

# REASONING WITH UNBELIEVERS AND THE PLACE OF THE SCRIPTURES IN TERTULLIAN'S APOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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We are frequently told that deep faith causes intolerance. Fundamentalists persecute; those who look at religious questions dispassionately do not. Though the view might have some truth, a survey of history casts doubt on it as simplistic.

Early Christians were persecuted by broad-minded Romans who insisted that they must participate in civil religion. Since sophisticated Romans did not themselves believe in the gods, or at least did not believe in anything like we normally think of when we use that word, we assume they did not care what Christians privately thought. Further, until Celsus and Porphyry pagans never bothered to study the faith. While the masses projected crude views on Christians, as they had on the Jews, and accused them of violent crimes; the learned dismissed them as superstitious.<sup>2</sup> In his letter to Trajan, Pliny the Younger wrote.<sup>3</sup>

I do not doubt that whatever kind of crime it may be to which they have confessed, their pertinency and inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished.... I thought it more necessary, therefore, to find out what truth there was in this [their beliefs and mode of worship] by applying torture to two maidservants, who were called deaconess. But I found nothing but a depraved and extravagant superstition, and I therefore postponed my examination and had recourse to you for consultation.

Pliny, famous as an urbane Roman, would have rejected the claim that he prejudged their case, but he did not hope for Trajan to explain Christian beliefs. He wanted advice on how to suppress the movement without making Rome appear cruel. In other words: What was the politically most expedient way to make Christians conform?

Less than a century after Pliny, Christians in North Africa were suffering under

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persecution. After becoming a Christian, Tertullian took up their case.<sup>4</sup> His personality is legendary. He thrived on debate, arguing with heretics and the official church after becoming a Montanist, as well as with civil officers.

This article looks at Tertullian's debate with the officials in Carthage found in *The Apology*. We will study the method he used in his defense of Christians. We are not asking so much what specific arguments he marshaled as what kind of arguments. Or, looking at the same issue from the other side of the equation, what kind of arguments would Roman officials have found persuasive?

We attach to this inquiry a second. We intend to explore how the Scriptures figured in *The Apology's* argument.

### I. TERTULLIAN'S TASK: ARGUING WITH THOSE WHO DID NOT ACCEPT CHRISTIAN PREMISES

Tertullian wrote *The Apology* to refute charges against Christians upon which the officials based their persecution. In chapter 2 he named four, two civil and public (sacrilege and treason) and two private and supposedly part of eucharistic celebrations (incest with mothers and sisters and the killing and eating of infants).

The latter two, incest and cannibalism, were scurrilous and propagated by rumor. That did not make them less serious, since they grew from fear and hatred of the unknown. We cannot tell just how many people actually thought the rumors true but evidence suggests a good number did until the middle of the third century.

Tertullian's defense against these two charges was to deny them. He noted that the authorities could not present one person who had actually witnessed the acts. He also pointed out how the acts were totally inconsistent with Christian faith and practice—much more so than with pagan faith and practice. We will look at one case of this defense to show how Tertullian argued in this regard.

The civil charges of treason and sacrilege were really more serious, since they arose from an indisputable feature of Christian discipline, the restriction of worship to the living God. Faithful Christians could not yield in the way Rome demanded they yield, to participate in civil religious ceremonies and offer supreme allegiance to the emperor, without denying the faith. According to Roman law, Christians were guilty.

There are a number of ways Tertullian might have made his case to vindicate the beleaguered faithful. First, he could have argued, as Western democracies now do, that religion is a private matter, and the state has no right to impose its will so long as its sovereignty is not undermined. But Rome did think the church undermined its sovereignty, and nothing in *The Apology* disputes that Tertullian thought religion a legitimate concern of the state.

Second, Tertullian could have reasoned that since the state was ruled by evil people, Christians should defy their laws. But this approach would have earned nothing but contempt as well as condemnation. Further, *The Apology's* tone suggests something different from defiance. It suggest an appeal to people who can reach a sound judgment.<sup>5</sup> This is an genuine apology.

Finally, Tertullian might have argued that Christians should not be persecuted because they were really not guilty of criminal acts. This is, in fact, the tactic he took. And it was

for this reason that his pre-Christian work as a lawyer proved invaluable. He not only knew the rules of legal debate but also practiced them with considerable skill.

But Tertullian's task was still not easily accomplished. True, the church now had the advantage of an advocate skilled in legal debate, and he could marshal compelling arguments against the charges of infanticide and incest, but those of treason and sacrilege were more difficult. As noted Christians, according to Roman law, were guilty; the public character of Christian action in these two cases made the charges inescapable.<sup>6</sup>

If Tertullian's goal was to argue that Christians were not guilty of criminal acts and yet acknowledge that in the cases of treason and sacrilege they systematically broke Roman law, the only recourse left was to prove that the laws were flawed. He had somehow to show that these laws, either as written or as commonly understood, were bad laws.

We will also inquire whether Tertullian could have used the Scriptures to any real gain. Several options lay before him. First, he might have explicitly cited or alluded to them as proof for his argument. But he could have done so and accomplished his ultimate goal only if the officials would have accepted the Scriptures as authoritative, which they hardly did.

Two other possibilities lay before him. Following one of them, Tertullian might first have given an apologetic for the Scriptures and then based his further argument on their authority. In fact, he does offer in chapters 18-20 a kind of apologetic. But, as we shall later see, he does not go on to make the Scriptures the basis for his remaining argument.

Or, Tertullian might have used scriptural themes but offered reasons why they should be accepted as true other than that the Scriptures prove them to be true. In doing so, he could have mentioned that these themes were scriptural and even that Christians adopted them because of the Scriptures. At the same time, however, he would have argued that Roman officials should accept them because of other evidence. This last is the method he follows in *The Apology*.

Before we go on several issues concerning Tertullian's implicit use of the Scriptures in *The Apology* merit note. First, his method in *The Apology* differs sharply from that in his works on heresy. For example, in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* the translator, Holmes, identifies 326 citations or allusions to the Bible in *Against Praxeas*. In *The Apology*, a document a quarter longer, Thelwall identifies only five. I have found more in *The Apology*, but certainly not enough to alter the impression the numbers give.

The short explanation for the difference between his method in *The Apology* and that in the anti-heretical works is that the latter were written to those who accepted the authority of the Scriptures, though the heretics did argue that they were the only ones who properly understood the Scriptures. But since Roman officials did not accept the Scriptures, an argument from them in *The Apology* would have been fruitless.

Having reached the preliminary view that Tertullian does not base his argument on scriptural authority, we have to inquire whether we can reconcile this method with his well-known rejection of human reason. The *Prescription against Heretics* (chapter 7) contains his famous remark contrasting human philosophy and God's revealed word and his assertion that Christians have no need of any source of knowledge beyond their faith. Granted, no one so prolific and creative as Tertullian can be held to rigid consistency, we still query how the same person could say the one thing and then do the other. The contrasting methods seem to be main points in both documents.

We mention this apparent contrast at the outset to indicate an issue that needs to be taken up again at the end of our study. The issue can be put into the form of a question: In order to be thoroughly scriptural and argue for a Christian view on this or that topic, do we have to prove beforehand that the Scriptures offer the sole or even the primary means of support? Or, to pose the question of the work we are presently studying, is Tertullian thoroughly scriptural in *The Apology*?

Our preliminary observations, therefore, indicate that in *The Apology* Tertullian primarily uses the Scriptures implicitly, that is, scriptural themes appear without any note to the effect that they have their origins in the Bible. And even when he uses them more explicitly by directly citing them or, as generally happens, by paraphrasing or alluding to them, his primary point is not to use scriptural origin as the reason why pagans ought to believe that an idea is true but simply to show this as the source from which Christian faith and practice have sprung.

We now inquire into Roman legal practice which provided for a review of a law's legitimacy. Tertullian's effort to exonerate Christians required both that it be possible to review a law and also that he follow the rules of legal review. Such a procedure did exist.<sup>7</sup> Before we can make sense of his argument, then, we must get critical aspects of the procedure in mind.

Roman law had originally grown from two sources, from the customs of early Romans and the will of patricians and then in the imperial era from the rulers. Both kinds of law, those from custom and those from the powerful, could very well be nothing more than inherited, self-serving traditions. Those in power had a good deal to gain by making certain that such laws were not amenable to correction from a higher standard.

But a procedure for legal review did evolve within the Roman system. During the period of the republic, the principle of natural law was introduced into Roman jurisprudence. The concept had already pervaded the Mediterranean world, Stoicism first coining its systematic, philosophical form. Settling the question whether Roman jurists adopted the concept directly from the Stoics or merely from their cultural milieu is unnecessary to our purposes. During the time when Rome's hegemony was extended far beyond the Italian peninsula, the idea of natural law had nearly universal acceptance and was profoundly influencing Roman jurisprudence.

We should make a few remarks about natural law and its relation to jurisprudence. First, natural law governs both that part of the universe which lack self-consciousness and, especially in the case of human beings, that which possesses it. For humans, the good life is achieved when people voluntarily govern their lives according to this law. Thus, through clear thought we can discover natural law and through a positive will we can follow it. Second, Stoic ethics pivoted on the four principles of wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage. Law was particularly concerned with the issue of justice. Third, in natural law theory ethical questions precede legal questions. The validity of a law depends up the degree to which it furthers justice. Fourth, since natural law is a universal principle, the customs of people everywhere should reflect its influence. This does not mean that all national laws are considered just, but that when they are compared, the pervasive character of natural law will appear. Thus, as the power of Rome extended farther and farther, the *jus gentium* was regarded less as a mere reflection of various ethnic customs and

more as *ius naturale*.

Now we consider briefly aspects of the procedure in Roman legal review. In a fine article on Tertullian's exegesis of Scripture J. H. Waszink<sup>8</sup> offers from Cicero (*De inventione* 2.40.116) four criteria for the examination of legal documents. Waszink makes the point that the African father transferred techniques he learned in working with legal documents to his study of the Scriptures. Putting aside the issue of method in interpreting the Bible, we return to his task as an advocate before a Roman court. The citation mentioned above is illuminating. Cicero writes that controversy over a law "arises from ambiguity, from the letter and intent [*lex scripto et sentential*], from conflicting laws [*lex contrariis legibus*], from reasoning by analogy, from definition." Thus, Cicero offers four ways in which the meaning of a law can be examined to determine whether it is an appropriate law or has been understood appropriately. The four ways are: (1) discovery of original intent, (2) comparison of contradictory laws, (3) discovery of meaning by analogy, and (4) giving precise definition to the law. The principle of natural law is seen most clearly in criterion three, but obviously provides the background for the other three criteria as well.

Before we conclude this section on the practice of Roman legal review, we make several observations which seem to contradict what we have just observed. First, Roman jurisprudence did not begin with the broad theory of natural law and extrapolate from it statutes for particular situations. That is, it did not work from the general to the specific. Rather, its tendency was to review current laws in the light of the general principles and how successfully they achieved equity. It worked from the specific to the general and then back to the specific.

The application of this to Christians is obvious. Roman courts would naturally have seen the laws which required compliance with civil religion as appropriate. The mere assertion that natural law confirmed the Christian case and refuted the law's legitimacy would have struck them as odd. Only through a detailed argument could the conformity of the Christian case with the principle of natural law have been made compelling.

Second, the fine achievements of Roman law in adapting natural law did not result in its disinterested application to all cases. Those involving Roman citizens and their property garnered the most impressive displays of such legal review. Rank injustice to non-citizens and common people were never reviewed and do not appear to have caused much soul-searching among the government. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix<sup>9</sup> has pointed out that experts in Roman law have long noted a contradiction between high standard and narrow application. In particular, magistrates were given a free hand in cases of criminal law to interpret and apply statutes. Their arbitrary cruelty, *extra ordinem* procedures were sanctioned by the state. They did not act illegally.

Thus, in the time of Tertullian, Roman legal practice offered a method of judicial review by which a statute or a custom could be examined. The general principle behind this procedure was that of natural law. Accordingly, a legal statute was appropriate to the degree it reflected natural law. Roman jurists were charged not only with the task of prosecuting or defending on the basis of enacted laws, but also with examining the appropriateness of laws. However, it would not have been a foregone conclusion that the principle of natural law in the case of Christians would have led to their exoneration. In the mind of a typical Roman jurist, Christian belief was superstitious, hardly something sup-

ported by natural reason. Further, they not only found Christian belief illegal, they also considered it dangerous for the welfare of the state and thus treasonous.

## II. TERTULLIAN'S REASONING IN THE APOLOGY

We query now whether Tertullian in fact appealed to the right of legal review in *The Apology*. In chapter 4 he indicates how he intends to proceed and he explicitly mentions the legal principle he will use in arguing his case. (I have edited the translation myself to divide the paragraphs into shorter and more logical units.)

Well, if I have found what your law prohibits to be good, as one who has arrived at such a previous opinion, has it not lost its power to debar me from it, though that very thing, if it were evil, it would justly forbid me? If your law has gone wrong, it is of human origin, I think; it has not fallen from heaven. Is it wonderful that man should err in making a law, or come to his senses in rejecting it? Did not the Lacedaemonians amend the laws of Lycurgus himself, thereby inflicting such pain on their author that he shut himself up, and doomed himself to death by starvation? Are you not yourselves every day, in your efforts to illumine the darkness of antiquity, cutting and hewing with the new axes of imperial rescripts and edicts, that whole ancient and rugged forest of your laws? Has not Severus, that most resolute of rulers, but yesterday repealed the ridiculous laws which compelled people to have children before the Julian laws allow matrimony to be contracted, and that though they have the authority of age upon their side? There were laws, too, in old times, that parties against whom a decision had been given might be cut in pieces by their creditors; however, by common consent that cruelty was afterwards erased from the statutes, and the capital penalty turned into a brand of shame. By adopting the plan of confiscating a debtor's goods, it was sought rather to pour the blood in blushes over his face than to pour it out. How many laws lie hidden out of sight which still require to be reformed! For it is neither the number of their years nor the dignity of their maker that commends them, but simply that they are just; and therefore, when their injustice is recognized, they are deservedly condemned, even though they condemn.

We could hardly find a clearer statement that natural law stands above civil enactments than that in the first sentence above. Civil laws which prohibit good as defined by natural law have no legitimate force; natural laws against an evil, though lacking statutory support, are still binding.

This principle forces an obvious insight into civil laws. They are no more than enactments of human beings and must be treated as such. When human error has been discovered, the law must be rescinded.

The last paragraph is crucial to Tertullian's argument. He does not bitterly accuse his readers of evil or stubbornness. He gently explains that they may have followed bad laws out of ignorance. But the laws should now be reviewed. Only one criterion can justify keeping a law: the justice of the law.

We turn to Tertullian's explicit discussion of the Scriptures in chapters 18-20. The standard edition of *The Apology* has 50 chapters, the section on the Scriptures appearing about one third of the way in the work. If Tertullian based his argument on the authority of the Scriptures, he would have developed the first third of the book as an apology for them and in the last two thirds argued from them. But he does not, as we have noted. We can show how this is the case by comparing the arguments of chapters 17 and 18. Chapter 17 describes how humans have a kind of natural knowledge of God.

The eye cannot see Him, though He is (spiritually) visible. He is incomprehensible, though in grace He is manifested. He is beyond our utmost thought, though our human faculties conceive Him. He is therefore equally real and great. But that which, in the ordinary sense, can be seen and handled and conceived, is inferior to the eyes by which it is taken in, and the hands by which it is tainted, and the faculties by which it is discovered; but that which is infinite is known only to itself. This it is which gives some notion of God, while yet beyond all our conceptions—our very incapacity of fully grasping Him affords us the idea of what He really is. He is presented to our minds in His transcendent greatness, as at once known and unknown. And this is the crowning guilt of men, that they will not recognize One, of whom they cannot possibly be ignorant. Would you have proof from the works of His hands, so numerous and so great, which both contain you and sustain you, which minister at once to your enjoyment and strike you with awe; or would you rather have it from the testimony of the soul itself? Though under the oppressive bondage of the body, though led astray by depraving customs, though enervated by lusts and passions, though in slavery to false gods; yet, whenever the soul comes to itself, as out of a surfeit, or a sleep, or a sickness, and attains something of its natural soundness, it speaks of God; using no other word, because this is the peculiar name of the true God. "God is great and good," "which may God give," are the words on every lip. It bears witness, too, that God is judge, exclaiming, "God sees," and, "I commend myself to God," and, "God will repay me." O noble testimony of the soul by nature Christian! Then, too, in using such words as these, it looks not to the Capitol, but to the heavens. It knows that there is the throne of the living God, as from Him and from thence itself came down.

This passage mirrors themes of Romans 1:18ff. and Acts 17:24ff., though differences also appear. The ideas about the testimony of material nature to God have been transmuted from the Scriptures, if we must find sources, through such predecessors as the African Munucius Felix (*The Octavius*, chapters 17-18). Tertullian's reflections upon his predecessor's work may have shaped how he read the Scriptures.

Tertullian values the testimony of the soul. While he argues that reflection on the material universe leads to recognition of the living and transcendent God, he also says that the inner soul of the human involuntarily testifies to truth about God. Then he makes the astounding observation that the soul is naturally Christian (*animae naturaliter Christianae*). Bray<sup>10</sup> claims that Tertullian hardly ignores the fallen condition of the human, since he had just catalogued shackles that inhibit a clear knowledge of God. This

claim is true, yet the whole point of the words which follow the recognition of this condition is that the soul persistently reflects an apprehension of God.

Now we turn to chapter 18 which specifically mentions the Scriptures.

But, that we might attain an ampler and more authoritative knowledge at once of Himself, and of His counsels and will, God has added a written revelation for the behoof of every one whose heart is set on seeking Him, that seeking he may find, and finding believe, and believing obey. For from the first He sent messengers into the world—men whose stainless righteousness made them worthy to know the Most High, and to reveal Him—men abundantly endowed with the Holy Spirit, that they might proclaim that there is one God only who made all things, who formed man from the dust of the ground (for He is the true Prometheus) who gave order to the world by arranging the seasons and their course. These have further set before us the proofs He has given of His majesty in His judgments by floods and fires, the rules appoint by Him for securing His favour, as well as the retribution in store of the ignoring, forsaking and keeping them, as being about the end of all to adjudge His worshippers to everlasting life, and the wicked to the doom of fire at once without ending and without break, raising up again all the dead from the beginning, reforming and renewing them with the object of awarding either recompense. Once these things were with us, too, the theme of ridicule. We are of your stock and nature: men are made, not born, Christians. The preachers of whom we have spoken are called prophets, from the office which belongs to them of predicting the future. Their words, as well as the miracles which they performed, that men might have faith in their divine authority, we have still in the literary treasures they have left, and which are open to all.

Tertullian does not mince his words. Knowledge given through revelation is superior to that given through any other form, not just parallel to it. Echoes of the Scriptures are numerous, as are more muted echoes of the rule of faith. Likening his former attitude to that of his auditors, as a mocker of Christian ideas, Tertullian reinforces the view that calm reflection can result in great change.

The balance of chapters 18-20 gives an apology for the Scriptures in three strokes. Its divine authority is shown by: (1) the remarkable translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (chapter 18); (2) the antiquity of the Hebrew Scriptures which predate the Greeks, Egyptians, or other ancients renown for their wisdom (chapter 19); and (3) the amazing fulfillment of scriptural prophecies (chapter 20).

Thus, chapters 18-20 offer an apology for the Hebrew Scriptures. But once Tertullian finished these comments, he returned to his previous argument and employed it throughout the balance of the book. Noting that Christianity was born in the time of Tiberius, and thus is not so ancient as the religion of Israel, he connects the two eras by observing that the prophets of Israel predicted the coming of Jesus. But we hear no citation of the New Testament Scriptures, only echoes them.

Tertullian's next move (in chapter 21) is stunning. He compares teaching about Christ with themes found in pagan thought.



Accordingly, He appeared among us, whose coming to renovate and illuminate man's nature was pre-announced by God—I mean Christ, that Son of God. And so the supreme Head and Master of this grace and discipline, the Enlightener and Trainer of the human race, God's own Son, was announced among us, born—but not so born as to make Him ashamed of the name of Son or of His paternal origin. It was not His lot to have as His father, by incest with a sister, or by violation of a daughter or another's wife, a god in the shape of serpent, or ox, or bird, or lover, for his vile ends transmuting himself into the gold of Danus. They are your divinities upon whom these base deeds of Jupiter were done. But the Son of God has no mother in any sense which involves impurity; she whom men suppose to be His mother in the ordinary way, had never entered into the marriage bond. But, first, I shall discuss His essential nature, and so the nature of His birth will be understood. We have already asserted that God made the world, and all which contains, by His Word, and Reason, and Power. It is abundantly plain that your philosophers, too, regard the Logos—that is, the Word and Reason—as the Creator of the universe. For Zeno lays it down that he is the creator, having made all things according to a determinate plan; that his name is Father and God, and the soul of Jupiter, and the necessity of all things. Cleanthes ascribes all this to the spirit, which he maintains pervades the universe. And we, in like manner, hold that the Word, and Reason, and Power, by which we have said God made all, have spirit as their proper essential substratum, in which the Word has inbeing to give forth utterances, and reason abides to dispose and arrange, and power is over all to execute. We have been taught that He proceeds forth from God, and in that procession He is generated; so that He is the Son of God, and is called God from unity of substance with God.

Tertullian boldly compares Christian and pagan ideas. Pagan ideas, he implies, can be drawn from two kinds of sources, myths and philosophy. The two do not have equal value. Though myths may resemble Christian teaching in that both refer to a divine son, they differ in that Christ's birth is unlike anything their vile stories report. Some philosophy, on the other hand, more closely resembles Christian teaching, since both speak of the Creator as God's Word, Reason, and Power. Tertullian hardly suggests that philosophers who spoke in this fashion had a clear idea of the truth, but he believes they were approaching truth, and this is far from the case with the myths.

Christians, according to Tertullian, read the Scriptures for two reasons. First, as implied in what we have noted, they provide clear knowledge of the truth; second, they give clear directives for living. For the second, I include the one instance, and the only instance I have discovered, in which Tertullian explicitly cites from the Bible in *The Apology* and indicates he is doing so (chapter 31).

But we merely, you say, flatter the emperor, and feign these prayers of ours to escape persecution. Thank you for your mistake, for you give us the opportunity of proving our allegations. Do you, then, who think we care nothing for the welfare of Caesar look into God's revelations, examine our sacred books, which we do not keep in hiding, and which many accidents put into the hands of those

who are not of us. Learn from them that a large benevolence is enjoined upon us, even so far as to supplicate God for our enemies, and to beseech blessings on our persecutors [Matthew 5:44]. Who, then, are greater enemies and persecutors of Christians, than the very parties with treason against whom we are charged? Nay, even in terms, and most clearly, the Scripture say, "Pray for kings, and rules, and powers, that all may be peace with you" [1 Timothy 2:21]. For when there is disturbance in the empire, if the commotion is felt by its other members, surely we too, though we are not to be given to disorder, are to be found in some place or other which the calamity affects.

The Scriptures explain Christian behavior. Christians do the The Apology (hence the quotation) what the Scriptures instruct them to do. Such use of the Scriptures has a restricted purpose. Tertullian is not asking that his readers agree with them; he merely asks that they note how seriously Christians read them. For Christians the Scriptures provide the rule of life.

Chapter 39 offers a fascinating description of Christian worship. In agreement with what we have seen before, he here describes how the Scriptures shape Christian belief and conduct. The new element in this passage is that through this window into early Christian worship we envision the actual process.

I shall at once go on, then, to exhibit the peculiarities of the Christian society, that, as I have refuted the evil charged against it, I may point out its positive good. We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering up prayer to God as with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. This violence God delights in. We pray, too, for the emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation. We assemble to read our sacred writings, if any peculiarity of the time makes either forewarnings or reminiscence needful. However it be in that respect, with the sacred words we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we make our confidence more steadfast; and no less by inculcations of God's precepts we confirm good habits. In the same place also exhortations are made, rebukes and sacred censures are administered. For with a great gravity is the work of judging carried on among us, as befits those who feel assured that they are in the sight of God; and you have the most notable example of judgment to come when any one has sinned so grievously as to require his severance from us in prayer, in the congregation and in all sacred intercourse.

In chapter 9, Tertullian takes up the charges against Christians of criminal acts. He begins by noting that pagans are guilty of infanticide. Citizens of his own country had formerly sacrificed infants to Saturn, and some continued the practice in secret. Tiberius, in an unsuccessful effort to eradicate the evil, had actually ordered the priests involved to be crucified. Why, Tertullian ironically asks, should Roman officials want Christians to worship the very deity unable to save his own children?

He next takes up the issue of cultic murder beyond that of children and mentions

cases where it was still practiced. He notes one instance in which the pagans, because they sacrificed a beast-fighter so his was not innocent blood, did not think it a crime. He queries: "Is it less, because of that, the blood of a man?"

Then, returning to the issue of infanticide, he asks whether sacrifice is the only way such a vile act could be carried out. Pagans have found many ways to dispose of unwanted children and suffer no punishment: drowning, exposure, and abortion. The last, he reasons, is impossible for Christians.

In our case, murder being once for all forbidden, we may not destroy even the foetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance. To hinder a birth is merely a speedier man-killing; nor does it matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to birth. That is a man which is going to be one [homo est et qui est futurus]; you have the fruit already in its seed.

Tertullian next considers blood-eating. Human blood had been consumed for several reasons: to seal a covenant between friends, to initiate one into the cult of the goddess Bellona, to cure epilepsy by consuming the blood of gladiators. Then, having mentioned the games, Tertullian goes on to speak of those who devour bears which have in their viscera undigested human flesh. He asks: Is this really less than cannibalism? We note in this passage how he alludes to the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:29).

Blush for your vile ways before the Christians, who have not even the blood of animals at their meals of simple and natural food; who abstain from things strangled and that die a natural death, or no other reason than that they may not contract pollution, so much as from blood secreted in the viscera. To clench the matter with a single example, you tempt Christians with sausages of blood, just because you are perfectly aware that the thing by which you thus try to get them to transgress they hold unlawful.

After naming more cases of murder or cannibalism, justified by the pagans, Tertullian turns to the issue of incest. We hear again the same litany of contradictions between pagan rage at what Christians supposedly do and what is known of them. The practice of incest was enjoined by Jupiter, reported of Persians, and glorified by Greeks in the story of Oedipus. Exposure of infants makes a pagan vulnerable to unintentional incest. Here is a infant left to the elements, picked up by a sympathetic stranger, and raised to maturity. Years later, not knowing the biological origins, the pagan giving way to uninhibited lust may have intercourse with this relative.

In contrast, Christian sexual ethics provide absolute protection from incest. The discipline of the church is clearly visible.

A persevering and steadfast chastity has protected us from anything like this: keeping as we do from adulteries and all post-marital unfaithfulness, we are not exposed to incestuous mishaps. Some of us, making matters still more secure, got away from them entirely the power of sensual sin, by a virgin continence, still boys in this respect when they are old.

### III. THE SCRIPTURES IN THE APOLOGY'S ARGUMENT

We return to the issue raised earlier, whether Tertullian contradicts himself when he says one thing in *The Prescription Against Heretics* and does another in *The Apology*. Actually, the contradiction might be more profound than at first recognized. In this case Tertullian would have explicitly argued for one method of discovering truth and excluded another in *The Prescription* and then would have systematically used the excluded method in *The Apology*.

Within *The Apology* Tertullian follows the techniques of Roman legal debate. He depends upon the principles of natural law and its corollary, general revelation, to an astonishing degree. He applies the principles in various ways to show how they confirm Christian thought. His argument from the beginning to the end proceeds on the assumption that this mode of argumentation is valid and will succeed. He nowhere breaks from it. He nowhere leaves us with the impression that he is merely playing the pagan's game but does not believe their rules are valid. Observations made now and then about the Scriptures introduce no new pattern of argument.

All of this leads us to an important conclusion. Tertullian really believes natural law and the Scriptures converge in some ways. We do not ignore that he acknowledges the serious problems with natural reason, as was discussed in the passage from chapter 17. But he suggests that in all people the soul innately knows something better about God than pagan thought reflects.

Does all of this make the Scriptures irrelevant? Or, to put the question a different way: Are there two equally reliable paths to the truth about God and his will, Scripture and natural reason and law? We observe several points in this regard, both drawn from *The Apology*.

What the pagan world offers is a mass of confusion within which there are only shreds of truth. These shreds are so mixed with error that pagans never follow them up. Therefore, he does not appeal to natural law so that pagans will follow it by itself but that they will note how their better thoughts parallel themes in Christian teaching.

The Scriptures, on the other hand, offer clear direction, and they are the source of Christian faith and practice. Nowhere in *The Apology* does Tertullian suggest that Christians have come to the truth about God (that he is spiritual and one) or do correct things (such as not kill or be chaste) because natural reason or natural law has enlightened them. The Scriptures awaken within the latent but darkened shreds of truth that natural reason and law reflect. They give clear instruction on the truth.

If this is all true, then, a second issue must be considered, the relation of the Scriptures to the "rule of faith." As is well known, Tertullian and Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3:4:1-2; 4:26:2-3) first articulated the concept of the rule, the former stating it in boldest form (*The Prescription Against Heretics* chapter 19, see chapters 12ff.). A few comments must suffice.

First, Tertullian did not see a necessary tension between the rule and the Scriptures as Protestants might. For him the two agreed perfectly, and any fear that an unresolvable conflict might arise is anachronistic.

Second, Tertullian appealed to the rule's authority in debates with gnostics. He did so for a simple reason: Both Catholics and gnostics believed the Scriptures supported their teachings; and the gnostics, it should be noted, had developed sophisticated interpreta-

tions and hermeneutics. Tertullian knew how well the gnostics went about their business and how skillfully they confused simple Catholics through a display of scriptural learning. So he short-circuited their claims by saying that according to the rule, which every Catholic knew, their case fell apart. It was not necessary in his opinion to refute them point by point from the Bible, showing how the Catholic view was correct and the gnostic wrong. Tedious debates (as his longest work, *Against Marcion*) had their place, and he hardly feared that Catholics could not prove their case by the Scriptures. But gnostic views contradicted Christian faith at its core, as witnessed to in the rule, and their learning was merely a display which confused the issues.

A more serious question may be embedded in our query about the relation of the rule to the Scriptures in Tertullian's thought: Have church traditions invaded and reshaped Christian teaching, so that they fundamentally contradict the Scriptures? Frequently, we hear the complaint that second, third, and fourth century teachers of the church converted the Hebrew religion of Jesus and the apostles into the Greek one of historic orthodoxy.

The complaint, however, is often driven by an agenda, so that the scholars object when the early teachers of the church failed to endorse their favorites views which they imaginatively find in the heroes the Bible. Adolf Harnack<sup>11</sup> is sure the ontological language of orthodoxy betrayed Jesus' simple gospel and made Christianity impossible for modern people. Anders Nygren<sup>12</sup> is sure Tertullian is little more than a Christian moralist and did not understand Paul and grace, as Luther did. G. E. Wright<sup>13</sup> is sure the language of the creeds obscured the Old Testament's vision of the God who acts. The list could go on. I only make a few comments relevant to our present task.

This complaint is wrong-headed and simplistic. There is no doubt that there is a clear attempt to translate the Gospel into language that conforms to the cultural environment the church lived in. But that is quite another thing from betrayal of its basic values. We can in fact argue the reverse: Unless the Church can translate its values into the language of its cultural environment, it has not really grasped the heart of these values. The pertinent question is: Does the church speak the language of the people and replace the values embedded in that language with Christian values? That is precisely what Tertullian attempted to achieve in the *Apology*.

Using hellenistic categories and hellenistic terms as justice, treason, and sacrilege, Tertullian redefined what those concepts ought to mean, infusing them with Christian values. He did not argue that a nation can survive without justice; he did argue that the pure Gospel provides the best picture of justice. He did not argue that a nation can survive without divine worship; he did argue that Christians alone really know the true God and how to worship him. He did not argue that a civilization can survive without obedience; he did argue that Christian ethics offered the highest form of serving the state. Whether the new definitions he gave to the terms were correct, whether his arguments were convincing, and whether he betrayed the Gospel at this or that point are not our major concern. In *The Apology* Tertullian redefined in legally approved terms the values of Roman civilization according to his Christian understanding of justice, citizenship, and religion.<sup>14</sup>

In a little more than a century after Tertullian wrote, the Roman Empire officially became Christian. Measuring *The Apology's* role in converting the empire offers special difficulties, since the intellectual transformation of a culture is hidden from public view.

We can see events which suggest a transformation is happening; we cannot see the process itself or describe all the factors in it. It might be easy to assign more success to Tertullian than he merits; certainly others made great contributions. However, the nature of his treatise suggests that his work was more important than some wish to acknowledge.<sup>15</sup>

The collapse of paganism's dominance in the Mediterranean world signifies more than purely political decisions or military acts. Paganism had lost its credibility; it no longer explained the world. The temples were empty and their priests went unpaid, because the values these institutions required for maintenance were no longer embraced. The intellectual universe had shifted in a Christian direction.

Several factors are involved in the intellectual foundation of a civilization: (1) What questions does it spend its intellectual energy trying to solve? (2) What criteria does it use to judge truth from error? (3) What terms does it use to embody its values? (4) What definitions do these crucial terms possess? In *The Apology* Tertullian did not set the agenda for the first three questions. The Romans decided that service of the state through divine worship was crucial for the survival of the state, that judicial review could occur under an appeal to natural law, and that treason and sacrilege were criminal acts. It is in the last category, the definition of these terms, that Tertullian made his contribution.

Though many bemoan Constantine's act as the tragic time when the church invited the world into its soul, it was inevitable. Certainly it was to his political advantage. Certainly the spiritual fervor of the church contributed; "the blood of Christians [was] seed" (chapter 50). But the intellectual groundwork had also been laid. The case for paganism had been eroded. Rage against Christians for the crimes of treason and sacrilege could not be sustained, because huge numbers of people now understood these concepts in more Christian terms. The church had succeeded in transvaluing them.

To take terms infused with pagan values and redefine them so they bear Christian values, as Tertullian attempted and in some degree accomplished in *The Apology*, is a supreme act of the loyal opposition.<sup>16</sup>

## NOTES

1. The English translation of *The Apology* we use is S. Thelwall's in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, edited by A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885). The Latin text is Oehler's in *Q. Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Apologeticus*, annotated and introduced by John E. G. Mayor and translated by Alex. Souter (Cambridge: University Press, 1917).

2. See L. F. Janssen, "Superstitio' and the Persecution of the Christians" in *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 33 (1979): 134-39.

3. The tenth letter of Pliny the Younger to Trajan, letter number 96, cited in *Documents of the Christian Church*, edited by Henry Bettenson (2nd edition; London: Oxford, 1963), pp. 4-5.

4. A fine discussion of the historical environment of *The Apology* is given by Philip Carrington in *The Early Church*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: University Press, 1957), pp. 394ff.

5. Gregory T. Armstrong, "Church and State Relations: The Changes Wrought by Constantine," *Journal of Bible and Religion*, vol. 32 (1964): 1-2.

6. R. D. Sider, "On Symmetrical Composition in Tertullian," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 24 (1973): 412.

7. An excellent summary of this entire question can be found in *Outlines of Roman Law: Comprising its Historical Growth and General Principles* by William C. Morey (New York, NY: Putnam, 1889), pp. 107ff.

8. "Tertullian's Principles and Methods of Exegesis" in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition*, edited by W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979), pp. 22-23. Our study does not examine Tertullian's exegesis because The Apology presupposes careful exegetical work rather than displays it. Consult for such a study the fine work by T. P. O'Malley, S. J., *Tertullian and the Bible* (Latinitas christianorum primaeva; Nijmegen-Utrecht: Dekker & van de Vogt, 1967).

9. "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?" *Past and Present* 26 (1952): pp. 11ff.

10. Gerald Lewis Bray, *Holiness and The Will of God* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1979), pp. 112-113.

11. *What Is Christianity?*, translated by Thomas Bailey Saunders (Gloucester, MA: Harper, 1978 [first Harper Torchbook edition in 19571]), pp. 152ff.

12. *Agape and Eros*, translated by Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster), pp. 335ff.

13. For example, see his comments in *God Who Acts* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 8; London: SCM, 1952), pp. 107-111.

14. The thesis that Tertullian redefined intellectual categories to invest them with Christian values has been dealt with at length by Jean-Claude Fredouille in *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1972). Relevant to our study especially is chapter 5, part 1, pp. 235ff.

15. For example, in an extended note W. H. C. Frend in *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984), p. 358, disputes the thesis of Barnes and Fredouille that Tertullian was "a seminal thinker who was also a bridge between the pagan and the Christian worlds."

16. My thesis is diametrically opposed to that of H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1951). Niebuhr identifies Tertullian as an example, if not the greatest one in the post-biblical era, of "Christ against culture" (pp. 51ff.). He goes on to identify Augustine as a great example of Christ transforming culture (pp. 206ff.). In this paper I have argued that The Apology attempts precisely what Niebuhr has in mind with Christ transforming culture. Further Augustine, working two centuries after Tertullian, was clearly in the latter's debt. Paganism in Augustine's time, was not only on the run; it was crippled. See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1967), pp. 299ff.