THE SUBTLETY OF TERTULLIAN

BY

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To many readers, Tertullian is not a subtle writer. R.B. Tollinton was keen to receive Clement of Alexandria into the Anglo-Saxon tradition; "in his distrust of extremes, in his love of peace, in his reverent and sober piety, he anticipates some of the best characteristics of our race." On this inaccurate approach, Tertullian would fit easier into the alternative John Bull tradition. His bluntness with Marcion was part of his cultural setting, but showed a wicked skill. Against Marcion's bodiless, docetic Christ, he argued that it would be easier to find a man like Marcion without heart and brains, than to find a man without a body (Marc.4.10.16).

Apologetic takes its targets separately so that argument against one target may not fit easily with argument against another. This is still evident in modern times where writers may exhibit great diversity in responding to objections within one culture, let alone venturing outside that culture. Tertullian successively takes many targets in his sights and acquits himself with such thoroughness that most targets are destroyed. Yet his readers, who admire his respect for contingency, have wondered how it all might fit together.

When a respect for problems and argument is shown, Tertullian's thought fits together remarkably well. Strangely, it is possible to read him for many years without noting how frequently his brief comments balance up the excessive vigour of his extended arguments. Subtlety and surprise are part of his offering to the careful reader. Ratio is his favourite word and his paradoxes are rhetorical, always capable of rational resolution. As a Stoic, he prized Heraclitus as much as did the Platonist Clement of Alexandria.

2 Cf. Diogenes Laertius, The lives of the philosophers, 6.53.
3 Some (like J.A.T. Robinson in "Honest to God") argued first for a vanished theism, others (like Küng) took their beginning from Jesus (Christ Sein) and his message. Robinson came later to christology and Küng went on to the question of God (Existiert Gott?).

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Justin recognised Heraclitus as a Christian before Christ (Iapol.46). Tertullian’s satire helped his arguments to win over waverers in his day; in modern times it tempts the lazy reader to skim over his argument. The history of ideas is no longer a respectable pursuit when a thinker’s conclusions are divorced from his arguments; yet that divorce is common in patristic study where conciliar discussions are read back into earlier writers and ecclesiastical debate takes the place of extended argument. Without extended analysis no writer is comprehensible; rational reconstruction is a protracted but necessary means to that understanding which is the scholar’s concern. Analysis carries no guarantee of accuracy, because all scholars miss things through conceptual parochialism or intellectual frailty, and because (within limits) things may be read differently, but there are no human pursuits from which human fallibility may be excluded.

1 Tertullian and the Jews

In his Adversus Judaeos, Tertullian sets out the failure of the Jews and the fulfilment of God’s triumph through the spread of the Christian faith. More than once, he links the dispersion and distress of Jews to their crucifixion of the son of God. Their scriptures are no longer theirs, but have passed to Christians who read them with understanding. Hardness of Jewish hearts explains the hardships of Jewish history. Yet in pud.8, he discusses whether the Christian might be the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, since the Christian takes precedence over the Jew. He rejects this interpretation. It is not possible so to identify the elder brother, for the Christian cannot object, as does the elder son, to the return and restoration of a wayward sibling. Indeed the Christian rejoices at the prospect of

1 Christian spirituality has commonly turned to Platonism. There is another strain which is found in the Heraclitean Stoicism of Tertullian and Irenaeus. It is joined in Origen and Augustine to Platonism, so that we have, in Daniélou’s words, “a Stoic world under a Platonic heaven.” See the answer to secularism in John Milbank (Theology and social theory, Oxford, 1990) who finds his most powerful argument in the cosmic peace of Augustine’s Stoic City of God.

5 As distinct from the awarding of prizes. On the distinction between rational and historical reconstruction see R. Rorty, The historiography of philosophy: four genres, in Philosophy in History, ed. R. Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 1984), 49.

6 “No agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant to do.” Q. Skinner, Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas, HTh 8 (1969), 28.