

CHAPTER SIX

Epilogue

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Tertullian's elaborate scheme for an ascetic discipline which would restore the Church to the primaeval sancity of Eden was a failure, but it would be a pity if this fact were allowed to obscure his very great achievement. For although there is little or no evidence that his recommendations were ever put into effect or that his sympathies with such fringe groups as the Montanists ever found an echo in subsequent writers, we must not forget that these defects in his work did not prevent later generations from reading and imitating his style and ideas. Tertullian's achievement in fact has little to do with the ultimate consequences of his holiness scheme. His real and lasting contribution to the development of Christian thought lies at a much deeper level.

Tertullian was the first major Christian writer after the New Testament period to perceive clearly and attempt to put into practice the fact that Christianity was a complete intellectual system independent of pagan philosophy. Its base lay in historically verifiable objective truth. Only Christianity could plausibly claim to be based on an authentic divine revelation accurately transcribed in a book which all could read and obey. The centrality of Scripture in his thought is impossible to overestimate. It was the law-book and charter of the Christian thinker, the infallible guide into all truth. Tertullian did not always live up to this principle, as we have seen. If he had he might have avoided certain serious misconceptions in his anthropology and in his understanding of salvation history. Nevertheless, even in these areas his achievement was sufficiently great to mark him out for all time as one of the seminal thinkers of Christendom.

Of crucial importance for his thought was the practical abolition of any effective distinction between soul and flesh in fallen man. If this had been the only thought he had ever had, it would be enough to show that his mind was substantially

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independent of pagan cultural assumptions. For what ancient theory imagined anything so astonishing as an indissoluble union of spirit and matter? As Tertullian himself was well aware, this idea was radically different from anything contemporary philosophy had to offer. It is true that he was unable to escape completely from the traces of Hellenistic dualism, and this brought him into serious difficulties when he tried to work out a doctrine of the sanctification of the flesh.

More serious than this, however, and fatal to his cause, was his failure to distinguish between temporal and eternal realities with sufficient clarity. By trying to bring the latter into the world of the former, he landed himself in a predicament from which there was no escape. Try as he might, perfection in a sinful world was an unattainable goal which led him to adopt positions which bore no relation to empirical reality. No doubt parallels to this attitude can be found in Stoicism, which also practised a kind of world-denying asceticism, but it is probably mistaken to attribute Tertullian's ideas to its influence. More likely it was a spiritual dilemma arising from within Christianity which lay behind his theological aberrations.

The late second century was a time of crisis for the Church in different ways. The Apostolic Age and those who remembered it had passed from the scene, and with them had gone the last living link with the historical revelation. From now on the Church would be dependent on spiritual leaders who could discern the mind of Christ in Scripture. As yet there was no real doctrine of episcopal authority to which all Christians would willingly submit, and no effective way of suppressing dissident movements or heretical teachers. There must have been many instances where the loudest voice commanded the greatest following, and it is probably no accident that substantial anti-heretical tracts begin to appear at this time. Those who remained faithful to the apostolic witness knew that the battle for truth would henceforth have to be fought as much within the Christian community as outside it, and their attentions were increasingly diverted in this direction.

At the same time, Christianity was at last beginning to make a serious impression of the Graeco-Roman world. Carl Andresen has shown in his masterly study of Origen's *Contra Celsum* (*Logos and Nomos*, Göttingen, 1954) how the intellectual initiative had

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passed to the Christians as early as the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-80) and how hard pressed the pagans would henceforth be to counter their arguments. The only serious alternative to Christianity was the universalist creed of the Roman Empire, but at the very moment when its power to attract men was to be most severely tested, it was entering a long period of political and economic crisis which would eventually lead to its downfall.

With the benefit of hindsight we can plot the course of history and trace the final victory of the Christian faith. But to the ordinary believer of the time things must have seemed very different. In the turmoil caused by famine and civil war, men turned to Christianity because it offered them a security which no temporal power possessed. In the blood of Jesus Christ hungry souls found forgiveness for their sins and a new assurance that their Creator cared for them. To the Christian belonged the inestimable privilege of that perfect union with the Divine which the philosophers had sought but not attained. Sanctification was the high calling and the sole pursuit of the true believer. But how could this sanctification be attained? Martyrdom was one obvious answer, but it could not be laid on to order, and the danger of recantation was always present to haunt the weaker brethren. Besides, the end was at hand. Christ might return at any moment to claim his own, and who would then be found worthy to reign with him in the Kingdom of God? Surely it would be those who had not soiled their garments, who had kept themselves separate from the sins of the world. It was this consideration more than any other which pushed Tertullian into a position where he had to embrace perfectionism as the only solution to the pressing demands of sanctification.

Later generations have come to terms in one way or another with the tension between the demands of the gospel and the realities of earthly existence, and in the process have rejected Tertullian's solution as extreme and unworkable. But despite his failure, the fundamental assumptions and methods of his theology have remained a model of scriptural interpretation and dogmatic definition which has stood the test of time and provided one of the principal bases of Christian thought. In so far as this is true, however, it is due exclusively to his fidelity

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to the Word of God. Those who in our day would remain true to this Word would do well to heed his principles and learn from his mistakes. The way to the future lies not in the rejection of the past, but in its rediscovery and re-presentation to each new generation of believers. Only in this way can the Church hope to remain true to itself and true also to the eternal gospel of her Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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