He further maintains against the gnostics that the body was not created incorruptible, but capable of incorruption.<sup>74</sup> Against any, ancient or modern, who would associate incorruptibility necessarily with Christ's incarnation, it is noteworthy that Irenaeus

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<sup>69</sup> *AH* II xiv 7.

<sup>70</sup> *AH* V i 1.

<sup>71</sup> Harnack, *op.cit.* II 250.

<sup>72</sup> R. S. Franks, *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ in its Ecclesiastical Development* (London n.d.) 145.

<sup>73</sup> Mackintosh, *op.cit.* 146.

<sup>74</sup> Danielou, *op.cit.* 401.

emphasises that incorruptibility was given, exceptionally, before the incarnation—to Enoch and Elijah, for example.<sup>75</sup> As Dr. Danielou makes plain, the gift of potential incorruptibility, there from the first, requires to be actualised. In Christ alone had God's design been perfectly realized. Other men are but on the way: 'On the one hand, there is a perfection of a certain kind in the beginning, the perfection involved in the fact that God gave his spirit to the first man. Any progress there may be, therefore, is not a movement from natural to supernatural Man. On the other hand, the first human being is but a child of a man, still at a very elementary stage.'<sup>76</sup> It follows that the gnostics, who regard all created things as evil, are guilty of misunderstanding the purpose of God in creation., As far as mankind is concerned that purpose is *παιδεία*, and, as Danielou further suggests, Irenaeus is original—and hence not entirely biblical—in seeking perfection not at the beginning of the process but at the end, and in applying the concept of *παιδεία* not to individuals only, but to the entire race.<sup>77</sup>

It is the emphasis upon *παιδεία* which most clearly reveals Irenaeus's indebtedness to the Greek intellectual atmosphere. His view of scripture and tradition notwithstanding, he here ends in ambiguity. For in Irenaeus Adam's sin is not only understandable—he was a mere babe;<sup>78</sup> it is excusable—he was seduced by the tempter.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, apart from the experience of the wretchedness of sin, men would have little appreciation of its opposite, moral worth.<sup>80</sup> All of which presupposes the fact of free will, and on this issue Irenaeus is quite clear. Men are free, and God exhorts rather than coerces them.<sup>81</sup> They *must* have free will since God created them in his image, and *He* is free.<sup>82</sup> The only alternative would render men automata.<sup>83</sup> Though created in God's *image*, and therefore potentially incorrupt, man's ultimate *likeness* to God is achieved only through striving.<sup>84</sup> All of which leads to a degree of moralism in Irenaeus which does not readily accord with what he elsewhere claims concerning the objectivity of Christ's recapitulatory mission. The comment of R. S. Franks following Werner is just: Irenaeus 'has not the Pauline conception of justification as an abiding state of communion with God in which the believer rejoices in the forgiveness of sins and faith works by love... on the whole the practical Christianity of Irenaeus, like that of the Apologists, is a moralism very different from the Pauline Christianity. Here again the influence of the Greek milieu makes itself felt.'<sup>85</sup> For all that, Dr. Van Til is somewhat less than fair when he charges Irenaeus with advocating 'a general theism maintained by many men who are not Christians and of Christianity as something that is added to this general

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theism.'<sup>86</sup> For Irenaeus has more than a little inkling that in Christ we are confronted by the *novel*. Thus, for example, in his exposition of the three covenants—the Decalogue, the Mosaic Law and the covenant of liberty—Irenaeus makes plain his view that in Christ God adopts

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<sup>75</sup> *AH V v 1.*

<sup>76</sup> Danielou, *op.cit.* 402: cf. *AH xxxviii 2-4.*

<sup>77</sup> Danielou, *op.cit.* 404.

<sup>78</sup> *Demonstratio* 12.

<sup>79</sup> *AH III xxiii 5.*

<sup>80</sup> *AH IV xxxviii:* cf Harnack, *op.cit.* II 271.

<sup>81</sup> *AH IV xxxvii 3.*

<sup>82</sup> *AH IV xxxvii 4.*

<sup>83</sup> *AH IV xxxvii 6.*

<sup>84</sup> *AH IV xxxvii 7.*

<sup>85</sup> Franks, *op.cit.* 48: cf Cunningham, *op.cit.* 140; G. P. Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh 1896) 89.

<sup>86</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Grand Rapids 1969) 83.

men as sons, and that this does not merely complete and clarify an earlier revelation, but marks a new departure. (Though even here he does not rise above the understanding of the objective as being the honouring of those 'who have obeyed and believed on Him... with immortality.'<sup>87</sup>)

We have said enough to show that any reduction of the distinctive notes of the New Testament gospel in Irenaeus occurs not because he deliberately set out to present the faith in terms of an alien creed, but because despite his disavowal of the philosopher's aid, and his doubts as to his competence, he was yet a child of an age permeated by Greek thought. We do not deny that Irenaeus's sacramentarianism led him from a different direction towards a synergistic reduction of the gospel. For the present, however, we are primarily concerned with things philosophical; and after reflecting upon these in relation to Irenaeus we draw the moral that we must be almost as vigilant when confronted by those who shun the philosophical atmosphere of their day as we are when we meet those who imbibe it with undue eagerness, since both may threaten the gospel. In other words, we must attend not only to what theologians say, we must observe what they do. Nowhere is this more necessary than in the case of Tertullian, to whom we now turn.

### 3

To Dr. Robert Mackintosh, Tertullian (c.160-c.220) was 'a masculine spirit and phrase-coiner like T. Carlyle, if bitterer still.'<sup>88</sup> Undoubtedly it was the robust faith of those who were prepared to suffer martyrdom for Christ which evoked Tertullian's admiration, and which was a factor in his conversion. Assuredly he could wield sarcasm and irony against Marcion, Valentinus and any others whom he deemed to be falsifiers of truth. Moreover, as 'phrase-coiner' he has bequeathed to Christianity a terminology in which to discuss trinitarian theology (with which we are not here primarily concerned), as well as some paradoxical utterances of the most tantalizing kind which will most certainly concern us. So much may still be affirmed with some conviction—and here the operative word is 'still', for other traditional claims about Tertullian are, under the scrutiny of contemporary scholarship, no longer justified. Thus, for example, Dr. T. D. Barnes has shown that Tertullian was *not* the son of a soldier, and, more importantly, that there were two Tertullians, of whom the theologian was *not* a trained jurist.<sup>89</sup> Hence such a comment as that of Fairbairn (here representative of his age) to the effect that 'If Tertullian had not been a jurist, his theology would not have been what it is'<sup>90</sup> is now seen to be wide of the mark. He was not a jurist, and his

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theology is what it is—and this presumably because of the intellectual milieu within which Tertullian worked, his own cast of mind, and those features of Christianity which do in any case lend themselves to legalistic interpretation.

What, then, was Tertullian's attitude towards the thought of his day? It is well known that he articulated the strongest possible disjunction between Christianity and philosophy:

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<sup>87</sup> *AH* IV xv 2.

<sup>88</sup> R. Mackintosh, 'Apologetics', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th edn. 1910-11) 190.

<sup>89</sup> T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford 1971) chap. IV.

<sup>90</sup> Fairbairn, *op.cit.* 39.

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from 'the porch of Solomon', 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.<sup>91</sup>

The words could hardly be clearer, but to what extent did Tertullian practice what he here preached? By way of clearing the ground we shall first make and justify some unproblematic assertions which might at first sight suggest that Tertullian was genuinely and *habitually* hostile to the thought and culture of his day.

In the first place, there is in Tertullian's writings evidence of a general impatience with society at large. The source of this impatience is his conviction that many of society's preoccupations are of secondary importance and, more particularly, that they do not compare with the clamant nature of the call to martyrdom and of the eschatological hope. For Tertullian the End is near, time is short, and the Holy Spirit as reprover of the world will not for ever tarry: 'But what a spectacle is the fast-approaching advent of our Lord, now owned by all, now highly exalted, now a triumphant One! ... Yes, and there are other sights: the last day of judgment... when the world, hoary with age, and all its many products, shall be consumed in one great flame!'<sup>92</sup> As for the true Christian meanwhile: 'In prayer we await the trumpet of the angel',<sup>93</sup> welcoming martyrdom should it come—'women even have despised the flames.'<sup>94</sup> In days of eschatological crisis what people do is of more importance than what they think:

It is our battle to be summoned to your tribunals, that there, under fear of execution, we may battle for the truth... we conquer in dying; we go forth victorious at the very time we are subdued. Call us, if you like, *Sarmenticii* and *Semaxii*, because, bound to a half-axle stake, we are burned in a circle-heap of fagots. This is the attitude in which we conquer, it is our victory robe, it is for us a sort of triumphal car... The oftener we are mown down by you, the more

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in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed. Many of your writers exhort to the courageous bearing of pain and death... And yet their words do not find so many disciples as Christians do, teachers not by words, but by their deeds.<sup>95</sup>

Again, 'our discipline carries its own evidence in itself; nor are we betrayed by anything else than our own goodness, just as bad men also become conspicuous by their own evil.'<sup>96</sup> And against any who would controvert such claims by indicating unworthy Christians, Tertullian simply redefines the term: 'although you prove that some of our people are evil, you do not

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<sup>91</sup> *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* vii.

<sup>92</sup> *De Spectaculis* xxx.

<sup>93</sup> *De Oratione* 29 This is Professor Friend's rendering as in art.cit. n. 101 below, 140.

<sup>94</sup> *Ad Martyras* 4.

<sup>95</sup> *Apologeticus* 50.

<sup>96</sup> *Ad Nat* I iv.

hereby prove that they are Christians.'<sup>97</sup> By contrast, 'I must not omit an account of the conduct also of the heretics—how frivolous it is, how worldly, how merely human, without seriousness, without authority, without discipline, as suits their creed.'<sup>98</sup>

We ought in passing to observe that the emphasis which Tertullian placed upon the discipline of the Christian life led him into the corresponding error and earned him the rebuke of Harnack: 'he everywhere endeavoured to give a conception of Christianity which represented it as a divine law, whereas in Irenaeus this idea is overshadowed by the conception of the Gospel as real redemption.'<sup>99</sup> Thus, for example, in his summary of the Rule of Faith Tertullian describes Christ's preaching as being concerned with the new law;<sup>100</sup> and as for specific moral recommendations, Professor Frend has reminded us how the degree of Tertullian's rigour increased with the passage of time:

In the *De Paenitentia*... he allowed (like Hermas) that a grievous sinner might be pardoned once. In *De Pudicitia* there could be no pardon. In *Ad Uxorem* flight in persecution was permitted. In *De Fuga* it was not. As in the strictest Jewry of the time, a second marriage was equated with adultery.<sup>101</sup>

All of which was to fertilize Tertullian's notions of merit and satisfaction, as we shall see.

Secondly, Tertullian opposed many of the specific doctrines which were being propounded in his day. He wrote against the pagans, against the gnostics—and in particular against Valentinian gnosticism, against the dualism of Hermogenes, and against Marcion. We shall have cause to refer to some of these again, but for the present we note that in addition to his detailed criticisms of the philosophers and others, Tertullian denounced the philosophers and heretics for even supposing that their opinions could have any real substance. For one thing they are so late in the field: 'I am accustomed, in my prescription against all heresies, to fix my compendious criterion [of truth] in the testimony of *time*; claiming priority therein as our rule, and alleging *lateness* to be the characteristic of every heresy.'<sup>102</sup> Christians for their part stand in a tradition remarkable for its venerability. Not indeed that venerability alone is a sufficient

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guarantee of truth. But the Christian message is not only old, it comes down bearing the stamp of apostolic authority: 'all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches... must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the [said] churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, [and] Christ from God; whereas all doctrine must be prejudged as false which savours of contrareity to the truth of the churches and apostles of Christ and God'.<sup>103</sup>

This apostolic authority is of supreme importance, for, thinks Tertullian, scripture alone is an insufficient guarantee of truth—not least because heretics are adept at applying faulty

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* v. cf *Apol.* 46.

<sup>98</sup> *Praes. Haer.* xli.

<sup>99</sup> Harnack, *op.cit.* II 16.

<sup>100</sup> *Praes. Haer.* xiii.

<sup>101</sup> W. H. C. Frend, 'Tertullian', *The Expository Times* 81 (1970) 140.

<sup>102</sup> *Adversus Marcionem* V xix.

<sup>103</sup> *Praes. Haer.* xxi.



exegesis to it with a view to supporting their own dubious positions. The embodiment of the Christian's charter is the Rule of Faith, and this Tertullian sets out in *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* xiii. The Christian inheritance—venerable and authoritative—suggests to Tertullian the only acceptable principle of Christian action: the wise man will act in accordance with the divine dispensation. As he says, 'One may no doubt be wise in the things of God, even from one's natural powers, but only in witness to the truth, not in maintenance of error: [only] when one acts in accordance with, not in opposition to, the divine dispensation.'<sup>104</sup> Again, right thinking will pay heed to the same dispensation: 'For by whom has truth ever been discovered without God? By whom has God ever been found without Christ? By whom has Christ ever been explored without the Holy Spirit? ... For it is really better for us not to know a thing, because He has not revealed it to us, than to know it according to man's wisdom, because he has been bold enough to assume it.'<sup>105</sup> Nor have the Valentinians any ground for accusing Christians of being simple—'as if indeed wisdom were compelled to be wanting in simplicity, whereas the Lord unites them both: "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and simple as doves".'<sup>106</sup> For in Christ the Christian has God's best, and in a real sense there is nothing more to be sought.<sup>107</sup> Not indeed that the Christian is called upon to refrain from the exercise of his mind, but 'Let our "seeking" ... be in that which is our own, and from those who are our own, and concerning that which is our own,—that, and only that, which can become an object of inquiry without impairing the rule of faith.'<sup>108</sup> That is, the Christian may legitimately raise questions within the faith, though he may not question its overall credibility and authority.

For all his determination to advocate a Christian methodology of action and thought, it will have been noted that Tertullian does not deny that one may be wise in the things of God 'even from one's natural powers'. Here the influence of Stoic natural theology upon him is clear, and on this basis he can offer something of an olive branch to the philosophers. 'Of course we shall not deny that philosophers have sometimes thought the same things as ourselves. The testimony of truth is the issue thereof... In nature, however, most conclusions are suggested, as it were, by that common intelligence wherewith God has been pleased to

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endow the soul of man. This intelligence has been caught up by philosophy...'<sup>109</sup> Thus he can elsewhere argue that 'some things are known even by nature: the immortality of the soul, for instance, is held by many; the knowledge of our God is possessed by all';<sup>110</sup> and on this basis he can advance something in the nature of an ontological argument for the existence of the one true God, as when he says that reason. 'forbids the belief in more gods than one, because the self-same rule lays down one God and not two, which declares that God must be a Being to which, as the great Supreme, nothing is equal.'<sup>111</sup> Indeed, on occasion Tertullian goes so far as to suggest, in a manner reminiscent of Justin, that Christianity is an improved philosophy, since whilst pagan philosophers merely affect the truth, Christians actually possess it.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *De Resurrectione Carnis* iii.

<sup>105</sup> *De Anima* i.

<sup>106</sup> *Adversus Valentinianos* ii.

<sup>107</sup> *Praes. Haer.* vii.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.* xii.

<sup>109</sup> *De An.* ii.

<sup>110</sup> *De Res.* iii.

<sup>111</sup> *Adv. Marc.* I v.

<sup>112</sup> *Ad Nat.* ii, iv.

Such concessions on Tertullian's part are, however, few and far between. His more general feeling is that philosophy is the cause of division within the church—a contention he illustrates by reference to Valentinus and Marcion, whose objections to orthodox Christianity derive, he thinks, from their points of agreement with heathen Platonic and Stoic thought: 'Heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy. From this source came the Aeons, and I know not what infinite forms, and the trinity of man in the system of Valentinus, who was of Plato's school. From the same source came Marcion's better god, with all his tranquility; he came of the Stoics...'<sup>113</sup> A few lines later Tertullian forces his strong disjunction between Athens and Jerusalem, whilst in *De Anima* he invokes the aid of Paul when making a related point:

We should then be never required to try our strength in contests about the soul with philosophers, those patriarchs of heretics, as they may be fairly called. The apostle, so far back as his own times, foresaw, indeed, that philosophy would do violent injury to the truth. This admonition [about false philosophy] he was induced to offer after he had been at Athens, had become acquainted with that loquacious city, and had there had a taste of its huckstering wiseacres and talkers.<sup>114</sup>

If, then, it be asked why it is that philosophers sometimes profess the same things as Christians, Tertullian, falling back upon venerability and authority, replies: 'The reason simply is, that they have been taken from our religion. But if they are taken from our sacred things, as being of earlier date, then ours are the truer, and have higher claims upon belief, since even their imitations find faith among you.'<sup>115</sup>

It is time to take stock. We find in Tertullian an apocalyptically inspired impatience with society; a concern more for right and heroic living than for mental exercise for its own sake; and a conviction that that Christianity which sets a man morally straight will also provide him with a reliable foundation and method of thought. Where the philosophers are right they have borrowed from the venerable and author-

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itative Christian tradition, or they rest upon commonly shared natural theology; in so far as they are in error (and this they are more often than not), they are disturbers of the faithful and disrupters of the church. We find both that Tertullian protests that Athens has nothing to do with Jerusalem, and that, as Orr pointed out, 'Tertullian knew how to avail himself of the philosophers when it suited him.'<sup>116</sup> He may not have realized the extent of his indebtedness to the culture of his day—to say this is not to patronize him, it is simply to be alive to the constraints which unconsciously bear upon any thinker in any age. But it is quite clear that he saw no need to harmonize philosophy and faith. Nor, as Harnack rightly noted, did Tertullian 'feel the slightest necessity for a systematic presentation of Christianity.'<sup>117</sup> It is quite consistent that one who can, at least on his own testimony, disjoin Athens and Jerusalem can also, against Marcion's scepticism, rejoice in the 'absurdity' of a Son of *God* who *died*: 'The Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried,

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<sup>113</sup> *Praes. Haer.* vii.

<sup>114</sup> *De An.* iii.

<sup>115</sup> *Apol.* 47.

<sup>116</sup> Orr, *op.cit.* 46 n.

<sup>117</sup> Harnack, *op.cit.* II 325 n. 1.

and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible.<sup>118</sup> Quasten puts it mildly when he says of Tertullian that 'to dissolve apparent contradictions was not given him.'<sup>119</sup> Rather, he seems to have rejoiced in them.

We shall now illustrate Tertullian's methodological ambivalence by reference to specific theological questions. In his remarks upon the corporeality of both God and of the soul Tertullian's Stoicism emerges clearly. Indeed, as Harnack reminds us, 'The Stoic notion of God's corporeality had scarcely a defender after Tertullian.'<sup>120</sup> That Tertullian was characteristically and presumably unconsciously muddled on the point is evidenced by his placing side by side the Stoic and the Platonic understanding of God. Thus on the one hand, in Stoic fashion, and in an attempt to refute docetism, he asks 'How could... He who is incorporeal have made things which have body?'<sup>121</sup> And, again, he argues that although 'God is a Spirit', 'Spirit has a bodily substance of its own kind, in its own form.'<sup>122</sup> On the other hand, Tertullian can propound a Platonic, transcendentalist, immaterialist theory of the divine nature. This emerges most clearly in what he has to say about the Logos.

For Tertullian the Logos is both God's agent of creation, and the vehicle of God's self-revelation to men. Whereas the Deity is in true Platonic fashion, ingenerate, the Logos is generated. This view places Tertullian on the slippery slope of subordinationism, as when he says that 'even then before the creation of the universe God was not alone, since He had within Himself both Reason, and, inherent in Reason, His Word, which He made *second to Himself* by agitating it within Himself.'<sup>123</sup> Matters are little helped by the ensuing explanation that the Logos is not created *ex nihilo*, but is a derivation from the Father.<sup>124</sup> Stoic and Platonic ideas here collide—nor are we far removed from the emanation theories of some of the gnostics—Tertullian's denials and his use of the Stoic term *prolatio* notwithstanding.<sup>125</sup> The crux of the

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problem is that Tertullian cannot convincingly appeal both to the distribution of divine substance—a possibility entailing relativity, and, with Plato, appeal to the distinction between the one absolute, ingenerate deity and *everything* else. This latter idea was uppermost in his mind, surely, when he said that there was a time when the Father had no Son.<sup>126</sup> H. R. Mackintosh was in no doubt as to the dire doctrinal consequences of Tertullian's position:

It is a form of subordinationism... which, owing to the cosmological entanglements of the Logos doctrine, and the persistence of the quasi-philosophic assumption that God's essence lies in mystery and abstract isolation, and cannot therefore be communicated, goes near to wreck the validity for faith of the work of the historic Christ. At the same time even Tertullian's most emphatic statements of subordination are intelligible enough

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<sup>118</sup> *De Carne Christi* v.

<sup>119</sup> J. Quasten, *Patrology* II (Westminster, Maryland 1935) 320.

<sup>120</sup> Harnack, *op.cit.* III 247 n.2.

<sup>121</sup> *Adversus Praxean* vii.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.* v (our italics).

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.* viii.

<sup>125</sup> cf *e.g.* *Adv. Marc.* II xxvii.

<sup>126</sup> *Adversus Hermogenem* iii.

as expressing a criticism of the Monarchian theory. There can be no question as to his religious estimate of Christ.<sup>127</sup>

Quite so, but at this point it is clear that the tangled philosophical skein has prevented Tertullian from giving due place to the scriptural, incarnational testimony concerning Christ which he was elsewhere, and in practice, anxious to heed.

At one point in particular Tertullian finds that the Scriptures and the rule of faith require supplementation, and he deliberately summons the Stoics to his aid: 'I call on the Stoics also to help me, who, while declaring almost in our own terms that the soul is a spiritual essence (inasmuch as breath and spirit are in their nature very near akin to each other), will yet have no difficulty in persuading [us] that the soul is a corporeal substance.'<sup>128</sup> Those thus called are Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus. Unlike Plato, for whom the soul is incorporeal and immaterial, Tertullian adopts the Traducian view to the effect that the substances of both soul and body are formed at one and the same time.<sup>129</sup> In fact so materialistic is Tertullian's mode of thought that he can not only conceive of the soul in terms of length, breadth and height, 'by which philosophers gauge all bodies', but he can accept the testimony of a female Montanist visionary to the effect that a soul is 'such as would offer itself to be even grasped by the hand, soft and transparent and of an ethereal colour, and in form resembling that of a human being in every respect.'<sup>130</sup> In short, except as corporeal the soul has no being, for what is incorporeal is not.<sup>131</sup>

The balance of evidence reinforces our suspicion that Tertullian was rather more in favour of the view that the cultural environment in which a thinker works is, given certain checks and sanctions, a reservoir from which he may (though preferably will not need to) draw, than of the view which might at first sight be represented by his Athens-Jerusalem polarity. If we are right, Quasten's comment that 'In contrast to the

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Greek apologists Tertullian emphasizes the uselessness of recourse to philosophy'<sup>132</sup> does not tell the whole story—as indeed Quasten elsewhere realizes when he makes the important qualification that 'the influence of the Stoics on Tertullian is not to be underestimated.'<sup>133</sup> Thus to allow for the influence of philosophy upon Tertullian is not to deny the force of his major claim to the effect that in the Scriptures and the rule of faith the Christian has a source of revelation with which philosophy cannot begin to compete. Nor is it to deny the fact that in the last resort the clamant question as far as Tertullian is concerned is not 'What intellectual aids may one legitimately utilize?'; it is 'In what, or whom, does one's trust repose?' His answer to this latter question is suggested by his understanding of the doctrines we are now briefly to review.

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<sup>127</sup> Mackintosh, *op.cit.* 155.

<sup>128</sup> *De An.* v.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.* xxvii.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.* ix.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.* vii.

<sup>132</sup> Quasten, *op.cit.* II 266.

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.* 321.

As with the other thinkers we are examining, so with Tertullian: it is in his account of God's activity in Christ, and of man's ability and need that the influence of the prevailing intellectual environment and the threat to scriptural teaching are most clearly seen. Professor Wiles has accurately stated Tertullian's view of the incarnation thus: 'Man is not just a spirit but flesh and spirit. If the Word did not become flesh, then flesh has been left outside the sphere of redemption. The possibility of full salvation depends upon the reality of the incarnation.'<sup>134</sup> But what did Christ do when he came? It is in the answer that he gives to this question that Tertullian, like the others of whom we treat in this article, leaves most to be desired. He writes, 'nothing is so worthy of God as the salvation of man... God held converse with man, that man might learn to act as God. God dealt on equal terms with man, that man might be able to deal on equal terms with God. God was found little, that man might become very great.'<sup>135</sup> It is clear from this that in Tertullian's view men need Christ's enabling, but it is not clear that Christ comes to men as anything more than exemplar and teacher. Again, Tertullian speaks of Christ the mediator, who '*shall* reconcile both God to man and man to God...',<sup>136</sup> and these words seem to minimize that stress upon Christ's *finished* work which was so evident in the thought of Irenaeus. Not indeed, that Tertullian does not speak much of Christ's death. On the contrary, in a famous passage in which he attacks docetism he roundly declares:

for He suffered nothing who did not truly suffer; and a phantom could not truly suffer. God's entire work, therefore, is subverted. Christ's death, wherein lies the whole weight and fruit of the Christian name, is denied, although the apostle asserts it so expressly as undoubtedly real, making it the very foundation of the gospel, of our salvation, and of his own preaching... Now, if His death be denied, because of the denial of His flesh, there will be no certainty of His resurrection... if Christ's resurrection be nullified, ours also is destroyed.<sup>137</sup>

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But again, when we ask what the death of Christ is for, what does it accomplish, and so on, it must be admitted that Tertullian's answer does not do justice to New Testament teaching. It is as if he does not see that the gulf between sinful man and the holy God requires more than exemplary suffering if it is to be traversed. Further, he appears to conceive of sin in metaphysical terms. The pristine soul is rational, but irrationality has subsequently intervened,<sup>138</sup> though, as Tertullian is eager to admit, 'there is a portion of good in the soul, of that original, divine, and genuine good, which is its proper nature. For that which derives from God is rather obscured than extinguished.'<sup>139</sup> Moreover, man, having the gift of freedom, is able to make some progress, aided by Christ, towards the amelioration of his lot. Otherwise human conduct would afford God no grounds for justly rewarding or punishing men:

I find, then, that man was by God constituted free, master of his own will and power; indicating the presence of God's image and likeness in him by nothing so well as by this constitution of his nature... This his state was confirmed even by the very law which God

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<sup>134</sup> Wiles, *op.cit* 134.

<sup>135</sup> *Adv. Marc.* II xxvii.

<sup>136</sup> *De Res.* lxiii (our italics).

<sup>137</sup> *Adv. Marc.* III viii: cf *De Baptismo* xi.

<sup>138</sup> *De An.* xvi.

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.* xli.

then imposed upon him. For a law would not be imposed upon one who had it not in his power to render that obedience which is due to law; nor, again, would the penalty of death be threatened against sin, if a contempt of the law were impossible to man in the liberty of his will... man is free, with a will either for obedience or resistance.<sup>140</sup>

In Van Til's estimation Tertullian thus 'virtually substitutes for the biblical concept of the freedom of the will of man as within the counsel of God and as in relationship to an environment constituted by the providence of God, the idea that man stands between God and the devil, both conceived as having some sort of ultimate power.'<sup>141</sup>

It is but a short step from this to the concepts of merit and satisfaction—especially given Tertullian's legalistic, moralistic cast of mind; and such ideas are to be found in embryo in his works. Thus, God the lawgiver is said to reward merit: 'God, never giving His sanction to the reprobation of good [deeds], inasmuch as they are His own... is in like manner the acceptor of them, and if the acceptor, likewise the rewarder.'<sup>142</sup> In a word, external acts of mortification and the like are said to discharge eternal punishments. In view of all this, it is difficult to resist Fairbairn's conclusion:

The legal idea Paul struggled so hard to expel thus returns in a more aggravated form, not as a Divine institution to purify, but as an instrument of judgment and justice, which those it condemned could yet propitiate. With it enters the notion, so offensive to Paul, of merit, and with merit the idea of the means of creating it, and of its worth or function with God. Hence comes the belief in a God

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who needs to be satisfied, and in penance as a method of satisfaction. In a moment, as twins born of the same idea, forensic theology and legal morality came to be. Both have a common basis, a God so much a personalised law that He needs by suffering to be satisfied for the dishonour done by sin.<sup>143</sup>

The climate of legalism coupled with a less than radical view of the nature of sin, and an unduly optimistic opinion of man's ability, both rational and moral, have combined to diminish the New Testament understanding of God's holiness and grace, and of the radical redemption wrought by Christ. In the last analysis the result, if not the overt intention, of Tertullian's approach is to make Christian belief somehow continuous with heathen thought, albeit preferable to it. The biblical concepts of the renewing of the mind and of the operation of God the Holy Spirit appear to have little impact upon his methodological perspective. The cause of this discrepancy is not to be sought in any attempt on Tertullian's part to cash theology in alien terms. On the contrary, he made every effort to rebaptize borrowed concepts. Thus, for example, for all his use of his Stoic heritage, he is careful when using the Stoic term *substantia* to disavow any pantheistic or monistic interpretation of the word.<sup>144</sup> The inadequacies we detect in him almost always derive from the intellectual air he breathed, rather than from any prophilosophical leanings on his part; and from his neglect of certain New Testament considerations of the most fundamental kind. We therefore concur with

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<sup>140</sup> *Adv. Marc.* II v.

<sup>141</sup> Van Til, *op.cit.* 98-9.

<sup>142</sup> *De Paenitentia* ii See Franks, *op.cit.* 1 103-8 for a lucid discussion of merit and satisfaction.

<sup>143</sup> Fairbairn, *op.cit.* 100: cf the even more downright verdict of Cunningham, *op.cit.* I 160.

<sup>144</sup> *Adv. Herm.* iii.

Professor Greenslade as far as he goes: 'Tertullian did not like philosophy, though he could not quite get rid of his own Stoic notion of matter. Apart from that, he genuinely tried to understand Christianity as *divinum negotium*, as Revelation, as something that God has done.<sup>145</sup> Yes, but when it came to delineating *what* God has done, Tertullian's inadequate grasp of the New Testament doctrines of God, man, sin and atonement, did not enable him fully to appreciate that Christianity is a religion of grace, and that the Christian life is not simply a conjunction of doctrinal assent with moral rigour, but is all of a piece and 'in Christ'. Thus, says Harnack, 'the essence of religion was split up—the most fatal turning-point in the history of Christianity.'<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> S. L. Greenslade, *Early Latin Theology* (London 1956) 24.

<sup>146</sup> Harnack, *op.cit.* II 31.