

## St. Tertullian on Philosophy

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St. Tertullian was an African Christian church “father” who lived approximately from 160 to 220. He converted to Christianity about 193. He is famous for his opposition to reliance on human reasoning for determination of truth about sacred matters. In fact, he sometimes appears to claim that the more outrageous a belief appears to reason to be, the more likely that belief is the correct one to hold. In particular, since it seems to him to be rationally impossible that Jesus could be both fully divine and fully human, that very impossibility counts as a powerful reason for thinking Jesus was indeed both God and man.<sup>1</sup>

Note that if this description of his views is correct, Tertullian is *not* merely saying that human reason has limitations which need to be recognized. He is saying that we ought not to rely on reason *at all*—in fact we ought to purposefully go *against* what reason suggests. Now, Tertullian apparently thought reason was not to be trusted because humans have become thoroughly corrupted by *sin*. Given that assumption, perhaps he would not have objected to using human reason to decide what foods are nourishing, whether to come in out of the rain, and various other practical things which seem more or less religiously neutral. That is, perhaps his distrust of reason was limited only to religiously significant issues. However, even if we charitably limit his position in this way, there remain very serious problems for interpreting his view. Before going on, read the following short excerpt from his writing.<sup>2</sup>

... [T]he Lord ...”chose the foolish things of the world”<sup>3</sup> to confound even philosophy itself. For it [i.e., philosophy] is ... the material of the world's wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and the dispensation of God. Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy. ... The same subject matter is discussed over and over again by the heretics and the philosophers; the same arguments are involved. [The heretics and philosophers constantly ask:] Whence comes evil? Why is it permitted? What is the origin of man? ... Unhappy Aristotle, who invented ... dialectics, the art of building up and pulling down [by using argumentation]; an art so evasive, ... so far-fetched in its conjectures, so ... productive of contentions—embarrassing even to itself, retracting everything, and really treating of nothing! Whence spring those ... “unprofitable

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<sup>1</sup>See his *De Carne Christi*.

<sup>2</sup>The excerpt is drawn from a translation of Tertullian's “The Prescription against Heretics”, found in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Anti-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publ. Co., 1885), vol. 3, p. 246.

<sup>3</sup>The reference is perhaps to St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Chap. 1, verse 20.

questions”, and “words which spread like a cancer”? From all these, when the apostle<sup>4</sup> would restrain us, he expressly names *philosophy* as that which he would have us be on our guard against. Writing to the Colossians, he says, “See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost”.<sup>5</sup> He had been at Athens<sup>6</sup> and had in his interviews [in Athens] become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth [i.e., philosophy], whilst it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects.<sup>7</sup> What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?<sup>8</sup> What concord is there between the Academy<sup>9</sup> and the Church? ... Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon”<sup>10</sup> who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart”. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!<sup>11</sup> We want no

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<sup>4</sup>The reference is to St. Paul.

<sup>5</sup>Paul's letter to the church at Colossus, Chap. 2, verse 8.

<sup>6</sup>Athens, Greece, was one of the chief centers for academic study in the Ancient world.

<sup>7</sup>Presumably the reference is to the fact that there were differing and opposed camps within the world of philosophical thought.

<sup>8</sup>Jerusalem was the capital of Israel, and religious center for the Jews. Athens was the reputed intellectual center of Greek “pagan” philosophy.

<sup>9</sup>The Academy was one of the most famous research institutions and schools of the Ancient world. It was founded by the philosopher, Plato, roughly 400 years before Jesus was born, and had as its most famous “student” the philosopher, Aristotle.

<sup>10</sup>Solomon was an ancient Jewish monarch during whose reign the Jewish nation flourished. He was noted for his wisdom, and built a grand temple for worship of the Jewish God. The reference here is presumably to a porch of the temple, suggesting that true wisdom comes from worship of God. In other places, Tertullian makes it clear that he thinks Christian teachings come directly from Jesus, via Jesus’ immediate followers, the apostles, and that they are perfectly clear teachings that do not need any rational interrogating.

<sup>11</sup>Stoicism and Platonism were names for philosophical schools of thought at the time. Some of Tertullian's contemporaries had engaged in theological theory-building, employing ideas from Stoicism or Platonism, and there was controversy about whether those attempts to combine Christianity with those philosophical approaches was sufficiently true to the original Christian viewpoint. It is reasonable to say that some of the attempts to merge Stoic or Platonic ideas with Christianity did considerable violence to the original Christian positions. Presumably, those attempts had much to do with motivating Tertullian to write as he did here. Perhaps he thought any attempt to use philosophy to enhance Christian

curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus. ... With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary<sup>12</sup> faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.<sup>13</sup>

One should ask whether Tertullian in this passage gives arguments, uses rational organization, and in other ways utilizes rational techniques to push for his position. If so, isn't his own practice inconsistent with his message? Isn't he using the very same techniques used by "unhappy" Aristotle? It certainly can easily appear that Tertullian is using the very same reasoning abilities to defend his point of view that he appears to be attacking.

In fairness to Tertullian, it should be noted that he did not consistently write in such negative terms about the usefulness of philosophy or human reasoning. Rather, it is only when reasoning leads people to reject the version of Christianity which seems true to Tertullian that Tertullian talks this way. That is, perhaps the true position Tertullian holds is not as inconsistent as one might think. *Probably what he really thinks is simply that one ought to believe Christian truths even when they seem unreasonable, and when human reasoning leads a person to reject Christian truths, then human reasoning has exceeded its capacities and ought to be ignored.* If there were some way that a person could know what the truth is about religious matters, without using reasoning, then Tertullian's position interpreted in this limited way, would seem to make sense.

To obtain an accurate picture of Tertullian's complete views about the proper relationship between reasoning and Christianity, we would need to read far more of his work. However, even though it probably does not reflect Tertullian's complete views on these matters, the above excerpt serves nicely as a brief statement of an anti-philosophical, anti-intellectual, perhaps even anti-theological stance, which has been frequently echoed in one form or another within the Christian community through the centuries. In more modern language, today's more conservative Christians sometimes sound something like Tertullian, rejecting any claim of human reason to criticize what they take to be the central doctrines of Christianity, and rejecting the use of theological inquiry to raise questions about any of the beliefs they hold dear. From this point of view, a theologian who raises such questions is undermining the faith of Christians and thus subjecting them to the danger of losing something very important. As Tertullian suggests, "we" don't want to be troubled by "disputation" after "possessing" Jesus. Just maintain a "simple" faith. Don't ask questions. Keep steadfast. That way of thinking has broad appeal within the Christian community.

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understanding would fail in the same way he thought those attempts failed.

<sup>12</sup>"palmary" means "deserving the palm of victory".

<sup>13</sup>Taken literally, of course, this is nonsense. One presumably could reasonably believe a great many things that are not part of "the faith", things about where one's house is located, what one's name is, and so on. Tertullian presumably means that no philosophical analysis of *Christian beliefs* is called for, no philosophical theories about life or God or such matters are needed. Moreover, we ought to avoid such philosophical additions to the pure, simple faith which Tertullian espoused.

Tertullian's position raises an important conceptual question about Christian faith: Is faith by its very nature opposed to rational inquiry into matters of faith? If faith is a simple commitment to believe various doctrines, then it would seem that raising questions about those doctrines is indeed opposed to faith. If faith is a commitment to trusting God, then doesn't that automatically rule out any questioning that might weaken the trust?