CHAPTER FIVE

The Holy Life

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We have seen how Tertullian constructed a theological system coloured by a latent ascetic bias, which enabled him to advocate a pattern of rigorous spiritual discipline in the Church. It is important to realise, however, that although Tertullian was undoubtedly a powerful and original thinker, many of the developments which he sought to encourage were not unknown elsewhere in the Oecumene. Recent investigation has made it clear that the late second century was a time of deepening spiritual ferment throughout the Roman world, a time moreover when Christianity first began to make itself felt as a serious rival to the pagan cults. As the new faith spread, it developed a fuller expression of tendencies latent in its own nature. In particular there was an increasing awareness among Christians of the element of voluntary renunciation connected with the perfect life of the resurrection.

In the New Testament there is a great deal of teaching about the second coming of Christ and the life of heaven, but in the canonical Scriptures these things are always balanced by careful reminders that the *parousia* has not yet come, and that for the time being Christians must be content to live in the tension of a revelation whose final goal has not yet been consummated. But as the Apostolic Age receded into history, this equilibrium was gradually lost by large sections of the Church. Most New Testament scholars believe that the *parousia* hope began to fade after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, but although there might be some truth in this view, there is much to suggest that in fact a very different development took place. All the evidence indicates that instead of abandoning the expectation of a new age, the second-century Church actually intensified this great hope. This showed itself in the tendency, well documented in the writers of this period, to apply biblical teaching about the resurrection life to present experience, in expectation of the imminence of the final consummation of all things.

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It is quite possible that many subsidiary factors like Hellenistic dualism or a revulsion against the gross sexual immorality of some pagan cults contributed to the spread of Christian asceticism, but the main impulse and the staying power behind it could only have come from within Christianity. Thus the New Testament passages which stressed the Christian's rightful participation in the sinful temporal world were played down, and the demands of the end-time given new emphasis. At the practical level, this tendency was particularly evident in matters relating to matrimony. St Luke (20.35-6) records that Jesus said that 'those who are deemed worthy to take part in... the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage...', a remark which in the context could apply only to those whose mortal life had ceased, but which was extended by the early Christians to cover the living as well. In addition, St Paul's preference for celibacy (cf. 1 Cor. 7, etc.) was widely held to be an encouragement to the Church to move in the same direction.

Apocryphal writings of the second century abound in allusions to the superiority of the unmarried state, and there are occasional references to Adam's fall as the beginning of

sexuality.[1] The great unsolved mystery in the origins of Christian asceticism is the extent to which similar practices in non-Christian religions and sects influenced its development. Philo has left us extended accounts of the Essenes of Judaea and the Therapeutae of Egypt, both of whom prefigure the monasticism of the Desert Fathers,[2] but whether or not either of these groups came into contact with Christians is unknown. It may be, as some have suggested, that the dominant strand in the primitive Syrian Church was a kind of Jewish Christianity influenced by the Qumran community, but great caution is required here. We must bear in mind that there were many variations within the ascetic movement, that encratism was often condemned in the earliest period, and that some of the most important figures like Bardaisan (Bardesanes) were apparently unaffected by the phenomenon.[3]

We have mentioned the Syrian Church specifically, because it provides us with the most detailed information about primitive asceticism'and because the history of its origins has offered the most fruitful field for scholarly speculation. In particular,

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it is impossible to ignore the massive work of the Estonian scholar Arthur Vööbus, who has catalogued the rise of Syrian asceticism in great detail. Like Bauer before him, Vööbus was forced to deduce where he could not prove, with results which are sometimes unfortunate. For example, his study examines at some length the teachings of Marcion and Valentinus (both of whom were censured by Tertullian), and concludes that they exercised a powerful influence in Syria.[4] Against this possibility, however, must be weighed the fact that both men were expelled from the Church at an early date, and their condemnation was evidently accepted in Syria with as much conviction as elsewhere.[5] There is also little indication that Syrian asceticism followed Marcion in repudiating the Old Testament or that it indulged in the philosophical fantasies of the Valentinians.

Vööbus also gives great weight to the influence of Tatian, and here he may be on firmer ground. Converted about the middle of the second century and devoted to Justin Martyr, Tatian spent the early years of his Christian life at Rome, where many Syrians had established themselves.[6] Eventually, however, he grew dissatisfied with the Church there, which seemed to lack the rigour and sense of mission which had characterised the first preachers and martyrs. In AD 172 he broke with it and returned to Syria.[7] The West condemned him as a heretic, but in Syria his name is still revered as that of a great scholar and disciple of Justin.

According to Vööbus, Tatian encouraged a form of asceticism derived from the Gospels. His first demand was that men should renounce earthly honours and possessions (Tatian, *Oratio*,

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[1] Cf., e.g., *Gospel of Thomas* 114.

[2] Eusebius actually believed that Philo was referring to Christians under another name; cf. *Hist. eccl*. ii. 17.18-19.

[3] R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 11-12.

[4] A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Vol. I, Louvain, 1958, pp. 45-61.

[5] Eusebius, op. cit., iv.30.

[6] It seems that even Bishop Anicetus (d. 172) was of Syrian extraction, and there must have been many orientals at Rome long before this. Juvenal speaks of the 'scum of the Orontes' (the river of Antioch) flowing into the Tiber, which indicates that there was a flourishing Syrian community at Rome a generation or two before this date.

[7] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 46.1 says that Tatian returned to the East in the twelfth year of Antoninus Pius, which would place it in AD 150. But this cannot be right. Epiphanius has confused Antoninus with his adopted son Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161-80).

ch. 11). Then came the restraints which must be put on bodily desires. Fasting and continence were obligatory, of course, and it seems that wine also was prohibited (cf. Jerome, *Comm, in Amos* 2.12). It may be difficult to see how Tatian could have got all this from the Gospels, but we must remember that for him the main goal of the ascetic was to imitate the life of Christ even to the smallest details. It is interesting to note that he was prepared to tamper with the Sacred Text when he thought the original departed from the strictness of the ascetic ideal. Thus in St John 15. I he altered Jesus' saying 'I am the vine' to 'I am the tree of the fruit of the earth', and similar adjustments can be found to his teaching on marriage as well.[8]

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Why did Tatian feel it was necessary to make these changes? Vööbus supposes that the main reason was that he was deeply impressed by the suffering of Jesus, and particularly by the warnings that his disciples, if they were to be true to his teaching, would have to carry their cross as well. Since the early life of Jesus was but the prelude to his death, everything told of it ought to be seen in this life. Passages which portrayed or hinted at an easy life detracted from the central message, and in Tatian's view were not part of Jesus' authentic teaching. It was in order to recover this that Tatian composed his Diatessaron, or harmony of the four Gospels, the first major attempt at a critical evaluation of the earliest Christian records.

If the ascetic life can be summed up in a few words, it was a holy war against the principalities and powers which ruled the world. Demons were very real to the ascetics, and influenced their thinking at least as much as the prospect of martyrdom. Jesus had warned men that it was more important to be on guard against those who could harm the spirit than against those who could touch the body only, and the feeling that here was a form of self-denial higher even than the cross or the arena became a standard feature of later monastic spirituality. The *martyrium perpetuum* of asceticism called for powers of endurance which those who were slain more swiftly did not require.

Tatian, however, did not restrict his use of imagery to warfare. St Paul had also spoken of the Christian life as a race whose prize was an eternal crown of glory. The spiritual athlete, like the soldier, could not afford to slacken the rigours of his training, and this apparently became a major justification for asceticism.

Prominent among the disciplines which Tatian expected his followers to practise was total abstinence from sexual intercourse. Carnal intercourse, whether for procreation or pleasure, was fornication.[9] Virginity was the highest of virtues, but lest a man or woman feel excluded from the discipline of sanctification because of past sins, Tatian was quick to point out that virginity could be practised in two separate forms. A man or woman could be a natural virgin, in which case he or she bore the name *bethula* (fem. *bethulta*), which in Syriac meant a person who had never enjoyed sexual intercourse. It was also possible, however, for a married couple to live in continence after

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conversion, in which case they were dignified with the name of *qaddishin*, holy ones.

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[8] Vööbus, op. cit., p. 41.
[9] Ibid., p. 36.

This use of *qaddishin* is intriguing, because there does not seem to be an exact parallel to it anywhere else. Why should married couples living together in continence be considered 'holy', when natural virgins were not? Perhaps the answer can be found by contrast with the pagan religions of the region. From time immemorial Syria had been the home of cruel and debauched fertility cults, whose rites included ritual intercourse with one of the god's prostitutes, who were also called *qaddishin*.[10] What better way to show how diametrically opposed to all this Christian teaching was than by applying the same word to those who practised chastity within marriage? This might also explain how asceticism penetrated the popular consciousness so effectively. To the ordinary Syrian, sexual intercourse was bound up with his cult. To abandon the latter in favour of Christianity would inevitably make the former suspect as well. As a light in the heathen darkness, the Christian idea of holiness was the exact opposite of the commonly received notion.

Syrian Christianity, it should be remembered, never went so far as to condemn marriage altogether, although no true Christian was expected to indulge himself in this way. The words of Jesus about leaving a wife for his sake, and St Paul's recommendation of celibacy were not lost on the Syrians. To this end they developed a complex and spurious doctrine of ihidayuta, which arose out of a confusion in Syriac between *Ihidaya=monogenēs* (only-begotten) and *Ihidaya=monachos* (solitary). Christ himself was the *Ihidaya* (only-begotten) and to become an *Ihidaya* (now in its other sense) was the highest form of Christian service. The believer must leave his family and dedicate himself to Christian celibacy, he must be single-minded in his resolve, and he must strive to put on the mind of Christ himself. In this doctrine was found the supreme theological and practical expression of the Syrian Fathers' ascetic teaching.

TERTULLIAN'S ASCETICISM

When we compare the findings of Vööbus with what we know of Tertullian's disciplinary injunctions, we are struck by the

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number of remarkable similarities between them, though we must not forget that there were also important differences. In our present state of knowledge it is impossible to say whether or not Tertullian was in touch with developments in Syria, or even to what extent practices well documented there in the fourth century were known as early as the second. If Vööbus is right in assigning such an important role to Tatian, then it is surprising that although he was mentioned by Irenaeus (*Adv. haer*. i.28.1), his name does not appear in Tertullian's writings and there is no indication that his teaching—if indeed it was his teaching—was known at Carthage. The fact that Tertullian readily publicised his knowledge of Montanus, who was a good deal more obscure and disreputable, makes a deliberate silence with respect to Tatian highly unlikely, if he in fact made use of his teaching. We ought to conclude, therefore, that this was probably not the case.

A serious comparison of their respective views confirms this initial judgment. Tatian's theological outlook, at least as represented by Vööbus, was primarily christocentric. Tertullian would probably not have been unsympathetic to a call to follow the *Ihidaya* (though, of course, the semantic confusion underlying this doctrine did not exist in Latin), but his own

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[10] Cf. Gen. 38.21; 1 Kgs. 22.47; 2 Kgs. 23.7; Hos, 4,14; Job 36.14.

outlook was primarily pheumatocentric, and linked to a profound concern with the problem of time, a notion scarcely discernible in Syria.

At a more superficial level, Tertullian's use of imagery was also more restricted to the concept of warfare than it apparently was in Syria. There is only one instance in which he used the parallel of the Christian athlete (*Ad mart.* 3.3-4) and there is little specifically ascetic teaching connected with it. The military imagery, however, was much more frequent. Of course, many extenuating factors may have helped to-account for this, e.g. the Romans were not particularly fond of games, Tertullian's father may have been a soldier,[11] and so on. But these cannot have been decisive. The crucial difference between a soldier and an athlete was that the former was an agent of the state, which in Roman eyes made him a much more revolutionary figure than a Christian athlete could ever be.

Moreover, when the Syrians spoke of holy warfare, they had in mind a spiritual battle against the demons which assaulted

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the soul in its human body. Tertullian did not reject this picture, but demonic powers were much less prominent in his thinking. In his writings the language of suffering and the soul's imprisonment have a decidedly worldly ring. It is significant that although his confessions of faith and his eschatological hope focus strongly on the return of Christ, they say nothing at all about the consummation of mystical union with him. For Tertullian the renewed life in the Spirit, who was at work both in individuals and in the Church, was a much more attractive proposition. Against the uncertainties and injustices of Roman rule, he could set the perfect reign of the Paraclete; to the state which claimed to embrace every man in its Oecumene, he could answer with the Church, a secret society perhaps, but one which had penetrated every corner of the pagan Empire and which would soon be revealed as the true ruler of the world (*Apol.* 1.6, *et passim*).

As for particular details, where Tatian apparently forbade the consumption of meat and wine because they were evil in *themselves*, Tertullian took a rather different line. He recognised that meat and wine were widely shunned by ascetics, but was cautious in forbidding their use. As far as he was concerned, it was not the substances which were evil, but the desire for them, a corruption which as Jesus had said, came not from outside the man but from within him. Adam after all had fallen, not because the fruit he ate was bad, but because he had succumbed to carnal lusts (*De ieiun.* 3.2). The same was true of marriage. Unlike Tatian, Tertullian did not say that carnal union was fornication in and of itself.[12] It was the human desire motivating sexual intercourse which was wrong and which had to be suppressed.

The shift of emphasis from the act to the intention behind it was of the greatest significance. Tertullian was aware, as the Syrians possibly were not, that the cause of sin went deeper than any evil inherent in matter. This also explains why Tertullian emphasised the role of the Holy Spirit in preference to the imitation of Christ, since the latter would inevitably get bogged down in externals. For him asceticism was an internal affair, and proceeded from a mind

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[11] Barnes, op. cit., pp. 13-21.
[12] Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* iii.23.8, claims that Tatian even denied salvation to Adam because he had known his wife. Tertullian, however, fully approved of marriage and procreation under the old dispensation; see, e.g., *De mono.* 7.3; *De pud.* 16.19.

transformed by the Spirit. Virtue was not a matter of fanatical rejection but of reasoned restraint, governed by a will fortified with the indwelling

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presence of the Paraclete. The imitation of Christ was not lost sight of, but it was firmly tied to an acceptance of the incarnation and a recognition that the flesh and all created things were good in the sight of God.

For all these reasons, therefore, it is easy to understand why the Holy Spirit cult of Montanus appealed to Tertullian more than the *ihidayuta* ideal of the Syrians could ever have done. But can Montanism explain his asceticism? True, they had renounced earthly possessions in the expectation that the New Jerusalem was about to descend, but this was not asceticism in the true sense. Tertullian's own warnings about the approaching end were not only more sophisticated than this, they were aimed more at self-control than at outright abandonment of the world. Undoubtedly, Tertullian was deeply impressed by the Montanist spirit of self-denial, and thought their practices should be mandatory in the Church. But what the Montanists had done in a spirit of ecstasy, with no clearly defined purpose, Tertullian put on a rational theological foundation. It was the progressive unfolding of the revelation in time, not a chance vision or prophecy, which served him as a base for constructing a reasoned apology for his asceticism.

There is little evidence to suggest that Syrian or Phrygian asceticism influenced Tertullian directly, but there is a third possibility, which is that a common source may lie behind them all.[13] This source has been labelled 'Jewish Christianity' and given the widest interpretation by the late Cardinal Daniélou.[14] Daniélou's thesis is that the earliest Christian communities were heavily influenced by converts from Judaism, both orthodox and heretical, who have left us a number of superficially Christianised documents which are only now beginning to receive the attention their importance deserves.

What is of special significance for us is that Daniélou claims not only that this Jewish Christianity was widely influential in Syria, a thesis which can be given a certain a priori plausibility from the historical, linguistic and geographical links between that country and Palestine, but also that it had a particular importance in the Latin-speaking world. Daniélou mentions a number of minor writings, of which *5 Esdras* and the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* are the best known, and finds in them evidence of tendencies which reflect this supposed influence.[15]

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[13] This requires some explanation. Daniélou, whose theories are discussed here, tried to claim a common Judaeo-Christian parentage for both Syrian and Latin Christianity. The idea that Montanism may also have developed under Judaic influence has been put forward by J. M. Ford, 'Was Montanism a Jewish-Christian Heresy?', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 17, 1966, pp. 145-58. It should be said, however, that her views are exceptionally ingenious and have commanded no support.

[14] J. G. Daniélou, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea*, Volume 1; *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, London, 1964, and Volume 3: *The Origins of Latin Christianity*, London, 1977.

[15] Ibid., Vol. 3, pp. 17-98.

Superficially, his examination of these writings is so thorough that it appears to be conclusive, with the result that we must admit the existence of an influential Latin-speaking Jewish-Christian community during the greater part of the second century—well before Tertullian.

On the other hand, Daniélou's theory is not without its difficulties, and taken together, these make his case much less convincing. First, there is his arbitrary grouping of a number of short and mutually unconnected works under a single heading, and his dating of these works to the second century. The *Passio Perpetuae*, however, can hardly be this early, since the martyrdoms which it celebrates occurred in AD 203, and Daniélou's statement that Tertullian's *Scorpiace* is dependent on the *Adversus Iudaeos* (thereby supposedly giving AD 212 as a terminus *ante quem* for the later document) has no evidence to support it.[16]

Second, there is his extremely wide definition of what constitutes Jewish Christianity, which at one point reaches out to engulf most if not all the phenomena usually classed under that equally elastic heading 'gnosticism'. The result is that even the most casual allusion to a Judaic or quasi-Judaic practice can be pressed into service in support of his argument, with little or no regard for the widespread cultural syncretism of the second century or the possibility of an independent development.

Third, there is Daniélou's portrayal of Tertullian as a fundamentally anti-Judaic writer. From beginning to end Tertullian's works are supposed to show a constant *prise de position* against Judaeo-Christianity, as Daniélou has conceived it. Whether or not this is true—and from the reception which Daniélou's hypothesis has received, it would appear that most scholars have found it greatly exaggerated, to say the least—it certainly puts a damper on any suggestion that Jewish Christianity may have influenced his asceticism. It is particularly noteworthy in this connection that Tertullian never exploited the close affinities which existed between the Jewish and Roman understandings of human origins, though he was certainly aware of "them and they were to play a significant role in later Christian apologetic.[17] It is true that he may have been marginally influenced by tendencies to which he was fundamentally opposed, but the balance of probabilities suggests that

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we must look elsewhere for a satisfactory explanation of his ascetic leanings. We believe that the most likely source for these lies not in oriental excesses, but in his own reaction to his pagan Roman past. Tertullian is often portrayed as the man who radically rejected even the more admirable elements in classical culture and religion. Much has been made, for instance, of his remark *Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?* (*De praescr. haer*. 7-9) which is supposed to reflect his uncompromising extremism in such matters. There is an element of truth in this, of course, but great care is needed to ensure that statements of this kind are properly understood. It is noticeable, for instance, that in his attacks on paganism, the examples chosen for explicit denunciation are all Greek in origin. Roman pagans came off generally very much better, and Seneca nearly acquired the status of an 'anonymous Christian' (*De anima* 20.1).

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[16] Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 38.

[17] Tertullian realised that Latin homo-humus (ground) paralleled the Hebrew 'ā*d̲ām*-'*ᵃd̲āmâh* (cf. *Apol*. 18.1; *Adv. Marc*. v. 10.9) but ignored the even more striking connection between *femina* and *femur* (thigh) with its suggestion that woman was created from a human bone. He may have failed to perceive this, however, since by his day the ancient declension (*feminis*, etc.) had been reconstructed (*femoris*, etc.), and even Augustine makes no mention of it.

At other times he recommended the constancy of the old Roman heroes as a model for Christians to follow (*Ad mart*. 4.4-9; *De mono*. 17.2-4) and the Vestal Virgins were always able to offer a challenge to the piety of Christian women (*De exhort. cast*. 13.2-4).

In his attitude to Roman religion, Tertullian took a line which must be considered ambivalent. Polytheism and extravagance he naturally abhorred, but much of the developed cult was of foreign importation. Authentic Roman religion, with its roots in the agrarian cycle of seed-time and harvest, birth and death, had a nobility which he admired and wished to see Christians bring to perfection. The secularism of Roman paganism, with its Virgilian yearning for a return to the blissful age of Saturn is reflected by Tertullian, who regarded the Pentecostal Age as the restoration of the primitive bliss of Eden (*De mono.* 4-5). Other Christians had seen this possibility in the Pauline imagery of Christ as the Second Adam, but none had gone so far as to make it the foundation of a complete eschatological social order. Pagan Rome must indeed be overthrown, but in its place would arise a new empire of the Spirit, to bring to perfection the noble ideals of the eternal city and its genius.

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HOLINESS AND CHASTITY

The essential Romanness of Tertullian's ideals and outlook stands out clearly in his teaching on sanctification, particularly in its moral aspect. This qualification is necessary, since he recognised that in the realm of the intellect, which he regarded as primary, paganism had nothing to offer the Christian. The Roman influence is more apparent at the level of actual practice. Even the orthodox believer was confronted with the power of lusts within, and the need to fortify the flesh against temptation was high on the agenda of every spiritually minded Christian.

Bodily lusts revealed themselves in two basic desires—eating and sexual pleasure. In theory both were equally reprehensible, and fasting had a place alongside continence in Tertullian's scheme of sanctification. But there is only one treatise (*De ieiunio*) devoted to fasting, and in practice it occupies a much less prominent place than continence does. This imbalance can hardly have been due to the particular vices of Roman society, since according to Juvenal the Romans were great gluttons as much or even more than they were great lovers. Furthermore, there is little about the *De ieiunio* to give it a specifically Roman flavour. Much of it is taken up with xerophagy (the eating of dry food), clearly a foreign import, and Tertullian nowhere appeals to the fasting of ancient Roman heroes the way he does to their chastity.

The lack of attention given to fasting may well have been due to the fact that, as a religious exercise, it had little meaning in the Roman world, and neither Tertullian nor his readers would have made much of it. It was also a discipline which could never be perfected, since food was necessary for life quite apart from the lusts of the appetite (cf. *De anima* 38.3).

Continence, however, was quite another matter, and here the demands of asceticism were powerfully reinforced by Roman tradition and prejudice. There was an ancient link between holiness and chastity which is fully reflected in Tertullian's writings, where the terms *castitas* and *sanctitas* are frequently coupled. Lest it be thought that this was a coincidence arising out of Tertullian's Christian beliefs, we may recall to mind something of the history of the classical tradition.

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The earliest literary evidence we have that the Romans frequently used *sanctus* and *castus* in tandem comes from Cicero, although there is a passage in Livy which suggests that the link may go back several centuries further in oral tradition. In a reference to the *ara pudicitiae plebeiae* (x.23.8) Livy said that it was attended '...*sanctius et a castioribus...*' which suggests that even at that early date the Romans believed that there was a natural link between modesty and religious observance.

Cicero certainly saw nothing unusual in coupling the two terms, as witness *De nat. deor.* 2.71: '*cultus... deorum est optimus idenique castissimus atque sanctissimus plenissimusque pietatis*'; or again, *De invent. rhet.* 2.144: '*praemia virtutis et officii sancta et casta esse oportere*'. It is true, of course, that Circero was not primarily interested in the moral aspect of these terms; he was much more concerned with ritual purity and correctness. This is clear from the way in which he applied the words indifferently to things and to people, paying no attention to their moral state. For instance, he wrote, *Pro Rab.* 11: '*qui castam contionem, sanctum campum... defendo servari oportere*' and *Pro Balbo* 9: '*quern ultimae gentes castiorem, moderatiorem, sanctiorem* [sc. *quam Pompeium*] *cogitaverunt*?'. In both these passages the meaning must surely be construed in a cultic rather than in a strictly moral sense.

After Cicero's time the application of castus and sanctus to inanimate objects seems to have died out, and the terms were used mainly to describe human beings. Thus we read in Manilius: '*si quern sanctum velis castumque probumque*' (4.571) and in Curtius: '*caste sancteque habitam esse reginam*' (iv.10.33). Pliny the Younger described Trajan as '*castus et sanctus et dis simillimus princeps*' (*Paneg.* 1.3), an interesting passage because it suggests that a man with these qualities was more godlike. *Castus* was frequently used to described a participant in a religious exercise, and of priests in general. In this connection it was often associated with *pius* rather than sanctus, although examples of the latter combination may also be found, as in Vitruvius i.7.2: '*religiose caste sanctisque moribus is locus debeat tueri*'; or *Columella* xii.18.4: '*sacrificia... quam sanctissime castissime facienda*'. Aulus Gellius even described a priest as: '...*castitate vitae sanctus*' (xv.18.2).

It may be objected that in none of these instances is there any clear indication that sexual abstinence was implicit in *castitas*,

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but this objection must give way before the clear testimony of the classical writers who used both words together in contexts where female chastity was certainly what was meant. Tibullus, for instance, pleaded with Delia:

> *At to casta, precor, maneas, sanctique pudoris*
> *adsideat custos sedula semper anus.*   (i.3.83-4)

A century and a half later we find Pliny the Younger praising the old-fashioned virtue of Fannia, wife of Helvidius: '*Doleo eam feminam maximam eripi oculis civitatis, nescio an aliquid simile visuris. Quae castitas illi, quae sanctitas, quanta gravitas, quanta constantia.*' (vii.19.4).

Furthermore this ideal of female chastity was firmly enshrined in Roman religion, as we can see from the honour paid to the Vestal Virgins. In their cult the ritual cleansing of the body was unmistakably associated with perpetual virginity. Physical virginity had special importance because unlike other forms of ritual chastity, once it had been defiled it could not be restored. The holiness of a Vestal Virgin was evident not from the correct performance of cultic observances, but from the physical fact of her virginity. Pliny the Younger makes this abundantly clear when he says of a Vestal who had betrayed her trust: *foedum... contactum quasi plane a casto puroque corpore novissima sanctitate reiecit*' (iv.11.9). We know from *De exhortatione castitatis* 13 that Tertullian certainly had Vestal Virgins in mind in his exhortations to chastity, and in the light of this it is not surprising to find that he ascribed perfect holiness to virgins (*Ad uxor*. i.8.2) and advocated virginity as the highest, though not the only, form of sanctification open to the Christian (*De exhort. cast*. 1.3-5).

Tertullian was also well acquainted with the old Roman notion that chastity in the form of continence within marriage was a special duty incumbent on priests and religious officials. Indeed, he explained these strict marriage laws and the occasional celibacy found among the pagan priesthood as a counterfeit of the divine ordinance (*Ad uxor*. i.7.5). This divine ordinance supposedly formed part of the levitical laws governing the marriage of Jewish priests, although in fact no such injunction exists (*De exhort. cast*. 7-3). There can be little doubt

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that in his equation of holiness with chastity, Tertullian was following closely in the mainstream of Roman thought from earliest times. This is all the more striking in that there is no exact parallel to the Roman idea either in the Greek or in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, despite Tertullian's sometimes desperate attempts to support his case from Scripture.

Of all the many passages which he quoted in his defence, none is more pointed than 1 John 3.3, which appears in *De monogamia* 3.7 as follows: '*Et omnis... qui seem ipsam in illo habet, castificat se, sicut et ipse castus est*.' The Greek original of this verse reads: *kai pas ho echōn tēn elpida tautēn—hautōi hagnizei heauton kathōs ekeinos hagnos estin*. The rendering of *hagnos* as *castus*, as far as we can judge, was Tertullian's own. Unfortunately there is no parallel text of the Vetus Latina extant, and the Vulgate translates *hagnos* as *purus* in this passage, although Jerome did use *castam* as a translation of *hagnēn* in 2 Corinthians 11.2, where the Church is described as a pure virgin. Interestingly enough, when Tertullian alluded to this passage he translated *hagnēn* as *sanctam* (*Adv. Marc*. v.12.6), which underlines our contention that the two words were virtually interchangeable. Tertullian's alternation between them as translations for the New Testament *hagnos* is not in itself surprising, as we shall see. What is more than questionable, however, is whether there was any genuine precedent for interpreting the meaning of *hagnos* in the restricted sense of 'chaste' which Tertullian evidently ascribed to *castus* and therefore, by virtue of association, to *sanctus* as well.

The word *hagnos* can be found in the earliest Greek literature and seems originally to have meant 'provoking a religious awe'. There is some doubt as to the exact meaning of the word in Homer, but there is at least one instance (*Od*. xi.386) where *hagnos* was applied to Persephone and cannot have had the meaning 'chaste'. Eduard Williger[18] has demonstrated

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[18] E. Williger, *Hagios—Ontersuchungen zur Terminologie des Heiligen in den hellenisch-hellenistischen Religionen*, Giessen, 1922.

that in pre-classical times *hagnos* was constantly used in the sense of 'taboo' though before long this was weakened to something corresponding to our word 'holy', especially as applied to things. Later, in Attic tragedy, we see the development of a secondary sense, 'ritually clean, pure'. It came to be virtually synonymous with *katharos*, and was frequently coupled with it in later Greek literature. It was especially frequent in the

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tragedians in the sense of 'free of blood-guilt'. Gradually the primitive meaning was lost sight of and *hagnos* came to mean simply 'clean' without any religious overtones. If it differed at all from *katharos* it is that it was used of cleansing by water whereas *katharos* was cleansing by *fire*. As for the meaning 'chaste', this is attested only rarely. Aristotle (*An. hist*. i.488 b 5) divided the animals into two categories, *aphrodisiastika* and *hagneutika*, and Williger claims that there was a popular custom of giving prostitutes the ironical name *Hagnē* (ibid., p. 72).

Hagnos did not appear again in a strictly religious context until the Septuagint, where it was used to mean 'ritually clean'. In particular the verbal form *hagnizein* was used to translate the Hebrew root *qdš* in the *Pi'el*, *Hiph'il* and *Hithpa'el*, when the meaning was 'to consecrate by purification'. The Hebrew word is infrequent, occurring only nineteen times, of which twelve are in 2 Chronicles 29-31. The Greek translators, however, were consistent in rendering it as *hagnizein*, which strongly suggests that the word was meant to convey the idea of sanctification by ritual cleansing. In the New Testament this idea is applied to the soul, as in 1 Peter 1.22: *tas psychas hymōn hēgnikotes en tēi hypakoei tes alētheias*. Similar ideas may be found in post-biblical Christian literature of the first and second centuries, where *hagnos* is used without any reference to chastity. As examples we may cite 1 Clement 1.3 which says: *en amōmō kai semnēi kai hagnēi syneidēsei* or again, the Epistle of Barnabas 8.3 which reads: *tēn aphesin tōn hamartiōn kai ton hagnismōn tēs kardias*. This is likewise the meaning in 1 John 3.3 which Tertullian quoted, giving *hagnos* as *castus*. However, even in the few passages where *hagnos* undoubtedly did mean 'chaste', there is every reason to suppose that the word denoted a purity which was primarily spiritual rather than physical. As evidence of this we may cite Polycarp, who says (*Ep*. 5.3): *tas parthenous en... hagnēi syneidēsei peripatein*. When physical chastity was meant it was spelled out in terms so obvious that it is difficult to believe that *hagnos* alone would ever have had the peculiar force of 'chaste'. A good example is 1 Clement 38.2 which reads: *ho hagnos en tēi sarki... mē alazoneuesthō ginōskōn hoti heteros estin ho epichorēgōn autōi tēn enkrateian*. Clement seems to have felt it necessary to stress *en tēi sarki*. Furthermore there is no evidence that the Greeks ever linked *hagnos* with *hagios*, despite their ancient

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etymological connection. *Hagnos* was frequently coupled, not with *hagios* but with *katharos*, a fact which was doubtless reflected in the Vulgate's preference for *purus* in 1 John 3.3. Whilst it is possible to find Greek precedents for the use of *hagnos* to mean both 'chaste' and 'holy', it cannot be claimed that these were the standard meanings of the word. We may confidently assert, therefore, that Tertullian's coupling of *castus* meaning 'chaste' and *sanctus* had no ready equivalent in Greek.

For the record we may add that what was true of Greek in this respect was even more true of Hebrew. Not once in the Old Testament do we find *qdš* being used in connection with chastity

or sexual continence within marriage. On the contrary, we find the word *qᵉdēšāh* used to denote a temple prostitute (Gen. 38.21-2; Deut. 23.17; Hos. 4-14). Sexual abstinence for a time was the rule during special periods of fasting and prayer, but even in the New Testament this was regarded as purely temporary, and there was no special virtue attached to it outside the context of a particular observance. Tertullian certainly made use of Jewish precedent to support his case, but it is clear that however much he may have insisted that chastity was merely an aid to the worship of God, he esteemed it for its own sake as well, a fact which is sufficient to set him apart from writers in the Jewish tradition. In later Judaism there were men like Aristeas (cf. *Ep*. 139) who spoke of being *hagnoi... kata sōma*, but this was a ritual concept which did not necessarily imply chastity. Likewise the Mishnah, despite its preoccupation with ritual cleanliness, did not include virginity in this (cf. iii. *Yeb*. 6.6).

It would seem to be clear from this, therefore, that the close relationship between holiness and chastity which we find in Tertullian's writings bears the stamp of a Latin, rather than a Greek or Hebrew origin. If this suggestion is correct, then it is clear that Tertullian regarded Christian moral teaching as the natural fulfilment of pagan Roman beliefs, as well as of the Old Testament law. Their gods may have been false, and their theological understanding seriously distorted, but in the matter of morals at least, the precepts of the ancient Romans were worthy of emulation by Christians (*De exhort. cast*. 1.4).

Of course it should be emphasised that the approval given to pagan customs was conditional on their conformability to

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fundamental Christian precepts, and was not merely the baptising of a heathen religion. When pagan habits conflicted with Christian teaching it was the former, not the latter, which gave way. Thus, for example, the Roman ideal of chastity was closely linked to the cult of the family, which lay at the heart of the traditional religion. Even the state was conceived in terms of an extended family, as witness the title *pater patriae* which was borne by Augustus and his successors. Devotion to the family, however, meant that great importance was attached to procreation as the means by which the line might be perpetuated and the worship of the hearth gods carried on. To the Roman mind immortality was understood in terms not dissimilar to what we would call ancestor worship, and the aim of the Roman was to have as many descendants as possible to perpetuate his memory.

Such a religion, however, could hardly be tolerated by Tertullian, since it obviously interfered with Christian ideas of virginity and life-long continence. It betrayed a lack of faith in the imminence of the *parousia* when time would be gathered up and brought to an end. For this reason he denounced the procreation of children as inconsistent with true faith, and urged married couples to remain childless (ibid.). Christian chastity was not intended to preserve the honour of the family, but to glorify the Lord of heaven and earth.

THE SEVERAL STATES OF CONTINENCE

It was a matter of universal agreement among ancient ascetics that continence was an essential aspect, even perhaps the foundation, of the truly holy life. But the pressures of practical reality obliged even the most rigorous of them, at any rate in the earlier period, to recognise that there was more than one form which abstention from sexual intercourse could

take. Both in Syria and in North Africa we can trace the development of a certain diversity in the practice of virginity from the very start. In Syria there were two forms of continence which were widely diffused in the Church. The first of these was *betuluta*, or virginity in the strict sense. Alongside this there was the practice of *qaddishuta*, which strictly speaking meant 'holiness' in Syriac, but which was used exclusively of married couples who had

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taken the vow of continence. Vööbus' remarks on this subject (op. cit., p. 72) are worth quoting:

> This word [*qaddishuta*] refers to sexual continence so that 'holy' is used as a synonym for chastity and purity. But it also must be observed that this term is distinctly separated from *betuluta*, virginity, which expression is reserved to those women and men who have kept their virginity and not married. The term 'holiness' then refers to married couples who have not preserved their virginity but practice continence. This practice can be noted clearly in *De virginitate* as well as in other ancient documents.

When we turn from this to Tertullian's teaching, the first thing which strikes us is the absence of the distinction between *virginitas* and *sanctitas* which apparently existed in Syria. Instead, Tertullian distinguished three grades of abstinence, all of which he designated as holy and two of which (at least) constituted virginity as well (*De exhort. cast*. 1.4). In his teaching the three forms of continence were distinguished. First, there was natural virginity, similar to the Syriac *betuluta*. This was the state of blessed innocence, a happy condition to be in, but not especially meritorious from God's point of view. Tertullian considered it to be the easiest option to endure, since there was no real hardship in forgoing what one had never known (ibid., 1.5). Natural virginity might even be dangerous since if it were pressed to its logical conclusion it might lead to the downgrading of the institution of marriage, an eventuality which Tertullian regarded as heresy (*De mono*. 1.1). On the other hand, however, he praised virginity in fulsome terms and stated that virgins, thanks to their total commitment to chastity, enjoyed complete fulfilled holiness (*De vir. vel*. 2.1; *Ad uxor*. i.8.2; *De exhort. cast*. 9-4).

On the surface these statements appear to contradict one another, but each must be understood in its context. The holiness of innocence was indeed a wonderful thing, but as it was a natural gift to all men at birth, no one had the right to claim any merit for it. Since its virtue rested on ignorance, it could not be applauded without a certain reserve. It must also have been a rare phenomenon. Most of the people to whom Tertullian addressed himself, and indeed he himself, could not

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claim this absolute virginity. But were they then to be excluded from the grace of sanctification? Certainly not! If only the innocent could know true holiness, then only Adam before the fall had any hope of salvation. Ignorance may have been a blessed state, but no Christian could suppose that it was superior to the life of those who had been redeemed and restored in Christ.

The second form of continence was more complex. This Tertullian described as virginity from the second birth (i.e. baptism' either by contract (in the case of married couples or by choice (in the case of the widowed). The logic of this was that when a man was baptised his previous

life was wiped out and he could begin again from scratch. The waters of baptism restored the virginity which his pre-Christian sinfulness had lost. It is not clear whether this form of continence had an exact parallel in Syria or not. Probably candidates for baptism received instruction in the demands of the ascetic life, but we do not know to what extent this was integrated into a comprehensive theology of baptism and post-baptismal sin. Given the mystical leanings of the Syriac fathers and their distaste for precision in such matters, we shall probably never be able to answer the question with any degree of assurance.[19] It seems likely, however, that *qaddishuta* was advocated for married couples without particular reference to baptism, and is therefore not directly analogous to the practice Tertullian favoured.

The third form of continence which Tertullian advocated was the voluntary renunciation of sexual intercourse by married couples some time after baptism. The lapse of time between baptism and renunciation was not specified, but it is difficult to see how the third form of continence would have differed from the second if there were not some such interval. This conversion of carnal marriage into spiritual union more nearly parallels the Syriac *qaddishuta*, where the use of the word 'holy' served to emphasise the act of consecration rather than the state of continence itself. It differed from the Syrian convention, however, in the importance which Tertullian accorded it within his threefold scheme. In Syria the latent notion of abandonment which ran through all ascetic discipline meant that the *qaddishin* soon came under suspicion, since cohabitation was held to be inconsistent with the solitary life of the *ihidaya*.[20] In Tertullian's thinking, however, monogamous con-

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tinence was the most important, if not actually the highest form of continence. As far as he was concerned, the greater the temptation, the nobler the virtue that resisted it (*De ieiun.* 4.4). He expressly forbade married couples to divorce, but urged them to live together in continence, praising God and helping each other to grow in the faith (*Ad uxor.* ii.1). Such a marriage, consecrated *spiritaliter* in *Christo*, to use Tertullian's phrase, would survive even death.

The doctrine of eternal marriage marked a new departure in Tertullian's thought, and one which landed him in considerable exegetical difficulty. Yet it is not hard to see the logic of his case. For if Christ had come to restore all things to the beginning and Adam had been married before the fall, how could it be admitted that marriage would cease to exist in the new creation (*Ad uxor.* 1.3.2; *De exhort. cast.* 5.2; *De mono.* 4.2)? That Tertullian would push his doctrine of the essential goodness of matrimony to such an extreme is clear evidence, if any more were needed, of just how far he differed from Tatian, to whom any form of marriage was undesirable. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Tertullian's teaching on eternal matrimony was developed primarily in order to combat the tendency of widows to look for another husband instead of giving themselves over to God completely.

How widespread this problem was is impossible to say, but there must have been many in the Church who had lost a partner in relatively early age. Tertullian himself may well have been one of them, although we cannot be sure about this.[21] In any case there can be no doubt that in

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[19] Murray, op. cit., pp. 14 ff.
[20] Vööbus, op. cit., pp. 78-83.
[21] It is generally thought that his wife died before the later treatises on marriage were written, which would explain why she is not mentioned in them. But this is an argument from silence, and may not be correct.

rejecting the possibility of remarriage after the death of a spouse, he was led by progressive stages to develop a theory of the divine significance of the initial marriage vow. In *Ad uxorem*, for instance, he adopted a negative attitude to the whole idea of matrimony and declared flatly that there would be no marriage in heaven (*Ad uxor*. i.1.5). Later on, however, his tone changed considerably. Gone was the confident assertion that the woman with seven husbands would have no spouse waiting for her at the resurrection (*De mono*. 9.1). A Christian must understand that the *indulgentia* by which multiple marriage had existed prior to the sending of the Spirit had been withdrawn at Pentecost, and a better system installed in its place (ibid., 11.7).

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A widower could thus take comfort in that his wife was separated from him in body but not in spirit (*De exhort. cast*. 11.1). The separation of death was only temporary; both partners would be reunited in heaven, in fulfilment of God's promise not to separate those whom he had joined together (*De mono*. 10.6). Furthermore, since Tertullian firmly believed in the resurrection of the body, it was a corporeal reunion which he envisaged (cf., ibid., 10.5). Purified of lust, the reunited couple would enjoy the same bliss as Adam and Eve had known in Eden.[22]

Having said all this, however, it remains true that Tertullian's attitude to marriage was never one of wholehearted approval. At bottom he believed that although God had undoubtedly created the institution, he had done so as a sop to the infirmity of the flesh (*Ad uxor*. ii.8.6-9 *De exhort. cast*. 12.2). This did not make it wrong in itself, especially as long as no higher form of life was recommended, but it did mean that matrimony was originally designed as an attempt to ward off worse evils rather than as a positive good. Thus St Paul was right when he said that it was better to marry than to burn, but that it was still better not to marry at all (*Ad uxor*. i.3.3; *De exhort. cast*. 3.9-10; *De mono*. 3-5). The fact that marriage was lawful did not matter; it was not expedient (*De exhort. cast*. 8. 1). The demands of the Kingdom were too pressing to allow any time to be spent in such wasteful frivolities as marriage (ibid., 8.12). It is true that much of his argument was directed against the practice of remarriage, or digamy, but its force was felt by single Christians as well. Like the widowed, they were best advised to remain in the state in which they had been called (*Ad uxor*. 1.4.3-5; ii.2.3; *De vir. vel.* 3).

HERETICS AND PSYCHICI

The attack on Tertullian's carefully constructed scheme came from two diametrically opposed directions. On the 'left' were the heretics who rejected marriage altogether; on the 'right' the *psychici* who regarded it as a purely temporal ordinance and permitted remarriage after a partner's death (*De mono*. 1.1). Unfortunately neither category is particularly well defined in his writings and we are obliged to reconstruct what we can from

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the evidence available to us. The heretics in particular are never clearly singled out, although it seems most likely that Tertullian had Marcion and his disciples in mind (cf. *Adv. Marc.* iv.11.6-9). On the other hand, he may have been thinking primarily of the dissidents whom St

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[22] But see *De mono*. 5.5, where Tertullian denied that Adam was married before the Fall. Probably what he meant was that Adam had not had sexual relations with his wife.

Paul had been obliged to reprimand (cf. 1 Cor. 7), in which case his introduction to the *De monogamia* must be construed as anachronistic. This, however, is unlikely. The third possibility is that he may have been motivated by a desire to refute charges of heresy laid against himself. This view is strengthened by the fact that he did not indulge in long tirades against the heretics, and his rejection of divorce, though it was somewhat lengthy, betrays a greater preoccupation with self-defence than with the need to refute unsound teaching on the part of others.[23] It is probable, therefore, that whoever these heretics may have been, and whatever Tertullian's motives were in denouncing them, they were not a large or influential body in the Church. Had things been otherwise we should expect to find a much more extensive refutation of their views.

In this respect the case of the *psychici* offers a remarkable contrast. Not only is far more space devoted to them, but we have a much better idea who they were—the main leaders of the Western Church, and in particular the Bishop of Rome.[24] A very large part of Tertullian's treatises on marriage is in fact taken up with a detailed examination of Scripture passages which the *psychici* used to defend their position. In his rebuttal Tertullian stretched all his considerable resources of argument and exegesis, although in the end he was unable to make a convincing case and fell back on secondary arguments which only highlighted the intrinsic weakness of his position.

The argument between Tertullian and the psychici seems to have been conducted along fairly straightforward lines, with each side producing proof-texts from Scripture which would then be refuted by the other side and counter-texts put forward. One obvious passage which supported the *psychici* was St Paul's advice that it was better to marry than to burn—*menus est nubere quam uri* (1 Cor. 7.9). As we have already mentioned, Tertullian countered this not so much by an appeal to other parts of Scripture as by an exercise in grammatical logic, from which he deduced that marriage, according to St Paul, was no more than the lesser of two evils. Elsewhere he was obliged to adopt

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more devious exegetical methods. He could not deny, for instance, that in the Genesis account of creation God had told man to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, a passage which the *psychici* were evidently fond of using against him (*De exhort. cast*. 6.1-3; *De mono*. 7.3-4). Tertullian replied by appealing to his dispensational theories, according to which the original command had been fulfilled under the old law and no longer had any relevance (*De exhort. cast*. 6.3).

More significant than these, however, was the argument in favour of second marriages which the *psychici* based on 1 Corinthians 7.39, and which Tertullian never successfully refuted, despite many attempts to do so. The original Greek reads as follows:

> *gynē dedetai eph' hoson chronon zēi ho anēr autēs. can de koimēthēi ho anēr eleuthera estin ho thelei gamēthēnai monon en Kyriōi.*

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[23] *De mono*. 9. The texts he used to defend matrimony were Matt. 5.32, 19.6; Gen. 2.23. His repudiation of divorce, it should be noted, was based on eschatological, rather than ethical or moral considerations.

[24] *De pud*. 1.6. His identity is disputed, some preferring Zephyrinus, others Callistus. Barnes, op. cit., p. 247, argues that the *episcopus episcoporum* was an unknown bishop of Carthage, but this is most improbable, since Tertullian also called him *pontifex maximus*, an obviously Roman title.

This verse appears in three separate translations in Tertullian's works:

Ad uxorem ii.2.3-4: *mulier defuncto viro libera est; cui cult nubat, tantum in Domino.*

De monogamia 11.3: *mulier vincta est in quantum temporis vivit vir eius; si autem mortuus fuerit, libera est, cui vult nubat, tantum in Domino.*

De monogamia 11.10: *mulier vincta est quamdiu vivit vit eius, si autem dormierit, libera est, cui volet nubat, tantum in Domino.*

In the first of these passages Tertullian was mainly concerned to demonstrate that Scripture forbade the marriage of a Christian with an unbeliever, and was therefore content to paraphrase the first half of the verse. He did add, however, that it was the will of the Holy Spirit that widows and the unmarried should remain as they were, although the more pressing question of mixed marriages rather pushed this advice into the background (*Ad uxor*. ii.2.4).

The full argument appeared only in the *De monogamia*. Tertullian had to grant the claim of the *psychici* that St Paul did in fact allow second marriages, but he insisted that this permis-

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sion had been given in specific and unusual circumstances, and that it had subsequently lapsed. To prove this, Tertullian advanced a wide range of considerations. In the first place, he claimed, the Corinthians whom St Paul had advised were new Christians unable to endure the solid food of sound teaching and still in need of a mother's milk (*De mono*. 11.6). For this reason certain concessions had been granted to them along lines already familiar to us, by the application of divine *indulgentia* (ibid., 11.7). Secondly, Tertullian maintained that St Paul was speaking to Christians who had married before their conversion and were now wondering whether to seek divorce. St Paul had forbidden this, according to the law, but at the same time he had laid down the principle that a man should not touch a woman. Tertullian argued from this that the overriding principle of I Corinthians 7 was that a man should remain in the state in which he had been called. Permission to remarry had been granted by the Apostle only to those who were widows at the time of their conversion. They could take a 'second' husband because becoming a Christian meant entering a new life and the previous marriage did not count. In practice, however, this permission was overruled by other considerations. The perils of the age and the imminence of the end meant that it was more important to care for the things of God than for the things of man, particularly the needs of a husband.

Exegetically Tertullian's argument that only a converted widow could remarry depended on the temporal force of the Greek *ean de koimēthēi*. In classical Greek composition can with the subjunctive denoted either a present or a future condition, and the aorist had no temporal significance. But Tertullian apparently insisted that the subjunctive referred explicitly to past time, and gave the translation 'if her husband be dead' rather than 'if her husband should die'. What is the true meaning? In all probability both are possible, though Tertullian's exclusion of the latter sense would be neither justified nor very likely in Classical prose. This does not necessarily mean that his knowledge of Greek was imperfect, however. It is quite possible

that he seriously believed that a future meaning was impossible, not on the basis of Classical grammar, but according to contemporary demotic usage, where the earlier distinctions had

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been erased and the subtleties of classical construction forgotten. It is at least possible that we have here an indication that Tertullian's use of Greek had not been influenced by the neo-Atticism which was gaining ground in the Greek-speaking world.[25] But however that may be, the argument was hardly a good one, and it need not surprise us that it failed to convince anybody.

Elsewhere, in the *De exhortatione castitatis*, Tertullian put forward an even more ingenious argument against second marriage by claiming that St Paul's advice on the subject was given out of his own head, whereas his exhortations to chastity carried divine authority. He claimed that the Apostle had advised widows to be content with their lot, but if they remarried there was nothing sinful in it (*De exhort. cast*. 4.1). St Paul had then gone on to add that God had given him no direct command in the matter, and that his advice was from one who was writing out of faith and trust in the divine mercy (1 Cor. 7.25). But for Tertullian, pressed as he was by the *psychici*, such an equivocation was not good enough. There was all the difference in the world between the commands of God and the precepts of men. Since there was no instance in Scripture where God himself allowed a second marriage, and since what God did not allow was automatically forbidden (a principle taken from Roman law), remarriage was obviously not permitted. He then reiterated his arguments from expediency, adding for good measure that even first marriages were less than safe (*De exhort. cast*. 4-3). The argument was crowned with a quotation from St Paul to the effect that a man would be happier if he remained celibate like the Apostle. Tertullian then pointed out that this last remark was more than a mere opinion, since it was followed by the Apostle's *puto autem, et ego Spiritum Dei habeo*. In direct contradiction to what we find in the *De pudicitia* he did not apply this remark to the whole passage, which would then have included the permission given to remarry, but restricted it to this one saying (ibid., 4.4-5).

The subtlety of these arguments and the shoddy exegesis which accompanied them give a clear indication of just how desperate Tertullian was in his attempts to override the obvious statements of Scripture. There is at least one example, however, where he went even further. This was in his argument drawn

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from the nature of the priesthood. According to him, the levitical priests had been forbidden to remarry, in proof of which he quoted a non-existent passage from Leviticus.[26] Of course, Tertullian then hastened to point out that under the new dispensation all the faithful were priests, which meant that they were all subject to the spurious levitical discipline!

Apparently some churchmen were prepared to compromise with Tertullian on this issue. They would agree that eternal monogamy was binding on bishops, as St Paul had decreed (1 Tim.

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[25] On the development of *koinē*, see R. Browning, *Mediaeval and Modern Greek*, London, 1969. Oddly enough, the perfect subjunctive in Latin could also have the force of a Greek aorist, and thus denote future time. This usage, however, had probably passed out of currency by Tertullian's time.

[26] Ibid., 7.1. This 'quotation' is from Lev. 21.13-4, which Tertullian read as *sacerdotes ne plus nubent*.

3.2-7), but not on the laity. To this halfway measure Tertullian replied with a withering attack. According to him, such a compromise solution was nothing but the thin edge of the wedge (*subtilissima argumentatio*); it was the duty of the bishop to set an example for everyone else (*De mono*. 12.2). There could be no question of admitting digamy by the back door as it were, by allowing it to non-office holders.

A study of Tertullian's views on marriage inevitably raises difficult questions about the validity of his exegetical methods.[27] It is only too easy to assume that his interpretation of Scripture shows an authoritarian cast of mind which failed to appreciate the flexibility of St Paul's approach. But such a judgment would be far too severe. It is not true, for instance, that he ignored St Paul's broad tolerance of marriage and suppressed those parts of the Apostle's teaching which he did not like. On the subject of second marriages, for example, he was quite willing to admit that St Paul had allowed them, and insisted only that this concession be understood in its proper context. Permission to remarry had been granted, Tertullian argued, by divine *indulgentia*. During the time of waiting which preceded the final perfecting of the saints, a Christian might take a second partner if it were the only way to prevent worse evils, but this was not part of God's normative will. But now, Tertullian claimed, this time was rapidly coming to an end. The *parousia* was at hand, and this made the interim arrangements which the apostles had made largely obsolete (cf. *De exhort. cast*. 8.3, *et passim*).

Does this eschatological interpretation of marriage bear any relation to what St Paul actually taught? The problem is complicated today by the intense interest which his views on marriage, and on women in general, have aroused in the Church.

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At the present time it is probably true to say that the teaching of 1 Corinthians 7 in particular is among the most unpopular and contested in the entire New Testament. Some have simply rejected it altogether, but this option is hardly possible for the committed Christian, for whom the Scriptures remain the final authority in matters of faith. As a result, there has been an increasing desire in recent years to interpret these passages as peculiarly relevant to their own age, but no longer applicable in quite the same way today. In support of this view it may be argued that St Paul was writing in the context of actual or impending persecution (cf. 1 Cor. 7.26) and that in other circumstances (such as our own?) he would have counselled a more positive approach to marriage.

This view is understandably attractive to those who cannot accept the permanent validity of the texts as they stand, but there can be no doubt that it involves a reinterpretation of St Paul far more drastic than anything Tertullian may have contemplated. The recent revival of interest in apocalyptic literature has shed new light on the implications of the word *anankē* ('distress', cf. ibid.) and confirmed the traditional eschatological interpretation of this text. St Paul clearly regarded marriage as a temporal institution, and therefore sought to put it in its context as a relative good, subordinate to spiritual things in the life of the Christian. In this respect Tertullian's mistake was not that he misunderstood St Paul, but that he tried to make the *eschaton* a present reality, in the belief that the end of time would then arrive.

Had Tertullian done no more than try to wind up history in the light of the apocalyptic events of his own time, it would be difficult to accuse him of a serious departure from Apostolic

[27] See G. Zimmermann, *Die hermeneutischen Prinzipien Tertullians*, Würzburg, 1937.

teaching, except in so far as the Apostles set no time-limit on their prophecies. More important were the consequences which flowed from Tertullian's presupposition. For the imminence of the *parousia* necessitated the Church's immediate and total sanctification *before* it arrived. It is here that major differences between Tertullian and St Paul begin to appear. The different conceptions of the 'flesh' and Tertullian's readiness to equate holiness with chastity need not have mattered very much if the final consummation of the Christian's vocation was relegated to eternity. It was the attempted secularisation of the *eschaton* which

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finally betrayed Tertullian's theology, and which allowed elements of pagan thinking to creep into his thought and ultimately vitiate it.

When we look at Tertullian's attitude from a distance of 1750 years and more it is easy enough to point to its inadequacies, its short-sightedness and its ultimate failure in the light of history. At the time, however, things must have seemed very different. Tertullian knew, if only subconsciously, that the Apostolic Age was gone beyond recall. The precise limits of the New Testament canon might still be disputed, but everyone agreed that new books would not be forthcoming. By his day, moreover, missionaries had made every nation conversant with the claims of Christ, so that pagan ignorance was no longer innocent as it had once been, but deliberate (*Apol*. 1.6-8). The Roman Empire had little to offer. Its bankrupt religions looked ridiculous beside Christianity, which suffered a totally unjustified persecution. The political settlement of Nerva's reign had been shattered in the civil strife of AD 193-7, and with it had gone the myth of an eternal *pax romana*. Can we wonder at the strength of Tertullian's eschatological vision?

Yet whatever excuses may be mustered in his defence, Tertullian was clearly wrong, and this was recognised by his contemporaries as much as it has been by subsequent generations. It is true that nobody wrote long treatises against him; his condemnation as a heretic was slow in coming and had little effect. But at the same time, no one very important rushed to his defence, although he seems to have had a considerable influence on the North African Church at the popular level.[28] Nor is this surprising. Much of what Tertullian had to say could be easily reduced to a few catch-phrases and widely disseminated to simple people uninterested in the subtleties of theological debate.[29] At a more advanced level, however, Tertullian's ethical teaching, with all its implications, could never be accepted by the leadership in the Church. His exegesis of Scripture, though it avoided the allegorising tendencies of the time, was too crude. His insistence that the end was nigh could be supported only by the example of the Montanists, whose enthusiasm had done great harm to the churches of Asia. His disciplinary injunctions, however admirable in themselves, were illustrated by examples of heroic chastity drawn from

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Roman history and religion, an odd source for one so opposed to paganism.

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[28] See Jerome, *De vir. Ill.* 53; *Comm. in Ep. ad Titum* 1.6; also Augustine, *De bono vid.* 4.6.
[29] On this subject, see J. Lebreton, 'Le désaccord de la foi populaire et de la théologie savante dans l'église chrétienne du troisième siècle', *Revue de l'histoire ecclésiastique* 19, 1923, pp. 481-506; ibid., 20, 1924, pp. 5-37.

Taken together these things could not fail to disturb and alienate responsible opinion in the Church. By themselves, his devotion to the Paraclete and his dispensational theories might have been overlooked, or even accepted by a large percentage of the faithful. The practical consequences of his radicalism, however, proved too much. It is here that Tertullian came into conflict with the rest of the Church and where ultimately his case was lost to the combined forces of tradition, common sense and expediency.