

CHRISTIAN AND
PAGAN IN THE
ROMAN EMPIRE

The Witness of Tertullian



Edited by
ROBERT D. SIDER

Christian and Pagan
in the Roman Empire

Selections from the Fathers of the Church

VOLUME 2

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For Lura Mae
my wife, companion, and incomparable friend

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The numbers placed in parentheses in Tertullian's texts below are section numbers from the original Fathers of the Church translations; these numbers do not appear in *Testimony of the Soul* because they do not appear in the original Fathers of the Church translation of this work.

Saskatoon, St. Nicholas' Day, 1999

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Of the life of Tertullian little can be said with certainty. He was an African, obviously educated—he wrote both Latin and Greek and had studied rhetoric, philosophy, and medicine. During the years of his known literary productivity, he appears to have lived in Roman Carthage. One gathers from his writings that he grew up a pagan, but we know nothing about the time and circumstances of his conversion to Christianity. He appears on the literary scene with his first treatises in 197. He wrote voluminously for more than one decade, and possibly more than two. The last of his works that can be securely tied to a date is the letter to Scapula, the proconsul in Africa in 212/213, but his treatise *On Modesty* has been dated by some as late as the early 220s. He began his literary career as a staunch defender of the tradition embodied in the emerging Catholic Church, but in the course of his career he became ever more assertive of Montanism, a Christian charismatic movement originating in Asia Minor. It is, however, debated whether his commitment to Montanism entailed a schismatic departure from the Church of his first faith. He disappears from our view without a trace of the course of his life after his last literary compositions. The date, place, and manner of his death are utterly unknown; we have only legend and conjecture to fill in the details.¹

1. Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (reissued with corrections and a Postscript, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 1–59, 242–59, 324–25, provides a critical analysis of the details available for a biographical reconstruction of the life of Tertullian. Pagination in this edition is identical with that of the original edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) except for the added pages (321–39) of the Postscript.

The importance of Tertullian in the development of early Christian thought, and his significance for our understanding of early Christianity, cannot be overestimated. Though he was certainly not the first Christian to write Latin, he is the first Christian Latin author from whom we have a major literary corpus. While he played a considerable role in shaping a Christian Latin vocabulary and provided formulae that became decisive in Western Christological reflection, it is as “witness” that his work will inspire a broadly based interest: witness in the first place to the kind of reflection current within the Church and, indeed, within forms of Christianity, such as the gnostic sects, that were thriving outside the emerging Catholic Church in the early third century; witness also to the inner life of the Church in its myriad aspects at this period; witness to the Church’s relationship to its contextual world of paganism; and, finally, witness to aspects of the pagan world itself—albeit a prejudicial witness, illuminating only those parts of that world that were germane to his themes, and then always with his own colored light.

The selections from Tertullian presented here have been chosen and edited to reveal the light Tertullian’s writings cast upon his world and upon himself as a Christian responding to his world. One should, perhaps, speak of his “worlds,” for he lived within a “Christian world”—the community of Christians—very self-conscious about its presence in the surrounding “pagan world.” Thus we shall find here both the presuppositions for, and the explication of, the nascent Christian theology that was developing within Tertullian’s Christian world. The *Apology*, for example, offers in abbreviated form a Christology based upon a logos theology. In this collection we shall see both in the *Apology* and elsewhere an appeal to the important distinction between general and special revelation, and we shall discover the presuppositions that give authenticity to the Scriptures and authority to the role they play in special revelation. In the writings presented here, there are repeated allusions to, even lengthy descriptions of, the demonic, and we shall see how the age-old question of blindness in the face of the obvious finds a “Christian” explanation by appeal to the insidious role of the demons as corruptors and perverters. Moreover, the waters

of baptism did not wash from Tertullian's mind the philosophy of Stoicism so deeply imbued from his pagan education; hence, we can observe the appeal to reason, so integral to Stoicism as a fundamental factor in the discussion of philosophical questions, growing ever sharper with time as we move from Tertullian's earlier to his later work. For Tertullian the divine is rational and the rational divine, and the closer he drew to Montanism the more his writings witness to the force with which Montanism's "Paraclete," that is, the Holy Spirit, drove him to express his thought in forms of argumentation like the syllogism, whose rationality seemed to demand assent to an inescapable truth, though in Tertullian's hands the argumentation was often reckless and the apparent validity specious. Hence, from our perspective, the more Tertullian boasted of reason, and the more insistently he attempted to place issues on the foundation of reason, the more irrational his argument seems to have become. In sum, the mind of Tertullian bubbles and seethes with presuppositions, imagery, and arguments often reflective in some manner of the Christian thinking of his time, though no doubt generally reshaped by his own predilections, subservient to his own purposes, and expressed in a manner as well as in terms that owe much to his pagan formation.

The selections given here also offer some vivid vignettes of Christian life in the late second and early third centuries. Few of these pictures are photographic reproductions, so to speak; most may seem impressionistic portraits or studies in perspective. One thinks, for example, of the highly idealistic portrait of Christian society in *Apology* 39. But Tertullian's argument sometimes allows us to read between the lines and to construct a picture of our own that is perhaps a little closer to reality: making some sort of compromise with their world, Christians clearly did attend the pagan shows against which Tertullian thundered; confessors who had endured tortures before the proconsul succumbed rather easily to the temptation to engage in unpleasant quarrels with their fellow confessors in prison; the legendary fearlessness of Christians in the face of persecution was matched by widespread anxiety; and it is clear from Tertullian's writing that some Christians were prepared to buy their way out of danger. In spite of the Church's apparently absolute

prohibition of both idolatry and murder, Christians found ways of serving in the military force. Thus from the searing rhetoric of Tertullian's often intransigent demands upon his fellow Christians there emerges, though sometimes by inference, the portrait of a Christian society struggling to define its identity in relation to the world and to establish the limits of compromise with the surrounding paganism.

Again, these pages are also witness to some aspects of contemporary pagan life, though the picture they afford is no doubt generally distorted by the Christian lens that Tertullian forces the reader to wear. The *Apology*, in particular, is rich in its allusiveness. Tertullian portrays a contemporary populace careless of evidence, eager for gossip, ready to believe the worst—even that their Christian neighbors are cannibals! In civic life the populace and the upper classes are alike of doubtful loyalty and greedy enough to betray an emperor for a fresh donative. They are degraded to the point that national celebrations are occasions for the most dissolute behavior. The portrait of pagan society in the *Spectacles* is no more flattering: the madness of the circus, the lewdness of the theater, the violence of stadium and amphitheater reflect the perversions of pagans. Such portraits are intended to force a contrast between Christians and pagans, and they may well be hyperbolic. But the anguished question of *Flight in Time of Persecution*, whether Christians could buy their freedom from persecution, implies an unflattering picture of those pagans who were willing to blackmail neighbors or acquaintances, and sometimes, perhaps, even individuals entirely unknown to them: they would threaten to inform against these Christians unless a sufficiently high fee was paid for their silence.

We can, however, gather hints of a more responsible element in pagan society. The gossips of the *Apology* are worthy only of our disdain, but the general charges made by pagans—that the Christians do not worship the gods and do not sacrifice on behalf of the emperor—must reflect a genuine element of concern on the part of Roman citizens for the welfare of the state, perhaps analogous to our own contemporary concern that citizens be, to some degree, integrated into a nation's culture, appreciate and adopt as their own the myths that appear to have made a nation great.

Thus a careful reading of the selections offered here should serve to bring the reader face to face with many aspects of the pagan world that provided the context for Christianity, along with the Christian response to that world. It should serve as well to illuminate the interior life and thought of the early Church of the late second and early third centuries—critical years, indeed, in the life of the Church, as it was a period of rapid expansion as well as a time when Church structures and theological understanding experienced considerable development.

In the Fathers of the Church (FOTC) series only two volumes (10 and 40) have been devoted to the work of Tertullian. Though these two volumes—from which, following editorial policy, our selections were chosen—do not by any means contain the full record of Tertullian's witness to pagan and Christian life in his world, they are a remarkably fertile source for our project and offer a fair representation of the theme as it can be found in Tertullian.

This series is intended to present selections that focus on a theme, without necessarily preserving the structure of the works from which the excerpts are taken. But in the case of Tertullian the treatises are so completely forged in the fire of rhetoric that generally one cannot disengage the themes from the structure without losing the force of argument that is so essential to the revelation of Tertullian's thought. In this volume, therefore, it has been a primary aim to preserve the fundamental structure and argument of the individual treatises. At the same time, I have abbreviated the treatises by omission in such a way that the argument is, I hope, actually facilitated: digressions have been omitted, examples and illustrative material radically reduced. In so doing I have not, of course, attempted to "improve" Tertullian; I should be pleased, however, if I have succeeded in making his writings more easily accessible to readers who wish to have some experience of early Christianity, but who have perhaps not yet acquired the intellectual context or the methodological tools to penetrate and understand literature that not only seems foreign, but is, in fact, when unadapted, sometimes quite complex and often very difficult.

The treatises of Tertullian in the FOTC volumes were translated by Rudolph Arbesmann, O.S.A., Sister Emily Joseph Daley, C.S.J., and Edwin A. Quinn, S.J. The translators chose a gen-

erally free style of translation which I have only lightly revised; normally, I have done so on the basis of the texts provided by Corpus Christianorum, series latina (CCSL) I, II (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), though occasionally I have adopted a reading from a more recent critical edition. I have sometimes, and without notice to the reader, inserted into the FOTC text a word or phrase that seemed essential to form a proper bridge between two passages that otherwise joined a little harshly when the intervening material had been omitted. Very occasionally, I have rearranged clauses and phrases in an FOTC sentence.

A brief introduction to each piece establishes a context for the reader. In the footnotes I have attempted not only to identify allusions, but briefly to suggest how Tertullian stands in the intellectual traditions both of pagan and of Christian thought, and I have pointed the reader to some basic sources in both traditions that may help to establish lines of cultural continuity reaching to the intellectual worlds that both precede and follow Tertullian. The reader will thus be in a better position to appreciate the ways in which Tertullian may be viewed as a witness to the age to which he belonged. The notes also identify certain expressions that seem to be of special importance for an appreciation of Tertullian's vision of the two worlds, pagan and Christian, in which he found himself: expressions such as "Christian" and "pagan"; "sacrament"—both a pagan and a Christian word; words for "Scripture" that both distinguish Christian literature from and identify it with pagan literature; and some words that are of inherent interest for Christian readers. Assuming a generally educated but not a specialist readership, I have offered in the notes bibliographical references—primarily but not exclusively studies written in English—that will facilitate the identification of some of the basic perennial problems as well as some issues of current interest raised by the representation of our theme in these treatises.

An appendix contains for the convenience of the reader a translation of the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan to which Tertullian appeals in the *Apology* and which constitutes a fundamental point of departure for understanding the official behavior of pagans toward Christians.

To sharpen the context of the treatises as represented here,

I have assigned a date to the composition of each of them as follows:

- 197: *To the Martyrs, Apology, Spectacles*
- 198: *The Testimony of the Soul*
- 211: *The Crown*
- 212 (or 208): *Flight in Time of Persecution*

The dating of many of Tertullian's treatises is highly problematical, however, and it has not been my intent, nor does it seem appropriate here, to establish and justify in a necessarily complex argument the dates I have assigned.²

2. For a discussion of the problems of dating the treatises, see Barnes, *Tertullian*, 30–56, and, in the Postscript, the important reconsideration of and revisions to the dates Barnes originally assigned to the treatises. For the dating of the treatises represented in this selection, see esp. pp. 325 and 328.

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