

Introduction

The writings of Tertullian of North Africa which bear on the nature of the church and of Christian ministry mark an important stage in a development from the fluid ecclesial concepts of the second century to the more fixed structures of the third. This is a shift from a dominant concern for the preservation of authentic apostolic doctrine to one for the validation of a regular, prescribed apostolic office.

Until the end of the second century nowhere is there in Christian thought – neither in the West nor the East – evidence of a clearly defined ecclesiology; that is, no extant Christian document of the period possesses a coherent and comprehensive doctrine of the church. It might be said that prior to the end of the second century the existence and the nature of the church were taken for granted. There is little evidence that any Christian writer before Tertullian had given attention to the question of the church's essential marks or notes. None appears to have gone beyond the reproduction of biblical images such as 'the body of Christ' and 'the bride of Christ'. Yet, by the middle of the third century, in the writings of the most prominent Western churchman of the time, Cyprian of Carthage, a highly developed ecclesiology had emerged. Questions of apostolic orthodoxy and a due order in Christian ministry and office aside, the church simply was. Its *raison d'être* was its existence. It was, at most, a means to an end, and no end in itself.¹

¹ Hans von Campenhausen's *Ecclesiastical authority and spiritual power in the church of the first three centuries* (London, 1969), provides already a more than adequate coverage both of the development of ecclesial structures and the inherent tension between the demands of the Spirit and the prerogatives of office within that process of development during

While a sharply defined, absolutist monoepiscopacy (rule by a single bishop) seems to have prevailed in parts of the Eastern church from early in the second century² two thirds of the way through the second century there is no evidence in the Latin West for anything other than a moderate form of monoepiscopacy. In the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons, for example, who clearly was a single bishop exercising jurisdiction over the Christian communities of Lyons and Vienne, the bishop is still only 'primus inter pares' and the episcopal office which he occupies is at times barely distinguishable from the presbyterate. Towards the end of the second century – at the time of the Quartodeciman Controversy and as reflected both in Hippolytus of Rome and Tertullian himself – there is, however, a single bishop exercising a jurisdiction independently of the presbyterate at Rome.³ Yet it is not until the middle of the third century, as evidenced by the writings of Cyprian of Carthage, that an absolutist, and not merely functional, monoepiscopacy becomes the unquestioned norm in the West. That such a transformation in the episcopate took place in the West within seventy years is remarkable; it was the result of a process of development for which the opening years of the third century were crucial. There was at that time a significant increase in the relative proportion of Christians in Roman society and a bitter dispute was beginning over the administration of penitential discipline within Christian communities.

Tertullian played a major but largely unacknowledged role in this process of development and his writings also closely reflected and influenced this development. An attempt to uncover the extent of his contribution in this area is well

the second century of the Christian era. I have for the most part followed his findings and will comment only where I find myself in significant disagreement with them.

² By 'absolutist' I mean the effective concentration of power and jurisdiction in someone who exercises complete authority over matters doctrinal and disciplinary and is accountable to no one this side of heaven. We might also note that the evidence of the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, while substantial and important, is largely uncorroborated by other contemporary sources.

³ The letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the church at Rome, unlike those to other churches, reflects the governing of that church not by a single bishop but by the presbyterate. The suggestion that this reflects only an interregnum at Rome is an unnecessary rationalisation.

overdue. Two related issues must also be considered. The first concerns Tertullian's relationship to the Catholic church: was he a schismatic who abandoned the church for a Montanist conventicle? The other is that of his relationship to the New Prophecy movement. Tertullian was no schismatic. Reports of a breach with the Catholic church have been exaggerated. The extent of the influence of Montanism on Tertullian has also been overstated. Tertullian – particularly the New Prophet – is the object of some suspicion among many Anglo-Catholic commentators who view with unease his apparent anti-clericalism, his advocacy of the New Prophecy and the suggestion of a hint of pre-Nicene unorthodoxy. Some Protestants are equally discomfited by the so-called 'Catholic' Tertullian for his seemingly uncritical support of the historic episcopate and for such matters as his apparent repudiation of marriage as an ideal state for the Christian. The former, however, appreciate what they perceive to be his support for the doctrine of apostolic succession and, however mistakenly, for the primacy of Rome; the latter appreciate his outpouring of vitriol on the occupants of clerical office.

There is no explicit formulation in Tertullian of the marks, notes or attributes of the authentic church. Implicitly present, however, are indications of those notes which appear in later formalised ecclesiologies. The Reformed emphases on preaching truly (the proclamation or handing on of a verifiable, authentic apostolic doctrine), administering the sacraments rightly (see *De Baptismo* and *De Exhortatione Castitatis*) and the maintenance of a godly discipline are present in Tertullian's thought. Of Paul Minear's four Master Images for the New Testament church – the People of God, the New Creation, the Fellowship in Faith and the Body of Christ – the last two are clearly present. The Fellowship of Faith is emphasised in Tertullian's early period, particularly with regard to the questions of unity and apostolicity (see *De Praescriptione*). The Body of Christ is perhaps the most important ecclesial image in the New Testament. While it does not at first appear dominant in Tertullian's thought, it soon becomes obvious that it is so. Of the five ecclesial models offered by Dulles, those of the church as Institution and as Herald

(promoting apostolic doctrine) are relevant to Tertullian's presentation; Tertullian's view of the authentic church as constituted by the presence of spiritual persons exhibiting prophetic and apostolic evidences and able, therefore, to forgive sin, may point to the church as Sacrament.

There is in his extant writings no explicit affirmation of the later credal formula of 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church'. And yet the seeds of such a formula are present. Thus I have also explored Tertullian's thought on the nature of the church by an investigation of the extent to which this later credal form provides a convenient framework. This impression of the presence in Tertullian of the traditional 'notes' of the church is more than confirmed by such investigation. It is also clear that Tertullian's thought on these matters undergoes no significant shift in his transition from staunch defender of the Catholic system to one of its most vocal critics.

Tertullian's understanding of authentic Christian ministry involves the nature of church office. This, in turn, revolves around the three-tier system of bishop, presbyters and deacons, which is validated for him by history rather than by theology. It is important also to consider here two other matters. The first is Tertullian's consistency of thought, particularly with reference to his transition from Catholic to New Prophet. The second is his understanding, particularly in the latter period, of the nature and legitimate exercise of 'potestas'.

In the General Conclusion I have demonstrated that Tertullian betrays, with one exception, no major shift in his thinking on the nature and authority of Christian ministry. This exception concerns the greater emphasis which he places, during the latter period, on the role of the Christian prophet. With regard to both major questions Tertullian preserves in both periods of his Christian life a 'high' view of the church and of the ministry, while still maintaining a healthy scepticism towards the claims of some within the Catholic hierarchy. In his New Prophecy period he displays no desire to repudiate the traditional three-tier system, nor the unity, holiness, catholicity or apostolicity of the church, but rather a vigorous affirmation and defence of both.

Tertullian's writings reflect the existence in Christian thought

of a shift from a major emphasis on doctrine to one on discipline. They reflect a shift in understanding office from a historically validated guarantee of apostolic doctrine to something which has an independent authenticity and which in part constitutes the nature of the true church. Consequently, office becomes itself an article within the body of apostolic doctrine.

There is general appreciation both of Tertullian's contribution to the development of trinitarian terminology and of his steadfast stand against heretics like Marcion and Valentinus.⁴ However, suspicions aroused by his attachment to the New Prophecy, by some rather unorthodox views (such as on the corporeality of the soul and the ban on second marriages), by his alleged rejection of philosophical culture, and by his abrasive and sometimes spiteful language, have hindered a rational consideration of his contribution to concepts of ecclesial office and ecclesiology in general. Tertullian the schismatic has been viewed as an unreliable contributor to theological debate in any forum. Some deny to him significant patristic status, while others doubt that he ever has anything of real worth to contribute.⁵ In more recent years, commentators like Fredouille, Sider, Barnes, Friend and von Campenhausen have sought to redress this imbalance and to rehabilitate his tainted reputation.⁶ The underlying purpose of this book is to seek to continue their work into the area of his ecclesiology.

⁴ This is particularly so of his early writings though of course much, if not all, of his monumental *Adversus Marcionem* was written in the later period.

⁵ 'Im eigentlichen Sinne kann Tertullian nicht als Kirchenvater betrachtet werden' contends P. van Beneden, 'Ordo. Über den Ursprung einer kirchlichen Terminologie', *VC* 23 (1969), p. 162, note 5; 'Tertullian is the greatest classical Latin writer of the beginning of the third century. The things he says are not to be trusted but nevertheless he makes wonderful reading' asserts T. Merton, 'The face: Tertullian and St Cyprian on virgins', *Cistercian Studies* 6 (1971), p. 334.

⁶ Fredouille, *Tertullien*; R. D. Sider, *Ancient rhetoric and the art of Tertullian* (Oxford, 1971); Barnes, *Tertullian*; W. H. C. Friend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford, 1952); von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical authority*.

PART I

The historical questions

CHAPTER I

The church in North Africa

CARTHAGE

The origins of the Christian church in North Africa are shrouded in obscurity. The reasons for this are not clear. It cannot be said, for example, that the region was a backwater of the empire, easily by-passed by the movements of the day. Very little indeed has been written on the Carthage of Tertullian's day. B. H. Warmington's *Carthage*, one of the most comprehensive works on Carthage in recent times, effectively deals only with the history of Carthage up to the time of the city's destruction at the end of the Third Punic War in 146 BC.¹ North Africa was, as the granary of Rome, a significant region of the empire, both militarily and economically; Carthage probably was the second city of the empire after Rome. Herodian, who wrote during the first half of the third century AD, asserted that 'the city is the next after Rome in wealth, population and size, though there is rivalry for second place between it and Alexandria in Egypt'.²

Why is there so little information about the origins of the church in one of the most important regions of the empire? If the thesis of Walter Bauer were in part correct – that 'in some areas the initial form of Christianity was actually heretical according to later standards, and that orthodoxy as defined by the church councils triumphed at a relatively late date'³ – one might speculate that the first Christian communities there were later

¹ B. H. Warmington, *Carthage* (London, 1960).

² Herodian, *History of the Empire from the time of Marcus Aurelius* (LCL, 1970, transl. by C. R. Whitaker), vii, 6, 1.

³ W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and heresy in earliest Christianity*, 2nd edn, ed. R. A. Kraft and G. Krodel (Philadelphia, 1971).

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adjudged as less than orthodox. Earlier records may not then have survived the rigorous scrutiny of a later age.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN NORTH AFRICA

Although it is widely agreed that there was no universal or systematic persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities until the reign of Decius in the mid-third century, official persecution was by no means sporadic in the provinces of Africa towards the end of the second and the beginning of the third centuries. It has been appropriately remarked that the history of the North African church during its first 500 years is, in great part, a history of martyrdom. Frend calls the African church 'a church of martyrs'.⁴ Thus, it is appropriate both that the earliest extant records of its existence should concern martyrs and also that its first celebrated Father should be one who was so preoccupied with the question of martyrdom. On 17 July 180, during the first year of the reign of the Emperor Commodus, there took place at the court of the Proconsul Vigellius Saturninus the trial and subsequent execution of twelve Christians from the otherwise unknown village of Scillium in Proconsular Africa.⁵ The twelve – Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Donata, Secunda, Vestia, Januaria and Generosa – all refused the command of the Proconsul to swear by the 'genius' of the Emperor, rejected his offer of a stay of thirty days in which to 'think the matter over', and were summarily executed.

This was not only the first recorded instance of a trial of Christians in North Africa, but probably the first conducted there. We have the claim of Tertullian himself that Vigellius Saturninus was the first Roman official 'qui primus hic gladium in nos egit'.⁶ Eusebius' suggestion – with reference to an outbreak of persecution at Lyons and Vienne in Gaul some three

⁴ W. H. C. Frend, 'The North African cult of martyrs: from apocalyptic to hero-worship (plates)', in *Jenseitsvorstellungen in Antike*, ed. T. Klausner and E. Dassmann (1982), p. 154.

⁵ *Passio Sanctorum Scillitanorum*; the text can be found in O. von Gebhardt, *Acta Martyrum Selecta*, pp. 22-7.

⁶ *Ad Scapulam* 3, 4.

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years earlier than the Scillitan trial⁷ – that this former persecution resulted from a decree of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius may also apply to the latter events in North Africa. And yet there is no other record of such an edict; it is more likely either that Marcus Aurelius had simply reissued Trajan's earlier advisory Rescript to Pliny, the Governor of Bithynia in the second decade of the second century, or that the Proconsul himself, perhaps both on the basis of Trajan's Rescript and in connection with the accession of Commodus to the throne, had simply acted on his own initiative. The legal basis, if such existed, of the trials of Christians has never been satisfactorily explained.⁸ Two comments of the historian T. D. Barnes are worth noting in this connection. He asserts both that 'the legal position of Christians continues exactly as Trajan defined it until Decius', and, perhaps even more significantly, that 'it is in the minds of men, not in the demands of Roman law, that the roots of the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire are to be sought'.⁹

The circumstances of the Scillitan martyrs – both their location and their nomenclature – suggest that the first African Christians were not Greek-speaking immigrants living in large urban centres (as was often the case in places like Gaul), but rather came from among the indigenous rural population which gathered itself around the smaller market-towns.¹⁰ Monceaux's claim that the extant account of the trial displays traces of Montanism cannot be maintained on the evidence of the text as it stands.¹¹ It is often presumed that the treatise *Ad Martyras*, one of Tertullian's earliest extant writings, was occasioned by a later bout of persecution, perhaps in Carthage itself, in the closing years of the second century. Leclercq considers that this treatise, along with the *Apologeticum* and the *Ad Nationes*, was written

⁷ *Ecclesiastical History* (LCL, 1980, transl. by J. E. L. Oulton), v, i, 47.

⁸ Most commentators agree that it was probably both the refusal of Christians to participate in the imperial cult and the fact that the church was, technically at least, an illegal society – A. N. Sherwin-White, *Letters of Pliny*, (Oxford, 1966) pp. 778f. contends that this was so particularly in the second century – which formed the legal basis for prosecution. See also A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman society and Roman law in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1978).

⁹ 'Legislation against the Christians', *JRS* 58 (1968), p. 48; *ibid.* p. 50.

¹⁰ G. Charles-Picard, *La civilisation de l'Afrique Romaine* (Paris, 1959), p. 38.

¹¹ P. Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne* (Paris, 1901), vol. 1, p. 81.

prior to the purported issue, during an imperial visit to Alexandria in 202, of an edict forbidding conversions to both Judaism and Christianity.¹² Rordorf, on the other hand, maintains that the occasion of *Ad Martyras* and the events depicted in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* belong to the same period, a persecution in Carthage in early to mid 203.¹³ Barnes, however, questions the historicity of this 202/3 edict, labelling it as ‘demonstrably fictitious’, and discounting any Severan persecution in that year as ‘myth’.¹⁴ A biographer of Septimius Severus, A. R. Birley, likewise condemns the existence of any such edict as ‘a piece of fiction’.¹⁵ The arguments of both are attractive, if not compelling, but the issue is far from settled. Braun argues, against Rordorf, that ‘benedicti martyres designati’ at *Ad Martyras* 1,1 does not refer exclusively to catechumens, and further, that the ‘praesentia tempora’ referred to by Tertullian in the same treatise (6,2) does not mean the same thing as ‘notre époque’.¹⁶ Barnes supports the position taken by Braun when he refutes the notion that any 202/3 persecution was exclusively directed against proselytising by pointing out that ‘in the *Passio Perpetuae* the charge is still being a Christian, not having become one’.¹⁷ The question of whether there was further official persecution in North Africa between the events recorded at Scillium and the trials and executions at Carthage in 203 must remain unresolved.

On 7 March 203 the well-born Perpetua, only recently become a mother, the slave-girl Felicitas, their fellow-disciples Revocatus, Saturninus and Secundulus, and their teacher Satyrus, were arraigned and convicted before the court of the Proconsul Hilarianus. Five of the six were subsequently put to death in the public arena. The sixth died while awaiting execution. The five were, of course, not the only martyred Christians in this period and region. Cyprian records the names

¹² H. Leclercq, *L'Afrique chrétienne* (Paris, 1904), p. 123.

¹³ W. Rordorf and R. Braun, ‘Dossier sur l’Ad Martyras de Tertullien’, *REAug* 26 (1980), pp. 3f.

¹⁴ T. D. Barnes, ‘Pre-Decian Acta Martyrum’, *JTS* ns19 (1968), p. 526.

¹⁵ A. R. Birley, *Septimius Severus, the African emperor* (London, 1971), p. 209.

¹⁶ Rordorf and Braun, ‘Dossier sur l’Ad Martyras’, pp. 14f.

¹⁷ Barnes, ‘Legislation’, p. 40.